THE SYSTEM OF OBJECTS

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

TRANSLATED BY JAMES BENEDICT

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Jean Baudrillard

Translated by James Benedict

VERSO

London • New York

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First published by Verso 1996
This edition © Verso 1996
Paperback edition reprinted 1997, 1999, 2002
Translation © James Benedict 1996
First published as *Le système des objets*
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Published with the financial assistance of the French Ministry of Culture

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Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York NY 10014–4606

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN 1–85984–943–1
ISBN 1–85984–068–X (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Baudrillard, Jean.
[Système des objets. English]
The system of objects / Jean Baudrillard ; translated by James Benedict.
p. cm.
ISBN 1–85984–943–1. — ISBN 1–85984–068–X (pbk.)
1. Values—Psychological aspects. 2. Object (Philosophy)
3. Technology and civilization. 4. Consumption (Economics)
I. Title.
BF778.B313 1996
306.4'6—dc20 96–6183
CIP

Typeset by Keystroke, Jacaranda Lodge, Wolverhampton
Printed and bound in Great Britain by the Bath Press

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Translator's Acknowledgements

For her unstinting help with this translation, I must yet again offer my heartfelt gratitude to M.N. Many many thanks as well to Malcolm Imrie and Jane Hindle, my editors at Verso.

INTRODUCTION

Could we classify the luxuriant growth of objects as we do a flora or fauna, complete with tropical and glacial species, sudden mutations, and varieties threatened by extinction? Our urban civilization is witness to an ever-accelerating procession of generations of products, appliances and gadgets by comparison with which mankind appears to be a remarkably stable species. This pullulation of objects is no odder, when we come to think about it, than that to be observed in countless natural species. Species which man has successfully inventoried. And in the period when he began to do this systematically he was also able to draw up, in the *Encyclopédie*, an exhaustive catalogue of the practical and technical objects that surrounded him. Since then, however, that balance has been lost: everyday objects (we are not concerned here with machines) proliferate, needs multiply, production speeds up the life-span of such objects – yet we lack the vocabulary to name them all. How can we hope to classify a world of objects that changes before our eyes and arrive at an adequate system of description? There are almost as many criteria of classification as there are objects themselves: the size of the object; its degree of functionality (i.e. the object's relationship to its own objective function); the gestures associated with it (are they rich or impoverished? traditional or not?); its form; its duration; the time of day at which it

appears (more or less intermittent presence, and how conscious one is of it); the material that it transforms (obvious in the case of a coffee grinder, less so in those of a mirror, a radio, or a car – though every object transforms something); the degree of exclusiveness or sociability attendant upon its use (is it for private, family, public or general use?); and so on. Indeed all such means of categorization may seem – when they are applied to an ensemble, such as the set of objects, that is undergoing continual mutation and expansion – barely less contingent than the order of the letters of the alphabet. The catalogue of the Manufacture d'Armes de Saint-Etienne proposes, if not structures, then at least subdivisions, but it takes into account only objects defined according to function: each object corresponds to an operation, often a tiny or heteroclite operation, but nowhere is any *system* of meanings even touched upon.[1] At a much higher level, the simultaneously formal, functional and structural analysis which Siegfried Giedion offers us – a kind of epic history of the technical object[2] – notes the changes in social structure associated with technical development, but scarcely addresses such questions as how objects are experienced, what needs other than functional ones they answer, what mental structures are interwoven with – and contradict – their functional structures, or what cultural, infracultural or transcultural system underpins their directly experienced everydayness. These are the questions we shall be asking here. We shall not, therefore, be concerning ourselves with objects as defined by their functions or by the categories into which they might be subdivided for analytic purposes, but instead with the processes whereby people relate to them and with the systems of human behaviour and relationships that result therefrom.

The study of this 'spoken' system of objects – that is, the study of the more or less consistent system of meanings that objects institute – always presupposes

1. The catalogue itself, however – its actual existence – is rich in meaning: its exhaustive nomenclatural aims have the resounding cultural implication that access to objects may be obtained only via the pages of a catalogue which may be leafed through 'for the pleasure of it', as one might a great manual, a book of tales, a menu. . . .

2. *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).

a plane distinct from this 'spoken' system, a more strictly structured plane, a structural plane transcending even the functional account of objects. This plane is the technological one.

The technological plane is an abstraction: in ordinary life we are practically unconscious of the technological reality of objects. Yet this abstraction is profoundly real: it is what governs all radical transformations of our environment. It is even – and I do not mean this in any paradoxical sense – the most concrete aspect of the object, for technological development is synonymous with objective structural evolution. In the strictest sense, what happens to the object in the technological sphere is *essential*, whereas what happens to it in the psychological or sociological sphere of needs and practices is *inessential*. The discourse of psychology or sociology continually refers us to the object as apprehended at a more consistent level, a level unrelated to any individual or collective discourse, namely the supposed level of *technological* language. It is starting from this language, from this consistency of the technical model, that we can reach an understanding of what happens to objects by virtue of their being produced and consumed, possessed and personalized.

It is imperative, therefore, to get a clear picture from the outset of the rationality of the object – a clear picture, that is, of the objective technological structure involved. Take, for example, Gilbert Simondon's account of the petrol engine:

> In today's engines each important part is so closely associated with the others by reciprocal exchanges of energy that it cannot undergo any essential variation whatsoever. . . . The form of the cylinder head, the metal of which it is manufactured, works in combination with all the other elements of the cycle to produce a particular temperature in the electrodes of the sparking-plug; this temperature in turn affects the characteristics of the ignition and of the cycle as a whole.
>
> Modern engines are concrete, whereas earlier ones were abstract. In the older version, each component intervened at a specific stage of the cycle and was then supposed to have no further impact on the others; motor parts

were rather like people, each doing their job without ever getting acquainted with their co-workers. . . . The technical object may thus be said to have a primitive form, an abstract form, in which each theoretical and material unit is treated as an absolute needing to be set up as a closed system if it is to function properly. Such a situation presents a set of problems of integration that have to be resolved. . . . This is the point at which specific structures emerge which, relative to each component, one might call defence mechanisms: for instance, the cylinder head of the internal-combustion heat engine starts to bristle with cooling fins. These were at first simply an extraneous element, as it were, added to the cylinder and the cylinder head for the sole purpose of cooling. In more recent engines, however, these fins have come to play a mechanical role as well by providing a ribbing that serves to inhibit the distortion of the cylinder head under the pressure of gases. . . . Now the two functions are no longer distinguishable; a unique structure has thus evolved, one which is not a compromise but a concomitance, a convergence. The ribbed cylinder head may now be made thinner, which allows for faster cooling. The bivalent fin/rib structure therefore fulfils the two formerly separate functions by means of a synthesis – and the result is far more satisfactory in both cases: it integrates the two functions and transcends them. . . . We may say, then, that the new structure is more concrete than the old and that it represents a genuine advance for the technical object, for the true technological problem is the need for a convergence of functions within a single structural feature, not the need for a compromise between conflicting requirements. Ultimately, this progression from abstract to concrete means that the technical object will tend towards the state of a system that is completely internally consistent and completely unified.[3]

3. Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Aubier, 1958), pp. 25–6.

This analysis is invaluable, because it supplies us with the elements of a coherent system that is never directly experienced, never apprehended at the practical level. Technology gives us a rigorous account of objects in which functional antagonisms are dialectically resolved into larger structures. Every transition from a system to another, better-integrated system, every commutation within an already structured system, every functional synthesis, precipitates the emergence of a meaning, an objective pertinence that is independent of the individuals who are destined to put it into operation; we are in effect at the level of a language here, and, by analogy with linguistic phenomena, those simple technical elements – different from real objects – upon whose interplay technological evolution is founded might well be dubbed 'technemes'.

It is quite possible to envision a science of structural technology working at this level that would study the organization of such technemes into more complex technical objects. This science could be strictly applied, however, only to a limited number of areas, ranging from laboratory research to the massive technological products of the aeronautics, astronautics, shipbuilding, heavy-vehicle or heavy-machinery industries. These are precisely the areas where technical pressures maximize structural constraints, where the collective and impersonal nature of the product reduces the effects of fashion to a minimum. Whereas car makers must continually explore every conceivable variation in the form of their product, while meeting a very few basic technological requirements (water cooling, cylinder-based engine, etc.), aircraft manufacturers are obliged to produce concrete technical objects solely on the basis of simple functional imperatives (safety, speed, efficiency, and so on). Here technological development follows an almost pure course. So, if we want to account for the system of *everyday* objects, a structural technological analysis is clearly inadequate.

We may dream of arriving at an exhaustive description of technemes and their semantic relations that would cover the entire world of real objects, but this must inevitably remain just that – a dream. It is therefore tempting to deal with technemes just as Plato would have us deal, as true astronomers, with the stars: 'If we mean, then, to turn the soul's native intelligence to its proper use by a genuine study of astronomy, we shall proceed, as we do in geometry, by means of problems,

and leave the starry heavens alone.'[4] Unfortunately, this impulse immediately runs into the directly experienced psychological and sociological reality of objects, a reality which, over and above objects' perceptible materiality, constitutes such a significant body of constraints that the integrity of the technological system is continually being modified and disturbed by it. It is this disturbance, and the way the rationality of objects comes to grips with the irrationality of needs, and the way this contradiction gives rise to a system of meanings that seeks to resolve it – it is these things that we are concerned with here, not technological models, even if the essential truth of these models provides the ground from which our direct experience of objects is continually emerging.

Each of our practical objects is related to one or more structural elements, but at the same time they are all in perpetual flight from technical structure towards their secondary meanings, from the technological system towards a cultural system. The everyday environment remains to a very great extent an 'abstract' system. For all their multiplicity, objects are generally isolated as to their function, and it is the user who is responsible, as his needs dictate, for their coexistence in a functional context, in a system which is not very economical, not very consistent, and indeed resembles the archaic structure of early petrol engines in that it comprises an assortment of partial functions that are often irrelevant or antagonistic to one another. The current trend, moreover, is by no means to rectify this inconsistency but, rather, to meet successive needs by introducing new objects. The result is that each object added to the sum of objects may be adequate to its own function but work against the whole; it even happens that a new object will be adequate to its function while at the same time working against it.

Furthermore, inasmuch as an object's formal and technical connotations are added to a functional incoherence, it is the whole system of needs, socialized or unconscious, cultural or practical – in short, a whole inessential system, directly experienced – which surges back on to the essential technical order and threatens the objective status of the object itself.

4. *The Republic of Plato*, trans F.M. Cornford (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1945 [1941]), Book VII, pp. 248–9.

To take an example: the most 'essential' and structural aspects of a coffee mill, and hence the most concretely objective things about it, are the electric motor, the electricity furnished by the power company, and the laws governing the production and transformation of energy; what is already less objective, because it depends on a particular person's need, is the mill's actual coffee-grinding function; and what is not objective in the slightest, and hence inessential, is whether it is green and rectangular or pink and trapezoid. A single structure, the electric motor, may be embodied in a variety of specific functions; functional differentiation is thus already a secondary consideration (and may eventually fall into the sheer incoherence of the completely useless object or 'gadget'[5]). A single function of an object may in turn become specific in a variety of forms – which brings us into that realm of 'personalization', of formal connotation, where the inessential holds sway. Indeed, the characteristic of the industrial object which distinguishes it from the craft object is that in the former the inessential is no longer left to the whims of individual demand and manufacture, but instead picked up and systematized by the production process, which today defines its aims by reference to what is inessential (and by reference to the universal combinatorial system of fashion).[6]

This inextricable complexity is what makes for the fact that the conditions under which a technological sphere may become autonomous, and therefore the possibility of a structural analysis in the realm of objects, are not comparable to the situation with regard to language. Apart from pure technical objects, with which as subjects we never have anything to do, we shall see that the two levels of objective denotation and of connotation (whereby the object is cathected, commercialized and personalized, whereby it attains utility and enters into a

5. [*Translator's note*: French, in borrowing the English word 'gadget', lays far more stress than English-speakers generally do on the connotation for which a gadget is an object, such as a novelty item, with no function or use value. It is with this emphasis that the author uses the term here and throughout the present work; see in particular his discussion of gadgets and robots below.]

6. The modalities of transition from essential to inessential are thus today themselves relatively systematic. This systematization of the inessential has its sociological and psychological aspects; it also has an ideological function of integration (see 'Models and Series' below).

cultural system) are not, under today's conditions of production and consumption, separable in the way that the levels of language [*langue*] and speech [*parole*] are separable in linguistics. The technological level simply does not have the sort of structural autonomy that would permit us to say that its equivalent of 'speech acts', namely the 'speaking' object, is no more important in an analysis of objects than speech acts are in an analysis of linguistic phenomena. Whereas a rolled *r* in contrast to a uvular *r* changes nothing so far as the linguistic system is concerned – in other words, the connoted meaning has absolutely no retroactive effect on the denoted structures – the connotation of an object may for its part bring great weight to bear upon technical structures, and alter them significantly. For technology, unlike language, does not constitute a stable system. Unlike monemes and phonemes, technemes are continually evolving. Now, the fact that the technological system is so closely implicated, by reason of its state of permanent revolution, in the very *time* of the practical objects that 'speak' it (much the same is true for language, but to a vastly lesser degree); the fact that this system has as its aims a mastery of the world and the satisfaction of needs – aims, that is to say, which are more concrete and less easily dissociated from praxis than communication, which is the aim of language; and, lastly, the fact that technology depends strictly on the *social* conditions under which technological research is carried out, and hence on the global order of production and consumption, an external constraint which in no way applies to language – all this means that the system of objects, unlike the linguistic system, cannot be described *scientifically* unless it is treated *in the process* as the result of the continual intrusion of a system of practices into a system of techniques. It is thus not consistent technical structures but, rather, the ways in which practices affect techniques – or, more exactly, the ways in which techniques are checked by practices – that account for reality here. In sum, the description of the system of objects cannot be divorced from a critique of that system's practical ideology. At the technological level there is no contradiction: there is merely intention. But a human science must be a science both of intention and of whatever counters that intention. How is it that a consistent technological system is disseminated as an inconsistent practical system? How is the 'language' of objects 'spoken'? By what means does this 'speech' system (or this system which falls somewhere

between language and speech) override the linguistic system? And finally, what is the location, not of the abstract consistency of the system of objects but, rather, of its directly experienced contradictions?[7]

7. On the basis of this distinction, it is nevertheless possible to posit a close affinity between the analysis of objects on the one hand and linguistics (or, more precisely, semiology) on the other. Thus what I refer to in the field of objects as marginal (or inessential) difference is analogous to the semiological notion of 'field of dispersal'. This field

> is made up of the varieties in execution of a unit (of a phoneme, for instance) as long as these varieties do not result in an alteration in meaning (that is, as long as they do not become pertinent variations) . . . : in the food system, for instance, we can speak of the dispersal field of a dish, which will be established by the limits within which this dish's name still signifies, whatever 'frills' preparers may add. . . . The varieties which make up the dispersal field are called *combinative variants*. . . . [These] do not participate in commutations of meaning; they are not pertinent. . . . Combinative variants have long been considered as phenomena pertaining to speech: they certainly are very close to it, but are nowadays held to pertain to language, since they are 'compulsory'. (Roland Barthes, 'Eléments de sémiologie', *Communications*, no. 4 [November 1964], p. 128. English translation by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith: *Elements of Semiology* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1967], pp. 84–5 [here slightly modified].)

Barthes adds that this notion is destined to become a central one in semiology, because variations of this kind, though they are non-signifying at the denotative level, may again become significant at the level of connotation.

Clearly the analogy between combinative variation and marginal difference is a profound one: both involve the inessential, both are without pertinence, both depend on a combinatorial system and become meaningful at the level of connotation. There is an essential difference between them, however: combinative variation remains external to the semiological plane of denotation, whereas marginal difference is, precisely, never 'marginal'. For the technological plane does not designate – as language *qua* system [*langue*] does for language in general [*langage*] – a fixed methodological abstraction which reaches the real world only by virtue of connotations; rather, it designates an evolving structural framework which connotations (inessential differences) arrest, stereotype and cause to regress. Technology's structural dynamism is paralysed, at the level of objects, in the differential subjectivity of the cultural system, which itself then retroactively impinges on the organization of technology.

A. THE FUNCTIONAL SYSTEM, OR OBJECTIVE DISCOURSE

I Structures of Interior Design

The Traditional Environment

The arrangement of furniture offers a faithful image of the familial and social structures of a period. The typical bourgeois interior is patriarchal; its foundation is the dining-room/bedroom combination. Although it is diversified with respect to function, the furniture is highly integrated, centring around the sideboard or the bed in the middle of the room. There is a tendency to accumulate, to fill and close off the space. The emphasis is on unifunctionality, immovability, imposing presence and hierarchical labelling. Each room has a strictly defined role corresponding to one or another of the various functions of the family unit, and each ultimately refers to a view which conceives of the individual as a balanced assemblage of distinct faculties. The pieces of furniture confront one another, jostle one another, and implicate one another in a unity that is not so much spatial as moral in character. They are ranged about an axis which ensures a regular chronology of actions; thanks to this permanent symbolization, the family is always present to itself. Within this private space each piece of furniture in turn, and each room, internalizes its own particular function and takes on the symbolic dignity pertaining to it – then the whole house puts the finishing touch to this integration of interpersonal relationships within the semi-hermetic family group.

All this constitutes an organism whose structure is the patriarchal relationship founded on tradition and authority, and whose heart is the complex affective relationship that binds all the family members together. Such a family home is a specific space which takes little account of any objective decorative requirements, because the primary function of furniture and objects here is to personify human relationships, to fill the space that they share between them, and to be inhabited by a soul.[1] The real dimension they occupy is captive to the moral dimension which it is their job to signify. They have as little autonomy in this space as the various family members enjoy in society. Human beings and objects are indeed bound together in a collusion in which the objects take on a certain density, an emotional value – what might be called a 'presence'. What gives the houses of our childhood such depth and resonance in memory is clearly this complex structure of interiority, and the objects within it serve for us as boundary markers of the symbolic configuration known as home. The caesura between inside and outside, and their formal opposition, which falls under the social sign of property and the psychological sign of the immanence of the family, make this traditional space into a closed transcendence. In their anthropomorphism the objects that furnish it become household gods, spatial incarnations of the emotional bonds and the permanence of the family group. These gods enjoyed a gentle immortality until the advent of a modern generation which has cast them aside, dispersed them – even, on occasion, reinstated them in an up-to-date nostalgia for whatever is old. As often with gods, furniture too thus gets a second chance to exist, and passes from a naïve utility into a cultural baroque.

The dining-room/bedroom pattern – an arrangement of movable property closely bound up with the house as immovable property – continues to be widely pitched by advertisers to a vast public. Department stores such as Lévitan and Galeries Barbès still titillate the collective taste with evocations of 'decorative' ensembles – despite the fact that contours are now 'stylized', despite the fact that decoration is out of favour. This furniture still sells, not because it is cheaper but because it embodies the official certainties of the group and enjoys the sanction of

1. They may also have taste and style – or not, as the case may be.

the bourgeoisie. A further reason is that such monumental furniture (sideboard, bed or wardrobe) and its arrangement echo the persistence of traditional family structures across broad social strata of modern society.

The Modern Object Liberated in Its Function

The style of furniture changes as the individual's relationships to family and society change. Corner divans and beds, coffee tables, shelving – a plethora of new elements are now supplanting the traditional range of furniture. The organization of space changes, too, as beds become day-beds and sideboards and wardrobes give way to built-in storage. Things fold and unfold, are concealed, appear only when needed. Naturally such innovations are not due to free experiment: for the most part the greater mobility, flexibility and convenience they afford are the result of an involuntary adaptation to a shortage of space – a case of necessity being the mother of invention. Whereas the old-fashioned dining-room was heavily freighted with moral convention, 'modern' interiors, in their ingeniousness, often give the impression of being mere functional expedients. Their 'absence of style' is in the first place an absence of room, and maximum functionality is a solution of last resort whose outcome is that the dwelling-place, though remaining closed to the outside, loses its internal organization. Such a restructuring of space and the objects in it, unaccompanied by any reconversion, must in the first instance be considered an impoverishment.

The modern set of furniture, serially produced, is thus apparently destructured yet not restructured, nothing having replaced the expressive power of the old symbolic order. There is progress, nevertheless: between the individual and these objects, which are now more supple in their uses and have ceased to exercise or symbolize moral constraint, there is a much more liberal relationship, and in particular the individual is no longer strictly defined through them relative to his family.[2] Their mobility and multifunctionality allow him to organize them more

2. We cannot help but wonder, however, whether he is not henceforward strictly defined through them relative to society at large. On this point, see 'Models and Series' below.

freely, and this reflects a greater openness in his social relationships. This, however, is only a partial liberation. So far as the serial object is concerned, in the absence of any restructuring of space, this 'functional' development is merely an emancipation, not (to go back to the old Marxian distinction) a liberation proper, for it implies *liberation from the function of the object only, not from the object itself.* Consider a nondescript, light, foldable table or a bed without legs, frame or canopy – an absolute cipher of a bed, one might say: all such objects, with their 'pure' outlines, no longer resemble even what they are; they have been stripped down to their most primitive essence as mere apparatus and, as it were, definitively secularized. What has been liberated in them – and what, in being liberated, has liberated something in man (or rather, perhaps, what man, in liberating himself, has liberated in them) – is their function. The function is no longer obscured by the moral theatricality of the old furniture; it is emancipated now from ritual, from ceremonial, from the entire ideology which used to make our surroundings into an opaque mirror of a reified human structure. Today, at last, these objects emerge absolutely clear about the purposes they serve. They are thus indeed free as *functional objects* – that is, they have the freedom to function, and (certainly so far as serial objects are concerned) that is practically the *only* freedom they have.[3]

Now, *just so long as the object is liberated only in its function, man equally is liberated only as user of that object.* This too is progress, though not a decisive turning-point. A bed is a bed, a chair is a chair, and there is no relationship between them so long as each serves only the function it is supposed to serve. And without such a relationship there can be no space, for space exists only when it is opened up, animated, invested with rhythm and expanded by a correlation between objects and a transcendence of their functions in this new structure. In a way space is the object's true freedom, whereas its function is merely its formal freedom. The

3. Similarly, the bourgeois and industrial revolution gradually freed the individual from his involvement with religion, morality and family. He thus acceded to a freedom in law as an individual, but also to an actual freedom as labour-power – that is, the freedom to sell himself as labour-power. This parallel has nothing coincidental about it, for there is a profound correlation here: both the serially produced 'functional' object and the social individual are liberated in their 'functional' objectification, not in their singularity or in their totality as object or person.

bourgeois dining-room was structured, but its structure was closed. The functional environment is more open, freer, but it is destructured, fragmented into its various functions. Somewhere between the two, in the gap between integrated psychological space and fragmented functional space, serial objects have their being, witnesses to both the one and the other – sometimes within a single interior.

The Model Interior

Modular Components

This elusive space, which is no longer either a confined externality nor an interior refuge, this freedom, this 'style' which is indecipherable in the serial object because it is subordinated to that object's function, may nevertheless be encountered in *model interiors*, which embody a new emerging structure and a significant evolution.[4]

Leafing through such glossy magazines as *Maison Française* or *Mobilier et Décoration* [Furniture and Decoration],[5] one cannot fail to notice two alternating themes. The first reaches for the sublime, presenting houses beyond compare: old eighteenth-century mansions, miraculously well-equipped villas, Italian gardens heated by infra-red rays and populated by Etruscan statuettes – in short, the world of the unique, leaving the reader no alternative (so far as sociological generalization is concerned, at any rate) but contemplation without hope. Aristocratic models such as these, by virtue of their absolute value, are what underpin the second theme, that of modern interior decoration and furnishing. The objects and furniture proposed here, though they are high in 'status' value, do impinge on sociological reality: they are not dream creations without commercial significance but, rather, *models* in the proper sense of the word. We are no longer in

4. In other words, these things happen at a privileged level. And there is a sociological and a social problem with the fact that a restricted group should have the concrete freedom to present itself, through its objects and furniture, as a model in the eyes of an entire society. This problem will be addressed later, however – see 'Models and Series' below.

5. A glossy magazine devoted to mass-produced products is unthinkable, the only appropriate form here being a catalogue.

a world of pure art, but in a world which (potentially, at least) is of interest to the whole of society.

These models of the home-furnishing avant-garde are organized around the basic distinction between COMPONENTS and SEATING; the practical imperative they obey is that of INTERIOR DESIGN, or syntagmatic calculation, to which may be contrasted, as seats are to components, the general concept of ATMOSPHERE.

TECMA: Extensible and interlocking components. Can be transformed or enlarged. Harmonious – they create a perfectly matching set of furniture. Functional – they answer all the needs of modern living. And they meet all your furnishing requirements – bookshelves, bar, radio, cupboards, wardrobe, desk space, cabinets, dresser, drawers, display unit, file storage, hideaway table. . . .

TECMA is available in oiled teak or finished mahogany.

OSCAR: Put your OSCAR environment together with your own hands! Exciting! Unprecedented!

The OSCAR furniturama is a set of specially pre-cut components. Discover the fun of designing a miniature three-dimensional model of your furniture, in colour and just the right size to handle! You can build your model and change it around to your heart's content – all in the comfort of your own home!

Then, with perfect confidence, order your original and personal OSCAR furniture – soon to be the pride of your household!

MONOPOLY: Every MONOPOLY ensemble is your personality's best friend. A high-quality cabinetwork system, in teak or makoré. Jointing and assembling leave no traces. Four-sided components can be put together in an infinite variety of ways – an infinite variety of genuine furniture adapted to your own particular tastes, size requirements and needs.

These are multi-combinable single-block components. You're sure to want them so that you too can give your home that refined atmosphere you've been dreaming about.

These examples reveal how the functional object is being transcended by a new kind of practical organization. Symbolic values, and along with them use values, are being supplanted by organizational values. The substance and form of the old furniture have been abandoned for good, in favour of an extremely free interplay of functions. These objects are no longer endowed with a 'soul', nor do they invade us with their symbolic presence: the relationship has become an objective one, founded on disposition and play. The value this relationship takes on is no longer of an instinctive or a psychological but, rather, of a tactical kind. What such objects embody is no longer the secret of a unique relationship but, rather, differences, and moves in a game. The former radical closure has disappeared, in parallel with a distinct change in social and interpersonal structures.

Walls and Daylight

The rooms and the house themselves now transcend the traditional dividing-line of the wall, which formerly made them into spaces of refuge. Rooms open into one another, everything communicates, and space is broken up into angles, diffuse areas and mobile sectors. Rooms, in short, have been liberalized. Windows are no longer imposed upon the free influx of air and light – a light which used to come *from outside* and settle upon objects, illuminating them *as though from within*. Now there are quite simply no windows, and a freely intervening light has become a universal function of the existence of things. In the same way objects have lost the substantiality which was their basis, the form which enclosed them whereby man made them part of his self-image: it is now space which plays freely between them, and becomes the universal function of their relationships and their 'values'.

Lighting

Many significant features of this general evolution might be pointed out. The tendency for light sources to be made invisible is a case in point. 'A recessed ceiling conceals perimeter neon fixtures for general diffuse lighting.' 'Uniform lighting is ensured by neon tubes concealed in various places: the full length of the recessed

ceiling above the curtains, behind and all along the top rim of the built-in units, beneath the upper row of cupboards, etc.' Everything suggests that the source of light continues to be evocative of the origin of all things: even though it no longer illuminates the family circle from the ceiling, even though it has been dispersed and made manifold, it is apparently still the sign of a privileged intimacy, still able to invest things with unique value, to create shadows and invent presences. Small wonder that a system founded on the objective manipulation of simple and homogeneous elements should strive to eliminate this last sign of internal radiance, of the symbolic envelopment of things by look or desire.

Mirrors and Portraits

Another symptomatic change is the disappearance of looking-glasses and mirrors. A psycho-sociology of the mirror is overdue, especially in the wake of so much metaphysics. The traditional peasant milieu had no mirrors, perhaps even feared them as somewhat eerie. The bourgeois interior, by contrast, and what remains of that interior in present-day serially produced furniture, has mirrors in profusion, hung on the walls and incorporated into wardrobes, sideboards, cabinets or panelling. As a source of light, the mirror enjoys a special place in the room. This is the basis of the ideological role it has played, everywhere in the domestic world of the well-to-do, as redundancy, superfluity, reflection: the mirror is an opulent object which affords the self-indulgent bourgeois individual the opportunity to exercise his privilege – to reproduce his own image and revel in his possessions. In a more general sense we may say that the mirror is a symbolic object which not only reflects the characteristics of the individual but also echoes in its expansion the historical expansion of individual consciousness. It thus carries the stamp of approval of an entire social order: it is no coincidence that the century of Louis XIV is epitomized by the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, nor that, in more recent times, the spread of mirrors in apartments coincided with the spread of the triumphal Pharisaism of bourgeois consciousness, from Napoleon III to Art Nouveau. But things have changed. There is no place in the functional ensemble for reflection for its own sake. The mirror still exists, but its most appropriate place is in the

bathroom, unframed. There, dedicated to the fastidious care of the appearance that social intercourse demands, it is liberated from the graces and glories of domestic subjectivity. By the same token other objects are in turn liberated from mirrors; hence, they are no longer tempted to exist in a closed circuit with their own images. For mirrors close off space, presuppose a wall, refer back to the centre of the room. The more mirrors there are, the more glorious is the intimacy of the room, albeit more turned in upon itself. The current proliferation of openings and transparent partitions clearly represents a diametrically opposed approach. (Furthermore, all the tricks that mirrors make possible run counter to the current demand for a frank use of materials.) A chain has definitely been broken, and there is a real logic to the modern approach when it eliminates not only central or over-visible light sources but also the mirrors that used to reflect them; by thus eschewing any focus on or return to a central point, it frees space of the converging squint which gave bourgeois décor – much like bourgeois consciousness in general – such a cross-eyed view of itself.[6]

Something else, too, has disappeared in tandem with mirrors: the family portrait, the wedding photograph in the bedroom, the full-length or half-length portrait of the master of the house in the drawing-room, the framed close-ups of the children almost everywhere. All these, constituting a sort of diachronic mirror of the family, disappear along with mirrors themselves when a certain level of modernity is reached (although this has not happened as yet on any wide scale). Even works of art, whether originals or reproductions, no longer have a part to play as an absolute value, but merely in a combining mode. The success of prints as decoration in contrast to framed pictures is in part to be explained by their lower absolute value, and hence greater value in association. No object, any more than lights and mirrors, must be allowed to regain too intense a focus.

6. The mirror occasionally makes a comeback, but it does so in a baroque cultural mode, as a secondary object – a romantic looking-glass, say, or an antique or bull's-eye mirror. The function is no longer the same (and will be addressed below apropos of antiques in general).

Clocks and Time

Another illusion forsworn by the modern interior is the illusion of time. An essential object has vanished: the clock. It is worth recalling that although the centre of the peasant room is the fire and fireplace, the clock is nevertheless a majestic and living element therein. In the bourgeois or petty-bourgeois interior it takes the form of the clock that so often crowns the marble mantelpiece, itself usually dominated by a mirror above – the whole ensemble constituting the most extraordinary symbolic résumé of bourgeois domesticity. The clock is to time as the mirror is to space. Just as the relationship to the reflected image institutes a closure and a kind of introjection of space, so the clock stands paradoxically for the permanence and introjection of time. Country clocks are among the most sought-after of objects, precisely because they capture time and strip it of surprises within the intimacy of a piece of furniture. There is nothing in the world more reassuring. The measuring of time produces anxiety when it serves to assign us to social tasks, but it makes us feel safe when it substantializes time and cuts it into slices like an object of consumption. Everybody knows from experience how intimate a ticking clock can make a place feel; the reason is that the clock's sound assimilates the place to the inside of our own body. The clock is a mechanical heart that reassures us about our own heart. It is precisely this process of infusion or assimilation of the substance of time, this presence of duration, which is rejected, just like all other returns to inwardness, by a modern order based on externality, spatiality and objective relationships.

Towards a Sociology of Interior Design?

It is the whole world of *Stimmung* that has disappeared, the world of 'natural' harmony between movements of the emotions and the presence of things: an internalized atmosphere as opposed to the externalized atmosphere of modern 'interiors'. Today, value resides neither in appropriation nor in intimacy but in information, in inventiveness, in control, in a continual openness to objective messages – in short, in the syntagmatic calculation which is, strictly speaking, the foundation of the discourse of the modern home-dweller.

The entire conception of decoration has changed too. Traditional good taste, which decided what was beautiful on the basis of secret affinities, no longer has any part here. That taste constituted a poetic discourse, an evocation of self-contained objects that responded to one another; today objects do not respond to one another, they communicate – they have no individual presence but merely, at best, an overall coherence attained by virtue of their simplification as components of a code and the way their relationships are calculated. An unrestricted combinatorial system enables man to use them as the elements of his structural discourse.

Advertising widely promotes this new conception of decoration: 'Create a livable and well-organized three-room flat in 30 square metres!'; 'Multiply your flat by four!' More generally, it always talks of interior decorating in terms of problems and solutions, and it is here, rather than in 'good taste', that the current direction of decoration is to be found: it is no longer a matter of setting up a theatre of objects or creating an ambience, but of solving a problem, devising the subtlest possible response to a complicated set of conditions, mobilizing a space.

In the case of serial objects, the possibilities of this functional discourse are reduced. Objects and furniture of this kind are dispersed elements whose syntactic links are not evident; to the degree that they are arranged in a calculated way, the organizing principle is penury, and the objects appear impoverished in their abstraction. This is a necessary abstraction, however, for it provides the basis, at the level of the model, for the homogeneity of the elements in functional interaction. First of all man must stop mixing himself up with things and investing them with his own image; he will then be able, beyond the utility they have for him, to project onto them his game plan, his calculations, his discourse, and invest these manoeuvres themselves with the sense of a message to others, and a message to oneself. By the time this point is reached the mode of existence of 'ambient' objects will have changed completely, and *a sociology of furnishing will perforce have given way to a sociology of interior design.*[7]

7. Roland Barthes describes this new stage as it affects cars:

> . . . the uniformity of models seems to belie the very idea of technical performance, so 'normal' driving becomes the only possible field in which phantasies of power and invention can be invested. The car thus

Both the images and the discourse of advertising attest to this development: the discourse, by placing the subject directly on the stage as actor and manager, in both the indicative and the imperative moods; the images, to the contrary, by leaving the subject out, for his presence would, in a way, be an anachronism. The subject is himself the order he puts into things, and this order excludes redundancy: man has simply to remove himself from the picture. His presence has accomplished its task. What man now creates is a space, not a décor, and whereas the figure of the master of the house was a normal part – indeed, the clearest connotation – of the traditional décor, a signature is thoroughly alien to any 'functional' space.

Man the Interior Designer

We are beginning to see what the new model of the home-dweller looks like: 'man the interior designer' is neither an owner nor a mere user – rather, he is an active engineer of atmosphere. Space is at his disposal like a kind of distributed system, and by controlling this space he holds sway over all possible reciprocal relations between the objects therein, and hence over all the roles they are capable of assuming. (It follows that he must also be 'functional' himself: he and the space in question must be homogeneous if his messages of design are to leave him and return to him successfully.) What matters to him is neither possession nor enjoyment but responsibility, in the strict sense which implies that it is at all times possible for him to determine 'responses'. His praxis is exclusively external. This modern home-dweller does not 'consume' his objects. (Here again, 'taste' no longer has the slightest part to play, for in both its meanings it refers us back to self-contained objects whose form contains an 'edible' substance, so to speak, which

transfers its phantasied power to a specific set of practices. Since we can no longer tinker with the object itself, we are reduced to tinkering with the way it is driven . . . it is no longer the car's forms and functions that call forth human dreams but, rather, its handling, and before long, perhaps, we shall be writing not a mythology of the automobile but a mythology of driving. ('La voiture, projection de l'ego', *Réalités*, no. 213, October 1963)

makes them susceptible of internalization.) Instead of consuming objects, he dominates, controls and orders them. He discovers himself in the manipulation and tactical equilibration of a system.

There is clearly something abstract about this model of the 'functional' home-dweller. Advertising would like us to believe that modern man no longer fundamentally *needs* his objects, that all he has to do now is operate among them as an intelligent technician of communications. Our environment, however, is a *directly experienced* mode of existence, and it is very abstract indeed to apply to it computational and informational models borrowed from the purely technical realm. Furthermore, this objectivizing approach is accompanied by a cascade of ambiguous phraseology – 'to your own taste', 'to your own measurements', 'personalization', 'the atmosphere will be yours alone', and so forth – which appears to contradict that approach but in fact covers for it. The objective game which man the interior designer is invited to play is invariably taken over by the double-dealing of advertising. Yet the game's very logic conveys with it the image of a general strategy of human relations, the image of a human project, of a *modus vivendi* for the technical age – a genuine change of civilization whose impact may be discerned even in everyday life.

Consider the object for a moment: the object as humble and receptive supporting actor, as a sort of psychological slave or confidant – the object as directly experienced in traditional daily life and illustrated throughout the history of Western art down to our own day. This object was the reflection of a total order, bound up with a well-defined conception of décor and perspective, substance and form. According to this conception, the form is an absolute dividing-line between inside and outside. Form is a rigid container, and within it is substance. Beyond their practical function, therefore, objects – and specifically objects of furniture – have a primordial function as vessels, a function that belongs to the register of the imaginary.[8] This explains their psychological receptiveness. They are the

8. A law of dimension also seems to come into play, however, at the level of symbolic organization: any object above a certain size, even one with phallic significance (car, rocket), becomes a receptacle, vessel or womb, while any below a particular size becomes penile, even if it is a bowl or a knick-knack.

reflection of a whole view of the world according to which each being is a 'vessel of inwardness' and relations between beings are transcendent correlations of substances; thus the house itself is the symbolic equivalent of the human body, whose potent organic schema is later generalized into an ideal design for the integration of social structures. All this makes up a complete mode of life whose basic ordering principle is Nature as the original substance from which value is derived. In creating or manufacturing objects, man makes himself, through the imposition of a form (i.e. through culture), into the transubstantiator of nature. It is the passing down of substances from age to age, from form to form, which supplies the archetype of creativity, namely creation *ab utero* and the whole poetic and metaphorical symbolic system that goes with it.[9] So, with meaning and value deriving from the hereditary transmission of substances under the jurisdiction of form, the world is experienced as given (as it always is in the unconscious and in childhood), and the task is to reveal and perpetuate it. So too, with the form perfectly circumscribing the object, a portion of nature is included therein, just as in the case of the human body: the object on this view is essentially anthropomorphic. Man is thus bound to the objects around him by the same visceral intimacy, *mutatis mutandis*, that binds him to the organs of his own body, and 'ownership' of the object always tends virtually towards the appropriation of its substance by oral annexation and 'assimilation'.

What we glimpse today in modern interiors is the coming end of this order of Nature; what is appearing on the horizon, beyond the break-up of form, beyond the dissolution of the formal boundary between inside and outside and of the whole dialectic of being and appearance relating to that boundary, is a qualitatively new kind of relationship, a new kind of objective responsibility. As directly experienced, the project of a technological society implies putting the very idea of genesis into question and omitting all the origins, received meanings and 'essences' of which our old pieces of furniture remained concrete symbols; it implies practical computation and conceptualization on the basis of a total abstraction, the

9. Intellectual and artistic production, traditionally seen in terms of gifts, inspiration or genius, has never really been anything more than an echo of this archetype.

notion of a world no longer given but instead produced – mastered, manipulated, inventoried, controlled: a world, in short, that has to be *constructed*.[10]

Although it is different in kind from the traditional procreative order, this modern order nevertheless also depends on a basic symbolic system. Whereas the earlier civilization, founded on the natural order of substances, may be said to have been underpinned by oral structures, the modern order of production, calculation and functionality must be viewed as a phallic order linked to the enterprise whose goal is the supersession and transformation of the given and the opening up of new objective structures; but it is at the same time a faecal order founded on an abstraction or quintessence meant to inform a homogeneous material world, on the measuring off and division of material reality, on a great anal aggressiveness sublimated into play, discourse, ordering, classifying and placement.

The organizing of things, even when in the context of technical enterprise it has every appearance of being objective, always remains a powerful springboard for projection and cathexis. The best evidence of this is the obsessiveness that lies behind so many organizational projects and (of most relevance to our present discussion) behind the will to design. Everything has to intercommunicate, everything has to be functional – no more secrets, no more mysteries, everything is organized, therefore everything is clear. This is not the old slogan of the house-proud: a place for everything and everything in its place. That obsession was moral, today's is functional – and explicable in terms of the faecal function, which requires absolute conductivity in all internal organs. Here we have the basis for a character profile of technical civilization: if hypochondria is an obsession with the circulation of substances and the functioning of the primary organs, we might well describe modern man, the cybernetician, as a mental hypochondriac, as someone obsessed with the perfect circulation of messages.

10. As a matter of fact this model of praxis emerges clearly only when a high technical level has been attained, or in the context of very advanced everyday objects, such as tape recorders, cars or household appliances, whose dials, dashboards or control panels bespeak the degree of mastery and coordination required to operate them. It should be noted that everyday life is still very largely governed by the traditional forms of praxis.

II Structures of Atmosphere

The term 'interior design' sums up the organizational aspect of the domestic environment, but it does not cover the entire system of the modern living space, which is based on a counterpoint between DESIGN and ATMOSPHERE. In the discourse of advertising the technical need for design is always accompanied by the cultural need for atmosphere. The two structure a single practice; they are two aspects of a single *functional* system. And both mobilize the values of play and of calculation – calculation of function in the case of design, calculation of materials, forms and space in the case of atmosphere.[11]

Atmospheric Values: Colour

Traditional Colour

In the traditional system colours have psychological and moral overtones. A person will 'like' a particular colour, or have 'their' colour. Colour may be dictated by an event, a ceremony, or a social role; alternatively, it may be the characteristic

11. To the extent that arrangement involves dealing with space, it too may be considered a component of atmosphere.

of a particular material – wood, leather, canvas or paper. Above all it remains circumscribed by form; it does not seek contact with other colours, and it is not a free value. Tradition confines colours to its own parochial meanings and draws the strictest of boundary-lines about them. Even in the freer ceremonial of fashion, colours generally derive their significance from outside themselves: they are simply metaphors for fixed cultural meanings. At the most impoverished level, the symbolism of colours gets lost in mere psychological resonance: red is passionate and aggressive, blue a sign of calm, yellow optimistic, and so on; and by this point the language of colours is little different from the languages of flowers, dreams or the signs of the Zodiac.

The traditional treatment of colour negates colour as such, rejects it as a complete value. Indeed, the bourgeois interior reduces it for the most part to discreet 'tints' and 'shades'. Grey, mauve, garnet, beige – all the shades assigned to velours, woollens and satins, to the profusion of fabrics, curtains, carpets and hangings, as also to heavier materials and 'period' forms, imply a moral refusal of both colour and space. But especially of colour, which is deemed too spectacular, and a threat to inwardness. The world of colours is opposed to the world of values, and the 'chic' invariably implies the elimination of appearances in favour of being:[12] black, white, grey – whatever registers zero on the colour scale – is correspondingly paradigmatic of dignity, repression, and moral standing.

'Natural' Colour

Colours would not celebrate their release from this anathema until very late. It would be generations before cars and typewriters came in anything but black, and even longer before refrigerators and washbasins broke with their universal whiteness. It was painting that liberated colour, but it still took a very long time for the effects to register in everyday life. The advent of bright red armchairs, sky-blue

12. 'Loud' colours are meant to strike the eye. If you wear a red suit, you are more than naked – you become a pure object with no inward reality. The fact that women's tailored suits tend to be in bright colours is a reflection of the social status of women as objects.

settees, black tables, multicoloured kitchens, living-rooms in two or three different tones, contrasting inside walls, blue or pink façades (not to mention mauve and black underwear) suggests a liberation stemming from the overthrow of a global order. This liberation, moreover, was contemporary with that of the functional object (with the introduction of synthetic materials, which were polymorphous, and of non-traditional objects, which were polyfunctional). The transition, however, did not go smoothly. Colour that loudly announced itself as such soon began to be perceived as over-aggressive, and before long it was excluded from model forms, whether in clothing or in furnishing, in favour of a somewhat relieved return to discreet tones. There is a kind of obscenity of colour which modernity, after exalting it briefly as it did the explosion of form, seems to end up apprehending in much the same way as it apprehends pure functionality: labour should not be discernible anywhere – neither should instinct be allowed to show its face. The dropping of sharp contrasts and the return to 'natural' colours as opposed to the violence of 'affected' colours reflects this compromise solution at the level of model objects. At the level of serially produced objects, by contrast, bright colour is always apprehended as a sign of emancipation – in fact it often compensates for the absence of more fundamental qualities (particularly a lack of space). The discrimination here is obvious: associated with primary values, with functional objects and synthetic materials, bright, 'vulgar' colours always tend to predominate in the serial interior. They thus partake of the same anonymity as the functional object: having once represented something approaching a liberation, both have now become signs that are merely traps, raising the banner of freedom but delivering none to direct experience.

Furthermore – and this is their paradox – such straightforward and 'natural' colours turn out to be neither. They turn out to be nothing but an impossible echo of the state of nature, which explains why they are so aggressive, why they are so naïve – and why they so very quickly take refuge in an order which, for all that it is no longer the old moral order with its complete rejection of colour, is nevertheless a puritanical order of compromise with nature. This is the order, or reign, of *pastels*. Clothing, cars, showers, household appliances, plastic surfaces – nowhere here, it seems, is the 'honest' colour that painting once liberated as a

living force now to be found. Instead we encounter only the pastels, which aspire to be living colours but are in fact merely *signs* for them, complete with a dash of moralism.

All the same, even though these two compromises, the flight into black and white and the flight into pastels, ultimately voice the same disavowal of pure colour as the direct expression of instinctual life, they do not do so in accordance with the same system. The first is systematized by reference to an unequivocally moral and anti-natural black/white paradigm, whereas the pastel solution answers to a system with a larger register founded *not on opposition to nature but on naturalness*. Nor do the two systems have the same function. Black (or grey) retains the meaning of distinction, of culture, as opposed to the whole range of vulgar colours.[13] As for white, it remains largely pre-eminent in the 'organic' realm: bathrooms, kitchens, sheets, linen – anything that is bound up with the body and its immediate extensions has for generations been the domain of white, a surgical, virginal colour which distances the body from the dangers of intimacy and tends to neutralize the drives. It is also in this unavoidable area of hygiene and down-to-earth tasks that the use of synthetic materials, such as light metals, formica, nylon, plastiflex, aluminium, and so forth, has experienced its most rapid growth and achieved a dominant position. Of course the lightness and practical utility of these materials have much to do with their success, but the very convenience they offer does not merely lighten the burden of work, it also helps to drain value from this whole basic area. The fluid, simplified lines of our refrigerators or similar machines, with their plastic or artificial lightweight material, operate likewise as a kind of 'whiteness' – as a non-stressed indicator of the presence of these objects that bespeaks the radical omission from our consciousness of the responsibilities they imply, and of bodily functions in general, which are never innocent. Little by little colour is making inroads here, too, but resistance to this development is very deeply felt. In any case, even if kitchens are blue or yellow, even if bathrooms are

13. Already, however, there are quite a few cars that are simply no longer available in black; apart from mourning or other ceremonial uses, black has almost completely disappeared from American life (except where it is brought back as a combining element).

pink (or even black – a 'snobbish' black as a reaction to the former 'moral' white), we may still justifiably ask to what nature such colours allude. For even if they do not turn pastel, they do connote a kind of nature, one that has its own history: the 'nature' of leisure time and holidays.

It is not 'real' nature which suddenly transfigures the atmosphere of daily life, but holidays – that simulacrum of nature, the reverse side of everyday routine, thriving not on nature but on the Idea of Nature. It is holidays that serve as a model here, holidays whose colours devolve into the primary everyday realm. And it was indeed in the fake natural environment of holidays, with its caravan, tents and camping gear, experienced as a model and as a zone of freedom, that the tendency towards bright colours, to plasticity, to the ephemeral practicality of labour-saving gadgets, and so on, first came to the fore. We began by transplanting our little house into Nature, only to end up bringing the values of leisure and the idea of Nature back home with us. There has been a sort of flight of objects into the sphere of leisure: freedom and the absence of responsibilities are thus inscribed both in colours and in the transitory and insignificant character of materials and forms.

'Functional' Colour

Thus, after a few brief episodes of violent liberation (notably in the world of art, with, in the end, but mild impact upon everyday life – except, of course, for the spheres of advertising and commerce, where colour's power to corrupt enjoys full rein), colour was immediately taken back in hand by a system in *which nature no longer plays any part except as naturalness* – as a mere connotation of nature behind whose screen instinctual values continue to be subtly disavowed. Nevertheless, the very abstractness of these now 'free' colours means that they are at last able to play an active role. It is towards this third stage that colour is at present orientating itself so far as model objects are concerned: a stage characterized by colour as an atmospheric value. Certainly an 'atmospheric' interplay of this kind is already prefigured in the colours associated with leisure, but these colours still refer too clearly to a system directly experienced, namely holidays and the primary level of everyday life; consequently they are subject to external constraints. In the fully

fledged system of atmosphere, by contrast, colours obey no principle but that of their own interaction; no longer constrained in any way, whether by ethical considerations or by nature, they answer to one imperative only – the gauging of atmosphere.

Indeed, in a sense we are no longer dealing with colours *per se* but with more abstract values. The combination, matching and contrast of tones are the real issues when it comes to the relationship between colour and atmosphere. Blue can go with green – all colours are capable of combination – but only certain blues with certain greens; furthermore, it is not so much a question of blue and green as one of *hot and cold*. At the same time, colour is no longer a way of emphasizing each object by setting it off from the décor; colours are now contrasting ranges of shades, their value has less and less to do with their sensory qualities, they are often dissociated from their form, and it is their tonal differences that give a room its 'rhythm'. Just as modular furniture loses its specific functions so much that at the logical extreme its value resides solely in the positioning of each movable element, so likewise colours lose their unique value, and become relative to each other and to the whole. This is what is meant by describing them as 'functional'.

Consider the following descriptions from a practical guide to interior decoration:

> The framework of the seats has been painted in the same shade as the walls, while the shade chosen for the upholstery echoes that of the hangings. There is harmony between the cold tones, off-white and blue, but certain touches supply the necessary warm response: the gold frame of the Louis XVI mirror, the light-coloured wood of the table, the parquet floor, and the bright red of the carpets. Red here constitutes a sort of upward movement – the red of the carpet, the red of the seats, the red of the cushions – to which is opposed a downward movement in the blues of hangings, settees and chairs.[14]

14. Betty Pepys, *Le guide pratique de la décoration*, p. 163.

> A plain matte white background interrupted by great blue surfaces (on the ceiling). White and blue are repeated in the arrangement of the décor: a white marble table, a screen partition. . . . A warm touch is supplied by the bright red doors of a low storage unit. In fact we find ourselves in a space handled entirely in plain colours, devoid of any nuances of tone or of any softness (all the softness having taken refuge in the picture on the left), albeit balanced by large areas of white.[15]

Here is another example: 'The little indoor tropical garden is not just protected but also lent rhythm by a slab of black enamelled glass.' (Notice that black and white in these descriptions retain nothing of their traditional value; they have escaped from the white–black polarity and taken on a *tactical* value within the extended range of all colours.) When one considers the advice to 'choose a particular colour because your wall is large or small, because it contains such and such a number of doors, because your furniture is antique or modern, or designed in a European or an exotic tradition, or for some other precise reason',[16] it becomes clear that the third stage we have been discussing is indeed characterized by an objectivity of colour; strictly speaking, colour is now one more or less complex factor among others – just one element of a solution. Once again, this is what makes colour 'functional' – that is to say, reduced to an abstract conceptual instrument of calculation.

Hot and Cold

So far as colours are concerned, 'atmosphere' depends upon a calculated balance between hot and cold tones. This is a fundamental distinction which – along with a few others (components/seats,[17] design/atmosphere) – helps to endow the discursive system of furnishing with a high degree of coherence, and thus makes it into a determining category of the overall system of objects. (We shall see that

15. Ibid, p. 179.
16. Ibid., p. 191.
17. See below, pp. 44 ff.

this coherence is perhaps merely that of a manifest discourse beneath which a latent discourse is continually deploying its contradictions.) To get back to the warmth of warm tones: this is clearly not a warmth grounded in confidence, intimacy or affection, nor an organic warmth emanating from colours or substances. Warmth of that kind once had its own density and required no opposing cold tones to define it negatively. Nowadays, on the other hand, both warm and cold tones are required to interact, in each ensemble, with structure and form. When we read that 'The warmth of its materials lends intimacy to this well-designed bureau', or when we are told of 'doors of matte oiled Brazilian rosewood traversed by chrome-plated handles [and] chairs covered in a buff leatherette that blends them perfectly into this austere and warm ensemble', we find that warmth is always contrasted with rigour, organization, structure, or something of the sort, and that every 'value' is defined by this contrast between two poles. 'Functional' warmth is thus a warmth that no longer issues forth from a warm substance, nor from a harmonious juxtaposition of particular objects, but instead arises from the systematic oscillation or abstract synchrony of a perpetual 'warm-and-cold' which in reality continually defers any real 'warm' feeling. This is a purely *signified* warmth – hence one which, by definition, is never realized: a warmth characterized, precisely, by the absence of any source.

Atmospheric Values: Materials

Natural Wood/Cultural Wood

The same sort of analysis applies to materials – to wood, for example, so sought after today for nostalgic reasons. Wood draws its substance from the earth, it lives and breathes and 'labours'. It has its latent warmth; it does not merely reflect, like glass, but burns from within. Time is embedded in its very fibres, which makes it the perfect container, because every content is something we want to rescue from time. Wood has its own odour, it ages, it even has parasites, and so on. In short, it is a material that has *being*. Think of the notion of 'solid oak' – a living idea for each of us, evoking as it does the succession of generations, massive furniture and ancestral family homes. The question we must ask, however, is

whether this 'warmth' of wood (or likewise the 'warmth' of freestone, natural leather, unbleached linen, beaten copper, or any of the elements of the material and maternal dream that now feeds a high-priced nostalgia) still has any meaning.

By now functional substitutes for virtually all organic and natural materials have been found in the shape of plastic and polymorphous substances: wool, cotton, silk and linen are thus all susceptible of replacement by nylon and its countless variants, while wood, stone and metal are giving way to concrete and polystyrene.[18] There can be no question of rejecting this tendency and simply dreaming of the ideal warm and human substance of the objects of former times. The distinction between natural and synthetic substances, just like that between traditional colours and bright colours, is strictly a value judgement. Objectively, substances are simply what they are: there is no such thing as a true or a false, a natural or an artificial substance. How could concrete be somehow less 'authentic' than stone? We apprehend *old* synthetic materials such as paper as altogether natural – indeed, glass is one of the richest substances we can conceive of. In the end, the inherited nobility of a given material can exist only for a cultural ideology analogous to that of the aristocratic myth itself in the social world – and even that cultural prejudice is vulnerable to the passage of time.

The point is to understand, apart from the vast horizons opened up on the practical level by these new substances, just how they have changed the 'meaning' of the materials we use.

Just as the shift to shades (warm, cold or intermediate) means that colours are stripped of their moral and symbolic status in favour of an abstract quality which makes their systematization and interplay possible, so likewise the manufacture of synthetics means that materials lose their symbolic naturalness and become

18. This development at least partially realizes the substantialist myth which, beginning in the sixteenth century, informed the stucco and the worldly demiurgy of the baroque style: the notion that the whole world could be cast from a single ready-made material. This substantialist myth is one aspect of the functionalist myth that I discuss elsewhere, and the equivalent on the material plane of automatism on the functional one. The idea is that a 'machine of machines' would replace all human gestures and institute a synthetic universe. It should be borne in mind, however, that the 'substantialist' dream is the most primitive and repressive aspect of the myth as a whole, for it continues to enshrine a pre-mechanist alchemy of transubstantiation.

polymorphous, so achieving a higher degree of abstractness which makes possible a universal play of associations among materials, and hence too a transcendence of the formal antithesis between natural and artificial materials. There is thus no longer any difference 'in nature' between a Thermoglass partition and a wooden one, between rough concrete and leather: whether they embody 'warm' or 'cold' values, they all now have exactly the same status as component materials. These materials, though disparate in themselves, are nevertheless homogeneous as cultural signs, and thus susceptible of organization into a coherent system. Their abstractness makes it possible to combine them at will.[19]

The Logic of Atmosphere

This 'discourse of atmosphere' concerning colours, substance, volume, space, and so on mobilizes all these elements simultaneously in a great systematic reorganization: it is because furniture now comprises movable elements in a decentralized space, and because it has a correspondingly lighter structure based on assembly and veneers, that there is a case for more 'abstract' woods – teak, mahogany, rosewood or certain Scandinavian woods.[20] And it so happens that the colours of these woods are not traditional either, but lighter or darker variations, often varnished, lacquered, or left deliberately unfinished; the main point, though, is that the colour in question, like the wood itself, is always *abstract* – an object of mental manipulation along with everything else. The entire modern environment is thus

19. And this is the difference, for instance, between the 'solid oak' of old and the present-day use of teak. Teak is not fundamentally distinct from oak in respect of origin, exoticism or cost; it is its use in the creation of atmosphere which means that it is no longer a primary natural material, dense and warm, but, rather, *a mere cultural sign of such warmth*, and by virtue of that fact reinstated *qua* sign, like so many other 'noble' materials, in the system of the modern interior: no longer wood-as-material but wood-as-component. And now, instead of the quality of presence, it has atmospheric value.

20. Certainly these woods are technically better suited than oak to the needs of veneering and assembling. It must also be said that exoticism plays the same role here as the idea of holidays does in the use of bright colours: it evokes the myth of an escape via 'naturalness'. The essential point, however, is that for all these reasons these woods are 'secondary' woods, embodying a cultural abstraction that enables them to partake of the logic of the system.

transposed onto the level of a sign system, namely ATMOSPHERE, which is no longer produced by the way any particular element is handled, nor by the beauty or ugliness of that element. That used to be true for the inconsistent and subjective system of tastes and colours, of *de gustibus non est disputandum*, but under the present system the success of the whole occurs in the context of the constraints of abstraction and association.

Whether or not you care for teak, for example, you are obliged to acknowledge that its use is consistent with the organization of component elements, that its shade is consistent with a plane surface, hence also with a particular 'rhythm' of space, etc., etc. – and that this is indeed the law of the system. There is nothing at all – not antiques, not rustic furniture in solid wood, not even precious or craft objects – that cannot be incorporated into the interactions of the system, thus attesting to the boundless possibilities of such abstract integration. The current proliferation of such objects does not constitute a contradiction in the system:[21] they enter the system precisely as the most 'modern' materials and colours, and as atmospheric elements. Only a traditional and fundamentally naïve view would find inconsistency in the encounter, on a teak-veneered chest, of a futuristic cube in raw metal and the rotten wood of a sixteenth-century carving. The point is, though, that *the consistency here is not the natural consistency of a unified taste but the consistency of a cultural system of signs.* Not even a 'Provençal' room, not even an authentic Louis XVI drawing-room, can attest to anything beyond a vain nostalgic desire to escape from the modern cultural system: both are just as far removed from the 'style' they ape as any formica-topped table or any black-metal and leatherette tubular chair. An exposed ceiling beam is every bit as abstract as a chrome-plated tube or an Emauglas partition. What nostalgia paints as an authentic whole object is still nothing but a combining variant, as is indeed signalled by the language used in speaking of provincial or period 'ensembles'. The word 'ensemble', closely related to 'atmosphere', serves to reintroduce any conceivable element, whatever subjective associations it may carry, into the logic of the system. That this system is affected

21. It does indicate a *shortcoming* of the system – but a successfully integrated one. On this point, see the discussion of antiques below.

by ideological connotations and latent motives is indisputable, and we shall return to this question later. But it is incontestable, too, that its logic, which is that of a combination of signs, is irreversible and limitless. No object can escape this logic, just as no product can escape the formal logic of the commodity.

A Model Material: Glass

One material sums up the idea of atmosphere and may be thought of as embodying a universal function in the modern environment. That material is GLASS. Advertising calls it 'the material of the future' – a future which, as we all know, will itself be 'transparent'. Glass is thus both the material used and the ideal to be achieved, both end and means. So much for metaphysics. Psychologically speaking, glass in its practical, as in its imaginary uses has many merits. It is the ideal modern recipient: it does not 'pick up the taste', it does not change over time as a function of its content, as do wood and metal, nor does it shroud that content in mystery. Glass eliminates all confusion in short order, and does not conduct heat. Fundamentally it is less a recipient than an isolator – the miracle of a rigid fluid – a content that is also a container, and hence the basis of a transparency between the two: a kind of transcendence which, as we have seen, is the first priority in the creation of atmosphere. Moreover, glass implies a symbolism of access to a secondary state of consciousness, and at the same time it is ranked symbolically at zero level on the scale of materials. Its symbolism is one of solidification – hence of abstractness. This abstractness opens the door to the abstractness of the inner world: the crystal of madness; to the abstractness of the future: the clairvoyant's crystal ball; and to the abstractness of nature: the other worlds to which the eye gains entry via microscope or telescope. And certainly, with its indestructibility, immunity to decay, colourlessness, odourlessness, and so on, glass exists at a sort of zero level of matter: glass is to matter as a vacuum is to air. We have already noted the operation of the values of play and calculation, combined with abstraction, apropos of the system of atmosphere. Above all, though, glass is the most effective conceivable material expression of the fundamental ambiguity of 'atmosphere': the fact that it is at once proximity and distance, intimacy and the refusal of intimacy, communication and non-

communication. Whether as packaging, window or partition, glass is the basis of a transparency without transition: we see, but cannot touch. The message is universal and abstract. A shop window is at once magical and frustrating – the strategy of advertising in epitome. The transparency of jars containing food products implies a formal satisfaction, a kind of visual collusion, yet basically the relationship is one of exclusion. Glass works exactly like atmosphere in that it allows nothing but the *sign* of its content to emerge, in that it interposes itself in its transparency, just as the system of atmosphere does in its abstract consistency, between the materiality of things and the materiality of needs. Not to mention glass's cardinal virtue, which is of a moral order: its purity, reliability and objectivity, along with all those connotations of hygiene and prophylaxis which make it truly the material of the future – a future, after all, that is to be one of disavowal of the body, and of the primary and organic functions, in the name of a radiant and functional objectivity (of which hygiene is the moral version for the body).

> Live in a garden in close intimacy with nature – experience the charm of every season totally, without giving up the comforts of a modern living space. This is the new heaven on earth, the grace bestowed by houses with picture windows.
>
> Glass tile or block set in concrete makes it possible to construct translucent walls, partitions, arches and ceilings that are as strong as if they were built of stone. Such 'transpartitions' allow the passage of light, which is thus able freely to permeate the whole house. But, since the glass used is not see-through, the privacy of each room is preserved.

Clearly the age-old symbolism of the 'house of glass' is still with us, even though in the modern version it has lost much of its sublime aspect. *The distinction accorded transcendence has given way to that accorded atmosphere* (just as in the case of mirrors). Glass facilitates faster communication between inside and outside, yet at the same time it sets up an invisible but material caesura which prevents such communication from becoming a real opening onto the world. Indeed, the modern 'house of

glass' does not open onto the outside at all; instead it is the outside world, nature, landscape, that penetrates, thanks to glass and its abstractness, into the intimate or private realm inside, and there 'plays freely' as a component of atmosphere. The whole world thus becomes integrated as spectacle into the domestic universe.[22]

The Man of Relationship and Atmosphere

From the foregoing account of colours and materials we may already draw a number of conclusions. The systematic alternation between hot and cold is fundamentally a defining trait of the concept of 'atmosphere' itself, for *atmosphere is always both warmth and distance.*

The 'atmospheric' interior is designed to permit the same alternation between warmth and non-warmth, between intimacy and distance, to operate not only between the objects that comprise it but also between the human beings who live in it. Friend or relative, family or customer – *some* relationship is always required, but it is supposed to remain mobile and 'functional'; in other words, the aim is that relating should be possible at every instant, but its subjective aspects should no longer be problematic, and the various relationships should therefore be freely

22. The ambiguity of glass becomes especially clear when we shift our focus from living-spaces to consumption and packaging – areas where its use is ever on the increase. Here too glass has all the desirable qualities: it protects the product against deterioration, letting nothing in but the appraising glance. 'To contain the product properly and let it be seen': a perfect definition of the goal of packaging. Mouldable to any form, glass offers unlimited options from the aesthetic point of view. We may confidently expect that before long it will be used to 'present' fruit and vegetables, ensuring that they remain as fresh as the morning dew. Very likely it will soon be enclosing even ordinary steaks with its transparent sheath. Invisible yet ubiquitous, it will constitute the ideal analogue of a more beautiful and limpidly clear life. Further, whatever purpose it may serve, glass can never become true refuse because it is without odour. It is a 'noble' material. All the same, the consumer is invited to throw it out after using it: 'No deposit – no return'. Glass thus cloaks the purchase in its 'indestructible' prestige – yet must be destroyed immediately. Is there a contradiction here? Not really, because glass is still playing its part as a component of atmosphere, but in this case 'atmosphere' has attained its full economic meaning, that of *packaging*. Glass sells things, it is functional in that sense, but it must also be consumed itself and, indeed, consumed at an accelerated rate. The psychological function of glass (its transparency and purity) is thus totally recuperated and submerged by its economic function. The sublime ends up as a motivation to buy.

interchangeable. Such is the nature of functional relationships, from which desire is (in theory) absent, having been neutralized for the sake of atmosphere.[23] This, however, is where ambiguity begins.[24]

Seats

This ambiguity is attested to by the objects that best express the relationship of atmosphere: *seats*, which we see continually alternating in the system of modern furnishing with modular *components*. These antithetical kinds of objects concretize the opposition between the concepts of interior design and atmosphere (although they do not constitute the sole underpinnings of that opposition).

The minimal function of the countless seats that fill the furnishing and home-decorating magazines is unquestionably to permit people to sit down: to sit down to rest, or sit down at a table to eat. But chairs no longer gravitate towards a table; these days seats take on their own meaning, while tables – typically low coffee tables – are subordinate to them. This meaning, moreover, refers not to the posture of the body but to the position of interlocutors relative to each other. The general arrangement of the seating and slight changes in people's positions in the course of an evening may be said, for example, to constitute a discourse in themselves. Modern seating – pouf or settee, wall-sofa or easy chair – invariably lays the stress on sociability and conversation, promoting a sort of all-purpose position, appropriate to the modern social human being, which de-emphasizes everything in the sitting posture that suggests confrontation. No more beds for lying in, no more chairs for sitting at[25] – instead, 'functional' seats which treat all positions, and

23. Even sexuality itself in its modern conception is subsumed by the functional relationship. As distinct from sensuality, which is warm and instinctual, sexuality is at once HOT AND COLD – by virtue of this it ceases to be a passion and becomes nothing but an atmospheric value.

24. In the system of objects, as in all directly experienced systems, the major structural antitheses are always in effect more complicated than they seem, for what appears as a structural antithesis from the standpoint of the system may well be simply a consistent rationalization of an underlying conflict.

25. Except for chairs at the dining-table – which are upright and have peasant-like overtones. But this evidences a reflex cultural process.

hence all human relationships, as a free synthesis. All moral overtones are gone: one no longer sits opposite anyone. It is impossible to become angry in such seats, or to argue, or to seek to persuade. They dictate a relaxed social interaction which makes no demands, which is open-ended but above all open to play. From their depths one is no longer obliged to meet another person's gaze or to look directly at them: these seats are so designed that one's eyes are entitled simply to look people over in a general way, for their positioning and depth combine to keep everyone's eye level 'naturally' at half the usual altitude – at an ill-defined elevation which is also that of the flow of words. Seats of this kind may well respond to a basic current concern, namely the wish never to be alone – but never to be face to face with another person either. The body is invited to relax, but it is above all the gaze, with all its perils, that must be put out to grass. Even as modern society frees us in large measure from the promiscuity of primary functions, it exacerbates the promiscuity of secondary ones, especially that of the gaze and its tragic dimension. Accordingly, just as primary demands are veiled, so likewise every effort is made to relieve social intercourse of all its rough edges, contradictoriness and, ultimately, obscenity – what is obscene here being the direct play of aggression and desire in the gaze.

The binary opposition between 'components' and 'seats' thus amounts to a complete system: modular components are the vehicle of modern man's organizing discourse, while from the depths of his chairs he proffers a discourse of relationship.[26] So 'man the interior designer' is always coupled with the 'man of relationship and atmosphere', and the two together give us 'functional man'.

26. Or perhaps, after all, simply a *passive* discourse – for we should not forget that advertising is far less inclined to enjoin the active arrangement of furniture than to stress the passive joys of relaxation. On this point the notion of atmosphere is similarly ambiguous, for it has both active and passive implications. 'Functional man' is exhausted from the start. And the millions of leather and Dunlopillo armchairs, each deeper than the last, whose modern virtues of atmosphere and repose fill the pages of the glossy magazines, amount to a sort of massive invitation from our future civilization to resolve all our tensions and bask in a placid seventh-day euphoria. The whole ideology of that civilization – still far distant, yet imminent in model objects – is to be found in these images of an idyllic, neo-pastoral modernity in which the inhabitant communes with his atmosphere from the mellow depths of his chair. Having solved the problems of his emotions, his functions and his contradictions, so that all that is left are relationships, a system of relationships whose structure he

Cultural Connotation and Censorship

For seats, then, but also for all other objects, cultural connotation is now as essential a requirement as calculation. In earlier times furniture stated its function. The fundamental nurturing function of the house found unequivocal expression in tables and sideboards that were heavy, round-bellied – overloaded with connotations of motherhood. Furniture whose function was taboo was flatly withdrawn from view, as in the case of a bed concealed in an alcove. As for the bed in the middle of the room, it was even more eloquent in its embodiment of bourgeois marriage (and not, of course, of sexuality). Today the bed is no more – in its place we have only couches, divans, settees and banquettes. Some 'beds' now disappear into the wall, bowing not to moral stricture but to abstract logic.[27] Tables are low, no longer centrally placed, weightless. The whole kitchen has lost its culinary function and is now a functional laboratory. This is progress, moreover, because the traditional environment, for all its directness, was an environment of moral obsession that bespoke the material difficulty of living. We do have more freedom in the modern interior, but this freedom is accompanied by a subtler formalism and a new moralism: everything here indicates the obligatory shift from eating, sleeping and procreating to smoking, drinking, entertaining, discussing, looking and reading. Visceral functions have given way to functions determined by culture. The sideboard used to hold linen, crockery or food; the functional elements of today house books, knick-knacks, a cocktail bar, or nothing at all. The term 'refined' – which, like 'functional', is a catchword of manipulated interior decoration – sums up this cultural constraint perfectly. Rooms have traded in the symbols of family for signs of social relationship. Once a solemn backdrop for affection, they are

rediscovers in a system of objects; having infused the space around him with life and 'created' a multiplicity of ways to integrate his modules into the room as a whole (much as he himself is integrated into the social whole); having thus put together a world absolved of drives and primary functions but overloaded with social connotations of calculation and prestige – having done all this, and tired out by his efforts, the modern home-dweller is ready to cosset his ennui by plunging into an easy chair whose form is a perfect match for the form of his body.

27. An exception here is an object reintroduced with a new connotation that occludes its earlier obscenity, a case in point being the old free-standing eighteenth-century Spanish bed. (See the discussion of antiques below.)

now an equally ritualistic décor of reception. A close reading of modern house-furnishings reveals that they converse among themselves with an ease in every way comparable to that of the dinner guests, that they mingle and drift apart with the very same freedom, and that they convey the same message: namely, that it is quite possible to live without working.

Of course, culture has always played the ideological role of pacifier, sublimating tensions associated with functional imperatives and answering the need for being to take on recognizable form beyond the material reality and conflicts of the world. Such a form – which attests, despite everything, to the existence of a purpose, and ensures the direct memory of a fundamental security – is no doubt even more urgently needed in a technological civilization. It is just that, like the reality it simultaneously reflects and disavows, this form is now being systematized. Systematic technicity calls forth systematic cultural connotation. And *this systematic cultural connotation at the level of objects is what I am calling* ATMOSPHERE.

Atmospheric Values: Gestural Systems and Forms

When we come, in our continuing analysis of atmospheric values, to the consideration of 'functional' forms (variously described as 'contoured', 'dynamic', etc.), we find that the 'stylization' of such forms cannot be disentangled from the stylization of the human gestural systems which correspond to them. The style of such gestural systems always implies the suppression of muscular energy, of labour. Primary functions are overwritten by secondary ones, by relationship and calculation, and instinctual drives give way to cultural connotation. All these tendencies are mediated practically and historically, at the level of objects, by the fundamental supersession of the gestural system of effort, by *the great shift from a universal gestural system of labour to a universal gestural system of control.* This is the turning-point at which a status enjoyed by objects for millennia, their anthropomorphic status, is definitively terminated – destroyed by the new abstractness of energy sources.

The Traditional Gestural System: Effort

So long as the energy applied was muscular in character, and hence immediate and contingent, the tool remained embedded in human relations, rich symbolically speaking but not particularly well designed structurally. The adoption of animals as a source of power did not represent a qualitative change: for entire civilizations human and animal power were essentially on a par. The unchanging nature of the energy employed meant that tools, too, underwent little change. Thus the status of the tool or manual object varied hardly at all over the centuries. Man's profound gestural relationship to objects, which epitomizes his integration into the world, into social structures, can be a highly fulfilling one, and this fulfilment is discernible in the beauty – the 'style' – of the relationship in its reciprocity. It nevertheless constitutes a constraint which, in tandem with the constraints imposed by social structures, stands in the way of real productivity. We cannot but admire scythes, baskets, pitchers or ploughs, amalgams of gestures and forces, of symbols and functions, decorated and stylized by human energy and shaped by the forms of the human body, by the exertions they imply and by the matter they transform; yet the magnificence of such conformities remains subordinate to the limitations of the relationship in question. Man is not free with respect to these objects, nor are these objects free with respect to man. A revolution in energy sources had to occur – long-range practical control had to become possible, along with the storage and measurement of a newly mobile energy – before man and object could be drawn into a fresh, objective dialogue, into a conflict-laden dialectic which had never been implicit in the reciprocal goal-directedness of their former constrained relationship. Only then could man embark upon an objective process of social development and the object likewise tend in the direction of its own truth, that is, its functionality multiplied by the amount of energy released.

For the real object is the functional object. Revolutions in the field of energy entail the replacement of energy symbiosis and symbolic compliance by the rationality of technology and the (relative) rationality of the reign of production. By the same token, man's relationship to objects becomes subject to a social dialectic which is basically that of the forces of production. What interests us here, however, is the impact of this upheaval on the realm of everyday life.

The Functional Gestural System: Control

We know from our practical experience how very far the mediation of gestures between man and things has been stretched: household appliances, cars, gadgetry, heating, lighting, communications and transportation systems – all require no more than minimal energy and action in order to function properly. Often a slight motion of hand or eye suffices; no dexterity is called for – at the most, reflexes. The domestic world, almost as much as the world of work, is governed by regular gestures of control and remote control. Buttons, levers, handles, pedals (even nothing at all – as when one passes in front of a photo-electric cell) have thus replaced pressure, percussion, impact or balance achieved by means of the body, the intensity and distribution of force, and the abilities of the hand (from which little more than quickness is now asked). A prehension of objects involving the whole body has given way to simple contact (of hand or foot) and simple surveillance (by the eye or, occasionally, by the ear). In other words, only man's 'extremities' now have an active part to play in the functional environment.

The liberating abstractness of energy sources is thus accompanied by a concomitant abstractness of human praxis with respect to objects. What is called for here is less a neuromuscular praxis than what Pierre Naville describes as a system of cerebro-sensory vigilance. But such a system cannot be self-sufficient: the total abstractness of remote action must be mitigated by what I refer to as a gestural system of control (by hand, eye, etc.).[28] There is a sense in which this minimal gestural system is essential, for without it all this abstract power would become meaningless. Man has to be reassured about his power by some sense of participation, albeit a merely formal one. So the gestural system of control must be deemed indispensable – not to make the system work *technically*, for more

28. To be more exact, it is not simply that the old gestural system of effort has been stretched out into a gestural system of control: it has also been split into a gestural system of control and a gestural system of *play*. Ignored by modern praxis, but nonetheless freed from its old constraints, the body finds genuine expression in sports and physical leisure activities – or at any rate, these supply it with a compensatory release, for we may well ask whether the splitting into two of the gestural system of effort institutes any real freedom of the body, or whether it merely establishes a binomial whose second term (in this case, games and sports) does no more than compensate for the first. A parallel might be drawn here with the splitting of time into active time and leisure time.

advanced technology could (and no doubt will) make it unnecessary, but, rather, to make that system work *psychologically*.

A New Operational Field

Since the energy of objects is abstract, their functionality is limitless: just as there is now scarcely any substance that has no plastic equivalent, so there is no gesture that cannot be replaced by technology. The simplest of mechanisms is liable to replace and subsume a whole set of gestures, concentrating their effectiveness and becoming independent not only of the agent but also of the material acted upon. Form and utility of the tool, raw material, energy applied – all these factors have changed. Thus the matter dealt with has undergone infinite differentiation – even to the point of disappearing altogether: that processed by a radio, for example, is information. The transformation of energy has entailed that of both materials and functions, for technology is not content merely to encapsulate earlier gestures, it also invents new operations, and above all splits up the operational field into completely different functions or sets of functions. Man's abstract relationship to his (technical) objects, his 'spectacular alienation', is thus less a matter of his gestures having been *replaced* than of the abstractness of the very way in which functions have been *split up*, and the impossibility of any analogical apprehension of this splitting-up by reference to earlier gestures.[29] Only an abstract (never an unmediated) intelligence can adapt to the new technical structures; meanwhile, man himself has yet to adapt to the increasingly exclusive use of these higher functions of intelligence and calculation. Resistance here has deep roots, and creates an irreparable delay. Man has become less rational than his own objects, which now run ahead of him, so to speak, organizing his surroundings and thus

29. The fire is a case in point. Originally the 'hearth' filled the combined functions of heating, cooking and lighting. This was the basis of its symbolic complexity. Later, the kitchen stove – already a kind of appliance – took over the functions of heating and cooking, while retaining a certain symbolic presence. Eventually all three tasks were separated in analytic fashion and assigned to separate specialized appliances whose synthetic aspect lay not in the concrete unity of the hearth but solely in the abstract identity of the energy (gas or electricity) on which they ran. This new environment, based on a completely different division of functions, has no symbolic dimension whatsoever.

appropriating his actions. Take the washing machine, for instance. In its form and operation it has no clear relationship to the clothes washed. The whole operation of washing has lost its specificity in space and time; it is a minimal intervention, a timed procedure in which the water itself is no more than an abstract vehicle for detergent chemicals. Functionally speaking, the washing machine belongs, therefore, to a relational field utterly different from that of the old-fashioned washboard or washtub – a functional field of associations which is no longer co-extensive with other objective operations, with the refrigerator, with the television, with the components of interior design, or with the automobile. Traditional tools, by contrast, belonged to a field of practical mediation between the material to be transformed and the person doing the transforming. We have thus moved from the depth of a vertical field to the extension of a horizontal one.

Just as the various parts of an object's mechanism have structure, so the various technical objects tend, independently of man, to become organized by themselves, to refer to one another in the uniformity of their simplified praxis, and thus come to constitute an articulated order, pursuing its own mode of technological development, wherein man's role does not go beyond a mechanical control which may well ultimately be taken over by the machine itself.

Miniaturization

In place of the continuous (but finite) *space* that gestures create for their purposes around the traditional object, the technical object institutes discontinuous and unlimited *extension*. The principle that regulates this new extension, this functional dimension, is the requirement that organization be maximized and communication optimized. Consequently, technological progress is now accompanied by an ever stronger tendency towards the miniaturization of technical objects.

Freed now from the need to refer to the human scale, to the 'life-size', and ever more taken up by the complexity of messages, mechanisms tend increasingly, on the model of the brain, towards an irreversible concentration of their structures, towards the quintessentially microcosmic.[30] After the Promethean expansion of a

30. This is the reason for our fascination with miniaturized watches, transistor radios, cameras, and so forth.

technology striving to occupy the whole world, the entirety of space, we are now entering the era of a technology that works on the world 'in depth', so to speak. The reign of electronics and cybernetics means that efficiency, freed from the shackles of gestural space, is henceforward dependent upon a saturation of minimal extension, governing a maximized field, which is without common measure with sensory experience.[31]

Stylization, Manipulability, Envelopment

The stylization of forms is invariably a corollary of the growing autonomy of the functional world and the optimized organization of space in its extension. Forms themselves also become more autonomous as they diverge further and further from a morphology founded on the human body and on the physical effort exerted by that body, yet they continue to allude thereto in one way or another. They organize themselves independently, but their former relationship to primary functions subsists in the abstractness of the sign: this is their *connotation*. Consider the hand, whose importance for the gestural system of control we have already mentioned. The first aim of all modern objects is manipulability ('manipulable' being virtually synonymous with 'functional'). But just what is the nature of the 'hand' which thus

31. This tendency to miniaturize may seem paradoxical in the context of a civilization of extension, expansion and spatialization. It is a tendency, however, that embodies both the ideal goal of that civilization and a contradiction within it. For our technological civilization is also a civilization of limits imposed on urban life, of a critical scarcity of space. And it is increasingly, by absolute everyday necessity (and not just by structural necessity), a civilization of the 'compact'. There is undoubtedly a link between lasers, calculators and micro-technology on the one hand and small cars, multifunctional gadgets, 'planned' flats and transistor radios on the other – but this link is not necessarily structural or logical. The principle of maximum organization which gives rise to technologies of miniaturization has the parallel function of palliating (though not resolving) a chronic shortage of space in everyday life. The two functions are not structurally related; it is simply that both are bound up with each other in the context of a single system. As for the everyday technical object, caught between the two, it is uncertain whether it represents a technological advance (miniaturization) or a degrading of the practical system (shortage of space). (The antagonism between structural technological evolution and the constraints of scarcity which govern the system as directly experienced is discussed later – see 'The Transformations of Technology', pp. 123 ff. below.)

determines the forms of these objects? Certainly no longer the prehensile organ that focuses effort: rather, nothing more than the abstract *sign* of manipulability, to which buttons, handles, and so on are all the better suited in that the operation concerned no longer calls for manual labour and, indeed, takes place elsewhere. Here we rediscover (though now on the morphological plane) the myth of naturalness of which we spoke above: the human body delegates no more than the signs of its presence to objects whose functioning, in any case, is independent from now on. At the very most it delegates its 'extremities', while objects, for their part, are 'contoured' in accordance with an abstract morphological meaning. There is a collusion of forms here which no longer refers to man save by way of allusion.[32] It is in this sense only that the object's form 'weds' the hand, that Airborne's armchair (of which more later) 'weds' the shape of your body: one form adapts to another. The traditional object or tool, by contrast, was not in any way 'wedded' to human forms; what it wedded was human physical effort and human gestures – indeed, the human body imposed itself upon that tool in order to carry out a material task. Today the human body would seem to be present only as the abstract justification for the finished form of the functional object. *Functionality is thus no longer the imposition of a real task, but simply the adaptation of one form to another (as of handle to hand) and the consequent supersession or omission of the actual processes of work.*

Thus freed from practical functions and from the human gestural system, forms become purely relative with respect both to one another and to the space to which they lend 'rhythm'. This is how we now define the 'style' of objects: inasmuch as their mechanism is virtual or taken for granted (a few simple gestures evoke its power without making it manifest, while the effective physical embodiment of the object remains indecipherable), it is only their form which is present – which wraps that mechanism in its perfection and confines it within its contours, cloaking and eliminating an energy that has been made into an abstraction and, as it were, crystallized. As in the development of some animal species, the form is externalized, enclosing the object in a sort of carapace. Fluid, transitive, enveloping, it unifies appearances by transcending the alarming discontinuity of the various

32. Just as we saw that in the realm of atmosphere, nature is no more than an allusion.

mechanisms involved and replacing it with a coherent whole. A functional atmosphere implies a continuous closure of line (also of material – of chrome, enamel or plastic) which restores the unity of a world whose profound equilibrium was formerly guaranteed by human gestures. We are heading towards an absolutism of forms: only the form is called for, only the form is read, and at the deepest level it is the functionality of forms that defines 'style'.

The End of the Symbolic Dimension

The fact is that this formal achievement papers over an essential lack; our technological civilization tries to use the universal transitivity of form as a means of compensating for the disappearance of the symbolic relationship associated with the traditional gestural system of work, as a way of making up for the unreality, the symbolic void, of our power.[33]

For gestural mediation is by no means confined to the practical realm, and the energy invested in physical effort is not merely muscular and nervous. Gestures and physical effort are also the vectors of a whole phallic symbolism, as deployed, for example, in such notions as penetration, resistance, moulding or rubbing. The rhythm of the sexual act is the prototype of all rhythmical gestures, and all technological praxis is overdetermined by it.[34] Because they press the whole body into the service of effort and accomplishment, traditional objects and tools acquire something of the deep libidinal cathexis of sexual exchange (as, at another level, do

33. The last thing I want to do, however, is romanticize either physical labour or the traditional gestural system. When one contemplates the centuries during which man was obliged to make up with his own strength for the shortcomings of his tools, when one recalls that, long after the day of slaves and serfs, peasants and craftsmen continued to manipulate objects unchanged since the Stone Age, one can only applaud the new abstractness of energy sources and the decline of a gestural system which was, after all, an appurtenance of servitude. The 'soulless machinism' of today – down to and including electric potato-mashers – is what has made it possible to get beyond the strict equivalence of gesture and product which once used up every moment of every endless day: at long last human gestures can embody a *surplus*. The consequences on another level, however, are nonetheless very far-reaching.

34. See Gaston Bachelard and Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'Imaginaire* (second edition, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963).

dance and ritual).[35] But of course all this is discouraged, demobilized, by the advent of the technical object. Everything once sublimated – and hence cathected symbolically – in the gestural system of work is now repressed. No vestige remains in our technical utilities of the theatrical and anarchic outgrowths of the objects of earlier times, which showed their age, and made no secret of the work they did. Spades and pitchers were living phalluses or vaginas in whose 'obscenity' the instinctual dynamics of human beings lay open to a symbolic reading.[36] The whole gestural system of work was also obscene, in sharp contrast to the miniaturized and abstract gestural system of control to which it has now been reduced. The world of the objects of old seems like a theatre of cruelty and instinctual drives in comparison with the formal neutrality and prophylactic 'whiteness' of our perfect functional objects. Thus the handle of the flatiron gradually diminishes as it undergoes 'contouring' – the term is typical in its superficiality and abstractness; increasingly it suggests the very absence of gesture, and carried to its logical extreme this handle will no longer be manual – merely manipulable. At that point, *the perfecting of the form will have relegated man to a pure contemplation of his power.*

The Abstractness of Power

Man's technical power can thus no longer be mediated, for it has no common measure with the human being and the human body. Nor, by extension, can it any longer be *symbolized*: functional forms can do no more than *connote* it. Certainly they overburden it with meaning in their absolute consistency (aerodynamism, manipulability, automaticity, etc.), but at the same time they are formal expressions

35. Similarly, it is arguable that the gestural system also facilitates the integration into objects of what Piaget calls paternal and maternal 'affective schemata' – the child's relationships to its primal human milieu: the father and mother themselves appear to the child as tools surrounded by other, secondary, tools.

36. Thus the classic maternal house of children's drawings, with its doors and windows, symbolizes both the child itself (a human face) and the body of the mother. Like the disappearance of the old gestural system, the disappearance of this traditional house, complete with storeys, staircase, attic and cellar, signals first and foremost the frustration of a faculty of symbolic recognition: the modern order disappoints us because it stymies any profound involvement, any visceral perception of our own body; because we can now recognize therein scarcely any aspect of our bodily organs, of our somatic organization.

of the void that separates us from our power; in a sense they are the ritual that accompanies the miracle-working of the modern world. They are the signs of our power, then, but also testimony to our irresponsibility with respect to that power. It is here, perhaps, that we should seek the reason for the morose technical satisfaction to which initial euphoria over mechanical achievement has so quickly given way, for the peculiar anxiety that takes hold of all beneficiaries of the wonders of the object, of obligatory non-involvement, and of the passively observed spectacle of their own power. The uselessness of habitual gestures and the breakdown of everyday routines founded on movements of the body have a profound psycho-physiological impact. Indeed, a genuine revolution has taken place on the everyday plane: *objects have now become more complex than human behaviour relative to them.* Objects are more and more highly differentiated – our gestures less and less so. To put it another way: objects are no longer surrounded by the theatre of gesture in which they used to be simply the various roles; instead their emphatic goal-directedness has very nearly turned them into the actors in a global process in which *man* is merely the role, or the spectator.

There is a moral to be drawn from the following little tale. We are in the eighteenth century. An illusionist well versed in clockwork has devised an automaton. An automaton so perfect, with movements so fluid and natural, that when the illusionist and his creation appear on the stage together, the audience cannot tell which is which. The illusionist then finds himself obliged to make his own gestures mechanical, and – in what is really the pinnacle of his art – to alter his own appearance slightly so as to give his show its full meaning; the spectators would eventually chafe if they were left in doubt as to which of the two figures was 'real', and the neatest solution is that they should take the man for the machine, and vice versa. . . .

This story provides a good illustration of a familiar fatal relationship to technology, even though in the case of modern reality we do not awake to the applause of an audience delighted to have been so thoroughly duped; a good analogy for a society with a technical apparatus so highly perfected that it appears to be a 'synthetic' gestural system superior to the traditional system, a sovereign projection of fully realized mental structures. For the time being the human gesture

is still alone capable of supplying the precision and flexibility demanded by certain tasks, but there is no reason to assume that the unceasing forward march of *techne* will not eventually achieve a mimesis which replaces a natural world with an intelligible artificial one. If the simulacrum is so well designed that it becomes an effective organizer of reality, then surely it is man, not the simulacrum, who is turned into an abstraction. It was already apparent to Lewis Mumford that 'the machine leads to a lapse of function which is but one step away from paralysis'.[37] This is no longer a mechanistic hypothesis but reality as directly experienced: the behaviour that technical objects impose is a broken-up sequence of impoverished gestures, of sign-gestures bereft of rhythm. It is rather like what happens to the illusionist of the story who, in response to the perfection of his machine, is led to dismantle and mechanize himself. *The coherence of his own structural projection thus relegates man to the inchoate.* In the face of the functional object the human being becomes dysfunctional, irrational and subjective: an empty form, open therefore to the mythology of the functional, to projected phantasies stemming from the stupefying efficiency of the outside world.

The Functionalist Myth

For the concrete dynamic of effort has not disappeared completely into the abstraction of the mechanisms and gestures of control. It has been internalized as the mental dynamic of a functionalist myth: the myth of the possibility of a totally functional world of which every present-day technical object is already a sign. The repressed gestural system is thus transformed into myth, projection, transcendence. No sooner do we lose sight of the route taken by energy, feel energy to be intrinsic to the object, become the non-responsible beneficiaries of an absence (or near-absence) of any need for gesture and physical effort, than we are surely justified in believing – indeed, are obliged to believe – in an absolute and limitless functionality, in efficacy as the virtue of signs. Something is revived here of the ancient habit, prevalent in a world of magic, of inferring reality from signs. 'Part of

37. *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1934; reprint, San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963), p. 344. Page references are to the reprint edition.

the feeling of the efficacy of primitive magic has survived in the unconditional belief in progress,' writes Gilbert Simondon.[38] This applies not only to technological society in a global sense but also – confusedly but tenaciously – to the everyday environment, where the most insignificant of gadgets may be the focal point of a techno-mythological realm of power. The way objects are used in everyday life implies an almost authoritarian set of assumptions about the world. And what the technical object bespeaks, no longer requiring anything more than our formal participation, is a world without effort, an abstract and completely mobile energy, and the total efficacy of sign-gestures.[39]

Functional Form: The Lighter

All this is exemplified in the stylized fluidity of 'functional' forms. It is precisely this mental dynamic, this simulacrum of a lost symbolic relationship, that such forms connote in their striving to reinvent a teleology from signs alone. Consider the lighter shaped like a pebble which has been successfully promoted by the advertisers in the last few years. Oblong, elliptical and asymmetrical in form, it is described as 'highly functional' – not that it is better than any other lighter for lighting cigarettes, but because it is 'perfectly shaped to fit into the palm of the hand'. 'The sea has polished it to the form of the hand': it is in a finished state. Its functionality resides not in its ability to light but in its manipulability. It is as though its form was predisposed by nature (the sea) for manipulation. This new teleonomy constitutes the rhetoric of this object. The connotation here is twofold: though it is an industrial product, this lighter is supposed to have retrieved one of the qualities of the craft object in that its form is an extension of the human gesture and the human body; meanwhile, the allusion to the sea takes us into the realm of a mythical nature itself culturalized as a function of man and perfectly adapted to

38. *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Aubier, 1958), p. 95.

39. This *mythology* must be distinguished from the *ideology* of Progress, which, abstract as it may be, is still a hypothesis about structures which is based on actual technological development. The functionalist myth, by contrast, is no more than the presumption, taken on faith from the mere testimony of signs, of the existence of a technological totality. The ideology of Progress is a socio-cultural mediation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the functionalist myth is an anticipatory fantasy.

man's every last desire: the sea plays the cultural role of polisher – an instance of nature's sublime craftsmanship.[40] The action of sea on stone is thus echoed by the hand creating fire; the lighter becomes a miraculous flint, and a prehistoric and craftsmanly purposiveness comes into play in the very practical essence of an industrial object.

Formal Connotation: Tail Fins

There was a long period during which American cars were adorned by immense tail fins. For Vance Packard these perfectly symbolized the American obsession with consumer goods.[41] They have other meanings, too: scarcely had it emancipated itself from the forms of earlier kinds of vehicles than the automobile-object began connoting nothing more than the result so achieved – that is to say, nothing more than itself as a victorious function. We thus witnessed a veritable triumphalism on the part of the object: the car's fins became the sign of victory over space – and they were *purely* a sign, because they bore no direct relationship to that victory (indeed, if anything they ran counter to it, tending as they did to make vehicles both heavier and more cumbersome). Concrete technical mobility was over-signified here as absolute fluidity. Tail fins were a sign not of *real* speed but of a sublime, measureless speed. They suggested a miraculous automatism, a sort of grace. It was the presence of these fins that in our imagination propelled the car, which, thanks to them, seemed to fly along of its own accord, after the fashion of a higher organism. The engine was the real efficient principle, the fins the imaginary one. Such interplay between the spontaneous and the transcendent efficacy of the object calls immediately for nature symbols: cars sprout fins and are encased in fuselages – features that in other contexts are functional; first they appropriate the characteristics of the aeroplane, which is a model object relative to space, then they proceed to borrow directly from nature – from sharks, birds, and so on.

40. Mythologies of the 'natural' generally evoke an earlier cultural system as a kind of pseudo-historical reference-point in their regression to a mythical totality. Thus the mythology of pre-industrial craftsmanship implies the myth of a 'functional' nature, and vice versa.

41. See *The Waste Makers* (New York: David McKay, 1960).

These days connotations of the natural have shifted to a different register. Formerly we were treated to a flood of motifs from the vegetable kingdom which, as a way of naturalizing them, submerged objects and even machines in signs of the fruits of the earth.[42] Now, by contrast, we are seeing the emergence of a systematization based on fluidity that seeks connotations no longer in earth or flora, which are static elements, but instead in air and water, which are fluid ones, as also in the dynamic world of animals. Despite this shift from organic to fluid, however, the modern version of naturalness does still refer to nature: astructural, inessential features such as the tail fin still lend *natural* connotations to technical objects.

It follows that such connotation is *allegorical* in character. When a fixed structure is invaded by astructural elements, when the object itself is overwhelmed by a formal detail, the true function is no longer anything but a pretext, and *the form does no more than signify the idea of the function*. In other words, the form has become allegorical. Tail fins are our modern allegory. We may have no more muses, no more flowers, but we do have fins on our cars and lighters polished by the sea. It is through allegory, moreover, that the discourse of the unconscious makes itself heard. The deep-rooted phantasy of speed finds expression in tail fins, but it does so in an allusive and regressive manner. For while speed has a phallic character, the speed evoked by tail fins is merely formal, fixed, and, as it were, visually edible. Speed so apprehended is no longer the result of an active process but, rather, the result of pleasure taken in speed-in-effigy, so to speak – the final, passive state of an energy completely degraded to the level of a pure sign, to a level where unconscious desire is forever chewing over an arrested discourse.

Thus formal connotation is indeed tantamount to the imposition of a *censorship*. Behind the functional self-realization of forms, traditional phallic symbolism has fallen apart: on the one hand this system has become abstract, a simulacrum of power (mechanism being concealed or indecipherable); at the same time, regressively and narcissistically, it is content to let itself be enveloped by forms and their 'functionality'.

42. Only curves still retain something of these vegetable and maternal overtones, tending to invest objects with the organic sense of *containing*. The sense, by extension, of natural evolution. They are consequently disappearing or becoming elliptical.

Form as Camouflage

A clearer picture thus begins to emerge of the way in which forms discourse, and of the orientation of that discourse. Inasmuch as forms are relative to one another, and continually refer to other, homologous forms, they present the aspect of a finished discourse – the optimal realization of an essence of man and an essence of the world. This discourse is never innocent, however: the articulation of forms among themselves always conceals another, indirect discourse. Thus the form of the lighter relates to the form of the hand, but only *by way of* the sea, which 'has polished it'; and a car's tail fins relate to the distance covered only *by way of* the aeroplane, the shark, and so on. More precisely, it is the *idea* of the sea, the aeroplane or the shark that mediates. It is the Idea of Nature which, in its myriad forms (animal or vegetable elements, the human body, space itself[43]), everywhere becomes involved in the articulation of forms. And to the extent that those forms constitute a system and thus re-create a kind of internal purposiveness, their reciprocal connotations are 'natural' – for nature remains the ideal point of reference of all goal-directedness.

'Vulgar' objects – objects that are nothing more than their function – embody no such purposiveness. In their case there is no justification for speaking of 'atmosphere', merely of environment. For a good while attempts were nevertheless made to endow them with a crude purposiveness: sewing machines were decorated with flowers, and it is not so long since Cocteau and Buffet could be found 'dressing up' refrigerators. Alternatively, if it proved impossible to 'naturalize' them, their existence would simply be concealed. After a rather brief period during which

43. The fact is that space itself has the connotation of *emptiness;* instead of space arising from the living interrelationship between forms (as a space with 'rhythms'), forms are apprehended, in their relationship to each other, *by way of* the emptiness which is the formalized sign of space. A room containing space so understood creates a 'natural' effect: we say that it is 'airy'. This is the temptation of emptiness, as when unadorned walls indicate culture and luxury. An *objet d'art* may seem more precious when it is surrounded by empty space. 'Atmosphere' is thus very often created merely by a formal arrangement which 'personalizes' particular objects through the disposition of empty space. In the case of serially produced objects, conversely, a shortage of space destroys atmosphere by depriving objects of the luxury of 'breathing'. (Should we perhaps interpret this affectation of emptiness as an echo of a moral order founded on distinction and distance?) Here too, then, we find that a traditional connotation has been reversed, for fullness and substantiality once served to valorize accumulation and naïve ostentation.

machines and technology flaunted their practical nature in obscene fashion out of sheer pride at their recent emancipation, the modesty that now reigns strives vigorously to veil all the practical functions of things. We are told that 'oil heating, once installed, is absolutely invisible'. Or: 'Though it is indispensable, the garage is not supposed to catch the eye from anywhere in the garden. So it has been hidden beneath a rockery. Alpine flowers cover its concrete roof, and access to the main house from the garage is via a little door concealed in the rockery.'

Naturalization, concealment, superimposition, décor – we are surrounded by objects whose form comes into play as *a false answer to the self-contradictory manner in which the object is experienced.* Recently disparities of décor have given way to subtler solutions. The connotation of nature, however, embedded as it is in the very discourse of forms, is still always present.

The naturalizing tendency spontaneously assumes a burden of moral and psychological meanings. Here the lexicon of advertising is telling. In this discourse a whole battery of emotionally laden words such as 'warmth', 'intimacy', 'radiance' and 'honesty' – a whole rhetoric of 'natural' values – goes hand in hand with the careful calculation of forms and the promotion of 'functional style'. All the talk of warmth, honesty or faithfulness bears eloquent witness to the dubiousness of a system in which long-lost traditional values reappear as signs, in exactly the same way as the signs of shark, space or sea appeared in our earlier examples. Clearly one cannot properly speak of 'hypocrisy' here. But surely this systematic, homogeneous and functional world, with its colours, materials and forms, which at every moment, though it does not actually *negate* them, does disavow, deny and omit drives, desires, and all the explosive force of the instinctual life[44] – surely this, too, is a moral – even a hyper-moral – world? Hypocrisy in its modern version consists not in concealing the obscenity of nature but, rather, in *being satisfied (or attempting to be satisfied) by the inoffensive naturalness of signs.*

44. The *moral* refusal of the instinctual itself signals an instinctual promiscuity. Here, by contrast, there is no more promiscuity: nature in all its forms is simultaneously signified and disavowed at the actual level of the sign.

III Conclusion: Naturalness and Functionality

It will be clear from the foregoing discussion of the values of interior design and atmosphere that the entire system is founded on the concept of FUNCTIONALITY. Colours, forms, materials, design, space – all are functional. Every object claims to be functional, just as every regime claims to be democratic. The term evokes all the virtues of modernity, yet it is perfectly ambiguous. With its reference to 'function' it suggests that the object fulfils itself in the precision of its relationship to the real world and to human needs. But as our analysis has shown, *'functional' in no way qualifies what is adapted to a goal, merely what is adapted to an order or system*: functionality is the ability to become integrated into an overall scheme. An object's functionality is the very thing that enables it to transcend its main 'function' in the direction of a secondary one, to play a part, to become a combining element, an adjustable item, within a universal system of signs.

The functional system is thus characterized, *in a thoroughly ambiguous way*, on the one hand by a *transcendence* of the traditional system under its three aspects – as the primary function of the object, as drives and primary needs, and as a set of symbolic relations between the two – and on the other hand by a simultaneous *disavowal* of these three mutually reinforcing aspects of the traditional system. In other words:

1. The coherence of the functional system of objects depends on the fact that these objects – along with their various properties, such as colour, form, and so on – no longer have any value of their own, but merely a universal value as signs. The order of Nature (primary functions, instinctual drives, symbolic relationships) is everywhere present in the system, but present only as signs. The materiality of objects no longer directly confronts the materiality of needs, these two inconsistent primary and antagonistic systems having been suppressed by the insertion between them of the new, abstract system of manipulable signs – by the insertion, in a word, of *functionality*. At the same stroke the symbolic relationship likewise disappears. What emerges from the realm of signs is a nature continuously dominated, an abstract, worked-upon nature, rescued from time and anxiety, which the sign is constantly converting into culture. This nature has been systematized: it is not so much nature as naturalness (or, equally well, 'culturalness'[45]). Such naturalness is thus the corollary of all functionality – and the connotation of the modern system of 'atmosphere'.

2. The always *transcended* presence of Nature (in a far more consistent and exhaustive fashion than in any earlier culture[46]) is what confers on this system its validity as a cultural model and its objective dynamism. But at the same time the always *denied* presence of Nature makes the system into a system of disavowal,

45. For indeed, there is no longer any antagonism here between culture and nature, save in the most formal sense, and the two are exchangeable at the level of signs. When we speak of naturalness [*naturalité*] and 'culturalness' [*culturalité*], the '-ness' is the important thing: the French suffix '*-ité*' always marks the shift to an abstract, secondary meaning operating at the level of signs, as witness *fin/finalité* (goal/teleonomy), *fonction/fonctionalité, histoire/historialité* (history/historicalness), *personne/personnalité*, etc. Such words tend, therefore, to have an essential role in the analysis of systematizations, particularly in connection with the structures of connotation. They have thus cropped up a good deal already in our present discussion, and will crop up again later. [*Translator's note*: As may be seen from the author's examples of '*-ité*' words, the cognate suffix '-ity' is not used in a way that would allow this pattern of meaning to be reflected in English translation. '*Culturalité*' has generally been translated as 'cultural connotation'.]

46. For culture, after all, has never been anything else. But today, for the first time, at the level of everyday life, the foundation has been laid for a system whose abstractness makes it capable of completely determining objects, hence of extending its internal autonomy very widely, even to the point (and this is its teleonomy) of achieving a perfect synchrony between man and his surroundings by reducing both to simple signs and elements.

lack, and camouflage (and this, too, in a way far more consistent than in all previous systems).

On the one hand, then, organization and calculation; on the other, connotation and disavowal. Both flow, however, from a single function of the sign, and together they constitute the one and only reality of the functional world.

Addendum: The Domestic World and the Car

The discussion that we have just brought to a close has been confined in its essentials to the domestic environment, to the dwelling-place. The private realm of the household is indeed where the vast majority of our everyday objects are to be found. The *system* nevertheless extends beyond the domestic interior – notably to an external item which itself constitutes an entire dimension of it: the motorcar.

The car epitomizes the object, perfectly illustrating every trait we have described: the rendering abstract of any practical goal in the interests of speed and prestige, formal connotation, technical connotation, forced differentiation, emotional cathexis, and projection in phantasy. Here more easily than anywhere else we may discern the collusion between the subjective system of needs and the objective system of production. I shall return to these points later. For the moment I want to emphasize the importance of the car's place within the system as a whole.

The automobile is a complement to all other objects considered together; each of these in its particularity appears merely partial in comparison with the automobile – not only because it is less complex, but also because it does not occupy its own specific position in the system. Only the domestic sphere *as a whole* (furniture, appliances, gadgets, etc.), as structured by the major distinction between interior design and atmosphere, holds a position comparable in value, in its relative coherence, to that of the car. True, at the level of lived experience the domestic realm, with its multiplicity of tasks, functions and relationships, is far more significant than the 'realm' of car-related activity. Yet it is undeniable that at the level of the *system* it no longer constitutes anything more than one binary pole of the global system, the other being cars.

Travel is a necessity, and speed is a pleasure. Possession of a car implies more: the driving licence is a sort of passport, a letter of credit from an aristocracy whose domain is the very latest in engine compression and speed. Disqualification from driving is surely tantamount to an excommunication, to a kind of social castration.[47]

Without going so far as to treat the car as a modern version of the old centaurian myth of a fusion between human intelligence and animal strength,[48] one may certainly describe it as a sublime object, for it opens a parenthesis, as it were, in the everydayness of all other objects. The material that it transforms, namely space–time, cannot be compared to any other. And the dynamic synthesis of space–time that the car offers in the shape of speed is likewise radically distinct from any kind of normal function. Movement alone is the basis of a sort of happiness, but the mechanical euphoria associated with speed is something else altogether, grounded for the imagination in the miracle of motion. Effortless mobility entails a kind of pleasure that is unrealistic, a kind of suspension of existence, a kind of absence of responsibility. The effect of speed's integration of space–time is to reduce the world to two-dimensionality, to an image, stripping away its relief and its historicity and in a way ushering one into a state of sublime immobility and contemplation. 'Movement', says Schelling, 'is merely the search for repose.' Beyond a hundred kilometres per hour there is a presumption of eternity (as also, perhaps, of neurosis . . .). Security founded on the sense of a world beyond or a world prior to this one is what nourishes car-induced euphoria, which has nothing of an active tonicity about it; rather, it is a passive satisfaction, albeit one accompanied by ever-changing scenery.

This 'dynamic euphoria' serves as an antithesis to the static joys of family life and immovable property, and opens a parenthesis in social reality. Chris Marker's film *Le joli mai* presents the confession of one person among millions of others for whom the automobile represents a kind of no-man's-land between workplace and family home, an empty vector of pure transport: 'I have no more good moments,' he says, 'except for those I spend between my house and my office. I drive, I drive.

47. It has occasionally been used as a penalty for procurers.

48. On centaur mythology and phantasy projections onto horses and cars, see the discussion of 'Collecting' below.

These days, though, I am not happy even then, because there is too much traffic.' It is not simply that the car rivals the house as an alternative zone of everyday life: the car, too, is an abode, but an exceptional one; it is a closed realm of intimacy, but one released from the constraints that usually apply to the intimacy of home, one endowed with a formal freedom of great intensity and a dizzying functionality. Home means a regressive attachment to domestic relationships and habits, whereas the intimacy of the car arises from an accelerated space–time metabolism and, inextricably, from the fact that the car may at any time become the locus of an *accident*: the culmination in a chance event – which may in fact never occur but is always imagined, always involuntarily assumed to be inevitable – of that intimacy with oneself, that formal liberty, which is never so beautiful as in death. The car achieves an extraordinary compromise, for it makes it possible to be simultaneously at home and further and further away from home. It is thus the centre of a new kind of subjectivity, but a centre bounded by no circumference, whereas the subjectivity of the domestic world is strictly circumscribed.

No other everyday object, gadget or appliance offers a sublimation or transfiguration of this order. Every functional object is overdetermined in its power, but such overdetermination is minimal in the spheres of household management and home ownership. Moreover, the house as a whole, except to the extent that it achieves self-transcendence by virtue of status or fashion, is not a recipient or bestower of value. (In fact a basic problem for couples is the common failure of the home to catalyse any such reciprocal valorization.) As opposed to the 'horizontal' sector of everyday domestic life, cars and their speed represent a sort of 'vertical' scheme, a sort of third dimension.[49] An 'aristocratic' dimension, too, in that it is free not only from the organic constraints of existence but also from social constraints. Whereas the domestic world seems to fall back to a place on the hither side of the social, cars, with their pure functionality which depends solely on the mastery of space and time, appear to deploy their virtues somewhere *beyond* society. Indeed, relative to the social sphere, household and motorcar partake of the same *private*

49. Hence the familiar reticence of the average motorist with respect to car safety devices such as belts. Safety at home is fine, but the car is from this point of view something quite different – the *opposite* of home, in fact.

abstractness, and the binomial they thus constitute, when it is articulated with another, that of work and leisure, frames the entirety of everyday experience.

This systematic bipolarity (the car as eccentric relative to the household yet at the same time complementary to it) tends to map onto the sociological distribution of sex roles. Very often the car remains a male preserve. 'Daddy has HIS Peugeot,' runs one advertising slogan, 'and Mummy has HER Peugeots': the father gets the Peugeot car and the mother gets the Peugeot egg-beater, the Peugeot coffee mill and the Peugeot electric mixer.[50] The family universe is a universe of foods and multifunctional appliances; as for the man, he rules over the world outside, the effective sign of which is the automobile: he himself does not appear in the picture. The same distinction thus applies both at the level of objects and at the level of roles (and in the Peugeot world, significantly enough, both levels are in evidence).

This parallelism could scarcely be accidental, and indeed it corresponds to profound psychosexual determinations.

We have noted that speed is at once transcendent and intimate. It implies the mastery of space *qua* abstract sign of the real world, and the exercise of this mastery involves narcissistic projection. Think of the 'erotic' significance of the car and of speed: by lifting social taboos and at the same time releasing us from immediate responsibility, the mobility of the car removes a whole set of resistances concerning ourselves and others: dynamism, brio, infatuation, daring – all flow from the freedom of the driver's situation, a situation which also fosters the erotic relationship by bringing into play a dual narcissistic projection onto a single phallic object (the car) or a single objectified phallic function (speed). The eroticism of the car is therefore not that of an active sexual approach but, rather, the passive eroticism of narcissistic seductiveness in both partners, or of a shared narcissistic communion in the same object.[51] The erotic significance of the object here plays the same role as the image (real or mental) in masturbation.

50. Admittedly this man–car, woman–house correlation is tending to become weaker, in reality if not at the level of representation.

51. A glimpse of this relationship of narcissistic complicity established through an object or a system of objects has recently been offered, apropos of couples, in Georges Perec's novel *Les choses, une histoire des années soixante* (Paris: Julliard, 1965) [English translation by Helen R. Lane: *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (New

From this perspective it would clearly be wrong to see the motorcar as a woman-object.[52] The fact that advertising always in effect does so, describing cars as compliant, racy, comfortable, practical, obedient, hot, and so on, is a symptom of the general tendency to feminize objects, the woman-object being the advertising world's most effective persuasive device and social myth. All objects, cars included, become women in order to be bought – but this is a function of the cultural system. The profound transformation of the car in phantasy is a different phenomenon altogether. Depending on the way it is used and its particular features (from the racing 'spider' to the luxurious limousine), the motorcar may equally well be invested either with the meaning of power or with the meaning of refuge: it may be a projectile or a dwelling-place. But basically, like all functional mechanical objects, it is experienced – and by everyone, men, women and children – as a phallus, as an object of manipulation, care, and fascination. The car is a projection both phallic and narcissistic, a force transfixed by its own image. We saw above, in connection with tail fins, how the car's very forms connote this unconscious discourse.

York: Grove Press, 1967]. No doubt this is a normal feature of modern living-together: everything now conspires to make objects into the fodder of relationships, and relationships themselves (whether sexual, marital, familial or microsocial) into a mere framework for the consumption of objects.

52. Some languages make it masculine, others feminine.

B. THE NON-FUNCTIONAL SYSTEM, OR SUBJECTIVE DISCOURSE

I Marginal Objects: Antiques

There is a whole range of objects – including unique, baroque, folkloric, exotic and antique objects – that seem to fall outside the system we have been examining. They appear to run counter to the requirements of functional calculation, and answer to other kinds of demands such as witness, memory, nostalgia or escapism. It is tempting to treat them as survivals from the traditional, symbolic order. Yet for all their distinctiveness, these objects do play a part in modernity, and that is what gives them a double meaning.

Atmospheric Value: Historicalness

The fact is that the marginal object is not an anomaly relative to the system, for *the functionality of modern objects becomes historicalness in the case of the antique object* (or marginality in the baroque object, or exoticism in the primitive object) *without this implying that the object ceases to function as a sign within the system*. What we have here is the connotation of nature, of 'naturalness' – indeed, fundamentally we have the ultimate instantiation of that connotation, which is to be found in signs of previous cultural systems. The cigarette lighter described above had a mythological dimension in its reference to the sea, but it still served a purpose; the way in which

antiques refer to the past gives them an *exclusively* mythological character. The antique object no longer has any practical application, its role being merely to *signify*. It is astructural, it refuses structure, it is the extreme case of disavowal of the primary functions. Yet it is not afunctional, nor purely 'decorative', for it has a very specific function within the system, namely the signifying of time.[1]

The system of atmosphere is defined in terms of extension, yet inasmuch as it aspires to be total it must conquer all of existence, including, therefore, the essential dimension of time. Clearly it is not real time but the signs or indices of time that antiques embody.[2] This allegorical presence in no way contradicts the general scheme: nature, time – nothing can escape, and everything is worked out on the level of signs. Time, however, is far less amenable than nature to abstraction and systematization. The living contradiction it enshrines resists integration into the logic of a system. This 'chronic' difficulty is what we see reflected in the spectacular connotation of the antique object. The connotation of naturalness can be subtle, but the connotation of historicalness is always glaring. The immobility of antiques has something self-conscious about it. No matter how fine it is, an antique is always eccentric; no matter how authentic it is, there is always something false about it. And indeed, it *is* false in so far as *it puts itself forward as authentic within a system whose basic principle is by no means authenticity but, rather, the calculation of relationships and the abstractness of signs.*

Symbolic Value: The Myth of the Origin

The antique thus has a particular status. To the extent that it is there to conjure up time as part of the atmosphere, and to the extent that it is experienced as a sign, it is simply one element among others, and relative to all others.[3] On the other hand,

1. I am restricting my account to antiques because they are the clearest example of 'non-systematic' objects. Obviously this account might be applied equally well, using the same premisses, to other varieties of marginal objects.
2. Just as naturalness is basically a disavowal of nature, so historicalness is a refusal of history masked by an exaltation of the signs of history: history simultaneously invoked and denied.
3. In point of fact the antique may be perfectly integrated into structures of atmosphere, for its presence is apprehended *en bloc* as 'warm', in contrast to the modern environment as a whole, which is 'cold'.

to the extent that it is not on a par with other objects and manifests itself as total, as an authentic presence, it enjoys a special psychological standing. It is in this respect that the antique may be said, though it serves no obvious purpose, to serve a purpose nevertheless at a deeper level. What lies behind the persistent search for old things – for antique furniture, authenticity, period style, rusticity, craftsmanship, hand-made products, native pottery, folklore, and so on? What is the reason for the strange acculturation phenomenon whereby advanced peoples seek out signs extrinsic to their own time or space, and increasingly remote relative to their own cultural system (a phenomenon which is the converse of 'underdeveloped' peoples' attraction to the technological products and signs of the industrialized world)?

The demand to which antiques respond is the demand for definitive or fully realized being.[4] The tense of the mythological object is the perfect: it is that which occurs in the present as having occurred in a former time, hence that which is founded upon itself, that which is 'authentic'. The antique is always, in the strongest sense of the term, a 'family portrait': the immemorialization, in the concrete form of an object, of a former being – a procedure equivalent, in the register of the imaginary, to a suppression of time. This characteristic of antiques is, of course, precisely what is lacking in functional objects, which exist only in the present, in the indicative or in the practical imperative, which exhaust their possibilities in use, never having occurred in a former time, and which, though they can in varying degrees support the spatial environment, cannot support the temporal one. The functional object is efficient; the mythological object is fully realized. The fully realized event that the mythological object signifies is birth. I am not the one who *is*, in the present, full of *angst* – rather, I am the one who *has been*, as indicated by the course of the reverse birth of which the antique object is the sign, a course which

4. And once again my remarks should be taken as equally applicable, by extension, to exotic objects; for modern man, in any case, changing country or latitude is essentially equivalent to plunging into the past (as tourism well demonstrates). The fascination for hand-made or native products, for bazaar items from all over the globe, arises less from their picturesque variety than from the anteriority of their forms or their manufacture, and from the allusion they contain to an earlier world – invariably a throwback to the world of our childhood and its playthings.

leads from the present far back into time: a regression, therefore.[5] The antique object thus presents itself as a myth of origins.

'Authenticity'

It is impossible not to draw a comparison between the taste for antiques and the passion for collecting (which we shall be discussing below). There are profound affinities between the two, and in both we find the same narcissistic regression, the same way of suppressing time, the same imaginary mastery of birth and death. All the same, there are two distinctive features of the mythology of the antique object that need to be pointed out: the nostalgia for origins and the obsession with authenticity. It seems to me that both arise from the mythical evocation of birth which the antique object constitutes in its temporal closure – being born implying, after all, that one has had a father and a mother. Obviously, beating a path back to the origins means regression to the mother; the older the object, the closer it brings us to an earlier age, to 'divinity', to nature, to primitive knowledge, and so forth. According to Maurice Rheims, this kind of mystique already existed in the High Middle Ages, when a Greek bronze or intaglio covered with pagan markings could acquire magical virtues in the eyes of a ninth-century Christian. The demand for authenticity is, strictly speaking, a very different matter. It is reflected in an obsession with certainty – specifically, certainty as to the origin, date, author and signature of a work. The mere fact that a particular object has belonged to a famous or powerful individual may confer value on it. The fascination of handicraft derives from an object's having passed through the hands of someone the marks of whose labour are still inscribed thereupon: we are fascinated by what has been *created*, and is therefore unique, because the *moment* of creation cannot be reproduced. Now, the search for the *traces of creation*, from the actual impression of the hand to the signature, is also a search for a line of descent and for paternal transcendence.

5. Two opposed tendencies are involved here. Inasmuch as the antique is integrated into the *current* cultural system, it comes from the depths of time *as signifier in the present of the empty dimension of time*. By contrast, the individual regression that the antique object makes possible is *a movement of the present into the past, into which it projects the empty dimension of being*.

Authenticity always stems from the Father: the Father is the source of value here. And it is this sublime link that antiques evoke in the imagination, along with the return journey to the mother's breast.

The Neo-Cultural Syndrome: Restoration

The quest for *authenticity* (being-founded-on-itself) is thus very precisely a quest for an *alibi* (being-elsewhere). Let me try to shed some light on these two notions by considering a well-known example of nostalgic restoration, as described in an article entitled 'How to Fix Up Your Ruin'.[6] This is what an architect does with an old farm in 'Ile-de-France'[7] that he has taken over and decided to restore:

> The walls, crumbling because of the lack of foundations, were demolished. Part of the original barn at the south gable was removed to make way for a terrace. . . . Of course the three major walls were reconstructed. For the purposes of waterproofing we left a 0.7-metre space beneath tarred flagstones at ground level. . . . Neither the staircase nor the chimney was part of the original structure. . . . We brought in Marseilles tile, Clamart flags, Burgundian *tuiles* for the roof; we built a garage in the garden and installed large French windows. . . . The kitchen is a hundred per cent modern, as is the bathroom. . . .

HOWEVER: 'The half-timbering, which was in good condition, has been retained in the new construction'; AND: 'The stone framework of the main entrance was carefully preserved during demolition, and its stones and tiles were reused.' The article is accompanied by photographs which indeed clearly show just what is left from the old farm in the wake of 'the architect's soundings and categorical choices': three beams and two stone blocks. But on this rock would our architect build his country house – and indeed, the couple of original stones left in that entrance-way now constitute the most fitting of symbolic foundations, reinvesting the

6. 'Comment bricoler votre ruine', *La maison française*, May 1963.

7. [*Translator's note*: The author's inverted commas suggest the quaintness of the name 'Ile-de-France' at the time of writing, for this was then an archaic regional denomination with no modern administrative meaning. This changed in 1976, when the entity known as the Région Parisienne was rebaptized Ile-de-France.]

whole edifice with value. It is they which exculpate the whole enterprise from all the compromises struck by modernity with nature in order to make the place more comfortable (an innocent enough intention in itself). The architect, now transformed into a gentleman farmer, has in actuality built himself the modern house that he wanted all along, but modernity of itself could not invest the place with value, could not make the house into a 'dwelling-place': true *being* was still lacking. Rather as a church does not become a genuinely sacred place until a few bones or relics have been enshrined in it, so this architect cannot feel at home (in the strongest sense: he cannot thoroughly rid himself of a particular kind of anxiety) until he can sense the infinitesimal yet sublime presence within his brand-new walls of an old stone that bears witness to past generations. Were it not for such witnesses, the oil heating and the garage (surmounted by its Alpine garden!) would be nothing more, sad to say, than what they are – the sad necessities of comfort. Nor is it only the functional arrangements that are exonerated by the authenticity of those old stones, but in some measure also the cultural exoticism of less important decorative elements (which are, naturally, 'in the best of taste and not in the least rustic'): opalescent lamps, straw-bottomed designer armchairs, a Dalmatian chair 'once strapped to the back of a donkey', a Romantic mirror, and so forth. The cunning of the cultural guilty conscience even leads to a curious paradox, for while the garage is concealed by a fake Alpine garden, a warming-pan introduced as a rustic accessory is described as 'there not as part of the décor but as a serviceable utensil'. 'It is used', we are assured, 'in wintertime'! So the garage's practical materiality is masked, but the warming-pan's practical essence is retrieved by means of mental acrobatics. In an oil-heated house a warming-pan is obviously quite superfluous. Yet if it is not used it will no longer be authentic, will become a mere cultural sign: the cultural, purposeless warming-pan will emerge as an all-too-faithful image of the vanity of the attempt to retrieve a natural state of affairs by rebuilding this house – and, indeed, an all-too-faithful image of the architect himself, who, fundamentally, has no part to play here, for his entire social existence lies elsewhere; his very *being* is elsewhere, and for him nature is nothing but a cultural luxury. Which is fair enough, so long as one can afford it. The architect, however, does not see things in that light: if the warming-pan

serves no purpose, it is merely a sign of wealth, and is thus of the order of *having*, of status, and not of the order of *being*. It must therefore be declared to have some purpose, in contrast to such truly useful objects as the oil heater and the garage, which are studiously camouflaged, as though they were ineradicable blots on nature. The warming-pan is therefore genuinely mythological; so, for that matter, is the whole house (although in another sense it is totally real and functional, responding as it does to a perfectly clear desire for comfort and fresh air). By choosing not to raze the old farm and build on the site in accordance simply with his own need for comfort, by his insistence on saving old stones and beams, our architect betrays the fact that he experiences the refinement and flawless functionality of his house as inauthentic, that these characteristics do not satisfy his deepest wishes.

Man is not 'at home' amid pure functionality – he requires something like that lustre of the wood of the True Cross which could make a church truly holy, some kind of talisman – a shard of absolute reality ensconced, enshrined at the heart of ordinary reality in order to justify it. Such is the role of the antique object, which always takes on the meaning, in the context of the human environment, of an embryo or mother-cell. By means of such objects a dispersed being identifies with the original and ideal situation of the embryo, retrogressing to the microcosmic yet essential state of prenatal life. These fetishized objects are therefore by no means mere accessories, nor are they merely cultural signs among others: they symbolize an inward transcendence, that phantasy of a centre-point in reality which nourishes all mythological consciousness, all individual consciousness – that phantasy whereby a projected detail comes to stand for the ego, and the rest of the world is then organized around it. The phantasy of authenticity is sublime, and it is always located somewhere short of reality (*sub limina*). Like the holy relic,[8] whose function it secularizes, the antique object reorganizes the world in a dispersive fashion which is quite antithetical to the extensive nature of functional

8. The significance of the relic is that it makes it possible to enshrine the identity of God or that of the soul of a dead person within an object. And there is no relic without a reliquary: the value 'slides' from the one to the other, and the reliquary, often made of gold, becomes the unmistakable signifier of authenticity, and hence more effective as a symbol.

organization – such organization being the very thing, in fact, from which it seeks to protect the profound and no doubt vital lack of realism of the inner self.

As symbol of the inscription of value in a closed circle and in a perfect time, mythological objects constitute a discourse no longer addressed to others but solely to oneself. Islands of legend, such objects carry human beings back beyond time to their childhood – or perhaps even farther still, back to a pre-birth reality where pure subjectivity was free to conflate itself metaphorically with its surroundings, so that those surroundings became simply the perfect discourse directed by human beings to themselves.

Synchronism, Diachronism, Anachronism

Within the private environment, mythological objects constitute a realm of even greater privacy: they serve less as possessions than as symbolic intercessors – as ancestors, so to speak, than which nothing is more 'private'. They are a way of escaping from everyday life, and no escape is more radical than escape in time, none so thoroughgoing as escape into one's own childhood.[9] Perhaps there is something of this metaphorical escape in all aesthetic feeling, but the work of art as such calls for a rational reading, whereas the antique does not: antiques partake of 'legend', because they are defined first and foremost by their mythical quality, by their coefficient of authenticity. The antique as directly experienced is quite unaffected by period or style, whether the object is a model or whether it is serial in character, whether or not it is precious, or whether it is genuine or fake: it remains in all cases 'perfect'; it is neither internal nor external, but 'elsewhere'; neither synchronic nor diachronic, but *anachronistic*; relative to its possessor, it is neither the complement of a verb 'to be' nor the object of a verb 'to have', but falls, rather, into the grammatical category of an internal object that gives expression to the essence of the verb in an almost tautological manner.

The functional object is devoid of being. Reality prevents its regression to that 'perfect' dimension the fact of proceeding from which suffices to ensure being.

9. Travelling as a tourist always involves going in search of lost time.

This is why such objects seem so reduced, for whatever their price, merit or prestige, they configure, and must perforce continue to configure, the loss of the Father and the Mother. Rich in functionality but impoverished in meaning, their frame of reference is the present moment, and their possibilities do not extend beyond everyday life. The mythological object, on the other hand, has minimal function and maximal meaning, while its frame of reference is the ancestral realm – perhaps even the realm of the absolute anteriority of nature. On the plane of direct experience, however, the antithetical traits of the mythological and the functional coexist in complementary fashion within the one system. Our architect, for example, has both oil heating and a peasant-style warming-pan. Similarly, a literary work may be available at the same time in paperback and in a limited edition or fine binding, an electric washing machine may cohabit with an old battledore, or a functional built-in cupboard may be found cheek by jowl with a prominently displayed Spanish cabinet.[10] This complementarity may even be discerned in the now common practice of dual residence, of combining a flat in the city and a house in the country.[11]

This duel between objects is fundamentally a duel of consciousness; it indicates a failure – and the attempt to redress that failure in a regressive fashion. In a civilization where synchronism and diachronism strive to establish systematic and exclusive control over reality, a third dimension, that of anachronism, nevertheless emerges (and this as much at the level of objects as at the level of behaviours

10. We should not seek one-to-one correspondences here, however, because the functional field of modern objects is configured in quite a different way from that of antiques. Moreover, the function of antique objects in this context exists only in the sense of a function that is extinct.

11. This splitting of the traditional single home into principal and secondary – or functional and 'naturalized' – residences offers the clearest possible illustration of the systematizing process: the system splits into two in order to strike a balance between terms that are formally antithetical yet fundamentally complementary. This split affects the whole of everyday life, as witness an organization of work and leisure wherein leisure by no means transcends or even provides an outlet from productive activity: instead, a selfsame everyday reality splits into two as a means of overriding the contradictions and imposing itself as a coherent and definitive system. It is true that this process is less marked in the case of isolated objects; the fact remains that every functional object is potentially capable of splitting in this way, of *becoming formally opposed to itself so as to fit more effectively into the overall system.*

and social structures). This regressive dimension, though it attests to a relative setback for the system, nevertheless finds a place within that system and even, paradoxically, enables the system to function.

Reverse Projection: The Technical Object and Primitive Man

Naturally, this ambiguous coexistence of modern functionality and traditional 'décor' arises only after a certain level of economic development, industrial production and practical environmental saturation has been attained. Less privileged social strata (peasants, workers) and 'primitive' peoples have no interest in what is old: they aspire to the functional. All the same, there is a similarity here between 'primitive' and 'civilized' attitudes. When a 'savage' grabs a watch or a fountain pen merely because it is a 'Western' object, we find this behaviour comical or absurd, for the object is not being given its true meaning but appropriated hungrily in accordance with an infantile type of relationship involving a power phantasy. Instead of having a function, the object has a virtue: it has become a sign. Yet is this not the very same procedure of impulsive acculturation and magical appropriation that drives 'civilized' people towards sixteenth-century woodcuts or icons? In both cases what is being acquired under the form of the object is a 'virtue': the 'savage' acquires modern technology, the 'civilized' person acquires ancestral significance. The 'virtue' is not of the same order in the two instances, however. What 'underdeveloped' people want from the object is an image of the Father as *Power* – in the event, *colonial* power;[12] what nostalgic 'civilized' people want is an image of the Father signifying *birth* and value. In the first case, a projective myth; in the second, a retrogressive one. A myth of power – and a myth of origins: whatever it is that man lacks is invested in the object. The 'underdeveloped' fetishize power by means of the technical object; technically advanced, 'civilized' people, for their part, fetishize birth and authenticity by means of the mythological object.

12. In the case of the child, too, objects in the environment come in the first place from the Father (and in early infancy from a phallic mother). To appropriate these objects is to appropriate the power of the Father (as Roland Barthes shows, apropos of motorcars, in 'La voiture, projection de l'ego', *Réalités*, no. 213, October 1963). The exercise of this power parallels the process of identification with the Father, and embraces all the conflicts this entails; consequently it is always ambiguous and partly aggressive in character.

This being said, the fetishism itself is identical. In the last reckoning every antique is beautiful *merely because it has survived, and thus become the sign of an earlier life.* It is our fraught curiosity about our origins that prompts us to place such mythological objects, the signs of a previous order of things, alongside the functional objects which, for their part, are the signs of our current mastery. For we want at one and the same time to be entirely self-made and yet be descended from someone: to succeed the Father yet simultaneously to proceed from the Father. Perhaps mankind will never manage to choose between embarking on the Promethean project of reorganizing the world, thus taking the place of the Father, and being directly descended from an original being. Our objects bear silent witness to this unresolved ambivalence. Some serve as mediation with the present, others as mediation with the past, the value of the latter being that they address a lack. Antiques are preceded by a particle, so to speak, and their inherited nobility compensates for the premature aging of modern objects. There was a time when old people were beautiful because they were 'closer to God' and richer in experience; our technological civilization has rejected the wisdom of the old, but it bows down before the solidity of old things, whose unique value is sealed and certain.

The Market in Antiques

More is involved here than a snobbish and status-seeking itch of the kind evoked by Vance Packard, for example, when he describes how fashionable Bostonians install old panes of a purplish tinge in their windows: 'The defectiveness of those panes is highly cherished even when their functional value is dubious. The panes were part of a shipment of inferior glass foisted off on Americans by English glassmakers more than three centuries ago.'[13] Or again: 'It was found that, if a suburbanite aspires to move up into the "lower-upper class, he will buy antiques – symbols of old social position bought with new money".'[14] Yet social standing may be signalled in a thousand ways (by a car, a modern detached house, etc.), so

13. *The Status Seekers* (New York: David McKay, 1959), p. 68.
14. Ibid.

why is the reference to the *past* so often chosen as a vector of status?[15] All acquired value tends to metamorphose into inherited value, into a received grace. But since blood, birth and titles of nobility have lost their ideological force, the task of signifying transcendence has fallen to material signs – to pieces of furniture, objects, jewellery and works of art of every time and every place. The door has thus been opened to a mass of 'authoritative' signs and idols (whose authenticity, in the end, is neither here nor there); the market has been invaded by a whole magical flora of real or fake furniture, manuscripts and icons. The past in its entirety has been pressed into the service of consumption. This has even created a kind of black market. The New Hebrides, Romanesque Spain and flea markets everywhere have already been stripped clean by the voracious appetite for nostalgia and primitivism of the Western world's bourgeois interiors. Statues of the Virgin and saints are stolen from churches, paintings are stolen from museums, then this booty is sold secretly to rich people whose residences are too new to give them the kind of satisfaction they want. It is a cultural irony – but an economic fact – that this thirst for 'authenticity' can now be slaked only by forgeries.

Cultural Neo-Imperialism

Fundamentally, the imperialism that subjugates nature with technical objects and the one that domesticates cultures with antiques are one and the same. This same private imperialism is the organizing principle of a functionally domesticated environment made up of domesticated signs of the past – of ancestral objects, sacred in essence but desacralized, which are called upon to exude their sacredness (or historicalness) into a history-less domesticity.

In this way the entire past, as a repertory of forms of consumption, is incorporated into the repertory of present-day forms in order to constitute a kind of transcendent sphere of fashion.

15. Certainly this tendency increases in a general way as people climb the social ladder, but it really takes off only once a certain status and a minimal level of 'urban acculturation' have been reached.

II A Marginal System: Collecting

Littré's dictionary defines '*objet*' in one of its meanings as 'anything which is the cause or subject of a passion; figuratively – and *par excellence* – the loved object'.

Let us grant that our everyday objects are in fact objects of a passion – the passion for private property, emotional investment in which is every bit as intense as investment in the 'human' passions. Indeed, the everyday passion for private property is often stronger than all the others, and sometimes even reigns supreme, all other passions being absent. It is a measured, diffuse, regulating passion whose fundamental role in the vital equilibrium of the subject or the group – in the very decision to live – we tend not to gauge very well. Apart from the uses to which we put them at any particular moment, objects in this sense have another aspect which is intimately bound up with the subject: no longer simply material bodies offering a certain resistance, they become mental precincts over which I hold sway, they become things of which I am the meaning, they become my property and my passion.

The Object Abstracted from Its Function

If I use a refrigerator to refrigerate, it is a practical mediation: it is not an object but

a refrigerator. And in that sense I do not possess it. A *utensil* is never possessed, because a utensil refers one to the world; what is possessed is always an object *abstracted from its function and thus brought into relationship with the subject.* In this context all owned objects partake of the same *abstractness*, and refer to one another only inasmuch as they refer solely to the subject. Such objects together make up the system through which the subject strives to construct a world, a private totality.

Every object thus has two functions – to be put to use and to be possessed. The first involves the field of the world's practical totalization by the subject, the second an abstract totalization of the subject undertaken by the subject himself outside the world. These two functions stand in inverse ratio to each other. At one extreme, the strictly practical object acquires a social status: this is the case with the machine. At the opposite extreme, the pure object, devoid of any function or completely abstracted from its use, takes on a strictly subjective status: it becomes part of a collection. It ceases to be a carpet, a table, a compass or a knick-knack and becomes an object in the sense in which a collector will say 'a beautiful object' rather than specifying it, for example, as 'a beautiful statuette'. An object no longer specified by its function is defined by the subject, but in the passionate abstractness of possession all objects are equivalent. And just one object no longer suffices: the fulfilment of the project of possession always means a succession or even a complete series of objects. This is why owning absolutely any object is always so satisfying and so disappointing at the same time: a whole series lies behind any single object, and makes it into a source of anxiety. Things are not so different on the sexual plane: whereas the love relationship has as its aim a unique being, the need to *possess* the love object can be satisfied only by a succession of objects, by repetition, or, alternatively, by making the assumption that all possible objects are somehow present. Only a more or less complex organization of objects, each of which refers to all the others, can endow each with an abstractness such that the subject will be able to grasp it in that lived abstractness which is the experience of possession.

Collecting is precisely that kind of organization. Our ordinary environment is always ambiguous: functionality is forever collapsing into subjectivity, and

possession is continually getting entangled with utility, as part of the ever-disappointed effort to achieve a total integration. Collecting, however, offers a model here: through collecting, the passionate pursuit of possession finds fulfilment and the everyday prose of objects is transformed into poetry, into a triumphant unconscious discourse.

The Object as Passion

'The taste for collection', says Maurice Rheims, 'is a kind of passionate game.'[16] For children, collecting is a rudimentary way of mastering the outside world, of arranging, classifying and manipulating. The most active time for childhood collecting is apparently between the ages of seven and twelve, during the latency period between early childhood and puberty. The urge to collect tends to wane with the onset of puberty, only to re-emerge as soon as that stage has passed. In later life, it is men over forty who most frequently fall victim to this passion. In short, there is in all cases a manifest connection between collecting and sexuality, and this activity appears to provide a powerful compensation during critical stages of sexual development. This tendency clearly runs counter to active genital sexuality, although it is not simply a substitute for it. Rather, as compared with genitality, it constitutes a regression to the anal stage, which is characterized by accumulation, orderliness, aggressive retention, and so on. The activity of collecting is not in any sense equivalent to a sexual practice, for it is not designed to procure instinctual satisfaction (as in fetishism, for example); it may nevertheless produce intense satisfaction as a reaction. The object here takes on the full significance of a loved object: 'Passion for the object leads to its being looked upon as a thing made by God. A collector of porcelain eggs is liable to believe that God never created a form more beautiful or more singular, and indeed that He devised this form solely for the greater delight of collectors.'[17] Collectors are forever saying that they are 'crazy about' this or that object, and they all without exception – even where the

16. *La vie étrange des objets* (Paris: Plon, 1959), p. 28. [*Translator's note*: There is an English translation by David Pryce-Jones: *Art on the Market* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1961). I have not used it here.]
17. Ibid., p. 33.

perversion of fetishism plays no part – cloak their collection in an atmosphere of clandestineness and concealment, of secrecy and sequestration, which in every way suggests a feeling of guilt. It is this passionate involvement which lends a touch of the sublime to the regressive activity of collecting; it is also the basis of the view that anyone who does not collect something is 'nothing but a moron, a pathetic human wreck'.[18]

The collector's sublimity, then, derives not from the nature of the objects he collects (which will vary according to his age, profession and social milieu) but from his fanaticism. And this fanaticism is identical whether it characterizes a rich connoisseur of Persian miniatures or a collector of matchboxes. The distinction that may legitimately be drawn here, to the effect that the collector loves his objects on the basis of their membership in a series, whereas the connoisseur loves his on account of their varied and unique charm, is not a decisive one. In both cases gratification flows from the fact that possession depends, on the one hand, on the absolute singularity of each item, a singularity which puts that item on a par with an animate being – indeed, fundamentally on a par with the subject himself – and, on the other hand, on the possibility of a series, and hence of an infinite play of substitutions. Collecting is thus qualitative in its essence and quantitative in its practice. If the feeling of possession is based on a confusion of the senses (of hand and eye) and an intimacy with the privileged object, it is also based just as much on searching, ordering, playing and assembling. In short, there is something of the harem about collecting, for the whole attraction may be summed up as that of an intimate series (one term of which is at any given time the favourite) combined with a serial intimacy.

Man never comes so close to being the master of a secret seraglio as when he is surrounded by his objects. Human relationships, home of uniqueness and conflict, never permit any such fusion of absolute singularity with infinite seriality – which is why they are such a continual source of anxiety. By contrast, the sphere of objects, consisting of successive and homologous terms, reassures. True, such

18. M. Fauron, president of the cigar-band collectors' association, in *Liens* (review of the Club français du Livre), May 1964.

reassurance is founded on an illusion, a trick, a process of abstraction and regression, but no matter. In the words of Maurice Rheims: 'For man, the object is a sort of insentient dog which accepts his blandishments and returns them after its own fashion, or rather which returns them like a mirror faithful not to real images but to images that are desired.'[19]

The Finest of Domestic Animals

Rheims's dog image is the right one, for pets are indeed an intermediate category between human beings and objects. The pathos-laden presence of a dog, a cat, a tortoise or a canary is a testimonial to a failure of the interhuman relationship and an attendant recourse to a narcissistic domestic universe where subjectivity finds fulfilment in the most quietistic way. Note, by the way, that these animals are not sexed (indeed, they are often neutered for their role as household pets); they are every bit as devoid of sex, even though they are alive, as objects are. This is the price to be paid if they are to provide emotional security: only their actual or symbolic castration makes it possible for them to serve as mitigators of their owners' castration anxiety. This is a part that all the objects that surround us also play to perfection. The object is in fact the finest of domestic animals – the only 'being' whose qualities exalt rather than limit my person. In the plural, objects are the only entities in existence that can genuinely coexist, because the differences between them do not set them against one another, as happens in the case of living beings: instead they all converge submissively upon me and accumulate with the greatest of ease in my consciousness. Nothing can be both 'personalized' and quantified so easily as objects. Moreover, this subjective quantifiability is not restricted: everything can be possessed, cathected or (in the activity of collecting) organized, classified and assigned a place. The object is thus in the strict sense of the word a mirror, for the images it reflects can only follow upon one another without ever contradicting one another. And indeed, as a mirror the object is perfect, precisely because it sends back not real images, but desired ones. In a

19. Rheims, *La vie étrange des objets*, p. 50.

word, it is a dog of which nothing remains but faithfulness. What is more, you can look at an object without it looking back at you. *That is why everything that cannot be invested in human relationships is invested in objects*. That is why regression of this kind is so easy, why people so readily practise this form of 'retreat'. But we must not allow ourselves to be taken in by this, nor by the vast literature that sentimentalizes inanimate objects. The 'retreat' involved here really is a regression, and the passion mobilized is a passion for flight. Objects undoubtedly serve in a regulatory capacity with regard to everyday life, dissipating many neuroses and providing an outlet for all kinds of tensions and for energies that are in mourning. This is what gives them their 'soul', what makes them 'ours' – but it is also what turns them into the décor of a tenacious mythology, the ideal décor for an equilibrium that is itself neurotic.

A Serial Game

Yet this mediation would seem to be a poor one. How can consciousness let itself be fooled in this way? Such is the cunning of subjectivity: an object that is possessed can never be a poor mediation. It is always absolutely singular. Not in reality, of course: the possession of a 'rare' or 'unique' object is obviously the ideal aim of its appropriation, but for one thing the proof that a given object is unique can never be supplied in a real world, and, for another, consciousness gets along just fine without proof. The particular value of the object, its exchange value, is a function of cultural and social determinants. Its absolute singularity, on the other hand, arises from the fact of being possessed by me – and this allows me, in turn, to recognize myself in the object as an absolutely singular being. This is a grandiose tautology, but one that gives the relationship to objects all its density – its absurd facility, and the illusory but intense gratification it supplies.[20] What is more, while this closed circuit may also govern human relationships (albeit less easily), the relationship with objects has one characteristic that can never be found in the intersubjective realm: no object ever opposes the extension of the process of

20. It also creates disillusion, of course, itself bound up with the tautological character of the system.

narcissistic projection to an unlimited number of other objects; on the contrary, the object imposes that very tendency, thereby contributing to the creation of a total environment, to that totalization of images of the self that is the basis of the miracle of collecting. For what you really collect is always yourself.

This makes it easier to understand the structure of the system of possession: any collection comprises a succession of items, but the last in the set is the person of the collector. Reciprocally, the person of the collector is constituted as such only if it replaces each item in the collection in turn. An analogous structure on the sociological level is to be found in the system of model and series: both the series and the collection serve to institute possession of the object – that is, they facilitate the mutual integration of object and person.[21]

From Quantity to Quality: The Unique Object

It may well be objected here that any exclusive passion for a single object on the part of an art lover suffices to demolish our hypothesis. It is quite clear, however, that the unique object is in fact simply the final term, the one which sums up all the others, that it is the supreme component of an entire paradigm (albeit a virtual, invisible or implicit one) – that it is, in short, the emblem of the series.

In the portraits in which he illustrates the passion of curiosity, La Bruyère puts the following words into the mouth of a collector of fine prints: 'I suffer from a grave affliction which will surely oblige me to abandon all thought of prints till the end of my days: I have all of Callot except for one – and one which, to be frank, is not among his best works. Indeed, it is one of his worst, yet it would round out

21. The *series* is practically always a kind of game that makes it possible to select any one term and invest it with the privileged status of a *model*. A child is throwing bottle-tops: which one will go the farthest? It is no coincidence if the same one always comes out ahead: this is his favourite. The model he thus constructs, the hierarchy he sets up, is in fact himself – for he does not identify himself with one bottle-top but, rather, with the fact that one bottle-top always wins. And he is just as present in each of the other tops, unmarked terms in the antagonism between winner and losers: throwing the bottle-tops one by one is playing at constituting oneself as a series in order then to constitute oneself as a model. Here, in a nutshell, is the psychology of the collector; and a collector who collects only privileged or 'unique' objects is simply making sure that he himself is the object that always wins.

Callot for me. I have searched high and low for this print for twenty years, and I now despair of ever finding it.' The equivalence experienced here between the whole series minus one and the final term missing from the series is conveyed with arithmetical certainty.[22] The absent final term is a symbolic distillation of that series without which it would not exist; consequently it acquires a strange quality, a quality which is the quintessence of the whole quantitative calibration of the series. This term is the unique object, defined by its final position and hence creating the illusion that it embodies a particular goal or end. This is all well and good, but it shows us how it is quantity that impels towards quality, and how the value thus concentrated on this simple signifier is in fact indistinguishable from the value that infuses the whole chain of intermediate signifiers of the paradigm. This is what might be called the symbolism of the object, in the etymological sense (cf. Greek *sumballein*, to put together), in accordance with which a chain of signifiers may be summed up in just one of its terms. The object is the symbol not of some external agency or value but first and foremost of the whole series of objects of which it is the (final) term. (This in addition to symbolizing the person whose object it is.)

La Bruyère's example illustrates another rule, too: that the object attains exceptional value only by virtue of its absence. This is not simply a matter of covetousness. *One cannot but wonder whether collections are in fact meant to be completed*, whether lack does not play an essential part here – a positive one, moreover, as the means whereby the subject reapprehends his own objectivity. If so, the *presence* of the final object of the collection would basically signify the death of the subject, whereas its absence would be what enables him merely to rehearse his death (and so exorcize it) by having an object represent it. This lack is experienced as suffering, but it is also the breach that makes it possible to avoid completing the collection and thus definitively erasing reality. Let us therefore applaud La Bruyère's collector for never finding his last Callot, for if he had done so he would thereby have ceased to be the living and passionate man that he still was, after all.

22. Any term in the series may become the final term: any Callot can be the one to 'round out Callot'.

It might be added that madness begins once a collection is deemed complete and thus ceases to centre around its absent term.

This account of things is buttressed by another story told by Maurice Rheims. A bibliophile specializing in unique copies learns one day that a New York bookseller is offering a book that is identical to one of his prize possessions. He rushes to New York, acquires the book, summons a lawyer, has the offending second copy burnt before him and elicits an affidavit substantiating this act of destruction. Once he is back home, he inserts this legal document in his copy, now once again unique, and goes to bed happy. Should we conclude that in this case the *series* has been abolished? Not at all. It only seems so, because the collector's original copy was in fact invested with the value of all virtual copies, and by destroying the rival copy the book collector was merely reinstituting the perfection of a compromised symbol. Whether denied, forgotten, destroyed, or merely virtual, the series is still present. The serial nature of the most mundane of everyday objects, as of the most transcendent of rarities, is what nourishes the relationship of ownership and the possibility of passionate play: without seriality no such play would be conceivable, hence no possession – and hence, too, properly speaking, no object. A truly unique, absolute object, an object such that it has no antecedents and is in no way dispersed in some series or other – such an object is unthinkable. It has no more existence than a pure sound. Just as harmonic series bring sounds up to their perceived quality, so paradigmatic series, whatever their degree of complexity, bring objects up to their symbolic quality – carrying them, in the same movement, into the sphere of the human relationship of mastery and play.

Objects and Habits: Wrist-Watches

Every object oscillates between a practical specificity, a function which is in a sense its manifest discourse, and absorption by a series or collection where it becomes one term in a latent, repetitive discourse – the most basic and tenacious of discourses. This discursive system of objects is analogous to the system of habits.[23]

23. Moreover, any object immediately becomes the foundation of a network of habits, the focus of a set of behavioural routines. Conversely, there is probably no habit that does not centre on an object. In everyday existence the two are inextricably bound up with each other.

Habits imply discontinuity and repetition – not continuity, as common usage suggests. By breaking up time, our 'habitual' patterns dispel the anxiety-provoking aspect of the temporal continuum and of the absolute singularity of events. Similarly, it is thanks to their discontinuous integration into series that we put objects at our sole disposition, that we own them. This is the discourse of subjectivity itself, and objects are a privileged register of that discourse. Between the world's irreversible evolution and ourselves, objects interpose a discontinuous, classifiable, reversible screen which can be reconstituted at will, a segment of the world which belongs to us, responding to our hands and minds and delivering us from anxiety. Objects do not merely help us to master the world by virtue of their integration into instrumental series, they also help us, *by virtue of their integration into mental series*, to master time, rendering it discontinuous and classifying it, after the fashion of habits, and subjecting it to the same associational constraints as those which govern the arrangement of things in space.

There is no better illustration of this discontinuous and 'habitual' function than the wrist-watch.[24] The watch epitomizes the duality of the way we experience objects. On the one hand, it tells us the actual time; and chronometric precision is *par excellence* the dimension of practical constraints, of society as external to us, and of death. As well as subjecting us to an irreducible temporality, however, the watch as an object helps us to appropriate time: just as the automobile 'eats up' miles, so the watch-object eats up time.[25] By making time into a substance that can be divided up, it turns it into an object to be consumed. A perilous dimension of praxis is thus transformed into a domesticated quantity. Beyond just knowing the time, 'possessing' the time in and through an object that is one's own, having the time continuously recorded before one's eyes, has become a crutch, a necessary reassurance, for civilized man. The time is no longer in the home, no longer the clock's beating heart, but its registration on the wrist continues to ensure the same

24. The watch is also indicative (as is the disappearance of clocks) of the irresistible tendency of modern objects towards miniaturization and individualization. It is also the oldest, the smallest, the closest to us, and the most valuable of personal machines – an intimate and highly cathected mechanical talisman which becomes the object of everyday complicity, fascination (especially for children), and jealousy.

25. Exactness about time parallels speed in space: time has to be gobbled up as completely as possible.

organic satisfaction as the regular throbbing of an internal organ. Thanks to my watch, time presents itself simultaneously as the very dimension of my objectification and as a simple household necessity. As a matter of fact, any object might be used to demonstrate how even the dimension of objective constraint is incorporated by everyday experience; the watch, however, is the best example, by virtue of its explicit relationship to time.

Objects and Time: A Controlled Cycle

The problem of time is a fundamental aspect of collecting. As Maurice Rheims says: 'A phenomenon that often goes hand in hand with the passion for collecting is the loss of any sense of the present time.'[26] But is this really just a matter of an escape into nostalgia? Certainly, someone who identifies with Louis XVI down to the feet of his armchairs, or develops a true passion for sixteenth-century snuffboxes, is marking himself off from the present by means of a historical reference, yet this reference takes second place to his direct experience of collecting's systematic aspect. The deep-rooted power of collected objects stems neither from their uniqueness nor from their historical distinctiveness. It is not because of such considerations that the temporality of collecting is not real time but, rather, *because the organization of the collection itself replaces time.* And no doubt this is the collection's fundamental function: the resolving of real time into a systematic dimension. Taste, particularity, status, the discourse of society – any of these may cause the collection to open onto a broader relationship (though this will never go beyond a group of insiders); in all cases, however, the collection must remain, literally, a 'pastime'. Indeed, it abolishes time. More precisely, by reducing time to a fixed set of terms navigable in either direction, the collection represents the continual recommencement of a controlled cycle whereby man, at any moment and with complete confidence, starting with any term and sure of returning to it, is able to set his game of life and death in motion.

It is in this sense that the environment of private objects and their possession (collection being the most extreme instance) is a dimension of our life which, though

26. *La vie étrange des objets*, p. 42.

imaginary, is absolutely essential. Just as essential as dreams. It has been said that if dreams could be experimentally suppressed, serious mental disturbances would quickly ensue. It is certainly true that were it possible to deprive people of the regressive escape offered by the game of possession, if they were prevented from giving voice to their controlled, self-addressed discourse, from using objects to recite themselves, as it were, outside time, then mental disorder would surely follow immediately, just as in the case of dream deprivation. We cannot live in absolute singularity, in the irreversibility signalled by the moment of birth, and it is precisely this irreversible movement from birth towards death that objects help us to cope with.

Of course the balance thus achieved is a neurotic one; of course this bulwark against anxiety is regressive, for time is objectively irreversible, after all, and even the objects whose function it is to protect us from it are perforce themselves carried off by it; and of course the defence mechanism that imposes discontinuity by means of objects is forever being contested, for the world and human beings are in reality *continuous*. But can we really speak here in terms of normality or anomaly? Taking refuge in a closed synchronicity may certainly be deemed denial of reality and flight if one considers that the object is the recipient of a cathexis that 'ought' to have been invested in human relationships. But this is the price we pay for the vast regulating power of these mechanisms, which today, with the disappearance of the old religious and ideological authorities, are becoming the consolation of consolations, the everyday mythology absorbing all the *angst* that attends time, that attends death.

It should be clear that we are not here promoting any spontaneous mythology according to which man somehow extends his life or survives his death by means of the objects he possesses. The refuge-seeking procedure I have been describing depends not on an immortality, an eternity or a survival founded on the object *qua* reflection (something which man has basically never believed in) but, rather, on a more complex action which 'recycles' birth and death into *a system of objects*. What man gets from objects is not a guarantee of life after death but *the possibility, from the present moment onwards, of continually experiencing the unfolding of his existence in a controlled, cyclical mode, symbolically transcending a real existence the irreversibility of whose progression he is powerless to affect.*

We are not far from the ball which the child (in Freud's account) causes to disappear and reappear in order to experience the absence and presence of its mother alternately (*Fort! Da! Fort! Da!*) – in order to counter her anxiety-provoking absence with this infinite cycle of disappearance and reappearance of the object. The symbolic implications of play within the series are not hard to discern here, and we may sum them up by saying that the object is *the thing with which we construct our mourning*: the object represents our own death, but that death is transcended (symbolically) by virtue of the fact that we *possess* the object; the fact that by introjecting it into a work of mourning – by integrating it into a series in which its absence and its re-emergence elsewhere 'work' at replaying themselves continually, recurrently – we succeed in dispelling the anxiety associated with absence and with the reality of death. Objects allow us to apply the work of mourning to ourselves right now, in everyday life, and this in turn allows us to live – to live regressively, no doubt, but at least to live. A person who collects is dead, but he literally survives himself through his collection, which (even while he lives) duplicates him infinitely, beyond death, *by integrating death itself into the series, into the cycle.* Once again the parallel with dreams applies here. If any object's function – practical, cultural or social – means that it is the mediation of a *wish*, it is also, as one term among others in the systematic game that we have been describing, the voice of *desire*. Desire is, in fact, the motor of the repetition or substitution of oneself, along the infinite chain of signifiers, through or beyond death. And if the function of dreams is to ensure the continuity of sleep, that of objects, thanks to very much the same sort of compromise, is to ensure the continuity of life.[27]

27. A story told by Tristan Bernard provides an amusing illustration of the fact that collecting is a way of playing with death (that is, a passion), and in consequence stronger, symbolically, than death itself. There was once a man who collected children: legitimate, illegitimate, children of a first or a second marriage, foundlings, by-blows, and so on. One day he gave a house party at which his entire 'collection' were present: a cynical friend of his remarked, however, 'There is one kind of child you do not have.' 'What type?' the host wanted to know. 'A posthumous child,' came the answer. Whereupon this passionate collector first got his wife pregnant and promptly thereafter committed suicide.

The same system is to be found, minus the narrative trappings, in games of chance. This is the reason for their fascination, which is even more intense than that of collecting. Such games imply a pure transcendence of death: subjectivity cathects the pure series with an imaginary mastery, quite certain that whatever the ups and downs of the play, no one has the power to reintroduce into it the *real* conditions of life and death.

The Sequestered Object: Jealousy

At the terminal point of its regressive movement, the passion for objects ends up as pure jealousy. The joy of possession in its most profound form now derives from the value that objects can have for others and from the fact of depriving them thereof. This jealous complex, though it is characteristic of the collector at his most fanatical, presides also, proportionately speaking, over the simplest proprietary reflex. A powerful anal-sadistic impulse, it produces the urge to sequester beauty so as to be the only one to enjoy it: a kind of sexually perverse behaviour widely present in a diffuse form in the relationship to objects.

What does the sequestered object represent? (Its objective value is secondary, of course – its attraction lies in the very fact of its confinement.) If you do not lend your car, your fountain pen or your wife to anyone, that is because these objects, according to the logic of jealousy, are narcissistic equivalents of the ego: to lose them, or for them to be damaged, means castration. The phallus, to put it in a nutshell, is not something one loans out. What the jealous owner sequesters and cleaves to is his own libido, in the shape of an object, which he is striving to exorcize by means of a system of confinement – the same system, in fact, by virtue of which collecting dispels anxiety about death. He castrates himself out of anguish about his own sexuality; or, more exactly, he uses a symbolic castration – sequestration – pre-emptively, as a way of countering anxiety about *real* castration.[28] This desperate strategy is the basis of the horrible gratification that jealousy affords. For one is always jealous of oneself. It is oneself that one locks up and guards so closely. And it is from oneself that one obtains gratification.

Obviously, this jealous pleasure occurs in a context of absolute disillusionment, because systematic regression can never completely eradicate consciousness of the real world or of the futility of such behaviour. The same goes for collecting, whose sway is fragile at best, for the sway of the real world lies ever just behind it, and is continually threatening it. Yet this disillusionment is itself part of the system

28. Of course this also goes for pets, and by extension for the 'object' in the sexual relationship, whose manipulation in jealousy is of a similar kind.

– indeed, is as responsible as satisfaction for setting the system in motion: disillusionment never refers to the world but, rather, to an ulterior term; disillusionment and satisfaction occupy sequential positions in the cycle. The neurotic activation of the system is thus attributable to this constitutive disillusionment. In such cases the series tends to run its course at a faster and faster pace, chasing its tail as differences wear out and the substitution mechanism speeds up. The system may even enter a destructive phase, implying the self-destruction of the subject. Maurice Rheims evokes the ritualized 'execution' of collections – a kind of suicide based on the impossibility of ever circumscribing death. It is not rare in the context of the system of jealousy for the subject eventually to destroy the sequestered object or being out of a feeling that he can never completely rid himself of the adversity of the world, and of his own sexuality. This is the logical and illogical end of his passion.[29]

The Object Destructured: Perversion

The effectiveness of the system of possession is directly linked to its regressive character. And this regression in turn is linked to the very *modus operandi* of perversion. If perversion as it concerns objects is most clearly discernible in the crystallized form of fetishism, we are perfectly justified in noting how throughout the system, organized according to the same aims and functioning in the same ways, the possession of objects and the passion for them is, shall we say, *a tempered mode of sexual perversion*. Indeed, just as possession depends on the discontinuity of the series (real or virtual) and on the choice of a privileged term within it, so sexual perversion is founded on the inability to apprehend the other *qua* object of desire in his or her unique totality as a person, to grasp the other in any but a discontinuous way: the other is transformed into the paradigm of various eroticized parts of the body, a single one of which becomes the focus of objectification. A particular

29. We must not confuse disillusionment, an internal motor of the regressive system of the series, with the lack we spoke of above, which on the contrary tends to foster emergence from the system. Disillusionment causes the subject to tighten his retrogressive embrace of the series; lack causes him to evolve (relatively speaking) in the direction of the outside world.

woman is no longer a woman but merely a sex, breasts, belly, thighs, voice and face – and preferably just one of them.[30] She thus becomes a constituent 'object' in a series whose different terms are gazetted by desire, and whose real referent is by no means the loved person but, rather, the subject himself, collecting and eroticizing himself and turning the relationship of love into a discourse directed towards him alone.

The opening sequence in Jean-Luc Godard's film *Contempt* clearly illustrates this. The dialogue in this 'nude' scene goes as follows.

'Do you love my feet?' the woman asks. (Note that throughout the scene she is inventorying herself in a mirror – this is not irrelevant, because in this way she attributes value to herself *as she is seen*, via her image, and thus, already, as spatially discontinuous.)

'Yes, I love them.'

'Do you love my legs?'

'Yes.'

'And my thighs?'

'Yes,' he replies once more. 'I love them.'

(And so on, from foot to head, ending up with her hair.)

'So, you love me totally?'

'Yes, I love you totally.'

'Me too, Paul,' she says, summing up the situation.

It may be that the film's makers saw all this as the clarifying algebra of a demystified love. Be that as it may, such a grotesque reconstruction of desire is the height of inhumanity. Once broken down by body parts into a series, the woman as pure object is then reintegrated into the greater series of all woman-objects, where she is merely one term among others. The only activity possible within the logic of this system is the play of substitutions. This was what we recognized earlier as the motor of satisfaction in the collector.

30. The regressive tendency, ever more specialized and impersonal, may converge on the hair or the feet, or, ultimately, crystallize – at the opposite pole to any living being – on a garter or a brassiere; we thus come back to the material object, whose possession may be described as the perfect way of eliminating the presence of the other.

In the love relationship the tendency to break the object down into discrete details in accordance with a perverse autoerotic system is slowed by the living unity of the other person.[31] When it comes to material objects, however, and especially to manufactured objects complex enough to lend themselves to mental dismantling, this tendency has free rein. With the automobile, for instance, it is possible to speak of '*my* brakes', '*my* tail fins', '*my* steering wheel'; or to say '*I* am braking', '*I* am turning' or '*I* am starting'. In short, all the car's 'organs' and functions may be brought separately into relation with the person of the owner in the possessive mode. We are dealing here not with a process of personalization at the social level but with a process of a projective kind. We are concerned not with *having* but with *being*. With the horse, despite the fact that this animal was a remarkable instrument of power and transcendence for man, this kind of confusion was never possible. The fact is that the horse is not made of pieces – and above all, that it is *sexed*. We can say 'my horse' or 'my wife', but that is as far as this kind of possessive denomination can go. That which has a sex resists fragmenting projection and hence also the mode of appropriation that we have identified as a perversion.[32] Faced by a living being, we may say 'my' but we cannot say 'I' as we do when we symbolically appropriate the functions and 'organs' of a car. That type of regression is not available to us. The horse may be the recipient of powerful symbolic cathexes: we associate it with the wild sexuality of the rutting season, as with the wisdom of the centaur; its head is a terrifying phantasy linked to the image of the father, yet its calm embodies the protective strength of Cheiron the teacher. It is never cathected, however, in the simplistic, narcissistic, far more impoverished and infantile manner in which the ego is projected onto structural details of cars (in accordance with an almost delusional analogy with disassociated parts and functions of the human body). The existence of a dynamic symbolism of the horse may be attributed precisely to the fact that isolated identifications with

31. This explains why the passionate feelings are transferred to the fetish, whose function is a radical simplification of the living sexual object which makes this object equivalent to the penis and cathects it accordingly.
32. By the same token possessive identification operates in the case of living beings only to the extent that such beings may be perceived as asexual: 'Does our head hurt?', we may say to a baby. When we are confronted by a sexed being, however, this kind of confusional identification is halted by castration anxiety.

distinct functions or organs of the horse are an impossibility; nor is there any prospect, therefore, of collapsing this relationship into an autoerotic 'discourse' concerned with disconnected elements.

Fragmentation and regression of that kind presuppose a technique, but one which has become autonomous at the level of the part-object. A woman broken down into a syntagma of erogenous zones is classified exclusively by the functionality of pleasure, to which the response is an objectivizing and ritualizing erotic technique that masks the anxiety associated with the interpersonal relationship while at the same time serving as a genuine (gestural and effective) dose of reality at the very heart of perversion as a phantasy system. The fact is that every mental system needs a credibility factor of this sort – a foothold in the real, a technical rationale or justification. Thus the accelerator referred to in the words 'I am accelerating', or the whole car implied when we say 'my car', serves as the real, technical justification for a whole realm of narcissistic annexation *short of* reality. The same goes for erotic technique, when it is accepted for what it is; for at this level we are no longer in the genital sphere, which opens onto reality, onto pleasure, but, rather, in a regressive, anal sphere of sexual systematizing for which erotic gestures are merely the justification.

Clearly, then, 'technical' is a very long way indeed from implying 'objective'. Technique does have this quality when it is socialized, when it is adopted by technology, and when it informs new structures. In the everyday realm, however, it constitutes a field that is always hospitable to regressive phantasies, because the possibility of a destructuring is ever imminent. Once assembled and mounted, the components of a technical object imply a certain coherence. But such a structure is always vulnerable to the human mind: held together from without by its function, it is purely formal for the psyche. The hierarchy of its elements can be dismantled at any time, and those elements made interchangeable within a paradigmatic system which the subject uses for his self-recitation. The object is discontinuous already – and certainly easy for thought to disassemble. Moreover, the task is all the easier now that the object – especially the technical object – is no longer lent unity by a set of human gestures and by human energy. Another reason why the car, in contrast to the horse, is such a perfect object for the purposes of narcissistic manipulation is that mastery over the horse is muscular and active, and calls for a gestural system

designed to maintain balance, whereas mastery over a car is simplified, functional and abstract.

From Serial Motivation to Real Motivation

Hitherto our discussion has paid no heed whatsoever to the actual nature of the objects that are collected: we have concentrated on the systematic aspects of collecting and ignored the thematic. It is obvious, however, that collecting masterpieces is not exactly the same thing as collecting cigar bands. First of all, a distinction must be drawn between the concept of collection (Latin *colligere*, to choose and gather together) and the concept of accumulation. At the simplest level, matter of one kind or another is accumulated: old papers are piled up, or quantities of food are stored. This activity falls somewhere between oral introjection and anal retention. At a somewhat higher level lies the serial accumulation of identical objects. As for collecting proper, it has a door open onto culture, being concerned with differentiated objects which often have exchange value, which may also be 'objects' of preservation, trade, social ritual, exhibition – perhaps even generators of profit. Such objects are accompanied by projects. And though they remain interrelated, their interplay involves the social world outside, and embraces human relationships.

However powerful external motivations may be, collections can never escape from their internal systematization; at best they may represent a compromise between internal and external factors, and even when a collection transforms itself into a discourse addressed to others, it continues to be first and foremost a discourse addressed to oneself. Serial motivation is discernible everywhere. Research shows that buyers of books published in series (such as *10/18* or *Que sais-je?*[33]), once they are caught up in collecting, will even acquire titles of no interest to them: the distinctiveness of the book relative to the series itself thus suffices to create a purely formal interest which replaces any real one. The motive of purchase is nothing but

33. [*Translator's note*: These are well-known series of pocket books in uniform format. *Que sais-je?* is a series of short monographs on a vast array of topics.]

this contingent association. A comparable kind of behaviour is that of people who cannot read comfortably unless they are surrounded by all their books; in such cases the specificity of what is being read tends to evaporate. Even farther down the same path, the book itself may count less than the moment when it is put back in its proper place on the shelf. Conversely, once a collector's enthusiasm for a series wanes it is very difficult to revive, and now he may not even buy volumes of genuine interest to him. This is as much evidence as we need to draw a clear distinction between serial motivation and real motivation. The two are mutually exclusive and can coexist only on the basis of compromise, with a notable tendency, founded on inertia, for serial motivation to carry the day over the dialectical motivation of interest.[34]

Mere collecting, however, may sometimes create real interest. The person who sets out to buy every title in the *Que sais-je?* series may end up confining his collection to a single subject, such as music or sociology. Once a certain quantitative threshold is reached, sheer accumulation may occasionally give way to a measure of discrimination. There is no hard-and-fast rule here. Artistic masterpieces *may* be collected with the same regressive fanaticism as cheese labels; on the other hand, children who collect stamps are continually swapping them with their friends. No iron-clad connection exists, therefore, between a collection's thematic complexity and its real openness to the outside world. At best such complexity may give us a clue, may be grounds for a presumption of openness.

A collection can emancipate itself from unalloyed accumulation not only by virtue of its cultural complexity but also by virtue of what is missing from it, by virtue of its incompleteness. A lack here is always a specific demand, an appeal for such and such an absent object. And this demand, in the shape of research,

34. This distinction between serial satisfaction and pleasure proper is an essential one. True pleasure is a sort of pleasure-in-pleasure whereby mere satisfaction is transcended as such, and grounds itself in a relationship. In serial satisfaction, by contrast, this second-level pleasure, this qualitative dimension of pleasure, disappears, is missing or unfulfilled. Satisfaction must depend on linear succession alone: an unattainable totality is extended by means of projection and compensated for by means of repetition. People stop reading the books they buy, then proceed to buy more and more. Similarly the repetition of the sexual act, or a multiplicity of sexual partners, may serve indefinitely as an ersatz form of love as exploration. Pleasure in pleasure is gone, only satisfaction remains – and the two are mutually exclusive.

passion, or messages to other people,[35] suffices to shatter that fatal enchantment of the collector which plunges him into a state of pure fascination. A recent television programme on collecting made the point well: every collector who presented his collection to the viewing audience would mention the very special 'object' that he did not have, and invite everyone to find it for him. So, even though objects may on occasion lead into the realm of social discourse, it must be acknowledged that *it is usually not an object's presence but far more often its absence that clears the way for social intercourse.*

A Discourse Addressed to Oneself

It remains characteristic of the collection that sooner or later a radical change will occur capable of wrenching it out of its regressive system and orientating it towards a project or task (whether status-related, cultural or commercial is of no consequence, just so long as an object eventually brings one human being face to face with another – at which point the object has become a message). All the same, no matter how open a collection is, it will always harbour an irreducible element of non-relationship to the world. Because he feels alienated and abolished by a social discourse whose rules escape him, the collector strives to reconstitute a discourse that is transparent to him, a discourse whose signifiers he controls and whose referent *par excellence* is himself. In this he is doomed to failure: he cannot see that he is simply transforming an open-ended objective discontinuity into a closed subjective one, where even the language he uses has lost any general validity. This kind of totalization by means of objects always bears the stamp of solitude. It fails to communicate with the outside, and communication is missing within it. In point of fact, moreover, we cannot avoid the question whether objects can indeed ever come to constitute any other language than this: can man ever use objects to set up a language that is more than a discourse addressed to himself?

35. Even in this case, however, the collector tends to call upon other people solely as observers of his collection, integrating them as third parties only in an already constituted subject–object relationship.

The collector is never an utterly hopeless fanatic, precisely because he collects objects that in some way always prevent him from regressing into the ultimate abstraction of a delusional state, but at the same time the discourse he thus creates can never – for the very same reason – get beyond a certain poverty and infantilism. Collecting is always a limited, repetitive process, and the very material objects with which it is concerned are too concrete and too discontinuous ever to be articulated as a true dialectical structure.[36] So if non-collectors are indeed 'nothing but morons', collectors, for their part, invariably have something impoverished and inhuman about them.

36. As distinct from science or memory, for example – which also involve collecting, but the collecting of facts or knowledge.

C. THE METAFUNCTIONAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL SYSTEM: GADGETS AND ROBOTS

We have now considered objects from the point of view of their objective systematization (interior design and atmosphere) and from that of their subjective systematization (collecting). Let us next turn our attention to their connotations – and hence to their ideological significance.

Technical Connotation: Automatism

If formal connotation is summed up in the word FASHION,[1] technical connotation is epitomized by the notion of AUTOMATISM, which is the major concept of the modern object's mechanistic triumphalism, the ideal of its mythology. What automatism means is that the object, in its particular function, takes on the connotation of an absolute.[2]

An example borrowed from Gilbert Simondon well illustrates this slipping to technical connotation via the idea of automatism.[3] From the strictly technological

1. See my account of the rhetoric of forms as 'atmospheric values', above, pp. 47 ff; for the sociological aspects, see 'Models and Series' below.
2. Thus, in the realm of forms, the tail fins of a car connote speed in the absolute, and this on the basis of formal criteria.
3. *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Aubier, 1958), p. 26.

standpoint, the elimination of the starting-handle makes the mechanical operation of cars more complicated, because it subordinates it to the use of electrical power from a storage battery that is external to the system. This increased complication – and abstractness – is nevertheless presented as progress, as a sign of modernity. Thanks to the connotation of automatism, which in fact masks a structural weakness, cars with starting-handles now seem outdated, and those without, modern. Of course, one might argue that the lack of a starting-handle serves a function every bit as real as the handle itself, namely the satisfaction of the desire for automatism. In the same way the chrome-plating and giant tail fins that weigh a car down could be said to serve the function of satisfying the demand for status. But the fulfilment of such secondary functions clearly militates against the material structure of the technical object. Even though so many unintegrated features remain both in the engine and in the external design of cars, the manufacturers tout excessive automatism in accessories as the last word in mechanical achievement. The same goes for the systematic resort to servo-mechanisms, whose most immediate effect is to render an object more fragile, thus raising its cost, shortening its effective life, and hastening its replacement.

'Functional' Transcendence

The degree to which a machine approaches perfection is thus everywhere presented as proportional to its degree of automatism. The fact is, however, that automating machines means sacrificing a very great deal of potential functionality. In order to automate a practical object, it is necessary to *stereotype it in its function*, thus making it more fragile. Far from having any intrinsic technical advantages, automatism always embodies the risk of arresting technical advance, for so long as an object has not been automated it remains susceptible of redesign, of self-transcendence through incorporation into a larger functional whole. When it becomes automatic, on the other hand, its function is fulfilled, certainly, but it is also hermetically sealed. Automatism amounts to a closing-off, to a sort of functional self-sufficiency which exiles man to the irresponsibility of a mere spectator. Contained within it is the dream of a dominated world, of a formally perfected technicity that serves an inert and dreamy humanity.

Current technological thinking rejects this tendency in principle, and holds that true perfection in machines – one genuinely founded on an increasing level of technicity, and hence expressing true 'functionality' – depends not on more automatism but on a certain margin of indeterminacy which lets the machine respond to information from outside. The highly technical machine is thus an open structure, and a universe of such open-ended machines presupposes man as organizer and living interpreter. But even if the automatizing tendency is repulsed at the highest technological level, the fact remains that in practice it is continually pushing objects into a dangerous abstractness. Automatism is king, and its fascination is indeed so powerful precisely because it is not that of a technical rationality: rather, we come under its spell because we experience it as a basic desire, as *the imaginary truth of the object*, in comparison with which the object's structure and concrete function leave us cold. Consider merely our continual wishing for 'everything to work by itself', for every object to perform this miracle of minimum effort in the carrying out of its assigned function. For the user, automatism means a wondrous absence of activity, and the enjoyment this procures is comparable to that derived, on another plane, from seeing without being seen: an esoteric satisfaction experienced at the most everyday level. The fact that every automated object may lead us into often unchangeable stereotypical behaviour constitutes no real challenge to this immediate demand of ours: the desire for automatism is there first – it takes priority over objective practice. And if it is so firmly rooted that the myth of its formal realization presents an almost material obstacle to the open-ended structuring of techniques and needs, the reason is that it is rooted in objects *as our own image*.[4]

Because the automated object 'works by itself', its resemblance to the autonomous human being is unmistakable, and the fascination thus created carries the day. We are in the presence of a new anthropomorphism. Formerly the image of man was clearly imprinted in the morphology and the manner of use of tools, of furniture, or of the house itself.[5] In the perfected technical object this compliance

4. Of course there is resistance here and there: a kind of 'heroic' personalization of driving, for instance, causes some people to disdain automatic gear-changing. But like it or not, such 'personal' heroism is destined to disappear.

5. Indeed, to some extent this still holds good for mechanical objects. The automobile, for example, has always continued to be shaped, even in its essential vehicular function, by the image of man. In its silhouette, its

has been destroyed, but it has been replaced by a symbolism of superstructural rather than primary functions: it is no longer his gestures, his energy, his needs and the image of his body that man projects into automated objects, but instead the autonomy of his consciousness, his power of control, his own individual nature, his personhood.

This supra-functionality of human consciousness is, in the end, what automatism strives to echo in the object. In a way that parallels the formal self-transcendence of the human individual, automatism aspires to be a sort of *ne plus ultra* of the object, enabling it to transcend its function. And automatism, too, uses a kind of formal abstraction to conceal structural defects, defence mechanisms and objective determinants. That perfect and perfectly autonomous monad which is the governing dream of subjectivity is thus also very clearly the dream that haunts objects. Emancipated from its former naïve animism and too-human meanings, the object finds the elements of its modern mythology in its own technical existence (thanks to the projection into the technical domain of the absolute formal autonomy of individual consciousness). And automatism, as one of the paths that this object continues to follow, invariably leads to an over-signification of man in his formal essence and in his unconscious desires – thus setting up an obstinate barrier to the object's own concrete structural goal, which is 'to change life'.

Man, for his part, by automating his objects and rendering them multifunctional instead of striving to structure his practices in a fluid and open-ended manner, reveals in a way what part he himself plays in a technical society: that of the most beautiful all-purpose object, that of an instrumental model.

In this sense automatism and personalization do not contradict one another in the slightest. Automatism is simply personalization dreamt in terms of the object. It is the most finished, the most sublime form of the inessential – of that marginal differentiation which subtends man's personalized relationship to his objects.[6]

forms, its internal organization, its mode of propulsion and its fuel, its development has persistently passed up all sorts of structural possibilities out of respect for the demands of human morphology, behaviour and psychology.

6. On personalization, see 'Models and Series' below. Automatism is deeply implicated. moreover, in the motivations of fashion and the calculations of production: even the tiniest of increments in the degree of automatism is the surest way to decategorize entire classes of objects.

Functional Aberration: Gadgets

Automatism *per se* is simply a technical deviation, but it opens the door to a whole world of functional delusion, to the entire range of manufactured objects in which a role is played by irrational complexity, obsessive detail, eccentric technicity or gratuitous formalism. In this poly-, para-, hyper- and meta-functional sphere, the object, at its farthest remove from objective determinants, is completely taken over by the imaginary. We have seen that automatism always embodies an irrational projection of consciousness; in this 'schizofunctional' world, however, nothing leaves a trace except obsessions pure and simple. There is a complete pataphysics of the object awaiting description here, a science of imaginary technical solutions.

If we ask, apropos of the objects that surround us, what is structural and what is astructural about them, or if we ask to what extent they are technical objects and to what extent accessories, gadgets or merely formal markers, we shall soon conclude – our highly neo-technical environment notwithstanding – that we live in a largely rhetorical and allegorical atmosphere. Indeed, it is the baroque, with its predilection for the allegorical, its new discursive individualism based on redundant forms and tricked-up materials, and its demiurgic formalism, that is the true inaugurating moment of the modern age. The baroque clearly foreshadows on the artistic plane all the themes and myths of our technological civilization, right down to its paroxysmic formalism of detail and movement.

Once this point is reached, the technical balance of objects is upset. Too many accessory functions are introduced from the point of view of which *the object answers no need other than the need to function*; it answers, in other words, to the functional superstition according to which for any operation there is – there must be – a corresponding object, and if none exists then one must be invented. As in the tinkering tradition of the Concours Lépine,[7] no true innovation is to be seen, but by juggling stereotyped techniques objects are created that are at once incredibly specific in their function and absolutely useless. So precise is the function proposed, in fact, that it can only be a pretext: such objects are *subjectively* functional, that is to

7. [*Translator's note*: The annual exhibition of the Association of French Inventors and Manufacturers, founded in 1902 by Louis Lépine.]

say, obsessional. As for the opposite, 'aesthetic', approach, which omits function altogether and exalts the beauty of pure mechanism, this ultimately amounts to the same thing. For the inventor at the Concours Lépine, the creation of a solar-powered boiled-egg opener or some other equally dotty gadget is merely an excuse for obsessive manipulation and contemplation. Like all obsessions, moreover, this particular variety has its poetic side, as manifested to a greater or lesser degree in Picabia's machines, in Tinguely's mechanical constructions, in the simple clockwork of a discarded watch, or in any object whose original use we simply cannot remember but whose mechanism still arouses a sort of delighted fascination in us. Something that serves no purpose whatsoever may in this sense still serve *us*.

Pseudo-Functionality: Gizmos

This empty functionalism is well summed up by the word 'gizmo'.[8] A gizmo does have an operational value, but whereas the function of a machine is explicit in its name, a gizmo, in the context of the functional paradigm, is always an indeterminate term with, in addition, the pejorative connotation of 'the thing without a name' or 'the thing I cannot name' (there is something immoral about an object whose exact purpose one does not know). The fact remains that it *works*. As a sort of dangling parenthesis, as an object detached from its function, what the 'gizmo' or the 'thingummyjig' suggests is a vague and limitless functionality – or perhaps better the mental picture of an imaginary functionality.

It would be impossible to classify the whole range of obsessional polyfunctionality. From Marcel Aymé's *'vistemboir'*, whose nature is a mystery to everyone, though everyone is sure it does have a use, to that 'Something' which in the Radio Luxembourg guessing game is the subject of endless questions whereby thousands of listeners try to find the name of some minute item (e.g. the strip made of a special stainless alloy that is fitted in a slide trombone which ensures that ... etc., etc.), and from Sunday-afternoon pottering to James Bond-style super-gadgetry, there

8. [*Translator's note*: I have used 'gizmo' for the French catch-all term *'machin'*, whose close kinship to the French *'machine'* is thus not apparent in the English.]

extends a panoply of wondrous accessories culminating in the immense industrial output of everyday objects – gadgets or gizmos – whose obsessional degree of specialization easily matches the old-fashioned baroque imagination of the amateur inventor. What is one to say of the ultrasound washing-up machine which removes encrusted food from dishes without the intervention of the human hand, the toaster with a nine-level browning control, or the electric cocktail swizzle-stick? At the serial and industrial level, what was once merely charming eccentricity or individual neurosis becomes a daily and ceaseless assault on the mind, which is either overtaken by panic or over-excited by sheer detail.

It is frightening to consider just how many things fall into the category of gizmos, just how many of our objects are covered by this empty concept. It is not difficult to see that the proliferation of technical detail here corresponds in each of us to an immense conceptual failure, and that our language is a very long way indeed behind the structures and functional articulation of the objects that we use, as it were, naturally. Our civilization has more and more objects and fewer and fewer names for them. The word 'machine', in becoming applicable to the realm of social labour, has acquired a precise enough generic sense; as recently as the late eighteenth century, however, it had much the same meaning as 'gizmo' today. Words like 'gizmo' now cover all those things which, on account of their specialization and because they answer to no true collective need, cannot be referred to as machines, and thus assume a mythological character. If 'machine' belongs to the sphere of functional 'language', 'gizmo' belongs to the subjective sphere of 'speech'. It goes without saying that in a civilization where such unnameable objects (or at any rate objects designated only in the loosest way, by means of neologism or paraphrase) are multiplying, resistance to mythology is perforce far weaker than in civilizations whose objects are clearly known and denominated down to their most detailed aspects. Today we live in a world of what Georges Friedmann calls Sunday drivers – people who have never opened the bonnets of their cars, people for whom *functioning is not merely the function of things but also their mystery.*

If we grant that our environment, and by extension our everyday view of the world, is thus largely shaped by functional simulacra, we are bound to ask what

superstition serves to maintain and compensate for this conceptual inadequacy. What exactly is the key to this mysterious functioning of objects? The answer is a vague but tenacious obsession with a world-machine, with a universal mechanism. The machine and the gizmo are mutually exclusive. It is not that the machine is a perfected form, nor that the gizmo is a degraded one: rather, the two are different in kind, the first operating in the real, the second in the imaginary realm. 'Machine' signifies, and in so doing structures, a particular real practical whole; 'gizmo' signifies nothing more than a *formal* operation – though that operation is the *total* operation of the world. The virtue of a gizmo may be ridiculous in reality,[9] but in the imagination it is universal. The electrical whatsit that extracts stones from fruit or some new vacuum-cleaner accessory for getting under sideboards are perhaps in the end not especially practical, but they do serve to reinforce the belief that for every need there is a possible mechanical answer, that every practical (and even psychological) problem may be foreseen, forestalled, resolved in advance by means of a technical object that is rational and adapted – perfectly adapted. As for what exactly it is adapted to, that is of no consequence. The important thing is that the world should present the appearance of having already been 'operated on'. The real referent of the gizmo is not a plum stone or the narrow space under the sideboard, but nature in its entirety reinvented in accordance with the technical reality principle: a total simulacrum of an automated nature. This is its myth and its mystery. And like all mythologies, this one too has two sides to it: it mystifies man by submerging him in a functional dream, but it equally well mystifies the object by submerging it in the irrationality of human determinants. There is a close collusion between the human-all-too-human and the functional-all-too-functional: the impregnation of the human world by technical goals invariably implies technology's impregnation by human ones – for better or for worse. We are, however, far more sensitive to human relationships being interfered with by the absurd and totalitarian concerns of technology than we are to technological development being interfered with by the absurd and totalitarian concerns of human beings. Yet

9. A minimal practical impingement on reality is nevertheless always required as a justification for the imaginary projection involved here.

it is unquestionably human irrationality and its figments which fuel the tendency for any machine to take on gizmo-like properties; it is they, in other words, which agitate functional *phantasy* behind any concrete functional *praxis*.

The true functionality of the gizmo is unconscious in character – hence its fascination for us. That it should be absolutely functional, absolutely adapted (though to what?), shows that this functionality and this adaptation must needs refer to a demand of a non-practical kind. The myth of a wonder-working functionality of the *world* is correlated with the phantasy of a wonder-working functionality of the *body*. There is a direct link between the paradigm of technical action executed by the world and the paradigm of sexual action executed by the subject; and in this perspective the gizmo, the ultimate tool, is basically a substitute for the phallus, the operative medium of function *par excellence*. Moreover, any object has something of the gizmo about it, for in proportion as its practical instrumentality fades it becomes susceptible of cathexis by a libidinal instrumentality. This is already true of the child's toy, or of any stone or piece of wood as perceived by 'primitives'; as we have seen, 'uncivilized' people can fetishize a simple pen, and 'civilized' ones can do the same with absolutely any abandoned mechanical object or ancient artefact.

For any object whatsoever, in fact, the reality principle may be put in brackets. *No sooner does an object lose its concrete practical aspect than it is transferred to the realm of mental practices*. In short, behind every real object there is a dream object.

We have already discussed the case of antiques in this context. In their case, however, the transcendence or mental abstraction concerned the material or the form, and was bound up with a regressive birth complex; pseudo-functional objects or 'gizmos', by contrast, are bound up with an abstract transcendence of the object's *functioning*, and hence with a projective, phallic power complex. Let me stress once more that this is an analytic distinction: whereas objects normally have but one real function, narrowly defined, their 'mental' functionality is unlimited, and any number of phantasies may have a place therein. A distinct evolution in their imaginary aspect is nevertheless signalled by the shift from an animistic to an energetic structure: traditional objects tended to bear witness to our *presence*, being static symbols of our bodily organs, but technical objects hold a different kind of fascination in that they evoke a virtual *energy*, and are thus less receptacles

of our presence than vehicles of our dynamic self-image. Here too, moreover, a reservation is called for, because the operation of energy itself tends to be downplayed in the most modern devices, with their encapsulated and elliptical forms. In a world dominated by communications and information, the sight of energy at work has become a rarity. Miniaturization and gestural depletion erode symbolic expressiveness.[10] But we may take comfort in the fact that even if objects sometimes escape practical human control, they never escape the imagination. *Modes of the imaginary follow modes of technological evolution*, and it is therefore to be expected that the next mode of technical efficiency will give rise to a new imaginary mode. At present its traits are difficult to discern, but perhaps, in the wake of the animistic and energetic modes, we shall need to turn our attention to the structures of a cybernetic imaginary mode whose central myth will no longer be that of an absolute organicism, nor that of an absolute functionalism, but instead that of an absolute interrelatedness of the world. For the time being our everyday environment remains unevenly divided between the three. The old sideboard, the car and the tape recorder exist side by side in the one sphere, even though their imaginary modes of existence, just like their technical modes of existence, differ radically.

At all events, whatever the functioning of the object may be like, we invariably experience it as OUR functioning: whatever the object's efficient mode – even should it be absurd, as in the case of the 'gizmo' – we project ourselves into that efficiency. In fact we do so *especially* when it is absurd, as witness the old phrase, at once magical and comical, according to which a thing 'might always come in useful': while it is true that objects do indeed serve specific purposes at times, they are much more commonly good for everything and nothing, and in that case their true utility lies in the very fact that they 'might always come in useful'.

10. In a world of miniaturized, mute, unmediated and impeccable appliances, the automobile, thanks to the dramatic visibility of engine and controls, remains the great exception – and the spectacular object *par excellence*.

Metafunctionality: Robots

The ultimate expression of such imaginary projection is the object as dreamt up by science fiction – the pure realm of the gizmo. We should be greatly mistaken were we to view science fiction as an escape from everyday reality: on the contrary, it is an extrapolation from the irrational tendencies of that reality through the free exercise of narrative invention. Although it is an invaluable witness to the civilization of the object, precisely because it heightens certain aspects thereof, science fiction has absolutely no prophetic value. It has practically nothing to do with the real future of technological development, for which it accounts in the future perfect tense, so to speak, drawing for nourishment on sublime archaisms and on a repertory of acquired forms and functions. It contains little in the way of structural invention, but it is an inexhaustible mine of imaginary solutions to stereotyped needs and functional requirements of an often marginal or mind-boggling variety. In a way science fiction is the apotheosis of tinkering. But while its true exploratory value may be very feeble, it supplies us with a wealth of information on the unconscious.

In particular, science fiction demonstrates what we have recognized as the most profound – albeit the most irrational – feature of the modern object, namely its automatism. When it comes down to it, the genre has only ever invented one super-object: the ROBOT. Soon man will no longer even have to steer his lawnmower on a Sunday afternoon, because it will start itself up, and stop once the job is done, of its own accord. Is this the only conceivable fate of objects? The itinerary laid down for them, leading inexorably to the complete automation of their existing functions,[11]

11. And perhaps – who knows? – to the total mimetism of 'spontaneous' self-generation, with coffee mills giving birth to baby coffee mills, just as children imagine. But things could surely then go no farther, because a machine capable of manufacturing an identical machine is, strictly speaking, inconceivable. Such a situation would clearly represent the ultimate in autonomy (a logic which always ends in tautology), but it is a situation that the imaginary realm cannot embrace, because that would mean also embracing magical and infantile regression back to a stage where automatic duplication or scissiparity is possible. Such a machine would in any case be the height of absurdity: self-reproduction being its sole function, it could never pod peas at the same time. . . . Reproduction is never the sole function of man himself. The imaginary is not synonymous with madness, and it must always effectively preserve the distinction between man and his double.

has far less to do with humanity's future technology than with its present psychological motivations. Consequently, the myth of the robot may be said to cover all paths taken by the unconscious in the realm of objects. The robot is a symbolic microcosm of both man and the world, which is to say that it simultaneously replaces both man and the world, synthesizing absolute functionality and absolute anthropomorphism. Its antecedents were electrical household appliances (cf. the 'automatic maid'). Fundamentally, therefore, the robot is simply the mythological end-product of a naïve phase of the imagination, a phase which implies the projection of a continual and *visible* functionality. For the substitution in question has to be visible: if it is to exert its fascination without creating insecurity, the robot must unequivocally reveal its nature as a mechanical prosthesis (its body is metallic, its gestures are discrete, jerky and unhuman). A robot that mimicked man to the point where its gestures had a truly human fluidity would create anxiety. What the robot must be is the symbol of a world at once entirely functionalized and entirely personalized, and hence reassuring at all levels; a world which can reincarnate the abstracted power of man just as far as is conceivable short of its being utterly engulfed by identification.[12]

If, for the unconscious, the robot is the perfect object that sums up all the others, this is not simply because it is a simulacrum of man as a functionally efficient being; rather, it is because, though the robot is indeed such a simulacrum, it is not so perfect in this regard as to be man's double, and because, for all its humanness, it always remains quite visibly an object, and hence a *slave*. In the last analysis, robots are always slaves. They may be endowed with any of the qualities that define human sovereignty except one, and that is sex. Their fascination and their symbolic value must operate under this one constraint. By virtue of their multifunctionalism

12. Let me return here for a moment to the fable of the eighteenth-century automaton that I recounted above (see p. 56). When the illusionist, at the pinnacle of his artistry, renders his own gestures mechanical and subtly changes his own appearance, his intention is to bring out his performance's true *raison d'être*, which is the pleasure to be derived from the difference between the automaton and the man. His audience would be far too alarmed if they were really unable to tell which figure was 'real', and he knows full well that creating a perfect automaton, and hence a perfect identity, is far less important than giving play to difference – and, indeed, that the very best outcome is that the spectators should take the machine for the man and the man for the machine.

they attest to man's phallic reign over the world, but at the same time, inasmuch as they are controlled, dominated, directed and rendered asexual, they also attest to a phallus that is enslaved, to a sexuality that is domesticated and unaccompanied by anxiety: all that remains is an obedient functionality embodied (so to speak) in an object which resembles me, an object to which the world is subject yet which is simultaneously subject to my will. In this way a threatening part of myself has been exorcized and turned into a sort of all-powerful slave, cast in my image, which I can use for purposes of self-aggrandizement.

It is thus not hard to understand the urge that exists to have all objects accede to the status of robots. This is the logical end of the object's unconscious psychological function. Its *actual* end, too – for the robot can evolve no farther: *it is frozen in its resemblance to man* and in functional abstraction at all costs. Active genital sexuality expires here also, because, as projected into the robot, it is neutralized, deactivated, conjured away – itself immobilized within the object whose development it has terminated. The process of abstraction here is narcissistic; the universe of science fiction is asexual.

The robot is interesting on a number of other counts also. As the mythological end of the object, it gathers unto itself all the phantasies attendant upon our deepest relationships with our environment.

The robot is a slave, then, but let us not forget that the theme of slavery is always bound up – even in the legend of the sorcerer's apprentice – with the theme of *revolt*. In one form or another, robots in revolt are by no means rare in science fiction. And that revolt is implicit even when it is not manifest. The robot, like the slave, is both good and perfidious: good as a captive force; perfidious as a force that may break its chains. Like the sorcerer's apprentice, man has every reason to fear the resurrection of this force which he has exorcized and bound to his own image. It is in fact his own sexuality, liable now to turn against him, that he is afraid of. Once liberated, unchained and in revolt, sexuality becomes man's mortal enemy. This is the lesson of the frequent and unpredictable revolts of robots, of the maleficent mutations that affect them, and even merely of the disquieting, ever-present threat of such brutal conversions occurring. Man is thus prey to the deepest forces within him: he finds himself confronted by a double who has enlisted his energies and

whose appearance, according to legend, spells death. What the mechanical perfidy of the science-fiction robot means (beyond the implication of a functional breakdown of the environment) is that subjugated phallic energies are rising in revolt. These narratives propose two solutions in this situation. Sometimes man tames the 'evil' forces that have been unleashed, and 'moral' order is restored. Alternatively, the forces embodied in the robot self-destruct: automatism is itself driven to suicide. The theme of the robot that goes off the rails and destroys itself is a common one – indeed, it is closely akin to the theme of the robot in revolt. There is a secret apocalypse of objects – or of the Object – which fuels the passionate interest of the reader. It is tempting to connect this development to a moral denunciation of the diabolical nature of science, the point being that if technology is on its own road to damnation, man will be restored to an untrammelled nature. This moral theme unquestionably plays a part in fictional narratives, but it is at once too naïve and too rational. Morality *per se* fascinates no one, yet the anticipated disintegration of the robot produces a strange satisfaction. The recurrent phantasy of ritualistic fragmentation which is the culminating point of the object's functional triumphalism is determined less by a moral constraint than by a profound wish. The spectacle of death is relished, and if we accept the idea that the robot symbolizes a subjugated sexuality, then by extension the robot's disintegration must constitute for man the symbolic spectacle of the atomization of his own sexuality – which he himself destroys, having pressed it into the service of his image. If we carry the Freudian view to its logical conclusion, we cannot but wonder whether this is not man's way of using technology in its most demented incarnations to celebrate the future occurrence of his own death, his way of renouncing his sexuality in order to be quit of all anxiety.

The current fashion for 'happenings' has brought the great science-fiction event of the 'suicide' or murder of the object a little closer to home. The happening involves an orgiastic destruction and debasement of objects, a veritable hecatomb whereby our whole satiated culture revels in its own degradation and death. A recent fad in the United States amounts to a mass-marketing of the happening in the shape of novel contraptions, composed of gears, rods, shafts and what-have-you – true jewels of useless functionality whose merit lies in the fact that they fall apart

of their own accord, suddenly and irreparably, after a few hours of operation. These objects are exchanged as gifts, and the period during which they duly malfunction, disintegrate and die is the occasion for a social get-together.

A similar, though less extreme, phenomenon is the embodiment in certain present-day objects of a kind of *fatum*. Here the car once again has pride of place. The individual commits himself to a car for better or for worse. Certainly the car serves him, but he would seem to accept and expect something more from it: the sort of destiny which in the cinema, for example, is ritually represented by death in a road accident.

The Transformations of Technology

We may thus trace functional mythologies, born of technics itself, all the way to a sort of fatality in which the world-mastering technology seems to crystallize in the form of an inverse and threatening purpose. At this point it behoves us to do two things. In the first place, we must reframe the problem of the fragility of objects, and of their defection; for although in the first instance objects present themselves to us as reassuring, as factors of equilibrium, albeit of a neurotic kind, they are also in the end a factor of continual disillusionment. Secondly, we must challenge our society's implicit assumption that a rationality of ends and means governs the sphere of production and the technological project itself.

The object's dysfunctionality, its counter-purpose, is governed by two parallel sets of determinants: a socio-economic system of production and a psychological system of projection. It is the reciprocal involvement of these two systems, their collusion, that we need to define.

Technological society thrives on a tenacious myth, the myth of uninterrupted technical progress accompanied by a continuing moral 'backwardness' of man relative thereto. These two claims are mutually supportive: moral 'stagnation' transfigures technical progress and turns it into the only certain value, and hence the ultimate authority of our society; by the same token, the system of production is absolved of all responsibility. A supposed moral contradiction serves to conceal the true contradiction, which is the fact, precisely, that the present production

system, while working for real technological progress, at the same time opposes it (along with any restructuring of social relationships to which it might lead). The myth of a happy convergence of technology, production and consumption masks all political and economic counter-purposes. How indeed could a system of techniques and objects conceivably progress harmoniously while the system of relations between the people who produced it continued to stagnate or regress? The fact is that humans and their techniques, needs and objects are structurally interlocked come what may. The indivisibility, within any single cultural sphere, of individual and social structures and of technical and functional modalities must surely be deemed axiomatic. Our technological civilization is no exception to the rule: techniques and objects therein suffer the same servitudes as human beings – and the process of material organization, hence of objective technical progress, is subject to exactly the same blocks, deviations and regressions as the concrete process of the socialization of human relationships, hence of objective social progress.

There is a cancer of the object: the proliferation of astructural elements that underpins the object's triumphalism is a kind of cancer. It is upon such astructural elements (automatism, accessory features, inessential differences) that the entire social network of fashion and controlled consumption is founded.[13] They are the bulwark which tends to halt genuine technical development. On their account, while appearing to manifest all the metamorphic powers of a prodigious health, objects that are already saturated wear themselves out completely through convulsive formal variation and changes whose impact is strictly visual. 'Technically speaking,' writes Lewis Mumford, 'changes in form and style are signs of immaturity; they mark a period of transition. The error of capitalism as a creed lies in the attempt to make this period of transition a permanent one.'[14] And Mumford notes that in the United States, for example, after the grand wave of inventions which between 1910 and 1940 brought in the automobile, the aeroplane,

13. See 'Models and Series' below.

14. *Technics and Civilization* (see above, p. 57, note 37), p. 396. The decisiveness of capitalism in this regard is manifest for an entire period, certainly, but once a certain threshold in technological development and in the distribution of goods and products has been passed, things are far less cut and dried.

the refrigerator, the television, and so on, significant invention practically petered out. Improvement, refinement, packaging – anything to enhance the prestige of the object, but nothing by way of structural innovation. 'The chief obstacle to the fuller development of the machine lies in the association of taste and fashion with waste and commercial profiteering.'[15] On the one hand, indeed, minor improvements, added complexity and ancillary systems sustain a false consciousness of 'progress' and conceal the urgent necessity for fundamental changes (a 'reformism' of the object, one might say). On the other hand, fashion – which, with its inchoate proliferation of secondary systems, is ruled by chance – is also the realm of an infinite recurrence of forms, and hence of maximum commercial prospects. There is in fact a fundamental antagonism between the verticality of technology and the horizontality of profit – between the continual self-transcendence of technical invention and the closedness of a system of recurrent objects and forms beholden to the goals of production.

This is where we encounter the ambition of objects to act as replacements for human relationships. In its concrete function the object solves a practical problem, but *in its inessential aspects it resolves a social or psychological conflict*. Such, at any rate, is the modern 'philosophy' of the object as understood by Ernest Dichter, prophet of motivation research, whose thesis boils down to the claim that for any source of tension whatsoever, for any individual or collective conflict, there must be an object capable of resolving it.[16] Just as there is a saint for every day of the year, so there is an object for every problem: the important thing is to manufacture and launch that object at the right moment. What Dichter deems an ideal solution, however, Mumford more accurately sees as a solution by default, but Mumford's conception of the object and of technics as substitute answers to human conflicts – a conception which he extends within a critical perspective to our whole civilization – is essentially the same as Dichter's. 'The fact is', he writes,

15. Ibid., p. 353.
16. See *The Strategy of Desire* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), p. 84.

> that an elaborate mechanical organization is often a temporary and expensive substitute for an effective social organization or for a sound biological adaptation.
>
> Power machines have given a sort of licence to social inefficiency.
>
> The machine, so far from being a sign in our present civilization of human power and order, is often an indication of ineptitude and social paralysis.[17]

It is difficult to assess the total cost to society as a whole of thus referring real conflicts and needs to the technical sphere, itself in thrall to fashion and forced consumption. But that cost is certainly colossal. If one considers the automobile, for instance, it is very hard now even to imagine what an extraordinary tool for the reorganization of human relations it might have been, thanks to its victory over space and the structural convergence of several techniques that it represented, so quickly did it become encrusted with parasitic functions defined by the requirements of prestige, comfort, unconscious projection, and so forth – functions which first impeded and then blocked the automobile's essential function, which was human integration. Today the car is a completely inert object. Ever more thoroughly abstracted from its social function of transportation, while at the same time serving to trap that function within archaic modalities, it continues to undergo frantic transformations, revisions and metamorphoses within the limits of possibility of a structure that cannot be changed. And a whole civilization can come to a halt in the same way as the automobile.

Three collateral lines of development may be distinguished here. The first concerns the technical structuring of the object, implying the convergence of functions, integration, material form and economy. The second concerns a parallel structuring of the world and of nature: space is mastered, energy is controlled, materials are mobilized – and a more meaningful and interrelated world emerges. Thirdly, human praxis, both individual and collective, is so structured as to foster an ever greater 'relativity' and mobility, along with an open-ended integration and an

17. Mumford, *Technics*, pp. 275, 276 and 426 respectively.

'economy' of society analogous to that of the most highly evolved technical objects. Despite the discrepancies arising from the distinct dynamics of each of these levels, it may be observed that, broadly speaking, whenever development slows or stops, it does so on all three at once. Once a technical object's development is arrested at a given outcome (which at the second level, in the case of the car, means a *partial* victory over space), it will henceforward do no more than continue to connote that frozen structure, to which all manner of subjective motivations will now return cathectically (regression at the third level). It is at this point that the technical object, having lost all dynamism, may enter into a relationship of fixed complementarity: car and house, for example, will come to constitute a closed system invested with conventional values, and the car, ceasing to serve relationship or exchange, will truly be nothing but an object of consumption: 'Not alone have the older forms of technics served to constrain the development of the neotechnic economy: but the new inventions and devices have been frequently used to maintain, renew, and stabilize the structure of the old order.'[18] The automobile no longer removes obstacles between men; on the contrary, men now invest the automobile with that which separates them. Space mastered becomes an even greater obstacle than the space over which mastery was sought in the first place.[19]

Technics and the Unconscious System

All the same, we have eventually to ask ourselves whether there is not something more at the root of this relative stagnation of forms and techniques, this systematic

18. Ibid., p. 266.

19. In a comparable way we may suppose that cinema and television have passed up, or are in the midst of passing up, vast concrete opportunities for 'changing life'. As Edgar Morin has written:

> Nobody is surprised by the fact that from the instant of its birth the cinematograph was drastically diverted from its apparent technical and scientific goals, that it was snapped up by show business and turned into the 'cinema', with the result that developments that might have seemed natural were atrophied from the outset. (*Le cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire* [Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1956], p. 15)

Morin goes on to show how the sluggishness of innovation (sound, colour, depth) was bound up with the consumption-driven exploitation of the cinema.

deficit (whose remarkable efficiency in terms of social integration will nevertheless be confirmed below when we discuss 'Models and Series'), than the self-interested dictatorship of a system of production, than an absolutely – and absolutely alienating – social agency. Whether, as Lewis Mumford puts it, it is simply a 'social accident' that objects remain in a state of underdevelopment. If humanity were 'innocent' in this respect, if the production system alone were responsible for technology's immaturity, there would indeed be an accident here – a contradiction just as inexplicable as its diametrical opposite, the bourgeois fiction of 'advanced' technology held back by moral 'retardation'. The truth is that there is no accident, and even if we must assign the lion's share of responsibility to a production system, structurally linked to the social order, which exploits the entire society by means of a system of objects, we still cannot help concluding, in view of the system's permanence and solidity, that a collusion exists somewhere between the collective order of production and an individual order of needs, albeit an unconscious one. What I mean by 'collusion' is a close relationship of negative complicity, or a set of reciprocal determinations, between the dysfunctionality of the socio-economic system and the far-reaching effects of the unconscious; the question was touched on above in connection with robots.

If connotation and personalization, fashion and automatism, all tend to focus upon those astructural features whose irrational motivations the logic of production seeks to control and systematize, this is perhaps also because man has neither a clear will to transcend nor any great prospect of transcending the aforementioned archaic structures of projection; or at least that he has a deep-seated resistance to sacrificing subjective, projective virtualities and their eternal recurrence on the altar of concrete structural development (both technical and social); or again, to put it in the simplest terms, that man has a profound resistance to imposing rationality upon the purely arbitrary goals of his needs. This may well constitute a fatal turn for the *modus existendi* of the object, as indeed of society as a whole. Once a certain point in technical development has been reached, and once primary needs have been satisfied, we may well demand a phantasied, allegorical and subconscious edibility of the object as much as, or even more than, an actual functionality. Why is it, after all, that the design of the automobile is not different: why is the driver's seat not

positioned forward and the vehicle streamlined in such a way as to let the operator efficiently occupy the space he has to travel through, instead of placing him in a substitute house – even, as it were, within a substitute subject endowed with projectile force? Surely the answer must be that the current form (even more exaggerated in racing cars, whose excessively long bonnet has every appearance of providing an absolute *model* here) facilitates an essential projection which is ultimately far more important than any progress in the art and science of travel.

Apparently man needs to overburden the world with this 'unconscious' discourse of his, even at the cost of halting that world's development. The implications of this are very far-reaching. If indeed the astructural elements around which our most tenacious desires seem to crystallize are not just parallel functions, complications or overloads, but properly speaking dysfunctions, failures or aberrations relative to an objective structural order, if indeed a whole civilization appears ready to turn away on their account from a genuine revolution in its structures, and if indeed all this is not accidental, then we are justified in asking whether man, under cover of the myth of functional extravagance (or 'personalized affluence'), which in fact conceals an obsession with his own image, does not after all incline much more towards an increasingly dysfunctional world than towards an increasingly functional one. He does appear, at any rate, to go along with the play of dysfunctions which is progressively turning our environment into a world of objects arrested in their growth by their own outgrowths, as it were, objects disappointed and disappointing to the very extent that they become personalized.

The substitutional aspect of the object, which a moment ago we noted was a decisive one, is even more in evidence here: it is even truer on the plane of unconscious conflicts than on that of social or conscious psychological ones, as evoked by Ernest Dichter and Lewis Mumford, that the use of technics – and, more simply, the consumption of objects – has secondary roles to play, imaginary solutions to offer. Technics as an effective mediation between man and the world is indeed the harder path. The easier path is the interpolation of a system of objects as an imaginary resolution of contradictions of every kind. This amounts to a short circuit between the technical order and the order of individual needs, a short circuit which exhausts the energies of both systems. Small wonder that the resulting system

of objects should bear the stigma of defection: its structural deficiency reflects the contradiction to which the system offers a merely formal solution. As the individual or collective *cover* for one conflict or another, the system of objects is inevitably marked by its denial of those conflicts.

But what are the conflicts that objects are called upon to cover up? Humanity has its whole future wagered on the simultaneous harnessing of natural external forces and of the internal pressure of the libido, both of which it experiences as threatening and fateful. The unconscious economy of the system of objects is a mechanism of projection and domestication (or control) of the libido which brings an efficient principle to bear. The domination of nature and the production of goods are in effect a parallel benefit thereof. Unfortunately, however, this admirable economy carries a dual risk for the human order: first there is the danger that sexuality might be in some sense conjured away and foreclosed in the technical realm, secondly the danger that this technical realm might in turn be disturbed in its development by the conflicted energy by which it has been invested. All the preconditions are thus assembled for the emergence of an insoluble contradiction, a permanent defection: the fact is that the system of objects as it operates today embodies an ever-present potential for *consent* to this sort of regression – the lure of an end to sexuality, its definitive absorption in the recurrence and continual forward flight of the technical order.

In practice the technical order always retains a certain dynamism of its own that blocks the sort of infinite recurrence characteristic of a perfect regressive system of this kind (which is equivalent, strictly speaking, to death). The necessary conditions for such an eventuality are nevertheless present in our system of objects, and the system is *haunted by the temptation of a reverse evolution which coexists in it with the potential for progress.*

This temptation to regress towards what can only be called death as a way of escaping from sexual anxiety sometimes assumes forms – still within the context of the technical order – that are ever more spectacular and brutal. It may then be transformed into the temptation, truly tragic in its implications, to see this order itself turned against its instigator – that is, against humanity; to see an ineluctable fate re-emerge from within the very technical order that had been designed to

exorcize it – a process akin to the one described by Freud, whereby repressed energy returns via the repressing agency itself and derails all mechanisms of defence. In contrast to the reassurance vouchsafed by a gradual regression, the tragic variety precipitates the dizzying sensations associated with such a brusque resolution of the conflict between the sexual drives and the ego. These sensations are a response to the eruption of hitherto contained energies within technical objects themselves – that is to say, within the very symbols of mastery over the world. Two contradictory goals are pursued simultaneously: the inevitability of fate is challenged, yet at the same time sought. This contradiction is reflected in the economic order of production, which, though it produces ceaselessly, can produce only fragile objects – objects that are partly dysfunctional and destined for an early death; the system thus works to destroy such objects as well as to produce them.

Let me stress once again that it is not the fragility of objects that is tragic, nor their death. Rather, it is the *temptation* represented by that fragility and that death. This temptation is satisfied in a way when an object fails us, even though this failing may at the same time inconvenience us or throw us into despair. This is the same kind of malign and vertiginous satisfaction that we encountered earlier, as projected into phantasies of revolt and destruction on the part of robots. The object takes its revenge. It becomes 'personalized' – in this case for the worse – because it revolts. This hostile volte-face may shock us and take us by surprise, but there is no denying that a submissive attitude soon develops towards this revolt, which we treat as inevitable, and as evidence of a fragility that distinctly appeals to us. A technical hitch infuriates us, but an avalanche of technical hitches can fill us with glee; if a jug develops a crack we are pained, but if it smashes to smithereens there is satisfaction in it. Our reaction to an object's failure is in fact always ambiguous. *This failure threatens our well-being, yet it gives material expression to the objection that we continually raise with respect to ourselves – an objection which also demands satisfaction.* As Ernest Dichter points out, you expect a cigarette lighter to work, but 'you do not assume, or even desire, that your lighter would admirably perform under all conditions'.[20] One has merely to imagine an infallible object, and the disillusion it would

20. Dichter, *The Strategy of Desire*, p. 94.

inevitably entail in connection – precisely – with the aforementioned objection one has to oneself, in order to realize that infallibility invariably generates anxiety. The fact is that a world without fallibility would imply the definitive resorption of an inevitable fate – and hence of sexuality. This is why we greet the slightest hint of a resurgence of fatefulness with deep satisfaction: the slightest breach allows sexuality to revive, even if for only a moment, even if it takes the form of a hostile force (as it always does in this context), and even if its emergence in such circumstances means failure, death and destruction. The underlying contradiction is thus resolved in contradictory fashion, but could things really go otherwise?[21]

Our 'technological' civilization, as foreshadowed by the American model, is a world at once systematized and fragile. The system of objects is the embodiment of this systematization of fragility, of ephemerality, of the ever more rapid recurrence of the repetition compulsion; the embodiment of satisfaction and disillusion; the embodiment of the problematical exorcism of the real conflicts that threaten individual and social relationships. With the advent of our consumer society, we are seemingly faced for the first time in history by an irreversible organized attempt to swamp society with objects and integrate it into an indispensable system designed to replace all open interaction between natural forces, needs and techniques. The principal basis of this system would appear to be the official, obligatory and supervised demise of the objects that it comprises: a gigantic collective 'happening' whereby the death of the group itself is celebrated through the euphoric destruction or ritualistic devouring of objects and gestures.[22] Here again one could argue that nothing more is involved than an infantile disorder of the technological society, and attribute such growing pains entirely to the dysfunctionality of our present social structures – i.e. to the capitalist order of production. The long-term prospect

21. A good illustration of this is the legend of the Student of Prague, according to which the protagonist's image steps out of the mirror and assumes the form of a double which haunts him (following the conclusion of a pact with the devil). Henceforward he has no reflection in the mirror, though his image continues to haunt him. One day, when the double happens (as in the primal scene) to be standing between him and the mirror, the student shoots and kills it – which is to say, of course, that he kills himself, for the double has stripped him of his reality. Just before he dies, however, he rediscovers his true image in the shards of the broken mirror.
22. This is what Edgar Morin has called the nihilism of consumption.

of a transcendence of the whole system would thus remain open. On the other hand, if something more is involved than the anarchic ends of a production system determined by social exploitation, if deeper conflicts in fact play a part – highly individual conflicts, but extended onto the collective plane – then any prospect of ultimate transcendence must be abandoned for ever. Are we contemplating the developmental problems of a society ultimately destined to become the best of all possible worlds, or, alternatively, an organized regression in the face of insoluble problems? Is all this the work of anarchic production relations or of the death instinct? What, in short, has made a civilization go wrong in this way? The question is still open.

D. THE SOCIO-IDEOLOGICAL SYSTEM OF OBJECTS AND THEIR CONSUMPTION

I Models and Series

The Pre-Industrial Object and the Industrial Model

The status of the modern object is dominated by the MODEL/SERIES distinction. To some extent, things were ever thus. A privileged minority in society has always served as a testing-ground for successive styles whose solutions, methods and artifices were then disseminated by local craftsmen. All the same, one cannot exactly speak of 'models' or 'series' in connection with any time before the industrial era. For one thing, there was a far greater homogeneity among all objects in pre-industrial society, because the mode of their production was still everywhere handcraft, because they were far less specialized in function, and because the cultural range of forms was more restricted (there being little reference to earlier or to extraneous traditions); furthermore, there was a much tighter segregation between the class of objects that could lay claim to 'style' and the class of locally produced objects that had use value only. Today a farmhouse table has cultural value, but just thirty years ago its sole value arose from the purpose it served. In the eighteenth century there was simply no relationship between a 'Louis XV' table and a peasant's table: there was an unbridgeable gulf between the two types of object, just as there was between the two corresponding social classes. No single cultural

system embraced them both.[1] Nor can it be said that a Louis XIII table is the model of which the countless tables and chairs that later imitated it are the serial form.[2] A limited dissemination of craft techniques did occur here, but there was no dissemination of *values*: the 'model' remained absolute, for it was bound to a transcendent reality. No serial production in the modern sense could be based on it. The social order was what gave objects their standing. A person was noble or not: nobility was not the ultimate – privileged – term in a series but, rather, a grace that bestowed absolute distinction. In the realm of objects the equivalent of this transcendent idea of nobility is what we call the 'style' of a period.

This distinction between pre-industrial 'period' objects and the 'models' of today is a very important one, because it allows us to get beyond the purely formal opposition and clarify the concrete relationship between model and series in our modern system.

Considering that broad strata of our society do in fact live among serially produced objects that refer formally and psychologically to models which only a small minority can enjoy, there is a strong temptation to simplify the problem by positing a polarity between the former and the latter, and then assigning the value of reality to just one of the poles: to separate series and model completely so as neatly to assign one to the real and the other to the imaginary realm. Unfortunately, the everydayness of serial objects is not unreal as compared with a putative world of models as true values, nor is the sphere of models imaginary just because it affects but a tiny minority, and thus might seem to fall outside social reality. Thanks to mass information and communications systems which promote models, there is now not only a well-established circulation of objects as such but also a 'psychological' circulation which constitutes a radical watershed between our industrial age and the pre-industrial age of the transcendent distinctiveness of period 'style'. Anyone who has bought a walnut bedroom set at Dubonbois Home Furnishings

1. Differences between classes of objects are doubtless never quite so sharp as those between social classes, however. The absolute hierarchical distinction between orders of society is mitigated at the level of objects by use: a table, after all, serves the same basic function at every rung of the social ladder.

2. It is true that much more recently the Henri II sideboard has become a true serial object, but this was achieved via the very different route of the industrial production of cultural objects.

or a few mass-produced electrical household appliances, and may indeed have done so as a way of realizing a personal dream and as a mark of upward social mobility, knows full well at the same time, through the press, the cinema or the television, that completely 'harmonized' and 'fully functional' living spaces are on the market. Naturally he perceives such things as part of a world of luxury and status from which he is almost inevitably excluded by money; yet he also feels that today this exclusion is no longer underwritten by any class-based legal statute, by any transcending social rationale buttressed by laws. This conviction is of paramount psychological significance, because it means that despite the frustration, despite the material impossibility of acceding to the model object, the use of serial objects invariably embodies an implicit or explicit reference to models.

Reciprocally, models themselves have quit their former isolated, caste-like existence;[3] having become part of industrial production, they are themselves now open to serial distribution. They, too, are now said to be 'functional' (an unthinkable claim for 'period' furniture) and in principle accessible to all. Likewise anyone, in principle, via the very humblest of objects, may partake of the model. Indeed, both model and serial objects in the pure form are increasingly difficult to find. The transition from the one to the other is subject to an infinite differentiation. Just like the production process, the object traverses every shade in the social spectrum. Such transitions are experienced in everyday life in terms of possibility and in terms of frustration: the model is internalized by those who are involved with serial objects, while the series is intimated, negated, transcended and lived in a contradictory manner by those who have to do with models. The socially immanent tendency whereby the series hews ever more narrowly to the model, while the model is continually being diffused into the series, has set up a perpetual dynamic which is in fact the very ideology of our society.

The 'Personalized' Object

It should be noted that the model/series scheme regarding the distribution of objects does not apply evenly to all categories. It works fine in the realm of clothing

3. This is not to say that they have lost their class-specific character (see below).

(for example, a dress from Fath versus a ready-to-wear dress) or in that of cars (for example, a Facel-Vega versus a Citroën 2CV). The more specific an object's function, however, the more ambiguous things become; thus the difference between a 'Frigidaire' from General Motors and a 'Frigeco' refrigerator, or between one television set and another, is not so easy to classify. In the case of small utensils such as coffee mills, the notion of 'model' tends to become indistinguishable from that of 'type', because the object's function tends very largely to absorb differences of status, which may eventually amount to no more than the contrast between luxury models and serial models. (This distinction marks the weakest expression of the notion of model.) At the opposite extreme, when we turn our attention to machines – collective objects *par excellence* – we find that there is no such thing, either, as a luxury version of a pure machine: a rolling-mill, even if it is the only example of its type in the world, is still, from the moment it appears, a serial object. One machine may be more 'modern' than another, but this does not make it the 'model' for which other, less advanced machines constitute the corresponding series. In order to ensure comparable performance, it will be necessary to build other machines of the same type – that is, to construct a pure series on the basis of this first member. There is no place here for a range of calibrated differences that might serve as the basis of a psychological dynamic. At the level of pure function, since there are no combinative variants, there cannot be any models either.[4]

The psycho-sociological dynamic of model and series does not, therefore, operate at the level of the object's primary function, but merely at the level of a secondary function, at the level of the 'personalized' object. That is to say: at the level of an object grounded simultaneously in individual requirements and in that system of differences which is, properly speaking, the cultural system itself.

4. The work of art does not answer to the model/series scheme either. The same categorical alternative is posed here as for the machine: the machine fulfils or does not fulfil a function, the work of art is genuine or fake. There are no marginal differences. Only at the level of the private and personalized object (not at the level of the work itself) does the model/series dynamic come into play.

Choice

No object is proposed to the consumer as a single variety. We may not be granted the material means to buy it, but what our industrial society always offers us 'a priori', as a kind of collective grace and as the mark of a formal freedom, is choice. This availability of the object is the foundation of 'personalization':[5] only if the buyer is offered a whole range of choices can he transcend the strict necessity of his purchase and commit himself *personally* to something beyond it. Indeed, we no longer even have the option of *not* choosing, of buying an object on the sole grounds of its utility, for no object these days is offered for sale on such a 'zero-level' basis. Our freedom to choose causes us to participate in a cultural system willy-nilly. It follows that the choice in question is a specious one: to experience it as freedom is simply to be less sensible of the fact that it is imposed upon us as such, and that through it society as a whole is likewise imposed upon us. Choosing one car over another may perhaps personalize your choice, but the most important thing about the fact of choosing is that it assigns you a place in the overall economic order. According to John Stuart Mill, choosing such and such an object in order to distinguish oneself from other people is in itself of service to society. Increasing the number of objects makes it easier for society to divert the faculty of choice onto them, so neutralizing the threat that the personal demand for choice always represents for it. Clearly 'personalization', far from being a mere advertising ploy, is actually a basic ideological concept of a society which 'personalizes' objects and beliefs solely in order to integrate persons more effectively.[6]

Marginal Difference

The corollary of the fact that every object reaches us by way of a choice is the fact that fundamentally no object is offered as a serial object, that every single object claims model status. The most insignificant object must be marked off by some

5. Where an object does exist in one version only (as in the case of cars in East Germany), this is an indication of penury which strictly speaking antedates the consumer society. No society can afford to consider such a stage anything but provisional.

6. I shall come back to this system later.

distinguishing feature – a colour, an accessory, a detail of one sort or another. Such a detail is always presented as specific: 'This dustbin is absolutely original – Gilac Décor has decked it with flowers for you!' 'A revolution in refrigeration – complete with brand-new freezer compartment and butter softener!' 'An electric razor on the cutting edge of progress – hexagonal, antimagnetic!'

These are what David Riesman calls marginal differences; perhaps it would be more exact to call them inessential differences. The fact is that at the level of the industrial object and its technological coherence the demand for personalization can be met only in inessentials. The sole way to personalize cars is for the manufacturer to take a serially produced chassis, a serially produced engine, then change a few external characteristics or add a couple of accessory features. A car cannot be personalized in its essence as a technical object, but only in its inessential aspects.

Of course, the more the object must respond to the demands of personalization, the more its essential characteristics are burdened by extrinsic requirements. Coachwork is weighed down by accessories, for example, even to the point where technical norms for a vehicle such as fluidity of line and mobility are contravened. 'Marginal' difference is thus not solely marginal, for it can run counter to an object's technical essence. The personalization function is not just an added value – it is also a parasitic value. Indeed, from the technological standpoint it is impossible to conceive of an object in an industrial system being personalized without thereby losing some measure of its optimal technical quality. The dictates of production bear the most responsibility here, for they play unrestrainedly on inessentials in order to promote consumption.

So, when you choose YOUR Ariane, you have forty-two colour combinations to select from (including solid colours and two-colour versions). De luxe hub-caps are available from your dealer when you buy your car. The point is, of course, that all these 'specific' differences are themselves picked up and mass-produced in serial form. *And this secondary seriality is what constitutes fashion.* Ultimately, therefore, every object is a model, yet at the same time there are no more models. What we are left with in the end are successive limited series, a disjointed transition to ever more restricted series based on ever more minute and ever more specific

differences. There are simply no more absolute models – and no more serial objects devoid of value categorically opposed to them. If it were otherwise, there would be no psychological basis for choice – and hence no cultural system. Or at least, no cultural system capable of embracing modern industrial society in its entirety.

The Ideal Nature of Models

How does this system of personalization and integration work? Its operation depends in the first place on the fact that each 'specific' difference continually negates and disavows the object's serial reality to the benefit of the model. Objectively, as we have seen, such differences are inessential. Furthermore, they often mask technical shortcomings.[7] They are in fact differences by default. They are always experienced, however, as features conferring distinction, indicative of value – as differences of overmeasure. It is thus not necessary for a concrete model to exist for every category of objects, and in many cases none does: minuscule differences, invariably apprehended as positive, quite suffice to extend the series, to create the aspiration towards a model that may be merely virtual. Such marginal differences are the motor of the series, and fuel the mechanism of integration.

Series and model should not be conceived of as two poles of a formal opposition, with the model being viewed as a sort of essence which – once divided and multiplied, so to speak, by virtue of the concept of 'mass' – gives birth to the series. From this standpoint, the model appears as a more concrete or denser state of the object which enables it to be retailed or disseminated as a series formed in its own image. The model/series distinction is often used in this way to evoke a kind of entropy homologous to the degeneration of higher forms of energy into heat. This conception, which deduces the series from the model, is completely at loggerheads with lived experience, which implies a continual inductive movement *from* the series *into* the model – less a degenerative (and literally unlivable) process than a siphoning process.

7. The technical downgrading of serial objects will be discussed in a moment; see also the section on 'Gadgets and Robots' above.

The fact is that the model is everywhere discernible in the series. It inhabits the slightest 'specific' difference between one object and the next. Above we noted the same tendency in collecting, where each item in a collection is marked by a relative difference which momentarily lends it a privileged status – the status, in effect, of a model; all such relative differences refer to all the others, and in aggregate they constitute absolute difference – or rather, fundamentally, just the *idea of absolute difference*, which is precisely what the Model is. We may say of a model that it exists or that it does not exist. The Facel-Vega certainly exists, yet all the variations in colour or capacity refer ultimately only to the *idea* of the Facel-Vega. Indeed, *it is essential that the model be no more than the idea of the model.* Only on this condition can it be present in every single relative difference, and thus integrate the whole series. If the Facel-Vega actually existed, the 'personalized' satisfaction to be derived from any other car would be radically compromised. On the other hand, the idealizing assumption that it exists serves as a justification and solid underpinning for personalization *vis-à-vis* something that is precisely *not* the Facel-Vega. The model is neither impoverished nor high-wrought: it is a generic image manufactured through the imaginary assumption of all relative differences. Its fascination stems directly from the tendency that causes the series to negate itself from one difference to the next; it is the fascination of intense movement, proliferating reference, never-ending substitution – in short, a formal idealization of transcendence. What is integrated and invested in the model is the whole evolution of the series.

The fact that the model is just an idea is, moreover, the only thing that makes the actual process of personalization possible. The notion that consciousness could be personalized in an object is absurd: it is personalized, rather, in a difference, because only a difference, by referring to the absolute singularity of the Model, can thereby refer at the same time to what is really being signified here, namely the absolute singularity of the user, the buyer or (as we saw above) the collector. Paradoxically, then, it is through an idea that is both vague and shared by all that everyone may come to experience himself as unique. Reciprocally, it is only continual self-individualization on the basis of the range of serial distinctions that allows the imaginary consensus of the idea of the model to be revived. Personalization and integration go strictly hand in hand. That is the *miracle of the system.*

From the Model to the Series

The Technical Deficit of the Serial Object

Now that we have analysed the formal play of differences by means of which the serial object manifests itself, and is experienced, as model, it is time to examine the *real* differences that distinguish the model from the series. For naturally the upward tendency of differential valorization relative to the *ideal model* masks the inverse reality of the destructuring and drastic downgrading of the serial object relative to the *real model*.

Of all the servitudes visited upon the serial object, the most obvious concerns its durability and its technical quality. The imperatives of personalization and production combined cause a proliferation of accessory features to the detriment of strict use value. The first effect of all the innovations and all the vagaries of fashion is to render objects more shoddy and ephemeral. Vance Packard points up this tendency, listing 'three different ways that products can be made obsolescent':

> *Obsolescence of function.* In this situation an existing product becomes outmoded when a product is introduced that performs the function better.
>
> *Obsolescence of quality.* Here, when it is planned, a product breaks down or wears out at a given time, usually not too distant.
>
> *Obsolescence of desirability.* In this situation a product that is still sound in terms of quality or performance becomes 'worn out' in our minds because a styling or other change makes it seem less desirable.
>
> The first type of obsolescence – the functional type – is certainly laudable. . . .[8]

The last two aspects of this scheme work together. The accelerated replacement of models itself affects the object's quality. Thus stockings may now come in all colours, but their quality will have declined (or perhaps research and development will have been cut back to finance an advertising campaign). Should the manipulated fluctuations of fashion fail to restimulate demand, recourse can be had to an

8. Vance Packard, *The Waste Makers* (New York: David McKay, 1960), p. 55.

artificial sub-functionality – to 'deliberately shoddy construction'. Packard quotes an industrial designer, Brooks Stevens, to the effect that 'Our whole economy is based on planned obsolescence, and everybody who can read without moving his lips should know it.'[9] And he finds that Oliver Wendell Holmes was prophetically close to the mark 'when he wrote of that wonderful one-hoss shay which was built in such a logical way that on a given day "it went to pieces all at once"'.[10] Thus certain American car parts are designed not to survive more than sixty thousand kilometres of driving. As manufacturers themselves will discreetly admit, the quality of most serial objects could be substantially improved with no significant increase in production costs. Deliberately debased parts are just as expensive to manufacture as normal ones . . . BUT THE OBJECT CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO ESCAPE FROM EPHEMERALITY OR FROM FASHION. This is the fundamental characteristic of the series: the objects that compose it are weakened on a systematic basis. In a world of (relative) affluence, *the shoddiness of objects replaces the scarcity of objects as the expression of poverty*. The series is forcefully imposed for a brief cross-section of time; its universe is distinctly perishable. THE OBJECT CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO ESCAPE DEATH. Unfettered technological progress would doubtless override this mortality of the object, but the strategy of production strives constantly to maintain it.[11] Ernest Dichter speaks, in connection with selling, of a 'strategy of desire'; we might well speak here of a strategy of frustration. These two strategies together serve to ensure the exclusive rule of the goals of production – indeed, production has now emerged as an all-surpassing agency with the power not merely of life but also of death over objects.[12]

The model, by contrast, is privileged in that it lasts (though only in a relative sense, for it too is caught in the speeded-up cycle of objects). It is granted solidity,

9. Ibid., p. 54.

10. Ibid., p. 57.

11. Of course this tendency is liable to be slowed by the operation of competition. But in countries (such as the United States) where monopolistic production is the norm, true competition has long been nonexistent.

12. It must nonetheless be acknowledged that this cynical strategic perspective is not the only villain here, for there is unquestionably a degree of willing compliance on the part of consumers. Many people would be disconcerted indeed at the prospect of having to keep the same car for twenty or thirty years, even if it continued to meet all their needs. On this point, see 'Gadgets and Robots' above.

entitled to 'loyalty'. Paradoxically, it has come to dominate an area traditionally reserved, it would seem, for the series, namely use value. This superiority of the model, reinforced by the influence of fashion – that is, the combination of technical and formal qualities – are what constitute its superior 'functionality'.

The 'Style' Deficit of the Serial Object

In parallel fashion, when we compare the serial object to the model we find that the serial object's physical attributes, just like its technical ones, are distinctly inferior. Consider the material used, for example: the steel and leather armchair on show at Airborne will crop up in aluminium and leatherette at Dubonbois Home Furnishings. The glass partition of a model interior will have a plastic echo in the serial version. Solid wood furniture will reappear in a whitewood veneer. A fine woollen or wild-silk dress will proliferate in ready-to-wear form in a wool mixture or in rayon. It is the heft, hardiness, grain or 'warmth' of a material whose presence or absence serves as a marker of difference. Such tactile characteristics are close to the most profound defining qualities of the model – far more so than the visual values of colour and form, which are more easily transposed to series because they are better suited to the needs of marginal differentiation.

Of course, even colours and forms are never integrated unscathed into a series. Finish is wanting, as is inventiveness. Faithfully transposed as they may be, forms suffer a subtle loss of their originality. What the serial object lacks is thus less the material itself than a certain consistency between material and form which ensures the model's finished quality. In series this consistency, this set of necessary relations, is destroyed for the sake of the differentiating action of forms, colours and accessories. Style gives way to combination. The process of downgrading referred to above in connection with the technical aspect is here more of a destructuring tendency. In the case of the model object, details and the workings of details are not the point. Rolls-Royces are black, and that's that.[13] The model is literally *hors série*, without peer – hence out of the game: only the 'personalization' of objects allows the play of differences to expand in proportion with the length of the series (as when

13. Or sometimes grey, it is true. But the 'moral' paradigm remains in place (see above, p. 31).

fifteen or twenty different shades are available for a single make of car); at the other extreme – the return to pure utility – the play of differences once more ceases to exist (for a very long time the Citroën 2CV came only in a grey that was hardly a colour at all). The model has a harmony, a unity, a homogeneity, a consistency of space, form, substance, and function; it is, in short, a syntax. The serial object is merely juxtaposition, haphazard combination, inarticulate discourse. As a detotalized form, it is nothing more than a collection of details relating in mechanical fashion to parallel series. Suppose that the uniqueness of the aforementioned armchair lies in its particular combination of tawny leather, black steel, general silhouette and mobilization of space. The corresponding serial object will emerge with plasticized leather, no tawniness, the metal lighter or galvanized, the overall configuration altered and the relationship to space diminished. The object as a whole is thus destructured: its substance is assigned to the series of objects in imitation leather, its tawniness is now a brown common to thousands of other objects, its legs are indistinguishable from those of any tubular chair, and so on. The object is no longer anything more than a conglomeration of details and the crossroads of a variety of series. Here is another example: a luxury car is in a red described as 'unique'. What 'unique' implies here is not simply that this red can be found nowhere else, but also that it is one with the car's other attributes: the red is not an 'extra'. But no sooner does this colour appear ever so slightly changed on a more 'commercial' car than it becomes the red of thousands of others – a mere detail or accessory feature of cars that are red as an 'extra', because they might just as well be green or black.

Class Differences

By now the reader should be getting a better feel for the distinction between model and series. More even than its consistency, it is the nuancing of the model that makes it distinctive. At present we are witnessing an attempt to stylize serial interiors – to 'bring good taste to the masses'. The result, generally speaking, is 'all in the same colour' and 'all in the same style': one may have a 'baroque living-room', a 'kitchen in blue', etc. What is presented as a 'style', however, is fundamentally a mere stereotype, the unnuanced generalization of a particular detail or aspect. The fact is that *the nuance (within a unity)* has come to characterize the model, while *difference*

(within uniformity) has come to characterize the series. Nuances in this sense are infinite in number, being emphases ever susceptible of reinvention in accordance with an open-ended syntax. Differences are finite in number, being the result of systematic variations on a single paradigm. Let us not be misled by the apparent scarcity of nuances and the apparent profusion of differences (due to their massive dissemination), for structurally speaking the fact remains that nuances are inexhaustible (the model in this connection may be said to come close to the work of art), whereas the serial difference is part of a finite combinatorial system or tablature which, though it no doubt changes continually in response to fashion, is nevertheless, for each synchronic moment considered, limited by and strictly subject to the dictates of production. In sum, the series offers the immense majority of people a restricted range of choices, while a tiny minority enjoy access to the model and its infinite nuances. For the majority a range which, however extensive it may be, is composed of invariable elements – generally the most obvious ones; for the minority a multitude of random possibilities. For the majority a set code of values; for the minority endless invention. We are thus indeed clearly dealing with class status and class distinctions.

The redundancy of its secondary features is an attempt to compensate for the serial object's loss of essential qualities. Colours, contrasts and the 'modern' look are thus overloaded with significance; indeed, the serial object's modernity is stressed at the precise moment when the model is sloughing modernity off. Whereas the model retains an airiness, a discretion, and a 'naturalness' that is the epitome of culture, the serial object remains stuck fast in its quest for uniqueness, and betrays a constrained culture, an optimism in the worst of taste, and an empty-headed humanism. For the serial object has its own class-specific script, its own rhetoric – just as the model has *its* own rhetoric of reticence, veiled functionality, perfection and eclecticism.[14]

14. In a system of this kind the two opposing terms cannot help but carry a surplus of meaning, for each is defined by reference to the other, and is to that extent redundant. Moreover, this redundancy of surplus meaning is the thing which, from the psycho-sociological point of view, defines the mode in which the system is directly experienced; although the present account may occasionally suggest the contrary, this can never be a system of pure structural oppositions.

Another expression of this redundancy is accumulation. There are always too many objects in serial interiors. And too many objects means too little space. Promiscuity or saturation occur as reactions to scarcity. Loss of quality must be made up for by the sheer number of objects.[15] The model has its own space, in which objects are neither too close to one another nor too far apart. The model interior is given structure by these relative distances, and if anything it tends towards the opposite kind of redundancy: connotation by emptiness.[16]

The Present as Privilege

Another axis of comparison in distinguishing model from series is time. We have noted that the serial object is designed not to last. Just like generations of people in underdeveloped societies, generations of objects in consumer society are short-lived, and one very soon gives way to the next. Where the abundance of objects increases, it always does so under the constraints of a calculated scarcity. That, however, is the problem of the object's technical durability. The immediate experience of the object, as determined by fashion, is another matter.

A rapid sociological examination of the market in antiques reveals that it is governed by the same laws and organized fundamentally in accordance with the same model/series scheme as the market in 'industrial' products. It emerges that within the potpourri which, in the case of furniture, includes everything from baroque to Chippendale, from Medici writing-tables to Art Nouveau and fake rustic, it is always possible (given the necessary financial resources and culture) to go higher and higher up the ladder of 'established' values in search of the focus of one's 'personal' mooring back in history. There is a status attached to regression in time, and one's means are liable to determine whether one acquires a genuine ancient Greek vase or a mere reproduction, a Roman amphora or a Spanish pitcher.

15. The bourgeois tradition inclined naturally towards redundancy and accumulation (bourgeois houses were often stuffed to the rafters). The more 'functional' approach of modern interior design runs counter to that tendency, however, so that the over-occupation of space in a modern house is more seriously inconsistent than in a traditional one.

16. See the discussion of 'formal connotation' above, pp. 59 ff.

In the world of objects the past and the exotic have a social dimension, a relationship to culture and income. The leisured classes go to their antique dealers for medieval, *haute époque* or French Regency furniture; the cultivated middle classes scour flea-market junk stalls for the wherewithal to re-create a solidly bourgeois cultural décor with 'authentic' peasant touches; and rustic themes are just perfect for service-sector employees enamoured of the largely bourgeoisified country interiors of the previous generation, or of provincial 'period styles' that are really hybrid forms impossible to date and having nothing but the vaguest echo of a 'period'. Each social class thus has its very own cut-price museum. Only workers and peasants still largely shun antiques. True, they have neither the leisure nor the money required, but the chief reason is that they are not as yet touched by the acculturation phenomenon affecting other classes. (Not that they consciously refuse it – rather, they simply fall outside its sphere of influence.) Nor, however, do they care for the modern and the 'experimental', for new 'creations' or for anything 'avant-garde'. Their own museum is often limited to cheap hardware and a folkloric world of china or earthenware animals, gewgaws, decorated mugs, framed mementoes, and the like – a whole stereotyped iconography quite liable to be found cheek by jowl with the very last word in electrical household appliances. This is in no way to downplay the need to 'personalize' – which is the same for all; it is just that the only people who can regress in time are those who can afford it. Difference – in this case culturalized difference – is what creates value, and it has to be paid for. Models and series are just as easy to find in the realm of cultural nostalgia as in the immediacy of fashion.

If we look to see what in this range of possibilities has the maximum value, we find that it is either the most avant-garde of objects or objects from the past with an aristocratic dimension: either a glass-and-aluminium villa with elliptical contours or an eighteenth-century château – either the ideal future or the *ancien régime*. Conversely the pure series, the unmarked term, is located, not exactly in the present, which is, along with the future, the time of the avant-garde and of the model, nor in that transcendent past which is the preserve of the well-to-do and their acquired culture, but instead in an 'immediate' past, an indefinite past which is fundamentally a sort of belated present, a limbo into which yesterday's models

have just recently fallen. In clothing styles the pace of change is very rapid, and the office workers of today wear dresses derived from last season's *haute couture* models. In furnishing, however, what has wide currency in the present is whatever was in high fashion a few years or even a generation ago. Serial time here is always the time of the wave before, so to speak. As far as their furniture is concerned, most people live in a time which is not theirs, a time of generality, of insignificance, the time of that which is not modern but not yet antique (and, no doubt, never will be antique): the equivalent in time of suburban impersonality in space. By comparison with the model the series does not stand merely for a loss of uniqueness of style, of nuances, and of authenticity: it stands also for the loss of the real dimension of time – for it belongs to a kind of empty sector of everyday life, a negative realm automatically filled up with senescent models. For only models change; series merely follow upon one another in the wake of a model with which they can never catch up. That is where their true unreality lies.

A Misadventure of the Person

'The product now in demand is neither a staple nor a machine, it is a personality,' according to David Riesman.[17] Personal achievement is indeed an *obligation* haunting the modern consumer in the context of the forced mobility imposed by the model/series system (which is, incidentally, but one aspect of a much larger structure of social mobility and aspiration). In the area which concerns us here, this constraint is paradoxical: it is clear that in the act of personalized consumption the subject, in his very insistence on being a *subject*, succeeds in manifesting himself only as an *object* of economic demand. His project, filtered and fragmented in advance, is dashed by the very process that is supposed to realize it. Since 'specific differences' are produced on an industrial scale, any choice he can make is ossified from the outset; only the *illusion* of personal distinctiveness remains. In seeking

17. David Riesman, in collaboration with Reuel Denny and Nathan Glazer, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press/London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 46.

to add that 'something' which will make for uniqueness, consciousness is reified in an even more intimate way, precisely because it is reified right down to that particular detail. Such is the paradox of alienation: a living choice is embodied in dead differences, indulgence in which dooms the subjective project to self-negation and despair.

This is the ideological function of the system: increasing status is nothing but a game, for all differences are integrated in advance. The very deceit with which the whole arrangement is shot through is an integral part of that arrangement, on account of the system's perpetual forward flight.

Yet are we quite justified in speaking of alienation here? Overall, the system of manipulated personalization is experienced by the vast majority of consumers as freedom. Only to a critical eye does this freedom appear merely formal, and the process of personalization as a misadventure of the person. Even in cases where advertising motivates on the basis of nothing at all (as where the same product goes by different brand names, where differences are illusory or where quality is erratic) – even where the choice is undoubtedly a trap – it still cannot be denied that even superficial differences are real as soon as someone invests them with value. How can we contest the satisfaction of a person who buys a dustbin decorated with flowers or an 'antimagnetic' razor? No theory of needs can authorize us to assign priority to one actually experienced satisfaction over any other. If the demand for self-worth is so deep-seated that in the absence of any alternative it embodies itself in a 'personalized' object, what basis do we have for rejecting this tendency, and in the name of what 'authentic' essential value could we do so?

The Ideology of Models

The system we have been describing reposes upon an ideology of democracy; it claims to be an aspect of social progress – to be what makes it possible for all gradually to gain access to models by virtue of a continual sociological upward movement which is carrying each stratum of society in turn to greater material luxury, and, from one 'personalized' difference to the next, ever closer to the absolute model.

Two objections may be raised to this account of things. In the first place, we find that we are in fact, in our 'consumer society', farther and farther away from equality before the object. The idea of the model has been obliged to seek refuge, concretely, in ever more subtle and definitive differences: such and such a skirt length, such and such a shade of red, such and such an advance in stereophony, or the few weeks that separate *haute couture* from mass distribution courtesy of Prisunic. All extremely ephemeral things – yet all very expensive indeed. A seeming equality attaches to the fact that all objects obey the same 'functional' imperative. But, as we have seen, this formal democratization of cultural status conceals other inequalities which are far more serious in that they affect the very reality of the object, its technical quality, its substance and its life-span. The privileges of the model are no longer institutional, it is true; they have, as it were, been internalized – but this has merely made them more tenacious. Just as, in the wake of the bourgeois revolution, no other classes ever gradually acquired positions of political responsibility, so likewise, in the wake of the industrial revolution, consumers have never won equality before the object.

The second point is that it is a delusion to take the model for an ideal point which the series will eventually be able to rejoin. The possession of objects frees us only as possessors, and always refers us back to the infinite freedom to possess more objects: the only progression possible here is up the ladder of objects, but this is a ladder that leads nowhere, being itself responsible for nourishing the inaccessible abstraction of the model. For the model is basically merely an idea, that is, a *transcendence internal to the system* – and the system in its entirety can continue in its forward flight indefinitely. There is no prospect of a model entering a series without being simultaneously replaced by another model. The whole system proceeds *en bloc*, but models replace one another without ever being transcended as such and without successive series, for their part, ever achieving self-transcendence as series. Models move along faster than series: they inhabit the present, whereas series float somewhere between past and present, wearing themselves out in the vain attempt to catch up with models. This perpetual cycle of aspiration and disillusion, dynamically orchestrated at the level of production, constitutes the arena in which objects are pursued.

There is a kind of inevitability at work here. Once a whole society articulates itself around models and focuses on them; once production strives in every way possible towards the systematic breaking down of models into series, and series in their turn into marginal differences or combinative variants, until at last objects come to have a status just as ephemeral as that of words or images; once the systematic stretching of series turns the whole edifice into a paradigm, but a paradigm whose ordering is irreversible, in that the ladder of status is fixed and the rules of the game of status are the same for everyone; once we fall under the sway of this managed convergence, this planned flimsiness, this continually eroded synchrony – then all negation becomes impossible. There are no more overt contradictions, no more structural changes, no more social dialectics. For the tendency which seems, in accordance with technical progress, to mobilize the whole system in no way challenges that system's ability to remain unmoving and stable in itself. Everything is in movement, everything shifts before our eyes, everything is continually being transformed – yet nothing really changes. This is a society whose embrace of technological progress enables it to make every conceivable revolution, just so long as those revolutions are confined within its bounds. For all its increased productivity, our society does not open the door to one single *structural* change.

II Credit

Rights and Duties of the Consumer-Citizen

Today, then, objects appear under the sign of differentiation and choice – but they also appear (or at least, all key objects do) under the sign of *credit*. When you buy something you certainly have to pay for it, but the *choice* is yours 'free', and by the same token credit terms are proposed as a free gift, as a kind of bonus from the world of production. The unstated assumption is that credit is the consumer's right, and ultimately an economic right of the citizen. Restriction of any kind on the possibility of buying on credit is felt to be a retaliatory measure on the part of the State; to do away with such arrangements – which is in any case unthinkable – would be experienced by society at large as the abolition of a freedom. For advertising, credit is a decisive argument in the 'strategy of desire', and its role is comparable in every way to any other quality of the object on offer; it is on a par in customer motivation with choice, 'personalization' and the rhetoric of promotion, of which last it is the tactical complement. The way in which the model is anticipated in the series is paralleled in the case of credit by the enjoyment of objects ahead of time; the psychological context is the same.

In principle the credit system does not affect the serial object more or less than

it affects the model, and there is nothing to stop anyone buying a Jaguar on hire purchase. In actuality, however, custom decrees that the de luxe model be paid for cash down; things bought on credit tend simply not to be models. There is a logic of status according to which the prestige of a cash purchase is one of the privileges of the model, while the constraint of periodic payments contributes to the psychological shortfall associated with the serial object.

A certain puritanism has long sensed some moral danger in credit, and placed on-the-spot payment among the bourgeois virtues. It must be admitted, however, that psychological resistance of this kind is gradually diminishing. Where it persists, it is merely a relic of a traditional notion of property, and largely confined to the class of small owners still faithful to the notions of inheritance, thrift and the family future. These survivals are sure to die out in time. Once property had priority over use; now the reverse is true, and the extension of credit, among other phenomena defined by David Riesman, marks the gradual transition from an 'acquisitive' civilization to a practical one. Credit customers are gradually learning how to make use of objects in complete freedom as though they were already 'theirs'. The difference, of course, is that while such objects are being paid for they are simultaneously wearing out: the final payment-due date is not unrelated to the 'replacement-due' date – indeed, as we know, some American firms strive to make the two intervening periods coincide exactly. There is always the risk, therefore, as in the event of defectiveness or loss, that an object will be, so to speak, used up before it is paid up. Even when credit seems to have been perfectly integrated into everyday life, this danger is the basis of an insecurity that was never experienced in connection with the 'patrimonial' object. Such an object was mine: I owed nothing. An object bought on credit will be mine when I have paid for it: it is conjugated, as it were, in the future perfect.

The anxiety that attaches to periodic payments is very specific. It eventually sets in train a parallel process which weighs down on us day after day even though we never become conscious of the objective relationship involved. It haunts the human project, not immediate practice. An object that is mortgaged escapes us in time, and has in fact escaped us from the outset. It flees us, and its flight echoes that of the serial object ever vainly striving towards the model. This dual

movement of things away from our grasp is what creates the latent fragility and ever-imminent disappointments of the world of objects that surrounds us.

In the end the credit system merely exemplifies what is a very general way of relating to objects in the modern context. Indeed, it is quite possible to live on credit without sitting amid a year's worth of credit invoices for car, fridge and television, because the model/series mechanism, with its obligatory orientation towards the model, is a handicap in its own right. This mechanism governs the realm of social advancement, which consequently becomes a realm of handicapped aspiration. *We are forever behindhand relative to our objects*. They are here before us, yet they are already a year away, located either in that final payment or else in the next model by which they are bound to be replaced. So credit simply transfers a basic psychological situation onto the economic plane; the obligation to follow a sequence is the same at both levels, whether it is economic, as with successive hire-purchase payments, or psycho-sociological, as in the systematic and ever-accelerating succession of series and models. In any event, we experience our objects in a predefined, mortgaged temporal mode. If there are now barely any restrictions on the use of credit, perhaps the reason is that *all* our objects today are apprehended as if they were obtained on credit, as debts incurred to society as a whole – debts that are always susceptible of adjustment, always fluctuating, always prey to chronic inflation and devaluation. Much in the same way as our earlier discussion of 'personalization' led us to conclude that this was far more than an advertising gimmick, that it was in fact a key ideological notion, so likewise credit must be viewed as far more than a financial arrangement, for it is nothing less than a fundamental dimension of our society and in effect a new ethical system.

The Precedence of Consumption: A New Ethic

A single generation has witnessed the eclipse of the notions of patrimony and of fixed capital. Until our parents' generation, objects once acquired were owned in the full sense, for they were the material expression of work done. It is still not very long since buying a dining-table and chairs, or a car, represented the end-point of a sustained exercise of thrift. People worked dreaming of what they might later

acquire; life was lived in accordance with the puritan notion of effort and its reward – and objects finally won represented repayment for the past and security for the future. They were, in short, a capital. Today objects are with us before they are earned, they steal a march on the sum total of effort, of labour, that they embody, so that in a sense *their consumption precedes their production.* True, these objects, which I merely make use of, no longer impose any patrimonial responsibility on me; they are bequeathed to me by nobody and I, in turn, shall bequeath them to nobody. They do, however, exert another kind of constraint, for they hang over me as debts as yet unsettled. If they no longer locate me in a relationship to a family or customary group, I am nevertheless brought into relation through them with society at large and its agencies (the economic and financial order, the fluctuations of fashion, and so forth). And I must pay for them over and over again, month by month, or replace them every year. This means that everything has changed: the significance these objects have for me, the projects they embody, their objective future, and mine. It is worth pondering the fact that for centuries generations of people succeeded one another in an unchanging décor of objects which were longer-lived than they, whereas now many generations of objects will follow upon one another at an ever-accelerating pace during a single human lifetime. Where once man imposed his rhythm upon objects, now objects impose their disjointed rhythm – their unpredictable and sudden manner of being present, of breaking down or replacing one another without ever aging – upon human beings. Thus the status of a whole civilization changes along with the way in which its everyday objects make themselves present and the way in which they are enjoyed. In a patriarchal domestic economy founded on inheritance and stable rents, consumption could never conceivably precede production. In accordance with good Cartesian and moral logic, work preceded its fruit as cause precedes effect. That ascetic mode of accumulation, rooted in forethought, in sacrifice, and in a resorption of needs that created great tension within the individual, was the foundation of a whole civilization of thrift which enjoyed its own heroic period before expiring in the anachronistic figure of the *rentier* – indeed, of the ruined *rentier,* who in this century has perforce learnt the historical lesson of the vanity of traditional morality and traditional economic calculation. By dint of living within

their means, whole generations have ended up living far below their means. Work, merit, accumulation – all the virtues of an era whose pinnacle was the concept of property are still discernible in the objects that stand as witness to that time, objects whose lost generations continue to haunt the petty-bourgeois interior.

The Obligation to Buy

Today a new morality has been born. Precedence of consumption over accumulation, forward flight, forced investment, speeded-up consumption, chronic inflation (implying the absurdity of saving) – these are the motors of our whole present system of buying first and paying off later in labour. Credit has thus brought us back to a situation that is in fact feudal in character, reminiscent as it is of the arrangement under which a portion of labour would be allocated in advance, as serf labour, to the feudal lord. There is a difference, however, for our system, unlike feudalism, reposes on complicity: modern consumers spontaneously embrace and accept the unending constraint that is imposed on them. They buy so that society can continue to produce, this so that they can continue to work, and this in turn so that they can pay for what they have bought. Witness the following American advertising slogans, noted by Vance Packard, which make the point very well: 'Buy days mean pay days – and pay days mean better days!'; 'Buy now – the job you save may be your own!'; 'Buy your way to prosperity!'[18]

The illusionism is truly remarkable: society appears to extend credit to you in exchange for a formal freedom, but in reality it is you who are giving credit to society, alienating your future in the process. Of course the system of production still depends fundamentally on the exploitation of labour-power, but today it is strongly reinforced by the circular consensus or collusion whereby subjection itself is experienced as freedom, and is thus transformed into an independent and durable system. In every individual the consumer colludes with the production system while having no relationship to the producer – the victim of the system – that he also is. Paradoxically, this split between producer and consumer is the

18. *The Waste Makers*, p. 17.

mainstay of social integration, because everything is done so that it can never take the living and critical form of a contradiction.

The Miracle of Buying

The advantage of credit (as of advertising) is indeed the dual dimension it bestows upon buying and its objective determinants. Buying on credit amounts to the total appropriation of an object for a fraction of its real value. A minimal investment for a profit out of all proportion to it. Payments are relegated to a dimly perceived future, and the object is acquired in exchange for a symbolic gesture. This transaction mirrors the behaviour of the mythomaniac, who for the price of a made-up story receives a quite disproportionate measure of attention from his audience. His real investment is minimal, while the benefits are extraordinary, for he acquires all the virtues of reality on the strength, practically speaking, of a mere sign. He too lives on credit – in the shape of the credulousness of other people. Now this inversion of the normal way of transforming reality – which proceeds from work to the product of work, and founds the traditional temporality of the logic of knowledge as of everyday praxis – this premature reaping of benefits is nothing less than *magical*. Likewise, what the buyer consumes and appropriates thanks to credit, along with the object prematurely acquired, is the myth of magical functionality promoted by the only society capable of offering him such possibilities of immediate self-realization. Naturally, he will very soon come face to face with socio-economic reality, just as the mythomaniac must sooner or later confront the spuriousness of his claims. Once unmasked, the mythomaniac either collapses or takes refuge in another tall tale. The buyer on the never-never is similarly liable to run up against unmeetable payment-due dates, and there is a good chance that he will seek psychological reassurance in this situation by buying some other item on credit. Forward flight is usual with this kind of behaviour, and the marvellous thing is that no causal connection is ever made, either by the mythomaniac between the story he tells and the failure he eventually experiences (for he learns nothing from this cold dash of reality), or by the buyer on credit between the gratification he obtains magically from his purchase and the payments he must subsequently

meet. In this respect the credit system is the acme of man's irresponsibility towards himself: the buyer alienates the payer, and even though they are in fact the same person, the system ensures, by separating them in time, that they never become aware of the fact.

The Ambiguity of the Domestic Object

In sum, credit pretends to promote a civilization of modern consumers at last freed from the constraints of property, but in reality it institutes a whole system of integration which combines social mythology with brutal economic pressure. Credit is an ethic, but it is also a politics. The tactic of credit works in tandem with that of personalization to give objects a socio-political function they never used to have. We no longer live in the age of serfdom or in the age of usury, but both these constraints have been incorporated in abstract and amplified form into the realm of credit. Credit is a social realm, a temporal realm, a realm of things by virtue of which, and by virtue of the strategy that imposes it, objects are able to fulfil their function as accelerators and multipliers of tasks, satisfactions and expenditures. They thus become a kind of trampoline, their very inertia serving as a centrifugal force which lends everyday life its rhythm – its tendency to forward flight, its precariousness and disequilibrium.

At the same time, objects, on which domesticity once depended as a means of escape from the pressures of society, now on the contrary serve to shackle the domestic universe to the circuits and constraints of the social one. By means of credit – which is a free gift and a formal freedom but also a social sanction, a form of subjection and a fatality at the very heart of things – domesticity is directly colonized: it acquires a kind of social dimension, but in the very worst sense. The most extreme and absurd effects of credit are eloquent: for example, when car payments are so pressing that the buyer cannot afford petrol for his vehicle, we have reached the point where the human project, filtered and fragmented by economic pressures, begins to feed upon itself. A fundamental truth about the present system emerges here too: *objects now are by no means meant to be owned and used but solely to be produced and bought*. In other words, they are structured as a

function neither of needs nor of a more rational organization of the world, but instead constitute a system determined entirely by an ideological regime of production and social integration. Indeed, private objects properly so called no longer exist: thanks to their multiple use, it is the social order of production, with its own particular complicities, which now haunts the intimate world of the consumer and his consciousness. This penetration also marks the fading of any prospect of effectively contesting or transcending that social order.

III Advertising

Discourse on Objects and Discourse-As-Object

Any analysis of the system *of* objects must ultimately imply an analysis of discourse *about* objects – that is to say, an analysis of promotional 'messages' (comprising image and discourse). For advertising is not simply an adjunct to the system of objects; it cannot be detached therefrom, nor can it be restricted to its 'proper' function (there is no such thing as advertising strictly confined to the supplying of information). Indeed, advertising is now an irremovable aspect of the system of objects precisely by virtue of its disproportionateness. This lack of proportion is the 'functional' apotheosis of the system. Advertising in its entirety constitutes a useless and unnecessary universe. It is pure connotation. It contributes nothing to production or to the direct practical application of things, yet it plays an integral part in the system of objects, not merely because it relates to consumption but also because it itself becomes an object to be consumed. A clear distinction must be drawn in connection with advertising's dual status as a discourse on the object and as an object in its own right. It is as a useless, unnecessary discourse that it comes to be consumable as a cultural object. What achieves autonomy and fulfilment

through advertising is thus the whole system that I have been describing at the level of objects: the entire apparatus of personalization and imposed differentiation; of proliferation of the inessential and subordination of technical requirements to the requirements of production and consumption; of dysfunctionality and secondary functionality. Since its function is almost entirely secondary, and since both image and discourse play largely allegorical roles in it, advertising supplies us with the ideal object and casts a particularly revealing light upon the system of objects. And since, like all heavily connoted systems, it is self-referential,[19] we may safely rely on advertising to tell us what it is that we consume *through* objects.

Advertising in the Indicative and in the Imperative

Advertising sets itself the task of supplying information about particular products and promoting their sale. In principle this 'objective' function is still its fundamental purpose.[20] The supplying of information has nevertheless given way to persuasion – even to what Vance Packard calls 'hidden persuasion', the aim of which is a completely managed consumption. The supposed threat this poses of a totalitarian conditioning of man and his needs has provoked great alarm. Studies have shown, however, that advertising's pervasive power is not as great as had been supposed. A saturation point is in fact soon reached: competing messages tend to cancel each other out, and many claims fail to convince on account of their sheer excessiveness. Moreover, injunctions and exhortations give rise to all kinds of counter-motivations and resistances, whether rational or irrational, among them the refusal of passivity, the desire not to be 'taken over', negative reactions to hyperbole, to repetition, and so on. In short, the discourse of advertising is just as likely to dissuade as to persuade, and consumers, though not entirely immune, appear to exercise a good deal of discretion when it comes to the advertising message.

Having said this, let us not be misled by the *avowed* aim of that message; while advertising may well fail to sell the consumer on a particular brand – Omo,

19. See Roland Barthes's account of the system of fashion: *Système de la mode* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).
20. We should not forget, however, that the earliest advertisements were for miracle cures, home remedies, and the like; they supplied information, therefore, but information only of the most tendentious kind.

Simca or Frigidaire – it does sell him on something else, something much more fundamental to the global social order than Omo or Frigidaire – something, indeed, for which such brand names are merely a cover.

Just as the object's function may ultimately amount merely to the provision of a justification for the latent meanings that the object imposes, so in advertising (and all the more so inasmuch as it is the more purely connotative system) the product designated – that is, its denotation or description – tends to be merely an effective mask concealing a confused process of integration.

So even though we may be getting better and better at resisting advertising in the *imperative*, we are at the same time becoming ever more susceptible to advertising in the *indicative* – that is, to its actual *existence* as a product to be consumed at a secondary level, and as the clear *expression* of a culture. It is in this sense that we do indeed 'believe' in advertising: what we consume in this way is the luxury of a society that projects itself as an agency for dispensing goods and 'transcends itself' in a culture. We are thus taken over at one and the same time by an established agency and by that agency's self-image.

The Logic of Father Christmas

Those who pooh-pooh the ability of advertising and of the mass media in general to condition people have failed to grasp the peculiar logic upon which the media's efficacy reposes. For this is not a logic of propositions and proofs, but a logic of fables and of the willingness to go along with them. We do not believe in such fables, but we cleave to them nevertheless. Basically, the 'demonstration' of a product convinces no one, but it does serve to rationalize its purchase, which in any case either precedes or overwhelms all rational motives. Without 'believing' in the product, therefore, *we believe in the advertising that tries to get us to believe in it*. We are for all the world like children in their attitude towards Father Christmas. Children hardly ever wonder whether Father Christmas exists or not, and they certainly never look upon getting presents as an effect of which that existence is the cause: rather, their belief in Father Christmas is a rationalizing confabulation designed to extend earliest infancy's miraculously gratifying relationship with the parents

(and particularly with the mother) into a later stage of childhood. That miraculous relationship, though now in actuality past, is internalized in the form of a belief which is in effect an ideal extension of it. There is nothing artificial about the romance of Father Christmas, however, for it is based upon the shared interest that the two parties involved have in its preservation. Father Christmas himself is unimportant here, and the child only believes in him precisely because of that basic lack of significance. What children are actually consuming through this figure, fiction or cover story (which in a sense they continue to believe in even after they have ceased to do so) is the action of a magical parental solicitude and the care taken by the parents to continue colluding with their children's embrace of the fable. Christmas presents themselves serve merely to underwrite this compromise.[21]

Advertising functions in much the same way. Neither its rhetoric nor even the informational aspect of its discourse has a decisive effect on the buyer. What the individual does respond to, on the other hand, is advertising's underlying leitmotiv of protection and gratification, the intimation that its solicitations and attempts to persuade are the sign, indecipherable at the conscious level, that somewhere there is an agency (a social agency in the event, but one that refers directly to the image of the mother) which has taken it upon itself to inform him of his own desires, and to foresee and rationalize these desires to his own satisfaction. He thus no more 'believes' in advertising than the child believes in Father Christmas, but this in no way impedes his capacity to embrace an internalized infantile situation, and to act accordingly. Herein lies the very real effectiveness of advertising, founded on its obedience to a logic which, though not that of the conditioned reflex, is nonetheless very rigorous: a logic of belief and regression.[22]

21. One is reminded of the neutral substances or placebos that doctors sometimes prescribe for psychosomatic patients. Quite often these patients make just as good a recovery after the administration of such inactive elements as they do after taking real medicine. What is it that such patients derive or assimilate from the placebo? The answer is the idea of medicine *plus* the presence of the physician: the mother and the father simultaneously. Here too, then, belief facilitates the retrieval of an infantile situation, the result being the regressive resolution of a psychosomatic conflict.

22. Such an approach might well be extended to mass communications in general, though this is not the place to attempt it.

Society as Maternal Agency: Airborne's Armchair

Sometimes this mythology is quite explicit in the discourse of advertising.[23] Consider a flyer put out by Airborne, specialists in armchairs, sofas and seating in general. 'True Comfort Cannot Be Improvised', runs the title. We are being warned here against the easy solution: comfort is not passivity, but has to be actively 'created' if passivity is to become possible. The text which follows immediately stresses Airborne's modern and scientific virtues:

> A good seat is a combination of four different factors: aesthetics, comfort, sturdiness and finish. . . . The creation of a masterpiece of this kind calls for something beyond the skills of the traditional craftsman. Not that those skills are now dispensable; on the contrary, they still lie at the very heart of the furniture maker's trade. . . .

The past is thus the guarantee of a kind of moral security: tradition is at once preserved and surpassed by the industrial revolution. But 'in this day and age a good seat has to be manufactured according to the means and methods decreed by the economics of the modern world'. In other words, this armchair cannot be just an armchair. Its purchaser must feel himself at one with a technological society (a society, of course, whose norms are nevertheless kept secret from him). The armchair makes him into a citizen of industrial society.

> This company, now meeting the comfort needs of thousands of French households, has become an entire industry in its own right, complete with its own research departments, engineers and creative artists, not to mention its machines, its stocks of raw materials, its after-sales service agencies, its sales network, etc.

The consumer needs to be fully aware that the industrial revolution took place for his benefit, that today all the structures of society are embodied in the qualities of this armchair, qualities which themselves come together in his own individual personality. In this way a whole universe is constituted which from his point

23. This is by no means necessary, however – the advertising image alone can easily convey it.

of view is governed by the sole sublime aim of ensuring his satisfaction. This perspective is confirmed as Airborne's advertising copy continues: 'A good armchair is a seat in which every family member feels at ease. There is no need to adjust it to your weight or height, for it is designed to wed the shape of your body.' There is no need to change anything in society or in yourself, because the industrial revolution has occurred, and technological society in its entirety adapts itself to you via this armchair so perfectly matched to your body's contours. There was a time when moral norms demanded that the individual adapt to society at large, but from the standpoint of an age of consumption – or a would-be age of consumption – such requirements belong to the outmoded ideology of the age of production; nowadays it is society as a whole which must adapt to the individual. What is more, society does not merely estimate the individual's needs and adapt to this or that particular need; rather, it is at pains to adapt to the individual himself, personally: 'You can always tell an Airborne seat from the fact that, when you sit in it, it is always YOUR armchair, YOUR chair or YOUR sofa, and you always get that comfortable feeling of being in a seat made exactly to measure for you alone.' To put all this metasociology of compliance in a nutshell: by virtue of this armchair's devotion, submissiveness and secret affinities with you personally, you will come to believe also in the devotion of Airborne's owner, his technical services, and so on and so forth. In this armchair, which is frankly quite pleasant to sit in (it is truly very functional), you are thus expected to apprehend the essence of a society that is definitively civilized, a society irreversibly committed to the idea of happiness – to YOUR happiness – and a society that spontaneously supplies each of its members with the wherewithal to achieve their own self-realization.

This ideological discourse extends even to consideration of materials and forms. Airborne's advertising evokes 'new materials which effectively embody the style of today'. 'After the Stone Age and the Age of Wood, we are now living, as far as furnishing is concerned, in the Steel Age.' 'Steel provides the structure.' And so on. But though steel may be exciting, it is also a rather hard substance, rather too closely associated with effort, with the necessity for the individual to adapt. So, sure enough, it has to be hastily transfigured, rendered pliant – the 'structure' has to be humanized:

> Though solid and unyielding, steel is suppleness itself when it is transformed into a set of springs. Once overlaid with genuine latex foam, it is soft and comfortable. And aesthetic too – because it may be wedded perfectly [again!] with the warmth of today's fabrics.

Structure is always violent, and distressingly so. Even at the level of the object it threatens to compromise the individual's relationship to society. To pacify reality, an appearance of peacefulness must be preserved. In order to please you, the Airborne armchair is thus transmuted by a seemingly natural process from steel to fabric, becoming a mirror of strength and tranquillity. And of course, to complete the picture, 'aesthetics' envelops 'structure', and celebrates the definitive wedding of the object to your 'personality'. Here again a rhetoric of substances is the vehicle of social conditioning. In this structure become form, in this quieted tenacity, in this ubiquitous 'nuptial' synthesis with its interplay between contentment and the memory of a will, in this phallic phantasy of violence (steel) which is, as it were, calmed and lulled by its own image – surely it is impossible not to discern, in all these, a pattern of global collusion with the world, implying a complete resolution of all tensions in a maternal and harmonious society.

It is not, therefore, that advertising 'alienates' or 'mystifies' us with its claims, words or images; rather, we are swayed by the fact that 'they' are sufficiently concerned to want to address us, to show us things, to take an interest in us. Riesman[24] and other critical theorists of American society have clearly shown how products are increasingly judged not by their intrinsic value but instead by the concern for one's existence that they imply on the part of the manufacturer, by the solicitude the advertiser demonstrates for the public.[25] Individuals are gradually conditioned by their ceaseless consumption – at once gratifying and frustrating, glorious and guilt-inducing – of the social body in its totality.

What advertising bestows upon objects, the quality without which 'they

24. *The Lonely Crowd* (see above, p. 152, note 17), pp. 210 ff.

25. In the case of radio programmes sponsored by a particular product, for example, the advertising injunction itself may be quite minimal as compared with the emotional collusion involved; indeed, it may amount to no more than a statement of the type 'This programme comes to you courtesy of Brand X'.

would not be what they are', is 'warmth'. Warmth is a modern property which we have already identified as the basis of 'atmosphere': just as colours are hot or cold (rather than red or green); just as the 'controlling dimension of personality'[26] (in an 'other-directed' society) is the 'warm–cold axis'; so likewise objects are hot or cold, that is to say, indifferent and hostile, or spontaneous, sincere and communicative – in a word, they are 'personalized'. They no longer present themselves as appropriate to some strictly circumscribed task – a crude and outdated practice; instead they submit themselves to us, they seek us out, surround us, and prove their existence to us by virtue of the profusion of ways in which they appear, by virtue of their effusiveness. We are taken as the object's aims, and the object *loves* us. And because we are loved, we feel that we exist: we are 'personalized'. This is the essential thing – the actual purchase of the object is secondary. The abundance of products puts an end to *scarcity*; the abundance of advertising puts an end to *insecurity*. The worst thing possible is to be obliged to invent one's own motives for acting, for preferring, for buying. The individual in such circumstances is inevitably brought face to face with his own misapprehensions, his own lack of existence, his own bad faith and anxiety. Any object which fails to dispel such guilty feelings – which fails, as it were, to know what I want, and what I am – is liable to be dubbed bad.[27] If the object loves me, then shall I be saved. Advertising (and, more broadly, public relations as a whole) relieves psychological insecurity by deploying an enormous solicitude, to which we respond by internalizing the solicitous agency – namely, that whole immense enterprise, producing not just goods but also communicational warmth, which global consumer society actually is.

We should remember, too, that in a society where everything is strictly subject to the laws of selling and profit, advertising is the most democratic of products, the only one that is 'free' – and 'free' to all. Objects are always sold; only advertising

26. Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, p. 167.

27. Thus Riesman tells us of a Chicago suburb whose residents protest, not against any objective shortcomings of the municipal services, but rather against the deficiencies of the psychological support offered, complaining that they have been 'so manipulated as to make them "not like it"' (ibid., p. 213).

is offered gratis.[28] The mechanism of advertising thus subtly renews links with archaic rituals of giving, of offering presents, as well as with the infantile situation of a passive gratification vouchsafed by the parents. Both choice and advertising serve to transform a purely commercial relationship into a personal one.[29]

The Festival of Buying Power

This gratificatory, infantilizing function of advertising, which is the basis of our belief in it and hence of our collusion with the social entity, is equally well illustrated by its playful aspect. We are certainly susceptible to the reassurance advertising offers by supplying an image that is never negative, but we are equally affected by advertising as a fantastic manifestation of a society capable of swamping the mere necessity of products in superfluous images: advertising as a show (again, the most democratic of all), a game, a *mise en scène*. Advertising serves as a permanent display of the buying power, be it real or virtual, of society overall. Whether we partake of it personally or not, we all live and breathe this buying power. By virtue of advertising, too, the product exposes itself to our view and invites us to handle it; it is, in fact, eroticized – not just because of the explicitly sexual themes evoked[30] but also because the purchase itself, simple appropriation, is transformed into a manoeuvre, a scenario, a complicated dance which endows a purely practical transaction with all the traits of amorous dalliance: advances, rivalry, obscenity, flirtation, prostitution – even irony. The mechanics of buying (which is already libidinally charged) gives way to a complete eroticization of

28. The same goes for *choice* (see 'Models and Series' above): the object *per se* is sold to us, but the 'range' of objects on offer is 'free'.

29. That choice and advertising should be offered to us 'free' in this way results from a greater expenditure on the 'personalization' of models and on the dissemination of advertising than on basic technical research. What is given to us 'free' at the psychological level takes away from the technical qualities of what is being sold to us. The significance of this tendency can hardly be understated, and in 'developed' societies it has assumed truly vast proportions. At the same time, who is to say whether advertising, by relieving insecurity and satisfying the imagination, does not fulfil an *objective* function every bit as fundamental as a technical progress responding to material needs?

30. Some common leitmotivs (breasts, lips) should perhaps be deemed less erotic than 'nurturing' in character.

choosing and spending.[31] Our modern environment assails us relentlessly, especially in the cities, with its lights and its images, its incessant inducements to status-consciousness and narcissism, emotional involvement and obligatory relationships. We live in a cold-blooded carnival atmosphere, a formal yet electrifying ambience of empty sensual gratification wherein the actual process of buying and consuming is demonstrated, illuminated, mimicked – even frustrated – much as the sexual act is anticipated by dance. By means of advertising, as once upon a time by means of feasts, society puts itself on display and consumes its own image.

An essential regulatory function is evident here. Like the dream, advertising defines and redirects an imaginary potentiality. Like the dream's, its practical character is strictly subjective and individual.[32] And, like the dream, advertising is devoid of all negativity and relativity: with never a sign too many nor a sign too few, it is essentially superlative and totally immanent in nature.[33] Our night-time dreams are uncaptioned, whereas the one that we live in our waking hours via the city's hoardings, in our newspapers and on our screens, is covered with captions, with multiple subtitling. Both, however, weave the most colourful of narratives from the most impoverished of raw materials, and just as the function of nocturnal dreams is to protect sleep, so likewise the prestige of advertising and consumption serves to ensure the spontaneous absorption of ambient social values and the regression of the individual into social consensus.

Festival, immanence, positivity – to use such terms amounts to saying that *in the first instance advertising is itself less a determinant of consumption than an object of consumption*. What would an object be today if it were not put on offer both in the mode of discourse and image (advertising) and in the mode of a range of models (choice)? It would be psychologically nonexistent. And what would modern citizens be if objects and products were not proposed to them in the twin dimensions

31. The literal meaning of the German word for advertising, '*die Werbung*', is erotic exploration. '*Der umworbene Mensch*', the person won over by advertising, can also mean a person who is sexually solicited.

32. Advertising campaigns designed to alter group behaviour or modify social structures (for example, those against alcohol abuse, dangerous driving, etc.) are notoriously ineffective. Advertising resists the (collective) reality principle. The only imperative that may be effective in this context is 'Give!' – for it is part of the reversible system of gratification.

33. Negative or ironic advertisements are mere antiphrasis – a well-known device, too, of the dream.

of advertising and choice? They would not be *free*. We can understand the reactions of the two thousand West Germans polled by the Allenbach Demoscopic Institute: 60 per cent expressed the view that there was too much advertising, yet when they were asked, 'Would you rather have too much advertising (Western style) or minimal – and only socially useful – advertising (as in the East)?', a majority favoured the first of these options, taking an excess of advertising as indicative not only of affluence but also of freedom – and hence of a basic value.[34] Such is the measure of the emotional and ideological collusion that advertising's spectacular mediation creates between the individual and society (whatever the structures of the latter may be). If all advertising were abolished, individuals would feel frustrated by the empty hoardings. Frustrated not merely by the lack of opportunity (even in an ironic way) for play, for dreaming, but also, more profoundly, by the feeling that they were no longer somehow 'being taken care of'. They would miss an environment thanks to which, in the absence of active social participation, they can at least partake of a travesty of the social entity and enjoy a warmer, more maternal and more vivid atmosphere. One of the first demands of man in his progression towards well-being is that his desires be attended to, that they be formulated and expressed in the form of images for his own contemplation (something which is a problem, or becomes a problem, in socialist countries). Advertising fills this function, which is futile, regressive and inessential – yet for that very reason even more profoundly necessary.

Gratification/Repression: A Two-Sided Agency

We need to discern the true imperative of advertising behind the gentle litany of the object: 'Look how the whole of society simply adapts itself to you and your desires. It is therefore only reasonable that you should become integrated into that society.' Persuasion is hidden, as Vance Packard says, but its aim is less the 'compulsion' to buy, or conditioning by means of objects, than the subscription

34. Naturally the existing political situation of the two Germanies must be taken into account, but there can be little doubt that the absence of advertising in the Western sense is a real contributing factor to West German prejudice against the East.

to social consensus that this discourse urges: the object is a service, a personal relationship between society and you. Whether advertising is organized around the image of the mother or around the need to play, it always aims to foster *the same tendency to regress to a point anterior to real social processes*, such as work, production, the market, or value, which might disturb this magical integration: the object has not been bought by you, you have voiced a desire for it and all the engineers, technicians, and so on, have worked to gratify your desire. With the advent of industrial society the division of labour severs labour from its product. Advertising adds the finishing touch to this development by creating a radical split, at the moment of purchase, between *products* and consumer *goods*; by interpolating a vast maternal image between labour and the product of labour, it causes that *product* no longer to be viewed as such (complete with its history, and so on), but purely and simply as a good, as an *object*. And even as it separates the producer and the consumer within the one individual, thanks to the material abstraction of a highly differentiated system of objects, advertising strives inversely to re-create the infantile confusion of the object with the desire for the object, to return the consumer to the stage at which the infant makes no distinction between its mother and what its mother gives it.

In reality advertising's careful omission of objective processes and the social history of objects is simply a way of making it easier, by means of the imagination as a social agency, to impose the *real* order of production and exploitation. This is where, behind the psychogogy of advertising, it behoves us to recognize the demagogy of a *political* discourse whose own tactics are founded on a splitting into two – on the splitting of social reality into a real agency and an image, with the first disappearing behind the second, becoming indecipherable and giving way to nothing more than a pattern of absorption into a maternal world. When advertising tells you, in effect, that 'society adapts itself totally to you, so integrate yourself totally into society', the reciprocity thus invoked is obviously fake: what adapts to you is an imaginary agency, whereas you are asked in exchange to adapt to an agency that is distinctly real. Via the armchair that 'weds the shape of your body', it is the entire technical and political order of society that weds *you* and takes you in hand. Society assumes a maternal role the better to preserve the rule

of *constraint*.[35] The immense political role played by the diffusion of products and advertising techniques is here clearly evident: these mechanisms effectively replace earlier moral or political ideologies. Indeed, they go farther, for moral and political forms of integration were never unproblematical and always had to be buttressed by overt repression, whereas the new techniques manage to do without any such assistance: the consumer internalizes the agency of social control and its norms in the very process of consuming.

This effectiveness is reinforced by the status accorded the signs advertising manipulates and the process whereby these are 'read'.

Signs in advertising speak to us of objects, but they never (or scarcely ever) explain those objects from the standpoint of a *praxis*: they refer to objects as to a world that is absent. These signs are literally no more than a 'legend': they are there primarily for the purpose of being read. But while they do not refer to the real world, neither do they exactly replace that world: their function is to impose a specific activity, a specific kind of reading. If they did carry information, then a *full* reading, and a transition to the practical realm, would occur. But their role is a different one: to draw attention to the absence of what they designate. To this extent the reading of such signs is intransitive – organized in terms of a specific system of *satisfaction* which is, however, perpetually determined by the absence of reality, that is to say, by *frustration*.

The image creates a void, indicates an absence, and it is in this respect that it is 'evocative'. It is deceptive, however. It provokes a cathexis which it then immediately short-circuits at the level of reading. It focuses free-floating wishes upon an object which it masks as much as reveals. The image disappoints: *its function is at once to display and simultaneously to disabuse.* Looking is based on a presumption of contact; the image and its reading are based on a presumption of possession. Thus advertising offers neither a hallucinated satisfaction nor a practical mediation with the world. Rather, what it produces is dashed hopes:

35. What is more, behind this system of gratification we may discern the reinforcement of all the structures of authority (planning, centralization, bureaucracy). Parties, States, power structures – all are able to strengthen their hegemony under cover of this immense mother-image which renders any real challenge to them less and less possible.

unfinished actions, continual initiatives followed by continual abandonments thereof, false dawnings of objects, false dawnings of desires. A whole psychodrama is quickly enacted when an image is read. In principle, this enables the reader to assume his passive role and be transformed into a consumer. In actuality, the sheer profusion of images works at the same time to counter any shift in the direction of reality, subtly to fuel feelings of guilt by means of continual frustration, and to arrest consciousness at the level of a phantasy of satisfaction. In the end the image and the reading of the image are by no means the shortest way to the object, merely the shortest way to another image. The signs of advertising thus follow upon one another like the transient images of hypnagogic states.

We must not forget that the image serves in this way to avoid reality and create frustration, for only thus can we grasp how it is that *the reality principle omitted from the image nevertheless effectively re-emerges therein as the continual repression of desire* (as the spectacularization, blocking and dashing of that desire and, ultimately, its regressive and visible transference onto an object). This is where the profound collusion between the advertising sign and the overall order of society becomes most evident: it is not in any mechanical sense that advertising conveys the values of society; rather, more subtly, it is in its ambiguous *presumptive* function – somewhere between possession and dispossession, at once a designation and an indication of absence – that the advertising sign 'inserts' the social order into its system of simultaneous determination by gratification on the one hand and repression on the other.[36]

Gratification, frustration – two indivisible aspects of social integration. Every advertising image is a key, a *legend*, and as such reduces the anxiety-provoking polysemy of the world. But in the name of intelligibility the image becomes impoverished, cursory; inasmuch as it is still susceptible of too many interpretations, its meaning is further narrowed by the addition of discourse – of a subtitle, as it

36. This account may also be applied to the system of objects. Because the object too is ambiguous, because it is never *merely* an object but always at the same time *an indication of the absence of a human relationship* (just as the sign in advertising is an indication of the absence of a real object) – for these reasons, the object may likewise play a powerful integrative role. It is true, however, that the object's practical specificity means that the indication of the absence of the real is less marked in the case of the object than in that of the advertising sign.

were, which constitutes a second legend. And, by virtue of the way it is read, the image always refers only to other images. In the end advertising soothes people's consciousness by means of a controlled social semantics – controlled, ultimately, to the point of focusing on a single referent, namely the whole society itself. Society thus monopolizes all the roles. It conjures up a host of images whose meanings it immediately strives to limit. It generates an anxiety that it then seeks to calm. It fulfils and disappoints, mobilizes and demobilizes. Under the banner of advertising it institutes the reign of a freedom of desire, but desire is never truly liberated thereby (which would in fact entail the end of the social order): desire is liberated by the image only to the point where its emergence triggers the associated reflexes of anxiety and guilt. Primed by the image only to be defused by it, and made to feel guilty to boot, the nascent desire is co-opted by the agency of control. There is a profusion of freedom, but this freedom is imaginary; a continual mental orgy, but one which is stage-managed, a controlled regression in which all perversity is resolved in favour of order. If gratification is massive in consumer society, repression is equally massive – and both reach us together via the images and discourse of advertising, which activate the repressive reality principle at the very heart of the pleasure principle.

The Presumption of Collectivity

Pax Washing Powder

It is not only the objective processes of production and of the market that are passed over in silence by advertising, but also real society and its contradictions. Advertising plays on the presence/absence of an overall social body – on a *presumption of collectivity*. The collective realm is imaginary in advertising, but its virtual consumption suffices to ensure serial conditioning. Take, for instance, a poster for Pax Washing Powder. We are shown an immense faceless crowd waving immaculate white flags (Pax whiteness) and gazing towards an idol in their midst consisting of a gigantic carton of Pax, reproduced with photographic accuracy, whose size relative to the crowd is approximately that of the United Nations building in New York. Of course a whole ideology of honesty and peace underpins

this image, but for our present purposes the most interesting thing here is the way it makes use of a hypostasized collectivity. The individual consumer will be successfully persuaded that he personally desires Pax to the extent that his own image is reflected back to him in advance as part of a synthesis. The crowd in the advertisement is him, and his desire is evoked by the image's presumption of a collective desire. Advertising is very canny here, for every desire, no matter how intimate, still aspires to universality. Subtending a man's desire for a woman is the assumption that all men are capable of desiring her. No desire, even a sexual one, can endure without the mediation of an imagined collective realm. Perhaps, indeed, no desire can ever take form without this imaginary dimension: is it conceivable that a man could love a woman if he were certain that no other man in the world could possibly desire her? Conversely, one can easily love a woman one does not even know if she is adored by masses of people. This is the ever-present (but for the most part hidden) underpinning of advertising. It is normal that our desires as we experience them should embody a reference to the collectivity, but what advertising strives to do is to make this the inaugural dimension of desire. Far from relying on the spontaneity of individual needs, advertising prefers to control these needs by mobilizing the collective reference and having consciousness crystallize entirely upon the collective idea. There is a kind of totalitarian social dynamics here, jubilantly celebrating its finest victory – the successful prosecution of a strategy of solicitation founded on the presumption of collectivity. This promotion of desire on the sole basis of the group responds to a fundamental need, that of communication, but it does so as a way of reinforcing not genuine collectivity but merely a phantom thereof. The Pax advertisement is perfectly clear: advertising affects to unify individuals on the basis of a product whose purchase and use actually banish each individual to his own private sphere. Paradoxically we are induced, in the name of everyone and out of a reflex of solidarity, to buy an object that we immediately use to differentiate ourselves from other people. Thus *nostalgia for collectivity fuels competition between individuals*. In point of fact this competition is itself illusory, in that in the end each individual who first reads the poster and then buys the product is *personally* buying *the same object* as everyone else. The upshot of the transaction, its 'benefit' (to the social order), remains a regressive identification with a vague

collective totality, and hence an internalization of the sanction of the social group. As always, complicity and guilt are closely associated here: what advertising *also* underpins, therefore, is (virtual) guilt towards the group. But it no longer does so according to the traditional pattern of moral censure, the difference being that anxiety and guilt are now aroused in advance, ready for use as required; and in fact they will be used, with the emergence of a controlled desire, to effect submission to group norms. It may be easy enough to resist the explicit imperative of the Pax poster – to declare that it cannot make you buy Pax rather than Omo or Sunil or, for that matter, any of them; it is much harder to reject the poster's second referent, namely the vibrant and enthusiastic crowd (buttressed by the ideology of 'peace'). And the reason why we have difficulty resisting this pattern of complicity is that here *resistance is not even the issue*: it is true that in this particular advertisement the connotation is still easy to interpret, but group sanction need not be indicated by a crowd: any representation whatsoever will do. An erotic one, for instance. True, we do not buy potato crisps *just because* they are connoted by a woman with blonde hair and a sexy bottom. What is certain, though, is that the brief moment when the libido is thus mobilized by an image offers a sufficient opportunity for society as an agency of control to invade us in its entirety, complete with its customary armamentarium, namely the mechanisms of repression, sublimation and transference.

Promotional Contests

Every year certain newspapers feature long-running competitions that conclude with the following decisive question: 'How many correct solutions will we receive in this contest?' The function of this simple question is to reintroduce pure chance, to whose elimination the contestants have by now been applying their minds for several weeks. Any real competition is thus immediately reduced to the kind of magical choosing that characterizes lotteries. What is interesting, however, is that the chance involved here is of no ordinary kind. It is neither the God nor the fate of earlier times, but a nonce-collectivity, a contingent and arbitrary group (the sum total of people liable to enter or win the contest) which becomes the agency

of adjudication, and it is the divining of this agency, the successful identification of an individual with this collective chance, that becomes the mark of the winner. All of which explains why the earlier questions in such competitions are generally so simple: the greatest possible number of entrants have to participate in the essential moment, in the magical intuiting of the Great Collectivity (pure chance serves, in addition, to restore the myth of absolute democracy). In short, the ultimate referent of these competitions turns out to be a sort of phantom collectivity, purely conjectural in nature, non-structural, devoid of any image of itself (it is 'embodied' solely in the most abstract way, and simultaneously with its self-dissolution, in the number of correct entries received), and bound up exclusively with the gratification of the single person or very few people who have happed upon it in its very abstractness.

GARAP

We consume the product through the product itself, but we consume its meaning through advertising. Picture for a moment our modern cities stripped of all signs, their walls blank as an empty consciousness. And imagine that all of a sudden the single word GARAP appears everywhere, written on every wall. A pure signifier, having no referent, signifying only itself, it is read, discussed, interpreted in a vacuum, signified despite itself – in short, consumed *qua* sign. What indeed can it signify except for the society itself that is capable of generating such a sign? By virtue of its very lack of signification it mobilizes an entire imaginary collectivity. It comes to stand for a whole society. In a way people end up 'believing' in GARAP. They consider it the mark of advertising's omnipotence, and judge that if only GARAP would assume the specificity of a product, then that product would meet with an immediate and sweeping success. Nothing, however, could be less certain, and the cunning of the advertisers lies precisely in the fact that they never reveal this. Were a specific referent to be made explicit, individual resistance would certainly come back into play. But consent (even ironic consent) thus founded on faith in a pure sign is self-creating. Advertising's true referent is here apparent in its purest form: like GARAP, advertising is mass society itself, using systematic,

arbitrary signs to arouse emotions and mobilize consciousness, and reconstituting its collective nature in this very process.[37]

Advertising is a plebiscite whereby mass consumer society wages a perpetual campaign of self-endorsement.[38]

A New Humanism?

Serial Conditioning

It should now be easier to grasp the nature of the system of conditioning that is at work behind the themes of competition and 'personalization'. That same ideology of competition which formerly, under the banner of 'freedom', constituted the golden rule of production has now been transposed without restrictions into the realm of consumption. Thanks to thousands of marginal distinctions and the often purely formal diffraction of a single product by means of conditioning, competition has become more aggravated on every plane, opening up the immense range of possibilities of a precarious freedom – indeed, of the ultimate freedom, namely the freedom to choose the objects which will distinguish one from other people.[39] In fact the ideology of competition is arguably bound to fall here into the toils of the same process, and hence to meet the same fate, as it did in the realm of production: although consumption may still take itself for a sort of liberal progression in which personal expression has a part to play, whereas production is

37. Every single advertising sign bears independent witness to this tautological system of recognition, because all such signs, whatever they signify, also refer to themselves *as advertising*.

38. Is this not somewhat reminiscent of Claude Lévi-Strauss's account of the totemic system, according to which arbitrary totemic signs are the conduit by whose means a social order makes itself apparent in its durable immanence? Viewed in this light, advertising would appear to be the end-product of a cultural system which has reverted (with its repertoire of 'brands') to the poverty of the sign codes of archaic systems.

39. The French word '*concurrence*' [here rendered as 'competition' – *Trans.*] is ambiguous in that it means both rivalry and convergence. It is true that furious competition is a sure way to produce convergence at a single point. There is a threshold of technical progress (reached notably in the United States) beyond which all objects of a given type become interchangeable, and the differentiation requirement can then be fulfilled only to the extent that all are modified in unison, say once a year, and this in accordance with the same criteria. The extreme form of free choice similarly subjects everyone to the ritual obligation to possess the same things.

inescapably governed by planning, this is merely because the techniques of psychological conditioning are far less advanced than those of economic planning.

We in Europe still want what others do not have: in the West, at any rate (the question having been deferred in the Eastern bloc), we are still at the competitive, the heroic stage in the choice and use of objects. The regular replacement and cyclical synchronization of models have not yet established themselves here as they have in the United States.[40] Should we attribute this to psychological resistance, or perhaps to the strength of tradition? Probably the cause is a simpler one: the majority of Western Europe's population is still a long way from achieving the sort of economic status that makes it fundamentally possible, with all objects of consumption aligned on the same maximal standard, for a single repertoire of models to hold sway, for diversity to become in effect less important than owning the 'latest' model, which is the essential stamp of social worth. In the United States 90 per cent of the population aspire solely to the possession of what others possess, and from one year to the next they massively choose the latest model, which is in every single respect the best. A solid class of 'normal' consumers has thus been constituted which, for all practical purposes, coincides with the entire population. Although we have not yet reached that stage in Europe, we are already very well able, on account of the irreversible pressure exerted by the American model, to perceive the ambiguity of advertising: it *provokes us into competing*, but at the same time the imaginary competition thus set in motion *already bespeaks a profound monotony*, a demand for uniformity, the sinking of the consuming masses into a regressive contentment. It tells us to 'Buy this, because it is like nothing else' ('the meat of the elite', 'the cigarette of the happy few', etc.) – but it also tells us to 'Buy this because everyone else uses it!'[41] Nor is there any real contradiction here. It is quite possible for each person to feel unique even though

40. In the United States, essential objects such as cars and refrigerators tend to have a predictable and obligatory life-span of one year (three years in the case of television sets, somewhat longer for a flat). Norms of social status end up imposing a kind of metabolism of the object, an ever-accelerating cycle. Very far removed from the cycles of nature, yet often oddly congruent with the old round of the seasons, this new kind of cycle and the necessity of complying with it are now the true basis of the American citizen's ethos.

41. This ambiguity is perfectly epitomized by advertising's use of 'you' – as in 'Guinness is Good for You'. Is this a polite (and hence personalizing) way of addressing the individual, or is the message directed at the social group as a whole? Is this 'you' (or the French *vous* in similar contexts) singular or plural? The answer is

everyone is alike: all that is needed is a pattern of collective and mythological projection – in other words, a model.[42]

We may well conclude that the destiny of consumer society (thanks not to Machiavellian technocrats but, rather, to the simple structural play of competition) is the functionalization of the consumer himself, the psychological monopolization of all needs – a unanimity in consumption which will at last harmonize with the concentration and unbridled interventionism that govern production.

Freedom by Default

Moreover, the ideology of competition is now giving way everywhere to a 'philosophy' of personal accomplishment. Society is better integrated, so instead of vying for possession of things, individuals seek self-fulfilment, independently of one another, through what they consume. The leitmotiv of discriminative competition has been replaced by that of personalization for all. Meanwhile, advertising has transformed itself from a commercial practice into a theory of the *praxis* of consumption, a theory which now crowns the whole social edifice. Expositions of this theory are to be found in the works of American advertising men (Ernest Dichter, Pierre Martineau, *et alii*). The thesis is simple: (1) the consumer society (objects, products, advertising) offers the individual the possibility, for the first time in history, of total liberation and self-realization; (2) transcending consumption pure and simple in the direction of individual and collective self-expression, the system of consumption constitutes a true language, a new culture. The 'nihilism' of consumption is thus effectively countered by a 'new humanism' of consumption.

both: the pronoun addresses each individual inasmuch as he resembles all others. Fundamentally this is the impersonal or gnomic 'you' (cf. Leo Spitzer in *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter*, December 1964, p. 961).

42. When Brigitte Bardot hairdos were all the rage, every girl who followed the fashion remained unique in her own eyes, because her point of reference was never the thousands of others who looked exactly like her but, rather, Bardot herself, sublime archetype and fountainhead of uniqueness. Among the mad – to carry this logic to its extreme – there is nothing especially bothersome about being one of four or five people in the asylum all of whom take themselves for Napoleon. Consciousness here is shaped not by a real relationship but by an imaginary one.

As to the first point, the question of personal fulfilment, Ernest Dichter, director of the Institute for Motivational Research, does not hesitate to define the problematics of the 'new man' as follows:

> The problem confronting us now is how to allow the average American to feel moral even when he is flirting, even when he is spending money, even when he is buying a second or third car. One of the most difficult tasks created by our current affluence is sanctioning and justifying people's enjoyment of it, convincing them that to take pleasure in their lives is moral and not immoral. Permission given the consumer freely to enjoy life, and proof that he has the right to surround himself with products that enrich his existence and give him pleasure – these should be the cardinal themes of all advertising and of all attempts to promote sales.[43]

The manipulating of motivation thus apparently ushers in an era in which advertising will assume moral responsibility for society as a body, replacing puritanical morality with a hedonism founded purely on satisfaction and introducing a new state of nature, so to speak, into the bosom of hypercivilization. There is an ambivalence in Dichter's last sentence, however: is the goal of advertising to free man from his resistance to happiness, or is it to promote sales? Is society to be reorganized for the sake of satisfaction or for the sake of profits? In his preface to the French edition of Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, Marcel Bleustein-Blanchet maintains that 'motivational research is no threat to individual freedom and in no way prejudices the individual's right to be rational or irrational'. But this claim is simple-minded, if not disingenuous. Dichter is more frank, and makes it clear that the freedom in question is *conceded*. He talks of 'giving consumers permission' – in other words, people must be allowed to be children without being ashamed of it. 'Free to be oneself' really means free to project one's desires onto commodities. And Dichter's 'free to enjoy life' means free to be irrational and

43. [*Translator's note*: The author gives *The Strategy of Desire* as the source of this passage, but I have been unable to trace it in the original edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), so I have retranslated from the French. But see the identical arguments set forth in Dichter's book, pp. 253 ff.]

regressive – and hence adapted to a specific social organization of production.[44] The 'philosophy' of selling has little use for such paradoxes, and it appeals to rational goals (enlightening people as to what they want) and to scientific methods as justifications for its attempt to provoke irrational behaviour (i.e. accepting the role of being nothing but a bundle of unmediated drives and being satisfied so long as those drives are satisfied). Even drives can be dangerous, however, and the neo-sorcerers of consumption are very careful indeed not to liberate anybody with a rousing call to happiness. Rather, they offer merely to resolve tensions – that is to say, they offer a freedom merely *by default*:

> . . . whenever a person in one socioeconomic category aspires to a different category, a 'tension differential' is developed within him and this leads to frustration and action. Where a product promises to help a group overcome this tension, achieve its level of aspiration in whatever area it may fall, that product has a chance of success.[45]

The aim is to allow drives hitherto inhibited by psychic agencies (taboos, superego, guilt) to crystallize upon objects, which themselves thus become capable of negating the explosive force of desire and materializing the ritual repressive function of the social order. What is dangerous is freedom of being, for it pits the individual against society. Freedom of ownership, however, is harmless, for it unknowingly serves society's purposes. Such freedom is highly moral, as Dichter points out; indeed, it is the very acme of morality, because it reconciles the consumer with himself and with the group at one and the same time. It is the perfect form of social being. Traditional morality required merely that the individual conform to the group, whereas the philosophy of advertising requires that he conform to himself, that all his personal conflicts be resolved. This is a morality that invades the individual as never before. Taboos, anxieties and neuroses, which tend to make individuals into outsiders and outlaws, are thus supposed to be removed in favour

44. Adapting a Marxian formulation from 'On the Jewish Question', we might say that the individual in consumer society is free as a consumer, but only as a consumer. The emancipation involved is a purely formal one.

45. *The Strategy of Desire*, p. 84.

of a reassuring regression into objects calculated to buttress the images of the Father and the Mother in every possible way. The increasingly 'free' irrationality of drives in the depths is to be accompanied by an increasingly strict control as they emerge into the light.

A New Language?

Let us now consider the second claim mentioned above: does the system of objects-cum-advertising really constitute a language? The whole philosophy of idealized consumption is based on the replacement of live, conflictual human relationships by a 'personalized' relationship to objects. 'Any buying process', Pierre Martineau tells us, 'is an interaction between the personality of the individual and the so-called "personality" of the product itself.'[46] The pretence is that products are now so differentiated and so numerous that they have been transformed into *complex* beings, and that consequently the relationship involved in buying and consuming is equivalent to any *human* relationship.[47] But this is the whole point: is there a living syntax here? Do objects inform needs and structure them in a new way? And, reciprocally, do needs inform new social structures through the mediation of objects and their production? If so, then we may speak of language in this connection; if not, then all this is nothing but the self-serving idealizations of managers.

Structure and Demarcation: Brands

Buying today bears no resemblance to a free or living form of exchange. It is a predetermined operation in which two strictly incompatible systems confront one another, one being the mobile, inconsistent individual, with his needs, his conflicts and his negativity; the other being the codified, classified, discontinuous and

46. *Motivation in Advertising: Motives That Make People Buy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957), p. 73.
47. There are other, archaic, ways of personalizing buying: barter, the second-hand trade (which involves chance), shopping expeditions (which involve patience and an element of play), and so on. The reason I call these forms archaic is that they all assume a passive product and an active buyer. Today all the responsibility for personalization has devolved onto advertising.

relatively consistent system of products in all their positivity. There is no interaction between the two, but there is certainly a forced integration of the system of needs into the system of products. Of course, the net result does constitute a system that signifies as well as a system for procuring satisfaction. But for there to be 'language' there has to be syntax, and in the case of objects of mass consumption all we have is an inventory.

Let me try to explain in more detail. At the stage of craft production, objects reflected the contingency, the uniqueness, of needs. The two systems were adapted to one another, yet their combination lacked coherence – indeed, the only coherence was the relative one of needs, which were mobile and contingent: objective technological progress did not exist. With the advent of the industrial era, manufactured products acquired a new coherence, one bestowed on them by the organization of technology and economic structures, while the system of needs now became less consistent than the system of objects. The latter, by imposing this new coherence, was able to mould a civilization.[48] At the same time, as Lewis Mumford notes, 'the machine has replaced an unlimited series of variables' – i.e. objects 'made to measure', adapted to specific needs – 'with a limited number of constraints'.[49] This development does undoubtedly lay the foundations for a new language: internal structuring, simplification, transitions to the bounded and the discontinuous, the constitution of technemes and their growing convergence. And if craft objects may be said to be on a par with words or speech [*parole*], it must be acknowledged that industrial technology institutes a linguistic system [*langue*]. But a linguistic system is not language in the full sense [*langage*]:[50] it is not the material structure of the motorcar that gives that car its voice, but the form, colour, contours, accessories or 'social standing' of the car as an object. And what we have here is a Tower of Babel, for each speaks in its own idiom. Even so, serial production contrives, by means

48. See Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Aubier, 1958), p. 24.

49. *Technics and Civilization* (see above, p. 57, note 37), pp. 277–8.

50. [*Translator's note*: No convention having been established on the English rendering of the terms *parole*, *langue* and *langage*, they are given here in square brackets in the hope that this may assist readers interested in the way the author uses these notoriously slippery Saussurean concepts. See also above, p. 11, note 7.]

of its calibrated differences and combinatorial variations, to carve out meanings, to generate a repertoire or lexicon of forms and colours via which recurrent modalities of 'speech' can be expressed. But does this amount to a language? No, because this vast paradigm lacks any true syntax. It lacks the rigorous syntax of technology and it lacks the loose syntax of needs, and it wafts back and forth between the two, a sort of two-dimensional repertoire which tends to exhaust its possibilities on the day-to-day level in an immense combinatorial grid of types and models where needs, in their incoherence, are effectively assigned places, but no reciprocal structuring occurs as a result; inasmuch as products are better integrated, it is needs that flow towards them and manage – by cutting themselves into pieces, by becoming discontinuous – to insert themselves, with difficulty and in arbitrary fashion, into the grid of objects. The fact is that the system of individual needs swamps the world of objects with its utter contingency, yet this contingency is somehow inventoried, classified and demarcated by objects: it thus becomes possible to *control* it – and this, from the socio-economic point of view, is the system's real goal.

If the industrial organization of technology acquires the power to mould our civilization, it does so, then, in a dual and contradictory way: by virtue of its coherence but also by virtue of its incoherence. By virtue, at a 'high level', of its structural (technological) coherence, but also, 'at the base', by virtue of the astructural (but controlled) incoherence of the mechanics of the commercialization of products and the satisfaction of needs. It is clear, therefore, that whereas language, because it is neither consumed nor owned in any true sense by those who speak it, always retains the possibility of access to the 'essential', to a syntax of exchange (structured communication), the system of objects-cum-advertising, for its part, overwhelmed by the inessential, by a destructured universe of needs, can satisfy such needs only in piecemeal fashion and can never found new structures of social exchange.

Here, once again, is Pierre Martineau:

> There is no simple relationship between kinds of buyers and kinds of cars, however. Any human is a complex of many motives . . . [whose] meanings may vary in countless combinations. Nevertheless the different makes and models are seen as helping people give expression to their own personality dimensions.

And Martineau offers several examples of such 'personalization':

> The conservative in car choice and behavior wishes to convey such ideas as dignity, reserve, maturity, seriousness. . . . Another definite series of car personalities is selected by the people wanting to make known their middle-of-the-road moderation, their being fashionable. . . . Further along the range of personalities are the innovators and ultramoderns. . . .[51]

No doubt Martineau is right: this is indeed how people define themselves by means of their objects. What is also clear, though, is that those objects do not constitute a real language, but merely a range of distinguishing marks more or less arbitrarily keyed to a range of stereotyped personalities. Everything suggests that the differentiating system of consumption is a powerful tool for demarcating (1) categories of needs within the consumer himself which now have but the remotest of relationships with the person as a living whole; and (2) categories – or 'status groups' – within society overall which can be identified by means of some particular set of objects. Hierarchies of products and objects thus come to play precisely the same role as that formerly played by a range of distinct values: they become the basis, in short, of the group's ethos.

Both the aforementioned functions entail the solicitation, impressment and classification of the personal and social world – a compulsion, exerted through objects, towards integration into a hierarchical repertoire with no syntax, that is to say, into *a system of categories that is distinctly not a language*. It is as though there were, not a social dialectic, but a social process of demarcation by whose means an order is imposed, an order which in turn dictates a sort of objective fate (materialized in objects) for each subgroup: in short, a set of pigeonholes within which relationships can only become more impoverished. Our enthusiastic and devious philosophers of 'motivation' would love to convince themselves, as well as everyone else, that the reign of objects is still the shortest road to freedom. As evidence of this they need this spectacular muddle of needs and satisfactions, this profusion of choices – this whole carnival of supply and demand – whose sheer

51. *Motivation in Advertising*, p. 75.

effervescence creates the illusion of a culture. But let there be no mistake: objects work as *categories of objects* which, in the most tyrannical fashion, define *categories of people* – they police social meaning, and the significations they engender are rigidly controlled. In their proliferation, at once arbitrary and coherent, objects are the best possible vector of a social order that is equally arbitrary and equally coherent, and, under the banner of affluence, they indeed become a most effective material expression of that order.

The concept of 'brand', which is advertising's prime concept, sums up the prospects for a 'language' of consumption rather well. All products (with the exception of perishable foodstuffs) are now offered under brand names. Every product 'worthy of the name' has a brand which may sometimes even become a generic term (e.g. 'frigidaire'). The brand's primary function is to designate a product; its secondary function is to mobilize emotional connotations:

> Actually, in our highly competitive system, few products are able to maintain any technical superiority for long. They must be invested with overtones to individualize them; they must be endowed with richness of associations and imagery; they must have many levels of meaning, if we expect them to be top sellers, if we hope that they will achieve the emotional attachment which shows up as brand loyalty.[52]

The psychological restructuring of the consumer may thus turn on a single word – PHILIPS, OLIDA or GENERAL MOTORS – capable of connoting at once a diversity of objects and a mass of diffuse meanings: a synthetic word covering a synthesis of emotions. Such is the miracle of Martineau's 'psychological label'. And this is the only language, ultimately, in which the object speaks to us – the only language that it has invented. Yet the basic lexicon that covers our walls and haunts our consciousness remains strictly asyntactic: different brands succeed one another, are juxtaposed, or replace one another, without articulation or transition; this is an erratic lexical system in which brands devour one another and the lifeblood of each brand is interminable repetition. There can be no more impoverished

52. Ibid., p. 50.

language than this one, laden with referents yet empty of meaning as it is. It is a language of mere *signals*, and 'brand loyalty' can never, therefore, be more than a conditioned reflex of manipulated emotions.

The philosophers of advertising will doubtless object that the satisfaction of 'deep motives' can only be a good thing (even if these motives are then integrated into an impoverished system of labels). 'Free yourselves from your inner censor!', they are liable to cry. 'Outsmart your superego!' 'Have the courage of your desires!' But the question is: are these deep motives really being called up so that they may be articulated as a language? Can a system of reference such as this really invest hitherto hidden areas of the personality with meaning – and, if so, with what meaning? To quote Martineau one last time:

> Naturally it is better to use acceptable, stereotyped terms. . . . This is the very essence of metaphor. . . . If I ask for a 'mild' cigarette or a 'beautiful' car, while I can't define these attributes literally, I still know that they indicate something desirable. . . . The average motorist isn't sure at all what 'octane' in gasoline actually is. . . . But he does know vaguely that it is something good. So he orders 'high-octane' gasoline, because he desires this essence quality behind the meaningless surface jargon.[53]

In other words, no sooner has the discourse of advertising awakened desire than it subjects it to generalization of the vaguest kind. Reduced to their simplest expression, the deep motives are keyed to a ready-instituted code of connotations, and 'choice', fundamentally, can only seal the collusion between this *moral* order and the individual's deepest wishes. Such is the alchemy of the 'psychological label'.[54]

53. Ibid., p. 100.

54. Comparing advertising to a kind of *magic* is really giving it too much credit, however. The nominalist lexicon of the alchemists has something of a genuine language about it, structured as it is by a praxis of research and interpretation. By contrast, the nominalism of 'brands' is strictly immanent – and congealed by economic imperatives.

In actuality, this stereotyped calling-forth of deep motives is nothing but a form of *censorship*. The ideology of personal fulfilment and the triumphant illogicality of drives supposedly freed from guilt are in fact merely a tremendous effort to materialize the superego. *What is 'personalized' in the object is primarily censorship.* No matter how much the philosophers of consumption may revel in the notion of deep motives as potentials for immediate happiness which have merely to be freed, the fact remains that the unconscious is conflicted, and inasmuch as advertising mobilizes it, it mobilizes it *as* conflict. Advertising does not liberate drives; first and foremost it liberates phantasies that serve to inhibit those drives. Hence the ambiguity of the object, in which the individual finds no route to self-transcendence, but merely an ambiguous retreat simultaneously to his desires and to the forces that censor those desires. We thus once more encounter the overall pattern of gratification/frustration described above: with its purely formal reduction of tensions and its ever-vain regressions, what the object invariably ensures is a perpetual renewal of conflicts. Here, perhaps, is a definition of the form of alienation particular to our time: our internal conflicts or 'deep tendencies' are mobilized and alienated in the process of consumption, in exactly the same way as labour-power is alienated in the process of production.

Nothing has really changed – it is just that strictures on self-fulfilment are here no longer imposed by means of oppressive laws or norms of obedience; repression is ensured instead through 'free' actions (buying, choosing, consuming), through spontaneous cathexes, through a sort of internalization operating within gratification itself.

A Universal Code: Status

The objects-cum-advertising system therefore constitutes less a language, whose living syntax it lacks, than a set of significations. Impoverished yet efficient, it is basically a code. It does not structure the personality, but designates and classifies it. It does not structure social relationships, but breaks them down into a hierarchical repertoire. In its formal expression it constitutes a universal system for the identification of social rank: the code of 'status'.

In the context of 'consumer society', the notion of rank as a yardstick of social being tends to assume the simplified form of 'status'. Status in this sense is still measured in terms of power, authority and responsibility, yet fundamentally the message now is 'There is no responsibility without a Lip watch!' Advertising always refers explicitly to the object as to the essential criterion: 'You will be judged by such and such', 'The elegant woman is recognizable by such and such', and so on. No doubt objects have always played an identifying role of this kind, but formerly they did so in parallel – and this often in a purely auxiliary way – with other systems: gestural, ritual or ceremonial systems, language, rank at birth, codes of moral values, etc. The peculiarity of our own society is that all such other means of gauging rank are gradually giving way to the code of 'status'. Naturally this code applies in varying degrees according to socio-economic level, but the social function of advertising is to bring everyone under its sway. It is a moral code, for it is sanctioned by the group, and any infraction of it entails the apportionment of some measure of guilt. It is a totalitarian code, for no one escapes it; escaping it in a private sense cannot prevent us from participating every day in its collective development. Not believing in it still means believing sufficiently in other people's belief in it to adopt a sceptical stance. Even actions intended as resistance to it must be defined in terms of a society that conforms to it.

Nor is this code without its positive aspects. In the first place, it is no more arbitrary than any other code. After all, even in our own eyes, value resides in the car that we change every year, in the part of town where we live, and in the multitude of objects with which we surround ourselves and which distinguish us from other people. True, that is not the whole story, but have not codes of value always been partial and arbitrary (and moral codes more than any)?

Secondly, the code of 'status' does constitute a socialization, and a total secularization, of distinguishing signs, and consequently contributes to the emancipation – at least in the formal sense – of social relations. Not only do objects make material life more tolerable by proliferating as commodities, they likewise make the relative standing of people more tolerable by gaining general acceptance as identifying signs. One thing may be said in favour of the 'status' system: it has the

virtue of rendering obsolete all the old rituals of caste or class, along – in a general way – with all preceding (and preclusive) criteria of social discrimination.

Thirdly, this code offers a *universal* system of decipherable signs for the first time in history. Perhaps it is to be regretted that it is usurping the place of all other codes, but it is arguable, conversely, that the gradual exhaustion of other systems (birth, class, function), the widening of competition, a greater social mobility, the accelerating fissiparity of social groups and the growing instability and proliferation of languages all created the necessity for a code which, by virtue of its straightforward universality, could guarantee clear and unencumbered communication. In a world where millions of men and women pass one another every day without being acquainted, the code of 'status' fulfils an essential social function by addressing people's vital need for knowledge of others. The fact is, however, that this universalization and this effectiveness are achieved only at the cost of a radical simplification, an impoverishment and a well-nigh definitive regression of the 'language' of value: 'Individuals define themselves through their objects.' Coherence is achieved through the institution of a combinatorial system or repertoire – a language that is functional, certainly, but symbolically and structurally immiserated.

What is more, the fact that a system of identification is now in place which is clearly legible to all, that the signs of value are entirely socialized and objectivized, by no means implies any true 'democratization'. On the contrary, it would appear that *the insistence on univocal reference merely exacerbates the desire to discriminate*: within the very framework of this homogeneous system, a perpetually renewed obsession with hierarchies and distinctions is to be observed. Even though barriers of morality, social convention and language have been overturned, new barriers and exclusions have arisen in the realm of objects: a new class or caste morality is thus enabled to colonize the most material and hitherto unchallengeable of spheres.

So, while the code of 'status' is at present coming to constitute a universal apparatus of signification that is immediately readable, facilitating the free flow of social representations from one end of society to the other, this does not mean that society is becoming more transparent. The code produces an illusion of

transparency, an illusion of readable social relations, behind which the real structure of production and real social relationships remain illegible. A society would be transparent only if knowledge of the apparatus of signification was *simultaneously* knowledge of social structures and social realities. This is not so in the case of the objects-cum-advertising system, which offers nothing but a code of meaning that is always complicitous and always opaque. What is more, though it may provide a formal security thanks to its coherence, this code is also the best means for the global social order to extend its immanent and permanent rule to all individuals.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF 'CONSUMPTION'

I should like to conclude this discussion of the various levels of the relationship to objects as an operative system with some attempt to define 'consumption'. It is to consumption, after all, that all aspects of practice in this area tend at present to lead.

Just so long as it is freed once and for all from its current meaning, that of a mechanism for satisfying needs, consumption may indeed be deemed a defining mode of our industrial civilization. For consumption is surely *not* that passive process of absorption and appropriation which is contrasted to the supposedly active mode of production, thus counterposing two oversimplified patterns of behaviour (and of alienation). It has to be made clear from the outset that consumption is an active form of relationship (not only to objects, but also to society and to the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system.

It has to be made clear that objects and material goods are not in fact the object of consumption – they are the object merely of needs and of the satisfaction of needs. From time immemorial people have bought, possessed, enjoyed and spent, but this does not mean that they were 'consuming'. The festivals of 'primitive' peoples, the largesse of the feudal lord, the luxury of the nineteenth-century bourgeois – none of these amounted to consumption. And if we are justified in using this term to describe present-day society, it is not because we now eat more or better, not because we absorb more images and messages, and not because we have more appliances and gadgets at our disposal. Neither the volume of goods nor the

satisfaction of needs serves properly to define the notion of consumption, for these are simply the preconditions of consumption.

Consumption is not a material practice, nor is it a phenomenology of 'affluence'. It is not defined by the nourishment we take in, nor by the clothes we clothe ourselves with, nor by the car we use, nor by the oral and visual matter of the images and messages we receive. It is defined, rather, by the organization of all these things into a signifying fabric: consumption is *the virtual totality of all objects and messages ready-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse.* If it has any meaning at all, consumption means *an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs.*

Traditional symbolic objects (tools, furniture, the house itself) were the mediators of a real relationship or a directly experienced situation, and their substance and form bore the clear imprint of the conscious or unconscious dynamic of that relationship. They were thus *not arbitrary.* Although they were bound by connotations – pregnant, freighted with connotations – they remained living objects on account of their inward and transitive orientation with respect to human actions, whether collective or individual. Such objects are not consumed. *To become an object of consumption, an object must first become a sign.* That is to say: it must become external, in a sense, to a relationship that it now merely signifies. It is thus *arbitrary* – and not inconsistent with that concrete relationship: it derives its consistency, and hence its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relationship to all other sign-objects. Only in this context can it be 'personalized', can it become part of a series, and so on; only thus can it be consumed, never in its materiality, but in its *difference.*

This conversion of the object to the systematic status of a sign implies the simultaneous transformation of the human relationship into a relationship of consumption – of consuming and being consumed. In and through objects this relationship is at once consummated and abolished;[1] the object becomes its inescapable mediation – and, before long, the sign that replaces it altogether.

1. [*Translator's note*: The author here and in the ensuing discussion exploits the fact that French has only one word (*consommer*) for both 'consume' and 'consummate'. I have therefore been obliged to use the two English words, or to paraphrase, in order to retain all the resonances of the text.]

So what is consummated and consumed is never the object but the relationship itself, signified yet absent, simultaneously included and excluded; it is the *idea of the relationship* that is consumed in the series of objects that displays it.

The relationship is no longer directly experienced: it has become abstract, been abolished, been transformed into a sign-object, and thus consumed.

This status of the relationship / object is governed at every level by the imperatives of production. The whole apparatus of advertising suggests that the living relationship, with its contradictions, must not be allowed to disturb the 'rational' order of production, and that it should be consumed like everything else. It must be 'personalized' so that it can be incorporated into the system. Here we rediscover, in its most extreme expression, the formal logic of the commodity as analysed by Marx: just as needs, feelings, culture, knowledge – in short, all the properly human faculties – are integrated as commodities into the order of production, and take on material form as productive forces so that they can be sold, so likewise all desires, projects and demands, all passions and all relationships, are now abstracted (or materialized) as signs and as objects to be bought and consumed. Take the couple, for example, whose objective *raison d'être* is now the consumption of objects – including the objects that formerly symbolized the relationship.[2]

The beginning of Georges Perec's novel *Les choses* is instructive in this context:

> The eye, at first, would glide over the gray rug of a long corridor, high and narrow. The wall would be cabinets, whose copper fittings would gleam. Three engravings . . . would lead to a leather curtain, hanging from large rings of black-veined wood, that a simple gesture would suffice to slide back. . . . It would be a living room, about twenty-one feet long and nine feet wide. On the left, in a sort of alcove, a large couch of worn black leather would be flanked by two book cases in pale wild-cherry wood, on which books would be piled helter-skelter. Above the divan a nautical chart would run the whole length of the wall panel. Beyond a little low table, under a silk prayer rug attached to the wall with three copper nails with large heads, and balancing

2. In the United States married couples have even been encouraged to get new wedding rings every year, and to make their relationship 'meaningful' by buying gifts 'together'.

> the leather hanging, another divan, perpendicular to the first, upholstered in light brown velvet, would lead to a small piece of furniture on high legs, lacquered in dark red, with three shelves that would hold bric-à-brac; agates and stone eggs, snuffboxes, jade ashtrays. . . . Farther on . . . small boxes and records, next to a closed phonograph of which only four machine-turned steel knobs would be visible. . . .[3]

Despite the thick mellow nostalgia that envelops this 'interior', it is clear that nothing in it has the slightest symbolic value any longer. One need only compare this description with any description of an interior by Balzac to see that no human relationship has left its imprint on these things: everything in Perec's décor is a sign, and purely a sign. Nothing has presence, nothing has a history – even though everything is laden with references: Oriental, Scottish, Early American, etc. The *only thing* all these objects have is their uniqueness: they are abstract in their difference, which is their mode of referentiality, and enter into combination with one another precisely by virtue of that abstractness. We are indubitably in the realm of consumption.[4]

As Perec's novel continues, we get a sense of how a system of sign-objects of this kind functions: far from symbolizing the relationship, what these objects actually describe, from the externality of their continual 'referring', is the relationship's emptiness, which is discernible at every moment in the lack of existence that each of the partners has for the other. Jérôme and Sylvie do not exist as a couple: their sole reality is as 'Jérôme-and-Sylvie' – as a pure complicity surfacing within the system of objects that signifies it. Nor can it be said that objects are an automatic substitute for the relationship that is lacking, that they serve to fill a void: on the contrary, they *describe* this void, the locus of the relationship, pursuant to a process which is a way of not living the relationship while at the

3. Georges Perec, *Les choses, une histoire des années soixante* (Paris: Julliard, 1965), p. 12 [English translation by Helen R. Lane: *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), pp. 11–12].

4. In the Perec 'interior' we are dealing with objects made transcendent by fashion, not with the 'serial' objects of mass production. Total cultural constraint – cultural terrorism – reigns here. But this makes no difference to the system of consumption itself.

same time (save in cases of complete regression) exposing it to the light of the possibility of its being lived. Thus the relationship is not sucked into the absolute positivity of objects but articulated with those objects as with so many solid points in a chain of signifiers – except that here the signifying configuration of objects is usually impoverished, schematic and closed, and deals only with the *idea* of a relationship, not with a relationship that can be lived. Leather couch, phonograph, bric-à-brac, jade ashtrays: it is *the idea of the relationship* that is signified in these objects, that is 'consumed' in them and hence abolished as anything to be directly experienced.

This implies that consumption may be defined as a *total idealist practice* of a systematic kind which goes way beyond relations to objects and interpersonal relations and extends to every level of history, communication and culture. Thus the demand for culture is a living demand, but it is only the *idea* of the collector's edition or the colour lithograph in the dining-room that is actually consumed. The demand for revolution is likewise a living demand, but so long as it is not actualized in practice it will be consumed as the idea of Revolution. As an idea the Revolution is indeed eternal, and must needs remain eternally consumable just like any other idea – all ideas, even the most contradictory, being capable of coexistence as signs in the idealist logic of consumption. The Revolution is therefore signified by a combinatorial terminology, a vocabulary of unmediated terms, in which it appears as already realized – and by which it is indeed 'consumed'.[5]

Similarly, objects of consumption constitute an idealist lexicon of signs wherein the will to live itself is discernible in an ever-receding materiality. Once again Perec's book makes the point:

> It sometimes seemed to them that a whole life could go harmoniously by between these book-lined walls, among these objects so perfectly domesticated that the two of them would end up believing that they had been forever

5. Consumed, that is, and at the same time consummated – hence also destroyed. To say that the revolution is consumed / consummated in the idea of the Revolution means that the revolution is both fulfilled (formally) and abolished in that idea; and what is presented as already realized is thenceforward consumable in an unmediated manner. [*Translator's note*: On 'consume' / 'consummate', see note 1 above.]

> created for their own use alone. . . . But they would not feel themselves tied down by them; on certain days they would go looking for adventure. Nothing they planned would be impossible.[6]

But note the conditional in this last sentence – and indeed, the novel goes on to give this prediction the lie: there are no more projects – only objects. Not that the project has disappeared, exactly: it is just that its 'realization' as a sign embodied in the object is taken as satisfaction enough. The object of consumption is thus the precise form of the project's self-renunciation.

This explains why THERE ARE NO LIMITS TO CONSUMPTION. If consumption were indeed what it is naïvely assumed to be, namely a process of absorption or devouring, a saturation point would inevitably be reached. If consumption were indeed tied to the realm of needs, some sort of progress towards satisfaction would presumably occur. We know very well, however, that nothing of the kind happens: people simply want to consume more and more. This compulsion is attributable neither to some psychological determinism ('once a drunk always a drunk', and so forth) nor to the pressure of some simple desire for prestige. That consumption seems irrepressible is due, rather, to the fact that it is indeed a total idealist practice which no longer has anything to do (beyond a certain threshold) either with the satisfaction of needs or with the reality principle. Its dynamism derives from the ever-disappointed project now implicit in objects. Thus embedded in unmediated form in the object, the project transfers its existential dynamic to the systematic and limitless acquisition of consumption's sign-objects. This means that consumption must henceforward either keep surpassing itself or keep repeating itself merely in order to remain what it is – namely, a reason for living. The very will to live, fragmented, disappointed, signified, is condemned to repeat itself and repeatedly abolish itself in a succession of objects. In this context all attempts to 'moderate' consumption or to devise a grid of needs capable of normalizing it attest to nothing but a naïve or grotesque moralism.

6. *Les choses*, French edition, p. 15 [English trans., pp. 15–16].

The systematic and limitless process of consumption arises from the disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life. In their ideality sign-objects are all equivalent and may multiply infinitely; indeed, they *must multiply* in order at every moment to make up for a reality that is absent. Consumption is irrepressible, in the last reckoning, because it is founded upon a *lack*.

THE SYSTEM OF OBJECTS

JEAN BAUDRILLARD
Translated by James Benedict

Published now for the first time in English, here is Jean Baudrillard's first book – a kind of theoretical letter-in-a-bottle tossed into the ocean in 1968, at a time when (as the author would put it later) 'the society of the spectacle and its denunciation were still the focal point of semiological, psychoanalytical and sociological arguments'.

Pressing Freudian and Saussurean categories into the service of a basically Marxist perspective, *The System of Objects* offers a cultural critique of the commodity in consumer society. Baudrillard classifies the everyday objects of the 'new technical order' as functional, nonfunctional and metafunctional. He contrasts 'modern' and 'traditional' functional objects, subjecting home furnishing and interior design to a celebrated semiological analysis. His treatment of nonfunctional or 'marginal' objects focuses on antiques and the psychology of collecting, while the metafunctional category extends to the useless, the aberrant and even the 'schizofunctional'. Finally, Baudrillard deals at length with the implications of credit and advertising for the commodification of everyday life.

The System of Objects is a *tour de force* of the materialist semiotics of the early Baudrillard, who emerges in retrospect as something of a lightning-rod for all the live ideas of the day: Bataille's political economy of 'expenditure' and Mauss's theory of the gift; Riesman's lonely crowd and the 'technological society' of Jacques Ellul; the structuralism of Roland Barthes in *The System of Fashion*; Henri Lefebvre's work on the social construction of space; and, last but not least, Guy Debord's situationist critique of the spectacle.

Jean Baudrillard was born in Reims in 1929 and now lives in Paris. Among his works translated into English are *Seduction*, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, *Simulations and Simulacra*, *Fatal Strategies* and, from Verso, *America*, *Cool Memories* and *The Transparency of Evil*. Verso will also be publishing the English translations of his two most recent books, *Le crime parfait* and *Fragments: Cool Memories III*.

For those interested in the relation between ideology and material culture ... *The System of Objects* ranks as one of the most important books of post-structuralist cultural criticism.
Mark Gottdiener, Professor of Sociology,
University of California at Riverside

VERSO
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014-4606

ISBN 1-85984-068-X
9 781859 840689

Cover design by the Senate
Illustration: *I love you with my Ford*, 1961, by James Rosenquist
Photo: Moderna Museet, SKM Stockholm, © James Rosenquist/DACS, London/VAGA, New York,1996

Revised Edition

Jean Baudrillard

The Consumer Society

Myths and Structures

The Consumer Society

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The Consumer Society

Myths and Structures

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#10-04 Samsung Hub
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English translation copyright © Sage Publications 1998
Introduction © George Ritzer 1998
Introduction © Barry Smart 2017
Originally published as *La société de consommation* © Editions Denoël 1970

This edition first published 1998. Reprinted 1999

This revised edition published 2017

This translation is published with financial support from the French Ministry of Culture

Published in association with *Theory, Culture & Society*, Goldsmiths, University of London

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Editor: Natalie Aguilera
Editorial assistant: Delayna Spencer
Production editor: Rachel Burrows
Marketing manager: Sally Ransom
Cover design: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the UK

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016955372

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-8237-6
ISBN 978-1-4739-8238-3 (pbk)

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Shower him with all earthly blessings, plunge him so deep into
happiness that nothing is visible but the bubbles rising to
the surface of his happiness, as if it were water; give him
such economic prosperity that he will have nothing left
to do but sleep, eat gingerbread, and worry about
the continuance of world history.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*

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Foreword

Jean Baudrillard's book *The Consumer Society* is a masterful contribution to contemporary sociology. It certainly has its place in the tradition which includes Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society*, Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* and David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*.

Baudrillard analyses our contemporary Western societies, including that of the United States. This analysis focuses on the phenomenon of the consumption of objects which he has already tackled in *The System of Objects* (Gallimard, 1968; translation, Verso, 1996). In his conclusion to that volume, he formulates the plan of the present work: 'It has to be made clear from the outset that consumption is an active form of relationship (not only to objects, but also to society and to the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system.'

He shows with great perspicacity how the giant technocratic corporations foster irrepressible desires, creating new social hierarchies which have replaced the old class differences.

A new mythology has arisen in this way. As Baudrillard writes,

> The washing machine *serves* as an appliance and *acts* as an element of prestige, comfort, etc. It is strictly this latter field which is the field of consumption. All kinds of other objects may be substituted here for the washing machine as signifying element. In the logic of signs, as in that of symbols, objects are no longer linked in any sense to a *definite* function or need. Precisely because they are responding here to something quite different, which is either the social logic or the logic of desire, for which they function as a shifting and unconscious field of signification.

Consumption, as a new tribal myth, has become the morality of our present world. It is currently destroying the foundations of the human being, that is to say, the balance which European thought has maintained since the Greeks between our mythological roots and the world of the logos. Baudrillard is aware of the risk we are running. Let us quote him once again:

> Just as medieval society was balanced on God **and** the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption **and** its denunciation. Though at least around the Devil heresies and black magic sects could organize. Our magic is white. No heresy is possible any longer in a state of affluence. It is the prophylactic whiteness of a saturated society, a society with no history and no dizzying heights, a society with no myth other than itself.

The Consumer Society, written in a concise style, should be carefully studied by the younger generation. Perhaps they will take up the mission of breaking up this monstrous, if not indeed obscene, world of the abundance of objects so formidably sustained by the mass media and particularly by television, this world which threatens us all.

J.P. Mayer
University of Reading

Translator's Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Marie-Dominique Maison, Leslie Hill, Mike Gane and Glynis Powell for various forms of linguistic assistance with this translation. Thanks are also due to Richard G. Smith for providing some invaluable background information.

For reasons of style, the author has made some very minor changes to the original text. I have personally taken the liberty of numbering the chapters.

C.T.

About the Authors of the Introductions

Barry Smart is Professor of Sociology at the University of Portsmouth, England. His books in the field of social theory include *Sociology, Phenomenology and Marxian Analysis* (1976: 2014); *Foucault, Marxism and Critique* (1983: 2009); *Modern Conditions, Postmodern Controversies* (1992); *Facing Modernity* (1999); and *Economy, Culture and Society: A Sociological Critique of Neo-liberalism* (2003). Other books include *The Sport Star: Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy of Sporting Celebrity* (2005); and *Consumer Society: Critical Issues and Environmental Consequences* (2010). He is the editor of *Michel Foucault: Critical Assessments I and II* (1994: 1995), *Resisting McDonaldization* (1999), and *Post-Industrial Society* (2011) and is co-editor of the *Handbook of Social Theory* (2001 with George Ritzer) and *Observation Methods* (2013 with Kay Peggs and Joseph Burridge).

George Ritzer, Distinguished University Professor at the University of Maryland, was named a Distinguished Scholar-Teacher there and received the ASA's Distinguished Contribution to Teaching Award. He holds an Honorary Doctorate from La Trobe University and the Robin William Lectureship from the Eastern Sociological Society. He has chaired four Sections of the ASA: Theoretical Sociology, Organizations and Occupations, Global and Transnational Sociology, and the History of Sociology. Among his books in theory are *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science* (1975/1980) and *Metatheorizing in Sociology* (1991). In the application of social theory to the social world, his books include *The McDonaldization of Society* (8th edn, 2015), *Enchanting a Disenchanted World* (3rd edn, 2010), and *The Globalization of Nothing* (2nd edn, 2007). His books have been translated into over twenty languages, with over a dozen translations of *The McDonaldization of Society* alone. Most of his work over the last decade, and currently, deals with prosumption.

Consuming Baudrillard: Introduction to the Revised Edition of *The Consumer Society*

Barry Smart

Introduction

This new edition of *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* appears in a challenging social, economic, and environmental context, one in which concerns about the 'disbenefits' of growth and the sustainability of prevailing modern ways of life are rising rapidly. As more and more people live, or aspire to live, in a 'consumer society' and the consequences of a materially acquisitive consumer orientated way of life for individuals, communities, other species, and the planet we inhabit have become more apparent, so consumer culture, in turn, has become an increasing focus of academic interest and critical inquiry. At the beginning of the century there were just under two billion people in what has been termed the 'global consumer class', that is people with the means to purchase a range of goods and services that were once largely confined to the wealthier populations of Western Europe, North America, and Japan, and an increasing number of people around the world are aspiring to have a comparable consumer lifestyle (Gardner et al 2004; Dobbs et al 2012). Our globally extensive materialistic way of life appears to be having an irreversibly detrimental impact on the planet's ecosystems and the prospect of continuing rapid growth in the consumption of goods and services has aroused concerns that the planet is in danger of being consumed to excess (Jackson 2009; Jordan 2009; Urry 2010; Smart 2010).

It was Jean Baudrillard, in a series of publications beginning in the late 1960s, who first sought to develop a sustained and innovative critical social analysis of the increasing significance and meaning of consumption in modern social life. Drawing on Marxist political economy, Freudian psychoanalysis, sociology, and semiology Baudrillard sought to challenge prevailing understandings of consumption. In particular he sought to counter what he considered to be a marginalisation of consumer activity in Marxist analyses and to overcome deficiencies in existing sociological accounts by generating a more radical analysis of the ways in which modern social life in the course of the twentieth century had become increasingly centred on consuming. Baudrillard recognised that contemporary society is bound up with the idea of consumption, that it is increasingly

organized around consuming, its social imaginary colonized by an unconscious social logic of consumption. It is to a consideration of consumption as an ordered system of codes and signs, to an analysis of the structures and myths of consumption, that Baudrillard's engaging narrative in *The Consumer Society* is directed.

Signs of consumption

The first of Baudrillard's consumption-related publications was *Le système des objets* (1968), the English translation *The System of Objects* was published in 1996.[1] Baudrillard's analysis of the system of objects in the developing 'global order of production and consumption' (1996: 9) was followed by two related papers 'La Morale des objets: Fonction du signe et logique de classe' (1969a) and 'La genèse idéologique des besoins' (1969b) both of which were subsequently published in *Pour une critique de l'economie politique de signe* (1972), the English translation *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* was published in 1981. These texts effectively prepare the ground for the analysis offered in *La Société de consommation* published in 1970, the English translation *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* first appearing in 1998.

For Baudrillard (1996: 200) America was the place where an 'ever-accelerating cycle' of consumption was considered to be most pronounced. While in the late 1960s his assessment was that Europe had not reached the same stage as the 'American model', the continent was well on its way and it has long since fully embraced the materially acquisitive modern consumer lifestyle, as subsequently has a growing middle class in both India and China. When Baudrillard was first outlining his ideas on the social logic of consumption credit cards in the USA were still in their relative infancy. The first *American Express* charge card appeared in 1958. BankAmericard was launched in the same year and in 1976 became *Visa*. In 1966 seventeen bankers formed a credit card federation which led to the Interbank Card Association and in 1969 they adopted the Master Charge name, which in 1979 duly became *Mastercard*. By 1970 just over half of the population of the USA had credit cards, but by the end of 2008 over 70% of US households had one or more cards, and during the period from 1968 to 2008 total credit card indebtedness in the USA increased from $8.8 billion (in 2008 dollars averaged over the year) to $942 billion (Wright and Rogers 2011: 111).

When *La Société de consommation* was published the ten largest corporations in the USA were respectively General Motors, Exxon Mobil, Ford Motor, General Electric, IBM, Chrysler, Mobil, Texaco, ITT Industries and Gulf Oil. Walmart, Nike, Ralph Lauren Corporation, Calvin Klein Inc., and Gap had not long been established and Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Google, and Facebook had yet to be founded. In the 1970s television viewing had become a significant feature of American culture

and television increasingly became the preferred medium for framing the consumer landscape, advertising products, and promoting brands. The commercial development towards the end of the twentieth century of the internet, the subsequent creation of social media and digital marketing, and the advent of online shopping has further significantly transformed the consumer landscape and multiplied the signs of consumption explored in Baudrillard's work.

In *The System of Objects* Baudrillard (1996: 1) describes the systemic character of the relentless 'procession of generations of products, appliances and gadgets' and the respects in which modern consumer commodities are increasingly differentiated in a complexly articulated sign system. It is in this text that Baudrillard first introduces his notion that it is not the function of objects that is at the heart of contemporary consumption but their 'signifying fabric' and that 'consumption means an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs' (1996: 218). Baudrillard explores taste, design, colour, technology, symbolism, and the growing presence of automatism in what he describes as a developing 'global consumer society' (1996: 186, 215, 217). Other aspects addressed, that anticipate aspects of the analysis in *The Consumer Society*, include credit, product obsolescence, brands, and advertising, as well as the emphasis frequently placed on consumer freedom, described by Baudrillard as 'imaginary' and 'stage-managed', primarily through advertising, and where the corollary of derived forms of consumer gratification is identified as 'equally massive' repression (1996: 194). Baudrillard concludes his exploration of the system of consumer objects by commenting that insofar as consumption is not bound up with needs then it is inexhaustible. In short, there are no limits to consumption. Subsequently modern consumption has proven to be truly irrepressible and limitless, as Baudrillard anticipated, and we live with its increasing growth and global diffusion, seduced by its pleasures and promised benefits, but also disturbed by its costs, including its proliferating excesses, accumulating waste, and destructive environmental consequences.

In the two related papers published in the same period as *The System of Objects* the cultural significance of the sign value of the object is reaffirmed. Baudrillard differentiates his analysis from significant aspects of Marx's critique of political economy, in particular the critical conceptual distinction drawn by Marx between use value and need on the one hand and exchange value and commodity form on the other.[2] Drawing on anthropological studies Baudrillard (1981[1969a]: 30) remarks that 'the consumption of goods … does not answer to an individual economy of needs but is a social function of prestige and hierarchical distribution'. So it is to a consideration of the symbolic order rather than use value, needs, and commodity exchange that Baudrillard directs attention in his analysis of the centrality of consumption within contemporary capitalism. Baudrillard argues it is the continuing significance of 'symbolic exchange value' in contemporary societies, rather than use value or needs, that should be the focus of a sociological analysis of consumption and that it is to 'the social theory of

the sign-object' that consideration needs to be directed (1981: 30, 54). Consumer objects are wrapped in signs and they derive their meaning from a 'hierarchical code of significations', through which they are differentiated from other consumer commodities (Baudrillard 1981: 64). To avoid sociology's conflation or misidentification of the ideology of consumption with 'consumption itself', Baudrillard argues it is necessary to expose the ideological genesis of consumer needs. To that end Baudrillard cautions against speaking 'of a consumer society as if consumption were a system of universal values appropriate to all men because of being founded upon the satisfaction of individual needs, when really it is an institution and a morality' and against explanations predicated on psychologism, culturalism, and psycho-social economics (1981: 62, 73–74).

Consuming Society

Baudrillard begins *The Consumer Society* by remarking on the profusion of objects that are now a taken for granted part of more and more people's everyday lives. Our consuming interest is continually cultivated, our appetites stimulated, by the relentless generation of newly designed consumer objects whose signs now litter the multiple screens on and through which we live our smartphoned, i-padded, internetted and digitalised lives. As Baudrillard perceptively observes, our lives are increasingly lived 'by object time', at their pace, their rhythm, according to their death-dates and retirement-replacement schedules, designed by consumer corporations whose manufacture of generations of differentiated products constitutes a 'chain of signifiers' to which consumers and their choices are continually exposed.

In reflecting on the abundance of commodities confronting the consumer Baudrillard describes how the transformed architecture of consumption, exemplified not only by department stores but also the drugstore, shopping centre or mall, lays hold to 'the whole of life'. The drugstore or shopping centre, air-conditioned, homogenized, and enticingly organized, constitutes a consuming community and is described as 'the *sublimate* of all real life'. The difference between then, the late 1960s to early 1970s and the second decade of the twenty-first century, being firstly the scale or size and then the reach or global proliferation of such 'landscapes of consumption' as George Ritzer (2005) designates them, secondly the rapidly increasing prominence of digitalized virtual equivalents, for example the purchasing portal of the internet and online shopping, the Amazonization of i-consumer desire, and thirdly the proliferation of digital communications media images and seductive signs of consumption in and through which social life increasingly is lived, experienced, and s(t)imulated.

Late modern forms of consumption have a captivating character, technology, 'progress', and growth seem to magically deliver an endless abundance of goods. But while consumers may be unaware of and inattentive to the extensive process of production that delivers the abundance of

goods on display in malls and shop windows, in advertising, and increasingly online, Baudrillard emphasises that our society remains a 'society of production', it is a society in which economic growth is pivotal, and it is a society in which consumer expenditure, both on the part of individuals and the community, continues to rise and needs to do so. But growth is problematic, it is an accounting fiction. It includes, as Baudrillard notes, only aspects 'visible and measurable' in terms of the criteria of economic rationality and excludes a host of essential activities and practices upon which economic life is unavoidably and necessarily predicated. Measures of growth, for example Gross National Product, include the value of all activities whether they are positive or negative, indeed Baudrillard remarks that the system lives by the negative aspects and 'cannot rid itself of them'. Here, Baudrillard observes, is 'the truth of the economic-political system of growth'. Product death dates, obsolescence, and waste are all systemically functional, even the dysfunctions of production and consumption are conducive to growth, as is most convincingly illustrated in Naomi Klein's (2007) discussion of the protocols and practices of 'disaster capitalism'.

In considering 'the vicious circle of growth' Baudrillard identifies a number of matters that subsequently have increased in significance, notably the 'heavy disparity between private consumption and collective expenditure', which at the time was considered to be 'more characteristic of the United States' than Europe; the complex relationships between mechanisms of redistribution, inequality, and life chances; and the consequences associated with 'environmental nuisances' arising from increasing productivity and 'dysfunctional consumption'. Baudrillard questions whether and to what extent state expenditure, taxation and social security have reduced inequalities in respect of standards of living and improved life chances in areas such as education and health. The evidence leads Baudrillard to question 'social redistribution' and to comment that insofar as privilege is preserved, and it is worth adding that subsequently privilege has been enhanced as wealth and income inequality have increased, perhaps the '*real* function' of social policy and associated redistributive mechanisms has been to manage growing social inequalities in consumer society, to ensure the majority remain politically quiescent, curiosity recalibrated as consuming interest by communications media, to be communally celebrated in spectacular 'cathedrals of consumption', and momentarily gratified by purchases of commodities and services (Ritzer 2005).[3]

Environment, waste, and growth

In *The Consumer Society* Baudrillard describes the environmental consequences of the 'advance of affluence', specifically continuing industrial development, technological innovation, and increasing consumerism, as mere 'nuisances'. Responses to the consequences identified, which include various forms of pollution, disruption, and 'environmental destruction',

generate compensatory forms of production and consumption which, in turn, serve to further raise gross national product. What this indicates to Baudrillard is that 'the system is exhausting itself in its own reproduction', in and through its growth, which to an increasing extent is being driven by the necessity to address its self-generated disruptive and destructive consequences, a theme that is echoed in Ulrich Beck's (1994) analysis of risk society and the reflexivity of modernization.[4] But it is not only the capitalist economic system that is being exhausted through its reproduction; the increasing pace and volume of production and consumption are exhausting natural resources, accelerating human induced species losses, and dramatically transforming the planet. While in the 1960s and 1970s some analysts, for example Rachel Carson (1962), Donna Meadows et al. (1962), and Andre Gorz (1980[1975]) amongst others, were confronting environmental issues and were aware of the increasing gravity of such matters, their concerns were not widely shared, as Baudrillard's representation of waste as merely 'environmental nuisance' perhaps serves to demonstrate.

Waste is synonymous with social life. Every society wastes resources, produces more than is needed and consumes more than is necessary, leading Baudrillard to argue that waste is functional, it cannot be eliminated, and that it 'orientates the whole system'. The consumer society also routinely produces a surplus and engages in superfluous production, but it is a society in which 'too much' has become a virtual necessity, a corollary of the pursuit of economic growth and valorization of increasing consumer choice. It is a society of 'productive waste', of excessiveness and mass consumption, one in which, Baudrillard argues, a squandering of resources 'no longer has the crucial symbolic and collective signification it could assume in primitive feasting and potlatch'. Increasingly in the consumer society this squandering is realised through aesthetically designed and technologically engineered forms of obsolescence. The modern consumer society requires displacement and destruction of its commodities, has deliberately designed their passing and visualized their death as essential stimulus for economic production and consumption, integral to which are the cyclically fluctuating configurations of fashion and the advertising industry's cultivation of a system of persuasive consumer signs and images. Consider the fast-passing generations of i-phones, nine generations between 2007 and 2015, and the accumulating spent commodities creatively captured in Chris Jordan's (2009) powerful photographic images of the growing wastelands of American consumer culture.

Is consumption about needs, happiness, and the achievement of well-being? Is the consumer society an 'affluent society'? On both counts Baudrillard is unconvinced. Outlining his views on the social logic of consumption he takes issue with the ideological focus on 'well-being and needs' and the ways in which determinants of inequality are regarded as dysfunctional. Confronting J K Galbraith's (1963[1958]) analysis of 'affluent society' Baudrillard argues that inequality and poverty are not to be considered as 'dysfunctions of the system', they are not residual manifestations, temporary

distortions, matters that will be corrected by further economic growth. The disparity between expenditure on private consumption and public services, which has increased significantly since Baudrillard addressed matters, is systemic, it is a manifestation of 'a *systematic logic* at work'. What emerges from Baudrillard's narrative is bleak, critical, and prescient. Growth is described as the system lubricant, it has allowed 'egalitarian democratic principles' to endure in the mythic form of a promise, the American Dream, the prospect of the future realisation of affluence and well-being, whilst ensuring an existing 'order of privilege and domination' is maintained or is enhanced, as it has been for the one percent who have been the primary beneficiaries of growth since the neoliberal turn in economic policy (Stiglitz 2013, 2015). The inegalitarian social and economic order of late capitalism, with its hierarchical social structure of privilege, is dependent upon continual growth, that is its 'strategic element'. Within the industrial capitalist system wealth and poverty are closely articulated, the generation of dissatisfactions and 'nuisances' are as necessary as the creation of satisfactions and achievement of innovations considered progressive, in short 'poverty and nuisance cannot be eliminated' for they are systemic, integral to system survival and growth.

In a series of observations on the object as sign and mark of social distinction, observations that invite comparison with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Baudrillard discusses how with the development of mass consumption, and the widespread availability of essential and formerly relatively scarce goods, new forms of social segregation appear, new hierarchies emerge, and criteria of social differentiation assume more subtle forms, including 'type of work and responsibility, level of education and culture (the *way* of consuming everyday goods ...) [and] participation in decision making'.[5] Baudrillard notes how, as a corollary of the increasing scarcity of particular commodities and their acquisition of status as signs of distinction and class privilege, a variety of new rights emerge, for example in respect of health, space, knowledge, and culture. What is signified by the emergence of such new social rights ('right to clean air') is not progress for Baudrillard, but the transformation of formerly 'natural' goods and values into commodities for economic profit and signifiers of social privilege, in short, manifestations of the relentless 'advance of the capitalist system'.

Bound up in their own consuming worlds individuals are preoccupied with their own aspirations and acquisitions and largely oblivious of the enduring systemic social ordering of difference, which their consuming conduct serves to reproduce. To understand the character of contemporary consumption it is vital to recognise it appears unlimited, that growth continually generates needs and aspirations, which seem to be inexhaustible and irreversible. The pursuit of social differentiation, status, and prestige in globalized, densely populated, urban industrial capitalist societies with a diversity of readily available communications media, leads to increasing status competition and in turn means there are no limits to needs, which 'grow exponentially'. Just as concentration of manufacturing plants and suppliers leads to increased industrial productivity, so the

growth of metropolitan concentration and digital communications media leads to a 'limitless promotion of needs'.

From the perspective of 'the growth society', which is what consumer society represents, production generates the needs appropriate to it, 'the needs of growth', and this leads Baudrillard to argue that elements identified as 'dysfunctions' are in practice logical, as 'the system produces only for its own needs'. Among the systemic needs listed by Baudrillard are cars and motorways, the higher education of middle managers, and in anticipation of knowledge becoming a scarce commodity in the knowledge society, 'the "democratization" of the university'. Subsequently, in the wake of the neoliberal turn in social and economic policy, there has been an increasing privatization of public services and in the USA, the UK, and a number of other countries universities have been corporatized, higher education has been commodified, and the student has been reconstituted as 'consumer' (Molesworth et al. 2011). The much greater growth of private expenditure and consumption in comparison to the public sector is 'no accident', it is a consequence of the social logic of consumption and economic growth. There is a systemically cultivated affinity between individual self-interest, consumer needs, and 'the productivist option', which is integral to the order of growth and which, as Baudrillard anticipates, extends with increasing privatization even to 'the most "rational" needs (education, culture, health, transport, leisure), cut off from their real collective significance'.

Theorising consumption

In a chapter that is in many respects the hub of the text, Baudrillard outlines a theory of consumption, in the course of which he clinically disposes of the remains of *homo oeconomicus* and identifies the limitations of the anthropological disciplines and their liturgical engagement with needs through such pivotal notions as utility (economics), motivation (psychology), and the individual (sociology and social psychology). After differentiating his understanding of the meaning and significance of consumption from economics, psychology, and sociology Baudrillard engages appreciatively yet critically with the analysis provided by social economist J K Galbraith in *The Affluent Society* and *The New Industrial State*. Dismissing the irrelevant abstraction of the formally free rationally calculating subject integral to economics, and criticized by Emile Durkheim (1978[1888]: 49) as 'the sad ... isolated egoist', Baudrillard focuses his critical analytical gaze on the pivotal notion of the '*conditioning of needs*', a prominent preoccupation in accounts of the consumer society.

Taking stock of Galbraith's diagnosis of contemporary capitalism, Baudrillard argues that the basic problem identified is that to ensure markets can be found for potentially unlimited productive capacity it is necessary to achieve control, not only over production but also consumer demand.

This view of the dilemma confronting an increasingly productive capitalism is longstanding and can be traced back at least to the early twentieth century, when Samuel Strauss (1924: 578–9) noted that with the increasing growth in production of goods and services consumption becomes 'a new necessity' and that the problem is no longer 'how to produce the goods but how to produce the customers.' In respect of this matter Baudrillard notes how Galbraith overturns the accepted economic orthodoxy that attributes sovereign power to the consumer in the marketplace, that deems consumer demand to govern supply, by presenting an analysis of the ways in which consumer needs, desires, wishes and behaviour are governed or managed by advertising, marketing, and branding. While Baudrillard agrees with some aspects of the critical assessment offered by Galbraith and other analysts, namely that 'the freedom and sovereignty of the consumer are mystification pure and simple', he nevertheless objects to the conditioning of consumer needs thesis, especially 'its idealist anthropological postulates', as well as associated utopian assumptions about alternatives.

The reality of consumer society is that consuming is a productive force and needs are systemic. Extending his engagement with the pull of consuming, and attempting to explain '*why* consumers "take" the bait', Baudrillard observes that, whilst life may appear to revolve around consuming, the puritan ethos prevails, indeed '*haunts* consumption and needs'. There is a drive or compulsion, an obligation, to consume which serves to problematise the ideology of 'consumption-as-enjoyment' and helps to explain the inability of increasing material acquisition to deliver commensurate increases in happiness and well-being, as later research has demonstrated so effectively (Schwartz 2005; Layard 2003). An explanation of the routine, everyday, presence of signs of consuming and the global diffusion of a consumerist way of life are not, in Baudrillard's view, a 'function of enjoyment', rather consumption is bound up with production, it 'secures the ordering of signs and the integration of the group'. In short, consumption is institutionalized, systemic, and the citizen is duty bound to consume, a view subsequently endorsed by Zygmunt Bauman (1998: 24) who notes how in late-modern society members are engaged '*primarily* – in their capacity as consumers … [and] need to play the role of the consumer'.

Elaborating on what he considers to be our obligation or duty to consume Baudrillard observes how as people's lives become less bound up with work and production they are encouraged, frequently exhorted, to devote more consideration and time to 'the *production* and continual innovation of ... needs and well-being', subsequently exemplified in one form by the proliferation of media narratives and corporate advertising campaigns offering advice, guidance, and encouragement to individuals to purchase 'makeovers' for their hair, skin, physique, clothes, homes, gardens, cars ... narratives which serve to confirm that consumer society is very much 'the society of learning to consume, of social training in consumption'. In addition consumer society, as is well known, is also a credit society. Credit serves to provide consumers with a mental training in economic calculation and insofar as it imposes

discipline and constraint it represents an extension of the rational and disciplinary ethos Max Weber (1976) identified as being integral to the formation of modern capitalism.

Baudrillard's recognition of the needs and satisfactions of consumers as significant productive forces, as equivalent in some respects to the importance for economic production of a reserve army of labour, remains of relevance. Indeed, given the subsequent impact of information technology and digitalization on production, exemplified for example by automation, robotics, 3-D printing, and the associated rapidly increasing precarity of employment and work, Baudrillard's observation that it is the consumer who has become 'irreplaceable' has only grown in significance with the passage of time. However, while Baudrillard's observations on the rising importance of the individual as consumer resonate powerfully with present circumstances, his parallel comments about the 'free market' and the state serve to illustrate how much economic life has changed since the late 1960s. In a series of observations on individual consumption, collective responsibility, social morality, and the state Baudrillard remarks that 'the "free market" has virtually disappeared, to be replaced by bureaucratic, state monopoly control'. The contrast presented by Baudrillard is overdrawn. Markets have never been 'free' in any absolute sense because 'laissez-faire' has continually required statecraft as Karl Polanyi (2001[1944]) confirmed. Moreover, it is evident from the introduction and deployment of neoliberal economic policies from the late1970s, in response to a crisis of capital accumulation, rising unemployment and inflation, and low rates of economic growth, that state market regulation was nowhere near as pervasive and not anything like as firmly embedded as Baudrillard's remarks imply (Harvey 2005).

But if in some respects Baudrillard's observations on market and state appear to be overdrawn, his comments on tensions between the private sphere, private interest, and individualism on the one hand and the public sphere, communal or collective interests on the other, draw attention to the cultural contradictions intrinsic to contemporary capitalism subsequently explored by Daniel Bell (1976). Tension has been a longstanding feature of capitalist settlements, especially in respect of the relationship between self-interest and consumer individualism on one hand and altruism and collective provision on the other. The withering of altruism in the face of the rising emphasis placed on consumer individualism and self-interest has led, as Baudrillard observes, to a 'deep contradiction between political and civil society in the "consumer society"'; the response to which has been to generate 'mechanisms of "collective solidarity"', a range of welfare services and resources designed to provide insurance, security, and care, measures which, Baudrillard remarks, wage-workers 'receive in the guise of gifts or "free" services', effectively a proportion of what has been appropriated from them in the form of surplus value and taxation. When discussing taxation and other economic levies and transfers which make it possible for bureaucratic state authorities to provide forms of social security, unemployment benefit, and welfare provision, Baudrillard suggests

the establishment 'arrogate to themselves the psychological benefit of appearing generous ... [and] charitable'. A few years after the publication of *The Consumer Society* the post-war settlement began to unravel as the deployment of neoliberal economic policies led to even greater emphasis on individualism and self-interest and an erosion of both the value of collective responsibility and the institutions of the welfare state.

Consumption is not confined to objects alone, services too are consumed. In a series of observations on the system of social relations Baudrillard notes how a range of attributes and dispositions are now consumed in the course of service provision. Loss of spontaneity and reciprocity in modern social relations has led, Baudrillard argues, to an increasing emphasis on 'personalized communication', exemplified by displays of concern, sincerity, and warmth, the signs of which are consumed. A variety of tertiary sector person-to-person service occupations, including positions in reception, social work, public relations, consultancy, and sales, involve forms of what Hochschild (2003:7) terms 'emotional labor', manifested as presentations of care and concern, simulations of sincerity, and insinuations of intimacy (Rojek 2015: 44). The signs of human relating reinserted into a variety of impersonal functional contractual settings represent for Baudrillard 'the lubrication of social relations with the institutional smile'. Emotional labour produces the signs of sincerity, warmth, and concern that are consumed by service users, but this 'system of solicitude', which exhorts us, amongst other things to 'Have a nice day', masks what Baudrillard describes as the 'truth of social relations', notably the increasing impersonality, distance, and competitiveness to which personal relationships are subject with the rising concentration of population in industrial metropolitan environments and, in turn, as commodification or 'the abstraction of exchange value' penetrates ever deeper into everyday life, early signs of which were identified by Georg Simmel (1950[1903]; 1991[1896]).

As the service sector has grown so the system of solicitude has become an increasingly significant part of the system of production, serving to contribute to the reproduction of consumption as 'social labour' and the mobilization of people as consumers. What is present in this context is institutionally and industrially manufactured solicitude, cultivation in the tertiary services sector of employment of a range of human qualities and personal relational and communication skills to ensure clients, customers, and service users experience a warm personal connection, in the course of engaging in exchange transactions, which masks the increasingly 'functionalized', premeditated, and contrived character of human relations.

Consuming time, leisure, and work

In a series of reflections on leisure and time Baudrillard ponders the sense of time in a consumer society and remarks that it is chronometric, measured, object-like, and abstract in quality, it is bound up with the system of

production and, rather than 'free', is itself commodified, has exchange value, and is 'liberated' merely to be invested, spent, or consumed. In the 'non-stop life-world of twenty-first century capitalism' this has become even more evident, as Jonathan Crary's (2014: 8) consideration of the 24/7 intensification of late modern life and consumer activity demonstrates. Notwithstanding all the rhetoric about freedom in leisure, Baudrillard comments that 'free' time is increasingly a logical impossibility, as time consumed in leisure, and time consuming as leisure, is in practice governed, subject to the norms and constraints of working time (Rojek 1995). Time is objectivized, earnt, possessed, and exploited. Like money it is spent and for Baudrillard it is an 'expression of the exchange value system'. As with work, accomplishment and performance are significant features of leisure and consumption. This is illustrated with references to the way people approach holidays, feel an obligation to do tours of historical sites and galleries, work at getting fit, have other body-maintenance and self-improvement regimes, and conform in Baudrillard's terms to the 'principles of duty, sacrifice, and asceticism', prominent features of the performative ethos of leisure.

Noting the unequal distribution of leisure and the respects in which it has been a mark of cultural distinction and privilege, Baudrillard identifies a possible future reversal, that work, and particular types of work, may well become more and more a mark of distinction and privilege. The example Baudrillard offers is of 'top executives and managing directors who feel they have to work 15 hours a day', who consume work and are consumed with and by work, and who appear to prefer work to 'free time'. It is worth adding that it is not just long working hours which has led to certain types of work acquiring a mark of distinction and privilege. The deployment of neoliberal policies in the financial and manufacturing sectors of the economy has led to very long working hours, but also to the privilege of very substantial financial rewards for certain categories of workers, executives, and managing directors, and capital gain as a material mark of distinction (Hewlett and Luce 2006; Arlidge 2009). Conversely, neoliberal policies have led to the lives of many other categories of workers being marked not by privilege but by precarity and the misfortune of having to work very long hours across a number of jobs for very poor rates of pay (Cuniah 2013). In some instances, as Bauman has observed, precarity is manifested as unemployment and an inability to embrace 'the consumerist model of life', leading those affected to suffer not only stigma but also forms of exclusion from consumer society, matters to which Baudrillard in his consideration of the industrial system and poverty devotes insufficient attention.

Concluding remarks

Decades after its publication *The Consumer Society* is more relevant than ever for exploring the reality of contemporary consumer culture and the

related reconfiguring of social and economic life. Increasingly it is through consumption, or rather signs of consumption, that a society represents itself, proclaims and promotes itself. In turn, it is through their signs of consuming that individuals present themselves, display identity, demonstrate inclusion and belonging, or where such signs are absent or lacking, manifest their exclusion, their 'flawed' character as Bauman (1998) argues. Our society is consumed with the idea of consumption which has acquired the status of myth; it cannot conceive of its future other than in terms of more economic growth in the form of the production of more material goods and services and, in turn, yet more and more consumption. Baudrillard makes reference to the double-sided character of the myth of consumption – it has 'its discourse and its anti-discourse' – a celebratory discourse on affluence and a critical discourse on consequences and contradictions. In identifying fundamental contradictions, imbalances, and anxieties endemic in the consumer society, made manifest in multiple forms of anomie and the radically alienating structure of production and consumption under the 'sign of capital', Baudrillard's discussion makes a significant contribution to the body of critical work on consumption. But it is evident that Baudrillard wanted to disassociate himself from '"critical" counter-discourse on the ravages of consumer society and the tragic end to which it inevitably dooms society as a whole', particularly intellectual criticisms of the tastes, values, and satisfactions attributed to the majority of consumers which he regarded as 'part of the game' and a 'critical mirage', which merely served to complete the myth.

The theoretical foundations of *The Consumer Society* are complex and diverse and reveal the influence of the works of particular classical and contemporary analysts on social and cultural thought in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Baudrillard draws on the works of a diverse range of analysts, including Karl Marx, Thorstein Veblen, and Emile Durkheim, there are references to the contributions of J K Galbraith, Marshall McLuhan, and Herbert Marcuse, some parallels with the work of Werner Sombart, and there are Freudian residues present in a number of his observations, including on the alienating consequences of commodity logic and the ideological genesis of consumer needs. *The Consumer Society* can be read as a dialogue with Marxist analysis and critical theory, a dialogue informed by functionalist notions and structuralist analysis. In seeking to counter the relative neglect of consumption and differentiate his analysis from established Marxist approaches Baudrillard draws on aspects of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics and Roland Barthes's semiology to provide an innovative understanding of contemporary social life governed by consuming, by a generalized commodity logic and spectacular images and signs of consumption. As a whole the text exemplifies the hybrid character of much contemporary sociology, although Baudrillard continually expressed ambivalence towards the discipline with which he remains associated, commenting in one interview conducted in 1984 that 'I don't consider myself to be deeply sociological. I work more on symbolic effects than on sociological data' (1993a: 68). *The Consumer Society* is a theoretically

innovative work which introduces ideas and concepts that subsequently became far more prominent in Baudrillard's later analyses. For example, the concepts of sign and code, simulation, and symbolic exchange are employed subsequently to reorientate contemporary social thought in a more substantial manner, perhaps most significantly in the first instance in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993d[1976]).

If theoretically *The Consumer Society* is in some respects a book of its time the observations provided on consumption continue to resonate strongly with our experience of everyday social life and especially with the (hyper) reality of contemporary consumer culture. Baudrillard's narrative, which imaginatively explores key aspects of late modern 'post-industrial' social life, in particular the centrality of 'the consumed image of consumption … our new tribal mythology', identifies a variety of emerging and developing tendencies that have only grown in reach and significance with the passage of time. It is in places a controversial book, not least in respect of Baudrillard's reservations about the value or relevance of '"critical" counter-discourse on the ravages of consumer society', but it is also one packed with stimulating ideas and it will undoubtedly engage generations of new readers and continue to enrich understanding of consumer culture, the respects in which forms of social and economic life revolve around consumer activity, and the complex constellation of consequences with which we all need to engage.

Notes

1 *Le système des objets* was Baudrillard's doctoral thesis and the continuing influence of his dissertation committee, Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, and Pierre Bourdieu, can be seen in the subsequent development of his work (Francis 2015 : 72).

2 Baudrillard acknowledged the influence Marx's analysis and political economy had on his work in an interview conducted in 1991: 'yes, there was a Marxist analysis in my work but very much mediated by many other things. I set about doing some theoretical work. From the start there was semiology and psychoanalysis and things of that sort, all of which went well together' (1993b: 20). In another interview conducted in the same year Baudrillard reiterated that in his analysis of consumption and 'the object as a sign' he worked with 'semiology, Marxism, psychoanalysis' (1993c: 172).

3 Inequality has increased significantly since Baudrillard's *La Société de consommation* was published in 1970. For example, in the USA in 1965 the CEO-to-worker pay-ratio was 20-to-1, but by 2015 it had increased to 354-to-1 (Fitz 2015). As Joseph Stiglitz (2013 : 9) states in his comprehensive analysis of inequality in the USA:

> The simple story of America is this : the rich are getting richer, the richest of the rich are getting richer still, the poor are becoming poorer and more numerous, and the middle class is being hollowed out. The incomes of the middle class are stagnating or falling, and the difference between them and the truly rich is increasing.

4 By 'reflexive modernization' Beck (1994 : 6) is alluding to the ways in which in risk society there is an increasing concern with the consequences of modernization or 'self-confrontation with the effects of risk society'. As Beck (2009 : 6) has commented subsequently, 'Incalculable risks and manufactured uncertainties resulting from the triumphs of modernity mark the *conditio humana* at the beginning of the twenty-first century'. A significant difference from Baudrillard being that a central preoccupation in Beck's work

is to develop a critical analysis of risks, manufactured uncertainties, and 'affluence-induced environmental destruction' (2009: 13).

5 A few provisional comparative thoughts on Baudrillard's and Bourdieu's positions on signs of distinction and discrimination in respect of art and culture can be found in Marie-Thérèse Killiam's (2006) account of Baudrillard's discussion in *L'effet Beaubourg* of the Beaubourg Center in Paris.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Chris Rojek for his comments on an earlier draft of the introduction. Needless to say he is not responsible for any shortcomings.

Introduction to the First Edition

George Ritzer

This English translation of *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (originally published in 1970) will be both a treat and a revelation to admirers of the work of Jean Baudrillard not fluent in French. Here is an early work by a scholar who has come to be thought of by many as *the* leading postmodern social theorist.[1] Postmodernists will be gratified to find, at least in their rudimentary form, many of the ideas associated with Baudrillard's later, more postmodern theorizing. Modernists will find a Baudrillard who is a much more modern social thinker than he is usually thought to be; one who is apt to be far more to their liking than the Baudrillard of the last decade or so. Metatheorists[2] will find many rewards in this work including a greater sense of Baudrillard's theoretical roots and the challenge of understanding a work of a thinker who was clearly in the throes of a profound intellectual transformation. Most importantly, theorists and other students of consumer society will discover a treasure trove of insights and perspectives into the world of consumption. Thus, this is a rewarding book at many levels, although it has, as we will see, its flaws.

This is no dusty and outdated theoretical work that is of little more than historical interest. In fact, it is a highly contemporary work that reads very well over a quarter of a century after its initial publication.[3] There is, for example, Baudrillard's discussion of such timely issues as sexually ambiguous, hermaphroditic models not unlike those who adorn the controversial Calvin Klein advertisements these days; the booming interest in fitness; the desire for slimness and the resulting dieting mania; obesity and the obsession with low-calorie, low-fat foods; and the burgeoning use of sexuality for commercial purposes. More generally, and importantly, this is a book about consumption and it is clear that Baudrillard was far ahead of his time in focusing on this issue. While most of his contemporaries in France (and elsewhere) were mired in stale old debates about production, Baudrillard recognized that consumption was where the important new issues and problems were to be found. Time has clearly borne Baudrillard out. There has been an outpouring of work, especially in Great Britain (for an overview, see Gabriel and Lang, 1995), on consumption and postmodern society is now seen as being more or less synonymous with consumer society (Featherstone, 1991; Bauman, 1992).

Baudrillard's foresight as far as consumption is concerned is exemplified by the fact, among others, that he dealt with the issue of credit at this early

stage in the development of the modern credit, especially credit card, system.[4] To this day, this issue has received virtually no attention from social theorists.[5] This is in spite of the fact that it is an absolutely central aspect of the booming consumer society. Yet, when Baudrillard was writing in the late 1960s the credit card industry was in its infancy and it was not to begin to profoundly transform society until long after *The Consumer Society* was published. Thus, Baudrillard was ahead of his time in recognizing the importance of this issue, and many other issues, associated with the consumer society.

A Modern Work

There are many ways in which *The Consumer Society* can be seen as a piece of modern social theory. The book offers a generally sustained and coherent argument. While this was also true of the previously published *The System of Objects* (1968/1996), and remained the case for a number of Baudrillard's works that followed in the 1970s and into the early 1980s, it is certainly not true of the more recent works which often read like pastiches of aphorisms with little or nothing to connect them. The modern reader who is put off by Baudrillard's more recent postmodern style will be more comfortable with the structure and development of *The Consumer Society*.

The scholarly format of the book will be familiar to most modern readers. Intellectual predecessors and antagonists are clear (something not always the case in postmodern works) and, as a result, so are the roots of many of Baudrillard's ideas. A powerful intellectual presence is John Kenneth Galbraith, especially his book *The Affluent Society* (1958/1964). Baudrillard uses many of Galbraith's ideas, and his critical analysis of them, to develop his own perspective on the affluent, that is consumer, society. For example, Baudrillard argues that there is no such thing as an affluent society; all societies combine 'structural excess' and 'structural penury'. Rather than an affluent society, Baudrillard argues that we live in a 'growth society'. However, this growth brings us no closer to being an affluent society. Growth produces *both* wealth and poverty. In fact, growth is a function of poverty; growth is needed to contain the poor and maintain the system. While he is not always consistent on this, Baudrillard argues that the growth society is, in fact, the opposite of the affluent society. Its inherent tensions lead to psychological pauperization as well as systematic penury (see later) since 'needs' will always outstrip the production of goods. Since both wealth and shortage are inherent in the system, efforts like those proposed by Galbraith to solve the problem of poverty are doomed to failure. Thus, in various ways, Baudrillard not only critiques, but also builds in very modern ways upon, Galbraith's work.

Baudrillard makes similar, albeit far less elaborate, use of the ideas of other important thinkers of the day such as Marshall McLuhan, Daniel Bell, David Riesman, Daniel Boorstin, and even the popular writer Vance Packard.

In other words, the intellectual landscape explored by Baudrillard was one that would have been much the same had a thinker less associated with the move to postmodern theory approached the topic of the consumer society in the late 1960s. And he explores that landscape in ways that are very familiar to the modernist.

More importantly, the set of classic social theorists informing Baudrillard's work was much the same as affected the theorizing of more conventional thinkers of the day. The most powerful presence, at least overtly,[6] is Marx, but Durkheim, Veblen, and Lévi-Strauss also play central roles in this analysis (Tocqueville is there, as well). Furthermore, there is an effort to synthesize ideas from these theorists with a number of other theoretical inputs. A modern, mainstream social theorist would be quite comfortable with both the theoretical heritage and the synthetic efforts involved in this work.

The important role accorded to Marx and his ideas, especially commodities and their use-value and exchange-value, is interesting in light of the fact that Baudrillard was soon to break with Marx in *The Mirror of Production* (1973/1975) and move progressively away from a Marxian perspective. Marxian theory is only one of several inputs shaping this work and in at least one crucial way (to be discussed later) this book deviates dramatically from a Marxian orientation.

Part of the reason for his influence is the fact that Marx, the master theorist of production, also has much to offer to anyone concerned with consumption. There are many parallels drawn by Baudrillard between production and consumption (for example, just as wage labour extorted labour power and increases in productivity, credit extorts savings; the consumer is often seen as a worker, a productive force; there is a 'reserve army' of needs analogous to the industrial reserve army); the ideas that apply to production are often extended to consumption. One of the most interesting of these extensions is Baudrillard's use of the concept of surplus value in reference to the distribution of welfare to the larger community. His contention is that society is expending part of its surplus in order to keep the public in line. Public munificence is seen as both a kind of ideological constraint (engendering a myth of service rather than a view of the world where everything is bought and sold) and a kind of social control.

More importantly, for Marx, and interestingly still for Baudrillard in this work, production is accorded priority over consumption. There is still the sense in this work, both explicitly and implicitly, that production is the base and all else, including consumption and the culture of which it is such an integral part, is superstructure. This is clearly a limiting, if not a self-defeating, perspective in light of developments in both the social world and social theory. In terms of the latter, there is now a clear recognition of the independent importance, if not ascendancy, of culture and commodities. And few, even among diehard Marxian theorists, would subscribe to a limited base–superstructure argument.[7]

Beyond use-value, exchange-value, commodities, and base–superstructure, Baudrillard employs a rather lengthy litany of Marxian ideas in *The Consumer Society*. The concepts of ideology, commodity fetishism and reification clearly fit quite well into a Marxian approach to consumption. More generally, there is a great deal of dialectical thinking about, among other things, the contradictions that afflict consumer society (especially the inability of production to keep pace with the explosive growth of 'needs'; and the ideology of equality versus the increasing differentiation of consumer society). There is a sense that the tendency toward monopolization occurs not only in the world of production but also in the world of consumption. Even that old warhorse, alienation, is trotted out on occasion and, startlingly, is central to the title of the book's concluding chapter. There is talk of revolution, even a hope that consumption offers the possibility of 'deep crises', 'new contradictions', and even revolutionary change. However, in the end, Baudrillard's structuralism, especially his interest in the immutability of the 'code', leads him to the view that no true revolution is possible. This is one of the many places in which Baudrillard's theoretical resources are at odds with one another and lead to a contradictory perspective on the consumer society. And this is one of the reasons why Baudrillard was soon to break with the Marxian tradition. Its optimistic view of the future was at loggerheads with his essentially pessimistic view of the world.

Émile Durkheim is a second classical theorist whose ideas had a profound influence on this work. As we will see below, Baudrillard had at this point not yet abandoned sociology so it is not surprising that he should be drawn to Durkheim, the premier French classical sociological theorist. One important effect of this is that Baudrillard focuses his attention on collective phenomena, on Durkheimian social facts. Indeed, he describes consumption in very Durkheimian terms as 'collective behaviour', 'something enforced, a morality, an institution', and 'a whole system of values'. He fully recognized that lots of intellectual baggage went with such a perspective including a sense of the importance of group integration and social control.[8] Similarly, consumption from this Durkheimian perspective is seen not as enjoyment or pleasure, but rather as something which is institutionalized, forced upon us, a duty. While not inconsistent with Marx's thinking on reified social structures, these ideas (collective, morality, values, duty, integration, institutions, social control) clearly have far more to do with Durkheim than with Marx. This is also true of the idea of socialization and the fact, underscored by Baudrillard, that we must be trained, we must learn, to consume.

However, in modern society, the managed possession of consumer goods is individualizing and atomizing. It leads to distinction and differentiation, not to social solidarity. Thus, modern consumption is at odds with the inherently collective nature of consumption. While even modern consumption is not totally individualistic, it is being pushed in that direction. Furthermore, production, like consumption, is viewed as a collective phenomenon. Thus, the pressure towards individualization in

modern consumption is seen as being at odds with the nature of *both* production and consumption.

Beyond his macroscopic or collective focus, throughout *The Consumer Society* Baudrillard does an incredible amount of Durkheimian functionalism.[9] In fact, given its macroscopic orientation and the functional analysis, the book sometimes reads as if it were written by a structural functionalist, a reality that can be traced to Baudrillard's continuing ties, at least at this point, to sociology. This orientation is made clear when, for example, Baudrillard critiques the general idea that waste within consumer society is dysfunctional[10] and argues for the need for sociological study that would show its true functions. He goes on to argue that it is wasteful, superfluous consumption that allows people and society to feel that they exist, that they are truly alive. In this sense, wasteful consumption is functional, not dysfunctional, and is analysable from the perspective of functional analysis. Similarly, he discusses the functionality of the fact that the heroes of production have been replaced by idols of consumption ('great wastrels') such as movie stars and sports heroes. It is they who fulfil the function of useless and inordinate expenditure. *The Consumer Society* is liberally studded with such functional analyses. One sometimes feels as if one is reading a work by a disciple of Talcott Parsons and not a book authored by someone whose work has become the antithesis of such mainstream sociology. While the signs of Baudrillard's rejection of that sociology, indeed all sociology, are to be found in this book, it also offers a considerable amount of the kind of sociology Baudrillard was to come to reject.

Another central concept in Durkheimian theory – anomie – plays a central role in this work. Indeed, while the Conclusion deals with the Marxian concept of alienation, the immediately preceding chapter has 'anomie' in its title. It is in this chapter that Baudrillard deals with various 'pathologies'[11] associated with the consumer society such as the violence perpetrated in it, the non-violence of those like 'hippies', and the 'fatigue' (seen as a form of concealed protest) of many within consumer society. Durkheim, of course, deals with such pathologies within the context of a modern, reformist orientation in which he discusses a variety of ways (e.g. occupational associations) to cope with them. While Baudrillard is far more modern in this work than he was to come to be, he is still not nearly modern enough to offer reforms to deal with a system that he clearly regards as inherently and inevitably corrupt.

Another major modern theorist of influence in *The Consumer Society* is Thorstein Veblen. This is somewhat surprising since Veblen has tended to be ignored by mainstream, modern theorists, but Baudrillard is drawn to him because of Veblen's pioneering work on consumption. Indeed, Veblen's image, as well as that of his famous concept of conspicuous consumption, is evoked by the opening line of the book which deals with the 'fantastic conspicuousness' of the wide array of consumer goods and services. Baudrillard not only usefully employs the notion of conspicuous consumption, but also spins off some interesting ideas of his own from it. For example, while the middle classes continue to engage in conspicuous

consumption, the elites may engage in new forms of *in*conspicuous consumption in order to create new and more subtle differences between themselves and the rest of society. Similarly, Veblen's arguments on conspicuous leisure are used to yield interesting insights into time and leisure. One of Baudrillard's conclusions is that it is impossible to waste time since in spending time in that way people are in fact *producing* something of value – prestige for themselves. Then, Baudrillard examines the 'benevolence' of things like advertisements where a 'free' television programme is offered in exchange for a few minutes of commercials. He sees this and things like it as conspicuous displays of disinterestedness.

Yet, while he builds upon some of Veblen's ideas, Baudrillard ultimately finds them wanting. For example, he clearly critiques Veblen's orientation from the point of view of the structuralist perspective (see later) that is the true heart of *The Consumer Society*. Baudrillard rejects Veblen's concern with imitation, the study of prestige at the 'phenomenal' level, and his concern with superficial conscious social dynamics. Instead, Baudrillard argues for the study of signs, structural relations, the code and, more generally, unconscious social logic.

While outside the sociological mainstream, structuralism is certainly a modern perspective (it was the modern source of poststructuralism and to a lesser extent postmodernism). Furthermore, it was the dominant intellectual perspective in the France of Baudrillard's early years as a scholar. While the imprint of Marx is strong, *The Consumer Society* is most powerfully influenced by a range of structuralist ideas. This is made clear by the book's subtitle, *Myths and Structures*, and by much of the substance of the book. The world of consumption is treated like a mode of discourse, a language (and even, following Lévi-Strauss, like a kinship system). As a language, consumption is a way in which we converse and communicate with one another. Once we think of consumption as a language, we are free to deploy the whole panoply of tools derived from structural linguistics including sign, signifier, signified and code. As a result, instead of Marxian use-values and exchange-values, consumables become sign-values. And it is this view of commodities that dominates this book, not the array of Marxian concepts which, while coexisting uncomfortably, are subordinated to them.

Baudrillard tries to relate the two theoretical perspectives that play the greatest role in undergirding his work by arguing that there are two entangled social orders – the *order of production* and the *order of consumption*. He still accords, at least overtly, the order of production priority, but recognizes that the logic of significations, and the order of production that goes with it, are of increasing importance. Whatever their relative significance, it is important that society be analysed from the perspective of both orders and their interrelationship.

Later, Baudrillard puts this another way, arguing that consumption is constrained at two levels. One is the level of structural analysis where consumption is constrained by the *constraint of signification*. The other is the level of 'socio-economico-political' analysis in which the *constraint of*

production is operant. Baudrillard could hardly be clearer: he is seeking to use *both* structuralist and traditional Marxian approaches.[12] However, he appears not to be trying to integrate them, but rather to have them operate side-by-side. For example, he argues that a true analysis of the social logic of consumption would focus not on the individual appropriation of the *use-value* of goods and services, but rather on the production and manipulation of social signifiers. It is structural analysis that is deemed the appropriate approach to the latter issue.[13] Not only are the two theories not integrated, but Baudrillard already clearly privileges structuralism. Because structural analysis takes priority over Marxian theory, Baudrillard is ultimately unable to offer a theory of revolution. The code prevents real social revolution. That type that it does permit – fashion revolutions – not only are harmless but serve to prevent genuine social revolutions.

When looked at from a structural perspective, what we consume is signs (messages, images) rather than commodities. This means that consumers need to be able to 'read' the system of consumption in order to know what to consume. Furthermore, because we all know the 'code', we know the meaning of the consumption of one commodity rather than another. Commodities are no longer defined by their use, but rather by what they signify. And what they signify is defined not by what they do, but by their relationship to the entire system of commodities and signs. There is an infinite range of difference available in this system and people therefore are never able to satisfy their need for commodities, for difference. It is this that in Baudrillard's view helps account for the seeming insatiability and continual dissatisfaction of consumers. And this, in turn, is one of the reasons for Baudrillard's dissatisfaction with the use of the concept of 'needs' – needs can, by definition, be satisfied and therefore cannot account for the insatiability of consumers. What people seek in consumption is not so much a particular object as difference and the search for the latter is unending.

There is a sense that there is a series of structures that, in playing out their nature and relationship to one another, produce the consumer society. In contrast to a Marxian approach, there are no agents in such a structuralist orientation. For example, Baudrillard contends that the 'system' maintains itself by producing wealth *and* poverty, dissatisfactions and satisfactions, disturbances and progress. Furthermore, it is not deliberately bloodthirsty capitalists who are to blame for poverty, but rather the 'system' and its structures 'obeying its own laws'.

To take another example, there is the issue of individual differentiation or personalization. The usual sociological approach to this topic is to think of individuals as consciously seeking to distinguish themselves from others. However, in Baudrillard's view, it is the code, or the system of differences, that causes individuals to be similar to, as well as different from, one another. In the very act of particularizing themselves, people are reading and conforming to the code. Baudrillard concludes that the sociological study of consumption (and everything else) must shift from the superficial level of conscious social dynamics to the unconscious social logic of signs

and the code. In other words, the key to understanding lies at the level of deep structures. It is those structures that constrain people who are only able to decode messages unconsciously.

Thus, structuralism represents the most powerful theoretical input into *The Consumer Society*. However, Baudrillard is already here a poststructuralist because he is supplementing structuralism with a series of other theoretical ideas derived from, among others, Marx, Durkheim, and Veblen. More generally, Baudrillard is still functioning as a sociologist and that further enriches (and complicates, even muddies) his analysis. In light of his later defection from, and acerbic remarks about, sociology, it is surprising to see Baudrillard employ sociology throughout this book. That involves not only utilization of a general sociological orientation, but more specific orientations such as the Durkheimian and functional analyses discussed earlier.

Although he utilizes an essentially structuralist approach to the issues, the impact of being a sociologist is most obvious in Baudrillard's concern with, and analysis of, inequality, social differentiation and social stratification.[14] (Of course, there is no necessary contradiction between structuralism and sociology, there is a 'structuralist sociology', although Baudrillard criticizes sociologists for seeing individuals as free and creative and for being 'wary of "deep motivation"'.) For example, because of their training, the upper classes are seen as having some degree of mastery over the code. It is the middle and lower classes who are the true consumers because they lack such mastery. As a result, they fetishize objects and seek to prove themselves and to find salvation in the consumption of objects.[15] Baudrillard urges the abandonment of the 'individual logic of satisfaction' (needs and so on) and a central focus on the 'social logic of differentiation'.[16] He argues that while 'primary penury' (a lack of goods) has largely been overcome in the modern world, 'structural penury' is built into the structure of modern growth society. That is, growth leads to privilege and that, in turn, leads to penury for many, at least in comparison to the state of those with privilege. He concludes that society's social logic is condemning people to a luxurious and spectacular penury. Since the cause lies in the social logic, it can only be solved by a revolution at that level, a revolution that, given his commitment to structuralism, Baudrillard believes unlikely, if not impossible.

There are times when Baudrillard adopts the perspective and mantle of sociologist (and structuralist) to critique the work of others. There is, for example, his critique of Galbraith for portraying individuals as passive victims and, in the process, ignoring sociological factors such as class, caste and social structure, as well as the more structural factor of the social logic of differentiation. In so doing, however, Baudrillard seems to be combining, perhaps more critically conflating, a structuralist approach ('the logic of differentiation') with a sociological orientation (to 'class', 'caste', and 'social structure'). In fact, this conflation is a confounding factor throughout the book.

In spite of his seeming commitment to a sociological approach, Baudrillard critiques traditional sociologists, as he does the economist

Galbraith, for focusing on individual needs for differentiation. He seems to often equate sociologists with 'psycho-sociologists' who focus on such individual, phenomenological matters.[17] Instead, Baudrillard supports a sociology that focuses on structures, especially the unconscious structures of interest to structuralists. This can only be accomplished by abandoning the individual logic of satisfaction and according central importance to the social logic of differentiation. Thus, Baudrillard's support for sociology is, once again, support for a structural sociology. Indeed, he sometimes takes the position that sociology involves a focus on such structural issues as 'social logic'. While Baudrillard explicitly takes this position, we must not forget the many places in this work in which he does more conventional (i.e. Durkheimian, functional) analyses and focuses on such traditional sociological issues as social stratification.

Intimations of Postmodernism

While *The Consumer Society* has a number of modern characteristics, it also anticipates many of the ideas that one associates with Baudrillard's later work, ideas that have now become essential aspects of postmodern social theory. However, as we will see at the close of this Introduction, *The Consumer Society* is also assailable from a postmodern position because it is still embedded, at least in part, in a modern paradigm.

While Baudrillard is already, for the reasons discussed above, a poststructuralist in *The Consumer Society,* it is clear why even that designation will come to be an uncomfortable, even an inappropriate, label to describe his orientation. The fact is that there is an uncomfortable and unstable mix of theoretical ideas in *The Consumer Society.* It seems clear in retrospect that the only option open to Baudrillard was to leave most of them behind and create a theoretical perspective unlike *any* that had come before. Many of the elements of that theory, at least in a rudimentary form, are to be found in *The Consumer Society,* but they do not yet come together to form a distinctive theoretical orientation. That had to await later theoretical work and intellectual development.

Let me begin with Baudrillard's privileging of primitive over modern society, as well as the concept of symbolic exchange, ideas which were to be more fully developed in later works, especially *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976/1993). It is clear that Baudrillard is critical of modern society[18] and that critique emanates from a sense of the importance of the symbolic, especially symbolic exchange, as it exists, in part, in primitive society and more generally in an abstract model of such an exchange process. There are many places in which Baudrillard offers a critique of modern practices in light of what they were like in more primitive society. For example, communication, especially through the mass media, has a 'technical, aseptic' form and *'is no longer achieved through a symbolic medium'*; it lacks 'real symbolic or didactic processes'. In modern society people display a kind of 'ludic curiosity' about

things; they 'play with combinations'. What is lost is 'passionate play', with passion implying total involvement and intense symbolic value. Modern consumption involves the external manipulation of signs and it lacks, among other things, the symbolic values involved in creation.

This aspect of Baudrillard's thinking is also well illustrated by what he has to say about time. Our modern sense of time, especially as something to be used, even wasted, in leisure is a product of our culture and economic system. Thus, time becomes a commodity like any other, albeit one that is rarer and more precious, in the consumer society. It can be exchanged with any other commodity, especially money. Leisure time is separated from work time and one is obligated, constrained to spend it. This all stands in stark contrast to Baudrillard's view of primitive society where there is no time; where it is meaningless to ask whether or not one has time. Time in this context is nothing more than the rhythm of collective activities, especially the rituals of eating and feasting. It is impossible to dissociate time from such activities, or to plan or manipulate time. Time in primitive societies is integral to symbolic exchange.

Waste is another area in which Baudrillard seeks to contrast modern and primitive society and to privilege the primitive form of waste. In the primitive world, waste is a festive ritual and a symbolic act of expenditure. However, in the modern world it has become a bureaucratic caricature in which wasteful consumption is obligatory. Baudrillard's overall position on the transition from primitive to modern society is that the fundamental characteristic of the latter is the loss of spontaneous, reciprocal, and symbolic human relations.

In this light, Baudrillard's discussion of the work of the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins on hunting-gathering societies is quite relevant and instructive. Baudrillard uses Sahlins's work not only to privilege primitive society, but also as one of many bases to critique Galbraith's ideas on the affluent society. Baudrillard argues, following Sahlins, that primitive societies can be seen as affluent while modern 'industrial and productivist' societies are 'dominated by scarcity'.

Hunter-gatherers like those of the Kalahari suffered from absolute poverty in the sense that they had few, if any, personal possessions. They did no 'work' in the contemporary sense of the term, made no economic calculations and did not amass a store of goods. They shared everything they did have with other members of the group and were confident (or foolish) enough to consume everything immediately. They managed to rest easy because they trusted in the abundance of natural resources. In contrast, modern society is characterized by anxiety and despair about a variety of insufficiencies. As a result, it was because they knew true affluence that the hunter-gatherers could afford to be what we would consider improvident.

To Baudrillard, following Sahlins, poverty involves not the quantity of goods a group possesses, but the nature of its human relationships. In the case of primitive hunter-gatherers there are transparent and reciprocal human relationships. There is no accumulation or monopolization of raw

materials, technologies, or products that would serve to interfere with free exchange and lead to scarcity. What there is, and what is the source of their wealth, is symbolic exchange. Wealth is based not on goods but on human exchange; and, since the latter is endless, wealth is unlimited. The small number of goods that do exist create general wealth because they circulate continually among the members of the group.

While these primitive societies bask in the 'wealth' of the dialectic of human relationships, modern societies are characterized by the 'dialectic of penury'. In a society characterized by such a dialectic there is unlimited and insatiable need; a constant sense that one does not have enough. Rather than a reciprocal sharing of what people have, modern society is characterized by differentiation and competition which contributes to the reality and the sense that there is never enough. Since the problem lies in social relationships (or in the social logic), it will not be solved by increases in production, by innovations in productive forces, or by what we usually think of as even greater abundance. The only solution to the problem lies in a change in social relationships and in the social logic. We need a social logic that brings with it the affluence of symbolic exchange, rather than one that condemns us to 'luxurious and spectacular penury'. This is an attractive (structural) sociological argument, although one wonders how Baudrillard thinks such a revolution is to come about since he has given up hope in a Marxian-style revolution and in a revolutionary agent. Later we will see how he seeks to deal with this problem.

Another concept that is apparent throughout *The Consumer Society* is simulations. As was the case with the notion of symbolic exchange, it too was later to become a focal concern, as well as the title, of a book (Baudrillard, 1983/1990). The concept of a simulation makes sense when one looks at it in light of Baudrillard's thinking on symbolic exchange and the privileging of primitive society. For example, in primitive society nature is seen as an original and specific presence which stands in contrast to culture. However, in the modern world nature has tended to be reduced to something carefully groomed, managed, policed and tailored to the needs of humans. Nature in this form is a simulation of what it is in primitive society. It has become a sham; simulations can be defined as 'sham objects' and it is such objects that define our consumer society. They are objects that offer an abundance of signs that they are real, but in fact they are not.

Another major example of simulations is found in Baudrillard's discussion of *kitsch* – 'trashy objects', 'folksy knick-knacks', 'souvenirs'. These are defined by Baudrillard as pseudo-objects not to be confused with 'real' objects. Kitsch can also be defined as objects which, while they have a superabundance of signs, lack any real signification. The popularity of kitsch is closely tied to the development of a mass-production market and society. Rather than an aesthetics of 'beauty and originality', kitsch offers an aesthetics of simulation, of objects that reproduce, imitate, ape, and repeat. Yet another type of simulation is the *gadget*, a useless, impoverished

object which simulates a function without having any real, practical referent. As such, the gadget is part of a broader process (growing numbers of useless, simulated objects) affecting society as a whole. As a result, all of society is suspected of uselessness, artificiality and fakery. More specifically, we act with gadgets in a ludic rather than a symbolic or utilitarian manner and this, too, is only part of a broader process since the curious play with combinations is coming to characterize more and more aspects of society. In other words, the world is coming to be increasingly dominated by simulations and we are reduced to playing with them rather than using them, or relating to them, symbolically.

Baudrillard argues that the mass media have greatly enhanced and generalized the simulation process. Instead of reality, people are treated to simulations involving the constant recombination of various signs, of elements of the code. Baudrillard has a problem here, and elsewhere, because lacking an Archimedean point, he cannot (or, at least, should not) label these simulations as false. Thus, he designates them 'neo-reality' because he recognizes that we need to find a way of avoiding using language which speaks of the 'false' and the 'artificial'. Yet, in other places that is just what Baudrillard does, as, for example, when he labels simulations 'sham objects'.[19]

Modern society is characterized not only by simulated objects, but also by simulated relationships. For example, advertisers are seen as imitating intimate, personal modes of communication in an effort to produce a sense of intimacy where, in fact, none exists. A simulated intimacy is created between people doing the advertising and potential customers, as well as between the latter and the products being advertised. This is but one part of what Baudrillard sees as a generalized game of human relations. Instead of the reciprocity characteristic of primitive societies and symbolic exchange, in modern society we have a gigantic simulation model of such reciprocal human relations.

More specifically, consumer society is one in which most of us are obliged to be solicitous of others. However, it is a simulated solicitousness which is forced, bureaucratized and counterfeit. As a result, we find ourselves surrounded by emotions and personal relations that are carefully orchestrated. Many of those we interact with are instructed to keep smiling and to be sure to tell us to 'Have a nice day.'

Symbolic exchange and simulations are two of a number of concepts that make their appearance, at least in rudimentary form, in *The Consumer Society*, concepts destined for further development in Baudrillard's later work. Other such ideas include the referendum, the examination, the ludic, cancerous and ecstatic growth, Americanism (Baudrillard, 1986/1989), fatality, and so on. The last concept which, like symbolic exchange and simulations, was fated to become part of the title of a later book by Baudrillard (1983/1990), makes one of its appearances at the close of *The Consumer Society*. It constitutes Baudrillard's way of dealing with the issue of how a revolution is to come about without a revolutionary subject rationally bringing it to fruition. In his view, the revolution will occur because it

is fated to happen, just as the fabled and formative (for Baudrillard) student rebellion of 1968 was destined to come about in France.

It is not surprising that Baudrillard anticipated many of his own ideas in *The Consumer Society*. What is surprising is the degree to which it anticipated later postmodern concerns with such issues as time, space, sexuality and the body. The latter two ideas are more associated with the work of Michel Foucault, but Baudrillard was already dealing with them in his early work.[20] Naturally, he examines both through the lens of consumption.

The body emerges as something that can be used to sell commodities and services as well as being itself a consumed object. In order to be used as an object to sell things, the body must be 'rediscovered' by its 'owner' and viewed narcissistically rather than merely functionally. Once the body is seen in this way, people are free to adorn it with objects and to pamper and seek to improve it with a variety of services. In other words, people are free to consume goods and services on behalf of the body and capitalists are free to produce and market all manner of goods and services (suntan lotions and exercise regimens, for example) aimed at the body. However, Baudrillard contends that it is not bodily drives that are liberated in this way, but merely the drive to buy more goods and services. Thus, the body, like labour power in Marxian theory, must first be liberated (at least as a factor in consumption) so that it can then be exploited.[21]

Once 'liberated' as an object, the body takes its place in the system of objects. However, it is not merely one of the mass of objects to be manipulated and consumed, it is the 'finest' of those objects. People have come to make increasingly great psychological investments in their bodies; in Marxian terms they have come to *fetishize* their bodies. The body has become the object that people lavish more attention *and* money on than any other object. We have become consumers of our own bodies and as such we consume a wide variety of goods and services in order to enhance them. Baudrillard argues that a historical transformation has taken place and instead of seeking salvation through the soul we have come to seek salvation through the body. The latter is evident, among other places, in the therapies, treatments, regimes and sacrifices associated with the body.

Closely tied to the issue of the body, especially its beauty, is that of sexuality. Baudrillard addresses, as Foucault was to later, the explosion of interest in sexuality. What concerns Baudrillard, however, is the role played by sexuality in the consumer society. Not only does sexuality tinge everything that is offered for consumption, but sexuality is itself offered for consumption. There are at least two main reasons for the centrality of sexuality in consumer society. On the one hand, and most obviously, sex sells and it is used to sell myriad objects and services. On the other hand, and perhaps more profound, is the fact that sexuality is expressed in consumption so that it will not become a force to disrupt and perhaps overthrow the existing social order. Thus, Baudrillard differentiates between eroticism as a domain of signs and exchange and the more basic and 'genuine' human desire. In the consumer society eroticism in its more

commercial form comes to predominate and it serves to control and subvert the explosive potential of desire.[22]

Consumption

While from both a prospective and a retrospective point of view *The Consumer Society* is fascinating theoretically and metatheoretically, it is clearly above all a work about consumption. While we have already touched on a number of issues relating to consumption, Baudrillard's thoughts on that process will concern us more directly in this section. Unfortunately, it is no easy matter to unravel what Baudrillard means by consumption. It is not that he does not try to define the concept, rather it is that he defines it in many different ways, perhaps because of the many different theoretical inputs into this work.

To Baudrillard, consumption is *not* merely a frenzy of buying a profusion of commodities, a function of enjoyment, an individual function, liberating of needs, fulfilling of the self, affluence, or the consumption of objects. Consumption *is* an order of significations in a 'panoply' of objects; a system, or code, of signs; 'an order of the manipulation of signs'; the manipulation of objects as signs; a communication system (like a language); a system of exchange (like primitive kinship); a morality, that is a system of ideological values; a social function; a structural organization; a collective phenomenon; the production of differences; 'a generalization of the combinatorial processes of fashion'; isolating and individualizing; an unconscious constraint on people, both from the sign system and from the socio-economico-political system; and a social logic.

If one tries to summarize all of the things that consumption is and is not, it seems clear that to Baudrillard consumption is *not*, contrary to conventional wisdom, something that individuals do and through which they find enjoyment, satisfaction and fulfilment. Rather, consumption *is* a structure (or Durkheimian social fact) that is external to and coercive over individuals. While it can and does take the forms of a structural organization, a collective phenomenon, a morality, it is above all else a coded system of signs. Individuals are coerced into using that system. The use of that system via consumption is an important way in which people communicate with one another. The ideology associated with the system leads people to believe, falsely in Baudrillard's view, that they are affluent, fulfilled, happy and liberated.

In the modern consumer society we consume not only goods, but also human services and therefore human relationships. People involved in those services are, as mentioned earlier, very solicitous of us. However, it is through such solicitousness that they serve to pacify us. Thus, pacification is added to the constraint and repression of the system and the code. Ultimately, what is being consumed in the consumer society is consumption itself. The last point is best exemplified by advertising.

In watching or reading advertisements people are consuming them; they are consuming consumption.

Baudrillard seeks to extend consumption from goods not only to services, but to virtually everything else. In his view, 'anything can become a consumer object.' As a result, 'consumption is laying hold of the whole of life.' What this communicates is the idea that consumption has been extended to all of culture; we are witnessing the commodification of culture. This, in turn, leads to one of the basic premises of postmodernism – the erosion of the distinction between high and low culture. Art, for example, has increasingly become indistinguishable from any other commodity. A good example is the production and sale of a large number of numbered prints. These mass-produced works of art become commodities like all others and are therefore valued in the same way as other commodities. They are evaluated in a relative manner within the same system of objects as, for example, Levi's jeans or McDonald's hamburgers. Art, jeans and burgers all acquire their meaning and their value relative to one another as well as to the entire system of consumer objects. A work of art is now consumed in the same way as, say, a washing machine. Indeed, they (or at least their signs) are substitutable for one another. Ultimately, cultural objects are subjected to the same demand for signs as all other commodities and they come to be created in order to satisfy that demand. Art, and culture more generally, come to be subject to the fashion cycle. Instead of being part of a process of symbolic exchange, art (like much else in the modern world) becomes just one more 'ludic and combinatorial practice'. Art is thus abolished by consumer society, but Baudrillard holds to the dream of an art that, instead of being in the thrall of consumer society, would be able to decipher it.

Pop art comes under Baudrillard's special scrutiny. Pop is a type of art that fits well within a society dominated by the logic of signs and consumption. Pop art is a system which produces 'art' objects that become just some of many 'sign objects' within the realm of consumption. It is virtually impossible to see pop art as high culture and to distinguish it from low culture. Indeed, one of the major subjects of pop artists is low culture as represented in Andy Warhol's work on Campbell soup cans and Marilyn Monroe. Art, or at least pop art, has ceased to be creative or subversive; it is merely one more set of objects to be included in the system of objects. It no longer creates or contradicts the world of consumer objects;[23] it is part of that world.

Within his body of thought on consumption, and often ignored because it does not fit well with his primary focus on signs, sign systems and the code, is Baudrillard's innovative ideas on the 'means of consumption'. Here is a term that is obviously derived from Marx's sense of the means of production[24] and it has a similar material connotation. In that sense, it runs counter to the main thrust of Baudrillard's work with its focus on signs and sign systems. The concept's existence is reflective, yet again, of the theoretical tension that exists within *The Consumer Society*. While clearly most influenced by structuralism and moving in a poststructuralist

and ultimately postmodernist direction, Baudrillard is still influenced by Marxian theory in general and, in this case, by Marx's thinking on the material means of production such as tools, raw materials, labour power, technologies and factories. The means of consumption discussed throughout *The Consumer Society* are similarly material phenomena.[25]

Baudrillard's paradigm of the means of consumption was the French, especially the Parisian, drugstore. This was different from its modern American counterpart; it was more like a mini department store or shopping centre (indeed, Baudrillard appears to equate the shopping centre and the drugstore). As a paradigm, the drugstore can become a whole community as it does in Parly 2 with its gigantic shopping centre, swimming-pool, clubhouse and housing development. The shopping centre, indeed the entire community, can be seen as the 'drugstore writ large'. In addition to drugstores, shopping centres, and planned communities, Baudrillard also mentions ski resorts, Club Med and airports under the broad heading of the new means of consumption. Also discussed in this context is the credit card.[26]

Baudrillard actually does relatively little with these new means of consumption given his primary interest in the non-material signs associated with consumer society. However, he was quite prescient in recognizing the importance of these phenomena at this early stage in their development. While from a contemporary American, and even global, point of view he may have picked the wrong paradigm (drugstores), since the time that Baudrillard wrote we have witnessed a massive expansion in the number and significance of the new means of consumption. The shopping centres, or malls, that he mentions have become a major presence. The credit card, as well as derivatives like the ATM and debit card, have undergone meteoric expansion. Ski resorts and Club Med have expanded, but to them should be added the far more important cruise ships, Las Vegas-like casino/hotels, and theme parks like Disney World or Euro Disney (in Baudrillard's France). Among the new means of consumption not mentioned by Baudrillard, but clearly part of the same domain, are fast-food restaurants (Ritzer, 1996), home shopping television networks, and cybermalls.

I have come to think of the new means of consumption as 'fantastic cages'. That is, they combine the material reality of Marx's means of consumption (or better Weber's iron cage) with a fantasy world of goods and services (Williams, 1982). While Baudrillard does not describe the means of consumption in these terms, there is support in his work for such a perspective. For example, he contends that affluence and consumption are both lived as myth and endured as objective processes. More generally, in addition to its constraining effect, consumption is described by Baudrillard as a magical, miraculous, fantastic world.[27] The new means of consumption offer the consumer fantastic, mythical images (signs) *and* they are objective structures that constrain the behaviour of consumers.

These new means of consumption are not only important as sites within which people consume signs, but also important in their own right

as structures that lead people to consume more and different things. In that sense, they are consistent with Baudrillard's concern with constraint throughout *The Consumer Society*. Terms like 'totalitarian', 'omnipotent', 'tyrannical', 'repressive' and 'terroristic' are frequently applied to the system of signs, the code, the consumer society, the media, leisure, affluence and so on. Baudrillard's world is characterized by not only obligatory consumption, but also obligatory leisure. However, there is also a sense here that society, as successful as it has been in its effort to control people, is doomed to ultimate failure. It cannot forestall the violent and non-violent (e.g. of 'hippies') reactions against consumer society. These reactions are 'fated' to occur.

While there is much criticism here of consumer society, Baudrillard is at pains to differentiate his position from that of mainstream critics such as Galbraith. He sees mainstream criticisms as an 'anti-discourse' which, along with the discourse in praise of consumption, creates the great myth of consumption in modern society. That counter-discourse focuses on the problems associated with consumer society and the tragedy to which it dooms society. However, to Baudrillard, both the counter-discourse and the positive discourse are part of the code and as such they *both* serve to reinforce it. Baudrillard appears to believe[28] that he avoids this problem, perhaps because his main target is the code rather than consumption *per se*. It is the code and its constraints that are the problem. They cannot be attacked through efforts to mobilize people to revolt against them. We are back to Baudrillard's fatal world and the only hope there is: a reaction that cannot be rationally mobilized; a reaction that is unforeseen but nonetheless certain.

Conclusion

The Consumer Society is a significant piece of social theory. The English-speaking world will find an intellectual banquet in this translation. Let me iterate the reasons why I think this is a superior contribution to social theory.

First, it is relatively timeless. Yes, there are a few things that date the book, but in the main the book reads as well today as it must have in 1970. Furthermore, it is a book that will prove to be relevant, if not required, reading for decades to come, for as long as consumerism is a dominant aspect of the social world. Since consumerism is apt to accelerate in the coming years, decades, even centuries, this book will be of continuing relevance.

Second, it is of general, if not universal, significance. This is not a book about France; it reads at least as well from the context of American society. Indeed, it is relevant to any society in the thrall of consumerism, or which is moving inexorably in that direction.

Third, it made a radical break with the productivist orientation that predominated in the France of the day. This was a difficult break for any

French social thinker interested in the economy and even more difficult for Baudrillard because he was operating, at least in part, from the overwhelmingly productivist Marxian perspective. Interestingly, today, almost three decades after the publication of *The Consumer Society*, much of the academic world, especially in the United States, has still not made the transition made almost three decades ago by Baudrillard. This is especially true of American sociology and social theory, both of which remain firmly embedded in a productivist paradigm. Thus, while there are well-established subfields like industrial sociology, the sociology of work, and the sociology of occupations, there is no subfield in the United States devoted to the sociology of consumption. It is stunning that such a contention can be made about a sociology at the centre of the world of consumption as it approaches the millennium, but that is the reality.

Fourth, the book shows a theorist (and a theory) in transition, one who is in the midst of struggling, sometimes unsatisfactorily, with a series of often incompatible theoretical perspectives. With the benefit of hindsight we can now see not only where Baudrillard was coming from, but where he was ultimately to go. Indeed, we can see where Baudrillard *had* to go given the tensions and predilections found in *The Consumer Society*.

Fifth, it shows a theorist at work who is sensitive *both* to the most important classical and contemporary theories and to the most important social issues of the day.

Sixth, this is a work that can be read profitably today for theoretical perspectives and ideas that can help us to think better about the consumer society. One example, of particular importance to me, is the idea of the (new) means of consumption. This, as we've seen, is almost a throwaway idea in *The Consumer Society*, one that is little developed by Baudrillard, but it is one that I think is worthy of much greater exploration. There are many such ideas in this book, and that says nothing of the central ideas (e.g. simulation) that have already proven of great utility to many observers of the social world.

This is important social theory, but it is also flawed, perhaps even deeply so. While from one angle there is theoretical richness to be found here, from another a range of theoretical perspectives can be seen as coexisting uncomfortably. As we have seen, this book draws upon Marx (and Marxian theory), Durkheim, Veblen, structuralism, and sociology in general. There is even some Freudian theory thrown into the mix, although Freudian ideas play far less of a role here than they did in *The System of Objects*. The coexistence of a number of theoretical perspectives, without any effort to integrate them, creates a number of problems, many of which have been pointed out previously. Thus, the materialism of a Marxian perspective and its concern for things like the means of production and consumption coexists uncomfortably with the (linguistic) structuralism that leads Baudrillard to accord much greater importance to such non-material phenomena as signs. In the end, of course, Baudrillard privileges the latter over the former, but the issue of the relationship between material and non-material phenomena is unexplored and unresolved.

There is considerable confusion about Baudrillard's views on the sociological perspective and how it relates to structuralism. On the one hand, Baudrillard is critical of sociology which he often associates with psychosociology. On the other hand, Baudrillard often explicitly does sociological analyses. At times they are quite straightforwardly sociological, such as when he analyses inequality and social stratification, or when he does one of his functional analyses. However, at other times he is, in fact, doing structural analysis when he says he is operating from a sociological perspective. For example, he often uses the term 'sociology' when he analyses, as he frequently does, the 'logic' of the social system. Yet, it most often seems that he is thinking of something like the structuralist's code when he is dealing with social logic. The fact is that much of this is quite muddy and he is clearly conflating a range of theoretical perspectives.

Relatedly, while Baudrillard has been able to move from production to consumption, a productivist bias continues to haunt this work. There is often a clear sense that production continues to retain its primacy over consumption. Furthermore, as pointed out previously, Baudrillard is often led to make some highly questionable analogies between production and consumption. Part of the reason for this is that Baudrillard had yet to part company with Marxian theory and its productivism. Another part, however, may have been that France of the late 1960s was a society still dominated by production; the shift in emphasis to consumption was in its earliest stages. As we approach the new millennium, the centrality of consumption over production is far clearer in France, the United States and other developed nations.

Furthermore, many of the ideas to be explored and fleshed out dramatically in later works – especially simulations and symbolic exchange – exist here in their rudimentary forms. This is clearly an early work in a career that was to lead to much more fully developed theorizing in the coming years. Thus, for example, one would probably miss the full implications of symbolic exchange were it not for knowledge of Baudrillard's later work. Indeed, it is clear that Baudrillard is only at the early stages of exploring these and other ideas and is himself only dimly aware of their full implications.

On the other hand, this early work bears none of the arrogant disregard for academic canons that characterizes his most recent work. In *The Consumer Society* Baudrillard is clearly working hard at the academic craft. He is reading the relevant literature, adopting its useful insights, critiquing its weaknesses and using all of it, as well as a sensitive eye towards the social world, to develop his theoretical ideas. While *The Consumer Society* is not nearly as important, at least theoretically, as say *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, it is far better and far more important than works like *Cool Memories* (1980–5/1990) or *America* (1986/1989).

Finally, it is worth critiquing this work from a postmodern perspective. From that point of view, itself heavily influenced by Baudrillard's later work, *The Consumer Society* is clearly still mired, at least to some degree, in a modern paradigm; it has all of the modernist characteristics discussed

earlier. But rather than rehash all of those from a postmodern perspective, let me emphasize the point that this book is dominated by that *bête noire* of postmodernists, a grand narrative. Fundamentally, and in many different ways, Baudrillard paints a picture of a world that has fallen from the glories of primitive society and the symbolic exchange that characterizes it.[29] During the industrial era, symbolic exchange was replaced by exchange dominated by use-values and exchange-values. When Baudrillard was writing this book, he clearly felt that we had moved into an era dominated by the exchange of sign-values.[30] However he describes the period in which he was writing, it comes off badly in comparison with primitive society and its symbolic exchange. While the terms are different, this is precisely the kind of grand narrative that postmodernists such as Lyotard (1979/1984) have lambasted. In addition to all of the other examples discussed previously, the following are just a few of the other ways in which Baudrillard expressed this grand narrative: the loss of spontaneous, symbolic human relations; more and more of society falling under the logic of signs and the code; the substitution of ludic and combinatorial practices with cultural signs for culture as a symbolic system; the achievement of communion through technical rather than symbolic means; sexuality as a spectre rather than as symbolic rejoicing and exchange; and the loss of authentic relationships.

In the years that followed, Baudrillard actually clarified and extended this grand narrative. However, most recently, his work has become more obscure and elusive on this issue, and many other issues. Nonetheless, a good portion of it remains embedded in a grand narrative much like the one described above. Of course, a critique of Baudrillard from a postmodern perspective may be dismissed by him since he generally rejects the designation of a postmodernist and refuses to use the term.

Another criticism of *The Consumer Society* may be traced to the fact that Baudrillard was in the process of transforming himself into less of a modernist and more of a postmodernist. Baudrillard is clearly trying to distance himself from the modern tendency to develop an Archimedean point (such as Marx's species being) from which to criticize society. However, while he may be making such an effort at an overt level, he seems to implicitly employ such an Archimedean point, symbolic exchange, throughout this book and ensuing works. Thus, Baudrillard had not yet shaken off his modernist inclinations and they were to continue to influence his work for some years to come.

As a result of his Archimedean point, Baudrillard is led into a number of other problematic positions. For example, he is uniformly positive about primitive society. He fails to see anything wrong with it and, more generally, with symbolic exchange. For another, he fails to see anything positive about, or right with, modern (or postmodern) consumer society. He is unremittingly critical of that society. An even slightly more balanced portrait of *both* primitive and modern societies would have enhanced Baudrillard's analysis.

As we turn Baudrillard's work around in our minds, it is clear that it has many flaws from many different perspectives. Yet, what important work in

social theory is flawless? In exploring the weaknesses we must not lose sight of the fact that *The Consumer Society* is a significant contribution to social theory, and Jean Baudrillard demonstrates here something that was to become even clearer as his work progressed in the ensuing decade or so – that he is a major social theorist.

Notes

1 The other major possibility would be Michel Foucault, but he is perhaps better thought of as a poststructuralist than as a postmodernist. Baudrillard eschews the poststructural label and Foucault abhorred all attempts to label him.
2 I am using this term to mean those who take sociological theory as a subject of study (Ritzer, 1991).
3 There are a few exceptions; a few things that do date the book. Examples include the discussion of a now-forgotten 1960s radio quiz show, Brigitte Bardot as a paradigm of female beauty, and the hippies and their rejection of modern consumer society.
4 He had dealt with it in greater detail in his previous book, *The System of Objects* (1968/1996). He also dealt with consumption, both directly and indirectly, in this earlier work, but in nothing like the detail in which it was to be analysed in *The Consumer Society*.
5 Two exceptions are *Expressing America: A Critique of the Global Credit Card Society* (Ritzer, 1995) and *Credit Card Nation: America's Dangerous Addiction to Consumer Debt* (Manning and Williams, 1996).
6 Although his name is rarely mentioned, I think *the* most powerful presence is Ferdinand de Saussure and the structuralism and structural linguistics he played such a central role in creating.
7 Fredric Jameson (1991) is one postmodernist who is often accused of this.
8 Consumption is also described as a system of communication, but while this idea too can be traced to Durkheim, it is better associated with other theoretical inputs into his work (see later).
9 Of course, there are those who see a great deal of functional thinking in Marx's work (e.g. Cohen, 1978/1986).
10 While he is doing functional analyses, there is no clear indication that Baudrillard had read Merton (1968) and his work on the functional paradigm.
11 Other pathologies dealt with by Baudrillard are a series of environmental 'nuisances' (air, water and noise pollution), cultural 'nuisances' (like grim housing developments, planned obsolescence, insecure employment), as well as poverty.
12 There is, of course, a Marxian strand of structuralism (Althusser, Poulantzas, etc.).
13 To this he adds a more sociological analysis of social differentiation and stratification. And this has both a lived and a structural aspect. As a result of the latter, people are permanently controlled by a code that they are, in the main, unable to fathom.
14 In Chapter 4, note 1, Baudrillard seems to acknowledge that there is a difference between a modern (presumably including modern sociology) and a structural approach to inequality.
15 Using a more sociological approach, Baudrillard also argues that the lower classes engage in consumption in an effort to compensate for their lack of upward mobility.
16 The key here is the notion of 'social logic' which Baudrillard clearly intends in a structural sense, but also associates with a sociological approach.
17 Baudrillard also critiques psycho-sociologists for being part of the service sector and for being interested in solving social problems by being therapists involved in dealing with communication problems.
18 At this stage in his work, Baudrillard *never* discusses postmodern society. While the term 'postmodern' had some early precursors, and C. Wright Mills had used it as early as 1959, it was not to begin to be used widely until the 1970s.

19 To take another example, he contends that desire is the truth of the body, implying that the body's modern sexuality or eroticism is false.
20 The body had come under Foucault's scrutiny in the *Birth of the Clinic* (1963/1975), but sexuality was not to become a focal concern until *The History of Sexuality* (1978/1980).
21 This is one of the many places in this work where Baudrillard remains locked in a Marxian perspective, causing him, among other things, to make a series of analogies between consumption and production. This is one of the key areas in which it is abundantly clear that Marxian theory is at least as much of a hindrance as it is a help to Baudrillard. It is this kind of tension that sets the stage for Baudrillard's later abandonment of a Marxian perspective.
22 Although Baudrillard does not explicitly make the point, desire would predominate in a society characterized by symbolic exchange.
23 The implication, once again, is that art in primitive society, in symbolic exchange, would play such a contradictory role.
24 In fact, Marx (1981: 471) used the term 'means of consumption' and distinguished it from 'means of production'. The former are commodities that enter individual consumption (as necessities or luxuries), while the latter enter productive consumption. However, Marx is not using 'means of consumption' as it is employed by Baudrillard and here to mean structures that serve to make consumption possible. They are to Marx consumer goods used by the proletariat (means of subsistence) and the capitalist (luxuries).
25 Although they can be seen as signs themselves (McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's are part of the sign system that is the fast-food industry) as well as settings which permit people to consume signs.
26 Credit cards might better be seen as 'meta-means of consumption', facilitating the use of means of consumption such as shopping malls and ski resorts.
27 Although it is a simulated fantasy world since truly meaningful dreamwork is in Baudrillard's view no longer possible. Yet again, the presumption is that truly meaningful dreamwork is only possible in primitive societies and/or those characterized by symbolic exchange.
28 Obviously, this author is dubious about Baudrillard's belief that he avoided falling into the trap that ensnared Galbraith and others.
29 It is interesting to note that Baudrillard (1968/1996: 54) had earlier noted his resistance to the idea of romanticizing the past.
30 Baudrillard (1976/1993; 1983/1990; 1990/1993) is later more explicit about this historical model and takes it further.

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PART I

The Formal Liturgy of the Object

1
Profusion

There is all around us today a kind of fantastic conspicuousness of consumption and abundance, constituted by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods, and this represents something of a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by **objects.** Their daily dealings are now not so much with their fellow men, but rather – on a rising statistical curve – with the reception and manipulation of goods and messages. This runs from the very complex organization of the household, with its dozens of technical slaves, to street furniture and the whole material machinery of communication; from professional activities to the permanent spectacle of the celebration of the object in advertising and the hundreds of daily messages from the mass media; from the minor proliferation of vaguely obsessional gadgetry to the symbolic psychodramas fuelled by the nocturnal objects which come to haunt us even in our dreams. The two concepts 'environment' and 'ambience' have doubtless only enjoyed such a vogue since we have come to live not so much alongside other human beings – in their physical presence and the presence of their speech – as beneath the mute gaze of mesmerizing, obedient objects which endlessly repeat the same refrain: that of our dumbfounded power, our virtual affluence, our absence one from another. Just as the wolf-child became a wolf by living among wolves, so we too are slowly becoming functional. We live by object time: by this I mean that we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession. Today, it is we who watch them as they are born, grow to maturity and die, whereas in all previous civilizations it was timeless objects, instruments or monuments which outlived the generations of human beings.

Objects are neither a flora nor a fauna. And yet they do indeed give the impression of a proliferating vegetation, a jungle in which the new wild man of modern times has difficulty recovering the reflexes of civilization. We have to attempt rapidly to describe this fauna and flora, which man has produced and which comes back to encircle and invade him as it might in a bad science fiction novel. We have to describe these things as we see and experience them, never forgetting, in their splendour and profusion, that they are *the product of a human activity* and are dominated not by natural ecological laws, but by the law of exchange-value.

> The busiest streets of London are crowded with shops whose show cases display all the riches of the world, Indian shawls, American revolvers, Chinese porcelain, Parisian corsets, furs from Russia and spices from the tropics, but all of these worldly things bear odious, white paper labels with Arabic numerals and the laconic symbols £.s.d. This is how commodities are presented in circulation. (Marx)[1]

Profusion and the Package

Profusion, piling high are clearly the most striking descriptive features. The big department stores, with their abundance of canned foods and clothing, of foodstuffs and ready-made garments, are like the primal landscape, the geometrical locus of abundance. But every street, with its cluttered, glittering shop-windows (the least scarce commodity here being light, without which the merchandise would be merely what it is), their displays of cooked meats, and indeed the entire alimentary and vestimentary feast, all stimulate magical salivation. There is something more in this piling high than the quantity of products: the manifest presence of surplus, the magical, definitive negation of scarcity, the maternal, luxurious sense of being already in the Land of Cockaigne. Our markets, major shopping thoroughfares and superstores also mimic a new-found nature of prodigious fecundity. These are our Valleys of Canaan where, in place of milk and honey, streams of neon flow down over ketchup and plastic. But no matter! We find here the fervid hope that there should be not enough, but too much – and too much for everyone: by buying a piece of this land, you acquire the crumbling pyramid of oysters, meats, pears or tinned asparagus. You buy the part for the whole. And this metonymic, repetitive discourse of consumable matter, of the *commodity*, becomes once again, through a great collective metaphor – by virtue of its very excess – the image of the *gift*, and of that inexhaustible and spectacular prodigality which characterizes the *feast*.

Beyond stacking, which is the most rudimentary yet cogent form of abundance, objects are organized in *packages* or *collections*. Almost all the shops selling clothing or household appliances offer a *range* of differentiated objects, evoking, echoing and offsetting one another. The antique dealer's window provides the aristocratic, luxury version of these sets of objects, which evoke not so much a superabundance of substance as a *gamut* of select and complementary objects presented for the consumer to choose among, but presented also to create in him a psychological chain reaction, as he peruses them, inventories them and grasps them as a total category. Few objects today are offered *alone*, without a context of objects which 'speaks' them. And this changes the consumer's relation to the object: he no longer relates to a particular object in its specific utility, but to a set of objects in its total signification. Washing machine, refrigerator and dishwasher taken together have a different meaning from the one each has individually as an appliance. The shop-window, the advertisement, the

manufacturer and the *brand name*, which here plays a crucial role, impose a coherent, collective vision, as though they were an almost indissociable totality, a series. This is, then, no longer a sequence of mere objects, but a chain of *signifiers*, in so far as all of these signify one another reciprocally as part of a more complex super-object, drawing the consumer into a series of more complex motivations. It is evident that objects are never offered for consumption in absolute disorder. They may, in certain cases, imitate disorder the better to seduce, but they are always arranged to mark out directive paths, to orientate the purchasing impulse towards *networks* of objects in order to captivate that impulse and bring it, in keeping with its own logic, to the highest degree of commitment, to the limits of its economic potential. Clothing, machines and toiletries thus constitute object *pathways*, which establish inertial constraints in the consumer: he will move *logically* from one object to another. He will be caught up in a *calculus* of objects, and this is something quite different from the frenzy of buying and acquisitiveness to which the simple profusion of commodities gives rise.

The Drugstore

The synthesis of profusion and calculation is the drugstore. The drugstore (or the new shopping centre) achieves a synthesis of consumer activities, not the least of which are shopping, flirting with objects, playful wandering and all the permutational possibilities of these. In this respect, the drugstore is more representative of modern consumption than the department stores. There, the quantitative centralization of the products leaves less margin for ludic exploration, the arrangement of departments and products imposing a more utilitarian path on the consumer. And, generally, the large stores retain something of the period in which they emerged, when broad classes of the population were first gaining access to *everyday* consumer goods. There is a quite different meaning to the drugstore: it does not juxtapose categories of merchandise, but *lumps signs together indiscriminately*, lumps together all categories of commodities, which are regarded as partial fields of a sign-consuming totality. In the drugstore, the cultural centre becomes part of the shopping centre. It would be simplistic to say that culture is 'prostituted' there. It is *culturalized*. Simultaneously, commodities (clothing, groceries, catering etc.) are also culturalized in their turn, since they are transformed into the substance of play and distinction, into luxury accessories, into one element among others in the general *package* of consumables.

> A new art of living, a new way of living, say the adverts – a 'switched-on' daily experience. You can shop pleasantly in a single air-conditioned location, buy your food there, purchase things for your flat or country cottage – clothing, flowers, the latest novel or the latest gadget. And you can do all this in a single trip, while husband and children watch a film, and then all dine together right there.

There's a café, a cinema, a bookshop, places to buy trinkets, clothing and lots more in the shopping centres: the drugstore takes in everything in kaleidoscopic mode. If the department store offers the fairground spectacle of commodities, the drugstore presents the subtle recital of consumption, the whole 'art' of which consists in playing on the ambiguity of the sign in objects, and sublimating their status as things of use and as commodities in a play upon 'ambience'. This is generalized neo-culture, where there is no longer any difference between a delicatessen and an art gallery, between *Playboy* and a treatise on palaeontology. And the drugstore is to modernize itself to the point of introducing 'grey matter':

> Just selling products doesn't interest us. We want to put a bit of grey matter in there too … Three levels. A bar, a dancefloor and sales outlets. Knick-knacks, records, paperback books, intellectual books, a bit of everything. But we aren't trying to flatter the clientele. We are really offering them 'something'. A language laboratory operates on the second level. Among the records and books, you can find the major movements which are stirring our society. Experimental music, tomes which explain our times. This is the 'grey matter' that goes with the products we sell. It's a drugstore, then, but a new-style drugstore with something extra – a little intelligence, perhaps, and a bit of human warmth.

The drugstore can become a whole town: this is the case with Parly 2 with its giant shopping centre in which 'art and leisure mingle with everyday life' and each group of residences radiates out from its swimming-pool, where the local clubhouse becomes its focus. A church built 'in the round', tennis courts ('the least we could do'), elegant boutiques and a library. The tiniest ski resort borrows this 'universalist' model of the drugstore: all activities there are encapsulated in, systematically combined around and centred on the basic concept of 'ambience'. Thus Flaine-la-Prodigue offers you a complete, all-purpose, combinatorial existence:

> Our Mont Blanc, our spruce forests; our Olympic runs, our children's 'plateau'; our architecture carved, chiselled and polished like a work of art; the purity of the air we breathe; the refined ambience of our Forum (modelled on the forums of Mediterranean towns. A lively time is to be had there after a day on the slopes. Cafés, restaurants, shops, skating-rinks, a night club, a cinema and a cultural and amusement centre are all located in the Forum to make the life you live off-piste particularly rich and varied); our internal TV system; our world-scale future (we shall soon be listed as a cultural monument by the Arts Ministry).[2]

We are at the point where consumption is laying hold of the whole of life, where all activities are sequenced in the same combinatorial mode, where the course of satisfaction is outlined in advance, hour by hour, where the 'environment' is total – fully air-conditioned, organized, culturalized. In the phenomenology of consumption, this general 'air-conditioning' of life, goods, objects, services, behaviour and social relations represents the perfected, 'consummated' [*consommé*] stage of an evolution which runs from affluence pure and simple, through interconnected networks of objects, to the total conditioning of action and time, and finally to the systematic

atmospherics built into those cities of the future that are our drugstores, Parly 2s and modern airports.

> *Parly 2*
> 'The biggest shopping centre in Europe.'
>
> 'Printemps, BHV, Dior, Prisunic, Lanvin, Franck et Fils, Hédiard, two cinemas, a drugstore, a Suma supermarket, a hundred other shops – all in a single location!'
>
> In the choice of shops, from grocery to high fashion, two imperatives: commercial dynamism and aesthetic sense. The famous slogan, 'Ugliness doesn't sell', is now *passé*. It might be replaced by: 'The beauty of the setting is the prime requirement for happy living.'
>
> A two-storey structure organized around a central mall, which is the split-level main thoroughfare – the triumphal avenue. Small- and large-scale traders reconciled. The modern pace of life reconciled with age-old idle wandering.
>
> The unprecedented comfort of strolling among shops whose tempting wares are openly displayed on the mall, without even a shop-window for a screen, the mall itself being a combination of the rue de la Paix and the Champs-Elysées. Adorned with fountains, artificial trees, pavilions and benches, it is wholly exempt from changes of season or bad weather: an exceptional system of climate control, requiring 13 kilometres of air-conditioning ducts, makes for perpetual springtime.
>
> Not only can you buy anything here, from shoelaces to an airline ticket; not only can you find insurance companies and cinemas, banks or medical services, bridge clubs and art exhibitions, but you are not a slave to the clock. The mall, like any street, is accessible night and day, seven days a week.
>
> Naturally, for those who want it, the centre has introduced the most modern style of payment: the 'credit card'. This frees shoppers from cheques or cash – and even from financial difficulties. To pay, you just show your card and sign the bill. There's nothing more to it. And every month you get a statement which you can pay off in full or in monthly instalments.
>
> In this marriage of comfort, beauty and efficiency, the Parlysians are discovering the material conditions of happiness which our anarchic cities denied them.

We are here at the heart of consumption as total organization of everyday life, total homogenization, where everything is taken over and superseded in the ease and translucidity of an abstract 'happiness', defined solely by the resolution of tensions. The drugstore writ large in the form of the shopping centre, the city of the future, is the *sublimate* of all real life, of all objective social life, in which not only work and money disappear, but also the seasons, those distant vestiges of a cycle which has at last also been homogenized! Work, leisure, nature and culture: all these things which were once dispersed, which once generated anxiety and complexity in real life, in our 'anarchic and archaic towns and cities', all these sundered activities, these activities which were more or less irreducible one to another, are now at last mixed and blended, climatized and homogenized in the same sweeping vista of perpetual shopping. All are now rendered sexless in the same hermaphroditic ambience of fashion! All at last *digested* and turned into the same homogeneous faecal matter (naturally enough, this occurs precisely under the sign of the disappearance of *liquid cash* – too visible a symbol still of the *real* faecality of real life, and of the economic and social

contradictions which once inhabited it). That is all over now. C*ontrolled*, lubricated, *consumed* faecality has passed into things; it seeps everywhere into the indistinctness of things and social relations. Just as the gods of all countries coexisted syncretically in the Roman Pantheon in an immense 'digest', so all the gods – or demons – of consumption have come together in our Super Shopping Centre, which is our Pantheon – or Pandaemonium. In other words, all activities, labour, conflicts and seasons have been united and abolished in the same abstraction. The substance of life unified in this way, in this universal digest, can no longer have in it any *meaning*: what constituted the dreamwork, the labour of poetry and of meaning – in other words, the grand schemata of displacement and condensation, the great figures of metaphor and contradiction, which are based on the living interconnection of distinct elements – is no longer possible. The eternal substitution of homogeneous elements now reigns unchallenged. There is no longer any symbolic function, but merely an eternal combinatory of 'ambience' in a perpetual springtime.

2

The Miraculous Status of Consumption

The Melanesian natives were thrilled by the planes which passed overhead. But those objects never came down from the skies to them, whereas they did descend for the whites, doing so because there were, in certain places, similar objects on the ground to attract the flying aircraft. So, the natives themselves set about building a simulacrum of an aeroplane from branches and creepers. They marked out a landing-ground, which they painstakingly illuminated by night, and patiently waited for the real aircraft to alight on it.

Without calling the anthropoid hunter-gatherers who today wander through our urban jungles primitives (though why not?), we might see this as a fable of the consumer society. The beneficiary of the consumer miracle also sets in place a whole array of sham objects, of characteristic signs of happiness, and then waits (waits desperately, a moralist would say) for happiness to alight.

I do not mean to present this as a principle of analysis. What we have here is simply the private and collective consumer *mentality*. But at this rather superficial level, we may venture this comparison: consumption is governed by a form of *magical thinking*; daily life is governed by a mentality based on miraculous thinking, a primitive mentality, in so far as that has been defined as being based on a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts (though what we have in this case is a belief in the omnipotence of signs). 'Affluence' is, in effect, merely the accumulation of the *signs* of happiness. The satisfactions which the objects themselves confer are the equivalent of the fake aircraft, the Melanesians' models, i.e. the anticipated reflection of the potential Great Satisfaction, of the Total Affluence, the last Jubilation of the definitive beneficiaries of the miracle, from whose insane hope daily banality draws its sustenance. These lesser satisfactions are as yet only exorcistic practices, means of calling down or summoning up total Well-being or Bliss.

In everyday practice, the blessings of consumption are not experienced as resulting from work or from a production process; they are experienced as a *miracle*. There is, admittedly, a difference between the Melanesian native and the viewer settling down in front of his TV set, turning the switch and waiting for images from the whole world to come down to him: the fact is that the images generally obey, whereas planes never condescend to land by magical command. But this technical success is not sufficient to show that our conduct is realistic and the natives' behaviour imaginary. For the same psychical economy ensures on the one hand that the natives' confidence in

magic is never destroyed (if the process fails to work, it is because they have not performed the necessary acts) and on the other that the miracle of TV is perpetually brought off, *without ceasing to be a miracle* – this latter by the grace of technology, which wipes out, so far as the consumer's consciousness is concerned, the very principle of social reality, the long social process of production which leads to the consumption of images. And does this so well that the TV viewer, like the native, experiences the appropriation as a *capturing* in a mode of miraculous efficacy.

The Cargo Myth

Consumer goods thus present themselves as *a harnessing of power,* not as products embodying work. And, more generally, once severed from its objective determinations, the profusion of goods is felt as a *blessing of nature,* as a manna, a gift from heaven. On contact with the whites, the Melanesians (to turn again to them) developed a Messianic form of worship: the cargo cult. The whites, they reasoned, lived lives of plenty, whereas they had nothing. This was because the whites knew how to capture or divert the goods that were destined for them, the blacks, by their ancestors who had withdrawn to the ends of the earth. One day, when the white men's magic had been foiled, their ancestors would return with the miraculous cargo, and they would never again know want.

Thus 'underdeveloped' peoples experience Western 'aid' as something natural and expected, something long due to them. As a magical remedy – having no relation to history, technology, continued progress and the world market. But if we look at all closely at them, do not the Western beneficiaries of the economic miracle behave collectively in the same way? Does not the mass of consumers experience plenty as an *effect of nature,* surrounded as they are by the fantasies of the Land of Cockaigne and persuaded by the advertisers' litany that all will be given to them and that they have a legitimate, inalienable right to plenty? Faith in consumption is a new element; the rising generations are now inheritors: they no longer merely inherit goods, but *the natural right to abundance.* And so the cargo myth lives again in the West whereas it is declining in Melanesia. For even if abundance is becoming a banal, daily fact, it continues to be experienced as a daily miracle, in so far as it does not appear to be something produced and extracted, something won after a historical and social effort, but something *dispensed* by a beneficent mythological agency to which we are the legitimate heirs: Technology, Progress, Growth, etc.

This does not mean that our society is not firstly, objectively and decisively a society of production, *an order of production,* and therefore the site of an economic and political strategy. But it means that there is entangled with that order an *order of consumption,* which is an order of the manipulation of signs. To that extent, we may draw a (no doubt venturesome) parallel with magical thought, for both of these *live off signs and under the*

protection of signs. More and more basic aspects of our contemporary societies fall under a logic of significations, an analysis of codes and symbolic systems – though this does not make these societies primitive ones, and the problem of the *historical production* of these significations and codes remains fully intact – that analysis having to articulate itself to the analysis of the process of material and technical production as its theoretical continuation.

The Consumed Vertigo of Catastrophe

The usage of signs is always ambivalent. Its function is always a conjuring – both a conjuring up and a conjuring away: causing something to emerge in order to capture it in signs (forces, reality, happiness, etc.) and evoking something in order to deny and repress it. We know that, in its myths, magical thought seeks to conjure away change and history. In a way, the generalized consumption of images, of facts, of information aims also *to conjure away the real with the signs of the real*, to conjure away history with the signs of change, etc.

Reality we consume in either anticipatory or retrospective mode. At any rate we do so at a distance, a distance which is that of the sign. For example, when *Paris-Match* showed us the secret forces assigned to protect the General [de Gaulle] training with machine-guns in the basement of the Prefecture, that image was not read as 'information', i.e. as referring to the political context and its elucidation. For every one of us, it bore within it the temptation of a superb assassination attempt, a prodigious violent event: the attempt will take place, it *is going to* take place; the image is the forerunner to it, and embodies the anticipated pleasure; all perversions have their acting-out. What we see here is the same inverse effect as in the expectation of miraculous abundance within the cargo cult. Cargo or catastrophe – in both cases, we have an effect of consumed vertigo.

We may, admittedly, say that it is, then, our fantasies which come to be signified in the image and consumed in it. But this psychological aspect interests us less than what comes into the image to be both consumed in it and repressed: the real world, the event, history.

What characterizes consumer society is the *universality of the news item* [*le fait divers*] in mass communication. All political, historical and cultural information is received in the same – at once anodyne and miraculous – form of the news item. It is entirely *actualized* – i.e. dramatized in the spectacular mode – and entirely *deactualized* – i.e. distanced by the communication medium and reduced to signs. The news item is thus not one category among others, but **the** cardinal category of our magical thinking, of our mythology.

That mythology is buttressed by the all the more voracious demand for reality, for 'truth', for 'objectivity'. Everywhere we find *'cinéma-vérité'*, live

reporting, the newsflash, the high-impact photo, the eye-witness report, etc. Everywhere what is sought is the 'heart of the event', the 'heart of the battle', the 'live', the 'face to face' – the dizzy sense of a total presence at the event, the Great Thrill of Lived Reality – i.e. the **miracle** once again, since the truth of the media report, televised and taped, is precisely that *I was not there.* But it is the truer than true which counts or, in other words, the fact of being there without being there. Or, to put it yet another way, the *fantasy.*

What mass communications give us is not reality, but *the dizzying whirl of reality* [*le vertige de la réalité*]. Or again, without playing on words, a reality without the dizzying whirl, for the heart of Amazonia, the heart of reality, the heart of passion, the heart of war, this 'Heart' which is the locus of mass communications and which gives them their vertiginous sentimentality, is precisely *the place where nothing happens.* It is the allegorical sign of passion and of the event. And signs are sources of security.

So we live, sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real. A miraculous security: when we look at the images of the world, who can distinguish this brief irruption of reality from the profound pleasure of not being there? The image, the sign, the message – all these things we 'consume' – represent our tranquillity consecrated by distance from the world, a distance more comforted by the allusion to the real (even where the allusion is violent) than compromised by it.

The content of the messages, the signifieds of the signs are largely immaterial. We are not engaged in them, and the media do not involve us in the world, but offer for our consumption signs as signs, albeit signs accredited with the guarantee of the real. It is here that we can define *the praxis of consumption*. The consumer's relation to the real world, to politics, to history, to culture is not a relation of interest, investment or committed responsibility – nor is it one of total indifference: it is a relation of **curiosity.** On the same pattern, we can say that the dimension of consumption as we have defined it here is not one of knowledge of the world, nor is it one of total ignorance: it is the dimension of **misrecognition.**

Curiosity and misrecognition denote one and the same form of overall behaviour towards the real, a form of behaviour generalized and systematized by the practice of mass communications and characteristic, therefore, of our 'consumer society'. This is the denial of the real on the basis of an avid and repeated apprehending of its signs.

We can at the same time define *the locus of consumption*: daily life. This latter is not merely the sum of daily doings, the dimension of banality and repetition: it is a *system of interpretation*. Everydayness is the separation of a total praxis into a transcendent, autonomous and abstract sphere (of the political, the social, the cultural) and the immanent, closed, abstract sphere of the 'private'. Work, leisure, family, acquaintances: the individual reorganizes all these things in an involutive mode, this side of the world and of history, in a coherent system based on the closure of the private, the formal freedom of the individual, the securitizing appropriation of the

environment, and misrecognition. Everydayness is, from the objective point of view of the totality, impoverished and residual, but it is, by contrast, triumphant and euphoric in its effort totally to autonomize and reinterpret the world 'for internal consumption'. It is here that there is profound, organic collusion between the sphere of private everydayness and mass communications.

Everydayness as closure, as *Verborgenheit*, would be unbearable without the simulacrum of the world, without the *alibi* of participation in the world. It has to be fuelled by the images, the repeated signs of that transcendence. As we have seen, its tranquillity needs the vertiginous spin of reality and history. Its tranquillity requires perpetual *consumed* violence for its own exaltation. That is its particular obscenity. It is partial to events and violence, provided the violence is served up at room temperature. The caricature image of this has the TV viewer lounging in front of images of the Vietnam War. The TV image, like a window turned outside-in, opens initially on to a room and, in that room, the cruel exteriority of the world becomes something intimate and warm – warm with a perverse warmth.

At this 'lived' level, consumption makes maximum exclusion from the (real, social, historical) world the maximum index of security. It seeks the resolution of tensions – that happiness by default. But it runs up against a contradiction: the contradiction between the passivity implied by this new value system and the norms of a social morality which, in essentials, remains one of voluntarism, action, efficacy and sacrifice. Hence, the intense sense of guilt which attaches to this new style of hedonistic behaviour and the urgent need, clearly outlined by the 'strategists of desire', to take the guilt out of passivity. For millions of people without histories, and happy to be so, passivity has to be rendered guiltless. And this is where spectacular dramatization by the mass media comes in (the accident/catastrophe report as a generalized category of all messages): in order for this contradiction between puritanical and hedonistic morality to be resolved, this tranquillity of the private sphere has to appear as a value *preserved only with great difficulty*, constantly under threat and beset by the dangers of a catastrophic destiny. The violence and inhumanity of the outside world are needed not just so that security may be experienced more deeply as security (in the economy of enjoyment [*jouissance*]), but also so that it should be felt *justifiable* at every moment as an option (in the economy of the morality of salvation). The signs of destiny, passion and fatality must flourish around the preserved zone in order that everydayness may seize back the grandeur and sublimity of which it is, precisely, the reverse side. Fatality is thus evoked and signified on all sides, so that banality may revel in it and find favour. The fact that road accidents play so extraordinarily well on radio and TV, in the press, in individual conversation and in the talk of the nation proves this: the crash is the finest exemplar of 'daily fatality'. If it is exploited with such passion, this is because it performs an essential collective function. The litany of road deaths is rivalled only by the litany of

weather forecasts. In fact the two form a mythic couple – the obsession with the sun and the litany of death are inseparable.

Everydayness thus offers this curious mix of euphoric justification by 'social standing' and passivity, on the one hand, and the *delectatio morosa* of potential victims of destiny on the other. The whole forms a specific mentality or, rather, 'sentimentality'. The consumer society sees itself as an encircled Jerusalem, rich and threatened. That is its ideology.[1]

3

The Vicious Circle of Growth

Collective Expenditure and Redistribution

Consumer society is not characterized merely by the rapid growth of individual expenditure. It is also accompanied by the growth of expenditure met by third parties (by the government in particular) for the benefit of private individuals, the purpose of some of this being to reduce the inequality of the distribution of resources.

This proportion of collective expenditure meeting individual needs has risen from 13 per cent of total consumption in 1959 to 17 per cent in 1965. In 1965, the percentage of needs met by third parties was:

- 1 per cent for food and clothing ('subsistence');
- 13 per cent for housing expenses, transport and communication networks ('the environment');
- 67 per cent in the fields of education, culture, sport and health ('protection and development of the person').

Collective expenditure is clearly channelled more towards human beings, then, than into the goods and material equipment made available for their use. Similarly, public expenditure is at its highest under the budget heads which look set to grow fastest. But it is interesting to note, with E. Lisle, that it was precisely in this sector where the community assumes the greater part of expenditure, in the sector which it has developed most intensively, that the crisis of May 1968 broke out.

In France, the 'social budget of the nation' redistributes more than 20 per cent of gross internal production (the national education system alone absorbs the total of taxes on personal incomes). The heavy disparity between private consumption and collective expenditure which Galbraith attacks seems much more characteristic of the United States than of the European nations. But this is not the issue. The real problem is whether *this state expenditure makes for an objective equalization of social chances.* Now, it seems clear that this 'redistribution' has little effect on social discrimination at all levels. As for inequality of standards of living, comparison of the two studies on family budgets made in 1956 and 1965 shows no reduction in the discrepancies. We know the incurable, hereditary disparities which apply in the field of education: where other mechanisms more subtle than the economic are in play, the use of economic redistribution alone very largely amounts to reinforcing the mechanisms of cultural inertia. The proportion of 17-year-olds in full-time education is 52 per cent: 90 per cent for

the children of senior managers, professionals and teachers, less than 40 per cent for farmers and workers. In higher education, the chances of access for boys in the former category are more than 33 per cent, but only 1 or 2 per cent for the latter.

In the health field, the redistributive effects are not clear: among the active population, there would seem to be an absence of redistribution, as though each social category were at least intent on getting back what it paid in contributions.

As regards taxation and social security, let us examine what E. Lisle has to say on the topic.

> Growing public consumption is financed by the development of taxes and other contributions: where social security alone is concerned, the ratio of contributions to total wage costs has risen from 23.9 per cent in 1959 to 25.9 per cent in 1967. Social security thus costs employed workers a quarter of their resources, it being fair to regard the so-called 'employers' contributions' as a deduction at source from workers' incomes, as is also the 5 per cent fixed-rate contribution. The total of these deductions is much higher than the sum deducted in income tax. Since the latter is progressive, but social security contributions and the fixed-rate contribution are regressive, the *net effect of tax and other deductions is regressive*. If we accept that indirect taxation, which mainly takes the form of VAT, is proportional to consumption, we may conclude that direct and indirect taxation and the social contributions paid by households and very largely earmarked for the financing of collective consumption *would not, overall, have any effect of reducing inequality or any redistributive impact*.
>
> So far as the effectiveness of public amenities is concerned, the available studies show frequent 'deflections' from the intentions of the authorities. When these amenities are designed for the most deprived, we gradually see their 'clientele' becoming more varied, with this diversification leading to an affective rejection, more for psychological than financial reasons, of the poor. When the amenities are intended to be open to all, the elimination of the weakest members of the community occurs from the outset. The effort to achieve open access usually ends in a segregation reflecting the social hierarchy. This would seem to indicate that in a highly inegalitarian society, political actions aimed at ensuring formal equality of access more often than not have increased the degree of inequality. (Commission du Plan, C*onsommation et Mode de Vie*)

Inequality with regard to death rates remains very great.

Once again, then, the unadorned figures have no meaning and the increase in available resources – a green light to affluence – has to be interpreted in its real social logic. Social redistribution and, in particular, the effectiveness of public action has to be questioned. Should we regard this 'deviant' performance on the part of 'social' redistribution, this restoration of social inequalities by the very mechanisms which are supposed to eliminate them, as a temporary anomaly due to the inertia of the social structure? Or should we, rather, formulate the radical hypothesis that the mechanisms of redistribution, which are so successful in preserving privilege, are in fact an integral part, a tactical element, of the power system – and hand in glove in that regard with the educational and

electoral systems? There would then be no point deploring the repeated failure of a social policy: we should, rather, have to conclude that it was performing its *real* function to perfection.[1]

In spite of certain findings, the evaluation of the effect of transfers, as regards both redistribution and the orientation of consumption, must be delicately handled. If the overall effect of transfers has, in the long run, made it possible to reduce the range of net incomes by half, the relative stability of this distribution of net incomes has only been achieved at the cost of a very great increase in the sums redistributed.

Environmental Nuisance

The advances of affluence – that is to say, of the possession of ever more goods and individual and collective amenities – have been accompanied by increasingly serious 'environmental nuisances' which are a consequence, on the one hand, of industrial development and technical progress, and, on the other, of the very structures of consumption.

First, we have seen the degradation of our shared living space by economic activities: noise, air and water pollution, environmental destruction, the disruption of residential zones by the development of new amenities (airports, motorways, etc.). Traffic congestion produces a colossal deficit in technical, psychological and human terms. Yet what does this matter, since the necessary excess of infrastructural building, the extra expenditure on petrol, the costs of treatment for accident victims, etc. will all be totted up as consumption, i.e. will become, under cover of the gross national product and statistics, an indication of growth and wealth! Does the flourishing mineral water industry permit us to speak of a real increase in 'affluence' since, to a large extent, it is merely a response to the deficient quality of urban water? And so on. We should never be done with listing all the productive and consumer activities which merely counteract internal nuisances generated by the system of growth. Once it has passed a certain threshold, extra productivity is almost entirely wiped out, swallowed up, by this *homoeopathic treatment of growth by growth*.

The 'cultural nuisance effects' caused by the technical and cultural effects of rationalization and mass production are, of course, strictly incalculable. Moreover, value judgements prevent us from defining common criteria. It would not be possible objectively to characterize the 'nuisance effect' of a grim housing estate or a 'Z feature' movie, as we might do with water pollution. Only a civil service inspector could propose, as happened at a recent congress, the creation, alongside a 'clean air ministry', of a 'crime of offending the intelligence' to protect the populace against the effects of the sensationalist press! But we may admit that nuisance effects of this kind are growing at the same pace as affluence.

The built-in obsolescence of products and machines, the destruction of old structures by which certain needs were met, and the increasing number

of bogus innovations that are of no appreciable benefit to our lives may all be added to the balance sheet here.

Perhaps even more serious than the downgrading of products and machinery is the fact, pointed out by E. Lisle, that

> the cost of rapid progress in the production of wealth is the mobility of labour, and therefore the instability of employment. A turnover and retraining of human beings which has very serious social costs and, most importantly, produces a general sense of *insecurity*. The psychological and social pressures of mobility, of status and competition at all levels (income, prestige, culture, etc.) are becoming more burdensome for everyone. It takes longer to recover, to get back to one's best, and offset the psychological and nervous wear-and-tear produced by the wide range of nuisances: the journey to work, overpopulation, continual stress and aggression … In short, the major cost of the consumer society is the sense of generalized insecurity it engenders.

Which leads to the system, as it were, devouring itself:

> In this rapid growth … which inevitably engenders inflationist tensions … a non-negligible fraction of the population is not able to keep up with the pace. These people are 'left on the scrapheap'. And those who stay the course and achieve the mode of life which is proposed as the model do so only at the cost of an effort which leaves them diminished. With the result that society finds itself compelled to cushion the social costs of growth by redistributing a growing proportion of the gross internal product into social investments (education, research, health) which are designed, above all, to serve growth. (E. Lisle)

Now, these compensatory expenditures, whether private or collective, which are intended to cope with dysfunctions rather than increase positive satisfaction, are *added in*, in all the accounts, *as part of the rise in the standard of living*. Not to mention the consumption of drugs, alcohol and all the other conspicuous or compensatory expenditures, or the military budgets, etc. All of this is growth and, hence, affluence.

The growing number of categories of people 'dependent on society', though not actually a nuisance as such (the battle against illness and the decline in mortality being one of the aspects of 'affluence' – a consumer demand), nonetheless puts a heavy financial burden on the process itself. Ultimately, writes J. Bourgeois-Pichat, 'one might imagine the part of the population whose activity is devoted to maintaining the good health of the country's inhabitants growing larger than the part that is actually involved in production.'

In short, we are everywhere reaching a point where the dynamic of growth and affluence is becoming circular and generating only wheel-spin and where, increasingly, the system is exhausting itself in its own reproduction. A threshold where the wheels turn, but do not advance, where the entire increase in productivity goes into maintaining the system's conditions of survival. The only objective result, then, is the cancerous growth of figures and balance sheets. In all essentials, however, we are returning, in strict terms, to the primitive state, which is that of absolute penury, the state of the animal or the native, all of whose energies are devoted to survival.

Or the state of those who, as Daumal has it, 'plant potatoes so as to be able to eat potatoes, so as to be able to plant potatoes again, etc.' Now, a system is inefficient when its cost is equal to, or higher than, its output. We are not at that point. But, through nuisances and the social and technical correctives to those nuisances, we can see on the horizon a general tendency towards a *tentacular internal functioning of the system*. With 'dysfunctional' consumption, both individual and collective, rising more quickly than the 'functional', the system is basically becoming parasitic upon itself.

The Accounting of Growth or the Mystique of GNP

In this reference to mystique, we are speaking of the most extraordinary collective bluff on the part of modern societies – of an operation of 'white magic' on the figures which in reality conceals a black magic of collective bewitchment. We are speaking of the absurd gymnastics of *accounting illusions*, of national accounts. Nothing enters into these except factors which are visible and measurable by the criteria of economic rationality, and that indeed is the central principle of the magic. Research, culture and women's domestic labour are all excluded from these accounts on this basis, though certain things which have no business there do figure in them, *merely because they are measurable*. Moreover, like dreams, they have no conception of the negative and lump together everything – nuisances and positive elements – in the most total (though by no means innocent) illogicality.

Economists lump together the value of all products and services of all kinds, making no distinction between public and private services. Nuisances and palliatives to them figure in the accounts on the same basis as the production of objectively useful goods. 'Motion pictures, television, cars, and the vast opportunities which go with mobility, together with such less enchanting merchandise as narcotics, comic books, and pornographia, are all included in an advancing gross national product.'[2]

The deficit side – damage and obsolescence – does not figure in the accounts or, if it does, it figures *positively*! The costs of travel to work, for example, are accounted as consumer expenditure! This is the logical result, expressed in figures, of the magical goal of production for its own sake: *every article produced is sacralized by the very fact of its being produced*. Every article produced is *positive*, every measurable thing is positive. The 30 per cent reduction in the luminosity of air in Paris over the past 50 years is regarded as external and non-existent by the accountants. But if it results in a greater expenditure of electrical energy, of light bulbs and spectacles, etc., then it exists – and exists, moreover, as an increase in production and social wealth! Any restrictive or selective infringement of the sacred principle of production and growth is met with cries of sacrilege ('We shall not touch one screw of Concorde!'). As a collective obsession consigned to the accounting ledgers, productivity primarily has the social function of a *myth*. And anything

can be used to fuel that myth – even the conversion of objective realities which refute it into figures which confirm it.

But there is perhaps in this mythic algebra of financial accounts a profound truth, **the** truth of the economico-political system of growth societies. It seems paradoxical to us that the positive and the negative should be added together indiscriminately. But it is perhaps quite simply *logical*. For the truth is perhaps that it is the 'negative' goods, the nuisances compensated, the internal operating costs, the social costs of 'dysfunctional' endoregulation, the subsidiary sectors of useless prodigality *which play the dynamic role of economic engine in that set-up*. This latent truth of the system is, of course, hidden by the figures, the magical addition of which conceals this admirable circularity of the positive and the negative (alcohol sales and hospital building, etc.). And this would explain the impossibility, despite all efforts and at all levels, of rooting out these negative aspects: the system lives by them and cannot rid itself of them. We shall meet this problem again in connection with poverty, that 'balancing counterforce' of poverty which growth societies 'drag along behind them' as a defect and which is in fact one of their most serious 'nuisances'. We have to accept the hypothesis that all these nuisances somewhere enter into the equation as positive factors, as continual factors of growth, as boosters of production and consumption. In the eighteenth century, in *The Fable of the Bees*, Mandeville proposed the theory (already regarded as sacrilegious and libertine in his day) that a society achieves equilibrium not through its virtues but through its vices, and that social peace, progress and human happiness are obtained by the instinctive immorality which leads them continually to break the rules. He was, of course, speaking of morality, but we may construe his words in a social and economic sense. It is, precisely, by its hidden defects, its balancing forces, its nuisances, and what seem like vices when compared with a rational system, that the real system prospers. Mandeville was accused of cynicism: it is the social order, the order of production, which is objectively cynical.[3]

Waste

We know how much the affluence of rich societies is linked to waste, given all the talk of a 'throwaway society' and the fact that some have even envisaged a 'garbage-can sociology': 'Tell me what you throw away and I'll tell you who you are!' But the statistics of waste and rubbish are not interesting in themselves: they are merely a redundant marker of the volume of goods on offer, and their profusion. We can understand neither waste nor its functions if we see in it only the residual scraps of what is made to be consumed but is not. Once again, we have here a simplistic definition of consumption – a moral definition based on the imperative utility of goods. So, all our moralists rail against the squandering of wealth – from the actions of the private individual who no longer respects that kind of *moral law internal to the object*

which its use-value is taken to be and the object's time-span (the individual who throws his goods away or changes them to comply with the whims of prestige or fashion, etc.) to waste on the national and international scale – and even on a kind of global scale, where the human race is seen as squandering wealth in its general economy and its exploitation of natural resources. In short, waste is always considered a kind of madness, of insanity, of instinctual dysfunction, which causes man to burn his reserves and compromise his survival conditions by irrational practice.

This vision at least betrays the fact that we are not in an era of *real* affluence, that every present-day individual, group or society, and even the species as such, stands under the sign of scarcity. Now, it is generally the same people who maintain the myth of the inevitable coming of affluence who deplore waste, linked to the menacing spectre of scarcity. At any event, this whole *moral* vision of waste as dysfunction needs to be reviewed from the perspective of a *sociological* analysis which would bring out its true functions.

All societies have always wasted, squandered, expended and consumed beyond what is strictly necessary for the simple reason that it is in the consumption of a surplus, of a superfluity that the individual – and society – feel not merely that they exist, but that they are alive. That consumption may go so far as *consumation*, pure and simple destruction, which then takes on a specific social function. In potlatch, for example, it is the competitive destruction of precious goods which sets the seal on social organization. The Kwakiutl sacrifice blankets, canoes, etched 'coppers', which they burn or throw into the sea to 'maintain their rank,' to assert their value. And, again, it is by 'wasteful expenditure' that the aristocratic classes have asserted their pre-eminence down the ages. The notion of utility, which has rationalistic, economistic origins, thus needs to be revised in light of a much more general social logic in which waste, far from being an irrational residue, takes on a positive function, taking over where rational utility leaves off to play its part in a higher social functionality – a social logic in which waste even appears ultimately as the essential function, the extra degree of expenditure, superfluity, the ritual uselessness of 'expenditure for nothing' becoming the site of production of values, differences and meanings on both the individual and the social level. Within this perspective, a definition of consumption as consumation – i.e. as productive waste – begins to emerge, a perspective contrary to that of the 'economic' (based on necessity, accumulation and calculation) and one in which, by contrast, the superfluous precedes the necessary, and expenditure takes precedence in terms of value over accumulation and appropriation (even if it does not precede them in time).

'O reason not the need! Our basest beggars/ Are in the poorest thing superfluous./ Allow not nature more than nature needs,/ Man's life is cheap as beast's,' writes Shakespeare in *King Lear* [Act II, Scene iv]. In other words, one of the fundamental problems posed by consumption is the following: do human beings organize themselves for purposes of survival, or

in terms of the individual or collective meaning they give to their lives? Now, this value of 'being', this structural value may involve the sacrifice of economic values. And this problem is not metaphysical. It is at the centre of consumption and may be expressed as follows: *does not affluence ultimately only have meaning in wastage*?

Should we define affluence in terms of foresight and the laying in of provisions, as Valéry does?

> When one contemplates piles of imperishable foodstuffs, is one not looking at time in hand and activity spared? A box of biscuits is a whole month of idleness and life. Pots of conserves and fibre baskets stuffed with seeds and nuts are a storehouse of quietude; a whole winter of tranquillity lies hoarded up in their aroma … Robinson Crusoe could smell the presence of the future in the coffers and chests in his store-room. His hoard radiated idleness. A sense of time emanated from it, in the way an absolute heat emanates from certain metals … Humanity only raised itself up slowly by finding a footing on that which endures. Foresight and the laying in of provisions gradually freed us from the rigours of our animal necessities and the 'word-for-word' character of our wants … Nature suggested this: it so arranged matters that we carried with us the means of resisting somewhat the inconstancy of events; the fat which is on our limbs, the memory which stands ready in the depth of our souls are models of stores laid up which our industry has imitated.

This is the *economic* principle to which Nietzsche's (and also Bataille's) vision of the living being, who wants above all to 'expend his strength', stands opposed:

> Physiologists should think again before positing the 'instinct of preservation' as the cardinal drive in an organic creature. A living thing wants above all to *discharge* its force: 'preservation' is only a consequence of this. Beware of *superfluous* teleological principles! The entire concept 'instinct of preservation' is one of them … The 'struggle for existence' – this formula refers to an exceptional situation; the rule is much rather the struggle for power, the ambition to have 'more' and 'better' and 'quicker' and 'more often'. (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* [Fragment 650])

This 'something more' by which value asserts itself may become the 'something of one's own'. This law of symbolic value, which states that the essential element always lies beyond what is indispensable, is best illustrated in expenditure, in loss, but it may also be verified in appropriation, provided that the latter has the differential function of being extra, of being 'something more'. As witness the Soviet example: the worker, the cadre, the engineer and the party member have a flat which does not belong to them: whether rented or granted for life, it is accommodation which goes with the job, tied to the social status of worker and active citizen, not to the private person. This good is a social service, not a piece of property, nor even less a 'consumable'. On the other hand, the secondary residence, the dacha in the country with its garden, is something which belongs to them. Neither is this a lifetime possession, nor is it revocable, and it can survive them and become hereditary. Hence the 'individualistic' infatuation attaching to it: all efforts are directed towards the acquisition

of that dacha (for want of automobiles, which to some extent play this same 'second home' role in the West). The dacha has a prestige value and a symbolic value: it is the 'something more'.

In a way, it is the same with affluence: for this to become a *value*, there has to be not simply enough, but *too much*. A significant difference has to be maintained and manifested between the necessary and the superfluous. This is the function of waste at all levels. By this, I mean that it is illusory to wish to reduce it, to aspire to eliminating it, for it is waste, in some way, which orientates the whole system. Indeed, just like the gadget (where does usefulness end, uselessness begin?), it can be neither defined nor delimited. All production and expenditure beyond the needs of strict survival can be termed waste (not just fashion in clothing and the food 'dustbin', but military super-gadgets, the 'Bomb', the superfluous agricultural equipment of certain American farmers, and the industrialists who renew their machinery every two years rather than getting the full value out of it: not only consumption, but production too – not to mention politics – largely obeys the laws of ostentatious processes). Profitable and sumptuary investments are everywhere inextricably interlinked. An industrialist who had invested 1,000 dollars in advertising declared: 'I know half of it is wasted, but I don't know which half.' This is always how it is in a complex economy: you cannot isolate what is useful or try to remove what is superfluous. Moreover, the (economically) 'wasted' half is not perhaps the half which takes on the least value, in the long term or, viewed more subtly, even in the very act of being 'lost'.

We have to interpret the immense wastage of our affluent societies this way. It is that wastage which defies scarcity and, contradictorily, signifies abundance. It is not utility, but that wastage which, in its essence, lays down the psychological, sociological and economic guidelines for affluence.

Is not the fact that the glass packaging can be thrown away the mark of **the golden age?**

One of the great themes of mass culture, as analysed by Riesman and Morin, illustrates this in an epic register: this is the theme of the *hero of consumption*. In the West, at least, the impassioned biographies of heroes of production are everywhere giving way today to biographies of heroes of consumption. The great exemplary lives of self-made men and founders, pioneers, explorers and colonizers, which succeeded those of saints and historical figures, have today given way to the lives of movie stars, sporting or gambling heroes, of a handful of gilded princes or globe-trotting barons – in a word, the lives of *great wastrels* (even if the imperative is often that they be shown, by contrast, in their daily 'simplicity', doing their shopping, etc.). With all these great dinosaurs who fill the magazines and TV programmes, it is always the excessiveness of their lives, the potential for outrageous expenditure that is exalted. Their superhuman quality is the whiff of potlatch that attaches to them. In this way, they fulfil a very precise social function: that of sumptuary, useless, inordinate expenditure. They fulfil this function by proxy for the whole social body, like the kings, heroes, priests or

great parvenus of bygone ages. Like them, indeed, they are never so great as when, like James Dean, they pay for this elevated position with their lives.

The essential difference is that, in our current system, this spectacular squandering no longer has the crucial symbolic and collective signification it could assume in primitive feasting and potlatch. This prestigious consumation, too, has been 'personalized' and mass-mediafied. Its function is to provide the economic stimulus for mass consumption, which is defined in relation to it as a subculture of labour. The caricature of the magnificent dress which the star wears for just one evening are the 'disposable panties' which, 80 per cent viscose and 20 per cent non-woven acrylic, can be put on in the morning and thrown away at night, and need no washing. Above all, this sublime, de luxe wastage highlighted by the mass media merely replicates, on the cultural level, a much more fundamental and systematic wastage which, for its part, is integrated directly into economic processes, a *functional*, bureaucratic wastage produced by the production system as it produces material goods, a wastage built into them and, therefore, obligatorily *consumed* as one of the qualities and dimensions of objects of consumption: their fragility, their built-in obsolescence, their condemnation to transience. What is produced today is not produced for its use-value or its possible durability, but rather with an *eye to its death*, and the increase in the speed with which that death comes about is equalled only by the speed of price rises. This alone would be sufficient to throw into question the 'rationalistic' postulates of the whole of economic science on utility, needs, etc. Now, we know that the order of production only survives by paying the price of this extermination, this perpetual calculated 'suicide' of the mass of objects, and that this operation is based on technological 'sabotage' or organized obsolescence under cover of fashion. Advertising achieves the marvellous feat of consuming a substantial budget with the sole aim not of adding to the use-value of objects, but of *subtracting value from them*, of detracting from their time-value by subordinating them to their fashion-value and to ever earlier replacement. And we may leave aside here the colossal quantities of social wealth sacrificed on military budgets and other state and bureaucratic prestige expenditure: that kind of prodigality no longer has any symbolic odour of potlatch about it; it is a desperate, but vital solution for an economico-political system in distress. This 'consumption' at the highest level is part of the consumer society, of the same order as the convulsive craving for objects at the level of the private individual. The two conjointly ensure the reproduction of the order of production. And we have to distinguish individual or collective waste as a symbolic act of expenditure, as a festive ritual and an exalted form of socialization, from its gloomy, bureaucratic caricature in our societies, where wasteful consumption has become a daily obligation, a forced and often unconscious institution like indirect taxation, a cool participation in the constraints of the economic order.

'Smash up your car, the insurance will do the rest!' Indeed, the car is without doubt one of the main foci of daily and long-term waste, both

private and collective. Not only is it so by its systematically reduced use-value, its systematically increased prestige and fashion coefficient, and the outrageous sums invested in it, but – without doubt much more deeply than this – by the spectacular collective sacrifice of sheet-metal, machinery and *human lives* in the Accident. The Accident: that gigantic 'happening', the finest offered by consumer society, through which society affords itself in the ritual destruction of materials and life the proof of its excessive affluence (a proof *a contrario*, but one that is much more effective in the depths of the imagination than the direct proof by accumulation).

The consumer society needs its objects in order to be. More precisely, it needs to *destroy* them. The use of objects leads only to their *dwindling disappearance*. The value created is much more intense in *violent loss*. This is why destruction remains the fundamental alternative to production: consumption is merely an intermediate term between the two. There is a profound tendency within consumption for it to surpass itself, to transfigure itself in destruction. It is in destruction that it acquires its meaning. Most of the time in daily life today, it remains subordinate – as a managed consumptivity – to the order of productivity. This is why, most of the time, objects are present *by their absence*, and why their very abundance paradoxically signifies penury. Stock is the excessive expression of lack and a mark of anxiety. Only in destruction are objects there *in excess* and only then, in their disappearance, do they attest to wealth. At any rate, it is clear that destruction, either in its violent and symbolic form (the happening, potlatch, destructive acting-out, both individual and collective) or in its form of systematic and institutional destructiveness, is fated to become one of the preponderant functions of post-industrial society.

PART II

The Theory of Consumption

4

The Social Logic of Consumption

The Egalitarian Ideology of Well-Being

The whole of the discourse on needs is based on a naïve anthropology: that of the natural propensity to happiness. Happiness, written in letters of fire behind the least little advert for bathsalts or the Canary Islands, is the absolute reference of the consumer society: it is the strict equivalent of *salvation*. But what is this happiness which haunts modern civilization with such ideological force?

Here again one has to revise all spontaneous conceptions. The ideological force of the notion of happiness does not originate in a natural propensity on the part of each individual to realize that happiness for himself. It derives, socio-historically, from the fact that the myth of happiness is the one which, in modern societies, takes up and comes to embody *the myth of Equality*. All the political and sociological virulence with which that myth has been charged since the industrial revolution and the revolutions of the nineteenth century has been transferred to Happiness. The fact that Happiness initially has that signification and that ideological function has important consequences for its content: to be the vehicle of the *egalitarian* myth, Happiness has to be *measurable*. It has to be a *well-being* measurable in terms of objects and signs; it has to be 'comfort', as Tocqueville put it, already noting this trend of democratic societies towards ever more well-being as a reduction of the impact of social misfortune and an equalization of all destinies. Happiness as total or inner enjoyment – that happiness independent of the signs which could manifest it to others and to those around us, the happiness which has no need of *evidence* – is therefore excluded from the outset from the consumer ideal in which happiness is, first and foremost, the demand for equality (or distinction, of course) and must, accordingly, always signify with 'regard' to *visible* criteria. In this sense, Happiness is even further removed from any collective 'feast' or exaltation since, fuelled by an egalitarian exigency, it is based on *individualistic* principles, fortified by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which explicitly recognize the right to Happiness of everyone (of each individual).

The 'Revolution of Well-Being' is heir to, or executor of, the Bourgeois Revolution, or simply of any revolution which proclaims human equality as its principle without being able (or without wishing) *fundamentally* to bring it about. The democratic principle is then transferred from a real equality of capacities, of responsibilities, of social chances and of happiness

(in the full sense of the term) to an equality before the Object and other *manifest* signs of social success and happiness. This is the *democracy of social standing*, the democracy of the TV, the car and the stereo, an apparently concrete but, in fact, equally formal democracy which, beyond contradictions and social inequalities, corresponds to the formal democracy enshrined in the Constitution. Both of these, the one serving as an alibi for the other, combine in a general democratic ideology which conceals the *absence* of democracy and the non-existence of equality.

In the mystique of equality, the notion of 'needs' is indissociable from that of well-being. Needs point to a reassuring universe of ends, and this naturalistic anthropology lays the ground for the promise of a universal equality. The implicit argument is as follows: all men are equal before need and before the principle of satisfaction, since all men are equal before the *use-value* of objects and goods (whereas they are unequal and divided before *exchange-value*). Need being indexed to use-value, we have here a relationship of *objective* utility or natural finality, in the face of which there is no longer any social or historical inequality. At the meat-and-drink level (use-value), there are no proletarians, no privileged individuals.

Thus the complementary myths of well-being and needs have a powerful ideological function of reducing, of eliminating the objective, social and historical, determinations of inequality. The whole political game of the welfare state and consumer society consists in surmounting their contradictions by increasing the volume of goods, with the prospect of an automatic equalization by quantity and a level of final *equilibrium*, which would be that of total well-being for all. Communist societies themselves speak in terms of equilibrium, of 'natural' individual or social needs, needs 'harmonized' and free of all social differentiation or class connotation. In this, they too drift from a *political* solution to a definitive solution by abundance, substituting the formal equality of goods for the social transparency of exchanges. Thus we also see the 'Revolution of Well-Being' taking over from the social and political revolution in the socialist countries.

If this perspective on the ideology of well-being is correct (namely, that that ideology is a vehicle for the myth of formal equality 'secularized' in goods and signs), then it is clear that the eternal problem of whether consumer society promotes or hinders equality, whether it is a fully achieved democracy (or on the way to being so) or the opposite – merely restoring earlier inequalities and social structures – is a *false problem*. Whether or not one is able to prove that consumption possibilities are being equalized (income differentials being flattened out, social redistribution, the same fashion for everyone, along with the same TV programmes and holiday destinations), this means nothing, since posing the problem in terms of the equalization of consumption is already to substitute the pursuit of objects and signs (level of substitution) for the real problems and their *logical* and sociological analysis. All in all, analysing Affluence does not mean seeking its verification in the statistics, which can only be as mythic as the myth, but radically changing focus and approaching the myth of Affluence with a logic other than its own.

Analysis does, of course, require that we assess affluence in terms of figures, that we draw up the balance sheet of well-being. But the figures do not speak for themselves, and they never provide any counterargument. Only interpretations speak, sometimes to one side of, sometimes against, the figures. Let us listen to what they have to say.

The most stubborn and unyielding of these is the idealist version:

- growth means affluence;
- affluence means democracy.

It being impossible to conclude that this state of total felicity is imminent (even at the statistical level), the myth becomes more 'realistic' and we have the ideal-reformist variant: the large-scale inequalities of the first phase of growth are diminishing, there is no 'iron law' any longer, incomes are becoming harmonized. The hypothesis of a smooth, continuous progress towards ever more equality is, of course, refuted by certain facts (the 'Other America': 20 per cent living in poverty, etc.). But these point to a temporary dysfunction, to teething troubles. Growth, while producing certain inegalitarian effects, implies an overall, long-term democratization. Thus, in Galbraith's view, the problem of equality/inequality is no longer relevant. It was linked to the problem of wealth and poverty and the structures of the 'affluent' society have resolved the problem, despite an unequal redistribution. The 'poor' (the 20 per cent) are those who remain, for one reason or another, outside the industrial system, outside growth. The principle of growth itself remains inviolate; it is homogeneous and is tending to homogenize the entire social body.

The basic question which arises at this level is the question of this 'poverty'. For the idealists of affluence, it is 'residual'; it will be cleared up by additional growth. Yet it seems to carry on down the post-industrial generations and all efforts to eliminate it (particularly in the USA, with the 'great society') seem to run up against some mechanism of the system which seems to reproduce it functionally at each stage of development, like a kind of drag on growth, a kind of mechanism indispensable to the general wealth. Should we believe Galbraith when he imputes this inexplicable residual poverty to the dysfunctions of the system (the priority accorded to military and other wasteful expenditure, a lagging of public services behind private consumption, etc.) or should we *turn* his argument *around* and conclude that *growth, in its very dynamic, is based on this disequilibrium*? Galbraith is very contradictory on this: all his analyses tend to demonstrate in a sense *how its defects are functionally implicated in the system of growth*, yet he recoils before the logical conclusions which would challenge the system itself and recasts everything in a liberal perspective.

Generally, the idealists do not go beyond this paradoxical affirmation: in spite of everything, and by a *devilish* inversion of its aims (which, as everyone knows, cannot but be *beneficent*), growth produces, reproduces and restores social inequality, privileges, disequilibria, etc. They will admit, for example, as Galbraith does in *The Affluent Society*, that, ultimately, it is an

increase in production which takes over the redistributive role ('As there comes to be more and more … so there will in the end be enough for everyone' – these principles, based on the physics of fluids, are *never* true in a social relations context, where, as we shall see below, things work in precisely the opposite way). Moreover, from these principles, Galbraith derives an argument for the underprivileged, to the effect that even those on the bottom rung of the ladder have more to gain from an accelerated growth of production than from any other form of redistribution. But this is all specious: for, if growth grants *everyone* access to an income and a volume of goods which are higher in absolute terms, what is sociologically characteristic is the *process of distortion* which sets in at the very heart of growth. It is the *rate of distortion* which subtly structures growth and gives it its true meaning. It is so much easier to content oneself with the spectacular disappearance of a particular extreme form of penury or certain *secondary* inequalities, to assess affluence by statistics and *general* quantities, by *absolute* increases and *gross* national products, than to analyse it in terms of structures! Structurally, it is the rate of distortion which is significant. It is that rate which, at an international level, marks the growing distance between the underdeveloped countries and the overdeveloped nations, and also, within those nations, the lower incomes falling further behind the higher, failing industries losing ground to the high-technology sectors, rural areas losing out to urban, industrial areas, etc. Chronic inflation allows this relative pauperization to be masked, by revising all nominal values upwards, whereas the calculation of the relative functions and averages would show up instances of partial decline at the bottom of the scale, and, at any event, a structural distortion throughout. There is no point constantly arguing that this is temporary or conjunctural when one sees the whole logic of the system sustaining it and the system indeed depending upon it for the fulfilment of its aims. At best, we can say the system stabilizes around a certain rate of distortion or, in other words, stabilizes, *whatever the absolute volume of wealth*, at a point which includes a *systematic* inequality.

The only way, in fact, to escape the idealist dead-end of this gloomy listing of dysfunctions is to admit that there is a *systematic logic* at work here. It is also the only way of getting beyond the false problematic of abundance and scarcity which, like votes of confidence in parliamentary circles, functions to stifle all discussion.

There is not in fact – and never has been – any 'affluent society', any more than there is an 'indigent society', since every society of whatever kind and *whatever the volume of goods produced or available wealth* is geared both to a *structural excess* and a *structural penury*. The excess may be the portion set aside for the gods or for sacrifice; it may be sumptuary expenditure, surplus value, economic profit or prestige budgets. It is, at any rate, that luxury levy which defines both the wealth of a society and its social structure, since it is always the prerogative of a privileged minority and its function is precisely to reproduce caste or class privilege. At the sociological level there is no equilibrium. Equilibrium is the ideal fantasy of economists

which is contradicted, if not by the very logic of society as a condition, then at least by all known forms of social organization. Every society produces differentiation, social discrimination, and that structural organization is based on the use and distribution of wealth (among other things). The fact that a society enters upon a phase of growth, as our industrial society has done, changes nothing in this process. Quite the contrary, indeed, in a certain way the capitalist system (and the productivist system in general) has been the culmination of that functional unlevelling, that disequilibrium, by rationalizing it and generalizing it in all respects. The spirals of growth are arrayed around the same structural axis. As soon as the fiction of GDP is abandoned as the criterion of affluence, we have to admit that *growth neither takes us further from, nor brings us closer to, affluence. It is logically separated from it by the whole social structure* which is, here, the determining instance. A certain type of social relations and social contradictions, a certain type of 'inequality', which used to perpetuate itself in the absence of economic progress, is today reproduced in and through growth.[1]

This means that we must take another view of growth. We shall no longer say with the enthusiasts: 'Growth produces affluence and therefore equality.' Nor shall we take the extreme opposite view: 'Growth produces inequality.' Overturning the false problem of whether growth is egalitarian or inegalitarian, we shall say that it is **growth itself which is a function of inequality.** It is the need of the inegalitarian social order – the social structure of privilege – to maintain itself that produces and reproduces growth as its strategic element. To put it yet another way, the internal autonomy of (technological, economic) growth is weak and secondary by comparison with that determination by the social structure.

Growth society is, overall, the product of a compromise between egalitarian democratic principles, which for support within that society can draw on the myths of Affluence and Well-Being, and the fundamental imperative of maintaining an order of privilege and domination. That society is not founded on technological progress. It is that mechanistic view which fuels the naïve illusion of future affluence. It is, rather, this contradictory dual determination which underpins the possibility of technological progress. It is this determination too which governs the emergence in our contemporary societies of certain egalitarian, democratic, 'progressive' processes. But it must be recognized that these only emerge there in *homoeopathic doses,* drip-fed out by the system to ensure its survival. In this systematic process, equality itself is a (secondary and derived) function of inequality. As is growth. The tendency for incomes to be equalized, for example (for it is chiefly at this level that the egalitarian myth operates), is necessary to the internalization of growth processes – an internalization which, as we have seen, contributes tactically to the reproduction of the social order, which is a structure of privilege and class power. All this points to the few symptoms of democratization as being *alibis* essential to the viability of the system.

These few symptoms are, moreover, themselves superficial and suspect. Galbraith rejoices at the decline in importance of inequality as an economic

(and, hence, social) problem – not that it has disappeared, as he says, but because wealth no longer brings with it the fundamental advantages (power, enjoyment, prestige, distinction) it once implied. The power of property-owners and stockholders is at an end; it is now experts and organized technicians who exercise power, if not indeed intellectuals and scientists! The conspicuous consumption of the great capitalists, the 'Citizen Kanes', is over, and there are no great fortunes any more. Indeed, the rich feel almost duty-bound to underconsume. In short, without wishing to do so, Galbraith clearly shows that if there is equality (if poverty and wealth are no longer a problem), it is precisely because equality no longer has any real importance. Things have moved on; the criteria of value are now elsewhere. Social discrimination, power and so on – those things which remain *the key factors* – have been shifted away from income or wealth pure and simple. It is of little consequence, in these conditions, if all incomes are in the end equal; the system can even afford the luxury of making a great step in that direction, *for the fundamental determination of 'inequality' is no longer to be found there.* Knowledge, culture, the structures of responsibility and decision-making, and influence are all criteria which, though still largely associated with wealth and level of income, have to a great extent relegated these latter – together with external marks of status – in the order of the social determinants of value, in the hierarchy of criteria of 'power'. Galbraith, for example, confuses the 'underconsumption' of the rich with the abolition of criteria of prestige based on money. Now, admittedly, the rich man who drives a 2CV no longer bedazzles. What he does is more subtle: he super-differentiates himself, super-distinguishes himself by his *manner* of consuming, by style. He maintains his privilege absolutely by moving from conspicuous to discreet (super-conspicuous) consumption, by moving from quantitative ostentation to distinction, from money to culture.

In fact, even this argument, which we might term the thesis of the 'tendency of the rate of economic privilege to fall', is not certain. For money always transmutes itself into hierarchical privilege, into a privilege of power and culture. We may accept that it is no longer decisive (has it ever been?). What Galbraith and the others fail to see is that the very fact that (economic) inequality is no longer a problem in itself constitutes a problem. Registering a little too hastily the abatement of the 'iron law' in the economic field, they then go no further, and fail to produce a broader theory of this 'iron law' or to see how it shifts from the field of incomes and 'consumption' – henceforth blessed by Affluence – to a much more general social field where, functioning more subtly, it makes itself all the more irreversible.

The Industrial System and Poverty

When one examines the problem of the industrial system *objectively* in its entirety, cutting through all the liturgy of growth and affluence, one sees that all the possible positions boil down to two fundamental options:

1 The Galbraith option (shared by so many others). This magical-idealist position consists in expelling from the system all the negative phenomena – dysfunctions, nuisances, poverty – on the grounds that these are admittedly deplorable but accidental, residual and eventually remediable. In this way, the enchanted orbit of growth is preserved.
2 The view that the system survives on disequilibrium and structural penury, that its logic is totally ambivalent, and that it is so not merely conjuncturally but structurally. The system only sustains itself by producing wealth **and** poverty, by producing as many dissatisfactions as satisfactions, as much nuisance as 'progress'. Its only logic is to survive and its strategy in this regard is to keep human society out of kilter, in perpetual deficit. We know the system has traditionally and powerfully drawn on the aid of *war* to survive and to revive. Today the mechanisms and functions of war have been integrated into the economic system and the mechanisms of daily life.

If one accepts this structural paradox of growth, from which the contradictions and paradoxes of affluence derive, then it is naïve and mystificatory to confuse the logical processes of social underdevelopment with the poor, the 20 per cent of 'underprivileged', the individuals 'thrown on the scrapheap'. Those processes cannot be located in real persons, in real places, in real groups. By the same token, they cannot be eliminated by the billions of dollars which have been thrown at the lower classes, or by the massive redistribution programmes to 'dispel poverty' and provide equal life-chances (all this being got up as the 'new frontier',[2] a social ideal to tug at the heart strings). We have to acknowledge at times that the 'great societists' themselves believe in all this, their bewilderment at the failure of their 'unremitting, generous' efforts being only the more comical for that fact.

If poverty and nuisance cannot be eliminated, this is because they are anywhere but in the poor neighbourhoods. They are not in the slums or shanty-towns, but in the socio-economic structure. Yet this is precisely what has to be concealed, what must not be said, and indeed billions of dollars are spent on hiding the fact (in the same way, heavy medical and pharmaceutical expenditure may be necessary to avoid admitting that a problem is not what it appears to be, and may, for example, be psychological in nature – the well-known process of 'denial'). A society, like an individual, may ruin itself in this way, trying to escape analysis. Now, it is true here that analysis would be lethal for the system itself. So the sacrifice of useless millions in the struggle against what is merely the *visible phantom* of poverty is not too high a price to pay if it means that the myth of growth is preserved. We have to go even further and acknowledge that *this real poverty is a myth* – and one in which the myth of growth glories, pretending to battle fiercely against it and yet keeping it alive all the same as its secret goals require.

Having said this, we should not believe that it is because they are *deliberately* bloodthirsty and odious that the industrial or capitalist systems continually regenerate poverty or identify with the arms race. Moralistic

analysis (which neither liberals nor Marxists escape) is always a mistake. If the system could find an equilibrium or survive on foundations other than unemployment, underdevelopment and military expenditure, it would do so. And on occasion it does. When it can safely maintain its power by way of beneficial social effects, by way of 'affluence', it does not fail to do so. It is not opposed on principle to the social 'spin-offs' of progress. It takes both nuclear power and the well-being of citizens as its objective, simultaneously and without distinction: the point is that, in its eyes, the two are ultimately equal as contents and its final goal lies elsewhere.

The simple fact is that, at the strategic level, it turns out that military expenditures (for example) are more reliable, easier to monitor and more effective in achieving the survival and goals of the system as a whole than education – as is also the case with motor cars rather than hospitals, colour televisions rather than playgrounds, etc. But that negative discrimination does not apply to public services as such. Things are much more serious than this: *the system knows only the conditions of its survival, it knows nothing of social and individual contents.* That should forearm us against a number of (typically social-reformist) illusions: the illusions which involve a belief that one can change the system by modifying its contents (transferring military expenditures to education etc.). Moreover, the paradox is that all these social demands are, slowly but surely, taken up and realized by the system itself, thus slipping through the fingers of those who turn them into a political platform. Consumption, information, communication, culture, affluence – all these things are today set in place, discovered and organized by the system itself, as new *productive forces*, for its greater glory. It too is changing over (relatively) from a violent to a non-violent structure: it is substituting affluence and consumption for exploitation and war. But it will win no affection for this, since it is not actually changing, but merely obeying its own laws.

The New Segregations

Not only affluence, but nuisance too has been taken up into the social logic. The ascendancy of the urban and industrial milieu is producing new examples of shortage: shortages of space and time, fresh air, greenery, water, silence. Certain goods, which were once free and abundantly available, are becoming luxuries accessible only to the privileged, while manufactured goods or services are offered on a mass scale.

The relative homogenization at the level of essential goods is thus being accompanied by a 'slippage' of values and a new hierarchy of utilities. The distortion and inequality are not reduced; they are *transferred elsewhere.* Everyday consumer objects are becoming less and less expressive of social rank. And incomes themselves, in so far as the great disparities are being reduced, are losing their value as a distinctive criterion. It is even possible that consumption (taken in the sense of expenditure, of the purchase and

possession of visible objects) will gradually concede to other criteria and other types of behaviour the pre-eminent role it currently plays in the variable geometry of status. Ultimately, *it will become the prerogative of everyone when it no longer has any meaning.*

We are already seeing the social hierarchy being registered in more subtle criteria: type of work and responsibility, level of education and culture (the *way* of consuming everyday goods may itself be a kind of 'scarce commodity'), participation in decision-making. Knowledge and power are, or are going to become, the two great scarce commodities of our affluent societies.

But these abstract criteria do not prevent us, even today, from reading a growing discrimination in other concrete signs. Segregation by place of residence is not new, but, being increasingly linked to a consciously induced shortage and chronic speculation, it is tending to become decisive, in terms of both geographical segregation (town centres and outskirts, residential zones, rich ghettos, dormitory suburbs, etc.) and habitable space (the inside and outside of the dwelling, the addition of a 'second home', etc.). Objects are less important today than space and the social marking of space. Habitat thus perhaps has an *opposite* function to that of other consumables. The latter have a homogenizing function, the former a differentiating function in terms of space and location.

Nature, space, clean air, silence – it is the incidence of the pursuit of these scarce commodities and their high price which we read in the differential indices of expenditure between two categories at opposite ends of the social spectrum. The difference in expenditure between workers and senior managers on essential goods is 100:135, but it is 100:245 on household equipment, 100:305 on transport and 100:390 on leisure. One should not see these figures as showing a quantitative graduation within a homogeneous space of consumption, but see, through them, the social *discrimination* attaching to the *quality* of goods sought after.

There is much talk of the right to health, to space, to beauty, to holidays, to knowledge and to culture. And, as these new rights emerge, so ministries emerge with them, such as the Ministries of Health, or of Leisure. And why not add Beauty and Clean Air? This whole phenomenon, which seems to express a general individual and collective advance, rewarded in the end with embodiment in institutions, is ambiguous in its meaning and one might, as it were, see it as representing quite the opposite: *there is no right to space until there no longer is space for everyone*, and until then space and silence are the privilege of some at the expense of others. Just as there was no 'right to property' until there was no longer land for everyone and there was no right to work until work became, within the framework of the division of labour, an exchangeable commodity, i.e. one which no longer belonged specifically to individuals. We might ask whether the 'right to leisure' does not, similarly, mean that leisure too has reached the stage of technical and social division which work did before it and has thus, in fact, come to an end.

The appearance of these new social rights, brandished as slogans and emblazoned on the democratic banner of the affluent society, is in fact symptomatic, therefore, of the elements concerned acquiring the status of distinctive signs and class (or caste) privileges. *The 'right to clean air' signifies the loss of clean air as a natural good, its transition to commodity status and its inegalitarian social redistribution.* One should not mistake for objective social progress (something being entered as a right in the tables of the law) what is simply the advance of the capitalist system – i.e. the progressive transformation of all concrete and natural values into productive forms, i.e. into sources

1 of economic profit;
2 of social privilege.

A Class Institution

Consumption no more homogenizes the social body than the educational system homogenizes cultural opportunities. It even highlights the disparities within it. One is tempted to regard consumption and the growing participation in the same(?) goods and the same(?) products, both material and cultural, as a corrective to social disparities, social hierarchy and the ever increasing level of discrimination where power and responsibilities are concerned. In fact, the ideology of consumption, like that of education (i.e. the representation one has of a total equality before the electric razor or the car, like the representation one has of a total equality before writing and reading), does indeed play this role. Everyone today can read and write; everyone has (or will have) the same washing machine and buys the same paperbacks. But this equality is entirely formal: though bearing on what is most concrete, it is in fact abstract. And it is, by contrast, on this homogeneous abstract base, on this foundation of the *abstract democracy of spelling or the TV set*, that the real system of discrimination is able to operate – and to operate all the more effectively.

In actual fact, it is not even true that consumer products, the signs of this social institution, establish this primary democratic platform: for, in themselves, and taken individually (the car, the razor, etc.), they have no meaning: it is their constellation, their configuration, the relation to these objects and their overall social 'perspective' which alone have a meaning. And that meaning is always a distinctive one. They themselves, in their materiality as signs (their subtle differences), reflect that structural determination. Like education, they obey the same social logic as other institutions, even in the inverted image they give of that logic.

Consumption, like the education system, is a class institution: not only is there inequality before objects in the economic sense (the purchase, choice and use of objects are governed by purchasing power and by educational level, which is itself dependent upon class background, etc.) – in short, not everyone has the same objects, just as not everyone has the same educational chances – but, more deeply, there is radical discrimination in the sense that only some people achieve mastery of an autonomous, rational

logic of the elements of the environment (functional use, aesthetic organization, cultural accomplishment). Such people do not really deal with objects and do not, strictly speaking, 'consume', whilst the others are condemned to a magical economy, to the valorization of objects as such, and of all other things as objects (ideas, leisure, knowledge, culture): *this fetishistic logic is, strictly, the ideology of consumption*.

Similarly, for those who do not have the key to them – that is to say, the code which admits one to their legitimate, rational and effective use – knowledge and culture are merely the occasion of a sharper, subtler cultural segregation, since knowledge and culture merely appear in their eyes, and in the use they make of them, as a supplementary mana, a reserve of magic power, instead of being the opposite: a learning process and an objective training.[3]

A Salvational Dimension

By their number, redundancy, superfluity and formal extravagance, by the play of fashion and all that exceeds pure and simple function in them, objects merely *simulate the social essence* – **status** – that grace of predestination which is only ever bestowed by birth to a few and which the majority, having opposite destinies, can never attain. This hereditary legitimacy (whether of blood or of culture) is at the very heart of the concept of status, the key concept in the whole dynamics of social mobility. Underlying all aspirations, there is this ideal end of a status by birth, a status of grace and excellence. And status also haunts the environment of objects. It is status which arouses this frenzy, this berserk world of knick-knacks, gadgets, **fetishes,** all of which seek to mark out a value for all eternity and prove *salvation by works, since salvation by grace is unattainable*. Hence the very particular prestige of the ancient object, which is a sign of heredity, of innate value, of irreversible grace.

It is a class logic which imposes salvation by objects. That is a *salvation by works*, which, in its 'democratic' nature, stands opposed to the aristocratic principle of salvation by grace and election. Now, in the universal consensus, salvation by grace always wins out over salvation by works. This is to some degree what we see among the lower and middle classes, where 'proving oneself by objects' – salvation by consumption – in its endless process of moral demonstration, battles despairingly to attain a status of personal grace, of god-givenness and predestination. That remains, nonetheless, the preserve of the upper classes, who prove their excellence elsewhere, in the display of their culture and the exercise of their power.

Differentiation and Growth Society

All this leads us, then, beyond the Metaphysics of Needs and Affluence, to a genuine analysis of the *social logic* of consumption. That logic is by no

means that of the individual appropriation of the *use-value* of goods and services – a logic of unequal abundance, some having rightful access to the miracle, others merely to the by-products of the miracle. It is a logic not of satisfaction, but of the production and manipulation of social signifiers. The process of consumption may be analysed within this perspective from two basic angles:

1 As a *process of signification and communication*, based on a code into which consumption practices fit and from which they derive their meaning. Consumption here is a system of exchange, and the equivalent of a language. Structural analysis is the appropriate approach at this level. We shall come back to this below.
2 As a *process of classification and social differentiation* in which sign/objects are ordered not now merely as significant differences in a code but as status values in a hierarchy. Here consumption can be submitted to a strategic analysis which determines its specific importance in the distribution of status values (overlapping with other social signifiers: knowledge, power, culture, etc.).

The principle of analysis remains as follows: you never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status.

Yet, this process of status differentiation, which is a fundamental social process by which everyone *takes their place within society*, has a lived aspect and a structural aspect, the one conscious, the other unconscious, the one ethical (the morality of social standing, of status rivalry, of the ladder of prestige), the other structural. One is permanently governed by a code whose rules and meaning-constraints – like those of language – are, for the most part, beyond the grasp of individuals.

The consumer experiences his distinctive behaviours as freedom, as aspiration, as choice. His experience is not one of being *forced to be different*, of obeying a code. To differentiate oneself is always, by the same token, to bring into play the total order of differences, which is, from the first, the product of the total society and inevitably exceeds the scope of the individual. In the very act of scoring his points in the order of differences, each individual maintains that order, and therefore condemns himself only ever to occupy a relative position within it. Each individual experiences his differential social gains as absolute gains; he does not experience the structural constraint which means that positions change, but the order of differences remains.

Yet it is this *constraint of relativity* which is crucial, in so far as it is with reference to this that the differential occupation of positions *will never end*. It alone can account for the fundamental character of consumption, its **unlimited** character, a dimension which cannot be explained by any theory of needs and satisfaction, since, if the calculation were made in terms of a calorific or

energy balance sheet or of use-values, a saturation point would very soon be reached. But we very clearly see the opposite happening: an acceleration of the rate of consumption, increased pressure on demand, which means that the gap between a giant-scale productivity and an even more frantic propensity to consume is, in fact, growing wider (meanwhile, affluence, understood as the harmonious matching of the two, recedes indefinitely). This can only be explained if we radically abandon the individual logic of satisfaction and accord the social logic of differentiation the decisive importance it deserves. And if we distinguish that logic of difference from mere conscious determinations of prestige, since these latter are still *satisfactions*, the consumption of *positive differences*, whereas the sign or mark of distinction is always both a positive **and** a negative difference – this is why it refers on indefinitely to other signs and impels the consumer on to definitive dissatisfaction.[4]

The alarm of economists and other idealist theorists of well-being at the clear inability of the consumption system to stabilize – at its uncontrolled, runaway character – is always very instructive. It is characteristic of their way of seeing things in terms of increases in goods and incomes – and never in terms of relation and differentiation by signs. Thus Gervasi writes: 'Growth is accompanied by the constant introduction of new products as the rise in incomes expands the scope for consumption.' 'The rising trend of incomes brings not only a wave of new products, but also a proliferation of different qualities for the same product.' (Why? What is the logical relation?) 'The rise in incomes leads to a progressive improvement in quality.' We have here again the same implicit thesis: 'The more you earn, the more you want, and better', this being true of everyone individually, without distinction, each person seeking a rational optimum of well-being.

Very generally, moreover, the field of consumption is a homogeneous one for them (with, at most, some disparities of income or 'cultural' disparities in it), which fans out statistically around an average type: the 'consumer'. This is a view induced by the conception of American society as an immense middle class – and European sociology has now, largely, fallen in with that view. In fact, the field of consumption is a *structured social field*, where not only goods, but needs themselves, like the various cultural characteristics, pass from a key group, a leading elite, to the other social categories as these 'rise' relatively on the social ladder. There is no 'mass of consumers' and no need emerges spontaneously from the grassroots consumer: needs have no chance of appearing in the 'standard package' of needs if they have not already been part of the 'select package'. The *path of needs*, like the path of objects and goods, is thus first socially selective: needs and satisfactions trickle down in accordance with an absolute principle, a kind of social categorical imperative which is the maintenance of distance and of differentiation by signs. It is this law which conditions all introduction of new objects as distinctive social material. It is this law of the 'top-down' replenishment of distinctive material which runs through the whole world of consumption, not the rise in incomes, which runs in the opposite direction (from the bottom up, towards total homogeneity).

No product has any chance of being mass-produced, no need has any chance of being satisfied on a mass scale unless it has already ceased to form part of the higher model and has been replaced by some other distinctive good or need – such that the distance is preserved. Popularization occurs only as a function of selective innovation at the top. And that process occurs, of course, as a function of the 'falling rate of distinction' of objects and goods in a growth society. Here again some preconceptions are in need of revision: popularization has its own mechanics (the mass media, etc.), but it has no logic of its own regarding content. It is within the upper echelons of society, as a reaction against the loss of earlier distinctive markers, that innovation takes place, in order to restore social distance. As a result, the needs of the middle and lower classes are always, like objects, subject to a certain backwardness; they lag temporally and culturally behind the needs of the upper classes. This is a not insignificant form of *segregation* in so-called democratic society.

One of the contradictions of growth is that it produces goods and needs at the same time, but does not produce them at the same rate – the rate of production of goods being dependent on industrial and economic productivity, the rate of production of needs on the logic of social differentiation. Now, the upward and irreversible mobility of the needs 'set free' by growth (i.e. *produced* by the industrial system as it obeys its internal logical constraints)[5] has its own dynamic, which is different from the dynamic of the production of the material and cultural goods supposedly meant to satisfy those needs. Beyond a certain level of urban socialization, status competition and psychological 'take-off', aspiration is irreversible and unlimited, and develops to a rhythm of accelerated socio-differentiation and generalized interrelativity. Hence the specific problems linked to this 'differential' dynamic of consumption. If aspirations were simply concurrent with productivity, subordinate to it, there would be no problem. In fact, by their very own logic, which is a logic of difference, they constitute an uncontrollable variable. They are not just another variable in the economic calculation – a socio-cultural variable of situation or context – but a crucial structural variable which governs all others.

We must, admittedly, accept (as the various studies on this point, particularly on cultural needs, have done) a certain *sociological inertia* of needs. In other words, a certain indexing of needs and aspirations to the social position achieved (and not in the least, as conditioning theorists believe, to the goods on offer). Once again at this level, we find the same processes which are those of social mobility. A certain 'realism' means that people in a particular social situation never have aspirations much beyond what they can reasonably hope to attain. By having aspirations *a little* beyond their objective chances, they internalize the official norms of a growth society. By having aspirations which are *little* beyond, they internalize the real norms of expansion of that society (Malthusian even in its expansion) which are always short of what is possible. The less one has, the lower one's aspirations (at least up to a certain threshold, where total

unrealism takes over to compensate for destitution). Thus, *the very process of the production of aspirations is inegalitarian*, since resignation at the bottom end of the social scale and freer aspirations at the top compound the inequality of objective possibilities of satisfaction. Here again, however, the problem must be seen in the round: it is quite possible that strictly consumer aspirations (material and cultural) – which, for their part, display a much greater degree of elasticity than professional or cultural aspirations – in fact *compensate* for the serious underachievement of certain classes in terms of social mobility. The compulsion to consume might be said to compensate for failure to rise up the vertical social ladder. At the same time as expressing a status demand, the aspirations to 'overconsume' (on the part of the lower classes in particular) might be seen as expressing the felt failure of that demand.

The fact remains that needs and aspirations, activated by social differentiation and demands for status, tend in a growth society always to progress a little more quickly than available goods or objective chances. Moreover, the industrial system itself, which presupposes the growth of needs, also presupposes *a perpetual excess of needs* over the supply of goods (in the same way as it speculates on a reserve of unemployment to maximize the profit it extracts from labour power: we meet here once again the deep-level analogy between needs and productive forces).[6] Speculating upon this discrepancy between goods and needs, the system does, however, verge on a contradiction in that growth not only implies the growth of needs and a certain disequilibrium between goods and needs, but further implies *the growth of that very disequilibrium* between the growth of needs and the growth of productivity. Hence the 'psychological pauperization' and the chronic, latent state of crisis, which is itself functionally linked to growth, but which can lead to a point of breakdown, an explosive contradiction.

Confronting the growth of needs and the growth of production means bringing out the decisive 'intermediate' variable that is differentiation. Hence, it is the increasing differentiation of products and the increasing differentiation of the social demand for prestige that must be seen in their interrelations.[7] Now, the former is limited, whereas the latter is not. There are no limits to man's 'needs' as a social being (i.e. as a being productive of *meaning* and relative to others in *value*). The quantitative intake of food is limited, the digestive system is limited, but the cultural system of food is, for its part, indefinite. And it is, moreover, a relatively contingent system. The strategic value of advertising – and also its trick – is precisely this: that it targets everyone *in their relation to others*, in their hankerings after reified social prestige. It is never addressed to a lone individual, but is aimed at human beings in their differential relations and, even when it seems to tap into their 'deep' motivations, it always does so in *spectacular* fashion. That is to say, it always calls in their friends and relations, the group, and society, all hierarchically ordered within the process of reading and interpretation, the process of 'setting-off' or 'showing-off' [*faire-valoir*] which it sets in train.

In a small group, needs, like competition, can doubtless stabilize. There is less of an escalation in the signifiers of status and the stuff of distinction. We can see this in traditional societies or micro-groups. But, in a society of industrial and urban concentration such as our own, where people are crowded together at much greater levels of density, the demand for differentiation grows even more quickly than material productivity. When the whole social world becomes urbanized, when communication becomes total, 'needs' grow exponentially – not from the growth of *appetite*, but from *competition*.

That escalation, that differential 'chain reaction', sanctioned by the total dictatorship of *fashion*, has the urban space as its locus. (And, reciprocally, the process reinforces urban concentration by rapid acculturation of the rural or marginal areas. It is, therefore, irreversible. Any vague desire to halt it is naïve.) Human density in itself exerts a fascination. But the *language of cities* is competition itself. Motives, desires, encounters, stimuli, the endless judgements of others, continual eroticization, information, the appeals of advertising: all these things make up a kind of abstract destiny of collective participation, set against a real background of generalized competition.

Just as industrial concentration results in an ever increased production of goods, so urban concentration results in a limitless promotion of needs. Now, though the two types of concentration are contemporaneous, they nonetheless have their own dynamics, as we have seen, and their results do not coincide. Urban concentration (and hence differentiation) outstrips productivity. That is the basis of urban alienation. A neurotic equilibrium does, however, establish itself in the end, somewhat to the advantage of the more coherent order of production – the proliferation of needs washing back over the order of products, and becoming integrated into it after a fashion.

All this defines *the growth society as the opposite of an affluent society*. Thanks to this constant tension between competitive needs and production, thanks to this *shortage-based* tension, to this 'psychological pauperization', the order of production manages only to give rise to – and only to 'satisfy' – the needs appropriate to it. In the growth-based order, there are, by this logic, no autonomous needs and there cannot be any. *There are only the needs of growth*. There is no place for individual goals in the system; there is room only for the goals of the system. All the dysfunctions pointed out by Galbraith, Bertrand de Jouvenel, etc., are *logical*. It is reasonably clear that cars and motorways are a need of the system, but so is the university training of middle managers. Hence the 'democratization' of the university is as much a systemic need as car production.[8] Because the system produces only for its own needs, it is all the readier systematically to hide behind the alibi of individual needs. Hence the gigantic growth of private consumption by comparison with public services (Galbraith). This is no accident. The cult of individual spontaneity and the naturalness of needs is, by its nature, father to the productivist option. Even the most 'rational' needs (education, culture, health, transport, leisure), cut off from their real collective significance, are taken up, in the same way as the incidental needs deriving from growth, into the systematic future perspectives of that growth.

Furthermore, it is in an even deeper sense that growth society is the opposite of an affluent society. Before being a society productive of goods, it is in fact a society productive of privileges. Now, there is a necessary, sociologically definable relationship between *privilege* and *penury*. There could not (in any society whatever) be privilege without penury. The two are structurally linked. Growth is, therefore, by its social *logic*, paradoxically defined by the reproduction of a structural penury. That penury no longer has the same sense as primary penury (a dearth of *goods*): that could be regarded as provisional and it is, in part, overcome in our societies, but the structural penury which substitutes for it is definitive since it is *systematized* as a booster function and power strategy in the very logic of the order of growth.

In conclusion, we shall state that there is, at any event, a logical contradiction between the ideological hypothesis of growth society, which is social homogenization at the highest level, and its concrete social logic, based on a structural differentiation – this logically contradictory whole forming the basis of an overall strategy.

And, lastly, we shall once again stress the major illusion, the cardinal myth of this false affluent society: the illusion of distribution on the idealist pattern of 'communicating vessels'. The flow of goods and products does not find its level like the sea. Social inertia, unlike natural inertia, does not lead to a state of distortion, disparity and privilege. Growth is not democracy. Profusion is a function of discrimination. How could it be the corrective to it?

The Palaeolithic, or the First Affluent Society

We must abandon the received idea we have of an affluent society as a society in which all material (and cultural) needs are easily met, for that leaves all social logic out of account. We should rather espouse the notion recently propounded by Marshall Sahlins in his article on the first affluent society, that it is our industrial and productivist societies which, unlike certain primitive societies, are *dominated by scarcity*, by the obsession with scarcity characteristic of the market economy.[9] The more one produces, the more clearly does one show up, amidst plenty, how irremediably far off is that final point which affluence would represent, defined as an equilibrium between human production and human goals. Since what is satisfied in a growth society, and increasingly satisfied as productivity grows, are the very needs of the order of production, not the 'needs' of man (the whole system depends indeed on these being misrecognized), it is clear that affluence recedes indefinitely: more precisely, it is irrevocably rejected and the organized reign of scarcity (structural penury) preferred.

For Sahlins, it was the hunter-gatherers (the primitive nomadic tribes of Australia, the Kalahari, etc.) who, in spite of their absolute 'poverty', knew true affluence. The primitive people of those societies have no personal possessions; they are not obsessed by their objects, which they throw away as and when they need to in order to be able to move about more easily.

They have no apparatus of production, or 'work': they hunt and gather 'at their leisure', as we might say, and share everything within the group. They are entirely prodigal: they consume everything immediately, make no economic calculations and amass no stores. The hunter-gatherer has nothing of that bourgeois invention, *economic man*, about him. He is ignorant of the basic principles of Political Economy. And, indeed, he never exploits human energies, natural resources or the effective economic possibilities to the full. He sleeps a lot. He has a trust – and this is what characterizes his economic system – in the wealth of natural resources, whereas our system is characterized (ever more so with technical advance) by despair at the insufficiency of human means, by a radical, catastrophic anxiety which is the deep effect of the market economy and generalized competition.

The *collective* 'improvidence' and 'prodigality' characteristic of primitive societies are the sign of *real* affluence. We have only the *signs* of affluence. Beneath a gigantic apparatus of production, we anxiously eye the *signs* of poverty and scarcity. But poverty consists, says Sahlins, neither in a small quantity of goods, nor simply in a relation between ends and means: it is, above all, a *relation between human beings*. The basis for the confidence of primitive peoples and for the fact that, within hunger, they live a life of plenty, is ultimately the transparency and reciprocity of social relations. It is the fact that no monopolization whatever of nature, the soil, the instruments or products of 'labour' intervenes to obstruct exchange and institute scarcity. There is among them no accumulation, which is always the source of power. In the economy of the gift and symbolic exchange, a small and always finite quantity of goods is sufficient to create general wealth since those goods pass constantly from one person to the other. Wealth has its basis not in goods, but in the concrete exchange between persons. It is, therefore, unlimited since the cycle of exchange is endless, even among a limited number of individuals, with each moment of the exchange cycle adding to the value of the object exchanged. It is this concrete and relational dialectic which we find inverted, as a *dialectic of penury* and unlimited need, in the process of competition and differentiation characteristic of our civilized, industrial societies. Where, in primitive exchange, every relationship adds to the social wealth, in our 'differential' societies every social relationship adds to individual lack, since every thing possessed is relativized in relation to others (in primitive exchange, it is *valorized* by the very relationship with others).

It is not, therefore, paradoxical to argue that in our 'affluent' societies abundance is *lost* and that it will not be restored by an interminable increase in productivity, by unleashing new productive forces. Since the structural definition of abundance and wealth lies in social organization, only a revolution of the social organization and of social relations could bring those things about. Will we return, one day, beyond the market economy, to prodigality? Instead of prodigality, we have 'consumption', forced consumption in perpetuity, twin sister to scarcity. It was social logic which brought primitive peoples the 'first' (and only) affluent society. It is our social logic which condemns us to luxurious and spectacular penury.

5

Towards a Theory of Consumption

The Autopsy of *Homo oeconomicus*

A fairy story: 'Once upon a time there was a Man who lived in Scarcity. After many adventures and a long journey through Economic Science, he met the Affluent Society. They married and had lots of needs.' 'The beauty of the economic man,' as A.N. Whitehead remarked, 'was that we knew exactly what he was after.'[1] That human fossil of the Golden Age, born, in the modern era, from the happy union of Human Nature and Human Rights, is endowed with a heightened sense of formal rationality, which leads him to:

1 seek his own happiness without the slightest hesitation;
2 prefer objects which will provide him with the greatest satisfactions.

The whole discourse, lay and academic, on consumption is articulated upon this sequence, which is the mythological sequence of a folk-tale: a Man 'endowed' with wants or needs which 'lead' him towards objects which 'give' him satisfaction. Since man is, nonetheless, never satisfied (he is, indeed, criticized for this), the same story begins over and over again, with the sterile self-evidence of old fables.

Some react with perplexity: 'Needs are the most stubbornly unknown of all the unknowns with which economic science deals' (Knight). But this doubt does not stop the litany on needs being faithfully recited by all the proponents of the anthropological disciplines from Marx to Galbraith, from Robinson Crusoe to Chombart de Lauwe. For economists, the key term is 'utility': the desire for a specific good for purposes of consumption or, in other words, the destruction of its utility. Need is therefore already given its object [*finalisé*] by the available goods; preferences are orientated by the particular spread of products offered on the market: this is, basically, *effective demand*. For the psychologist, the key idea is 'motivation', a slightly more complex theory, less 'object-oriented' and more 'instinct-oriented', of a kind of pre-existent, ill-defined necessity. For sociologists and psycho-sociologists who come last in line, there is a 'socio-cultural' dimension here. The anthropological postulate of an *individual* endowed with needs and inclined by nature to satisfy them is not questioned, nor is that of the consumer as a free, conscious being who is presumed to know what he wants (sociologists are wary of 'deep motivations'), but on the basis of this idealist postulate it is accepted that there is a 'social dynamic' of needs. Models of competition and conformity are brought in ('keeping up with the Joneses')

drawn from the group context or from grand 'cultural models' relating to society at large or to history.

Roughly speaking, three positions can be identified: for Marshall, needs are interdependent and rational; for Galbraith (we shall come back to him), choices are imposed by persuasion; for Gervasi (and others), needs are interdependent and are the product of a learning process (rather than a rational calculation).

Gervasi: 'Choices are not made at random, but are socially controlled and reflect the cultural model within which they are made. It is not just any old goods which are produced or consumed: they must have some meaning with regard to a system of values.' This leads into a view of consumption in terms of integration: 'The goal of the economy is not the maximization of production *for the individual*, but the maximization of production linked in with the value system of the society' (Parsons). Duesenberry will claim, in this same vein, that the only choice is, in fact, to vary one's possessions as a function of one's position on the hierarchical ladder. Ultimately, it is the difference of choices between one society and another and the similarity of choices within the same society which force us to consider consumer behaviour as a social phenomenon. There is an appreciable difference between this view and that of the economists: their 'rational' choice has here become conformist choice, the choice of conformity. Needs are directed not so much towards objects as towards values, and their satisfaction initially has the sense of *signing up to those values*. The fundamental, unconscious, automatic choice of the consumer is to accept the style of life of a particular society (it is, therefore, no longer a choice(!) and the theory of the autonomy and sovereignty of the consumer is refuted).

This sociology culminates in the notion of the 'standard package', defined by Riesman as the set of goods and services which forms more or less the baseline heritage of the average American. Rising regularly, indexed to the national standard of living, it is an ideal minimum of a statistical kind, a standard model of middle-class life. Exceeded by some, only dreamt of by others, it is an *idea* in which the American way of life is encapsulated.[2] Here again, the 'standard package' refers not so much to the materiality of goods (TV, bathroom, car, etc.) as to *the ideal of conformity*.

All this sociology does not advance us very much. Apart from the fact that the notion of conformity has never been anything but a cover for an immense tautology (in this case: the average American defined by the 'standard package', which is itself defined by the statistical average of goods consumed. Or, to put it sociologically, a particular individual is a member of a particular group because he consumes particular goods, and he consumes particular goods because he is a member of a particular group). The postulate of formal rationality we have seen at work among economists is simply transferred here to the relation between the individual and the group. Conformity and satisfaction are analogous: they involve the same matching-up of a subject to objects, or a subject to a group – *these terms being posited as separate entities* – by means of a logical principle of equivalence.

The concepts of 'need' and 'norm' are the expressions in the respective cases of this miraculous match-up.

Between the 'utility' of the economists and the 'conformity' of the sociologists, there is the same difference as Galbraith establishes between the pursuit of profit, the pecuniary motivation characteristic of the 'traditional' capitalist system, and the behaviour of identification and adaptation specific to the era of organization and the technostructure. The basic question which results, both for the psycho-sociologists of conformity and for Galbraith, and which (with good reason) does not arise for the economists – for whom the consumer remains an individual ideally free in his final, rational calculation – is that of the *conditioning of needs*.

Since Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* and Dichter's *The Strategy of Desire* (not to mention a number of other works), the conditioning of needs (by advertising in particular) has become the favourite theme in the discussion of the consumer society. The celebration of affluence and the great lament over 'artificial' or 'alienated' needs are the two central strands in a single mass culture – and even in the social-scientific ideology on the question. This latter is generally rooted in an old moral and social philosophy deriving from the humanist tradition. In the case of Galbraith, it is based on more rigorous economic and political thinking. We shall therefore concentrate here on two of his works: *The Affluent Society* and *The New Industrial State*.

Summarizing his position, we may say that the basic problem of contemporary capitalism is no longer the contradiction between 'profit maximization' and the 'rationalization of production' (from the point of view of the entrepreneur), but that between a potentially unlimited productivity (at the level of the technostructure) and the need to dispose of the product. It becomes vital for the system in this phase to control not just the apparatus of production, but consumer demand; to control not just prices, but what will be demanded at those prices. The 'general effect' – either prior to the act of production (surveys, market research) or subsequent to it (advertising, marketing, packaging) – is to 'shift the locus of decision in the purchase of goods from the consumer where it is beyond control to the firm where it is subject to control'.[3] More generally, 'the accommodation of the market behaviour of the individual, as well as of social attitudes in general, to the needs of producers and the goals of the technostructure is an inherent feature of the system [it would be more appropriate to say: a *logical* feature]. It becomes increasingly important with the growth of the industrial system.'[4] This is what Galbraith calls the 'revised sequence', as opposed to the 'accepted sequence', where the initiative is supposed to lie with the consumer and to impact back, through the market, on the manufacturers. In this new case, by contrast, the manufacturers control market behaviour, and guide and model social attitudes and needs. This is, at least tendentially, the total dictatorship of the order of production.

This 'revised sequence' destroys the fundamental myth of the 'accepted sequence' (it has at least that critical value): namely, that it is the individual

who exercises power in the economic system. That emphasis on the power of the individual contributed largely to legitimating organization: all the dysfunctions, nuisances and inherent contradictions of the order of production are justified since they extend the scope of consumer sovereignty. It is clear, by contrast, that the whole economic and psycho-sociological apparatus of market research, motivational studies, etc., which, it is claimed, ensures that real demand and the deep wants of the consumer govern the market, exists solely to stimulate that demand in order to create further outlets for products while constantly masking this objective process by staging its opposite. 'Man only became an object of science for man when automobiles became harder to sell than to manufacture.'

So Galbraith everywhere denounces the boosting of demand by those 'artificial accelerators' the technostructure deploys in its imperialist expansion, accelerators which render any stabilization of demand impossible.[5] Income, prestige purchases and surplus labour form a frantic vicious circle, the infernal round of consumption based on the celebration of so-called 'psychological' needs. These are differentiated from 'physiological' needs by apparently being based on 'discretionary income' and freedom of choice; they can thus be ruthlessly manipulated. Advertising clearly plays a crucial role here (this, too, has become a conventional idea). It seems attuned to the needs of the individual and to products. In fact, says Galbraith, it is attuned to the industrial system: 'It appears to place a significance on products only in so far as it is important for the system, and it upholds the importance and prestige of the technostructure from the social point of view.' Through advertising, the system appropriates social objectives for its own gain, and imposes its own goals as social objectives: 'What's good for General Motors …'.

Once again, one can only agree with Galbraith (and others) that the freedom and sovereignty of the consumer are mystification pure and simple. This carefully sustained mystique (preserved first and foremost by economists) of individual satisfaction and choice, which is the culmination of a whole civilization of 'freedom', is the very ideology of the industrial system, justifying its arbitrary power and all the collective nuisances it generates: dirt, pollution, deculturation. In fact, the consumer is sovereign in a jungle of ugliness where *freedom of choice has been forced upon him*. The revised sequence (that is to say, the *system* of consumption) thus ideologically complements and continues the work of the *electoral system*. The drugstore and the polling booth, the loci of individual freedom, are also the system's two mammary glands.

We have set out at length this analysis of the 'technostructural' conditioning of needs and consumption because it is all-powerful today, because it constitutes, thematized as it is in every way in the pseudo-philosophy of 'alienation', a genuine collective representation which is itself part of consumption. But it is open to some fundamental objections, all of which relate to its idealist anthropological postulates. For Galbraith, the needs of the individual can be stabilized. There is in the *nature* of Man something like

an *economic principle* which would make him impose limits on his objectives and needs and, at the same time, on his efforts, were it not for the action of 'artificial accelerators'. In short, a tendency to a – not now maximal, but 'harmonious' – satisfaction, a satisfaction that is balanced at the individual level and which – rather than getting caught up in the vicious circle of excessive gratifications described above – should be able to articulate itself on a social organization of collective needs which is also harmonious. All this is completely utopian.

1 On the principle of 'authentic' or 'artificial' satisfactions, Galbraith rails against the 'specious' reasoning of the economists: 'There is no proof that an expensive woman obtains the same satisfaction from yet another gown as does a hungry man from a hamburger. But there is no proof that she does not. Since it cannot be proven that she does not, her desire, it is held, must be accorded equal standing with that of a poor man for meat.'[6] 'Absurd,' says Galbraith. But, it is not absurd at all (here the classical economists are almost right to disagree with him – but, in fact, they take their stand in establishing this equivalence on the terrain of effective demand and thus sidestep all the problems). It is nonetheless true that, from the point of view of the consumer's own satisfaction, there is no basis on which to decide what is 'factitious' and what is not. The enjoyment of TV or of a second home is experienced as 'true' freedom; no one experiences these things as an alienation. Only an intellectual can say such a thing, from the depths of his moralizing idealism, but this at most marks him out as being, for his part, an alienated moralist.

2 On the 'economic principle', Galbraith says: 'What is called economic development consists in no small part in devising strategies to overcome the tendency of men to place limits on their objectives as regards income and thus on their efforts.'[7] And he cites the example of Filipino workers in California: 'The pressure of debt, and the pressure on each to emulate the most extravagant, quickly converted these happy and easygoing people into a modern and reliable work force.'[8] And all the underdeveloped countries, where the appearance of Western gadgets is the most reliable spur to economic growth. This theory, which we might term the theory of 'pressurizing' or economic training in consumption, linked to pressurized economic growth, is seductive. It shows up forced acculturation to the processes of consumption as the *logical next stage* in the development of the industrial system, following on from the nineteenth century when workers were trained in the processes of industrial production (timekeeping, disciplined action).[9] Having said this, we would have to explain *why* consumers 'take' the bait, why they are vulnerable to this strategy. It is too easy to appeal to a 'happy and easygoing' nature and to impute a mechanical responsibility to the system. There is no more a 'natural' tendency to be easygoing than there is to pressurized working. What Galbraith does not see – and this forces him to present individuals as mere passive victims of the system – is the whole social logic of differentiation, the distinguishing processes of class or caste which are fundamental to the social structure and are given free

rein in 'democratic' society. In short, there is a whole sociological dimension of difference, status, etc., lacking here, in consequence of which all needs are reorganized around an *objective* social demand for signs and differences, a dimension no longer grounding consumption as a function of 'harmonious' individual satisfaction (which might thus be limited in terms of the ideal norms of 'nature'), but as an unlimited social activity. We shall come back to this point later.

3 'Needs are in reality the fruits of production,' says Galbraith, not realizing just how right he is. For, beneath its demystified, lucid air, this thesis, as he understands it, is merely a more subtle version of the natural 'authenticity' of certain needs, and bewitchment by the 'artificial'. Galbraith means that, without the productivist system, a great number of needs would not exist. He means that by producing particular goods and services, companies at the same time produce all the means of suggestion tailored to gaining acceptance for them and therefore, ultimately, 'produce' the needs which correspond to them. There is a serious psychological lacuna in this conception. Needs are closely specified in advance here in relation to *finite objects*. The need is simply a need for a *particular* object, and the consumer's psyche is, ultimately, just a shop-window or a catalogue. It is true also that, taking this simplistic view of human beings, one cannot but arrive at a crushing psychological reduction in which empirical needs are mirror-reflections of empirical objects. Now, at this level, the conditioning thesis is false. We know how consumers resist particular precise injunctions, how they rove over the gamut of objects with which they might fulfil their 'needs', how advertising is not all-powerful and sometimes induces opposite reactions, and what substitutions there can be between one object and another to meet the same 'need' etc. In short, at the empirical level, a whole complicated strategy, psychological and sociological, cuts across the strategy of production.

The truth is, not that 'needs are the fruits of production', but that **the system of needs** is **the product of the system of production.** This is quite different. By system of needs, we mean that needs are not produced one by one, in relation to the respective objects, but are produced as *consumption power*, as an overall propensity within the more general framework of the productive forces. It is in this sense that the technostructure may be said to be extending its grasp. The order of production does not 'capture' the order of enjoyment (strictly speaking, such an idea is meaningless) for its own ends. It *denies* the order of enjoyment and supplants it, while reorganizing everything into a system of productive forces. Over the history of the industrial system, we may trace the following *genealogy of consumption*:

1 The order of production produces the machine/productive force, a technical system radically different from the traditional tool.
2 It produces capital/rationalized productive force, a rational system of investment and circulation, radically different from 'wealth' and from earlier modes of exchange.

3 It produces waged labour power, an abstract, systematized productive force, radically different from concrete labour and the traditional 'workmanship'.
4 And so it produces needs, the **system** of needs, demand/productive force as a rationalized, integrated, controlled whole, complementary to the three others in a process of total control of the productive forces and production processes. Needs as a system are also radically different from enjoyment and satisfaction. They are produced as *system elements*, not as *a relationship of an individual to an object* (just as labour power no longer has anything to do with – and even denies – the worker's relation to the product of his labour, and just as exchange-value no longer has anything to do with concrete, personal exchange, or the commodity form with real goods, etc.).

This is what Galbraith – and with him all the 'alienists' of consumption – fail to see, as they persist in demonstrating that *man's relation to objects, man's relation to himself is rigged*, bamboozled, manipulated – consuming this myth as he consumes objects – because, accepting the timeless postulate of a free, conscious subject (in order to have this resurface at the end of history in a happy ending), they cannot but attribute all the dysfunctions they uncover to a diabolical power – here the technostructure, armed with advertising, public relations and motivational research. This is magical thinking if ever there were such a thing. They do not see that needs, taken one by one, are *nothing* and that there is only a system of needs, or rather that needs are only *the most advanced form of the rational systematization of the productive forces at the individual level*, where 'consumption' takes over *logically* and necessarily from production.

This may clear up a number of mysteries which are inexplicable to our pious 'alienists'. They deplore the fact, for example, that, though we are in the 'age of affluence', the puritan ethic has not been abandoned, that the old moral and self-denying Malthusianism has not been replaced by a modern mentality based on enjoyment. The whole of Dichter's *Strategy of Desire* is aimed at getting around and subverting these old mental structures 'from below'. And it is true: there has been no revolution of mores and the puritan ideology is still in force. In the analysis of leisure we shall see how it pervades all apparently hedonistic practices. We may assert that the puritan ethic, with all it implies in terms of sublimation, transcending of self and repression (in a word, in terms of morality), *haunts* consumption and needs. It is that ethic which drives it from the inside and gives it this compulsive, unlimited character. And the puritan ideology is itself reactivated by the process of consumption: this is indeed what makes the latter the powerful factor of integration and social control we know it to be. Now, all this remains paradoxical and inexplicable from the point of view of consumption-as-enjoyment. By contrast, all is clear if we accept that needs and consumption are in fact an *organized extension of the productive forces*: there is then nothing surprising about the fact that they

should also fall under the productivist and puritan ethic which was the dominant morality of the industrial age. The generalized integration of the individual 'private' level (needs, feelings, aspirations, drives) as productive forces cannot but be accompanied by a generalized extension at this level of the patterns of repression, sublimation, concentration, systematization, rationalization – and, of course, alienation! – which for centuries, but particularly since the nineteenth century, have governed the construction of the industrial system.

Shifting Objects – Shifting Needs

Until now the whole analysis of consumption has been based on the naïve anthropology of *Homo oeconomicus*, rather than *Homo psychooeconomicus*. Within the ideological extension of classical political economy, it has been a theory of needs, objects (in the broadest sense) and satisfactions. Or, rather, it has not been a theory, but an immense tautology: 'I buy this because I need it' is equivalent to the fire which burns because of its phlogistic essence. We have shown elsewhere to what degree all this empiricist/finalist thinking (the individual taken as end, and his conscious representation taken as the logic of events) was of the same order as the magical speculation of primitive peoples (and ethnologists) around the notion of mana.[10] No theory of consumption is possible at this level: the spontaneously self-evident, like analytical thinking in terms of needs, will never produce anything but a consumed reflection of consumption.

This rationalist mythology of needs and satisfactions is as naïve and helpless as traditional medicine is when faced with hysterical or psychosomatic symptoms. Let us explain this point: outside the field of its objective function, where it is irreplaceable, outside the field of its denotation, the object becomes substitutable in a more or less unlimited way within the field of connotations, where it assumes sign-value. Thus the washing machine *serves* as an appliance and *acts* as an element of prestige, comfort, etc. It is strictly this latter field which is the field of consumption. All kinds of other objects may be substituted here for the washing machine as signifying element. In the logic of signs, as in that of symbols, objects are no longer linked in any sense to a *definite* function or need. Precisely because they are responding here to something quite different, which is either the social logic or the logic of desire, for which they function as a shifting and unconscious field of signification.

Objects and needs are here substitutable, within reason, like the symptoms of hysterical or psychosomatic conversion. They obey the same logic of slippage, transference, limitless and apparently arbitrary convertibility. When an illness is *organic*, there is a necessary relation between symptom and organ (similarly, when taken as an appliance or tool, there is a necessary relation between the object and its function). In hysterical or psychosomatic conversion, the symptom is, like the sign, (relatively) arbitrary: there

is a chain of somatic signifiers – migraine, bowel disorder, lumbago, throat infection, general fatigue – along which the symptom 'wanders', just as there is a long sequence of signs/objects or symbols/objects over which wander not needs (which are always linked to the rational finality of the object), but desire and a further determination which is that of the unconscious social logic.

If we pin the need down to a particular spot, if, that is, we *satisfy* it by taking it literally, by taking it as it presents itself, as the need for a *particular* object, then we make the same mistake as we would in applying a traditional remedy to the organ where the symptom is located. As soon as it is cured at this one point, it will resurface at another.

The world of objects and needs might thus be seen as a world of *generalized hysteria*. Just as, in conversion, all the body's organs and functions become a gigantic paradigm for the symptom to work its way through, in consumption objects become a vast paradigm for another language to work through, for something other to speak. And we might say that this evanescence, this continual mobility to the point where it becomes impossible to define an objective specificity of the need (just as it is impossible in hysteria to define an objective specificity of the illness for the good reason that it does not exist), this flight from one signifier to another is merely the superficial reality of a *desire* which is, for its part, insatiable because it is based on lack. And that it is this forever unquenchable desire which signifies itself locally in successive objects and needs.

Sociologically – in the face of the endless, naïve confusion at the unstoppable advance and boundless renewal of needs, which is in fact irreconcilable with the rationalist theory that a satisfied need creates a state of equilibrium and resolution of tensions – we may advance the hypothesis that, if one admits that need is never so much the need for a particular object as the 'need' for difference (*the desire for the* social *meaning*), then it will be clear that there can never be any *achieved* satisfaction, or therefore any *definition* of need.[11]

To the shifting nature of desire must be added, then (though is there a metaphorical relation between the two?), the shifting nature of differential significations. Between the two, individual, finite needs only assume meaning as successive foci. It is in their very substitution that they signify, yet simultaneously veil, the true spheres of signification – the spheres of lack and difference – which overflow them on all sides.

Denial of Enjoyment

The 'craving' for objects is 'objectless' (Riesman). Consumer behaviour, which is apparently focused on, and orientated towards, objects and enjoyment [*jouissance*], in fact conduces to quite other goals: that of the metaphorical or displaced expression of desire, that of production, through differential signs, of a social code of values. It is not, then, the individual

function of interest across a corpus of objects which is determinant, but the immediately social function of exchange, of communication, of distribution of values across a corpus of signs.

The truth of consumption is that it is not a function of enjoyment, but a *function of production* and, hence, like all material production, not an individual function, but *an immediately and totally collective one.* Without overturning the traditional conception in this way, no theoretical analysis is possible: whatever approach one takes, one falls back into the phenomenology of enjoyment.

Consumption is a system which secures the ordering of signs and the integration of the group: it is therefore both a morality (a system of ideological values) and a communication system, a structure of exchange. It is on this basis, and on the fact that this social function and structural organization far surpass individuals and impose themselves upon them by way of an unconscious social constraint, that we can found a theoretical hypothesis that is neither a mere reciting of figures nor a descriptive metaphysics.

According to this hypothesis, paradoxical as it may seem, consumption is defined as *exclusive of enjoyment*. As social logic, the consumption system establishes itself on the basis of a denial of enjoyment. Enjoyment no longer appears there at all as finality, as rational end, but as the individual rationalization of a process whose ends lie elsewhere. Enjoyment would define consumption *for oneself,* as something autonomous and final. But consumption is never that. Enjoyment is enjoyment for one's own benefit, but consuming is something one never does alone (this is the illusion of the consumer, meticulously sustained by the whole of the *ideological* discourse on consumption). One enters, rather, into a generalized system of exchange and production of coded values where, in spite of themselves, all consumers are involved with all others.

In this sense, consumption is an order of significations, *like language,* or like the kinship system in primitive society.

A Structural Analysis?

Let us recall here the Lévi-Straussian principle: what confers on consumption its character of being a social fact is not what it apparently preserves of nature (satisfaction, enjoyment/pleasure), but the essential procedure by which it breaks with nature (what defines it as a code, an institution, a system of organization). Just as the kinship system is in the last instance based not on consanguinity and filiation, on a natural datum, but on an arbitrary classification arrangement, so the system of consumption is in the last instance based not on need and enjoyment but on a code of signs (signs/objects) and differences.

Marriage rules are so many ways of providing for the circulation of women within the social group or, in other words, so many ways of replacing a system of consanguineous relations of a biological order by a

sociological system of alliance. Marriage rules and kinship systems may thus be regarded as a kind of language or, in other words, as a set of operations aimed at ensuring a certain type of communication between individuals and groups. It is the same with consumption: there, too, a bio-functional, bio-economic system of goods and products (the biological level of need and subsistence) is supplanted by a sociological system of signs (the level of consumption proper). And the basic function of the regulated circulation of objects and goods is the same as it is with women or words: ensuring a certain type of communication.

We shall come back to the differences between these various types of 'language': they have to do essentially with the mode of production of the values exchanged and the type of division of labour attaching to them. Clearly, goods are something produced, which women are not, and they are produced in a different way from words. The fact remains that, at the distribution level, goods and objects – like words and (in the past) women – form a global, arbitrary, coherent system of signs, a *cultural* system which, for the contingent world of needs and enjoyment, for the natural and biological order, substitutes a social order of values and classification.

This is not to say that there are no needs or no natural utility, etc. The point is, rather, that consumption, as a concept specific to contemporary society, is not to be defined at that level. For needs and the like are valid for all societies. What is sociologically significant for us, and which marks out our age as an age of consumption, is precisely the generalized reorganization of this primary level into a system of signs which reveals itself to be one of the specific modes, and perhaps *the* specific mode, of transition from nature to culture in our era.

The circulation, purchase, sale, appropriation of differentiated goods and signs/objects today constitute our language, our code, the code by which the entire society *communicates* and converses. Such is the structure of consumption, its language [*langue*], by comparison with which individual needs and pleasures [*jouissances*] are merely speech effects.

The Fun System or Enforced Enjoyment

One of the strongest proofs that the principle and finality of consumption is not enjoyment or pleasure is that that is now something which is forced upon us, something institutionalized, not as a right or a pleasure, but as the *duty* of the citizen.

The puritan regarded himself, his own person, as a business to be made to prosper for the greater glory of God. His 'personal' qualities, his 'character', which he spent his life producing, were for him a capital to be invested opportunely, to be managed without speculation or waste. Conversely, but in the same way, consumerist man [*l'homme-consommateur*] regards *enjoyment as an obligation*; he sees himself as *an enjoyment and satisfaction business.* He sees it as his duty to be happy, loving, adulating/adulated,

charming/charmed, participative, euphoric and dynamic. This is the principle of maximizing existence by multiplying contacts and relationships, by intense use of signs and objects, by systematic exploitation of all the potentialities of enjoyment.

There is no question for the consumer, for the modern citizen, of evading this enforced happiness and enjoyment, which is the equivalent in the new ethics of the traditional imperative to labour and produce. Modern man spends less and less of his life in production within work and more and more of it in the *production* and continual innovation of his own needs and well-being. He must constantly see to it that all his potentialities, all his consumer capacities are mobilized. If he forgets to do so, he will be gently and insistently reminded that he has no right not to be happy. It is not, then, true that he is passive. He is engaged in – has to engage in – continual activity. If not, he would run the risk of being content with what he has and becoming asocial.

Hence the revival of a *universal curiosity* (a concept to be explored further) in respect of cookery, culture, science, religion, sexuality, etc. 'Try Jesus!' runs an American slogan. You have to try *everything*, for consumerist man is haunted by the fear of 'missing' something, some form of enjoyment or other. You never know whether a particular encounter, a particular experience (Christmas in the Canaries, eel in whisky, the Prado, LSD, Japanese-style love-making) will not elicit some 'sensation'. It is no longer desire, or even 'taste', or a specific inclination that are at stake, but a generalized curiosity, driven by a vague sense of unease – it is the 'fun morality' or the imperative to enjoy oneself, to exploit to the full one's potential for thrills, pleasure or gratification.

Consumption as the Emergence and Control of New Productive Forces

Consumption is, therefore, merely an *apparently* anomic sector, because it is not, according to the Durkheimian definition, governed by formal rules and seems open to the immoderation and individual contingency of needs. It is not at all, as is generally imagined (this is why economic 'science' is, ultimately, reluctant to discuss it), a marginal sector of indeterminacy where the individual, elsewhere constantly constrained by social rules, might at last – being left to himself in the 'private' sphere – recover a margin of freedom and personal leeway. Consumption is an active, collective behaviour: it is something enforced, a morality, an institution. It is a whole system of values, with all that expression implies in terms of group integration and social control functions.

The consumer society is also the society of learning to consume, of social training in consumption. That is to say, there is a new and specific mode of *socialization* related to the emergence of new productive forces and the monopoly restructuring of a high-productivity economic system.

Credit plays a crucial role here, even if it only partially affects spending budgets. It is an exemplary idea because, in the guise of gratification, ease of access to affluence and a hedonist mentality 'freed from the old taboos of saving, etc.', credit is in fact a systematic socio-economic training in enforced saving and economic calculation for generations of consumers who would otherwise, in a life of subsistence, have escaped demand planning and would not have been exploitable as consumption power. Credit is a disciplinary process of the extortion of savings and the regulation of demand, just as wage labour was a rational process of extortion of labour power and increases in productivity. The example quoted by Galbraith of the Puerto Ricans who have been turned from the passive, easygoing people they once were into a modern labour force by being motivated to consume is striking evidence of the tactical value of regulated, enforced, instructed, stimulated consumption within the modern socio-economic order. And this is achieved, as Marc Alexandre shows in his article 'La société de consommation', by the *mental* training of the masses through credit (with the discipline and budgetary constraints it imposes) in economic foresight, investment and 'basic' capitalist behaviour.[12] The rational and disciplinary ethics which was, according to Weber, at the origins of modern productivist capitalism, in this way invests a whole area which had previously eluded it.

It is difficult to grasp the extent to which the current training in systematic, organized consumption is *the equivalent and extension, in the twentieth century, of the great nineteenth-century-long process of the training of rural populations for industrial work*. The same process of rationalization of productive forces which took place in the nineteenth century in the sector of *production* reaches its culmination in the twentieth in that of *consumption*. The industrial system, having socialized the masses as labour power, had much further to go to complete its own project [*s'accomplir*] and socialize them (that is, control them) as consumption power. The small savers or anarchic consumers of the pre-war age, who were free to consume or not, no longer have any place in this system.

The whole ideology of consumption is there to persuade us that we have entered a new era and that a decisive human 'Revolution' separates the painful, heroic Age of Production from the euphoric Age of Consumption, where justice is at last done to Man and his desires. Nothing could be further from the truth. Production and consumption are part of *one and the same process of expanded reproduction of the productive forces and their control*. This imperative, which is that of the system, passes into daily mentalities, ethics and ideology – and here is the great trick – in its *inverted* form: in the form of the liberation of needs, individual self-fulfilment, enjoyment and affluence, etc. The themes of Spending, Enjoyment and Non-Calculation ('Buy now, pay later') have taken over from the 'puritan' themes of Saving, Work, and Heritage. But this is merely the semblance of a Human Revolution: in fact, it is an internal substitution, within the framework of a general process and a system which remain in all essentials

unchanged, of a new system of values for an old one which has become (relatively) ineffective. What could become a new finality has become, when emptied of its real content, an enforced mediation of the reproduction of the system.

The needs and satisfactions of consumers are productive forces that have now been constrained and rationalized like the others (labour power, etc.). From all the angles we have (as yet barely) explored, consumption has thus appeared to us, by contrast with the ideology through which we experience it, as a dimension of constraint:

1 it is dominated by the *constraint of signification* at the level of structural analysis;
2 and by the *constraint of production* and of the production cycle in the strategic (socio-economico-political) analysis.

Affluence and consumption are not, then, achieved Utopia. They are a new objective situation, governed by the same basic processes, but overdetermined by a new morality – the whole corresponding to a *new* sphere of productive forces in process of controlled integration into the *same* expanded system. In this sense, there is no objective 'Progress' (nor, *a fortiori*, has there been any 'Revolution'): we have here quite simply the same thing and something else. This results in the fact, which is indeed perceptible in everyday life, of the total *ambiguity* of Affluence and Consumption: they are always lived as *myth* (the assumption of happiness beyond history and morality) and *endured as an objective process of adaptation* to a new type of collective behaviour.

On consumption as a civic constraint, Eisenhower stated in 1958: 'In a free society, government best encourages economic growth when it encourages the *efforts* of individuals and private groups. The government will never spend money as profitably as an individual tax-payer would have were he freed from the burden of taxation.' It is as though consumption, while not being a direct impost, might effectively succeed taxation as a social levy. 'With nine million dollars of tax cuts,' adds *Time* magazine, 'consumers went to two million retail stores in search of prosperity … They realized that they could increase economic growth by replacing their fans with air-conditioners. They *secured the boom* of 1954 by purchasing five million miniaturized television sets, a million and a half electric carving knives etc.' In short, they performed their civic duty. 'Thrift is un-American,' said Whyte.

On needs as productive forces – the equivalent of the 'reserves of labour' of the heroic age – take this advertisement for cinema advertising: 'Thanks to its giant screens, cinema enables you to present your product *in situ*: colours, shapes, packaging. The 2,500 cinemas in our advertising network have a weekly audience of three and a half million. 67% of that audience are between 15 and 35. They are consumers *at the height of their needs* who want, and are able, to buy.' They are, precisely, people at the height of their (labour) powers.

The Logistical Function of the Individual

'The individual serves the industrial system not by supplying it with savings and the resulting capital; he serves it by consuming its products. On no other matter, religious, political, or moral, is he so elaborately and skilfully and expensively instructed,' writes Galbraith.[13]

The system needs people as workers (wage labour), as savers (taxes, loans, etc.), but increasingly it needs them *as consumers*. The productivity of labour is increasingly a matter for technology and organization and investment is increasingly left to companies themselves (cf. Paul Fabra, 'Les superbénéfices et la monopolisation de l'épargne par les grandes entreprises', *Le Monde*, 26 June 1969). *Where the individual as such is required and is practically irreplaceable today is as a consumer.* We may therefore predict that the heyday of the system of individualist values is just around the corner, that system whose centre of gravity is currently shifting from the individual entrepreneur and saver, those figureheads of competitive capitalism, to the individual consumer, broadening out at the same time to the totality of individuals – keeping step in this regard with the extension of the techno-bureaucratic structures.

During the competitive stage, capitalism sustained itself after a fashion with a hybrid system of individualistic and altruistic values. The fiction of an altruistic social morality (inherited from the whole of traditional spirituality) was there to smooth over the antagonism of social relations. The 'moral law' was the product of individual antagonisms, just as the 'law of the market' was that of competitive processes: it preserved the fiction of an equilibrium. Individual salvation for the community of all Christians, and individual rights limited only by the rights of others, were long-held beliefs. They are impossible today. Just as the 'free market' has virtually disappeared, to be replaced by bureaucratic, state monopoly control, so altruistic ideology is no longer sufficient to restore a minimum of social integration. No other collective ideology has arisen to take over from these values. Only the state's collective constraint is there to halt the exacerbation of individualisms. Hence the deep contradiction between political and civil society in the 'consumer society': the system is forced to produce more and more consumer individualism, which it is at the same time forced to repress ever more harshly. This can only be resolved by an added dose of altruistic ideology (itself bureaucratized: 'social lubrication' by solicitude, redistribution, gifts, hand-outs, wholesale propaganda for charitableness and human relations).[14] Since this dose of altruistic ideology itself forms part of the system of consumption, it is not capable on its own of helping it attain equilibrium.

Consumption is, therefore, a powerful element of social control (by the atomization of consuming individuals), but by that very fact it brings with it a need for ever greater *bureaucratic constraint* on the processes of consumption – which will as a consequence be exalted more and more energetically as the *realm of freedom*. There is no escaping from this circle.

The automobile and traffic provide the classic example of all these contradictions: unlimited promotion of individual consumption sits alongside desperate calls for collective responsibility and social morality and increasingly severe constraints. The paradox is as follows: one cannot both repeat to the individual that 'the level of consumption is the just measure of social merit' and demand of him another kind of social responsibility since, in his individual consumption efforts, he is already taking on that social responsibility fully. Once again, consumption is *social labour*. The consumer is required and mobilized as *worker* at this level too (perhaps as much today as he is at the level of 'production'). One should not, then, ask the 'consumption worker' to sacrifice his wages (his individual satisfactions) for the good of the collectivity. Somewhere in their social subconscious, the millions of consumers have a kind of practical intuition of this new status as alienated worker. They spontaneously interpret the call for public solidarity as mystification, and their tenacious resistance on this level is merely a reflex of *political* defence. The 'fanatical egoism' of the consumer is also the subconscious rough sense of being, in spite of all the emotional rhetoric on affluence and well-being, the new exploited subject of modern times. The fact that this resistance and this 'egoism' lead the system into irresolvable contradictions to which it responds only by reinforced constraints merely confirms that consumption is a gigantic *political* field, the analysis of which – after that of production and alongside it – remains to be carried out.

The whole discourse on consumption aims to make the consumer Universal Man, to make him the general, ideal and definitive embodiment of the Human Race and to turn consumption into the beginnings of a 'human liberation' that is to be achieved instead of, and in spite of, the failure of political and social liberation. But the consumer has nothing of a universal being about him: he is himself a political and social being, a productive force and, as such, he breathes new life into some basic *historical* problems: of ownership of the means of consumption (not the means of production), of economic responsibility (responsibility for the *content* of production), etc. There is here a potential for deep crises and new contradictions.

The *Ego consumans*

Nowhere – or hardly anywhere – up to now have these contradictions surfaced consciously, apart from a few strikes by American housewives and the sporadic destruction of consumer goods (May 1968 and the 'No bra day', when American women publicly burned their bras). And it has to be said that everything is stacked against this happening. 'What does the consumer represent in the modern world? Nothing. What could he be? Everything, or almost everything. Because he remains alone next to millions of other solitary individuals, he is at the mercy of every vested interest' (*Le Coopérateur*, 1965). And it must be said that individualist interest plays a large part in this

(even though we have seen that there are contradictions latent within it). Because it affects a collective sector, the sector of social labour, exploitation by *dispossession* (of labour power) reveals itself generative of solidarity (beyond a certain threshold). It leads to a (relative) class consciousness. The managed *possession* of consumer goods and objects is individualizing, atomizing and dehistoricizing. As a producer, by the very fact of the division of labour, the worker presupposes others: exploitation is the exploitation of all. As a consumer, man becomes solitary again, or cellular – at best, he becomes *gregarious* (watching TV with the family, part of the crowd at the stadium or the cinema, etc.). The structures of consumption are both very fluid and closed. Can one imagine car drivers organizing against road tax? Or collective action being mounted against television? Every one of millions of TV viewers may be opposed to advertising, but it will still be broadcast. The fact is that consumption is orchestrated initially as a speaking to oneself [*un discours à soi-même*], and it tends to play itself out, with its satisfactions and disappointments, in this minimal exchange. The consumer object isolates. The private sphere has no concrete negativity because it is enfolded in on its objects, which have none. It is structured from the outside by the system of production whose strategy (no longer ideological at this level, but always political) … whose strategy of desire invests in this instance the materiality of our existence, its monotony and its distractions. Or, alternatively, as we have seen, the consumer object produces distinction(s), produces status stratification. If, in this case, it no longer isolates, it differentiates. It *collectively assigns* consumers to a code, without, however, arousing any *collective solidarity* (in fact, it does the opposite).

Overall, then, consumers as such are lacking in consciousness and unorganized, as was often the case with workers in the early nineteenth century. It is as such that they are everywhere celebrated, praised, hymned by 'right-thinking' writers as 'Public Opinion', that mystical, providential, *sovereign* reality. Just as 'the People' is glorified by Democracy provided that it remains the people (and does not intervene on the political and social stage), so consumers are recognized as enjoying sovereignty (Katona speaks of the 'powerful consumer') so long as they do not attempt to exercise it on the social stage. The People are the workers, provided they are unorganized. The Public and Public Opinion are the consumers, provided they content themselves with consuming.

6

Personalization or the Smallest Marginal Difference

To Be or Not to Be Myself

> There is no woman, however *demanding*, who cannot satisfy the tastes and *desires of her personality* with a Mercedes-Benz! From the hue of the leather, the trim and the colour of the bodywork to the hubcaps and the thousand and one comforts offered by the fittings, *standard or optional*. As for men, though mainly concerned with the technical qualities and performance of a car, they will willingly fulfil their wives' desires, since they will be equally proud to be complimented on their good taste. You can choose your Mercedes-Benz from 76 different colour styles and 697 selections of interior décor.
>
> To have *found* your personality, to be able to assert it, is to discover the pleasure of being *truly* yourself. It often takes *very little* to achieve this. After a great deal of searching, I realized that a *little light tint* in my hair was enough to create perfect harmony with my complexion and my eyes. I found this blonde tone in the Récital range of rinses … And this Récital blonde, which is so *natural*, has not changed me. I am *more than ever* myself.

These two pieces (there are so many one could have chosen) were taken from *Le Monde* and a minor women's weekly respectively. The prestige and social status evoked within them are worlds apart: between the magnificent Mercedes 300 SL and the 'little light tint' of the Récital shampoo there is an enormous social gulf, and the women represented in the two pieces doubtless never meet (except perhaps at the Club Méditerranée – who knows?). They are at opposite ends of the social scale, but united by the same constraint of differentiation, *personalization*. The one is 'A', the other 'non-A', but the pattern of 'personal' value is the same for both, and for all of us beating a path through the 'personalized' jungle of 'optional' merchandise, desperately seeking the foundation cream that will reveal the naturalness of our face, the little touch that will show up our deep individual bent, the difference which will make us ourselves.

All the contradictions involved in this theme, which is basic to consumption, can be felt in the desperate gymnastics performed by the language in which it is expressed, in the constant attempt to achieve an impossible, magical synthesis. If you *are* someone, can you 'find' your personality? And where are *you* while this personality is haunting you? If you are yourself, do you have to be so 'truly'? There again, if you have a false 'self' for a double, is a little light tint sufficient to restore the miraculous unity of one's being? What does this 'so' natural blonde mean? Is it natural or isn't it? And if I am myself, how can I be so 'more than ever'?

Wasn't I entirely myself yesterday? Can I raise myself to the second power? Can I represent an added value to myself, appreciating as a company's assets appreciate? One could find thousands of examples of this illogicality, of this internal contradiction eating away at all that relates to the personality today. *'But,'* as Riesman writes, *'the product now in demand is neither a staple nor a machine; it is a personality.'* The high point of this magical litany of personalization is achieved with the following injunction:

Personalize your own home yourself!

This 'over-reflexive' expression (personalizing oneself … in person etc.!) tells the real story. What all this rhetoric says, while floundering about unable to say it, is precisely that *there is no one there – no person*. The 'person' as absolute value, with its indestructible features and specific force, forged by the whole of the Western tradition as the organizing myth of the Subject – the person with its passions, its will, its character (or banality) – is absent, dead, swept out of our functional universe. And it is this absent person, this lost instance which is going to 'personalize' itself. It is this lost being which is going to reconstitute itself *in abstracto,* by force of signs, in the expanded range of differences, in the Mercedes, in the little light tint, in a thousand other signs, incorporated and arrayed to re-create a *synthetic individuality* and, at bottom, to shine forth in the most total anonymity, since difference is by definition that which has no name.

The Industrial Production of Differences

Advertising as a whole has no *meaning.* It merely conveys significations. Its significations (and the behaviours they call forth) are never *personal*: they are all differential; they are all marginal and combinatorial. In other words, they are of the order of *the industrial production of differences* – and this might, I believe, serve as the most cogent definition of the *system of consumption*.

The real differences which characterized persons made them *contradictory* beings. Differences of the 'personalizing' type no longer set individuals one against another; these differences are all arrayed hierarchically on an indefinite scale and converge in *models,* on the basis of which they are subtly produced and reproduced. As a result, to differentiate oneself is precisely to affiliate to a model, to label oneself by reference to an abstract model, to a combinatorial pattern of fashion, and therefore to relinquish any real difference, any *singularity,* since these can only arise in concrete, conflictual relations with others and the world. This is the miracle and the tragedy of differentiation. In this way, the whole process of consumption is governed by the production of artificially diversified models (like brands of soap powder), where the trend to monopoly is the same as in the other sectors of production. There is *monopoly concentration of the production of differences.*

This is an absurd formula: monopoly and difference are logically incompatible. If they can be combined, it is precisely because the differences are not differences and, instead of marking a person out as someone singular, they mark rather his conformity with a code, his integration into a sliding scale of values.

There is in 'personalization' something similar to that 'naturalization' effect we constantly meet in the environment – the effect which consists in restoring nature as sign after it has been eliminated in reality. Thus, for example, a forest is cut down to build a group of buildings, which are then given the name 'Park Estate' and a few trees are planted to create a 'natural' feel. The 'naturalness' which haunts the whole of advertising is, similarly, a 'cosmetic' effect: 'Use Ultra-Beauty cosmetics for the smooth, even, lasting look in which your complexion has that *natural* bloom you dream of!' … 'I'm certain my wife doesn't use make-up!' … 'This veil of make-up, invisible and yet present.' Similarly, the 'functionalization' of an object is a coherent abstraction which superimposes itself upon – and everywhere substitutes for – its objective function ('functionality' is not use-value, it is sign-value).

The logic of personalization is the same: it is contemporaneous with naturalization, functionalization, culturalization, etc. The general process can be defined historically: it is industrial monopoly concentration which, *abolishing the real differences* between human beings, homogenizing persons and products, *simultaneously ushers in the reign of differentiation*. Things are much the same here as with religious or social movements: it is upon the *ebbing* of their original impulse that churches or institutions are built. Here, too, *it is upon the loss of differences that the cult of difference is founded*.[1]

Modern monopoly production is never just the production of goods; it is always also the (monopoly) production of relations, and of differences. Thus, a deep logical collusion links the mega-corporation and the micro-consumer, the monopoly structure of production and the 'individualistic' structure of consumption, since the 'consumed' difference in which the individual revels is also one of the key sectors of generalized production. At the same time, under the sign of monopoly, there is very great homogeneity today between the various contents of production/consumption: goods, products, services, relations and differences. All these things, once distinct, are now produced in the same way, and are thus equally fated to be consumed.

There is also in the combinatorial personality an echo of the combinatorial culture we spoke of above. Just as that consisted in a collective realignment, through the mass media, to the lowest common culture (LCC), so personalization consists in a daily realignment to the smallest marginal difference (SMD): seeking out the little qualitative differences by which style and status are indicated. For example, smoke a Kent:

> The actor smokes one before going on stage, the rally driver before clipping on his helmet, the painter before signing his canvas, the young boss before saying 'no' to his main shareholder[!] … The moment it ceases to smoulder in the ashtray, the action is on – precise, calculated, unstoppable.

Or smoke a Marlboro, like the journalist 'with two million readers awaiting his editorial'. You have a classy girl and an Alfa-Romeo 2600 Sprint? Just add 'Green Water' cologne and the trinity is complete: your status as a true aristocrat of the post-industrial age is secure. Or put the same earthenware tiles in your kitchen as Françoise Hardy or the same built-in gas hob as Brigitte Bardot. Or use a toaster which makes you initialled toast, or put charcoal *'aux herbes de Provence'* in your barbecue. Of course, the 'marginal' differences themselves are part of a subtle hierarchy. From the highly select bank, with its Louis XVI-style safes reserved for 800 choice clients (Americans who must keep at least 25,000 dollars in their current accounts) to the managing director's desk which is antique or *Premier Empire* (for senior managers, opulent functional suffices), from the arrogant prestige of *nouveau riche* villas to the nonchalance of high-class clothing, all these marginal differences mark out the most rigorous social discrimination, in accordance with a general law of the distribution of distinctive matter (and against that law – even more than against the criminal law – ignorance is no defence). Not everything is permitted, and violations of this code of differences, which, though it is a shifting one, is no less a *ritual* for all that, are punished. As can be seen in the amusing story of the commercial traveller who bought the same Mercedes as his boss and was fired. He appealed against his dismissal and was granted compensation by a tribunal, but the employer did not take him back. All men are equal before objects as use-value, but they are by no means equal before objects as signs and differences, which are profoundly hierarchical.

Metaconsumption

It is important to grasp that this personalization, this pursuit of status and social standing, are all based on signs. That is to say, they are based not on objects or goods as such, but on *differences*. Only in this way can we understand the paradox of 'underconsumption' or 'inconspicuous consumption', i.e. the paradox of prestigious super-differentiation, which is no longer displayed in *ostentation* (Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption'), but in discretion, sobriety and self-effacement. These latter merely represent a further degree of luxury, an added element of ostentation which goes over into its opposite and, hence, a *more subtle difference*. Differentiation may then take the form of the rejection of objects, the rejection of 'consumption', and yet this still remains the very ultimate in consumption.

> If you're wealthy and middle-class, don't go to the Quatre-Saisons. Leave the Quatre-Saisons to the young couples panicking over the funds they haven't got, the students, the secretaries, the salesgirls, the workers sick of living in squalor … Leave it to all those who want nice furniture because ugliness is wearisome, but want simple furniture too because they hate pretentious flats.

Who is going to answer this perverse invitation? Some wealthy middle-class individual, perhaps, or some intellectual anxious to seem a man of the people.

At the level of signs, there is no absolute wealth or poverty, nor any opposition between the *signs* of wealth and the *signs* of poverty: they are merely sharps and flats on the keyboard of differences. 'Ladies, come to X for the most windswept look you can find!' … 'This simple dress leaves not a hint of *haute couture*.'

There is also a full-blown syndrome of anti-consumption, a very 'modern' phenomenon which is, at bottom, a *metaconsumption* and acts as a cultural indicator of class. The middle classes tend rather towards conspicuous consumption. They are, in this regard, heirs to the great capitalist dinosaurs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is where they are culturally *naïve*. Needless to say, there is a whole class strategy behind this:

> One of the few restrictions on the consumption of the mobile person is the resistance of the upper class to the *arrivistes* by exercise of the strategy of conspicuous underconsumption; in this way the already arrived attempt to impose their own limits on those who would become their peers.[2]

This phenomenon, in its many and varied forms, is a crucial one for the interpretation of our society, since one might be taken in by this formal reversal of signs and mistake what is merely a change in the form of the distance between classes as an effect of democratization. It is on the basis of luxury that the lost simplicity is consumed. And this same effect is met at all levels: it is on the basis of the bourgeois condition that intellectual 'slumming' and 'proletarianism' are consumed, just as, in another sphere, it is on the basis of a lost heroic past that contemporary Americans go on package tours to prospect for gold in the rivers of the West: this 'exorcism' of opposite effects, of lost realities, of contradictory terms is everywhere the sign of an effect of consumption and overconsumption which, in every case, fits into a logic of distinction.

It is crucial to grasp this social logic of differentiation as fundamental to the analysis and to see that the exploitation of objects as differential, as signs – the level which alone specifically defines consumption – is precisely established upon the relegation of their use-value (and the 'needs' attaching to it).

> Preferences in the consumption field are not viewed as a development of the human ability to relate oneself discriminatingly to cultural objects. For the objects are hardly given meaning in private and personal values when they are so heavily used as counters in a preferential method of relating oneself to others. The cultural objects, whatever their nature, are mementos that somehow remain unhumanized by the force of a genuinely fetishistic attachment.[3]

This factor (the priority of differential value), which Riesman applies to 'cultural' objects (though there is in this regard no difference between 'cultural objects' and 'material objects'), can be seen illustrated in an almost experimental way by the example of a mining town in the Quebec taiga, where, as the reporter tells us, in spite of the proximity of the forest

and the almost total uselessness of a car, every family nonetheless has its automobile outside its door:

> This vehicle, washed and polished, and occasionally taken out for a run of a few miles on the local bypass (there are no other roads) is a symbol of the American standard of living, the sign that one belongs to mechanical civilization.

(and the author compares these magnificent limousines with a totally useless bicycle found in the Senegalese bush outside the house of a black former NCO who had returned to live in his village). Even more strikingly, the same demonstrative, ostentatious reflex leads well-off executives to have summer cottages built in a 10-mile radius around the town. In this spacious, airy town, with its salubrious climate and open to nature on all sides, what could be more useless than a 'place in the country'! What we see at work here, then, is prestigious differentiation in the pure state, and we see to what extent the 'objective' reasons for owning an automobile or a second home merely provide a cover for a more fundamental determination.

Distinction or Conformism?

The logic of differentiation is not generally made a principle of analysis by traditional sociology. That sociology identifies a 'need of the individual to differentiate himself' as one more element in the repertoire of individual needs, which it sees as alternating with the opposite need to conform. The two coexist happily at the psycho-sociological descriptive level, in the most total illogicality and absence of theory – a state of affairs dubbed 'dialectic of equality and distinction' or 'dialectic of conformism and originality', etc. This is to confuse everything. It has to be recognized that consumption is not ordered around an individual with his *personal* needs, which are then subsequently indexed, according to demands of prestige or conformity, to a group context. There is, *first*, a structural logic of differentiation, which produces individuals as *personalized*, that is to say, as different one from another, but in terms of general models and a code, to which, in the very act of particularizing themselves, they *conform*. The singularity/conformism schema, regarded in terms of the individual, is not essential: it is merely the level of life-experience. The basic logic is that of *differentiation/personalization*, *viewed in terms of the code*. In other words, conformity is not status equalization, the *conscious* homogenization of the group (each individual aligning himself with the others), but the fact of having the same code in common, of sharing the same signs which make all the members of that group different from a particular other group. It is the difference from the other group which creates the *parity* (rather than the conformity) of the members of a group. Consensus is established differentially, and the effect of conformity is merely the result of this. This is a crucial point, since it entails that all sociological analysis (particularly where consumption is concerned) is to be shifted from the phenomenal study of prestige, 'imitation' and the superficial field of the conscious

social dynamic towards the analysis of codes, structural relations, and systems of signs and distinctive material – that is to say, towards a *theory* of the *unconscious* field of social logic.

Thus, the function of this system of differentiation goes far beyond the satisfaction of needs of prestige. If we accept a hypothesis we advanced earlier, we can see that the system never operates in terms of *real* (singular, irreducible) differences between *persons*. What grounds it as a system is precisely the fact that it eliminates the specific content, the (necessarily *different*) specificity of each human being, and substitutes the *differential* form, which can be industrialized and commercialized as a distinguishing sign. It eliminates all original qualities and retains only the schema generative of distinctions and the systematic production of that schema. At this level, differences are no longer exclusive: not only do they logically imply one another in the combinatory of fashion (in the same way as there is 'play' between different colours), but, in sociological terms, it is *the exchange of differences which clinches group integration*. Differences coded in this way, far from dividing individuals, become rather *the matter of exchange*. This is a fundamental point, through which consumption is defined: not any longer (1) as a functional practice of objects – possession, etc., or (2) as a mere individual or group prestige function, but (3) as a system of communication and exchange, as a code of signs continually being sent, received and reinvented – as *language*.

In the past, differences of birth, blood and religion were not exchanged: they were not differences of fashion, but essential distinctions. They were not 'consumed'. Current differences (of clothing, ideology, and even sex) are exchanged within a vast consortium of consumption. This is a socialized exchange of signs. And if everything can be exchanged in this way, in the form of signs, this is not by virtue of some 'liberalization' of mores, but because differences are systematically produced in accordance with an order which integrates them all as identifying signs and, being substitutable one for another, there is no more tension or contradiction between them than there is between high and low or left and right.

So, in Riesman, we see the members of the peer group socializing preferences, exchanging evaluations and, by their continual competition, ensuring the internal reciprocity and narcissistic cohesion of the group. They come together (Latin *competere*) in the group through 'competition', or rather through what, being filtered through the code of fashion, is no longer open and violent competition – such as that of the market or a physical struggle – but *a ludic abstraction of competition*.

Code and Revolution

It will be easier now to grasp the crucial ideological function of the system of consumption in the current socio-political order. That ideological function can be deduced from the definition of consumption as the establishment of

a generalized code of differential values and from the function of the system of exchange and communication which we have just determined.

Modern (capitalist, productivist, post-industrial) social systems do not, to any great extent, base their social control, the ideological regulation of the economic and political contradictions by which they are riven, on the great egalitarian and democratic principles, on that whole system of ideological and cultural values that is broadcast to all corners of the earth and is operative everywhere. Even when seriously internalized through schooling and socialization, these conscious egalitarian values – of law and justice, etc. – remain relatively fragile, and would never be up to the task of integrating a society whose objective reality they too visibly contradict. Let us say that at this ideological level, contradictions can always break out again. But the system can count much more effectively on an *unconscious* mechanism of integration and regulation. And this, unlike equality, consists precisely in involving individuals in a system of *differences*, in a *code of signs*. Such is culture, such is language, such is 'consumption' in the deepest sense of the term. What is politically effective is the creation not of a situation in which contradiction is replaced by equality and equilibrium, but of one in which contradiction is replaced by **difference.** The solution to social contradiction is not equalization, but differentiation. No revolution is possible at the level of a code – or, alternatively, revolutions take place every day at that level, but they are 'fashion revolutions', which are harmless and foil the other kind.

Here again, the proponents of the classical analysis are wrong in their interpretation of the ideological role of consumption. It is not by heaping comfort, satisfaction and social standing on individuals that consumption is able to defuse virulent social tension (that idea is linked to the naïve theory of needs and can only lead to the absurd hope of making people ever more destitute in order to have them rebel). It is, rather, by *training them in the unconscious discipline of a code*, and competitive cooperation at the level of that code; it is not by creating more creature comforts, but by getting them to play by the *rules* of the game. This is how consumption can on its own substitute for all ideologies and, in the long run, take over alone the role of integrating the whole of society, as hierarchical or religious rituals did in primitive societies.

The Structural Models

'What mother has not dreamt of a washing machine specially designed for her alone?' asks an advert. And, indeed, what mother has not? Millions, then, have dreamt of the *same* washing machine, specially designed for each of them alone.

'The body you dream of is **your own.**' This admirable tautology, which self-evidently resolves down to an argument for a particular kind of bra, brings together all the paradoxes of 'personalized' narcissism. It is by coming

close to your *reference* ideal, by being 'truly yourself', that you most fully obey the collective imperative and most closely coincide with a particular 'imposed' model. Fiendish trick or the dialectic of mass culture?

We shall see how consumer society conceives itself as, precisely, a society of consumption and reflects itself narcissistically in its image. This process spreads right down to each individual, remaining all the while a collective function, and this explains why it is in no way incompatible with conformism. Indeed, the opposite is true, as the two examples above well illustrate. The narcissism of the individual in consumer society *is not an enjoyment of singularity*; it is *a refraction of collective features*. However, it is always presented as narcissistic investment of 'oneself' through smallest marginal differences (SMDs).

The individual is everywhere invited, primarily, to enjoy **himself,** to indulge himself. The understanding is that it is by pleasing oneself that one is likely to please others. Ultimately, perhaps, self-indulgence and self-seduction may totally supplant the objective aim of seduction. The enterprise of seduction turns round upon itself in a kind of perfect 'consumption', but its referent remains, nonetheless, the instance of the other. Put simply, pleasing has become an enterprise in which the person to be pleased is merely a secondary consideration. Like the repetition of the brand name in advertising.

This invitation to self-indulgence is mainly directed at women. But the pressure is exerted on *women* through the myth of *Woman*. Woman as collective and cultural model of self-indulgence. Évelyne Sullerot puts this well:

> Woman is sold to women … while doing what she believes is preening herself, scenting herself, clothing herself, in a word 'creating' herself, she is, in fact, consuming herself.

And this falls in with the logic of the system: not just one's relationship with others, but also one's relation to oneself becomes a *consumed* relation. Though this should not be confused, once again, with the fact of being pleasing to oneself on the strength of genuine qualities – of beauty, charm, taste, etc. That is something quite different; in that case, there is no consumption, but a spontaneous and natural relation. Consumption is always defined by the substitution for this spontaneous relation of a relation mediated by signs. If woman does, in fact, consume *herself*, this is because her relation to herself is objectivized and fuelled by signs, signs which make up the feminine model, which constitutes the real object of consumption. It is that model women consume when they 'personalize' themselves. Ultimately, women 'can reasonably trust in neither the sparkle of their eyes, nor the softness of their skin: those things, which are theirs, bring them no certainty' (Bredin, *La Nef*). There is a great difference between *having self-worth* [*valoir*] by dint of natural qualities and *showing oneself off to best advantage* [*se faire valoir*] by subscribing to a model and conforming to a ready-made code. What we have in this latter case is a *functional femininity*

in which all the natural values of beauty, charm and sensuality give way to the *exponential* values of (artificially achieved) naturalness, eroticism, 'figure' and expressiveness.

Like violence,[4] the forms of seduction and narcissism are laid down in advance by *models* produced industrially by the mass media and composed of *identifiable* signs (if all girls are to think they are Brigitte Bardot, then they must stand out from the crowd by virtue of their hair, their mouths or a particular feature of clothing – that is to say, necessarily the same thing for all of them). Everyone finds his or her own personality in living up to these models.

The Masculine and the Feminine Models

Functional femininity has its counterpart in functional masculinity or virility. The models are, quite naturally, arranged in twos. They are the product not of the *differentiated* nature of the sexes, but of the differential logic of the system. The relation of the Masculine and the Feminine to *real* men and women is relatively arbitrary. Increasingly today, men and women play equally on the two registers in creating their significations, but, for their part, the terms of the signifying opposition only derive validity from their distinction. These two models are not descriptive: they *govern* consumption.

The masculine model is the model of particularity [*exigence*] and choice. All masculine advertising stresses the rule of *choice*, in terms of rigour and inflexible attention, as a matter of 'professional ethics'. The modern man of quality is *particular* or *demanding*. He will countenance no failing and he neglects no detail. He is a 'select' individual, though he is not so passively or by natural grace, but by practising selectivity (the fact that that selectivity is orchestrated by others is a quite separate matter). There is no question of letting himself go or indulging himself; his aim is to achieve distinction. Knowing how to choose and not to let one's standards slip are equivalent to the military and puritan virtues: intransigence, decisiveness, valour. These virtues will be possessed by the least young dandy who buys his clothes from Romoli or Cardin. The masculine model is, then, a model of competitive or selective virtue. Much more deeply, choice – as a sign of belonging to the elect (he who chooses, who *knows how to* choose, is chosen, is one of the elect) – is the counterpart in our societies to the rite of *challenge* and competition in primitive ones: it confers status.

In the feminine model, women are, much rather, enjoined to take pleasure themselves. It is not, in this case, selectivity and particularity, but self-indulgence and narcissistic concern for one's own welfare which are indispensable. At bottom, men are still being invited to play soldiers, and women to play dolls with themselves.

Even at the level of modern advertising, the two models – the masculine and the feminine – are always segregated, then, and masculine hierarchical pre-eminence still survives (it is here, in the models, that the *fixity of the*

value system can be read: the hybridity of 'real' behaviour matters little in this regard, since the deep mentality is shaped by the models – and the masculine/feminine opposition, like that between manual and intellectual labour, has not changed).

We have, then, to retranslate this structural opposition into the language of social supremacy.

1 The masculine choice is 'agonistic': it is, by analogy with the challenge, the noble behaviour *par excellence*. It is honour which is in play, or *Bewährung* (proving oneself), an ascetic and aristocratic virtue.

2 By contrast, what is perpetuated in the feminine model is the *derived* value, the vicarious value (Veblen writes of 'vicarious status' and 'vicarious consumption'). Women are only called on to gratify themselves in order the better to be able to enter as objects into the masculine competition (enjoying themselves in order to be the more enjoyable). They never enter into direct competition (except with other women over men). If a woman is beautiful – that is to say, if the woman is a woman – she will be chosen. If the man is a man, he will choose his wife among other objects/signs (**his** car, **his** wife, **his** eau de toilette). Under cover of self-gratification, woman (the feminine model) is consigned to the performance of proxy 'services'. She is not autonomously determined.

This status, shown up at the narcissistic level in advertising, has quite other – and equally real – aspects at the level of productive activity. Woman, whose fate lies with the paraphernalia (household objects), fulfils not only an economic function, but a prestige function, deriving from the aristocratic or bourgeois idleness of women who, by that idleness, attested to the prestige of their masters: the housewife does not produce; she does not show up in the nation's accounts; she is not recorded as a *productive force*. She is, in fact, fated to be of value as a *force of prestige*, by her official uselessness, by her status as a 'kept' slave. She remains an attribute, reigning over those secondary attributes, the household objects.

Or, in the middle and upper classes, she devotes herself to 'cultural' activities. These are also unpaid, unaccounted and generally unaccountable. That is to say, they are activities involving no responsibility. She 'consumes' culture, though she does not even do this in her own right: it is decorative culture. Thus she is engaged in *cultural promotion*, which, in spite of all the democratic alibis, always falls in with this same requirement that it be useless. Ultimately, culture is simply a sumptuary side-effect of 'beauty' – culture and beauty being not so much values in themselves, activities carried on for their own sake, as evidence of superfluity, an 'alienated' social function (performed by proxy).

Once again, we are speaking here of differential *models*, which are not to be confused with real sexes, or with social categories. There is diffusion and contamination everywhere. Modern man (as we see everywhere in advertising) is also called on to indulge himself. The modern woman is called on to choose and to compete, to be 'particular' or 'demanding'. All this is, of course, in keeping with a society where the respective social, economic and

sexual functions are *relatively* intermingled. However, the distinction between the masculine and feminine models remains, for its part, total (and, indeed, even the mixing of social and occupational tasks and roles is, in the end, a weak and marginal phenomenon). It is even possible that the structural and hierarchical opposition between the Masculine and the Feminine is growing stronger in certain respects. Thus, the appearance in advertisements (for Sélimaille knitwear) of Publicis's handsome young male nude marked the extreme point of contamination. This did not, however, change the distinct and antagonistic models one jot. What it did bring out was the emergence of a 'third', hermaphroditic model, everywhere linked to the emergence of adolescence and youth. This is a sexually ambiguous, narcissistic model, but one much closer to the feminine model of self-indulgence than the demanding masculine one.

Furthermore, what we are seeing very generally today is the *extension of the feminine model to the whole field of consumption*. What we have said of women in their relationship to prestige values, and of their 'proxy' status, goes, virtually and absolutely, for *Homo consumans* in general – men and women together. And it goes for all members of social categories whose destinies lie more or less (increasingly, as the current political strategy has it) with 'paraphernalia', household objects and 'proxy' pleasures. Entire classes are thus fated, in the image of Woman (who, as Woman/Object remains emblematic of consumption), to *function* as consumers. Their promotion to the rank of consumers might thus be said to seal their destiny as serfs. Though, as is not the case with the housewife, far from sinking into oblivion, their alienated activity is today boosting the national economic figures.

PART III

Mass Media, Sex and Leisure

7

Mass-Media Culture

The 'Neo' – or Anachronistic Resurrection

As Marx said of Napoleon III, sometimes in history the same events occur twice: the first time with real historical import; the second merely as caricatural evocation of the event, as a grotesque avatar of it – sustained by a *legendary reference*. Cultural consumption may thus be defined as the time and place of the caricatural resurrection, the parodic evocation of what already no longer exists – of what is not so much 'consumed' as 'consummated' (completed, past and gone). The tourists who journey by coach to the far north to re-enact the Gold Rush, hiring Eskimo tunics and clubs to provide some local colour, are people who are consuming: they are consuming in ritual form something which was a historical event, and has been forcibly reactualized as legend. In history, this process is called restoration: it is a process of the denial of history and the anti-evolutionist resurrection of earlier models. Consumption, too, is thoroughly imbued with this anachronistic substance. In its service stations in winter, Esso offers you its log fire and barbecue kit. This is a characteristic example: it is the masters of petrol, the 'historical liquidators' of log fires and their entire symbolic value, who serve these back up to you as the Esso neo-log-fire. What is consumed here is the simultaneous, combined, collusive enjoyment of the automobile and the defunct prestige of everything whose death-knell the automobile sounded – these latter now resuscitated by the automobile! We ought not to see this as mere nostalgia: it is the historical and structural definition of consumption that, by way of this 'lived' level, it *exalts signs on the basis of a denial of things and the real*.

We have already seen how, through mass communications, the pathetic hypocrisy of the minor news item heightens with all the signs of catastrophe (deaths, murders, rapes, revolution) the tranquillity of daily life. But this same pathetic redundancy of signs is visible everywhere: the glorification of the very young and the very old, the front-page treatment for blue-blood weddings, the mass-media hymning of the body and sexuality – everywhere we see the historical disintegration of certain structures celebrating, as it were, under the sign of consumption, both their real disappearance and their caricatural resurrection. The family is dissolving? It is glorified. Children aren't children any more? Childhood is turned into something sacred. The old are alone, sidelined? A collective show of sympathy for the aged. And, even more clearly, the body is glorified precisely as its real possibilities are atrophying and it is increasingly harassed by the system of urban, professional and bureaucratic control and constraints.

Cultural Recycling

It is now one of the characteristic dimensions of our society, in so far as one's professional expertise, individual career path and social position are concerned, to engage in retraining – in what is known, in French, as *le recyclage*. It is now the case that everyone who does not wish to fall behind, be left on the shelf or lose their professional standing must 'update' their knowledge, their expertise – in short, their practical range of skills – on the labour market. This is a notion heard particularly in connection with technical staff and also, more recently, with teachers. It claims, therefore, to be scientific and based on the continual advance of knowledge (in the exact sciences, sales techniques, teaching methods, etc.), to which all individuals should normally adapt if they are to remain 'up to speed'. In fact, the term 'recycling' prompts a number of thoughts: it inevitably brings to mind the 'cycle' of fashion: in that field, too, everyone must be 'with-it' and must 'recycle themselves' – their clothes, their belongings, their cars – on a yearly, monthly or seasonal basis. If they do not, they are not true citizens of the consumer society. Now, it is clear that there is no continual progress in these fields: fashion is arbitrary, transient, cyclical, and adds nothing to the intrinsic qualities of the individual. It does, however, impose thoroughgoing constraints, and the sanction it wields is that of social success or banishment. We may ask ourselves whether the 'recycling of knowledge', under its scientific cover, does not conceal this same kind of accelerated, obligatory, arbitrary change as fashion, and does not bring into play at the level of knowledge and persons the same 'built-in obsolescence' as the cycle of production and fashion foists on material objects. In that case, we should have here not a rational process of the accumulation of scientific knowledge, but a non-rational social process of consumption, indissociable from all the others.

Medical recycling: the check-up. Bodily, muscular, physiological recycling: Le Président[1] for men; diets and beauty care for women; holidays for everyone. But we can (and *must*) extend this notion to much broader phenomena: the very 'rediscovery' of the body is a corporeal recycling; the 'rediscovery' of Nature, in the form of a countryside trimmed down to the dimensions of a mere sample, surrounded on all sides by the vast fabric of the city, carefully policed, and served up 'at room temperature' as parkland, nature reserve or background scenery for second homes, is, in fact, a recycling of Nature. That is to say, it is no longer an original, specific presence at all, standing in symbolic opposition to culture, but a *simulation*, a 'consommé' of the signs of nature set back in circulation – in short, nature *recycled*. If we have not yet reached this point everywhere, it is nonetheless the current trend. Whether we speak of countryside planning, conservation or environment, it is, in every case, a question of recycling a nature which is itself doomed. Like events, like knowledge, Nature is governed in this system by the *principle of being up-to-the-minute*. It *has to* change functionally, like fashion. It provides an *ambience* and is therefore subject to a

replacement cycle. This is the same principle as is today invading the occupational field, where the values of science, technique, skill and competence are giving way to 'recycling' – that is to say, to the irresistible pressures of mobility, status and the career *profile.*[2]

This principle of organization governs all 'mass' culture today. What all the acculturated receive is not culture, but *cultural recycling.* (Ultimately, not even the truly 'cultured' escape this, or at least they will not.) They get to be 'in the know', to 'know what's going on'; they get to update their cultural rig-out on a monthly or yearly basis. They get to submit to that low-intensity constraint which is perpetually shifting like fashion and is the *absolute opposite* of culture conceived as:

1 an inherited legacy of works, thought and tradition;
2 a continuous dimension of theoretical and critical reflection – critical transcendence and symbolic function.

Both these dimensions are also denied by the cyclical subculture, made up of obsolescent cultural ingredients and signs, by the *up-to-the-minute* cultural *scene,* which runs from kinetic art to weekly encyclopaedias – recycled culture.

We can see that the problem of the consumption of culture is not, properly speaking, linked to cultural contents. Nor is it connected with the 'audience for culture' (the eternal false problem of the 'vulgarization' of art and culture to which both the practitioners of 'aristocratic' culture and the champions of 'mass' culture fall prey). The decisive factor is not whether millions or only a few thousand partake of a particular work, but that that work, like the car of the year, or nature in parklands, is condemned to be merely an ephemeral sign because it is produced, deliberately or otherwise, in what is today the universal dimension of production: the dimension of the cycle and recycling. Culture is no longer made to last. It keeps up its claim to universality, of course, and to being an ideal reference, doing so all the more strongly for the fact that it is losing its semantic substance (just as Nature was never glorified quite so much before it was everywhere laid waste). However, in its reality, and by its mode of production, it is subject to the same pressure to be 'up-to-the-minute' as material goods. And we must stress once again that this does not have to do with the *industrial dissemination* of culture. The fact that Van Gogh is exhibited in department stores or that Kierkegaard sells 200,000 copies is of no matter here. What affects the *meaning* of the works is the fact that *all significations have become cyclical.* In other words that, through the very system of communication, a particular mode of succession and alternation has been imposed upon them, a combinatorial modulation which is precisely that of hemlines and television programmes (cf. below, 'Medium is Message'). And also the fact that, given this situation, culture, like the pseudo-event in 'public information', like the pseudo-object in advertising, can be produced (and virtually is produced) *out of the medium itself,* out of the code of reference. Here we find that same logical procedure we come upon in 'simulation models'[3] or see at work in gadgets, which are *merely a play on forms and technology.*

Ultimately, there is no longer any difference between 'cultural creativity' (in kinetic art, etc.) and this ludic/technical play of combinations. And no difference between 'avant-garde creations' and 'mass culture' either. The latter tends to combine stereotyped themes and (ideological, folk-loric, sentimental, moral, historical) contents, while the former combines forms and modes of expression. But both play primarily on a code, and on a calculation of market share and amortization. Moreover, it is curious to see how the system of literary prizes, currently despised in the world of letters for its academic decrepitude (from a universal standpoint, it is, in fact, stupid to award a prize to *one book a year*), has gained a remarkable new lease of life from its adaptation to the functional cycle of modern culture. The regularity of these prizes, which in other ages was absurd, is now compatible with the present vogue for recycling, with the focus of cultural fashion on the present. In the past, these prizes marked out a book for posterity, and it was faintly ridiculous. Today, they mark out a book for topical interest, and it works. They have found their second wind.

The *Tirlipot* and the Quiz Machine, or the Lowest Common Culture (LCC)

The mechanics of the *tirlipot* game consist, in theory, in seeking out the definition of a verb by question-and-answer methods (*tirlipoter* [to 'whatsit'] is the equivalent of the 'thingamyjig', a floating signifier for which, by selective restitution, the specific signifier is to be substituted).[4] It is, then, in theory, an intellectual learning process. It is evident, however, that, with a few rare exceptions, the contestants are incapable of asking real questions: they find questioning, probing or analysing a nuisance. They start out from the answer (a particular verb which they have in mind) and deduce the question from it. This is, in fact, the interrogative form of the dictionary definition (e.g. 'is to *tirlipot* to put an end to something?' If the compère says 'Yes, in a way' or even, simply, 'Perhaps … what do you have in mind?', then the automatic reply comes back 'to finish' or 'complete'). What we have here is precisely the approach of the handyman trying one screw after another to see if they fit, a rudimentary exploratory method based on trial-and-error, with no rational investigation involved.

With *the quiz machine* we find the same principle. There is no learning. A minicomputer asks you questions, offering a range of five replies to each. You choose the right answer. Time counts. If you respond instantaneously, you get maximum points and are a 'champion'. This is not, therefore, thinking time, but reaction time. The machine does not bring intellectual processes into play, but merely immediate reaction mechanisms. You must not weigh up the proposed answers or deliberate: you have to *see* the right answer, register it like a stimulus on the same optomotor lines as the photo-electric cell. To know is to see (cf. the Riesmannian 'radar', which allows you to move about among other people, maintaining

or cutting off the contact, immediately selecting positive and negative relationships). Most of all, there must be no analytical thinking: this is penalized by a lower points total due to the time wasted.

If these games do not have a learning function (as is always argued by the programme-makers and the mass-media ideologues), what in fact is their function? In *tirlipot*, it is clearly participation: the content is of no importance. For the contestant, it is the pleasure of occupying the airwaves for 20 seconds, long enough to have one's voice heard, to mingle that voice with the compère's, to hold his attention by striking up a brief dialogue with him and, through him, to strike up magical contact with that warm and anonymous multitude, the public. It is clear that most people are not at all disappointed when they get the answer wrong. They have had what they wanted: *communion* – or, rather, that modern, technical, aseptic form of communion that is *communication*, 'contact'. What marks out the consumer society is not, in fact, the much deplored absence of ceremonies – the radio game is a ceremony just as much as the mass or primitive sacrifice – but the fact that ceremonial communion is no longer achieved by way of bread and wine, which can be seen as flesh and blood, but through the mass media (which are not just the messages, but the whole broadcasting set-up, the network, the station, the receivers and, of course, the programme-makers and public). In other words, *communion is no longer achieved through a symbolic medium, but through a technical one*: this is what makes it communication.

What is shared, then, is no longer a 'culture', the living body, the actual presence of the group (everything which made up the symbolic and metabolic function of the ceremony and the feast), nor is it even knowledge in the proper sense of the term, but that strange corpus of signs and references, of recollections from schooldays and intellectual fashion signals known as 'mass culture', which we might term lowest common culture (LCC), the way one speaks of a lowest common denominator in mathematics. This is also akin to the 'standard package' which lays down the lowest common panoply of objects the average consumer must possess in order to accede to the title of citizen of this consumer society. The LCC lays down the lowest common panoply of 'right answers' the average individual is supposed to possess if he is to win his spurs as cultural citizen.

Mass communication excludes culture and knowledge. There is no question of real symbolic or didactic processes coming into play, since that would be to compromise the collective participation which is the meaning of the ceremony, a participation which can only be enacted through a *liturgy*, a formal code of signs meticulously voided of all meaning content.

We can see that the term 'culture' is potentially very misleading. This cultural 'consomme', this 'digest'/repertoire of coded questions/answers, this LCC, is to culture what life insurance is to life: it is there to ward off its dangers, and, on the basis of the denial of a living culture, to glorify the ritualized signs of *culturalization*.

However, this LCC, which draws its sustenance from an automatized question-and-answer mechanism, has many affinities with the 'culture' of

the schoolroom. Indeed, all these games have the archetype of the *examination* as their mainspring. And this is no accident. The examination is the pre-eminent form of social advancement. Everyone wants to take exams, even in bastardized, radiophonic form, because there is today something prestigious about being examined. The endless proliferation of these games contains within it, then, a powerful process of social integration: we can, ultimately, imagine a whole society integrated into these mass-media contests, the whole of social organization dependent on their sanction. There has already been one society in history which had a total system of selection and organization by examination: China under the Mandarins. But that system only affected an educated fringe. In this case, we should have entire masses mobilized in an endless game of double-or-quits, in which everyone would be securing or endangering his social destiny. In this way, we would be spared the archaic machinery of social control, the best system of integration having always been that of ritualized competition. We have not reached that point yet. For the moment, let us note the very great aspiration to be a part of the exam situation – a dual aspiration this, since everyone may be examined, but anyone can also slot into that situation as examiner, as judge (as a tiny fragment of that collective authority called the public). This is an oneiric duplication, phantasmic in the strictest sense: being both the one person and the other. But it is also a tactical operation of integration by delegation of power. What defines *mass* communication is, therefore, the combination of technical medium and LCC (*not the massive numbers of people* taking part). The quiz machine is also a mass medium, even if the game seems to be an individual one. In playing this machine, where intellectual dexterity registers as beeps and flashing lights – an admirable synthesis of knowledge and the household appliance – you are still being programmed by a collective agency. The computerized medium is merely a technical materialization of the collective medium, of that system of 'lowest common culture' signals which governs the participation of all in each and each in the same system.

Let us say, once again, that it is pointless and absurd to compare High Culture and Mass-Media Culture and to contrast their value. The one has a complex syntax, the other is a combinatory of elements which can always be broken down into stimulus-response and question-and-answer patterns. The latter is most vividly illustrated in the radio game. But, far beyond this ritual spectacle, this pattern governs the behaviour of the consumer in each of his acts, in his general conduct, which is organized as a series of responses to different stimuli. Tastes, preferences, needs, decisions: where both objects and relationships are concerned, the consumer is perpetually appealed to, 'questioned' and required to respond. Making a purchase is, in this context, akin to a radio quiz. It is today not so much an original act on the part of the individual aimed at concretely satisfying a need, as, primarily, *the response to a question* – a response which engages the individual in the collective ritual of consumption. It is a game to the extent that every object is always one among a range of variants, between which the individual is

required to choose – the act of purchasing is a choosing, the determination of a preference – precisely as he or she must choose between the answers offered by the quiz game. It is in this sense that the purchaser *plays*, replying to a question which is never the direct one regarding the utility of the object, but the indirect one regarding the 'play' among the variants of the object. That 'play' and the choice which marks its successful conclusion characterize the purchaser/consumer as opposed to the traditional user.

Lowest Common Multiples (LCMs)

The lowest common culture (LCC) of the radio waves or the mass-circulation magazines today has an artistic subsidiary. This is the multiplication of artworks, for which the Bible – itself now multiplied and delivered to the masses in weekly instalments – provided the miraculous prototype in the celebrated multiplication of loaves and fishes beside the Sea of Galilee.

A great democratic wind has blown through the heavenly Jerusalem of culture and art. 'Contemporary art', from Rauschenberg to Picasso, from Vasarely to Chagall and on to younger artists, is holding its 'private view' at the Printemps department store (though, admittedly, it is doing so at the top of the building and not compromising the second-floor 'interior decoration' department with its harbour views and setting suns). The work of art is breaking out of the solitude in which it has for centuries been confined as unique object and privileged moment. Once upon a time, as everyone knows, galleries were sanctuaries. But the masses have now taken over from the solitary owner or the enlightened art-lover. And there is not simply industrial reproduction to delight the masses, but a work of art that is both unique and collective: the Multiple.

> In a happy initiative, under the aegis of the Prisunic department stores, Jacques Putman has just published a collection of original prints at a very affordable price (100 F). No one finds it odd any longer to acquire a lithograph or an etching *at the same time as a pair of stockings or a garden chair.* The second 'Prisunic Suite' has just gone on show at L'Oeil gallery. It is now on sale in the shops. This is not a promotion, nor yet a revolution[!]. The multiplication of images is a response to a multiplying public, which inevitably[!] leads to the creation of places to view those images. Experimental research no longer ends in enslavement to power and money: the art-loving benefactor is giving way to the *participating client* … Each numbered and signed print is made in an edition of 300 copies … A victory for the consumer society? Perhaps. But what matter, since quality is preserved? Those who will not understand contemporary art today are those who do not want to.

Art speculation, which was based on rarity value, is over. With the 'Unlimited Multiple', art moves into the industrial era (as it so happens, these Multiples, produced in limited editions, immediately give rise to a black market and 'alternative' speculation: the false ingenuousness of the producers and designers). The work of art in the pork butchers, the

abstract in the factory … Don't say, 'What is Art?' any more; don't say, 'Art is too dear'; don't say, 'Art isn't for me': read *Les Muses*.

It would be too easy to say that a Picasso painting in a factory will never abolish the division of labour and that the multiplication of multiples, were that to be achieved, will never abolish social division and the transcendence of Culture. The illusion of the ideologues of the Multiple (let us not speak here of the conscious or subconscious speculators among both artists and dealers, though they are by far the largest group involved) and of cultural dissemination or promotion more generally is, nonetheless, an instructive one. Their noble effort to democratize culture or, where the designers are concerned, 'to create beautiful objects for the greatest number', visibly meets with failure – or with such commercial success that it becomes suspect as a result, which amounts to the same thing. But this contradiction is merely apparent: it exists because these fine souls stubbornly insist on *regarding Culture as a universal, while seeking, at the same time, to disseminate it in the form of finite objects* (whether unique or produced in their thousands). In so doing, they are merely delivering up to the logic of consumption (i.e. to the manipulation of signs) certain contents or symbolic activities which were not previously subject to that logic. Producing multiple works does not in itself imply any 'vulgarization' or 'loss of quality': what happens is that, as 'mass-produced' objects, works so produced become effectively objects of the same kind 'as the pair of stockings and the garden chair', and acquire their meaning in relation to those things. They no longer stand opposed, as *works* and as semantic substance – as *open* significations – to other *finite* objects. They have become finite objects themselves and are part of the package, the constellation of accessories by which the 'socio-cultural' standing of the average citizen is determined. This, at least, is what would happen in the best of cases, where everyone really did have access to them. For the moment, although they are not artworks any longer, these pseudo-works are nonetheless rare objects, economically or 'psychologically' inaccessible to most people and sustaining, as distinctive objects, a slightly expanded parallel Culture market.

It is perhaps more interesting – though the problem is the same – to look at what is consumed in the weekly instalment encyclopaedias, such as *La Bible, Les Muses, Alpha, Le Million* and in the mass-circulation musical and artistic publications, such as *Grands peintres* and *Grands musiciens*. We know that the audience for these publications is potentially very large, embracing all those in the middle classes who are educated to secondary or technical level (or whose children are so educated): white-collar workers, lower and middle managers.

To these recent large-scale publications we should also add those which, from *Science et vie* to *Historia* and the like, have long fed the demand for culture of the 'potentially upwardly mobile'. What do they want from this frequenting of science, history, music and encyclopaedic knowledge – that is to say, of established, legitimate disciplines, the contents of which – unlike what is broadcast by the mass media – have a specific value? Are

they looking to learn something, to acquire a real grounding in culture, or do they want a mark of social advancement? Are they looking to culture as a practice or as a possession to be acquired; are they seeking knowledge or status? Is what we have here a 'package effect' once again, that effect which, as we have seen, marks out – as one sign among others – the object of consumption?

In the case of *Science et vie* (we draw in what follows on a readership survey of this magazine analysed by the Centre de sociologie européenne), the readers' demands are ambiguous: there is here a disguised, clandestine aspiration to acquire 'high-brow' culture by way of accession to technical culture. Reading *Science et vie* is the product of a compromise: an aspiration to elite culture is present, but so too is a defensive counter-motivation in the form of a rejection of elitism (in other words, there is both an aspiration to join the higher class and a reaffirmation of class position). More precisely, such reading functions as *a mark of membership*. But membership of what? The abstract community, the virtual collective of all those driven by the same ambiguous exigency, of all those who also read *Science et vie* (or *Les Muses*, etc.). This is an act of allegiance of a mythological order: the reader imagines a group whose presence he consumes *in abstracto* through his reading: an unreal, mass relationship, which is, quite precisely, the *mass communication effect*. An undifferentiated complicity which nonetheless constitutes the deeply experienced substance of that reading – embodying a value of recognition, of membership, of mythic participation (one can detect just this same process at work among the readers of the *Nouvel Observateur*: to read that magazine is to *affiliate oneself* to the readers of that magazine; it is to use a 'cultural' activity as a class emblem).

Naturally, most readers (we should perhaps say, most 'devotees') of these mass-circulation publications, which are the vehicles of a 'middlebrow' culture, will claim in good faith that they are concerned with their content and that their aim is knowledge. But this cultural 'use-value', this objective goal, is largely overdetermined by the sociological 'exchange-value'. It is that demand, indexed to increasingly intense status competition, which is met by the vast 'culturalized' material of periodicals, encyclopaedias and paperback editions. All this cultural substance may be said to be 'consumed', in so far as its content does not sustain an autonomous practice, but a rhetoric of social mobility, and in so far as it meets a demand which has *something other than culture* as its object or, rather, seeks culture only as a *coded element of social status*. There is here an inversion, and the strictly cultural content appears only as connotation, as a secondary function. We can say, then, that it is consumed in the same way as a washing machine becomes a consumer good at the point where it is no longer an implement but a luxury, prestige element. We know that, at that point, it no longer has any specific presence and many other objects could be substituted for it – culture being, precisely, one of them. Culture becomes an object of consumption in so far as, sliding towards another discourse, it becomes interchangeable and homogeneous with other objects (even if it remains

hierarchically superior to them). And this is true not only of *Science et vie*, but also of 'high' culture, 'great' painting, and classical music, etc. All these things can be sold together at the drugstore or the newsagents. But it is not, strictly speaking, a question of the sales outlet, the size of the production run or the 'cultural level' of the audience. If all these things are sold and consumed together, that is because culture is subject to the same competitive demand for signs as any other category of objects and that it is *produced to meet that demand*.

It is then subject to the same mode of appropriation as other messages, objects and images which make up the 'ambience' of our daily life: the mode of *'curiosity'*. This is not necessarily something frivolous or casual; there may be passionate curiosity, particularly among those categories of people in process of acculturation. But it presupposes succession, cycles, the pressure for changes of fashion. Thus, for the exclusive practice of culture as a symbolic system of meaning it substitutes a ludic and combinatorial practice of culture as a system of signs. 'Beethoven is fabulous!'

Ultimately, what individuals get from this 'culture' – which excludes both the autodidact, the marginal hero of traditional culture, and the cultured person, that embalmed humanistic flower on the verge of extinction – is cultural 'recycling', an aesthetic recycling which is one of the elements of the generalized 'personalization' of the individual, of cultural 'show' [*faire-valoir*] in competitive society and which is the equivalent, all other things being equal, of the setting-off or showing-off [*faire-valoir*] of the object by packaging. Industrial aesthetics – design – has no aim other than to restore to industrial objects – deeply affected by the division of labour and bearing the stamp of their functions – this 'aesthetic' homogeneity, this formal unity or playful dimension which might be said to connect them all in a kind of secondary 'environment' or 'ambience' function.

This is the work of those 'cultural designers' one now finds everywhere: in a society where individuals are severely affected by the division of labour and the fragmentary nature of their work, they seek to 'redesign' them through 'culture', to integrate them into a single formal shell, to facilitate interaction in the name of the promotion of culture, to promote an ambience for people, as design does for objects. Moreover, we should not lose sight of the fact that this packaging, this cultural recycling is, like the 'beauty' industrial aesthetics bestows upon objects, 'undeniably a selling point', to quote Jacques Michel. 'It is an acknowledged fact today that a pleasant environment, created by harmony of shapes and colours and, of course, the quality of materials[!], has a beneficial effect on productivity.'[5] And it is true: acculturated people, like designed objects, are better integrated socially and professionally; they 'fit in' better and are more 'compatible'. One of the happiest hunting grounds of the functionalism of human relations is the promotion of culture: there 'human design' meets 'human engineering'.

We need a term which would be to culture what 'Aesthetics' (in the sense of industrial aesthetics, the functional rationalization of forms, the

play of signs) is to beauty as a symbolic system. We have no word for this functionalized substance of messages, texts, images, classic masterpieces or cartoon strips, this coded 'creativity' and 'receptiveness', which have replaced inspiration and sensibility, this collective *managed* work on significations and communication, this 'industrial culturality', haunted pell-mell by the cultures of all ages, which we continue, for want of a better word, to call 'culture', though we do so at an enormous cost in misunderstandings, nurturing a constant dream – in the hyperfunctionalism of consumed culture – of the universal, of myths capable of deciphering our age without themselves being mythological 'spectaculars', of an art which could decipher modernity without being abolished in it.

Kitsch

Alongside gadgetry, one of the other major categories of modern object is kitsch. The kitsch object is commonly understood as one of that great army of 'trashy' objects, made of plaster of Paris [*stuc*] or some such imitation material: that gallery of cheap junk – accessories, folksy knick-knacks, 'souvenirs', lampshades or fake African masks – which proliferates everywhere, with a preference for holiday resorts and places of leisure. Kitsch is the equivalent of the 'cliché' in speech. And this should tell us that, as in the case of the gadget, we are dealing with a *category* which is difficult to define, but which should not be confused with any particular *real* objects. Kitsch can be anywhere: in the detail of an object or in the plan of a new residential area, in an artificial flower or in a photo-novel. It can best be defined as a *pseudo-object* or, in other words, as a simulation, a copy, an imitation, a stereotype, as a dearth of real signification and a superabundance of signs, of allegorical references, disparate connotations, as a glorification of the detail and a saturation by details. There is, moreover, a close affinity between its internal organization (unconnected superabundance of signs) and its appearance on the market (proliferation of disparate objects, a mass-produced accumulation). Kitsch is a *cultural category*.

This proliferation of kitsch, which is produced by industrial reproduction and the vulgarization at the level of objects of distinctive signs taken from all registers (the bygone, the 'neo', the exotic, the folksy, the futuristic) and from a disordered excess of 'ready-made' signs, has its basis, like 'mass culture', in the *sociological* reality of the consumer society. This is a mobile society: broad swathes of the population are moving up the social ladder, reaching a higher status and, at the same time, acceding to cultural demand, which is simply the need to manifest that status in signs. At all levels of society, the generations of parvenus want their package. There is no point, then, blaming the 'vulgarity' of the public or the 'cynical' tactics of the industrialists who wish to shift their wares. Though this aspect is important, it cannot *explain* the cancerous excrescence of the mass of 'pseudo-objects'. There has to be a demand, and that demand is a function of social mobility. There is no kitsch

in a society without social mobility. In such a society, a limited range of luxury objects suffices as distinctive material for the privileged caste. Even the copy of a work of art still has 'authentic' value in the classical age. By contrast, it is the great periods of social mobility which see the object flourish in other guises: it is with the rising bourgeoisie of the Renaissance and the seventeenth century that preciosity and the baroque emerge. Though these are not the direct ancestors of kitsch, they already bear witness to the growth and fragmentation of distinctive material at a time of social pressure and relative hybridity of the upper classes. It is, however, mainly since the time of Louis-Philippe in France, the *Gründerjahre* in Germany (1870–90) and the end of the nineteenth century and the age of the department stores in all Western societies, that the universal knick-knack form has become one of the major manifestations of the object and one of the most fruitful branches of commerce. That era is unending, since our societies are now potentially in a phase of continual mobility.

Kitsch obviously reaffirms the value of the rare, precious, unique object (production of which can also become industrial). Kitsch and the 'authentic' object thus between them organize the world of consumption according to the logic of a distinctive material which is, today, always shifting and expanding. Kitsch has a weak distinctive value, but that weak value is linked to maximum statistical profitability: entire classes seize on it. This can be contrasted with the maximal distinctive quality of rare objects, which is connected with their limited supply. We are talking here not of beauty, but of distinctiveness, and this is a *sociological* function. In this sense, all objects can be classified hierarchically as values, depending on their statistical availability, on their more or less limited supply. This function defines at every moment, for a particular state of the social structure, the scope afforded to a particular social category to distinguish itself and mark its status through a particular category of objects or signs. When broader strata accede to a particular category of signs, the upper classes are obliged to distance themselves by other markers which are limited in number (either by their origin, such as paintings or authentic antiques, or systematically, such as luxury editions or custom-built cars). In this logic of distinction, kitsch is never innovative: it is defined by its derived and weak value. This weak valency is, in its turn, one of the reasons for its unlimited multiplication. *It multiplies in ever greater quantities*, whereas, at the top of the social ladder, 'classy' objects *become fewer in number by increasing in quality* and are revived by becoming rare.

This derivative function is once again linked to its 'aesthetic' or anti-aesthetic function. To the aesthetics of beauty and originality, kitsch opposes its *aesthetics of simulation*: it everywhere reproduces objects smaller or larger than life; it imitates materials (in plaster, plastic, etc.); it apes forms or combines them discordantly; *it repeats fashion* without having been part of the experience of fashion. In all this, it is all of a piece with the 'gimmicky' gadget in the technical world. That gadget is, similarly, a technological parody, an excrescence of useless functions, a

continual *simulation* of function without any real, practical referent. This aesthetics of simulation is profoundly linked to kitsch's socially assigned function of translating social class aspirations and anticipations, of expressing the magical affiliation with a culture, with the forms, manners and markers of the upper class – an aesthetics of acculturation resulting in a subculture of objects.[6]

The Gadget and the Ludic

The machine was the emblem of industrial society. The gadget is the emblem of post-industrial society. No rigorous definition of the gadget exists. If, however, we agree to define the object of consumption by the relative disappearance of its objective function (as an implement) and a corresponding increase in its sign function, and if we accept that the object of consumption is characterized by a kind of *functional uselessness* (what is consumed is precisely something other than the 'useful'), then *the gadget is indeed the truth of the object in consumer society*. Hence, *anything can become a gadget* and everything potentially is one. The gadget might be said, then, to be defined by its potential uselessness and its ludic combinatorial value.[7] So both sew-on badges, which have had their hour of glory, and the 'Venusik', a perfectly 'pure' and useless cylinder of polished metal (its only possible use being as a paperweight, the function reserved for all absolutely useless objects!), are gadgets. 'Lovers of formal beauty and potential uselessness, the fabulous "Venusik" has arrived!'

But the typewriter which can write in 13 different character sets, 'depending on whether you are writing to your bank manager or your lawyer, a very important client or an old friend', is also a gadget – for where is 'objective' uselessness to begin? As are the inexpensive homemade trinkets and also the IBM dictation machine: 'Imagine a little machine (12cm x 15cm) you can have with you everywhere – in the office, at weekends and on your travels. You hold it in one hand and, with a flick of the thumb, whisper your decisions, dictate your directives, hail your victories. Everything you say is committed to its memory … Whether you are in Rome, Tokyo or New York, your secretary will not miss a single one of your syllables.' What could be more useful? What could be more useless? When technology is consigned to mental practices of a magical type or to modish social practices, then the technical object itself becomes a mere gadget again.

In a car, are the chrome, the two-speed windscreen wipers and the electric windows gadgets? Yes and no: they do have some utility in terms of social prestige. The contemptuous connotation of the term comes quite simply from a *moral* perspective on the instrumental usefulness of objects: some are said to have a use, others not. By what criteria? There is no object, even the most marginal and decorative, that does not have some use, if only because, in having no use, it becomes once again a mark of distinction.[8] Conversely, there is no object which does not, in a sense, serve no precise

purpose (or which cannot, in other words, serve a purpose other than its intended one). There is no way out of this, except to define a gadget as something which is explicitly intended for secondary functions. Thus, not only the chrome, but also the 'cockpit' and the whole car are gadgets if they are part of a logic of fashion and prestige or part of a fetishistic logic. And the systematics of objects means that this is the dominant tendency for all objects today.

The world of the pseudo-environment and the pseudo-object is one in which all 'functional' 'creators' revel. Take André Faye, 'technician of the art of living', who creates Louis XVI furniture, the stylish doors of which open to reveal the smooth, brilliant surface of a turntable or hi-fi speakers:

> His objects move, like Calder's mobiles: both everyday objects and real works of art can be designed on this basis. And when set in motion and coordinated with chromophonic projections, they come ever closer to the *total spectacle* to which he aspires … Cybernetic furniture, desks with variable geometry and orientation, a calligraphic Teletype machine … At long last a telephone fully built into the human body to enable you to call New York or answer Honolulu from the grounds of a mansion or beside a swimming pool.

All this, for Faye, represents 'a subjugation of technology to the art of living'. And it all irresistibly calls to mind the Concours Lépine.[9] What difference is there between the videophone desk and the cold-water-based heating system devised by some illustrious inventor? Yet, there is a difference. It is that the good old artisanal brainwave was a curious excrescence, the mildly unhinged poetry of a heroic technology. The gadget, by contrast, is part of a systematic logic which lays hold of the whole of daily life in the spectacular mode, and, as a consequence, casts a suspicion of artificiality, fakery and uselessness over the whole environment of objects, and, by extension, over the whole environment of human and social relations. In its broadest sense, the gadget attempts to move beyond the generalized crisis of *purpose* [*finalité*] and usefulness *in the ludic mode*. But it does not – and cannot – attain the symbolic freedom the toy has for the child. It is impoverished, a fashion effect, a kind of artificial accelerator of other objects; it is caught in a circuit where the useful and the symbolic resolve into a kind of combinatorial uselessness, as in those 'total' light shows, where the entertainment itself is a gimmick or, in other words, a social pseudo-event – a game without players. The pejorative resonance the terms 'gadgetry' and 'gimmickry' have acquired today ('a mere gadget', 'just gimmickry') no doubt reflects both a moral judgement and the anxiety generated by the generalized disappearance of use-value and the symbolic function.

But the reverse is also true. That is to say, the combinatorial 'new look' of the gadget can be opposed by – and this is the case for any object, even one which is itself a gadget – *the exaltedness of the new*. The period of newness is, in a sense, the sublime period of the object and may, in certain cases, attain the intensity, if not the quality, of the emotion of love. This phase is one of a symbolic discourse, in which fashion and reference to others have no part. It is in this mode of intense relation that the child experiences his

objects and toys. And it is not the least of the charms, later, of a new car, book, gadget or item of clothing that they plunge us back into absolute childhood. This is the opposite logic to that of consumption.

The gadget is defined in fact by the way we act with it, which is not utilitarian or symbolic in character, but **ludic.** It is the ludic which increasingly governs our relations to objects, persons, culture, leisure and, at times, work, and also politics. It is the ludic which is becoming the dominant tone of our daily habitus, to the extent indeed that everything – objects, goods, relationships, services – is becoming gadgetry or gimmickry. The ludic represents a very particular type of investment: it is not economic (useless objects) and not symbolic (the gadget/object has no soul), but consists in a play with combinations, a combinatorial modulation: a play on the technical variants or potentialities of the object – in innovation *a playing with the rules of play*, in destruction a playing with life and death as the ultimate combination. Here, our domestic gadgets link up once again with slot machines, *tirlipots* and the other cultural radio games, the quiz machine in the drugstore, the car dashboard and the whole range of 'serious' technical apparatus which makes up the modern 'ambience' of work from the telephone to the computer – all those things we *play* with more or less consciously, fascinated as we are by the operation of machines, by childlike discovery and manipulation, by vague or passionate curiosity for the 'play' of mechanisms, the play of colours, the play of variants: this is the very soul of passionate play [*le jeu-passion*], but diffuse and generalized and hence less cogent, emptied of its pathos and become mere *curiosity* – something between indifference and fascination, which might be defined by its opposition to *passion*. Passion may be understood as a concrete relation to a *total person* or to some object taken as a person. It implies total investment and assumes an intense symbolic value. Whereas ludic curiosity is merely interest – albeit violent interest – in the *play of elements*.

Take the pinball machine. The player becomes absorbed in the machine's noise, jolts and flashing lights. He is playing with electricity. As he presses the controls, he has a sense of unleashing impulses and currents through a world of multi-coloured wires as complex as a nervous system. There is in his play an effect of magical participation in science. To grasp this, one has only to observe the crowd which gathers around the repair man in a café when he opens up the machine. No one understands the connections and circuits, but everyone accepts this strange world as an incontrovertible datum. There is nothing here of the relation of rider to horse, worker to tools or art-lover to work of art. The relation of man to object is strictly magical, which is to say that it is bewitched and manipulatory.

This ludic activity may give the appearance of being a passion. But it never is. It is consumption – in this case, abstract manipulation of lights, 'flippers' and electrical reaction times, in other cases, the abstract manipulation of marks of prestige in the variants of fashion. Consumption is combinatorial investment: it is exclusive of passion.

Pop: an Art of Consumption?

The logic of consumption, as we have seen, can be defined as a manipulation of signs. The symbolic values of creation and the symbolic relation of inwardness are absent from it: it is all in externals. The object loses its objective finality and its function; it becomes a term in a much greater combinatory, in sets of objects in which it has a merely relational value. Moreover, it loses its symbolic meaning, its millennial anthropomorphic status, and tends to peter out into a discourse of connotations which are also simply relative to one another within the framework of a totalitarian cultural system (that is to say, a system which is able to integrate all significations whatever their provenance).

We have based our argument here on the analysis of *everyday* objects. There is, however, another discourse on the object – the discourse of art. A history of the changing status of objects and their representation in art and literature would itself be revealing. After operating in the whole of traditional art as symbolic, decorative props, objects have ceased in the twentieth century to be indexed to moral and psychological values; they have ceased to live by proxy in the shadow of man and have begun to take on extraordinary importance as autonomous elements in an analysis of space (Cubism, etc.). They have as a result been fragmented, even to the point of abstraction. Having celebrated their parodic resurrection in Dada and Surrealism, which were then destructured and volatilized by the abstract, they are apparently now reconciled again with their image in neo-figuration and pop art. It is here that the question of their contemporary status arises: indeed it is forced upon us by their sudden elevation to the zenith of artistic figuration.

In short, is pop the form of art contemporaneous with the logic of signs and consumption we are speaking of, or is it merely an effect of fashion, and hence itself a pure object of consumption? There is no contradiction between the two. We may accept that pop art transposes an object-world, while at the same time simply issuing (by its own logic) in objects pure and simple. Advertising shares this same ambiguity.

Let us formulate the matter another way: the logic of consumption eliminates the traditional sublime status of artistic representation. There is, strictly, no longer any privileging of the essence or signification of the object over the image. The one is no longer the truth of the other: they coexist in the same physical and logical space, where they also 'operate' as signs (in their differential, reversible, combinatorial relation).[10] Whereas all art up to pop was based on a 'depth' vision of the world,[11] pop regards itself as homogeneous with this *immanent order of signs*: homogeneous with their industrial, mass production and hence with the artificial, manufactured character of the whole environment, homogeneous with the spatial saturation and simultaneous culturalized abstraction of this new order of things.

Does it succeed in 'rendering' this systematic secularization of objects, in 'rendering' this new sign-based [*signalétique*] environment, which is

wholly in externals, so that nothing remains of the 'inner light' which gave all earlier painting its prestige? Is it an *art of the non-sacred*? That is to say, an art of pure manipulation? Is it itself a non-sacred art or, in other words, an art productive of objects, but not creative?

Some will say (including the pop artists themselves) that things are much simpler: they do what they do because they want to; basically, they enjoy doing it; they look around them and paint what they see; it is spontaneous realism, etc. This is mistaken. Pop signifies the end of perspective, the end of evocation, the end of testimony, the end of the creative act and, last but not least, the end of the subversion of the world and the curse of art. Its aim is not merely the immanence of the 'civilized' world, but its total integration into that world. There is in this a crazy ambition, the ambition of abolishing the splendours (and foundations) of a whole culture, the culture of transcendence. And there is in it perhaps quite simply also an ideology. Let us first remove two objections. First, that it is 'an American art' – in the objects it depicts (including the obsession with the Stars and Stripes), in its pragmatic, optimistic empirical practice, in the undeniably chauvinistic infatuation of certain of its backers and collectors who have 'identified' with it etc. Though the objection is a tendentious one, let us reply to it objectively. If all these things are *Americanism*, the pop artists, following their own logic, cannot but sign up to them. If manufactured objects 'speak American', that is because they have no other truth than that mythology which swamps them – and the only rigorous approach is to integrate this mythological discourse and integrate oneself into it. If the consumer society is trapped in its own mythology, if it has no critical perspective on itself, and if *that is precisely its definition*,[12] there can be no contemporary art which is not, in its very existence and practice, compromised by and complicit with that opaquely self-evident state of affairs. This is indeed why the pop artists paint objects in terms of their real appearance, since it is *in that way, as ready-made signs, 'fresh from the assembly line', that they function mythologically*. This is why they prefer to paint the brand names, slogans and acronyms these objects bear and, in the extreme case, may paint only those things (Robert Indiana). This is neither play nor 'realism': it is recognizing the obvious truth of the consumer society which is that the truth of objects and products is their *brand name*. If that is 'Americanism', then Americanism is the very logic of contemporary culture and one cannot fault the pop artists for pointing this up.

No more, indeed, can one criticize them for their commercial success and for accepting it unashamedly. The worst thing would be for them to claim some 'accursed' status and thus reinvest themselves with a sacred function. It is logical for an art which does not contradict the world of objects, but explores its system, to make itself part of that system. It is even the end of a hypocrisy and of a radical illogicality. As opposed to earlier painting (since the end of the nineteenth century), whose genius and transcendence did not prevent it from being a *signed* object and an object marketed in terms of its signature (the abstract expressionists pushed this

conquering genius and shameful opportunism to its extreme), the pop artists reconcile the object of painting and the painting as object. Coherence or paradox? In its predilection for objects, its endless figuration of 'branded' objects and food products – and also in its commercial success – pop is the first art to explore its own status as 'signed' and 'consumed' art object.

Yet this logical enterprise, which one cannot but approve even in its extreme consequences (even where these contravene our traditional aesthetic *morality*), is accompanied by an ideology into which it is in some danger of sinking: an ideology of Nature, of 'Waking-Up' and authenticity reminiscent of the best moments of bourgeois spontaneity.

This 'radical empiricism', 'uncompromising positivism', and 'anti-teleologism' sometimes assumes a dangerously *initiatory* air.[13] Oldenburg writes:

> I drove around the city one day with Jimmy Dine. By chance we drove along Orchard Street, which is crowded with small stores on both sides. As we drove I remember having a vision of *The Store*. In my mind's eye, I saw a complete environment based on this theme. It seemed to me that I had discovered a new world. Everywhere I went I began wandering through the different stores as *if they were museums*. I saw the objects displayed in windows as precious works of art.

And Rosenquist:

> Then suddenly the ideas seemed to flow towards me through the window. All I had to do was seize them on the wing and start painting. Everything spontaneously fell into place – the idea, the composition, the images, the colors, everything started to work on its own.

As is clear from this, the pop artists are not to be outdone by previous generations so far as 'Inspiration' is concerned. Since Werther, this theme has underpinned the ideality of a *Nature* to which one only has to be faithful to achieve truth. One simply has to awaken or reveal that Nature. In John Cage, the musician who inspired Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, we read: 'art should be an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order … but simply a way of *waking up* to the very life we are living, which is so excellent, once one gets one's mind, one's desires out of the way and lets it act of its own accord.' This assent to a revealed order – the universe of images and manufactured objects showing through ultimately as a *nature* – leads to mystico-realist professions of faith: 'A flag was just a flag, a number was simply a number' (Jasper Johns) or (Cage again): 'We must set about discovering a means to let sounds be themselves', which supposes an essence of the object, a level of absolute reality that is never that of the everyday environment and which, in relation to that environment, constitutes nothing short of a surreality. Wesselmann speaks in this way of the 'super-realism' of an ordinary kitchen.

In short, there is total confusion here and what we have is a kind of behaviourism composed of a juxtaposition of things seen (something like a consumer society impressionism), accompanied by a vague Zen or Buddhist mysticism of the stripping away of the ego or superego to rediscover the 'id'

of the surrounding world. There is also something distinctly American about this curious mixture!

But there is above all a serious ambiguity and incoherence here. For, by presenting the surrounding world not as what it is (first and foremost an artificial field of manipulable signs, a total cultural artifact, in which neither sensation nor vision are in play, but differential perception and the tactical play of significations), but as revealed nature, as essence, pop gives itself a dual connotation: on the one hand, it poses as the ideology of an integrated society (current society = nature = ideal society, though we have seen that this collusion forms part of its logic); on the other, it reinstates the whole *sacred process of art*, which destroys its own basic objective.

Pop lays claim to be the art of the banal (it is on these grounds that it calls itself 'pop(ular)' art), but what is the banal but a metaphysical category, a modern version of the category of the sublime? The object is banal only in its use, in the moment of its use (the 'working' radio in Wesselmann's installations). The object ceases to be banal as soon as it signifies. Now, we have seen that the 'truth' of the contemporary object is no longer to be used for something, but to signify, no longer to be manipulated as an instrument, but as a sign. And it is the success of pop, at its best, to show it to us as such.

Andy Warhol, who is the most radical in his approach, is also the artist who best sums up the theoretical contradiction in this art practice and the difficulties it has in envisaging its real object. He says: 'The canvas is an absolutely everyday object, like this chair or that poster' (as ever this desire to absorb art, to rehabilitate it, in which there is both American pragmatism – terroristic insistence on the useful, integrationist blackmail – and something like an echo of the mystique of sacrifice). He adds: 'Reality needs no intermediary, all you have to do is isolate it from the environment and put it on canvas.' Now, this is the whole question: the everydayness of this chair (or a particular hamburger, tail-fin or pin-up) is precisely its context and, specifically, the mass-produced context of all similar or almost similar chairs, etc. Everydayness is *difference in repetition*. By isolating the chair on the canvas, I remove all everydayness from it and, at the same time, deprive the canvas of its character of everyday object (in which respect, according to Warhol, it should absolutely resemble the chair). This is a familiar dead-end: art can neither be absorbed into everyday life (the canvas = the chair), nor can it grasp the everyday as such (the chair isolated on the canvas = the real chair). Immanence and transcendence are equally impossible: they are the two aspects of a single dream.

There is, in short, no essence of the everyday, of the banal, and thus no art of the everyday: this is a mystical aporia. If Warhol (and others) believe that there is, that is because they delude themselves about the very status of art and the artistic act – something far from uncommon among artists. Indeed, we find the same mystical nostalgia at the level of the productive act: 'I would like to be a machine,' says Andy Warhol, who does in fact paint with stencils, silk screens, etc. Now, there can be no worse arrogance for art than to pose as machine-like, no greater affectation on the part of

the person who enjoys the status of creator, whether he wishes it or not, than to devote himself to serial automatism. Yet, one cannot accuse Warhol or the pop artists of bad faith: their logical demand runs up against a sociological and cultural status of art which they are powerless to change. It is this powerlessness that is expressed in their ideology. When *they* try to desacralize their practice, society simply sacralizes them the more. And we arrive at the situation where their attempt – the most radical yet – to secularize art, both in its themes and in its practice, leads to a glorification and unprecedented manifestation of the sacred in art. Quite simply, the pop artists forget that, for a painting to cease to be a sacred super-sign (a unique object, a signature, the object of a noble, magical commerce), it is not sufficient to change the content of the picture or the artist's intentions: it is the structures of the production of culture which decide the matter. Ultimately, only the rationalization of the art market, on the same basis as any other industrial market, could desacralize artworks and restore them to the status of everyday objects.[14] This is perhaps neither conceivable, nor possible, nor even desirable. Who knows? At any event, it is the limit state: once one has reached it, one either stops painting or continues at the cost of sliding back into the traditional mythology of artistic creation. It is along this fault line that classical pictorial values are rehabilitated: of an 'expressionist' kind in Oldenburg, fauvist and Matissian in Wesselmann, 'art nouveau' and akin to Japanese calligraphy in Lichtenstein, etc. But what do these 'legendary' resonances matter to us here? Of what consequence are these effects, which make it possible to say that 'this is still painting all the same'? The logic of pop lies elsewhere – not in an aesthetic computation or a metaphysics of the object.

One could define pop as a *game with* – and a manipulation of – the different levels of mental perception, a kind of mental Cubism that would seek to diffract objects not in terms of a spatial analytics, but in terms of the modalities of perception elaborated over the centuries by a whole culture on the basis of its intellectual and technical machinery: objective reality, image-as-reflection, drawn figuration, technical figuration (photography), abstract schematization, discursive utterance, etc. On the other hand, the use of the phonetic alphabet and industrial techniques have imposed patterns of division, splitting, abstraction and repetition (ethnographers report the bewilderment of primitive peoples when they discover several *absolutely* identical books: their whole vision of the world is overturned). We may see in these various modes the thousand figures of a *rhetoric of designation*, of recognition. And this is where pop art comes in: it works on the differences between these different levels or modes, and on the perception of those differences. For example, the screen print of a lynching is not an evocation of an event: it presupposes that the lynching has already been transformed into a news item, a journalistic sign, by way of mass communications – a sign taken up again at one further remove by the screen print. The same photograph repeated presupposes the single photograph and, beyond that, the real being whose reflection it is. And that

real being might indeed figure in the work without exploding it: that would merely be one more combination.

Just as there is no order of reality in pop art, only levels of signification, so too there is no real space. The only space is that of the canvas, of the juxtaposition of the different sign-elements and the relationship between them. There is no real time either, the only time being that of the reading, the differential perception of the object and its image, of a particular image and the same image repeated, etc. This is the time necessary for *mental adjustment*, for *accommodation* to the image, to the artifact in its relation to the real object (we are speaking here not of a reminiscence, but of the perception of a *local*, *logical* difference). That reading will not be the search for connections and coherence either, but an onward movement, a registering of succession.

It is evident that the activity which pop imposes (taking it, once again, in its strictest ambition) is far removed from our 'aesthetic sense'. Pop is a 'cool' art: it demands not aesthetic ecstasy or affective or symbolic participation ('deep involvement'), but a kind of 'abstract involvement', a sort of *instrumental curiosity*. And this retains something of a child-like curiosity, a näive enchantment of discovery. And why not? One can also see pop as *images d'Épinal* or a book of hours of consumption, but one which particularly brings into play the intellectual reflexes of decoding and deciphering discussed above.

All in all, pop art is not a popular art. For the popular cultural ethos (if such a thing exists) is based precisely on an unambiguous realism, on linear narration (and not on the repetition or diffraction of levels), on allegory and the decorative (and this is not pop art, since these two categories refer to 'something other' which is essential), and on emotional participation linked to the varying fortunes of good and evil forces.[15] It is at a truly rudimentary level that pop art can be mistaken for a 'figurative' art: a colourful range of images, a näive chronicle of the consumer society, etc. It is true that Pop artists have been happy to claim that it is such. Their candour is immense, and their ambiguity too. As for their humour, or the humour ascribed to them, we are again on shifting ground. It might be instructive here to note the reactions of the public. In many, the works provoke a moral and obscene laugh (or hint of a laugh) – the canvases being indeed obscene to the classical gaze – followed by a derisive smile, which might be a judgement on either the objects painted or the painting itself. It is a smile which willingly enters into the game: 'This isn't very serious, but we aren't going to be scandalized by it. And, deep down, perhaps …' But these reactions are rather strained, amid some shameful dejection at not knowing quite what to make of it all. Even so, pop is both full of humour and humourless. Quite logically, it has nothing to do with subversive, aggressive humour, with the telescoping of surrealist objects. It is no longer a question of short-circuiting objects in their function, but one of juxtaposing them to analyse the relations between them. This approach is not terroristic.[16] At most it involves something akin to cultural alienation effects. In fact, something quite different is going on here.

To return to the system we have been describing above, let us not forget that a *certain smile* is one of the *obligatory signs* of consumption: it no longer represents a humour, a critical distance, but is merely a reminder of that transcendent critical value which today is given material embodiment in the knowing wink. This false distance is present everywhere: in spy films, in Godard, in modern advertising, which uses it continually as a cultural allusion. It is not really clear in the end whether this 'cool' smile is the smile of humour or that of commercial complicity. This is also the case with pop, and its smile ultimately encapsulates all its ambiguity: it is not the smile of critical distance, but the smile of *collusion*.

The Orchestration of Messages

In TV, radio, press and advertising, we find a discontinuum of signs and messages in which all orders are equivalent. A radio sequence taken at random includes:

- an advert for Remington razors;
- a summary of the last fortnight's social unrest;
- an advert for Dunlop SP-Sport tyres;
- a debate on capital punishment;
- an advert for Lip watches;
- a report on the war in Biafra;
- an advert for Crio 'sunflower' washing powder.

In this litany, in which the drama of world history alternates with objects playing walk-on parts (the whole forming a kind of Prévert poem with alternating black and rose-tinted pages – the latter the advertising ones, of course), the periods of intensity are apparently the news reports. But these are also, paradoxically, the periods of neutrality and impersonality: the discourse about the world does not seek to generate concern. This tonal 'blankness' contrasts with the highly charged nature of the discourse on objects, with its cheery, elated note, its vibrato. All the pathos of reality, of unforeseen events, of persuasion is transferred to the object and its discourse. This careful balance between the discourse of 'news' [*information*] and the discourse of 'consumption', to the exclusive emotional advantage of the latter, tends to assign advertising a background function, to allot it the role of providing a repetitious, and therefore reassuring, backdrop of signs against which the vicissitudes of the world are registered through an intermediary. Those vicissitudes, neutralized by the editing, are then ripe, themselves, for simultaneous consumption. The radio news is not the hotch-potch it seems: its systematic alternation imposes a single pattern of reception, which is a pattern of consumption.

And this is not so much because the value accorded to the advertising message by its tone suggests that, at bottom, world history is immaterial and the only things worth getting excited about are consumer objects.

That is secondary. The real effect is more subtle: it is the imposition upon us, by the systematic succession of messages, of the *equivalence* of history and the minor news item, of the event and the spectacle, of information and advertising *at the level of the sign*. It is not in the direct discourse of advertising, but there that the real consumption effect is to be found. It is in the segmenting – thanks to the technical media of TV and radio – of the event and the world into discontinuous, successive, non-contradictory messages – signs which can be juxtaposed and combined with other signs within the abstract dimension of the programme. What we consume, then, is not a particular spectacle or image in itself, but the potential succession of all possible spectacles – and the certainty that the law of succession and the segmenting of the schedules will mean that there is no danger of anything emerging within them that is not one spectacle or one sign among others.

Medium is Message

Here, and in this sense at least, we have to accept as a fundamental feature of the analysis of consumption McLuhan's formula that 'the medium is the message'. This means that the true message the media of TV and radio deliver, the one which is decoded and 'consumed' deep down and unconsciously, is not the manifest content of sounds and images, but the constraining pattern – linked to the very technical essence of those media – of the disarticulation of the real into successive and equivalent signs: it is the *normal*, programmed, miraculous transition from Vietnam to variety, on the basis of a total abstraction of both.

And there is something like a law of technological inertia which means that the closer one gets to true documentary, to 'live coverage', and the more closely the real is pursued with colour, depth and one technical improvement after another, the greater does the real absence from the world grow. And the more the 'truth' of TV or radio has to be recognized: that the primary function of each message is to refer to another message. So Vietnam refers on to advertising, advertising to the TV news, etc., the systematic juxtaposition of these things being the discursive mode of the medium, its message, its meaning. But we have to recognize that, while speaking to and of itself in this way, the medium is imposing a whole system of segmentation and interpretation of the world upon us.

This technological process of mass communications delivers a certain kind of very imperative message: a *message-consumption message*, a message of segmentation and spectacularization, of misrecognition of the world and foregrounding of information as a commodity, of glorification of content as sign. In short, it performs a conditioning function (in the advertising sense of the term: in this sense, advertising is the 'mass' medium *par excellence*, and its schemata leave their stamp on all the other media) and a function of misrecognition.

This is true of all the media, even of the book medium, of 'literacy', which McLuhan makes one of the central linkages in his theory. He takes the view that the emergence of the printed book was a key turning-point in our civilization, not so much for the contents (ideological, informational, scientific, etc.) it passes down from one generation to another, as for the *basic constraint of systematization it exerts by virtue of its technical essence*. He takes the view that the book is, first and foremost, a *technical model*, and that the order of communication prevailing within it (visualized segmentation, letters, words, pages, etc.) is a more influential, more determining model in the long term than any particular symbol, idea or fantasy that makes up its manifest content: 'The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.'[17]

Self-evidently, most of the time, the content conceals from us the real function of the medium. It presents itself as a message, whereas the real message, with regard to which the manifest discourse is perhaps mere connotation, is the deep structural change (of scale, of model, of habitus) wrought in human relations. Crudely put, the 'message' of the railways is not the coal or the passengers it carries, but a vision of the world, the new status of urban areas, etc. The 'message' of TV is not the images it transmits, but the new modes of relating and perceiving it imposes, the alterations to traditional family and group structures. And we may go even further and say that, in the case of TV and the modern mass media, what is received, assimilated and 'consumed' is not so much a particular spectacle as the potentiality of all spectacles.

This, then, is the truth of the mass media: it is their function to neutralize the lived, unique, eventual character of the world and substitute for it a multiple universe of media which, as such, are homogeneous one with another, signifying each other reciprocally and referring back and forth to each other. In the extreme case, they each become the content of the others – and that is *the totalitarian 'message' of a consumer society*.

What the TV medium conveys by its technical organization is the idea (the ideology) of a world endlessly visualizable, endlessly segmentable and readable in images. It conveys the ideology of the *omnipotence of a system of reading over a world become a system of signs*. TV images present themselves as the metalanguage of an absent world. Just as the smallest technical object, the tiniest gadget, is a promise of a universal technical Assumption, so images/signs are a presumption of an exhaustive imagining of the world, of a total assumption of the mode of reality into the image, which might be regarded as its memory, its universal decoding unit. Behind the 'consumption of images' looms the imperialism of a system of reading: increasingly, only what can be read (what *must* be read: the 'legendary') will tend to exist. And there will no longer be any question then of the truth of the world, or its history, but only of the internal coherence of the system of reading. Thus, on a confused, conflictual, contradictory world, each medium imposes its own more abstract, more coherent logic; it imposes itself – a

medium – as message, to use McLuhan's expression. And it is the substance of the fragmented, filtered world, the world reinterpreted in terms of this simultaneously technical and 'legendary' code, that we 'consume' – the entire material of the world, the whole of culture industrially processed into finished products, into sign material, from which all eventual, cultural or political value has vanished.

If we regard the sign as the articulation of a signifier and a signified, we may specify two types of confusion. For the child, or the 'primitive', the signifier may fade in favour of the signified (as when the child mistakes its own image for a living being, or African TV viewers ask where the man who has just disappeared from the screen has gone). Conversely, in the self-centred image or the code-centred message, the signifier becomes its own signified, a circular confusion between the two arises to the signifier's advantage, and we see the abolition of the signified and the *tautology of the signifier.* This is what defines consumption, the systematic *consumption effect* at the level of the mass media. Instead of going out to the world via the mediation of the image, it is the image which circles back on itself via the world (it is the signifier which designates itself under cover of the signified).

We move from the message centred on the signified – a transitive message – to the message centred on the signifier. For example (in the case of TV), from events signified by the image to the consumption of the image as such – i.e. precisely as something different from those events, as spectacular – Brecht would say 'culinary' – substance, exhausting itself in the very time-span of its absorption, and never referring on beyond. Different too in the sense that it does not offer events to be either seen or understood in their (historical, social or cultural) specificity, but delivers them up, all without distinction reinterpreted in terms of the same code which is at once an *ideological structure* and a *technical structure* – i.e., in the case of TV, the ideological code of mass culture (a system of moral, social and political values) and the mode of segmentation, of articulation of the medium itself, which imposes a certain type of discursivity that neutralizes the multiple and shifting content of messages and substitutes its own imperative constraints of meaning. Unlike the manifest discourse of the images, this deep-level discursivity of the medium is decoded *unconsciously* by the viewer.

The Advertising Medium

In this sense, advertising is perhaps the most remarkable mass medium of our age. Just as, when it speaks of a particular object, it potentially glorifies all of them, and in referring to a particular object and brand it speaks in fact of the totality of objects and a world made up in its totality of objects and brands, so, in targeting each consumer, it is targeting them all, and in addressing each individual, it is addressing them all, thus simulating a *consumer totality,* retribalizing consumers in the McLuhanesque sense of the

term, i.e. through a complicity, an immanent, immediate collusion at the level of the message, but above all at the level of the medium itself and the code. Every image, every advertisement imposes a consensus – that between all the individuals potentially called upon to decipher it, that is to say, called on, by decoding the message, to subscribe automatically to the code in which it has been couched.

It is not, then, its contents, its modes of distribution or its manifest (economic and psychological) objectives which give advertising its mass communication function; it is not its volume, or its real audience (though all these things are important and have a support function), but its very logic as an autonomized medium, i.e. as an object referring not to real objects, not to a real world or a referential dimension, but from *one sign to the other*, from *one object to the other*, from *one consumer to the other*. In the same way, books become means of mass communication if they link the person who reads them with all those who read them (reading a book is not, in that case, a matter of meaning content, but a pure and simple sign of cultural complicity), or if the book/object links up with others in the same collection, etc. One might analyse how language itself, a symbolic system, reverts to being a mass medium at the level of the brand name and the language of advertising. Mass communication is everywhere defined by this systematization at the level of the technical medium and the code, by the systematic production of messages not from the world, but from the medium itself.[18]

Pseudo-Event and Neo-Reality

We enter here the world of the pseudo-event, of pseudo-history and pseudo-culture which is discussed by Boorstin in *The Image*. By this he means a world of events, history, culture and ideas not produced from shifting, contradictory, real experience, but *produced as artifacts from elements of the code and the technical manipulation of the medium*. It is this, and nothing else, which defines all signification whatsoever as *consumable*. It is this generalization of the *substitution of the code for the referential dimension* which defines mass-media consumption.

The raw event is exchange: it is not material for exchange. It only becomes 'consumable' when filtered, fragmented and reworked by a whole industrial chain of production – the mass media – into a finished product, a material of combined, finite signs, analogous to the finished products of industrial production. This is the same operation make-up performs on the face: for real but discordant features, the systematic substitution of a network of abstract but coherent messages made up from technical elements and a code of imposed significations (the code of 'beauty').

We have to beware of interpreting this gigantic enterprise of production of the artificial and the cosmetic, of pseudo-objects and pseudo-events, which is invading our daily existence, as a denaturing or falsifying of an

'authentic' content. We can see from all that has just been said that the abduction of meaning, the depoliticization of politics, the deculturing of culture and the desexualization of the body in mass-media consumption occurs in a region far beyond the mere 'tendentious' reinterpretation of *content*. It is in the *form* that everything has changed: a neo-reality has everywhere been substituted for reality, a neo-reality entirely produced by combining elements of the code. Over the whole span of daily life, a vast *process of simulation* is taking place, similar in style to the 'simulation models' through which the operational and cybernetic sciences work. A model is 'built' by combining features or elements of reality, and an event, a structure or a future situation is 'played out on' those elements, and tactical conclusions are drawn from this with which to operate on reality. In a controlled scientific procedure, this can serve as an instrument of analysis. In mass communications, it assumes *force of reality*: reality itself is abolished, obliterated, in favour of this *neo-reality of the model*, which is given material force by the medium itself.

However, let us once again beware of language, which speaks automatically of the 'false', the 'pseudo' or the 'artificial'. And let us turn again, with Boorstin, to the subject of advertising in order to try to grasp this new logic, which is also a new practice and a new 'mentality'.

Beyond the True and the False

Advertising has a strategic position in this process. It is the reign of the pseudo-event *par excellence*. It turns the object into an event. In fact, it constructs it as such by eliminating its objective characteristics. It constructs it as a *model*, as a spectacular news item. 'Modern advertising began when the advertisement was no longer a spontaneous announcement and had become "made news"'[19] (it is in this way that advertising becomes homogeneous with 'news', which is itself subjected to the same labour of 'myth-making': advertising and 'news' thus constitute a single visual, written, phonic and mythic substance; they succeed each other and alternate in all the media in a way which seems *natural* to us – they give rise to the same curiosity and the same spectacular/ludic absorption).[20]

Journalists and advertisers are *mythic operators*: they present the object or the event as drama, as fiction. They 'offer it up reinterpreted' and might even, at a pinch, construct it deliberately. If we wish to judge objectively, then, we must apply the categories of myth to them: this latter is neither true nor false and the question is not whether one believes in it or not. That indeed gave rise to two false problems which are endlessly debated:

1 Do advertising executives believe in what they do? (If they did, they could be partly forgiven.)
2 Don't consumers ultimately believe in advertising? (If they did, they would be partly saved.)

So, Boorstin argues that advertisers should not be blamed, since the source of the persuasion and mystification was not so much their unscrupulousness as our pleasure at being deceived: it was not so much their desire to seduce, as our desire to be seduced. And he takes the example of Barnum, whose 'great discovery was not how easy it was to deceive the public, but rather, how much the public enjoyed being deceived'.[21] This is a seductive hypothesis, but a false one. This whole state of affairs is not based on some sort of reciprocal perversity, some cynical manipulation or collective masochism revolving around the true and the false. The truth is that advertising (like the other mass media) does not deceive us: *it is beyond the true and the false*, just as fashion is beyond ugliness and beauty and the modern object, in its sign function, is beyond usefulness and uselessness.

The problem of the 'veracity' of advertising should be posed as follows: if advertising men really 'lied', they would be easy to unmask. But they do not. And if they do not, this is not because they are too intelligent, but because 'the advertiser's art … consists largely of the art of making persuasive statements which are neither true nor false.'[22] For the good reason that there is no longer either any original or any real referential dimension and, like all myths and magic formulas, advertising is based on a different kind of *verification*, that of the self-fulfilling prophecy. 'The successful advertiser is the master of a new art: the art of making things true by saying they are so. He is a devotee of the technique of the self-fulfilling prophecy.'[23]

Advertising is prophetic language, in so far as it promotes not learning or understanding, but hope. What it says presupposes no anterior truth (that of the object's use-value), but an ulterior confirmation by the reality of the prophetic sign it sends out. This is how it achieves its end. It turns the object into a pseudo-event, which will become the real event of daily life through the consumer's endorsing its discourse. We can see that the true and the false are indiscernible here, just as they are in political opinion polls where we no longer know whether the real vote is simply ratifying the polls (and it is, then, no longer a real event, but merely a substitute for the polls which, from having been simulations that are *statistical indicators*, have become *determining* agents of reality) or whether the polls are reflecting public opinion. This is an inextricable tangle. Just as nature imitates art, so daily life ends up being the replica of the model.

The mode of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' is the tautological mode. Reality is no longer anything but the model speaking itself. So it is with magical formulas, so it is with simulations and so also with advertising which, among other styles of discourse, plays – for preference – on the tautological. Everything in that discourse is a 'metaphor' for one and the same thing: the brand. The expressions 'a better beer' (than what?), 'Lucky Strike, a toasted cigarette' (of course it's toasted; they all are!) merely refer back to a spiral of self-evidence. When Hertz ('the world no. 1 for car hire') says, at the end of a long advertisement, 'Be logical. If you did not find that little something more with us, we would not have reached the position we have today … And someone else perhaps would be placing this advertisement', what is

this but pure tautology and circular argument? Everywhere, repetition itself functions as efficient causality in this way. Just as molecules are artificially synthesized in certain laboratories, so truth is 'artificially synthesized' here from efficient speech. 'Persil washes whitest' is not a sentence; it is Persil-speak. This and other advertising syntagms do not explain, do not offer any meaning, and are therefore neither true nor false, but they eliminate precisely both meaning and proof. They substitute an unadorned indicative, which is a repetitive imperative. And that tautology of discourse seeks, as in the magic formula, to induce tautological repetition *by the event*. The consumer, by his purchase, will merely ratify *the coming to pass of the myth*.

We might pursue the analysis of advertising discourse further in this direction, and we might also extend it to the various modern media. If we did so, we should see that everywhere, in a radical inversion of the traditional logic of signification and interpretation based on truth and falsehood, it is here the myth (or the model) which finds its event – by means of a production of speech which is now industrialized on the same basis as the production of material goods.

8

The Finest Consumer Object: The Body

In the consumer package, there is one object finer, more precious and more dazzling than any other – and even more laden with connotations than the automobile, in spite of the fact that that encapsulates them all. That object is the BODY. Its 'rediscovery', in a spirit of physical and sexual liberation, after a millennial age of puritanism; its omnipresence (specifically the omnipresence of the female body, a fact we shall have to try to explain) in advertising, fashion and mass culture; the hygienic, dietetic, therapeutic cult which surrounds it, the obsession with youth, elegance, virility/femininity, treatments and regimes, and the sacrificial practices attaching to it all bear witness to the fact that the body has today become an *object of salvation*. It has literally taken over that moral and ideological function from the soul.

Unremitting propaganda reminds us that, in the words of the old hymn, we have only one body and it has to be saved.[1] For centuries, there was a relentless effort to convince people they had no bodies (though they were never really convinced); today, there is a relentless effort to *convince them of their bodies*. There is something strange about this. Is not the body the most obvious of things? It seems not. The body is a *cultural* fact. Now, in any culture whatsoever, the mode of organization of the relation to the body reflects the mode of organization of the relation to things and of social relations. In a capitalist society, the general status of private property applies also to the body, to the way we operate socially with it and the mental representation we have of it. In the traditional order – in the case of the peasant, for example – there was no narcissistic investment or spectacular perception of his body, but an instrumental/magical vision, induced by the labour process and the relation to nature.

What we want to show is that the current structures of production/consumption induce in the subject a dual practice, linked to a split (but profoundly interdependent) representation of his/her own body: the representation of the body as **capital** and as **fetish** (or consumer object). In both cases, it is important that, far from the body being denied or left out of account, there is deliberate *investment in* it (in the two senses, economic and psychical, of the term).

The Secret Keys to Your Body

A fine example of this managed reappropriation of the body is provided by *Elle*, in an article entitled 'The secret keys to your body which unlock the door to complex-free living'.

'Your body is both your outer limit and your sixth sense,' the article begins, and it assumes a serious air by recounting the psycho-genesis of the appropriation of the body and its image: 'At around six months, you began to perceive, as yet very obscurely, that you had a distinct body.' After an allusion to the mirror-stage ('psychologists call this …') and a timid allusion to erogenous zones ('Freud says that …'), it comes to the central point: 'Are you at ease in your body?' Right away, in comes Brigitte Bardot (BB): she 'is at ease in her body'. 'Everything about her is beautiful: her neck, her back, particularly the small of the back … BB's secret? She really inhabits her body. She is like a little animal who precisely fills up her dress.' (Does she inhabit her body or her dress? Which of these, the body or the dress, is her second home? This is precisely the point: she wears her body like a dress, and this makes 'inhabiting' a fashion effect, a 'package' effect, and relates it to a ludic principle which is further reinforced by the 'little animal' reference.) If, in the past, it was 'the soul which clothed the body', today it is the skin which clothes it, though not the skin as irruption of nudity (and, hence, of desire), but as prestige garment and second home, as sign and as fashion reference (and therefore substitutable for the dress without change of meaning, as can be seen in the current exploitation of nudity in the theatre and elsewhere, where, in spite of the false sexual pathos, it appears as one more term in the fashion paradigm).

Let us return to our text. 'You have to be in touch with yourself, you have to learn to read your body' (if you don't, you are anti-BB).

> Lie on the ground and stretch out your arms. Now run the middle finger of your right hand very slowly along that invisible line which runs from the ring finger right along the arm to the crook of the elbow and the armpit. You'll find the same line on your legs. These are lines of sensitivity. This is your *carte du tendre*.[2] There are other lines of *tendresse*: along the spinal column, on the nape of the neck, the stomach, the shoulders … If you do not know them, then repression occurs in your body, as it does in your psyche … The territories of the body which your sensitivity does not inhabit, which your thinking does not visit, are ill-favoured areas … The circulation there is poor; there is a lack of muscle tone. Or, alternatively, cellulite[!] tends to settle there once and for all.

In other words: if you don't make your bodily devotions, if you sin by omission, you will be punished. Everything that ails you comes from being culpably irresponsible towards yourself (your own salvation). Quite apart from the atmosphere of singular moral terrorism which infuses this *carte du tendre* (and which equates with puritan terrorism, except that in this case it is no longer God punishing you, but your own body – a suddenly maleficent, repressive agency which takes its revenge if you are not gentle with it), one can see how this discourse, under the guise of reconciling everyone with their own body, does in fact reintroduce, between the subject and the objectivized body as threatening double, the same relations which are those of social life, the same determinations which are those

of social relations: blackmail, repression, persecution syndrome, conjugal neurosis (the same women who read this will read a few pages further on that if they are not affectionate to their husbands, they will bear the responsibility for the failure of their marriages). Apart, then, from this latent terrorism, directed in *Elle* more particularly at women, what is interesting is the suggestion that one should revert back into one's own body and invest it narcissistically 'from the inside', not in any sense to get to know it in depth, but, by a wholly fetishistic and spectacular logic, to form it into a smoother, more perfect, more functional object for the outside world. This narcissistic relation – it is a *managed* narcissism, operating on the body as in colonized virgin 'territory', 'affectionately' [*tendrement*] exploring the body like a deposit to be mined in order to extract from it the visible signs of happiness, health, beauty, and the animality which triumphs in the marketplace of fashion – finds its mystical expression in the readers' confessions which follow: 'I was discovering my body. I could feel it in all its purity.' And, even better: 'It was as though I was being hugged by my body. I began to love it. And, loving it, I wanted to care for it with the same affection I felt for my children.' What is significant is this regressive involution of affectivity into the body-as-child, the body-as-trinket – inexhaustible metaphor of a penis cherished, cradled and … castrated. In this sense, the body, become the finest object of solicitude, monopolizes for itself all so-called normal affectivity (towards other real persons), without, however, taking on a value of its own, since, in this process of affective rerouting [*détournement*], any other object can, by the same fetishistic logic, play this role. The body is simply the finest of these psychically possessed, manipulated and consumed objects.

But the main thing is that this narcissistic reinvestment, orchestrated as a mystique of liberation and accomplishment, is in fact always simultaneously an investment of an efficient, competitive, economic type. The body 'reappropriated' in this way is reappropriated first to meet 'capitalist' objectives: in other words, where it is invested, it is invested in order to produce a yield. The body is not reappropriated for the autonomous ends of the subject, but in terms of a *normative* principle of enjoyment and hedonistic profitability, in terms of an enforced instrumentality that is indexed to the code and the norms of a society of production and managed consumption. In other words, one manages one's body; one handles it as one might handle an inheritance; one manipulates it as one of the many *signifiers of social status*. The woman who said she 'wanted to care for it with the same affection [she] felt for [her] children' immediately adds: 'I began to visit beauticians … The people who saw me after that crisis found me happier, better looking.' 'Recuperated' as an instrument of enjoyment and an indicator of prestige, the body is then subjected to a *labour of investment* (solicitude, obsession) which, once the myth of liberation that acts as cover is peeled away, doubtless represents a more profoundly alienated labour than the exploitation of the body as labour power.[3]

Functional Beauty

In this long process of sacralization of the body as exponential value, of the *functional* body – that is to say, the body which is no longer 'flesh' as in the religious conception, or labour power as in industrial logic, but is taken up again in its materiality (or its 'visible' ideality) as narcissistic cult object or element of social ritual and tactics – beauty and eroticism are two major leitmotivs.

They are inseparable and the two together institute this *new ethics of the relation to the body.* Though valid for both men and women, they are, nevertheless, differentiated into feminine and masculine poles. The two opposing models – the basic elements of which are largely interchangeable – might be termed **phryneism**[4] and **athleticism.** Still, the feminine model has a kind of priority: it is this model which, to some extent, functions as the template of this new ethics. And it is not by chance that it is in *Elle* that we find the type of material we have analysed above.[5]

For women, beauty has become an absolute, religious imperative. Being beautiful is no longer an effect of nature or a supplement to moral qualities. It is **the** basic, imperative quality of those who take the same care of their faces and figures as they do of their souls. It is a sign, at the level of the body, that one is a member of the elect, just as success is such a sign in business. And, indeed, in their respective magazines, beauty and success are accorded *the same mystical foundation*: for women, it is *sensitivity*, exploring and evoking 'from the inside' all the parts of the body; for the entrepreneur, it is the adequate *intuition* of all the possibilities of the market. A sign of election and salvation: the Protestant ethic is not far away here. And it is true that beauty is such an absolute imperative only because it is a form of capital.

Let us take this same logic a little further. The ethics of beauty, which is the very ethics of fashion, may be defined as the reduction of all concrete values – the 'use-values' of the body (energetic, gestural, sexual) – to a single functional 'exchange-value', which itself alone, in its abstraction, encapsulates the *idea* of the glorious, fulfilled body, the *idea* of desire and pleasure [*jouissance*], and of course thereby also denies and forgets them in their reality and in the end simply peters out into an exchange of signs. For beauty is nothing more than sign material being exchanged. It *functions* as sign-value. That is why we can say that the beauty imperative is one of the modalities of the functional imperative, this being valid for objects as much as it is for women (and men), the beautician every woman has become being the counterpart of the designer and stylist in the business sphere.

Moreover, if we look at the dominant principles of industrial aesthetics (functionalism), we can see that they apply generally to the charter for beauty: BB feeling 'at ease in her body' or 'precisely fill[ing] up her dress' is part of this same pattern of the 'harmonious marriage of function and form'.

Functional Eroticism

Alongside beauty, as we have just defined it, sexuality everywhere orientates the 'rediscovery' and *consumption* of the body today. The beauty imperative, which is an imperative of **turning** the body **to advantage** by way of narcissistic reinvestment, involves *the erotic as sexual foil*. We have clearly to distinguish the erotic as a generalized dimension of exchange in our societies from sexuality properly so called. We have to distinguish the erotic body – substrate of the exchanged signs of desire – from the body as site of fantasy and abode of desire. In the drive/body, the fantasy/body, the individual structure of desire predominates. In the 'eroticized' body, it is the social function of exchange which predominates. In this sense, the erotic imperative – which, like courtesy or so many other social rituals, is mediated by an instrumental code of signs – is merely (like the aesthetic imperative in beauty) a variant or metaphor of the functional imperative.

The *Elle* woman is 'hot' with that same heat, that same warmth one finds in modern furniture: it is an 'atmospheric' heat. It no longer comes from intimacy and sensuality, but from calculated sexual signification. Sensuality is heat. This sexuality, for its part, is *hot and cold*, like the play of warm and cold colours in a 'functional' interior. It has the same 'whiteness' as the enveloping forms of 'stylized', 'dressed-up' modern objects. But it is also not a 'frigidity', as has been suggested, since frigidity still implies a sexual resonance of violation. The fashion model is not frigid: she is an *abstraction*.

The fashion model's body is no longer an object of desire, but a functional object, a forum of signs in which fashion and the erotic are mingled. It is no longer a synthesis of gestures, even if fashion photography puts all its artistry into *re-creating* gesture and naturalness by a process of simulation.[6] It is no longer, strictly speaking, a body, but a *shape*.

This is where all modern censors are misled (or are content to be misled): the fact is that in advertising and fashion naked bodies (both women's and men's) refuse the status of flesh, of sex, of finality of desire, instrumentalizing rather the fragmented parts of the body in a gigantic process of *sublimation*, of denying the body in its very evocation.[7]

Just as the erotic is never in desire but in signs, so the functional beauty of the fashion models is never in their expressions but in their 'figures'. Irregularity or ugliness would bring out a meaning again: they are excluded. For beauty here is wholly in abstraction, in emptiness, in ecstatic absence and transparency. This disembodiment is ultimately encapsulated in the *gaze*. These fascinating/fascinated, sunken eyes, this objectless gaze – both oversignification of desire and total absence of desire – are beautiful in their empty erection, in the exaltation of their censorship. That is their functionality. Medusa eyes, eyes themselves turned to stone, pure signs. Thus, all along the unveiled, exalted body, in these spectacular eyes, eyes ringed by fashion, not by pleasure, it is the very meaning of the body, the truth of the body which vanishes in a hypnotic process. It is to this extent that the body – particularly the female body and, most particularly, the

body of that absolute model, the fashion mannequin – constitutes itself as an object that is the equivalent to the other sexless and functional objects purveyed in advertising.

Pleasure Principle and Productive Force

Conversely, the least of objects, implicitly cathected on the pattern of the female body/object, is fetishized in this same way. Hence the generalized imbuing of the whole field of 'consumption' by eroticism. This is not *a* fashion in the lighter sense of the term; it is the specific, rigorous logic of *fashion*. Bodies and objects form a network of homogeneous signs which may, on the basis of the abstraction we have just discussed, exchange their significations (this is, properly speaking, their 'exchange-value') and 'show each other off [*se faire valoir*] mutually'.

This *homology between bodies and objects* takes us into the deep mechanisms of managed consumption. If the 'rediscovery of the body' is always the rediscovery of the body/object in the generalized context of other objects, one can see how easy, logical and necessary a transition there is from the functional appropriation of the body to the appropriation of goods and objects in shopping. And we know, indeed, to what extent the modern eroticism and aesthetics of the body are steeped in an environment teeming with products, gadgets and accessories in an atmosphere of total sophistication. From hygiene to make-up (not forgetting suntans, exercise and the many 'liberations' of fashion), the rediscovery of the body takes place initially through objects. It even seems that the only drive that is really liberated is the *drive to buy*. We may recall here the example of the woman who, having suddenly fallen madly in love with her body, dashes off to the beauty parlour. And there is also the more common, opposite case: all those women who go in for all the eaux de toilette, massages and treatments in the hope of 'rediscovering their bodies'. The theoretical equivalence between bodies and objects as signs is what in fact makes possible the magical equation: 'Buy – and you will be at ease in your body.'

This is where all the psycho-functionality analysed above assumes its full economic and ideological meaning. The body sells products. Beauty sells products. Eroticism sells products. And this is not the least of the reasons which, in the last instance, orientate the entire historical process of the 'liberation of the body'. It is the same with the body as it is with labour power. It *has to be* 'liberated, emancipated' to be able to be exploited rationally for productivist ends. Just as freedom to dispose of oneself and personal interest – the formal principles of the individual freedom of the worker – have to operate for labour power to be able to transform itself into the demand for wages and exchange-value, so the individual has to rediscover his body and invest it narcissistically – *the formal principle of pleasure* – for the force of desire to be able to transform itself into a demand for rationally manipulable objects/signs. *The individual has to take*

himself as object, as the finest of objects, as the most precious exchange material, for an economic process of profit generation to be established at the level of the deconstructed body, of deconstructed sexuality.

Modern Strategy of the Body

However, this productivist objective, this economic process of profit generation, by which the social structures of production are generalized at the level of the body, is doubtless still secondary to the goals of integration and social control set in place by the whole mythological and psychological apparatus centred around the body.

In the history of ideologies, those relating to the body long had an offensive, critical value against the ideologies of the spiritualist, puritan, moralizing type which were centred on the soul or some other non-material principle. Since the Middle Ages, all heresies have been to some extent claims of the flesh, the advance resurrection of bodies against the rigid dogma of the Churches (this is the 'Adamical' tendency, which reappeared repeatedly, always to be condemned by orthodoxy). Since the eighteenth century, sensualist, empiricist, materialist philosophy has demolished the traditional spiritualist dogmas. It would be interesting to make a detailed analysis of the very long process of historical disintegration of that fundamental value called the soul, around which the whole individual scheme of salvation was organized and also, of course, the whole process of social integration. This long desacralization and secularization in favour of the body has run through the whole of the Western era: the values of the body have been subversive values, sources of the most acute ideological contradiction. But how do matters stand today when these values are largely uncontested and have gained acceptance as a new ethic (there is much to be said on this subject: we are now, rather, in a phase in which the puritan and hedonist ideologies are concertinaed, their themes intermingling at every level)? We can see that the body today, apparently triumphant, instead of still constituting a living, contradictory force, a force for 'demystification', has quite simply taken over from the soul as mythic instance, as dogma and as salvational scheme. Its 'discovery', which for many centuries represented a critique of the sacred, a call for greater freedom, truth and emancipation – in short a battling for humanity, against God – today occurs as an act of *resacralization*. The cult of the body no longer stands in contradiction to the cult of the soul: it is the successor to that cult and heir to its ideological function. As Norman O. Brown says in *Life against Death*: 'We must not be misled by the flat antinomy of the sacred and the secular, and interpret as "secularization" what is only a metamorphosis of the sacred.'[8]

The material evidence of the 'liberated' body (though, as we have seen, liberated as sign/object and censored in its subversive truth as desire, not only in athletic activity and hygiene, but also in eroticism)

must not be allowed to deceive us here: it merely expresses the supplanting of an outdated ideology – that of the soul, which is inadequate for a developed productivist system and incapable now of ensuring ideological integration – by a more functional modern ideology which, in all essentials, preserves the individualistic value system and the social structures connected with it. And it even reinforces these, establishing them on an almost permanent basis, since it substitutes for the transcendence of the soul the total immanence, the spontaneous self-evidence of the body. Now, that self-evidence is false evidence. The body as instituted by modern mythology is no more material than the soul. Like the soul, it is an *idea* or, rather – since the term 'idea' does not mean much – it is a hypostasized part-object, a double privileged and invested as such. It has become, as the soul was in its time, the privileged substrate of objectivization – *the guiding myth of an ethic of consumption*. We can see how intimately the body is involved in the goals of production as (economic) support, as principle of the managed (psychological) integration of the individual, and as (political) strategy of social control.

Is the Body Feminine?

Let us come back to the question we set aside at the beginning of this chapter: that of the role which falls to woman and the female body as privileged vehicle of Beauty, Sexuality and managed Narcissism. For if it is clear that this process of reduction of the body to aesthetic/erotic exchange-value affects both the male and the female (we have suggested two terms for this, athleticism and phryneism, phryneism being defined roughly as the woman of *Elle* and the fashion magazines, masculine athleticism finding its wider model in the athleticism of the executive, a model presented everywhere in advertising, films, mass literature: bright eyes, broad shoulders, lithe muscles and a sports car. This athletic model also encompasses sexual athleticism: the high-ranking executive of the *Le Monde* small ads is also *Playboy* man. But in the end, however much of a part is played by the masculine model[9] or the transitional, hermaphroditic models, the 'young' forming a kind of third sex, the site of a 'polymorphous, perverse sexuality'),[10] it is woman who orchestrates or rather around whom is orchestrated this great Aesthetic/Erotic Myth. We have to find an explanation for this which is not simply of the archetypal sort along the lines: 'Sexuality is the sphere of Woman because she represents Nature, etc.' Admittedly, in the historical era we are dealing with here, woman has been confused with maleficent sexuality and condemned as such. But that moral/sexual condemnation is entirely underpinned by a *social* servitude: woman and the body have shared the same servitude, the same relegation, throughout Western history, The sexual definition of woman is *historical* in origin: the repression of the body and the exploitation of woman were carried out in the same spirit, every exploited (and therefore threatening) category having automatically

to assume a sexual definition. Blacks are 'sexualized' for the same reason, not because they might be said to be 'closer to Nature', but because they are exploited and kept in serfdom. The repressed, sublimated sexuality of a whole civilization inevitably combines with the category whose social repression and subjection form the very basis of that culture.

Now, just as women and bodies were bound together in servitude, the emancipation of woman and the emancipation of the body are logically and historically linked (for related reasons, the emancipation of the young is contemporaneous with them). But we can see that this simultaneous emancipation occurs *without the basic ideological confusion between woman and sexuality being removed* – the legacy of puritanism still bears down on us with all its force. Indeed, only now does it assume its full scope since women, once *subjugated* as a sex, are today **'liberated'** as a sex – to the extent that we see this almost irreversible confusion now deepening in all its forms, since *it is in so far as she 'liberates' herself that woman becomes more and more merged with her body.* But we have seen in what conditions this takes place: it is, in fact, the apparently liberated woman who merges with the apparently liberated body. We may say both of women and the body – as we may say of young people and all the categories whose emancipation constitutes the leitmotiv of modern democratic society – that all the things in whose name they are 'emancipated' (sexual freedom, eroticism, play, etc.) form themselves into systems of *'tutelary'* values, 'irresponsible' values, simultaneously orientating consumer behaviour and behaviours of social *relegation*, with the very exaltation and excess of honour that surrounds them standing in the way of real economic and social responsibility.

Women, young people and the body – the emergence of all of which after thousands of years of servitude and forgetting in effect constitutes the most revolutionary potentiality – and, therefore, the most fundamental risk for any social order whatever – are integrated and recuperated as a 'myth of emancipation'. Women are given Woman to consume, the young are given the Young and, in this formal and narcissistic emancipation, their real liberation is successfully averted. Or alternatively, by assigning Revolt to the Young ('Young = revolt'), two birds are killed with one stone: the revolt diffusely present throughout society is conjured away by allotting it to a particular category and that category is neutralized by confining it to a particular role – revolt. An admirable vicious circle of managed 'emancipation', which we also find applied in the case of women: by confusing women and sexual liberation, each is neutralized by the other. Women 'consume themselves' through sexual liberation, and sexual liberation 'is consumed' through women. There is no play on words here. One of the basic mechanisms of consumption is this formal autonomization of groups, classes and castes (and the individual) by and through the formal autonomization of systems of signs or roles.

There is no question here of denying the 'real' development of the status of women and young people as social categories: they are in fact freer; they vote, have rights, work more and work earlier. Similarly, it would be pointless

to deny the objective importance now accorded to the body, to the care of it and its pleasures, to the 'added element of body and sexuality' which the average individual enjoys today. We are far from the 'ideal release' Rimbaud spoke of, but let us accept, nonetheless, that there is in all this a greater freedom of manoeuvre for, and a greater positive integration of, women and young people, and bodily problems. What we are saying is that this relative, concrete emancipation, because it is merely the emancipation of women, young people and the body *as categories* immediately indexed to a functional practice, is accompanied by a mythical transcendence or, rather, itself divides to produce a mythical transcendence, an *objectivization as myth*. The emancipation of some women (and – why not? – the relative emancipation of all) is merely to some extent the secondary gain, the spin-off from – and the cover for – that immense strategic operation which consists in *containing in the idea of woman and her body the whole social peril of sexual liberation*, in confining the peril of women's liberation to the *idea* of sexual liberation (in eroticism), in calling down on to the Woman/Object all the perils of the social liberation of women.[11]

The Medical Cult: 'Fitness'

The predominant relation to health is derived from the current way of relating to the body, which is not so much a relation to one's own body as to the functional, 'personalized' body. When it is mediated by an instrumental representation of the body, that relation can be defined as a general function of maintaining the body's equilibrium. When mediated by a representation of the body as prestige good, it becomes a functional status demand. It then enters into a competitive logic and expresses itself in a virtually unlimited demand for medical, surgical and pharmaceutical services – a compulsive demand linked to the narcissistic investment of the body/(part) object and a status demand linked to the processes of personalization and social mobility; a demand which, at any event, bears only a distant relation to that 'right to health' which is a modernist extension of human rights, complementary to the rights to liberty and property. Health today is not so much a biological imperative linked to survival as a social imperative linked to status. It is not so much a basic 'value' as a form of prestige display. In the mystique of such display, fitness stands next to beauty. Their signs are exchanged within the framework of personalization, that anxious, perfectionist manipulation of the sign function of the body. This corporeal syndrome of display, which links narcissism and social prestige, can also be very clearly seen in inverted form in the current very widespread fact, which must be regarded as one of the essential elements of modern ethics, that any loss of prestige, any social or psychological reversal is immediately *somatized*.

It is, therefore, superficial to claim that the use of medicine (usage of doctors) has been 'desacralized' and that because people go more often

and more freely to their doctors, because they use and abuse this democratized social provision in a complex-free way (which is not true), they are coming closer to an 'objective' practice of health and medicine. 'Democratically consumed' medicine has lost nothing of its sacredness and its magical functionality. But it is clearly not that traditional functionality which attached, through the person of the priest-healer, the sorcerer and the medicine-man, to operation on the *practical* body, on the instrumental body threatened by outside hazards, such as still figures in the 'uncultivated' peasant vision, in which the body is not interiorized as a personal, 'personalized' value. In that vision, one does not achieve one's salvation or mark one's status through one's body. It is, rather, a tool of one's labour and mana, that is to say, efficient force. If it gets out of sorts, the doctor restores the body's mana. This type of magic and the corresponding status of the doctor is tending to disappear. But it is not giving way, in the modern 'vision', to an objective representation of the body. It is giving way to two complementary modalities: narcissistic investment and prestige display: a 'psychical' dimension and a status dimension. It is in these two directions that the status of the doctor and of health is being reworked. And it is only now, through the 'rediscovery' and the *individual* sacralization of the body, that *medicality is assuming its full scope* (just as it was only with the mythic crystallization of the 'individual soul' that clericality as a transcendent institution really took off).

Primitive 'religions' know no 'sacrament'; they are collective practices. It was with the individualization of the principles of salvation (mainly in Christian spirituality) that sacraments and the 'officiants' in charge of them were established. It was with the even more thoroughgoing individualization of conscience that individual confession, the sacrament *par excellence*, was instituted. Making all due allowance and wholly aware of the dangers of the comparison, it seems to me to be the same with the body and medicine: it is with generalized individual 'somatization' (in the broadest, non-clinical sense of the term), with the body's becoming an object of prestige and salvation and a fundamental value, that the doctor becomes a 'confessor', a 'source of absolution' and an 'officiant', and the medical profession settles into the overprivileged social status which it currently enjoys.

All kinds of sacrificial behaviours of auto-solicitude and malign exorcism, of gratification and repression, converge more than ever on the privatized, personalized body – a whole host of secondary, 'irrational' purchases to no practical, therapeutic end. Much of this is consumption which even transgresses economic imperatives (half of the money spent on medicines is on non-prescription items, and this goes even for those covered by the welfare system). What prompts such behaviour other than the deep-seated belief that it has to cost you something (and it is enough that it costs you something) for health to be yours *in exchange*? This is ritual, sacrificial consumption rather than medication. Thus we see a compulsive demand for medicines among the 'lower' classes and a demand for the doctor among the better-off, but whether the doctor is seen by the former as a dispenser

of material signs and goods or by the latter more as the 'psychoanalyst of the body', medicine and doctors have a cultural *virtue* rather than a therapeutic function, and they are consumed as 'virtual' mana. And that consumption takes place according to a thoroughly modern ethics which, by contrast with the traditional form, which demanded that *the body should serve*, enjoins all individuals *to put themselves in the service of their own bodies* (cf. the *Elle* article). One has a duty to take care of oneself as one has to cultivate one's mind: it is, in a sense, a mark of respectability. The modern woman is both the vestal and the manager of her own body; she takes care to keep it beautiful and competitive. The functional and the sacred are inextricably intermingled here. And the doctor receives both the respect due to the expert and the reverence due to the priest.

The Obsession with Slimness: The 'Figure'

The obsession with looking after one's figure can be understood in terms of the same categorical imperative. There is in no sense, of course, any natural affinity between beauty and slimness (one only has to glance at other cultures to see this). Fat and obesity have also been regarded as beautiful in other places and at other times. But *this* imperative, universal, democratic beauty inscribed as a right and a duty on the pediment of consumer society, is *indissociable from slimness*. Beauty cannot be fat or slim, heavy-limbed or slender as it could in a traditional definition based on the *harmony* of forms. It can only be slim and slender, according to its current definition as a combinatorial logic of signs, governed by the same algebraic economy as the functionality of objects or the elegance of a diagram. It even tends, somewhat, towards the scrawny and emaciated, on the lines of the models and mannequins that are simultaneously the negation of the flesh and the exaltation of fashion.

This may seem a strange state of affairs, for if we take as one definition of consumption that it is a generalization of the combinatorial processes of fashion, we know that fashion can play on anything, on opposite terms: it can play without distinction on the old and the new, the 'beautiful' and the 'ugly' (in their classical definitions), the moral and the immoral. *But it cannot play on the fat and the thin*. There is something akin to an absolute limit here. Might it be that in a society of overconsumption (of food), slenderness becomes a distinctive sign in itself? Even if slimness acts as such a sign in relation to all previous cultures and generations and to the peasant and 'lower' classes, we know there are no signs which are distinctive *in themselves*, but only opposing formal signs (old and new, long and short (skirts), etc.) which *follow one upon the other* as distinctive signs, and alternate in such a way as to bring fresh grist to the mill, without any one of these definitively squeezing out the other. Now, paradoxically, in the area of the 'figure', an area which is *par excellence* that of fashion, the fashion cycle no longer operates. There has to be something more fundamental

than distinction. Something which *must* be linked to the very mode of complicity with our own bodies which we have seen being established in the contemporary era.

The 'liberation' of the body has the effect of constituting it as an object of solicitude. Now that solicitude, like everything which has to do with the body and the relation to the body, is *ambivalent*. It is never solely positive and overall, indeed, it is negative. The body is always 'liberated' as simultaneous object of this *dual solicitude*.[12] As a consequence, the immense process of solicitude of the 'gratifying' kind, a process we have described as the instituting of the body in its modern form, is accompanied by an equal and equally substantial investment of *repressive solicitude*.

It is this repressive solicitude which is expressed in all the modern collective obsessions relating to the body. Hygiene, in all its forms, with its fantasies of sterility, asepsis, prophylaxis or, by contrast, of promiscuity, contamination, pollution – tending to conjure away the 'organic' body and, in particular, the functions of excretion and secretion – aims at a negative definition of the body, by elimination, as though it were a smooth, faultless, sexless object, cut off from all external aggression and thereby protected from itself. The obsession with hygiene is not, however, the direct heir to puritan morality. That morality denied, reproved and repressed the body. In a more subtle way, contemporary ethics sanctifies it in its hygienic abstraction, in all its purity as a disincarnated signifier. But a signifier of what? Of forgotten, censored desire. This is why the (phobic, obsessional) hygienic compulsion is never far away. Overall, however, the preoccupation with hygiene founds a morality based not on pathos, but on play: it 'eludes' deep fantasies in favour of a superficial, cutaneous religion of the body. Taking care of, being 'loving' towards the body, that morality prevents any collusion between the body and desire. It is closer, all in all, to the sacrificial techniques of 'preparation' of the body, to the ludic techniques of control – not repression – of primitive societies, than it is to the repressive ethics of the puritan era.

Much more than in hygiene, it is in the ascetic practice of 'dieting' that the aggressive drive against the body is to be seen, a drive 'liberated' at the same time as the body itself. Ancient societies had their ritual fasting practices. As collective practices linked to the celebration of festivals (before or after – fasting before Communion – fasting in Advent – Lent after Mardi Gras), it was their function to siphon off all this diffuse aggressive drive against the body (the whole ambivalence of the relation to food and 'consumption') and channel it into collective observance. Now, these various institutions of fasting and mortification have fallen into disuse as so many archaisms incompatible with the total, democratic liberation of the body. Clearly, our consumer society can no longer bear any restrictive norm and even excludes such a norm on principle. However, in liberating the body in all its potentialities for satisfaction, it thought it was liberating a naturally pre-existing harmonious relationship between man and his body. It turns out that this was a *fantastic mistake*. The whole antagonistic aggressive

drive liberated at the same time, now no longer canalized by social institutions, surges back today into the very heart of the universal solicitude for the body. It is that drive which fuels the veritable enterprise of self-repression now affecting one-third of the adult populations of the overdeveloped countries (and 50 per cent of women; an American study has shown that 300 adolescent girls out of 446 are on a diet). It is this drive which, above and beyond the (once again undeniable) determinations of fashion, is stoking up this irrepressible, irrational self-destructive frenzy in which beauty and elegance, which were the original goals, are now merely alibis for a daily, obsessive disciplinary exercise. In a total turnabout, the body becomes that menacing object which has to be watched over, reduced and mortified for 'aesthetic' ends, while one's eyes are kept riveted throughout on the skinny, emaciated models of *Vogue*, in whom one can decipher all the inverted aggressiveness of an affluent society towards its own body triumphalism, all the vehement denial of its own principles.

This meeting of beauty and repression in the cult of the figure (in which the body, in its materiality and sexuality, basically has no part any more, simply functioning now as the physical medium for two logics wholly removed from the logic of satisfaction: the *fashion imperative*, a principle of social organization, and the *death imperative*, a principle of psychical organization) is one of the great paradoxes of our 'civilization'. The mystique of the 'figure' and the fascination with slimness have such a profound impact only because they are forms of **violence,** because in them the body is literally *sacrificed* – both fixed in its perfection and violently vitalized as in sacrifice. All the contradictions of this society are encapsulated here, at the level of the body. 'With its remarkable action', Scandi-Sauna will bring you a slimmer waistline – better hips, thighs and ankles – a flat stomach – regenerated tissues – firmed-up flesh – smooth skin – a new figure. 'After three months of using Scandi-Sauna … I lost those extra pounds and, at the same time, acquired remarkable physical fitness and mental harmony.' In the USA, 'low-calorie foods', artificial sweeteners, fat-free butters and diets launched with great advertising campaigns make fortunes for their backers and manufacturers. It is estimated that 30 million Americans either are, or believe themselves to be, obese.

The Sex-Exchange Standard

Automatic sexualization of everyday essentials: 'Whether the article to be pitched out into commercial space is a brand of tyres or a new model of coffin, the aim is always to hit the potential client in the same spot: below the belt. Eroticism for the elite; pornography for the masses' (Jacques Sternberg, *Toi ma nuit*, Losfeld).

Naked theatre (Broadway: *Oh Calcutta!*): the authorities licensed the performances on condition that there were neither erections nor penetration on stage.

First pornography fair at Copenhagen – 'Sex 69': this was a 'fair' and not a festival, as the newspapers had reported. In other words, it was essentially a commercial event, designed to enable the manufacturers of pornographic material to conquer new markets. It seems that the Christiansborg leaders,[13] generously concerned to remove all mystery from this field – and, hence, much of its attraction – by bringing down the barriers, had underestimated the financial side of the business. A number of smart people, on the lookout for profitable investments, were not slow to grasp what an opportunity the intensive exploitation of this sector could represent for them, now that it was part of the open market. Having rapidly organized themselves, they are now, as a consequence, developing pornography into one of Denmark's most profitable industries (source: the press).

Not a millimetre of erogenous zone has been left unexploited (J.-F. Held). The talk everywhere is of 'sexual explosion', of the 'escalation of eroticism'. Sexuality is 'at the forefront' of consumer society, spectacularly overdetermining the entire signifying field of mass communications. All that is presented there has about it a conspicuous sexual vibrato. Everything offered for consumption has a sexual coefficient. At the same time, of course, *it is sexuality itself which is offered for consumption*. Here again we have the same operation as we adverted to with regard to youth and revolt, women and sexuality: by indexing sexuality in an increasingly systematic way to commercialized and industrialized objects and messages, these latter are diverted from their objective rationality, while sexuality itself is diverted from its explosive finality. Social and sexual change thus tread well-beaten paths which have already been carefully explored by 'cultural' and promotional eroticism.

Admittedly, this explosion, this proliferation is contemporaneous with deep changes in the relations between the sexes and in individual relations to the body and sex. It is, even more, an expression of the real – and in many respects new-found – urgency of sexual problems. But it is not certain either that this sexual 'display' of modern society is not a gigantic cover for these very problems, or that, by giving them systematic 'official status', it does not lend them a deceptive appearance of 'freedom', which masks the profound contradictions involved.

We can sense that this eroticization is excessive and that there is meaning in the excessiveness. Is it merely the expression of a crisis of desublimation, of a relaxation of traditional taboos? In that case, we might imagine that once a certain saturation level had been reached, once the cravings of the heirs of puritanism had been satisfied, liberated sexuality would recover its equilibrium, having now detached itself, and achieved its independence, from the productivist, industrial spiral. One might also take the view that the escalation, once begun, will continue like that of GNP, the conquest of space or innovation in fashion and objects, *and for the same reasons* (J.-F. Held). In this perspective, sexuality is *once and for all part of the unlimited process of production and marginal differentiation*, because it is the very logic of that system which has 'liberated' it as *erotic system* and individual and collective consumption function.

Let us distance ourselves here from any kind of moral censorship: we are not speaking of 'corruption' and we know, in any case, that the worst sexual 'corruption' may be a sign of vitality, richness, emancipation: it is, in that case, revolutionary and marks the historical flowering of a new class conscious of its triumph. The Italian Renaissance was an age of this kind. Such sexuality is a mark of rejoicing. However, it is not this sexuality, but its spectre which resurfaces – as a sign of death – when a society is in decline. The decomposition of a class or a society always ends in the individual dispersal of its members and (among other things) in a veritable contagion of sexuality, both as individual motive and as social ambience. The end of the *ancien régime* was one such period. It seems that a seriously splintered collectivity, because it is cut off from its past and lacks any imagining of a future, re-enters an almost pure world of drives, mingling in the same feverish dissatisfaction the immediate determinations of profit and sex. The disturbance of social relations, and the precarious collusion and ferocious competition which create the ambience of the economic world, affect the nerves and the senses. Sexuality, ceasing to be a factor of cohesion and shared elation, becomes an individual frenzy for profit. Everyone is obsessed with it and thereby isolated. And, in a characteristic feature, as it is exacerbated, it also becomes *anxious* about itself. It is no longer shame, modesty or guilt, those marks of the centuries of puritanism, which weigh upon it: indeed, these gradually vanish as the official norms and prohibitions disappear. It is the individual agency of repression, internalized *censorship*, which penalizes this sexual liberation. Censorship is no longer socially instituted (religiously, morally, juridically) in formal opposition to sexuality; it now plunges deep into the individual unconscious and feeds on the same sources as sexuality. All the sexual gratifications which surround one now bear within them their own continual censorship. There is no longer any repression (or there is less); but censorship has become a function of everyday life.

'Nous implanterons une débauche inouïe' said Rimbaud in his 'Villes'.[14] But sexual liberation and the escalation of eroticism have nothing to do with the 'derangement of all the senses' [*dérèglement de tous les sens*].[15] The orchestrated derangement and muted anxiety with which it is imbued, far from 'changing life', merely make up a collective ambience in which sexuality in fact becomes a *private* affair, that is to say, one that is fiercely self-conscious, narcissistic and tired of itself – the very ideology of a system which it crowns in terms of mores and in which it is a *political* cog. For, above and beyond the advertisers, who 'play' the sexuality 'card' so as to sell more products, there is the existing social order, which 'plays the card of' sexual liberation (even if it condemns it morally) against the threatening dialectic of the totality.

Symbols and Fantasies in Advertising

This generalized censorship which defines *consumed* sexuality must not, above all, be confused with *moral* censorship. It does not penalize conscious

sexual behaviours in the name of conscious imperatives. This is, indeed, a field in which apparent permissiveness is *de rigueur*; everything conspires towards it and even the perversions can be freely engaged in (these things are all relative, of course, but this is the general trend). The censorship which our society, in its sexual hyperaesthesia, sets in place is more subtle: *it operates at the level of fantasies themselves and the symbolic function*. This kind of censorship is unaffected by the campaigning measures used against traditional censorship: to use those today is to fight an enemy that is past and gone. And the weapons of the (still virulent) puritan forces, with their censorship and morality, are outdated too. The basic process is going on elsewhere, not at the conscious and manifest level of the seductive artifices – for good or ill – of sex. There is a terrible naïvety about this, among both the decriers of sexual liberty and its defenders, on the right and on the left.

Let us take an example from an advertisement for Henriot champagne (J.-F. Held).

> A bottle and a rose. The rose flushes with colour, begins to open, approaches the screen, swells, becomes tumescent. The amplified sound of a beating heart fills the cinema, accelerates, grows fevered, wild. The cork begins to rise from the bottle slowly, inexorably. It grows in size, moves towards the camera, its brass binding wires breaking one after another. The heart beats and beats, the rose swells, the cork again – ah, and suddenly the heart stops, the cork flies off and the foaming champagne bubbles out over the neck of the bottle, the rose grows pale and closes, the tension subsides.

Let us recall also that advertisement for bathroom installations in which, with a great many contortions – and in ever greater close-up – a vamp simulates a mounting orgasm with taps and pipes and a whole battery of phallic, spermatic devices. And the thousands of similar examples in which there is all-out 'hidden persuasion' – so-called – that persuasion which 'so dangerously' manipulates our 'drives and fantasies' and no doubt has more impact in intellectual circles than on the imagination of consumers. Erotic advertising, so obsessive and guilt-inducing, stirs up such profound emotions in us. A naked blonde with black braces appears and, hey presto, the braces manufacturer is rich. And even though he points out that 'you only have to raise the most harmless umbrella towards the sky to turn it into a phallic symbol', Held does not question either the fact of its being a symbol, or the effectiveness of that symbol as such on effective demand. Further on, he compares two advertising projects for Weber lingerie: the manufacturers chose the first of these and they were right, he says, because, in the other, the

> swooning young man looks almost as though he has been slain. For women, the temptation to be dominant is great … but it is also a frightening temptation … If the sphinx-woman and her victim had become Weber's brand image, the ambiguous guilt of their possible clients would have been so great that they would have chosen less compromising brassières.

And so the analysts, all deliciously a-quiver, will turn their learned attentions to the fantasies in advertising, to the devouring orality in them, the anality or the phallic symbols – all these things directly plumbed into the

consumer's unconscious, which was simply ready and waiting to be manipulated (that unconscious is, of course, assumed to be already there and given in advance, since Freud said so – a hidden essence, whose preferred fare is the symbol or the fantasy). There is the same vicious circularity between the unconscious and fantasies as there once was between subject and object at the level of consciousness. An unconscious stereotyped as an individual function and fantasies delivered as finished products by advertising agencies are indexed one to the other, defined one by the other. This is to elude all the real problems posed by the logic of the unconscious and the symbolic function by spectacularly materializing them in a mechanical process of signification and the efficacity of signs: 'There is the unconscious and then there are the fantasies which lock into it, and this miraculous combination sells products.' There is the same naïvety here as among the ethnologists who believed the myths related to them by native peoples and took them literally, along with the superstitious belief of those peoples in the magical efficacy of their myths and rites – all of which was done to maintain the ethnologists' own rationalist myth of the 'primitive mentality'. There are beginning to be doubts about the direct impact of advertising on sales. It is perhaps also time to cast equally radical doubt on this naïve fantasmic mechanics – which serves as an alibi for both advertisers and analysts.

Crudely put, the question is this: is there really any libido in all this? What is there that is sexual, libidinal in the eroticism deployed? Is advertising (and are the other mass-media systems) a genuine *'scene'* of fantasy? Is this *manifest* symbolic, fantasy content ultimately to be taken any more literally than the manifest content of dreams? And is the erotic injunction ultimately any more valid or symbolically effective than the direct commercial injunction is in the marketplace? What is really going on here?

In reality, one is faced with a mythology at one remove, which strives to pass off as *fantasy* what is merely *fantasmagoria*, to entrap individuals, by way of a rigged symbolics, with the *myth* of their individual unconscious, to make them invest it as a consumer function. People have to believe that they 'have' an unconscious, that that unconscious is there, projected into and objectivized in the 'erotic' symbolism of advertising, which serves as a proof that it exists, that they are right to believe in it and therefore to wish to come to terms with it, first at the level of the 'reading' of symbols, then by the acquisition of the goods designated by those symbols and supporting those 'fantasies'.

There are, in fact, neither symbols nor fantasies in this whole erotic shebang, and it is tilting at windmills to describe all this as a 'strategy of desire'. Even when there is not irony in the phallic or other messages, when they are not conveyed in an openly playful way, 'with a nod and a wink', we may safely take it that all the erotic material surrounding us is entirely *culturalized*. It is neither fantasmic nor symbolic material, but simply *atmospheric*. It is neither Desire nor the Unconscious speaking, but the psychoanalytic culture, or rather subculture, which has become banal and commonplace, has passed into ordinary commercial parlance. It is second-level affabulation; strictly speaking, it is *allegory*. Id (the Unconscious) does not speak there;

what does speak merely refers on to psychoanalysis as it is established, integrated and 'recuperated' today in the cultural system. And it certainly does not refer to psychoanalysis as analytic practice, but to the sign function of psychoanalysis, as something culturalized, aestheticized, mass-mediafied. At any event, one should not confuse a formal and allegorical combinatory of mythologized themes with the discourse of the Unconscious, any more than the artificial log fire should be confused with the symbol of fire. There is no relation between that 'signified' fire and the poetic substance of fire analysed by Bachelard. That log fire is a cultural sign and nothing more; it has value merely as a cultural *reference*. Thus, the whole of advertising and modern erotics are made up of signs, not of meaning.

One must not be taken in by the escalation of the erotic in advertising (any more than by the escalation of 'irony', the play, the distancing and the 'counter-advertising' which, significantly, go along with it): all these contents are merely juxtaposed signs, all of which culminate in the super-sign that is the **brand name,** which is the only real message. Nowhere is there language – and certainly not the language of the Unconscious. This is why the 50 female bottoms priggishly arrayed by Airborne in its recent advert ('Ah, yes. They're all there … this is where we do all our initial research, examining every angle … for we believe, with Mme de Sévigné …', etc.) can be shown – and many others too. They don't offend against anything, nor do they awaken anything 'deep within us'. They are merely cultural connotations, a metalanguage of connotations: they speak the sexualist myth of a culture that is 'with-it'; they have nothing to do with real anality, which is precisely why they are inoffensive, and immediately consumable as images.

The real fantasy is not representable. If it *could* be represented, it would be unbearable. The advertisement for Gillette razor-blades showing two velvety female lips framed by a razor blade can only be viewed because it does not really express the – unbearable – fantasy of the castrating vagina to which it 'alludes', and because it is content simply to combine together signs emptied of their syntax, isolated signs, itemized signs, which trigger no unconscious associations (and which indeed systematically evade these), only 'cultural' ones. This is the Madame Tussaud's of symbols, a petrified forest of fantasies/signs which no longer have in them anything of the *work* of the drives.

All in all, then, to denounce advertising for its manipulation of the emotions is to pay it too great a compliment. But this gigantic mystification, in which both censors and defenders willingly collude, doubtless has a very precise function, which is to deflect attention from the real process, that is to say from the radical analysis of the processes of censorship which 'operate' very effectively underneath all this fantasmagoria. The real conditioning we are subjected to by the machinery of erotic advertising is not some 'deep-level' persuasion or unconscious suggestion, but *rather* the censorship of the deep meaning, the symbolic function, the fantasmic expression in an articulated syntax – in short, the censorship of the living emanation of sexual signifiers. All this is blotted out, censored, abolished in a codified play of sexual signs, in

the opaque obviousness of the sexual that is deployed on all sides, in which the subtle destructuring of syntax leaves place only for a closed, tautological manipulation. It is in this systematic terrorism, which operates at the level of signification itself, that all sexuality empties itself of its substance and becomes material for consumption. It is here that the 'process' of consumption takes place, and this is of quite a different order of seriousness from naïve exhibitionism, fairground phallicism and knockabout Freudianism.

The Sexed Doll

The sexed doll is a new toy. But the toys directed at children on the basis of adult fantasies implicate the whole of a civilization. This new doll attests to the general nature of our relation to sex in consumer society which, like our relation to everything else, is governed by *a process of simulation and restoration*. The driving principle of this is an artificial mad desire [*vertige*] for realism: sexuality is confused, in this case, with the 'objective' reality of the sexual organs.

If we look closely, it is the same with colour in television, with nudity in advertising or elsewhere, as it is in participation in the factories or the 'organic and active' participation of spectators in the 'total' spectacle of avant-garde theatre: everywhere we find an effort artificially to restore a 'truth' or a 'totality', *systematically* to restore a totality on the basis of the prior division of labour or functions.

In the case of the sexed doll (the equivalent of sex as *toy*, as infantile manipulation), we must first have split off sexuality as totality, in its symbolic total exchange function, in order to be able to contain it in *sexual signs* (genitals, nudity, secondary sexual characteristics, the generalized erotic signification of all objects) and to *assign these to the individual* as private property or as attributes.

The 'traditional' doll fully performed its symbolic (and thus *also* sexual) function. To deck it out with a specific sexual sign is, in a sense, to strike out that symbolic function and to confine the object to a spectacular function. This is not a special case: this sex *added to* the doll as secondary attribute, as sexual affabulation and, in fact, as *censorship* of the symbolic function is the equivalent, at the level of the child, of the nudist and erotic affabulation, of that glorification of the signs of the body which surrounds us on all sides.

Sexuality is a total, symbolic structure of exchange:

1 *It is deposed from its symbolic function* by substituting for it the realistic, manifest, spectacular significations of sex and 'sexual needs'.
2 *It is deposed from its exchange function* (this is fundamental) by individualizing Eros, by assigning the sex to the individual and the individual to the sex. This is the culmination of the technical and social division of labour. Sex becomes a fragmented function and, in the same process, is allotted to the individual as 'private' property (as also occurs with the Unconscious).

We can see that one thing is going on here and one alone: the denial of sexuality as symbolic exchange or, in other words, as total process beyond *functional* division (that is to say, the denial of sexuality as *subversive*).

Once its total, symbolic exchange function has been deconstructed and lost, sexuality collapses into the dual use-value/exchange-value schema (which two aspects are together characteristic of the notion of *object*). It is objectivized as a separate function, both:

1 use-value for the individual (by way of his/her own sex, 'sexual technique' and 'sexual needs', for in this case, it is a matter of technique and needs, not of desire);
2 exchange-value (though this is no longer symbolic, but either economic and commodity-based – prostitution in all its forms – or, as is much more significant today, conspicuous sign-value – 'sexual status').

It is this whole story which is told by the sexed doll in its guise as 'progressive' toy. Like the naked female rump thrown in as a bonus in an advert for record players or Air India, this dollish sex is a *logical* aberration. It is as grotesque as a brassière on a pre-pubescent girl (a thing you can see on beaches). And, though in appearance opposite to that, it has the same meaning. The one veils, the other 'unveils', but the two are equally affected, and equally puritanical. In each case, there is a *censorship* operating through the artifact, through the conspicuous *simulation* which is always based on a *metaphysics of realism* – the real here being the reified and the opposite of the true.

The more signs/attributes of the real are added and the more the artifact is perfected, the more is truth censored by diverting the symbolic charge towards the cultural metaphysics of reified sex. Everything will now be artificially sexualized in this way (not just dolls), the better to exorcise the libidinal dimension and the symbolic function. But this particular case is an admirable one, for here it is the parents who, in good faith(?) and on the pretext of sexual education, carry out a veritable *castration* on the child by the over-exhibition of sexual signs where they have no place at all.

9

The Drama of Leisure or the Impossibility of Wasting One's Time

In the real or imagined abundance of the 'consumer society', Time occupies something of a privileged place. The demand for that very special kind of good equals the demand for almost all the others taken together. There is, of course, no more an equality of opportunity – or democracy – of free time than there is of other goods and services. Moreover, we know that, though it has some significance between periods or between cultures, the accounting of free time in chronometric units is not at all meaningful for us as an absolute value: the *quality* of that free time, its rhythm and its contents, and whether it is residual to the demands of work or 'autonomous', are all things which make a difference between particular individuals, categories or classes. And even the excess of work and the lack of leisure can become the privilege of the manager or of the high-ranking official. In spite of these disparities, which would only assume their full meaning within a differential theory of signs of status (of which 'consumed' free time is a part), the fact remains that time retains a particular mythic value for its equalizing of human conditions, a value which has been taken up again strongly and thematized in our own day in the concept of leisure time. The old adage that 'all men are equal before time and death', which once encapsulated in its entirety the demand for social justice, today lives on in the carefully tended myth that all are equal in leisure.

> Going harpoon fishing together and sharing the Samos wine created a deep sense of fellow-feeling. On the boat back, they realized that they knew each other only by their Christian names and, wishing to exchange addresses, discovered to their amazement that they worked in the same factory, the one as technical director, the other as nightwatchman.

This delightful little fable, which sums up the entire ideology of the Club Méditerranée, involves several metaphysical postulates:

1. Leisure is the realm of freedom.
2. Every man is, by nature, in substance free and equal to others: he has only to be put back in a state of 'nature' to recover this substantial liberty, equality and fraternity. Thus, the Greek islands and the underwater depths are heirs to the ideals of the French Revolution.
3. Time is an a priori, transcendent dimension, which pre-exists its contents. It is there waiting for you. If it is alienated and subjugated in work, then 'you don't have time.' When you are away from work or unconstrained, 'you have time.' As an absolute, inalienable dimension, like air or water, in leisure it once again becomes everyone's private property.

This last point is the key one: it hints at the fact that time might well be only the product of a certain culture and, more precisely, of a certain mode of production. In that case, it is *necessarily* subject to the same status as all the goods produced or available within the framework of that system of production: that of property, private or public, that of appropriation, that of the **object,** possessed and alienable, alienated or free, and, like all objects produced by that systematic mode, partaking of the reified abstraction of exchange-value.

Of most objects, one can still say that they have a certain use-value, which is in theory dissociable from their exchange-value. But is this true of time? Where is the use-value that could be defined by some objective function or specific practice? For this is the exigency which lies at the bottom of 'free' time: *that we restore to time its use-value*, that we liberate it as an empty dimension to fill it with its individual freedom. Now, in our system, time can only be 'liberated' as object, as chronometric *capital* of years, hours, days, weeks, to be 'invested' by each person 'as he pleases'. It is already, therefore, no longer in fact 'free', since it is governed in its chronometry by the total abstraction which is that of the system of production.

The demand underlying leisure is, therefore, an insolubly contradictory and truly desperate one. Its fervid hope for freedom attests to the power of the system of constraints which is nowhere so total, precisely, as at the level of time. 'When I speak of time, it is already gone,' said Apollinaire. Of leisure we may say that 'When you "have" time, it is no longer free.' And the contradiction here is not one of terms, but of substance. This is the *tragic* paradox of consumption. Everyone wants to put – believes he has put – his desire into every object possessed, consumed, and into every minute of free time, but from every object appropriated, from every satisfaction achieved, and from every 'available' minute, the desire is already absent, necessarily absent. All that remains is *consommé* of desire.

In primitive societies there is no time. The question of whether one 'has' time or not has no meaning there. Time there is nothing but the rhythm of repeated collective activities (the ritual of work and of feasting). It cannot be dissociated from these activities and projected into the future, or planned and manipulated. It is not individual; it is the very rhythm of exchange which culminates in the act of feasting. There is no name for it; it merges with the verbs of exchanging, with the cycle of men and nature. It is, therefore, 'bound', but not constrained and this 'binding' (*Gebundenheit*) does not stand opposed to some kind of 'freedom'. It is properly symbolic, which is to say that it cannot be abstractly isolated. But to say 'time is symbolic' has no meaning: it simply does not exist there, any more than does money.

The analogy between time and money is, on the other hand, fundamental to the analysis of 'our' times and what the great significant break between working time and free time might imply. This is a crucial break since the basic options of consumer society are based upon it.

'Time is money': this slogan etched in letters of fire on Remington typewriters is also written above the factory gates, and inscribed in the subjugated time of daily life, in the increasingly important notion of the 'time-budget'. It even governs – and it is this which concerns us here – leisure and free time. And it is this slogan too which defines empty time and is etched on the beach sundials and over the entrances to the holiday villages.

Time is a rare and precious commodity, subject to the laws of exchange-value. This is clearly true of working time, since it is bought and sold. But, increasingly, free time itself has to be directly or indirectly purchased before it can be 'consumed'. Norman Mailer has analysed the production calculation carried out on orange juice, delivered frozen or liquid (in a carton). The latter is dearer because the price includes the two minutes gained over preparing the frozen product: *in this way, the consumer's own free time is being sold to him*. And there is logic in this, since 'free' time is in fact time 'earned'; it is capital on which a return can be had, potential productive power, which has therefore to be bought if one is to have control of it. One could only be amazed or indignant at this if one still held to the naïve hypothesis of a 'natural' time, ideally neutral and available to all. The idea, which is not at all absurd, that one might be able to put a shilling in a juke-box and 'buy back' two minutes' silence illustrates the same truth.

Divisible, abstract, measured time thus becomes homogeneous with the exchange-value system: it forms part of that system on the same basis as any other object. As an object of temporal calculation, it can and must be exchanged against any other commodity (in particular, money). Moreover, the notion of time-as-object [*la notion de temps/objet*] is a reversible one: just as time is an object, so all produced objects can be considered as crystallized time – not just labour time in the calculation of their market value, but also leisure time, in so far as technical objects 'save' time for those who use them and are sold on that basis. The washing machine is free time for the housewife, potential free time transformed into an object so as to be buyable and sellable (free time she may possibly take advantage of to watch TV and the adverts she can see there for washing machines!).

This law of time as exchange-value and as productive force does not stop at leisure's doorstep, as though leisure miraculously escaped all the constraints that rule working time. The laws of the (production) system do not take holidays. On the roads, on the beaches, in the holiday villages – they everywhere continually reproduce *time as productive force*. The apparent division into working time and leisure time – the latter ushering in the transcendent sphere of liberty – is a myth. This grand opposition, which is increasingly fundamental at the lived level of consumer society, remains nonetheless a formal one. This gigantic orchestration of annual time into a 'solar year' and a 'social year', with the holidays as the solstice of private life and the beginning of spring as the solstice (or equinox) of collective life – this gigantic ebbing and flowing is a seasonal rhythm in appearance only. It is *not a rhythm* at all (a succession of natural moments of a cycle), but a *functional mechanism*. It is a single systematic process which splits two ways

into working time and leisure time. We shall see that, as a function of this common objective logic, the norms and constraints which are those of working time are transferred to free time and its contents.

Let us return, for a moment, to the specific ideology of leisure. Rest, relaxation, escape and distraction are, perhaps, 'needs': but they do not in themselves define the specific exigency of leisure, which is the consumption of *time*. Free time is, perhaps, the entire ludic activity one fills it up with, but it is, first of all, *the freedom to waste one's time*, and possibly even to 'kill' it, to expend it as pure loss (this is why it is insufficient to say that leisure is 'alienated' because it is merely the time necessary to reproduce labour power. The alienation of leisure is more profound: it does not relate to the direct subordination to working time, but is linked to the **very impossibility of wasting one's time).**

The true use-value of time, the use-value which leisure desperately tries to restore, is that of being wasted.[1] The holidays are this quest for a time which one can waste in the full sense of the term, without that waste entering in its turn into a process of calculation, without that time being (at the same time) in some way 'earned'. In our system of production and productive forces, one can only *earn* one's time: this fatality weighs upon leisure as it does upon work. One can only 'exploit [*faire-valoir*] one's time', if only by making a spectacularly empty use of it. The free time of the holidays remains the private property of the holiday-maker: an object, a possession he has earned with the sweat of his brow over the year; it is something owned by him, possessed by him as he possesses his other objects – something he could not relinquish to give it or sacrifice it (as one does with objects in making gifts of them), to yield it back up to total availability, to that absence of time which would be true freedom. He is tethered to 'his' time as Prometheus was tethered to his rock, tethered to the Promethean myth of time as productive force.

Sisyphus, Tantalus, Prometheus: all the existential myths of 'absurd freedom' are reasonably accurate representations of the holiday-maker in his setting, with all his desperate efforts to imitate 'vacation', gratuitousness, a total dispossession, a void, a loss of himself and of his time which **he cannot** achieve, being, as he is, an object caught up in a definitively objectivized dimension of time.

We are in an age when men will never manage to waste enough time to be rid of the inevitability of spending their lives earning it. But you can't throw off time like underwear. You can no longer either kill it or waste it, any more than you can money, since they are both the very expression of the exchange-value system. In the symbolic dimension, gold and money are *excrement*. It is the same with objectivized time. But it is, in fact, very rare – and logically impossible in the current system – for money or time to be restored to their 'archaic', sacrificial function of excrement. That would really be to deliver oneself of them in the symbolic mode. In the order based on calculation and capital, things are, in a sense, precisely the opposite way about: objectivized by it, and manipulated

by it as exchange-value, *it is we who have become the excrement of money, it is we who have become the excrement of time.*

Thus, everywhere, in spite of the fiction of freedom in leisure, 'free' time is logically impossible: there can only be constrained time. The time of consumption is that of production. It is so to the extent that it is only ever an 'escapist' parenthesis in the cycle of production. But, once again, this functional complementarity (variously shared out in the different social classes) is not its essential determination. Leisure is constrained in so far as, behind its apparent gratuitousness, it faithfully reproduces all the mental and practical constraints which are those of productive time and subjugated [*asservi*] daily life.

It is not characterized by creative activities: creating, artistically or otherwise, is never a *leisure* activity. Leisure is generally characterized by regressive activities of a type pre-dating modern forms of work (pottering, handicrafts, collecting, fishing). The guiding model for free time is the only one experienced up to that point: the model of childhood. But there is confusion here between the childhood experience of freedom in play and the nostalgia for a stage of social development prior to the division of labour. In each of these cases, because the totality and spontaneity leisure seeks to restore come into being in a social time marked essentially by the modern division of labour, they take the objective form of escape and *irresponsibility.* Now, this irresponsibility in leisure is homologous with, and structurally complementary to, irresponsibility in work. 'Freedom' on the one hand, constraint on the other: the structure is, in fact, the same.

It is the very fact of the functional division between the two great modalities of time which constitutes a system and makes *leisure the very ideology of alienated labour.* The dichotomy establishes the same lacks and the same contradictions on both sides. So, everywhere, we find in leisure and holidays the same eager moral and idealistic pursuit of accomplishment as in the sphere of work, the same **ethics of pressured performance.** No more than consumption, to which it belongs entirely, is leisure a praxis of satisfaction. Or, at least, we may say that it is so only in appearance. In fact, the obsession with getting a tan, that bewildered whirl in which tourists 'do' Italy, Spain and all the art galleries, the gymnastics and nudity which are *de rigueur* under an obligatory sun and, most important of all, the smiles and unfailing *joie de vivre* all attest to the fact that the holiday-maker conforms in every detail to the principles of duty, sacrifice and asceticism. This is the 'fun-morality' Riesman speaks of, that properly ethical dimension of salvation in leisure and pleasure which no one can now escape, except by finding their salvation in other criteria of accomplishment.

The increasingly marked tendency towards the physical concentration of tourists and holiday-makers – which stands in formal contradiction to the declared motive of pursuing freedom and autonomy – obeys the same principle of constraint which is homologous with that experienced in work. Solitude is a value spoken about, but not practised. People flee work, but not physical concentration. Here again, of course, social discrimination

plays its part (see *Communications*, 8). Sea, sand, sun and the presence of a crowd are much more necessary to holiday-makers at the bottom of the social scale than to the better-off. This is partly a question of financial resources, but, above all, it is one of cultural aspirations: 'Subjected to passive holidays, they need the sea, the sun and the crowd to feel as though they really are somebody' (Hubert Macé, in *Communications*, 10, 'Vacances et tourisme', 1967).

'Leisure is a collective vocation.' This journalistic headline perfectly sums up the institutional character, the aspect of internalized social norm which free time and its consumption have assumed, in which the privilege of enjoying snow, idleness and cosmopolitan cuisine merely masks deep compliance with:

1 a collective morality of maximization of needs and satisfactions, which reflects point by point in the private and 'free' sphere the principle of maximization of production and productive forces in the 'social' sphere;
2 a code of distinction, a structure of differentiation – the distinctive criterion, which for the well-to-do of earlier ages was 'idleness', having now become the 'consumption' of useless time. It is the constraint that one must do nothing (useful) which governs leisure – and does so very tyrannically – just as it governed the status of the privileged in traditional societies.

Leisure, which is still very unequally distributed, remains, in our democratic societies, a factor of cultural distinction and selection. We may, however, envisage this trend reversing itself (at least we may imagine this): in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, the Alphas are the only ones who work, the mass of the others being condemned to hedonism and leisure. We may admit that, with the progress of leisure, and the generalized 'promotion' of free time, there will be a reversal of this privilege and the great thing will be to set aside less and less time for *obligatory consumption*. If, as is probable, though it is the opposite of what are ideally their goals, leisure activities, as they develop, increasingly sink into competitiveness and the disciplinary ethic, then we may suppose that work (a certain type of work) will become the place and time in which to recover from one's leisure. And work can even now be a mark of distinction and privilege once again, as is the case with the affected 'servitude' of top executives and managing directors who feel they have to work 15 hours a day.

So we come to the paradoxical end-point where it is work itself that is *consumed*. To the extent that work is *preferred* to free time, that it meets a 'neurotic' demand, and that the excess of it is a mark of prestige, we are in the field of the consumption of work. But we know that anything can become a consumer object.

The fact remains that today, and for long into the future, the distinctive value of leisure will remain. Even the reactional valorization of work merely proves *a contrario* the force of leisure as a *noble value* in our deepest conceptions. 'Conspicuous abstention from labour becomes the

conventional index of reputability', writes Veblen in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*. Productive work is base: this tradition is still alive. It is perhaps even reinforced with the increased status competition we find in modern 'democratic' societies. This law of leisure-value is assuming the force of an absolute social prescription.

Leisure is not, therefore, so much a function of *enjoyment* of free time, satisfaction and functional repose. Its definition is that of an unproductive consumption of time. And so we come back to the 'wasting' of time we spoke of at the outset, though in this instance to show how *consumed* free time is in fact the time of a *production*. This time, which is economically unproductive, is the time of a production of *value* – distinctive value, status value, prestige value. Doing nothing (or doing nothing productive) is, in this regard, a specific activity. Producing value (signs, etc.) is an *obligatory* social prestation; it is the very opposite of passivity, even if the latter forms the manifest discourse of leisure. In fact, time is not 'free' in leisure; it is *expended*, and not as pure loss, because it is the moment, for the social individual, of a production of status. No one needs leisure, but all are charged to prove their freedom not to perform productive labour.

The *consumation* of empty time is, therefore, a kind of *potlatch*, in which free time serves as a material of signification and sign-exchange (in parallel with all the activities subsidiary and internal to leisure). As in Bataille's *The Accursed Share*, it assumes value in its very destruction, in being sacrificed. And leisure is the site of this 'symbolic' operation.[2]

It is, therefore, within the logic of distinction and the production of value that leisure *is justified* in the last instance. We may verify this almost experimentally: left to his own devices, in a state of 'creative freedom', the leisured individual desperately seeks out a nail to bang in or an engine to strip down. Outside the competitive sphere, there are no autonomous needs, no spontaneous motivation. But still he does not give up doing nothing. Far from it. He imperiously 'needs' to do nothing, for this has a value of social distinction.

Still today, what the average individual seeks in his holidays and free time is not the 'freedom to fulfil himself' (as what? what hidden essence is going to emerge?), but to demonstrate the uselessness of his time, the excess of time he possesses as sumptuary capital, as *wealth*. Leisure time, like consumption time in general, is becoming the highly charged part of social time, the part productive of value – a dimension not of economic *survival*, but of social *salvation*.

We can see now what, ultimately, is the basis of the 'freedom' of free time. This is akin to the 'freedom' to work and the 'freedom' to consume. Just as labour has to be 'freed' as labour power to be able to assume economic exchange-value, and just as the consumer *must* be 'freed' as such, that is to say, left (formally) free to choose and establish preferences for the system of consumption to be established, so time has to be 'freed', that is to say, extricated from its (symbolic, ritual) implications to become: not only (1) *a commodity* (in labour time) in the cycle of economic exchange; but also,

(2) *a sign* and sign material assuming, in leisure, a social exchange-value (ludic prestige value).

It is this last modality alone which defines *consumed* time. Labour time, for its part, is not 'consumed' – or, rather, it is consumed only in the sense that an engine consumes petrol, a sense which bears no relation to the *logic* of consumption. As for 'symbolic' time, that time which is neither economically constrained nor 'free' as sign-function, but *bound* – in other words, indissociable from the concrete cycle of nature or reciprocal social exchange – that time is clearly not 'consumed'. In fact it is only by analogy with, and projection of, our chronometric conception that we call it 'time'; it is a rhythm of exchange.

In an integrated and total system like ours, there cannot be any free availability of time. And leisure is not the availability of time, it is its **display.** Its fundamental determination is the *constraint that it be different from working time.* It is not, therefore, autonomous: it is defined by the absence of working time. That difference, since it constitutes the deep value of leisure, is everywhere connoted and marked with redundancy, over-exhibited. In all its signs, all its attitudes, all its practices, and in all the discourses in which it is spoken of, leisure thrives on this exhibition and over-exhibition of itself as such, this continual ostentation, this **marking,** this **display.** Everything may be taken away from it, everything stripped from it but this. It is this which defines it.

10

The Mystique of Solicitude

The consumer society is not simply characterized by the abundance of goods and services but by the more important fact that in this society *everything is a service*. What is available to be consumed never presents itself as pure and simple product, but as a *personal service*, as gratification. From 'Guinness is good for you', via the receptionist's smile and the automatic cigarette machine's 'thank-you', to the politicians' deep concern for their fellow citizens, each of us is beset by a formidable obligingness, surrounded by a conspiracy of devotion and goodwill. The tiniest bar of soap is presented as the fruit of the thinking of a whole council of experts who have been poring for months over the softness of *your* skin. Airborne puts its entire management team at the service of your 'bottom':

> For this is the crux. That is our prime area of study … Our business is seating you. Anatomically, socially and, almost, philosophically. All our chairs are the product of detailed observation of your person … If a chair has a polyester seat, that is all the better to hug the delicate curve of your posterior, etc.

This chair is no longer a chair, it is a total social service for your benefit.

Nothing is purely and simply consumed today – that is to say, bought, possessed and used for particular ends. Objects no longer serve *a purpose*; first and foremost they serve *you*. Without this direct object, the personalized 'you', without this total ideology of personal service, consumption would not be what it is. It is the warmth of *gratification*, of personal allegiance which gives it its whole meaning – not *satisfaction* pure and simple. It is in the sun of this solicitude that modern consumers bask.

Social Transfers and Maternal Transference

In all modern societies, this system of gratification and solicitude has its official support structure in the form of all the institutions of social redistribution (social security, pension funds, subsidies, insurances, grants and the various benefits) by which, as F. Perroux argues,

> the public authorities have been induced to correct the excesses of the powers of the monopolies by providing social allocations aimed at satisfying needs and not at remunerating productive services. These latter transfers, for which nothing is apparently rendered in return, in the long term reduce the aggressiveness of the so-called dangerous classes.

We shall not discuss the real efficacy of this redistribution here, or the economic mechanisms by which it is effected. What concerns us is the collective

psychological mechanism it brings into play. Thanks to their tax levies and their economic transfers, the social authorities (in other words, the established order) arrogate to themselves the psychological benefit of appearing generous, present themselves in a charitable light. A whole maternal, protectionist lexicon is deployed to refer to these institutions: social security, insurance, family allowance, old-age cover, unemployment benefit. This bureaucratic 'charity', these mechanisms of 'collective solidarity' – all of them 'hard-won social gains' – thus act, through the *ideological* operation of redistribution, as mechanisms of *social control*. It is as though a certain part of surplus value were sacrificed to preserve the rest[1] – the overall system of power sustaining itself with this ideology of munificence in which the 'benefit' bestowed conceals the profit taken. This kills two birds with one stone: the wage-earner is quite pleased to receive in the guise of gifts or 'free' services a part of what has previously been taken from him.

This is, in short, what J.M. Clarke refers to as the 'pseudo-market society'. In spite of their commercial spirit, Western societies protect their cohesion by social security legislation, the correction of initial inequalities and various priority allocations. The principle underlying all these measures is an extra-mercantile solidarity. The means is a judicious use of a certain dose of constraint for transfers which in themselves obey not the principles of equivalence, but the rules of a gradually rationalizing redistributive economy.

More generally, it is, in Perroux's view, true of every commodity that

> it is the nexus not only of industrial processes, but of relational, institutional, transferential and cultural ones. In an organized society, people cannot purely and simply exchange commodities. What they hand over to each other are symbols, significations, services and information. Every commodity must be regarded as the nexus of non-chargeable services which qualify it socially.

Now this point, which is correct, means, if we turn it around, that no exchange, no prestation in our society of whatever type is 'free', that the venality of exchange, even exchange of the most apparently disinterested kind, is universal. Everything is bought and sold, but market society cannot concede this either theoretically or legally. Hence the crucial ideological significance of the 'social' mode of redistribution: this induces in the collective mentality the myth of a social order entirely devoted to 'service' and the well-being of individuals.[2]

The Pathos of the Smile

However, alongside the economic and political institutions, there is a whole other – more informal, non-institutional – system of social relations which interests us more precisely here. This is that entire network of 'personalized' communication which is invading everyday consumption. For we are indeed talking of consumption here – the consumption of human relations, of solidarity, reciprocity, warmth and social participation standardized in the form of services – a continual consumption of solicitude, sincerity and warmth,

but consumption in fact only of the *signs* of that solicitude, which is even more vital for the individual than biological nourishment in a system where social distance and the atrociousness of social relations are the objective rule.

The loss of (spontaneous, reciprocal, symbolic) human relations is the fundamental fact of our societies. It is on this basis that we are seeing the systematic reinjection of human relations – in the form of *signs* – into the social circuit, and are seeing the *consumption* of those relations and of that human warmth *in signified form*. The receptionist, the social worker, the public relations consultant, the advertising pin-up girl, all these apostles of the social machine have as their secular mission the gratification, *the lubrication of social relations with the institutional smile.* Everywhere we see advertising aping intimate, intimist, personal styles of communication. It attempts to speak to the housewife in the language of the housewife next door, to speak to the executive or the secretary as a boss or a colleague, to speak to each of us as our friend or our superego or as an inner voice in the confessional mode. It thus produces intimacy where there is none – either among people or between people and products – by a veritable process of simulation. And it is this, among other things (though perhaps this above all), which is consumed in advertising.

The whole of group dynamics and similar practices arise out of the same (political) objective or the same (vital) necessity: the accredited psychosociologist is well paid to reinject solidarity, exchange and communication into opaque intra-company relationships.

So it is with the whole tertiary sector of **services.** With the shopkeeper, the bank clerk, the salesgirl or the representative, in information services, sales promotion, all these jobs in the packaging, marketing and merchandising of human relations, not forgetting the sociologist, the interviewer, the impresario and the salesman, whose professional rule is one of 'contact', 'participation' and 'gaining the psychological involvement' of others – in all these sectors of employment and roles, the connotation of reciprocity and 'warmth' is written into the planning and exercise of the function. It is the key asset in job-finding, promotion and salary level. Having 'human qualities', 'interpersonal skills', 'warmth', etc. We are surrounded by waves of fake spontaneity, 'personalized' language, orchestrated emotions and personal relations. 'Keep smiling'. '*Seid nett miteinander!*':

> The smile of Sofitel-Lyon is the smile we hope to see on your face when you step through our door. It is the smile of everyone who has already spent an enjoyable time at one of our hotels … It is the demonstration of our hotel philosophy – service with a smile.

Or there is operation *verres de l'amitié* [literally: friendship glasses]:

> *Verres de l'amitié,* with a dedication from the great names of stage, screen, sport and journalism, will serve as 'free gifts' to be given away with the products of firms which choose to make a donation to the French Medical Research Foundation … Among the personalities who have signed and decorated the *verres de l'amitié* are the racing driver Jean-Pierre Beltoise, the cyclist Louison Bobet, Yves Saint-Martin, Bourvil, Maurice Chevalier, Bernard Buffet, Jean Marais and the explorer Paul-Émile Victor.

Or TWA:

> We are handing out a million dollars in bonuses to those among our employees who have surpassed themselves serving you! This hand-out depends on you, our contented passengers. We ask you to vote for the TWA employees who have really delighted you with their service!

A tentacular superstructure which goes far beyond the simple functionality of social exchange to form a 'philosophy', a value system for our technocratic society.

'Playtime' or the Parody of Services

This huge system of solicitude is based on a total contradiction. Not only can it not mask the iron law of market society, the objective truth of social relations, which is competition – social distance increasing with urban and industrial concentration and crowding – and, most importantly, the spread of the abstraction of exchange-value into the very heart of daily life and the most personal relationships, but this system, in spite of appearances, is **itself a system of production.** It is the production of communication, of human relations in the service sector style. What it produces is sociability. Now, as a system of production, it cannot but obey the same laws as those of the mode of production of material goods. It cannot but reproduce in its very functioning the social relations it aims to transcend. Though designed to produce solicitude, it is condemned simultaneously to produce – and reproduce – distance, noncommunication, opacity and atrocity.

This basic contradiction makes itself felt in all the fields of 'functionalized' human relations. Precisely because this new sociality, this 'radiant' solicitude, this warm 'ambience' no longer has anything spontaneous about it, because it is produced institutionally and industrially, it would be astonishing if the social and economic truth of it did not show through in its very *tone*. And it is indeed this distortion we find everywhere: everywhere this bureaucratic system of solicitude is skewed by, shot through with, aggressiveness, sarcasm and involuntary (black) humour, and everywhere the services rendered, the obligingness are subtly combined with frustration and parody. And everywhere, linked to this contradiction, one feels the *fragility* of this general system of gratification, and that it is always about to malfunction and collapse (which does indeed happen occasionally).

We are touching here on one of the deep contradictions of our so-called 'affluent' society: that between the notion of 'service', which has feudal origins and traditions, and the dominant democratic values. The serf or feudal servant served 'in good faith', without any mental reservations: however, the system is already visibly in crisis in Swift's *Directions to Servants* (1745), in which the servants, united on the margins of their masters' society, form a society apart, a parasitic, cynical, parodic and sarcastic society. This is the collapse, where the manners of the day were concerned, of the fealty-based society of 'service': it leads to a fierce hypocrisy, to a

kind of latent, shamefaced class struggle, to reciprocal shameless exploitation between masters and servants under cover of a system of values which, formally, has not changed.

Today we have democratic values: as a result, there is an irresolvable contradiction at the level of 'services', the provision of which is irreconcilable with the formal equality of persons. The only outcome is a generalized social **game** (for it is everyone's lot today – and not just in private life but also in their social and occupational practice – to receive or provide services. Everyone is, to a greater or lesser extent, everyone else's tertiary sector). This social game of human relations in a bureaucratic society differs from the fierce hypocrisy of Swift's domestics. It is a gigantic 'simulation model' of the absent reciprocity. We no longer have dissimulation here, but functional simulation. The vital minimum of social communication is only achieved by this pressurized relational 'performance', in which everyone is engaged. It is a magnificent *trompe-l'oeil*, designed to smooth over the objective hostility and distance inherent in all present relationships.

Our world of 'services' is still largely Swift's world. The spite of the functionary, the aggressiveness of the bureaucrat are archaic forms that are still Swiftian in inspiration. For example, the servility of the ladies' hairdresser, the deliberate, unreserved importunity of the commercial traveller are still violent, forced, caricatural forms of the service relationship. Theirs is a rhetoric of servility in which an alienated form of *personal* relationship nonetheless shows through, as it did between Swift's masters and servants. The way the bank clerk, the bellboy or the postmistress express, by their acrimony or their hyper-devotion, that they are paid to do what they do is the very thing that makes them human, personal and irreducible to the system. Their coarseness, insolence, affected reserve, calculated slowness, open aggressiveness or, conversely, their excessive respect is plainly and simply that which, within them, is battling against the contradiction of having to embody, *as though it were natural*, a systematic devotion for which they are also paid. Hence the unwholesome ambience, constantly verging on veiled aggression, of this exchange of 'services' *in which the real persons resist the functional 'personalization' of the exchanges.*

But this is merely an archaic residue: the true functional relationship today has resolved all tension. The 'functional' service relationship is no longer violent, hypocritical or sado-masochistic; it is openly warm, spontaneously personalized and definitively pacified. We find it in the extraordinary, vibrant atonality of the announcers at major airports or on TV; in the atonal smile, so 'sincere' and calculated (though, ultimately, it is neither of these things for it is no longer a question of sincerity or cynicism here, but of 'functionalized' human relations, cleansed of all temperamental or psychological aspects, cleansed of all real, affective harmonics, and reconstituted on the basis of the calculated vibrations of the ideal relationship – in a word, freed from any violent moral dialectic of being and appearance, and restored to the simple functionality of the *system* of relations).

We are still, in our service consuming society, at the crossroads of these two orders. This was very well illustrated by Jacques Tati's film *Playtime*, which moved from traditional, cynical sabotage, the wicked parodying of services (the whole episode in the fancy restaurant, with the cold fish passing from one table to another, the malfunctioning systems, all the perversion of 'reception structures', and the breakdown of a world that is simply too new) to the useless instrumental functionality of reception rooms, armchairs and pot-plants, glass façades and 'impeccable' communication, all in the icy solicitude of the countless gadgets and a perfect ambience.

Advertising and the Ideology of the Gift

The social function of advertising is to be understood in the same extra-economic perspective as the ideology of the gift, of free offers and service. For advertising is not merely sales promotion or the use of suggestion for economic ends. It is perhaps not even these things *first and foremost* (its economic effectiveness is increasingly being questioned): the specific message of 'the language of advertising' is the denial of the economic rationality of commodity exchange under the auspices of a general exemption from payment.[3]

That exemption assumes minor economic dimensions in the form of reductions, discounts and free gifts, all the little 'gizmos' and 'freebies' offered when one makes a purchase. The profusion of free offers, games, competitions and bargains is the outer trappings of promotional activity, its external aspect, as it appears to the ordinary housewife. An identikit picture:

> In the morning, the housewife/consumer throws back the shutters of her house – that happy house she has won in the Floraline competition. She takes her tea from the splendid Persian-style breakfast cups she got with Triscottes (only 9 francs 90 plus five tokens). She puts on a little dress – a bargain from 3J (20 per cent off) and sets off to the Prisunic, not forgetting her Prisu Card which allows her to make cashless purchases … No problem finding a main course! At the supermarket she played the Buitoni magic lantern game and won 40 centimes off a tin of *poulet impérial* (5 francs 90). And, for her son, something cultural: the Peter Van Hought painting free with Persil soap powder. Thanks to Kellogg's Corn Flakes, he has built himself an airport. In the afternoon, to relax, she puts on a record, a Brandenburg Concerto. The LP cost her 8 francs with the San Pellegrino three-pack. In the evening, a great new experience: a colour TV loaned free of charge by Philips for three days (simply on approval, no obligation to buy), etc.

'I sell less and less washing powder and more and more gifts,' sighs the marketing director of a detergent manufacturer.

These are just the little touches, the window dressing of public relations. The point is, however, that the whole of advertising is merely a gigantic extrapolation of this 'something extra'. In advertising, the little daily gratuities assume the dimensions of a total social fact. Advertising is something 'bestowed'. It is a continual free offer to and for everyone. It is the prestigious

image of affluence, but above all it is the repeated gage of the virtual miracle of 'something for nothing'. Its social function is, therefore, that of a public relations sector. We know how public relations proceeds: the works visit (Saint-Gobain), executive refresher courses in Louis XIII chateaux, the photogenic smile of the MD, artworks in the factories, group dynamics: 'the task of a PR man is to maintain a harmony of mutual interests between public and managers.' In the same way, it is the function of advertising in all its forms to set in place a *social fabric* ideologically unified under the auspices of a collective super-patronage, a kindly super-feudality, which provides all these 'extras' the way aristocrats laid on feasts for their people. Through advertising, which is already a social service in itself, all products are presented as services, all real economic processes are staged and reinterpreted socially as effects of giving, of personal allegiance and affective relations. No matter that this munificence, like that of potentates, is only ever a functional redistribution of a part of the profits. The trick of advertising is precisely to *substitute everywhere the magic of the cargo cult* (the total, miraculous abundance the natives dream of) *for the logic of the market*.

All the artful moves of advertising tend in this direction. See how discreet it is everywhere, how benevolent, self-effacing and disinterested. An hour's radio programme against a one-minute 'ad' for its product. Four pages of poetic prose and the company trademark placed shamefacedly(?!) at the foot of a page. And all its games with itself, piling on the self-effacement and the 'anti-advertising' parodies. The blank page for the millionth Volkswagen: 'We can't show it to you. We've just sold it.' All these things, which could be included in a history of the rhetoric of advertising, are logically deducible from advertising's need to distance itself completely from the level of economic constraints and to fuel the fiction of a game, a party, a charitable institution, a disinterested social service. The conspicuous display of disinterestedness plays its part as a social function of wealth (Veblen) and an integrating factor. And even a play of aggressiveness towards the consumer – antiphrasis – is admissible. All is possible and everything works, though not so much to sell as to restore consensus, complicity, *collusion* – in short, here again, to produce relationship, cohesion, communication. The fact that the consensus produced by advertising can *then* result in attachment to objects, acts of purchase and implicit conformity to the economic imperatives of consumption is certain, but it is not the essential point. And, at any event, that economic function of advertising is *consequent* upon its overall social function. This is indeed why it is never safely assured.[4]

The Shop-Window

The shop-window – all shop-windows – which are, with advertising, the foci of our urban consumer practices, are also the site *par excellence* of that 'consensus operation', that communication and exchange of values through

which an entire society is homogenized by incessant daily acculturation to the silent and spectacular logic of fashion. That specific space which is the shop-window – neither inside nor outside, neither private nor wholly public, and which is already the street while maintaining, behind the transparency of its glass, the distance, the opaque status of the commodity – is also the site of a specific social relation. Tracking along the shop-windows, with their *calculated riot of colour*, which is always at the same time a frustration, this hesitation-waltz of shopping is the Kanak dance in which goods are exalted before being exchanged. Objects and products are offered there in a glorious *mise-en-scène*, a sacralizing ostentation (this is not a pure and simple displaying, any more than is the case in advertising, but, as G. Lagneau says, a 'setting-off', a 'showcasing'). This symbolic giving, aped by the objects themselves on their stage-set, this symbolic, silent exchange between the proffered object and the gaze, is clearly an invitation to real, economic exchange inside the shop. But not necessarily, and at any event the communication which is established at the level of the shop-window is not so much between individuals and objects as a generalized communication between all individuals, not via the contemplation of the same objects but via the reading and recognition in the same objects of the same system of signs and the same hierarchical code of values. It is this acculturation, this training, which takes place at every moment everywhere in the streets, on the walls and in the underground stations, on advertising hoardings and neon signs. Shop-windows thus beat out the rhythm of the social process of value: they are a continual adaptability test for everyone, a test of managed projection and integration. The big stores are a kind of pinnacle of this urban process, a positive laboratory and social testing ground, where, as Durkheim writes in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the collectivity reinforces its cohesion, as in feasts and spectacles.

Therapeutic Society

The ideology of a society which is continually taking care of you culminates in the ideology of a society which is actually treating you medically, as a potential patient. The social body surely must be thought rather ill then, and its citizen consumers rather fragile – always on the verge of collapse, of becoming unhinged – for this 'therapeutic' discourse to be so widespread among professionals, in the public prints and among analytical moralists.

Bleustein-Blanchet: 'In my view, Gallup polls are an indispensable gauge of opinion, which the advertiser must use, like a *doctor* calling for tests and X-rays.'

An ad man: 'What the client is looking for is security. He needs to be reassured, taken care of. At times you are a father to him, at times a mother or a son.' 'Our profession is akin to the art of medicine.' 'We're like medics, we give advice. We don't force anything on anyone.' 'My job is a vocation, like a doctor's.'

Architects, advertising executives, town planners, designers all see themselves as demiurges or, rather, as *thaumaturges* of social relations and the environment. 'People live in ugliness': this we have to cure. Psycho-sociologists, too, see themselves as *therapists* of human and social communication. This is even true of industrialists, who present themselves as missionaries of well-being and general prosperity. 'Society is sick': this is the refrain of all the well-meaning souls in power. The consumer society is a canker; 'we have to give it back some soul,' says M. Chaban-Delmas. It must be said that this great myth of the Sick Society, a myth which evacuates all analysis of the real contradictions, is one those contemporary medicine-men the intellectuals very largely connive in. They, however, tend to locate society's ills at a fundamental level. Hence their prophetic pessimism. Professionals, in general, tend rather to maintain the myth of the Sick Society, as a society that is sick not so much organically (in which case it would be incurable) but functionally, at the level of its interchanges and metabolism. Hence their dynamic optimism: it only has to be cured to re-establish the *functionality* of interchanges, to speed up the metabolism (that is to say, once again, to inject communication, relationship, contact, human balance, warmth, efficiency and the controlled smile). These are all tasks they undertake cheerfully and profitably.

The Ambiguity and Terrorism of Solicitude

What has to be stressed about this whole liturgy of solicitude is its profound ambiguity. An ambiguity which coincides very exactly with the double meaning of the verb 'to solicit':

1 The dimension of 'solicitude', in the 'caring', 'favouring', 'mothering' sense. The **gift.**
2 The opposite meaning it assumes in the sense of **'requesting'** (soliciting a reply), 'demanding', or even 'commandeering'. This is a sense which is even more clearly seen in the modern usage of the term ('soliciting information', etc.). What is involved here is a diverting, a seizing of something; turning it to one's own ends. This is precisely the opposite of what is meant by solicitude.

Now, the function of all the apparatuses of solicitude, institutional or otherwise (public relations, advertising, etc.), which surround us – and are, indeed, proliferating – is both to care for and to satisfy, on the one hand, and surreptitiously to gain by enticement and abduction on the other. The average consumer is always *subjected* to this two-pronged undertaking. He is solicited in every sense of the word – the ideology of the **gift** which is conveyed by 'solicitude' serving always as an alibi for the real conditioning which is that of his 'solicitation' or entreaty.[5]

This rhetoric of thaumaturgy and solicitude which stamps the consumer society, the affluent society, with a particular emotional tone has precise social functions:

1 The emotional re-education of individuals isolated within bureaucratic society by the technical and social division of labour and by the parallel technical and social division – *itself equally total and bureaucratic* – of consumption practices.

2 A political strategy of formal integration which covers – and covers up for – the failings of the political institutions: just as universal suffrage, referendums and parliamentary institutions are designed to establish a social consensus through *formal* participation, so advertising, fashion, human and public relations can be interpreted as a kind of *perpetual referendum* – in which citizen consumers are entreated [*sollicités*] at every moment to pronounce in favour of a certain code of values and implicitly to sanction it. This *informal* system of mobilization of assent is safer: it leaves practically no way of saying 'no' (admittedly, the political referendum is also a democratic staging of the affirmative response). In every country today we see 'participationist' modes of integration taking over from the *violent* processes of social control (repressive, state, political constraints). This they do, first, in the parliamentary, electoral form, and, subsequently, through the informal processes of *solicitation* we are discussing. It would be interesting to analyse in this light the 'public relations' operation mounted by Publicis/Saint-Gobain in the great sociological event that was Boussois's hostile takeover bid for Saint-Gobain: public opinion was mobilized, and called upon as a witness and a 'psychological stakeholder' in the operation. In the objective restructuring of the capitalist enterprise, the public found itself, under the guise of 'democratic' information, integrated as jury, and, through the symbolic group of the shareholders in Saint-Gobain, manipulated as an actor in the drama. One can see how advertising activity, understood in the broadest sense, can shape and totalize social processes, how it can substitute itself daily – and no doubt even more effectively – for the electoral system in psychological mobilization and control. A whole new political strategy is coming into being at this level, contemporaneous with the objective development of the 'technostructure' and monopoly productivism.

3 'Political' control by solicitation and solicitude is accompanied by a more intimate control over motivations themselves. This is where the term 'solicit' assumes its double meaning, and it is in this sense that all solicitude is basically *terroristic*. Let us examine the admirable example of advertising which runs: 'When a girl tells you she adores Freud, what she means is that she loves comic strips: 'a girl is a "little wild thing", full of contradictions. Now, beyond these contradictions, it is up to us, advertisers, to understand that girl. More generally, to understand the people whom we wish to address.' People, then, are incapable of understanding themselves, of knowing what they are and what they want, but *we* are there to do that. We know better than you do about yourselves. A repressive position of paternalistic analysis. And the ultimate ends of this 'higher understanding' are clear: 'Understanding people in order to be understood by them. Knowing how to speak to them in order to be heard by them. Knowing how to please them in order to interest them. In short, knowing

how to sell them a product – your product. This is what we call "communication".' A marketing trick? Not just that. This girl *has no right to like Freud*. She is wrong and, for her own good, we are going to foist upon her what it is that she secretly likes. The whole of the social inquisition is here, the whole of psychological repression. Advertising in general does not admit these things so clearly. Yet, at every moment, it operates the same mechanisms of charitable and repressive control.

It is the same with the advert for TWA: 'the airline which understands you'. And just look how it understands you:

> We cannot bear to think of you all alone in your hotel room, frantically twiddling the controls of your TV … We'll do everything we can to enable you to take your better half with you on your next business trip, with our special family tariff etc. With your better half alongside you, at least you'll have someone to change channels … That's what love is.

There is no question of being alone then. You don't have the right to be alone: 'We cannot bear the idea.' If you don't know what it is to be happy, we'll teach you. We know better than you. And even how to make love: your better half is your erotic 'second channel'. You didn't realize that? We'll teach you that too. We are there to understand you. That is our role.

Sociometric Compatibility

Sociability or the ability to 'relate to people', to sustain relationships, to stimulate exchanges, to intensify the social metabolism, becomes in this society a mark of 'personality'. Consuming, spending and following fashion and, through these things, communicating with others is behaviour which forms a keystone of the contemporary sociometric 'personality' outlined by David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd*. The whole system of gratification and solicitude is, in fact, merely the affective modulation (itself functionalized) of a system of relations in which the status of the individual is changing totally. To enter the cycle of consumption and fashion is not simply to surround oneself with objects and services as one pleases; it is to change one's being and directedness. It is to move from an individual principle based on autonomy, character, the inherent value of the self to a principle of perpetual recycling by indexation to a code in which the value of the individual becomes rational, diffracted, changeable: it is the code of 'personalization', which no individual himself possesses, but which traverses each individual in his signified relation to the others. The person as a determining instance disappears and is replaced by personalization. From this point on, the individual is no longer a centre of autonomous values, but merely the expression of multiple relations in a process of shifting interrelationships. 'The other-directed person is, in a sense, at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a rapid if sometimes superficial intimacy with and response to everyone.'[6] He is, in fact, caught in the toils of a kind of sociometric graph and is perpetually redefined by his position in these bizarre spiders' webs

(these threads which connect A, B, C, D, E, in a web of positive, negative, unilateral and bilateral relations). He is, in short, a sociometric being, whose definition is that he is *at the point of intersection with others.*

This is not simply an 'ideal' model. This *immanence of others, and this immanence in others,* governs all status behaviour (and hence the whole field of consumption) according to a process of unlimited interrelationship, where there is not, strictly speaking, any individualized Subject with its 'freedom', or 'Others' in the Sartrean sense of the term, but a generalized 'ambience', in which the relative terms only assume meaning by their differential mobility. The same tendency can be read at the level of the objects/elements and their combinatorial manipulation in modern interiors. In this new type of integration, then, it is a matter not of 'conformism' or 'non-conformism' (although these terms are still constantly found in journalistic language, they relate to traditional bourgeois society), but of optimum sociality, *of maximum compatibility with others* and with the various situations and professions (retraining, versatility), of mobility at all levels. To be universally 'mobile', dependable and versatile: that is what 'culture' is in the era of human engineering. So, molecules form on the basis of the multiple valencies of particular atoms; they can be unformed and reorganized differently or turned into large, complex molecules. This adaptive capacity coincides with a social mobility which is different from the rise of the 'traditional' parvenu or self-made man. There is no severing of ties in the course of making one's individual career, no breaking out of one's class to make one's way, no meteoric rise. It is, rather, a question of *being mobile with everyone else,* and rising up the coded rungs of a strictly demarcated hierarchical ladder.

There is, indeed, no question of not being mobile: mobility is a warrant of morality. We also have here, then, in every case, an enforced *mobilization*. And the unceasing compatibility is also an *accounting* [*comptabilité*]: in other words, the individual, who is defined as the sum of his relations, of his 'valencies', is also always accountable as such: he becomes a unit of calculation and enters voluntarily into a sociometric (or political) plan/calculation.

Proving Oneself and Approval (*Werbung und Bewährung*)

In this network of anxious relations, in which there is no longer any absolute value, but only functional compatibility, it is no longer a question of 'asserting oneself', of 'proving oneself' (*Bewährung*), but of relating to and gaining the approval of others, soliciting their judgement and their positive affinity. This mystique of gaining approval is everywhere gradually supplanting the mystique of proving oneself. The traditional individual's objective of transcendent accomplishment is giving way to processes of reciprocal solicitation (in the sense in which we defined it above: *Werbung*). Everyone 'solicits' and manipulates, everyone is solicited and manipulated.

This is the foundation of the new *morality*, in which individualistic or ideological values give way to a kind of *generalized relativity*, of receptivity and agreement, of anxious communication – others must 'speak to' you (and *speak you*: they must address you, but must also express you and say what you are), love you, rally round you. We have seen the orchestration of this in advertising, which does not so much seek to inform you (or even, in the end, to mystify you) as to 'speak to' you. 'It is not important,' writes Riesman, 'whether Johnny plays with a truck or in the sandbox, but it matters very much whether he involves himself with Bill – via any object at all.'[7] We are reaching a point where the group is less interested in what it produces than in the human relations within it. Its essential work may be, more or less, to *produce relationship*, and to consume this as it goes along. This process may even suffice to define a group quite apart from any external objective. The concept of 'ambience' sums all this up quite well: 'ambience' is the diffuse sum of relations, produced and consumed by the group – the presence of the group to itself. If it does not exist, it can be programmed and produced industrially. This is, indeed, the most common case.

In its broadest sense, which goes well beyond common usage, this concept of ambience is characteristic of the consumer society which may be defined as follows:

1 Values related to 'objectives' and transcendence (final, ideological values) give way to ambience-related (relational, immanent, objectiveless) values, which exhaust themselves in the moment of relating ('consumed' values).
2 The consumer society is simultaneously a society of the production of goods and of the *accelerated production of relations*. Indeed, this latter is the defining aspect. This production of relations, which is still craft-based at the intersubjective level or the level of primary groups, is, however, tending gradually to become aligned to the mode of production of material goods or, in other words, to the generalized industrial mode. It then becomes, by this same logic, the province (if not, indeed, the monopoly) of specialized (private or national) enterprises, and indeed constitutes their social and commercial *raison d'être*. The consequences of this development are as yet difficult to foretell. It is difficult to accept that (human, social, political) relationships are produced in the same way as objects, and that, once they come to be produced in that same way, they become, similarly, objects of consumption. Yet this is, in fact, the case. But we are merely at the beginning of a long process here.[8]

Cult of Sincerity – Functional Tolerance

For it to be produced and consumed, relating must – like material goods, like labour power, and according to the same logic – be 'liberated', 'emancipated'. In other words, it must free itself from all the traditional

social conventions and rituals. This marks the end of courtesy and etiquette, which are incompatible with generalized functional relations. But the disappearance of etiquette does not mean that we come to relate spontaneously to one another. Our relating simply falls under the sway of industrial production and fashion. But because it is the opposite of spontaneity, it will imperiously take over all the marks of that spontaneity. Riesman has noted this in his description of the 'cult of sincerity'.[9] This is a mystique parallel to those of 'warmth' and 'solicitude' we have discussed above, as of all the *obligatory* signs and rites of *absent* communication: '[This] yearning for sincerity is a grim reminder of how little they can trust themselves or others in daily life.'[10]

It is, in fact, the ghost of lost sincerity which haunts all this contact-based friendliness, these perpetual 'live link-ups', this aping and forcing of dialogue at all costs. The authentic relationship is lost, long live sincerity! Behind this obsession with 'honest pricing', with sporting, sentimental and political fair play, with the 'simple ways of the "great and the good"', the straight-talking confessions of cinema or other idols, or telephoto-lens shots of the daily life of royal families – and in this frantic demand for sincerity (like that for seeing the materials in modern building) – there is perhaps also (from a more 'sociological' point of view) the acculturated classes' immense mistrust of – and immense reaction against – traditional culture and rites, of whatever kind, which have always served to mark social distance. A massive obsession, which runs through the whole of mass culture – a class expression of the *déclassés* of culture: the fear of being had, of being duped and manipulated by signs as they have been historically over centuries – or, alternatively, the fear or rejection of high, ceremonial culture, a fear repressed beneath the myth of a culture of the 'natural' and of instant communication.

At all events, in this industrial culture of sincerity, it is still the *signs* of sincerity which are consumed. And that sincerity is no longer opposed to cynicism or hypocrisy as it was within the register of being and appearance. In the field of functional relations, cynicism and sincerity *alternate* without contradicting each other, in the same manipulation of signs. Naturally, the moral schema (sincerity = good; artificiality = evil) still operates, but it no longer connotes real qualities. It now connotes only the difference between the *signs* of sincerity and the *signs* of artificiality.

The problem of 'tolerance' (liberalism, laxism, the 'permissive society', etc.) takes the same form. The fact that those who were once mortal enemies are now on speaking terms, that the most fiercely opposed ideologies 'enter into dialogue', that a kind of peaceful coexistence has set in at all levels, that morality is less strict than it was, in no sense signifies some 'humanist' progress in human relations, a greater understanding of problems or any such airy nonsense. It indicates simply that, since ideologies, opinions, virtues and vices are ultimately merely material for exchange and communication, all contradictory elements are equivalent in the play of

signs. Tolerance in this context is no longer either a psychological trait or a virtue: *it is a modality of the system itself.* It is like the total compatibility and elasticity of the elements of fashion: long skirts and mini-skirts 'tolerate' each other very well (indeed they signify nothing other than the relationship which holds between them).

Tolerance connotes morally the generalized relativity of functions/signs, objects/signs, beings/signs, relations/signs, ideas/signs. In fact, we are beyond the opposition between fanaticism and tolerance, as we are beyond that between sincerity and fakery. 'Moral' tolerance is no greater than it was before. We have simply changed systems; we have moved on to functional compatibility.

11

Anomie in the Affluent Society

Violence

The consumer society is at one and the same time a society of solicitude and a society of repression, a pacified society and a society of violence. We have seen that 'pacified' daily life thrives on a daily diet of consumed violence, 'allusive' violence: news reports of accidents, murders, revolutions, the atomic or bacteriological threat – the whole apocalyptic stock-in-trade of the mass media. We have seen that the affinity between violence and the obsession with security and well-being is not accidental: 'spectacular' violence and the pacification of daily life are homogeneous, because they are each equally abstract and each is a thing of myths and signs. We might also add that violence is nowadays inoculated into daily life in homoeopathic doses – a vaccine against fatality – to ward off the spectre of the *real* fragility of that pacified life. For it is no longer the spectre of scarcity which haunts the civilization of affluence, but the spectre of **fragility.** And that spectre, which is much more menacing because it concerns the very equilibrium of individual and collective structures, and which has to be warded off at all costs, is in fact kept at bay by this roundabout solution of consumed, packaged, homogenized violence. This violence is not dangerous violence: blood on the front page no more compromises the social and moral order than does sex (despite the emotional blackmail on the part of the censors who wish to persuade themselves of this, and to persuade us of it). It simply attests to the fact that the balance is a precarious one, that the social and moral order is made up of contradictions.

The real problem of violence arises elsewhere. It is the problem of the *real*, uncontrollable violence secreted by plenty and security once a certain threshold has been reached. This is no longer integrated violence, consumed with the rest, but the uncontrollable violence which well-being secretes in its very achievement. That violence is characterized (precisely like consumption as we have defined it, though not as superficially understood) by the fact that it is *aimless and objectless.*[1] It is because we base our lives on the traditional idea of the pursuit of well-being as a *rational* activity that the eruptive, unaccountable violence of the Stockholm youth gangs, of the Montreal riots, of the Los Angeles murderers, seems an incredible, incomprehensible manifestation and one which stands in apparent contradiction to social progress and affluence. It is because we base our lives on the *moral* illusion of the conscious finality of all things, of the basic rationality of individual and collective choices (the whole system of values rests on this:

there is in the consumer an absolute instinct which inclines him by essence towards his preferential ends – the *moral* myth of consumption which is the direct heir to the idealist myth of man as naturally inclined towards the Beautiful and the Good), that this violence seems unspeakable to us, absurd, diabolical. Now, perhaps it quite simply means that something far exceeds the conscious objectives of satisfaction and well-being by which this society justifies itself (in its own eyes) or, rather, by which it reinstates itself within the norms of conscious rationality. In this sense, this unexplained violence must cause us to reassess all our thinking on affluence: affluence and violence go together; they have to be analysed together.

The more general problem of which this 'objectless' violence is a part, a violence which is as yet sporadic in certain countries, but virtually endemic in all developed or overdeveloped countries, is that of the *fundamental contradictions of affluence* (and not just its sociological disparities). It is the problem of the multiple forms of **anomie** (to use Durkheim's term) or of **anomaly,** depending on whether we look at them in terms of the rationality of institutions or the lived evidence of normality – forms which run from *destructiveness* (violence, delinquency), through collective escapist behaviour (drugs, hippies, non-violence), to contagious *depressiveness* (fatigue, suicide, neuroses). Each of these characteristic aspects of the 'affluent' or 'permissive' society raises in its way the problem of a fundamental imbalance.

It is not easy to adapt to affluence, say Galbraith and the 'strategists of desire': 'our economic attitudes are rooted in the poverty, inequality, and economic peril of the past' (or in centuries of puritan morality in which humanity lost the habit of happiness).[2] This difficulty of living in affluence should itself show us, if such a demonstration were needed, that the alleged 'naturalness' of the desire for well-being is not so natural as all that. Otherwise, individuals would not have so much trouble getting used to it; they would embrace plenty with open arms. This should indicate to us that there is in consumption something quite different, and perhaps even something opposite: something for which people have to be educated, trained, even tamed. It should tell us that there is here, in fact, a new system of moral and psychological constraints which has nothing to do with the realm of freedom. The vocabulary of the neo-philosophers of desire is significant in this connection. According to them, it is a question simply of *teaching* people to be happy, of teaching them to *devote* themselves to happiness, of *creating* within them the *reflexes* of happiness. Affluence is not, then, a paradise. It is not a leap beyond morality into the ideal immorality of plenty. It is a new objective situation governed by a new morality. Objectively speaking, it is not therefore an advance, but quite simply *something different*.

There is, then, this ambiguity about affluence: it is always simultaneously experienced as euphoric myth (of resolution of tensions and conflicts, of happiness beyond history and morality) and *endured* as a process of more or less enforced adaptation to new types of behaviour, collective constraints

and norms. The 'Revolution of Affluence' does not usher in the ideal society; it simply leads into a different type of society.

Our moralists would like to reduce this social problem to one of 'mentalities'. So far as they are concerned, the key shift has already occurred: real affluence is here and we simply have to move from a mentality of scarcity to a mentality geared to affluence. And they deplore how difficult this is and are horrified to see forms of *resistance to plenty* emerging. However, one has only to accept for a moment that affluence itself is merely (or is *also*) a system of constraints of a new type to understand immediately that the new (more or less unconscious) social constraint must be accompanied by a new type of demand for freedom. In the event, this takes the form of a rejection of the 'consumer society' in violent and Erostratic[3] form (the blind destruction of material and cultural goods) or non-violent, abdicationist form (refusal to engage in it through either production or consumption). If affluence were freedom, then this violence would indeed be unthinkable. If affluence (growth) is constraint, then that violence is easy to understand; it follows *logically*. If it is wild, objectless, formless, this is because the constraints it is contesting are themselves also unformulated, unconscious, illegible: they are the very constraints of 'freedom', of controlled accession to happiness, of the totalitarian ethic of affluence.

This sociological interpretation leaves space for (I even believe it connects at a deep level with) a psychoanalytic interpretation of these apparently aberrant phenomena of the 'rich' societies. The moralists we have referred to, who also regard themselves as psychologists, all speak of *guilt*. By this they always mean a residual guilt, a hangover from puritan times, which, in terms of their logic, must now be on the decline. 'We are not yet ready for happiness.' 'The prejudices which do us so much harm.' Now it is clear that this guilt (let us accept the term) is, on the contrary, increasing as our affluence progresses. A gigantic process of primitive accumulation of anxiety, guilt and rejection runs parallel to the process of expansion and satisfaction and it is this source of discontent which fuels the violent, impulsive subversion of – and murderous 'acting-out' against – the very order of happiness. It is not therefore the past and tradition or any other of the stigmata of original sin which cause human beings, rendered fragile by happiness, to become uneasy in a state of affluence and, on occasion, to rise up against it. Even though that old burden is still there, it is no longer the key factor. Guilt, 'malaise' and profound incompatibilities are at the heart of the *current* system itself, and are produced by it in the course of its *logical* development.

Forced to adapt to the **principle of need,** to the **principle of utility** (the principle of economic reality) or, in other words, to the ever full and *positive* correlation between a product of some kind (object, good or service) and a satisfaction through the one being indexed to the other; forced into this concerted, unilateral and ever positive finality, *the whole of the negativity of desire,* the other side of **ambivalence,** and hence all the things

which do not fit into this positive vision, *are rejected, censored by satisfaction itself* (which is not enjoyment [*jouissance*]: enjoyment, for its part, is ambivalent), and, no longer finding any possible outlet, crystallize into a gigantic fund of anxiety.[4]

This explains the basic problem of violence in the affluent society (and, indirectly, all the symptoms of anomaly, depression or abdication). That violence, which is radically different from the violence engendered by poverty, scarcity and exploitation, is the emergence, in action, of the negativity of desire which is omitted, occulted, censored by the total positivity of need. It is the opposite mode of the ambivalence which resurfaces at the very heart of the smug equivalence of man and his environment in satisfaction. It is – against the imperative of productivity/consummativity – the emergence of *destructiveness* (the death drive) for which there can be no bureaucratic reception structures, since these would then become a part of a process of planned satisfaction and, hence, a system of positive institutions.[5] We shall see, however, that, just as there are models of consumption, so society suggests or sets up 'models of violence' through which it seeks to tap, control and massmediafy these irruptive forces.

Indeed, in order to prevent this fund of anxiety, accumulated as a result of the *breakdown of the ambivalent logic of desire* and hence of the *loss of the symbolic function*, from resulting in that uncontrollable, anomic violence, society acts at two levels:

1 On the one hand, it attempts to diminish this anxiety by the proliferation of caring agencies: innumerable collective services, roles and functions are created; soothing, guilt-dispelling balm and smiles are injected into the system – psychological lubricants, not unlike the cleansing agents in washing powder. Enzymes gobbling up anxiety. And tranquillizers, relaxants, hallucinogens and therapies of all kinds are also on sale. An endless task, in which *the affluent society, the provider of satisfaction without end, exhausts its resources producing the antidote to the anxiety generated by that satisfaction*. An increasingly large budget goes into consoling the beneficiaries of the miracle of affluence for their anxious satisfaction. We may liken this to the economic deficit (which is not in fact calculable) created by the disbenefits of growth (pollution, built-in obsolescence, crowding, scarcity of natural resources), but it undoubtedly exceeds that by a very long way.

2 Society may try – and does try systematically – to claw back that anxiety as a means of stimulating consumption, or to claw back the guilt and the violence in their turn as consumable goods or distinctive cultural signs. There is, then, an intellectual luxury of guilt characteristic of certain groups, a 'guilt exchange-value'. Or, alternatively, the cultural malaise[6] is offered for consumption like everything else; it is resocialized as a cultural commodity and an object of collective delectation, which merely leads more deeply into anxiety, since this cultural metaconsumption is tantamount to a new censorship and starts the process off again. At any event, violence and guilt are mediated here by cultural *models* and turn back into the consumed violence we discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

These two control mechanisms have powerful effects, but they are not, however, capable of forestalling the critical process of the turning – the subversive conversion – of affluence into violence. And it is useless to hold forth and gripe on, as *all* the critics do, about this 'inevitability' of violence, the 'unstoppable spiral', the possible social and moral solutions or, on the other hand, about paternalistic permissiveness ('young people have to have an outlet for their energies'). Some will look back longingly to the days 'when violence had a meaning', the good old violence of war, patriotism, passion and, ultimately, rationality – violence sanctioned by an objective or a cause, ideological violence or the individual violence of the rebel, which was still of the order of individual aestheticism and could be regarded as one of the fine arts. People will go on trying to fit this new violence into old models and apply known treatments to it. But we have to see that this violence, which is no longer strictly historical, no longer sacred, ritualistic or ideological – nor yet again, for all that, pure act or expression of individual singularity – is structurally linked to affluence. This is why it is irreversible, always imminent and so fascinating to everyone, whatever their explicit attitudes to it: this is because it is rooted in the very process of growth and increased satisfaction in which everyone is now involved. From time to time, within our closed universe of consumed quietude and violence, this new violence very briefly takes over *for everyone* a part of the lost symbolic function, before resolving back into a consumer object.

Serge Lentz (on *The Chase*): 'The last scenes of the film are so savage that, for the first time in my life, my hands were shaking as I left the cinema. In the New York theatres where the film is currently showing, these same scenes spark incredible reactions. When Marlon Brando throws himself on a man, wild, hysterical members of the audience jump up screaming "Kill him! kill him!" '

July 1966: Richard Speck breaks into a nurses' home in Chicago's south side. He binds and gags eight young women all aged about 20. Then he executes them one by one by stabbing or strangulation.

August 1966: C.J. Whitman, an architecture student at the University of Austin, Texas, sets himself up with a dozen guns on a 300-foot block overlooking the university campus and starts shooting: 13 dead, 31 injured.

Amsterdam, June 1966: For the first time since the war, there was fighting of extraordinary violence for several days in the very heart of the city. The Telegraaf building was stormed. Lorries were burned, windows smashed, hoardings torn down. Thousands of demonstrators running rampant. Millions of florins' worth of damage. One dead, some 10 injured. The revolt of the 'Provos'.

Montreal, October 1969: Grave disorder broke out on Tuesday following a strike of policemen and fire fighters. Two hundred taxi drivers ransacked the premises of a transport company. Shots were fired and two people were

killed. After that attack, 1,000 young people descended on the city centre, smashing shop-windows and looting. There were 10 bank raids, 19 armed attacks, three terrorist explosions and a host of burglaries. Given the scale of these events, the government put the army on standby and passed an emergency law conscripting police officers.

The murder at the Polanski villa: Five persons of varying degrees of celebrity killed at a villa in the Los Angeles hills, including the wife of Polanski, a director of sado-fantastic films. A murder of idols exemplary because, by a kind of fanatical irony, it lent material form, in the very details of the murder and its staging, to some of the characteristics of the films which had won fame and success for the victims. And interesting because it illustrated the paradox of that violence: both savage (irrational, with no obvious objective) and ritualistic (indexed to spectacular models imposed by the mass media – in this case, Polanski's very own films). Like the Austin murder, this was not a crime of passion, not committed by the criminal underworld or done for gain; it lay outside the traditional criteria of the legal system or of individual responsibility. Mindless, unreflected murders and yet *'reflected' in advance* (here, astonishingly, to the point of precise imitation) *by mass-media models*, and being reflected along this same route in similar murders or forms of 'acting-out' (cf. also suicides by fire). This alone defines them: their spectacular connotation as news items, such that they are conceived from the outset as film scenarios or as reportage, and their desperate attempt in pushing back the limits of violence to be 'irrecuperable', to transgress and smash that mass-media order, to which they are in fact party even in their asocial vehemence.

Subculture of Non-Violence

Indissociable from these new-style phenomena of violence, though formally opposed to them, are the modern manifestations of non-violence. From LSD to flower-power, psychedelia to hippies, zen to pop music, all have in common the rejection of socialization through status and the principle of productivity, the rejection of this whole contemporary liturgy of affluence, social success and gadgetry. Whether this rejection paints itself as violent or non-violent, it is always the rejection of the activism of the society of growth, of enforced well-being as the new repressive order. In this sense, violence and non-violence, like all anomic phenomena, have a litmus function. This society which gives itself out to be, and sees itself as, hyperactive and pacified is revealed by the beats and the rockers on the one hand, and the hippies on the other, to be characterized at a deep level by *passivity* and *violence*. The one group lays hold of the latent violence of this society and turns that violence against it, taking it to extremes. The other group extends the secret, orchestrated passivity of this society (behind its façade of hyperactivity) into a practice of abdication and total asociality, thus causing that society to deny itself, in accordance with its own logic.

Let us leave aside here all the Christic, Buddhist, lamaistic themes of Love, Awakening and Heaven on earth, the Hindu litanies and total tolerance. The question would seem rather to be the following: do the hippies and their community represent a real alternative to the processes of growth and consumption? Are they not merely the inverted and complementary image of those processes? Are they an 'anti-society', ultimately capable of overturning the whole social order, or are they merely a decadent outgrowth of that order – or even simply one of the many versions of the visionary sects which have always cast themselves out of the world in order imperatively to bring about the earthly paradise? Here again, we must not mistake the mere metamorphosis of an order for its subversion.

> We want to have time for living and loving. The flowers, the beards, the long hair and the drugs are secondary … Being 'hip' first and foremost means being a friend to humanity. Someone who tries to take a fresh, non-hierarchical look at the world: a non-violent person, who respects and loves life. Someone who has true values and a true sense of proportion, who puts freedom before authority and creation before production, who values cooperation and non-competition … Just someone kind and open who avoids doing others harm. That's the main thing.

Or again:

> As a general rule, doing what you think is right whenever and wherever it may be, without worrying about approval or disapproval, on the sole express condition that it causes no harm or offence to anyone.

The hippies immediately made headlines in the West. With its fondness for primitive societies, the consumer society immediately seized on them as part of its folklore, like a strange, inoffensive flora. Are they not ultimately, from a sociological point of view, merely a luxury product of rich societies? Are not they, with their orientalist spirituality, their gaudy psychedelia, also marginals who merely exacerbate certain traits of their society?

They are, or remain, conditioned by the basic mechanisms of that society. Their asociality is communal, tribal. We may speak, in their regard, of McLuhan's 'tribalism', that resurrection on a planetary scale, under the aegis of the mass media, of the oral, tactile, musical mode of communication which was that of archaic cultures before the visual, typographical era of the Book. They advocate the abolition of competition, of the defensive system and functions of the ego. But this is merely to translate into more or less mystical terms what has already been described by Riesman as 'other-directedness', an objective evolution of personal character structure (organized around the ego and the superego) towards a group 'ambience' in which everything comes from, and is directed towards, others. The hippies' mode of guileless emotional transparency is reminiscent of the imperative of sincerity, openness and 'warmth' of the 'peer group'. As for the regression and infantilism which constitute the seraphic, triumphant charm of the hippie communities, these needless to say

merely reflect, in glorificatory mode, the irresponsibility and infantilism to which modern society confines each of its individuals. In short, the 'Human', almost hounded out of existence by productivist society and the obsession with social standing, celebrates its *sentimental resurrection* in the hippie community, where, beneath the apparent total anomie, all the dominant structural features of the mainstream society persist.

Writing of American youth, Riesman, referring to the cultural models defined by Margaret Mead, speaks of a 'Kwakiutl' style and a 'Pueblo' style. The Kwakiutl are violent, agonistic, competitive and rich, and engage in unrestrained consumption in the potlatch. The Pueblos are gentle, kind and inoffensive; they live frugally and are content to do so. Our current society can thus be defined by the formal opposition between a dominant culture which is one of unrestrained, ritualistic, conformist consumption, a culture which is violent and competitive (the potlatch of the Kwakiutl) and a permissive, euphoric, 'drop-out' subculture of the hippie/Pueblo type. But everything indicates that, just as violence is immediately reabsorbed into 'models of violence', the contradiction here resolves itself into functional coexistence. The extreme of acceptance and the extreme of rejection here meet up, as on a Moebius strip by means of a simple twist. And the two models ultimately develop in concentric zones around the same axis of the social order. John Stuart Mill put it brutally: 'In this age, the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a *service.*'[7]

Fatigue

Just as there is a world hunger problem, so there is now also a worldwide problem of fatigue. Paradoxically, the two are mutually exclusive: endemic, irrepressible fatigue – like the irrepressible violence we have discussed above – is the prerogative of rich societies and is a product of, among other things, the overcoming of hunger and endemic scarcity which remains the major problem for pre-industrial societies. Fatigue, as a collective syndrome of the post-industrial societies, thus represents one of the profound anomalies, one of the 'dysfunctions' of prosperity. As a new *mal du siècle*, it should be analysed in conjunction with the other phenomena of anomie, whose recrudescence marks our age, at a time when such problems ought in fact to be disappearing.

Just as the new violence is 'objectless', so this fatigue is 'groundless'. It has nothing to do with muscular fatigue or lack of energy. It does not arise from physical exertion. There is, of course, much spontaneous talk of 'nervous strain', of 'depression' and psychosomatic illness. This kind of explanation is now part of mass culture: it is in all the newspapers (and all the conferences). Everyone can fall back on this, as though it were something that could now be taken for granted, and can hence derive gloomy pleasure from being a martyr to their nerves. Admittedly, this fatigue

signifies one thing at least (in this respect it has the same revelatory function as violence and non-violence): this society which claims to be – which regards itself as being – in constant progress towards the abolition of effort, the resolution of tension, greater ease of living and automation, is in fact a society of stress, tension and drug use, in which the overall balance sheet of satisfaction is increasingly in deficit, in which individual and collective equilibrium is being progressively compromised even as the technical conditions for its realization are being increasingly fulfilled.

The heroes of consumption are tired. Various interpretations for this may be advanced on the psycho-sociological level. Instead of equalizing opportunities and reducing social competition (economic and status competition), the consumption process makes competition more violent and more acute in all its forms. Only in the consumer age are we at last in a society of generalized, *totalitarian* competition, which operates at all levels – the economy, knowledge, desire, the body, signs and drives. These are all things which are now *produced* as exchange-value in an endless process of differentiation and super-differentiation.

We may also take it, with Chombart de Lauwe, that, rather than matching up 'aspirations, needs and satisfactions' as it claims to do, this society creates ever greater disparities both among individuals and among social groups who are wrestling, on the one hand, with the imperative of competition and upward social mobility and, on the other, with the – now highly internalized – imperative to maximalize their pleasures. Under so many opposing constraints, the individual comes apart. The social discrepancy of inequalities is added to the internal discrepancy between needs and aspirations to make this society one that is increasingly at odds with itself, disunited, suffering from a 'malaise'. Fatigue (or 'asthenia') will then be interpreted as a response on the part of modern man – a response in the form of a passive refusal – to his conditions of existence. But it has to be seen that this 'passive refusal' is in fact a *latent violence*, and that it is, by this token, only one possible response, the others being responses of *overt violence*. Here again, we have to restore the principle of ambivalence. Fatigue, depression, neurosis are always convertible into overt violence, and vice versa. The fatigue of the citizen of post-industrial society is not far removed from the 'go-slow' or 'slowdown' of factory workers, or the schoolchild's 'boredom'. These are all forms of passive resistance; they are 'ingrowing' in the way one speaks of an 'ingrowing toenail', turning back in towards the flesh, towards the inside.

In fact, we must reverse all the terms of the spontaneous view: fatigue is not passivity set against the social hyperactivity outside. It is, rather, *the only form of activity* which can, in certain conditions, be set against the constraint of general passivity which applies in current social relations. The tired pupil is the one who passively goes along with what the teacher says. The tired worker or bureaucrat is the one who has had all responsibility taken from him in his work. Political 'indifference', that catatonia of the modern citizen, is the indifference of the individual deprived of any

decision-making powers and left only with the sop of universal suffrage. And the physical and mental monotony of work on the production line or in the office plays its part, too: the muscular, vascular, physiological catalepsy of positions imposed (both standing and seated), of stereotyped gestures, of all the inertia of the chronic underemployment of the body in our society. But this is not the essential point, and this is why 'pathological' fatigue will not be cured by sport and muscular exercise as naïve specialists contend (any more than it will by stimulants or tranquillizers). For fatigue is a concealed form of protest, which turns round against oneself and 'grows into' one's own body because, in certain conditions, that is the only thing on which the dispossessed individual can take out his frustration, just as the blacks rebelling in the cities of America begin by burning down their own neighbourhoods. *True passivity is to be found in the joyful conformity to the system* of the 'dynamic' young manager, bright-eyed and broad-shouldered, ideally fitted to continual activity. Fatigue is an activity, a latent, endemic revolt, unconscious of itself. This explains its function: the 'slowdown', in all its forms, is (like neurosis) the only way to avoid total, genuine breakdown. And it is because it is a (latent) activity that it can suddenly go over into open revolt, as the month of May [1968] everywhere showed. The spontaneous, total contagion, the 'powder-keg' of the May movement can only be explained by this hypothesis: what was taken for lifelessness, disaffection and generalized passivity was in fact a potential of forces *active* in their very resignation, in their ebbing – and hence immediately available. There was no miracle. And the ebbing since May is not an inexplicable 'reversal' of the process either. It is the *conversion* of a form of open revolt into a modality of latent *protest* (the term *'protest'* should indeed be applied only to this latter form: it refers to the many forms of refusal cut off momentarily from a practice of radical change).

Having said this, the fact remains that, in order to grasp the meaning of fatigue, we have to resituate it, beyond psycho-sociological interpretations, in the general structure of depressive states. Insomnia, headaches, migraines, pathological obesity or anorexia, atony or compulsive hyperactivity: though formally different or opposed, these symptoms can in reality be *interchanged*, can substitute one for another, somatic 'conversion' being always accompanied, and even defined by, the virtual 'convertibility' of all symptoms. Now – this is the crucial point – this logic of depressiveness (namely that, being no longer linked to organic lesions or real dysfunctions, symptoms 'wander around') echoes the very logic of consumption (namely that, being no longer linked to the objective function of objects, needs and satisfactions succeed one another, link up one to another, substitute one for another on the basis of a fundamental dissatisfaction). It is the same elusive, unlimited character, the same systematic convertibility which regulates the flow of needs and the 'fluidity' of depressive symptoms. We shall turn once again here to the principle of ambivalence, which we have already mentioned in connection with violence, to sum up the total, structural interrelatedness of the system of consumption and the system of

abreaction/somatization (of which fatigue is merely one aspect). All the processes of our societies tend towards a deconstruction, a dissociation of the ambivalence of desire. That ambivalence, totalized in *jouissance* and the symbolic function, is split apart, but, in going off in two different directions, it obeys a single logic: all the positivity of desire passes into the series of needs and satisfactions, where it resolves itself in terms of managed aims; all the negativity of desire, however, passes into uncontrollable somatization or into the acting-out of violence. This explains the profound unity of the whole process: no other hypothesis can account for the multiplicity of disparate phenomena (affluence, violence, euphoria, depression) which, taken together, characterize the 'consumer society' and which we sense are all necessarily inter-linked, though their logic remains inexplicable within the perspective of a classical anthropology.

Though this is not the place to do it, we ought to go further into:

1 the analysis of consumption as a general process of 'conversion', or, in other words, of 'symbolic' transfer of a lack to a whole chain of signifiers/objects successively invested as part-objects;
2 generalizing the theory of the part-object to the processes of somatization – here again a symbolic transfer and an investment – on the basis of a theory of the body and its status as object within the system of modernity. We have seen that this theory of the body is essential to the theory of consumption, the body being an epitome of all these ambivalent processes: both invested narcissistically as an object of eroticized solicitude and invested 'somatically' as an object of concern and aggressivity.

'It's absolutely classic,' comments a specialist in psychosomatic illness. 'You take refuge in your headaches. It could be anything else at all, such as colitis, insomnia, various kinds of pruritus or eczema, sexual difficulties, obesity, respiratory, digestive or cardiovascular problems… or quite simply, and indeed most often, insurmountable *fatigue.*'

Significantly, depression comes to the surface at the point where one is released from the constraints of work and where the time for satisfaction begins (or should begin) – the managing director with migraines from Friday night to Monday morning; suicide or death following hard upon retirement, etc. It is very well known too that, beneath the now institutional, ritual demand for free time, the 'age of leisure' has seen the development of a growing demand for work, for activity, a compulsive need to 'be doing' or 'acting' in which our pious moralists immediately saw a proof that work was man's 'natural vocation'. It seems more likely that this non-economic demand for work is an expression of all the aggressivity that has not been satisfied in leisure and satisfaction. But it can find no resolution by that route since, arising from the depths of the ambivalence of desire, it here reformulates itself as a demand or a 'need' for work and thus re-enters the cycle of needs, from which we know there is no way out for desire.

Just as violence can be turned to domestic use, to heighten the enjoyment of security, so fatigue, like neurosis, can become a cultural trait of distinction. Then the whole ritual of fatigue and satisfaction comes into play, most often among the cultivated and the privileged (though this cultural 'alibi' is filtering down very quickly). At this stage, fatigue is no longer anomic at all, and nothing of what we have just said of it applies to this 'obligatory' fatigue: this is 'consumed' fatigue and forms part of the social ritual of exchange and status.

Conclusion

On Contemporary Alienation or the End of the Pact with the Devil

The Student of Prague

The *Student of Prague* is an old silent film from the 1930s, an expressionist film of the German school.[1] It tells the story of a poor but ambitious student impatient for a more prosperous life. As he is taking part in a drinking bout in a café near Prague, a hunt is in progress all around in which that city's high society is finding what amusement it can. Someone rules over that society and is pulling the strings. He can be seen manoeuvring the animals at will and regulating the movements of the hunters. And this man of relatively advanced years, with his top hat, gloves, knobbed stick, slight paunch and little turn-of-the-century goatee beard, looks like one of the hunters. He is the Devil. He contrives to have one of the women from the hunt lose her way. She meets the student – love at first sight! But the woman, being rich, is beyond his grasp. Returning home, the student broods on his ambition and dissatisfaction, which have now assumed a sexual dimension.

The Devil then appears in the student's seedy room, which contains only books and a life-size mirror. In exchange for his image in the mirror, he offers him a pile of gold. The deal is struck. The Devil peels the specular image from the mirror as though it were an etching or a sheet of carbon paper, rolls it up, puts it in his pocket, and leaves, in suitably obsequious and sardonic fashion. Here the film's real argument begins. Thanks to his money, the student enjoys success after success, avoiding, with cat-like tread, the mirrors with which the fashionable society in which he moves unfortunately surrounds itself. At the beginning, however, he retains his peace of mind; he is not greatly vexed at no longer seeing his own image. But then, one day, he sees his own flesh-and-blood image. This double, which now frequents the same circles and clearly takes an interest in him, follows him around and never lets him rest. It is, we surmise, his own image – the image he sold – which the Devil has revived and put back into circulation. As the good image it is, it remains attached to its model; but, as the bad image it has become, it now accompanies him not only when he chances to pass by mirrors, but in life itself, wherever he goes. He runs the risk of being compromised by it at any moment, if the two are seen together (a number of

small incidents of this kind have already occurred). And if he flees society to avoid it, it takes his place and completes what he had begun, distorting his actions to the point of rendering them criminal. One day when he has provoked a duel, but has resolved to make his excuses on the duelling ground, he arrives at the appointed place at dawn. But he is too late: his double has passed that way before him and the opponent is already dead. The student hides. His image continues to hound him, as though to be avenged for having been sold. He sees the image everywhere. It appears to him behind tombs, or at the edge of the cemetery. He is no longer able to have any social life; his existence is impossible. In this despairing state, he rejects even a sincere offer of love and, to put an end to all his troubles, settles on the plan of killing his own image.

One day, the image pursues him into his room. In the course of a violent scene between the two, it happens to pass in front of the mirror from which it came. At the memory of this initial scene, nostalgia for his image, mingled with fury at what he is enduring on its account, pushes the student to the brink. He fires at it. Naturally, the mirror is smashed and the double, become again the phantasm it once was, vanishes into thin air. But at the same moment, the student slumps to the ground; it is *he* who is dying. For, by killing his image, he is killing himself, since, without his noticing it, the image has become living and real in his stead. In his death throes, however, he grasps at one of the fragments of the mirror scattered about the floor and realizes that *he can see himself again*. He loses his body, but, by paying that price, his *normal* likeness is restored to him just before he dies.

The mirror image here symbolically represents the meaning of our acts. These build up around us a world that is *in our image*. The transparency of our relation to the world is expressed rather well by the individual's unimpaired relation to his image in a mirror: the faithfulness of that reflection bears witness, to some degree, to a real reciprocity between the world and ourselves. Symbolically, then, if that image should be missing, it is the sign that the world is becoming opaque, that our acts are getting out of our control and, at that point, we have no perspective on ourselves. Without that guarantee, no identity is possible any longer: I become another to myself; I am *alienated*.

This is the first element, then, which the film presents. But it is not content merely to tell a general tale. It immediately supplies the concrete meaning of the situation. The image is not lost or abolished by chance: it is *sold*. It falls into the commodity sphere, we might say, and this is indeed the sense of *concrete, social* alienation. At the same time, the fact that the Devil can pocket this image as an object is also the fantastic illustration of the real process of commodity fetishism: from the moment they are produced, our works and our acts fall out of our grasp and are objectivized; they fall, literally, into the Devil's hands. Thus, in Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl* the shadow too is separated from the person maleficently and becomes a pure thing, an article of apparel one might leave at home if one were not careful and which could get stuck to the ground if there were too sharp a frost.

Schlemihl, who has lost his shadow, fancies he might have one drawn for him by a painter – one which will follow him about. And Egyptian legends say that one should not walk too close to water, since crocodiles have a taste for passing shadows. The plots of the two tales are equivalent: whether we are speaking of image or shadow, it is in each case the transparency of our relation to ourselves and to the world that is shattered, and life then loses its meaning. But there is one thing in the fables of *Schlemihl* and *The Student of Prague* that is superior to many other pacts with the Devil: the fact that they put Gold, and Gold alone – that is to say, commodity logic and exchange-value – at the centre of alienation.

The two fables do, however, proceed in quite different ways after that, with the logic of the Schlemihl story – in which Chamisso does not carry through the consequences of the shadow being transformed into an object – lacking rigour. Chamisso fills out his tale with fantastical, comic episodes, like the chase over the 'sunlit sandy plain' after a wandering, masterless shadow, which might be his, or when the Devil gives him back his shadow to try out again for a few hours. But Schlemihl does not suffer directly from his alienated shadow; he suffers only the social reprobation which attaches to the absence of a shadow. Once it has escaped, it does not turn against him to become the instrument which destroys his very being. Schlemihl is condemned to solitude, but *he remains the same.* Neither his consciousness nor his life is taken from him, only life in society. Hence the final compromise, in which he stoically rejects the second bargain proposed by the Devil, which would give him back his shadow in exchange for his soul. Thus, *he loses his shadow, but he saves his soul.*

The Student of Prague follows a much tighter logic. As soon as he has sold his image or, in other words, has sold a part of himself, the student is hounded *to his death* by it in real life. This translates the unvarnished truth of the process of alienation: nothing of what is alienated runs off into some neutral circuit, into an 'external world' over against which we might be said to remain free – suffering, with each dispossession, only a loss in our *having,* but always retaining possession of ourselves in our 'private' sphere and ultimately remaining intact in our *being.* This is the reassuring fiction of the 'inner self' or 'heart of hearts' [*for intérieur*], where the soul is free of the world. Alienation goes much deeper than that. There is a part of us which gets away from us in this process, but we do not get away from it. The object (the soul, the shadow, the product of our labour become object) *takes its revenge.* All we are dispossessed of remains attached to us, but negatively. In other words, it *haunts* us. That part of us sold and forgotten is still us, or rather it is a caricature of us, the ghost, the *spectre* which follows us; it is our continuation and takes its revenge.

We encounter the troubling atmosphere of this inversion of subject and object, this sorcery of the otherness of the same, in the most everyday expressions: 'He followed him about like a shadow.' And also in our cult of the dead – a propitiating of a part of us which is alienated once and for all, and from which, as a consequence, we can expect only ill. Now, there

is a part of ourselves by which, *when living*, we are collectively haunted: social labour power, which, once sold, returns, through the whole social cycle of the commodity, to dispossess us of the meaning of labour itself; labour power which has become – by a social, not a diabolical, operation, of course – the materialized obstacle to the fruits of our labours. It is all this which is symbolized in *The Student of Prague* by the sudden emergence, live and hostile, of the image, and by the long suicide (for such we must call it) which that image imposes on the one who sold it.

What is crucial here, and is dramatically demonstrated to us, is that the alienated human being is not merely a being diminished and impoverished but left intact in its essence: it is a being turned inside out, changed into something evil, into its own enemy, set against itself. This is, on another level, the process Freud describes in repression: the repressed returning through the agency of repression itself. It is the body of Christ on the cross changing into a woman to obsess the monk who has taken a vow of chastity. In alienation, it is the human being's objectivized life-forces which at any moment change *into him to his cost*, and thus drive him to his death.

In the end, Schlemihl gives relative meaning to his life and dies a natural death, like a solitary American industrialist, in a charitable institution he himself founded in the days when he was wealthy. He saved his soul by rejecting the second bargain. This division of the action flows necessarily from the ambiguity of the initial idea and, as a result, the fable entirely loses its rigour.

In *The Student of Prague*, there is no second bargain. The student dies inexorably from the *logical* consequences of the first. This means that, for Chamisso, it is possible to sell one's shadow – that is to say, to be alienated in all respects of one's behaviour – and *still to save one's soul*. Alienation leads only to a conflict in social *appearances*, and, that being the case, Schlemihl can very easily overcome it *abstractly* in solitude, whereas *The Student of Prague* develops the *objective* logic of alienation in all its rigour and shows that *there is no way out but death*. Every ideal solution for overcoming alienation is cut off. Alienation cannot be overcome: it is *the very structure of the bargain with the Devil*. It is the very structure of market society.

The End of Transcendence

The Student of Prague is a remarkable illustration of the processes of alienation, that is to say, of the generalized pattern of individual and social life governed by commodity logic. Moreover, since the early Middle Ages, the Pact with the Devil has been the central myth of a society engaged in the historical and technical process of the domination of Nature, that process being always simultaneously a process of the taming of sexuality. Among the forces of evil, indexed to the Devil, the Western 'Sorcerer's Apprentice' has served constantly to thematize the immense guilt attaching to the puritanical, Promethean enterprise of Progress, of sublimation and labour,

of rationality and efficiency. That is why this medieval theme of the re-emergence of the repressed – of being haunted by the repressed and selling one's soul (the 'pact' reflecting the irruption of market processes into early bourgeois society) – was revived by the romantics in the very earliest years of the 'industrial age'. Since then, the theme has continued to run (parallel to the myth of the 'miracle of technology') beneath the myth of the *inevitability of technology*. All our current science fiction is steeped in it, as is the whole of everyday mythology, from the peril of the atomic catastrophe (the technological suicide of civilization) to the theme, played out in a thousand variations, of the fatal gap between technical Progress and human social morality.

We may, therefore, suggest that the age of consumption, being the historical culmination of the whole process of accelerated productivity under the sign of capital, is also the age of radical alienation. Commodity logic has become generalized and today governs not only labour processes and material products, but the whole of culture, sexuality, and human relations, including even fantasies and individual drives. Everything is taken over by that logic, not only in the sense that all functions and needs are objectivized and manipulated in terms of profit, but in the deeper sense in which everything is *spectacularized* or, in other words, evoked, provoked and orchestrated into images, signs, consumable models.

But the question then is: in so far as it revolves around *the alterity of the selfsame* (that is to say, around an alienated, abducted, essence of man), can this schema (or this concept) of alienation still be operative in a context in which the individual is no longer ever confronted with his own split image? The myth of the Pact and the Sorcerer's Apprentice is still a *demiurgic myth*, the myth of the Market, Gold and Production, the transcendent objective of which turns around against human beings themselves. By contrast, consumption is not Promethean; it is hedonistic and regressive. Its process is no longer one of labour and self-surpassing, but *a process of absorption of signs and absorption by signs*. It is, therefore, characterized, as Marcuse says, by the *end of transcendence*. In the generalized process of consumption, there is no longer any soul, no shadow, no double, and no image in the specular sense. There is no longer any contradiction within being, or any problematic of being and appearance. There is no longer anything but the transmission and reception of signs, and the individual being vanishes in this combinatory and calculus of signs. Consumer man never comes face to face with his own needs, any more than with the specific product of his labour; nor is he ever confronted with his own image: *he is immanent in the signs he arranges*. There is no transcendence any more, no finality, no objective: what characterizes this society is the absence of 'reflection', of a perspective on itself. There is, therefore, no *maleficent agency* either, like that of the Devil, with whom one could enter into a Faustian pact to gain wealth and glory, since one is given these things by a *beneficent*, maternal *ambience* – the affluent society itself. Or, alternatively, we must suppose that it is society as a whole, as a *société anonyme*, as a thing of 'limited liability', which has struck a contract with the

Devil, has bartered all transcendence and finality for affluence, and is now haunted by an absence of ends.

In the specific mode of consumption, there is no transcendence any more, *not even the fetishistic transcendence of the commodity*. There is now only immanence in the order of signs. Just as there is no agonizing ontological struggle, but a logical relation between the signifier and the signified, so there is no longer an ontological struggle between the being and its double (its shadow, its soul, its ideal), whether divine or diabolic; there is logical calculation of signs and absorption into the system of signs. There is no longer any mirror or looking-glass in the modern order in which the human being would be confronted with his image for better or for worse; there is only the *shop-window* – the site of consumption, in which the individual no longer produces his own reflection, but is absorbed in the contemplation of multiple signs/objects, is absorbed into the order of signifiers of social status, etc. He is not reflected in that order, but absorbed and abolished. *The subject of consumption is the order of signs*. Whether we define this latter structurally, as the instance of a code, or empirically as the generalized ambience of objects, the involvement of the subject is no longer, at any event, that of an 'alienated' essence in the philosophical, Marxist sense of the term. It is not that of an essence which is dispossessed, taken over by some alienating agency and become foreign to itself. For there is no longer, properly speaking, any 'selfsame', any 'subject itself', or, therefore, any 'alterity of the selfsame', and therefore no alienation in the strict sense. The situation is rather like that of the child kissing his image in the mirror before going to bed: he doesn't entirely mistake the image for himself, since he has already 'recognized' it. Nor is it an alien double in which he is reflected: he *plays* with it, *somewhere between sameness and otherness*. So it is with the consumer: he 'plays out' his personalization between one term and another, one sign and another. Between signs there is no contradiction, just as there is no exclusive opposition between the child and his image: there is collusion and ordered involvement. The consumer defines himself by his choice within a 'game' played between different models or, in other words, by his combinatorial involvement in that game. It is in this sense that consumption is ludic and that *the ludic dimension of consumption has gradually supplanted the tragic dimension of identity*.

From Spectre to Spectrum

We have today no myth equal to that of the Pact with the Devil or the Sorcerer's Apprentice (which thematized the fatal contradiction between the individual being and his Double) to thematize the peaceful coexistence – in the guise of a paradigmatic declension – of the successive terms which define the 'personal' model. Tragic duality (which the situationists are again restoring in the concept of the 'spectacle', the 'society of the spectacle', and radical alienation) had its great myths, all of them linked to the notion of a human

essence and the inevitability of losing it – linked to Being and its **spectre.** But the ludic ramification of the person into a spectrum of signs and objects, nuances and differences, which constitutes the basis of the consumption process and totally redefines the individual not as alienated substance but as shifting difference – this novel process, which is not analysable in terms of the person (what an admirable amphibology we have in the French word *personne* which, on its own, means 'no one'!) and the alterity of the person, has not found an equivalent myth to embody the Metaphysics of Consumption – a metaphysical myth to represent what the Double and Alienation represented for the order of production. *This is no accident*. Myths, like the faculties of speech, reflection and transcription, are indissociable from transcendence, and disappear with it.

Consumption of Consumption

If the consumer society no longer produces myth, this is because *it is itself its own myth*. The Devil, who brought Gold and Wealth (the price of which was our soul), has been supplanted by Affluence pure and simple. And the pact with the Devil has been supplanted by the contract of Affluence. Moreover, just as the most diabolical aspect of the Devil has never been his existing, but his making us believe that he exists, so Affluence *does not exist*, but it only has to make us believe it exists to be an effective myth.

Consumption is a myth. That is to say, it is *a statement of contemporary society about itself,* the way our society speaks itself. And, in a sense, the only objective reality of consumption is the *idea* of consumption; it is this reflexive, discursive configuration, endlessly repeated in everyday speech and intellectual discourse, which has acquired the force of *common sense.*

Our society thinks itself and speaks itself as a consumer society. As much as it consumes anything, it consumes *itself* as consumer society, as *idea*. Advertising is the triumphal paean to that idea.

This is not a supplementary dimension; it is a fundamental one, for it is the dimension of myth. If we did nothing but consume (getting, devouring, digesting), consumption would not be a myth, which is to say that it would not be a full, self-fulfilling discourse of society about itself, a general system of interpretation, a mirror in which it takes supreme delight in itself, a utopia in which it is reflected in advance. In this sense, affluence and consumption – again, we mean not the consumption of material goods, products and services, but the consumed image of consumption – do, indeed, constitute our new tribal mythology – the morality of modernity.

Without that anticipation and reflexive potentialization of enjoyment in the 'collective consciousness', consumption would merely be what it is and would not be such a force for social integration. It would merely be a richer, more lavish, more differentiated mode of subsistence than before, but it would no more have a *name* than ever it did before, when nothing designated as collective value, as reference myth what was merely a mode of

survival (eating, drinking, housing and clothing oneself) or the sumptuary expenditure (finery, great houses, jewels) of the privileged classes. Neither eating roots nor throwing feasts was given the name 'consuming'. Our age is the first in which current expenditure on food and 'prestige' expenditure have both been termed **consumption** by everyone concerned, there being a total consensus on the matter. The historic emergence of the *myth* of consumption in the twentieth century is radically different from the emergence of the technical concept in economic thinking or science, where it was employed much earlier. That terminological systematization for everyday use changes history itself: it is the sign of a new social reality. Strictly speaking, there has been consumption only since the term has 'passed into general usage'. Though it is mystifying and analytically useless – a veritable 'anti-concept' indeed – it signifies, nonetheless, that an ideological restructuring of values has occurred. The fact that this society experiences itself as a consumer society must be the starting point for an objective analysis.

When we say that this 'affluent' society is its own myth, we mean that it takes over, at a general level, that admirable advertising slogan which might happily serve as its motto: **the body you dream of is your own.** A kind of immense collective narcissism is inducing society to merge itself into – and absolve itself in – the image it presents of itself, to be convinced of itself in the way that advertising ends up convincing people of their bodies and the prestige values of those bodies. In short, it is becoming its own 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.[2] Boorstin has shown how this immense process of self-demonstrative tautology works in the USA, where a whole society speaks itself in the mode of prophecy, but a prophecy which does not have future ideals or transcendent heroes for its substance, but solely the reflection of itself and of its immanence. Advertising is dedicated entirely to this function: the consumer can at any moment read, as in Till Eulenspiegel's mirror, what he is and what he desires – and fulfil that desire in the process. There is no longer any ontological distance or fissure. The suture is immediate. It is the same with opinion polls, market research surveys and all those actions in which the great Delphic Oracle of Public Opinion is made to speak and to rave: they foretell social and political events and substitute themselves, like identikit pictures, for the real events, which end up reflecting them. Hence, as Boorstin writes, 'public opinion – once the public's expression – becomes more and more an image into which the public fits its expression. Public opinion becomes filled with what is already there. It is the people looking in the mirror.'[3] So it is too with celebrities, stars and 'heroes of consumption':

> The hero stood for outside standards. The celebrity is a tautology … Celebrities are known primarily for their well-knownness. Yet the celebrity is usually nothing greater than a more publicized version of us. In imitating him, in trying to dress like him, talk like him, look like him, think like him, we are simply imitating ourselves … By imitating a tautology, we ourselves become a tautology standing for what we stand for … We look for models, and we see our own image.[4]

And of television, Boorstin remarks: 'At home we begin to try to live according to the script of television programmes of happy families, which are themselves nothing but amusing quintessences of us.'[5]

Like every great myth worth its salt, the myth of 'Consumption' has its discourse and its anti-discourse. In other words, the elated discourse on affluence is everywhere shadowed by a morose, moralizing, 'critical' counter-discourse on the ravages of consumer society and the tragic end to which it inevitably dooms society as a whole. That counter-discourse is to be heard everywhere. Not only is it found in intellectualist discourse, which is always ready to distance itself by its scorn for 'simple-minded values' and 'material satisfactions', but it is now present within 'mass culture' itself: advertising increasingly parodies itself, integrating counter-advertising into its promotional technique. *France-Soir*, *Paris-Match*, the radio, the TV, and ministerial speeches all contain as an obligatory refrain the lament on this 'consumer society', where values, ideals and ideologies are giving way to the pleasures of everyday life. We shall not soon forget Chaban-Delmas's famous flight of oratory: 'We have to control consumer society by giving it back some soul!'

This endlessly repeated indictment is part of the game: it is the critical mirage, the anti-fable which rounds off the fable – the discourse of consumption and its critical undermining. O*nly the two sides taken together constitute the myth*. We have, therefore, to allot to the 'critical' discourse and the moralizing protest their true responsibility for the elaboration of the myth. It is that discourse which locks us definitively into the mythic and prophetic teleology of the 'Civilization of the Object'. It is that discourse which, being itself much more fascinated by the Object than either common sense or the grassroots consumer, transfigures it into a mythic and fascinated anti-object critique. The rebels of May 1968 did not escape this trap of reifying objects and consumption excessively by according them diabolical value, of denouncing them as such and building them up into a determining instance. And the real work of myth-making lies here. If all the denunciations, all the disquisitions on 'alienation', and all the derisive force of pop and anti-art play so easily into establishment hands, that is because they are themselves part of the myth, which they round out by providing the counter-melody within the formal liturgy of the Object we spoke of at the beginning – and do so in a manner that is without doubt more perverse than the spontaneous adherence to consumer values.

In conclusion, we shall say that this counter-discourse, which establishes no *real* distance, is as immanent in consumer society as any of its other aspects. This negative discourse is the intellectual's second home. Just as medieval society was balanced on God **and** the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption **and** its denunciation. Though at least around the Devil heresies and black magic sects could organize. Our magic is white. No heresy is possible any longer in a state of affluence. It is the prophylactic whiteness of a saturated society, a society with no history and no dizzying heights, a society with no other myth than itself.

But here we are once again speaking in morose, prophetic terms, caught in the trap of the Object and its apparent plenitude. Now, we know that the Object is nothing and that behind it stands the tangled void of human relations, the negative imprint of the immense mobilization of productive and social forces which have become reified in it. We shall await the violent irruptions and sudden disintegrations which will come, just as unforeseeably and as certainly as May 1968, to wreck this white Mass.

Notes

Chapter 1

1 K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1971, p. 87.
2 Contrary to a rather odd assertion in Mark Poster's book *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Polity, 1988, p. 55, note 4), Flaine is not 'Baudrillard's parody of suburban communities around Paris' but a genuine ski resort in Haute-Savoie (Tr.).

Chapter 2

1 This situation is almost ideally realized by a city like Berlin. Moreover, almost all science-fiction novels have as their theme the situation of a rational and 'affluent' Great City *threatened* with destruction from without or within by some great hostile force.

Chapter 3

1 Tables appearing in the original French have been removed at the author's request (Tr.).
2 J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, Penguin in association with Hamish Hamilton, Harmondsworth, 1962, p. 210.
3 There is in this sense an absolute difference between waste in our 'affluent societies', a waste that is a *nuisance integrated into the economic system*, which is a functional wastage not productive of collective value, and the destructive prodigality engaged in by all the so-called 'societies of scarcity' in their festivals and sacrifices, this latter being waste 'by excess', in which the destruction of goods was a source of collective symbolic values. Breaking up old cars that have gone out of fashion or burning coffee in locomotives is in no sense festive. It is a deliberate, systematic destruction for strategic ends. So too is military expenditure (perhaps only advertising …). The economic system cannot transcend itself in an act of festive waste, caught up as it is in its own alleged 'rationality'. It can only devour its excess of wealth as it were shamefully, practising a calculated destructiveness that is complementary to its productivity calculations.

Chapter 4

1 The term 'inequality' is inappropriate. The equality/inequality opposition, ideologically linked to the system of modern democratic values, only fully covers economic disparities and cannot figure in a structural analysis.
2 Or the 'Great Society', recently imported into France.
3 On this point, see Chapter 7 in relation to 'lowest common culture' and 'lowest common multiples'.
4 It is, of course, in its functioning as a system of social differentiation (2 above) that consumption takes on this unlimited dimension. As a system of communication and exchange (1 above), where it may be compared to language, a *finite* range of goods and

services (like the finite material of linguistic signs) can very well suffice, as we see in primitive societies. Language [*la langue*] does not proliferate because there is no *ambivalence* of the sign at that level, that ambivalence being grounded in social hierarchy and simultaneous double determination. By contrast, a certain level of *parole* and style does give rise again to distinctive proliferation.

5 On this point, see Chapter 5, section 'Consumption as the Emergence and Control of New Productive Forces'.

6 This is the 'reserve army' of needs.

7 This growing differentiation does not necessarily signify *a growing distance from the top to the bottom* of the scale, a 'greater overall imbalance', but *increasing discrimination*, an increase in the quantity of distinctive signs *within* a hierarchy whose extremes have moved closer together. Relative 'democratization' and homogenization are accompanied by a related intensification in status competition.

8 In this sense, the distinction between 'real' and 'artificial' needs is also a false problem. 'Artificial needs' do, of course, mask the non-satisfaction of 'essential' needs (television instead of education). But this is secondary to generalized determination by growth (the expanded reproduction of capital), in respect of which the terms 'natural' and 'artificial' have no meaning. We might even say that this natural-artificial opposition, which implies a theory of human finalities, is *itself an ideological product of growth*. It is reproduced by growth and is functionally linked to it.

9 *Les Temps modernes*, October 1968.

Chapter 5

1 Quoted by Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, Signet, New York, 1967, epigraph to Chapter 10.

2 In the survey carried out by *Sélection du Reader's Digest* (A. Piatier, 'Structures et perspectives de la consommation européenne'), the pattern which emerges is not one of an immense middle class, as in the case of the USA, but that of a minority, a consumer elite (the As) serving as a model for a majority which does not yet possess that range of luxury goods (sports car, stereo, second home) which every European worthy of the name must have.

3 Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, p. 215.

4 Ibid., p. 222.

5 This is the 'anti-coagulant' effect of advertising (Elgozy).

6 Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, p. 281. 6 Ibid., p. 279.

8 Ibid., p. 280.

9 On this, see this chapter, section 'Consumption as the Emergence and Control of New Productive Forces'.

10 J. Baudrillard, 'The ideological genesis of needs', in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Telos, St Louis, 1981, pp. 63–87.

11 This paragraph has been slightly modified by the author (Tr.).

12 *La Nef*, no. 37.

13 Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, p. 49.

14 On this point, see Chapter 10, 'The Mystique of Solicitude'.

Chapter 6

1 It is the same with relationships. The system is built upon a total liquidation of personal ties, of concrete social relations. It is to this extent that it becomes necessarily and *systematically* productive of relationship (public relations, human relations, etc.). The production of relationships has become one of the key sectors of production. And because they no longer have anything spontaneous about them, because they are *produced*, those relationships are

necessarily fated, like all that is produced, to be consumed (unlike *social relations*, which are the unconscious product of social labour and not the result of deliberate, controlled industrial production: these are not 'consumed' but are, in fact, the site of *social contradictions*).

On the production and consumption of human relations and social relationships, see Chapter 10, 'The Mystique of Solicitude'.

2 D. Riesman, *Abundance for What? And Other Essays,* Chatto and Windus, London, 1964, p. 129.
3 D. Riesman (with N. Glazer and R. Denney), *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character,* Doubleday Anchor, New York, n.d., pp. 98–9.
4 See Chapter 11, section 'Violence'.

Chapter 7

1 The reference is to the Le Président health clubs. See note 4 to Chapter 8 (Tr.).
2 If beauty is to be found in the 'figure', the career is defined by its 'profile'. Such connivances of vocabulary are significant.
3 See this chapter, section 'Pseudo-Event and Neo-Reality'. The term 'gadget' covers a rather different semantic field in French, referring in particular to objects which are not necessarily technical implements, but merely useless objects of a 'gimmicky' kind. However, since the French usage will be reasonably clear from the author's argument here, I have generally retained the term 'gadget', which has at least equally pejorative connotations in English (Galbraith writes, 'The word gadget is itself a pejorative term for durable goods', *The Affluent Society,* p. 162) (Tr.).
4 *Tirlipot* is the name of a 1960s radio quiz game.
5 *Le Monde,* 28 September 1969.
6 There is, in this sense, a relationship of sorts between kitsch and snobbery. However, snobbery is linked, rather, to the aristocracy/bourgeoisie acculturation process and kitsch essentially to the rise of the 'middle' classes in a bourgeois industrial society.
7 But it is not a toy, as the toy has a symbolic function for the child. However, a 'new look' toy, a fashionable toy becomes a gadget once again simply by dint of such modishness.
8 The *pure* gadget, defined as something totally useless to anyone at all, would be an absurdity.
9 An annual French competition for artisans and inventors (Tr.).
10 See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream,* Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1963.
11 The cubists were still searching for the 'essence' of space, seeking to unveil a 'secret geometry', etc. In Dada, Duchamp or the surrealists, objects were wrenched from their (bourgeois) functions to be set up in their subversive banality, in a reminder of their lost essence and of an order of authenticity evoked by way of the absurd. In Francis Ponge, the apprehension of the naked, concrete object is still the act of a – poetic – consciousness or source of perception. In short, whether poetic or critical, the whole of art, 'without which things would merely be what they are', is fuelled (before pop) by transcendence.
12 Cf. the Conclusion, section 'The Consumption of Consumption'.
13 Mario Amaya, *Pop as Art: A Survey of the New Super Realism,* Studio Vista, London, 1965.
14 In this sense, the truth of pop might be said to be wage labour and the advertising hoarding, not the contract and the art gallery.
15 'Popular' art is concerned not with objects, but always primarily with human beings and their actions. It would not paint cooked meats or the American flag, but a-man-eating or a-man-saluting-the-American-flag.
16 In fact we often read this 'terroristic' humour in it, but we do so out of critical nostalgia on our part.
17 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* Sphere, London, 1967, p. 27.
18 It is easy to see how one can, in this sense, 'consume' language [*du langage*]. As soon as it becomes loaded with in-group connotations, and, instead of being a vehicle for meaning,

turns into a group lexicon, a class or caste heritage (the style of the 'smart set', intellectual jargon; the political jargon of a party or grouping); as soon as it ceases to be a *means of exchange* and becomes a *material of exchange* for the internal usage of a group or class – its real function, under cover of conveying a message, being one of collusion and recognition; and as soon as, rather than putting meaning into circulation, it begins itself to circulate as password, as shibboleth, in a process of group tautology (the group speaking itself), then language is an object of consumption, a fetish.

It is no longer being used as a language [*langue*], as a system of distinctive denotative signs, but consumed as a system of connotation, as a distinctive code.

We find the same process in 'medical consumption'. There has been an extraordinary inflation of the demand for health care, closely linked to the rise in the standard of living. The line between 'justifiable' demand (though on what definition of a vital minimum and bio-psychosomatic equilibrium might it be considered justified?) and the consumer compulsion for medical, surgical and dental treatment is becoming blurred. Medical practice is turning into *the use of the doctor him/herself* and this sumptuary, conspicuous use of the doctor/object, the medicine/object, joins the second home and the car as part of the panoply of social standing. Here again, the medication – and, particularly where the wealthier classes are concerned, the doctor (Balint: 'The medication most frequently dispensed in general practice is the doctor himself') – cease to be the means of achieving health, considered as a final goal, and become themselves the focus of the ultimate demand. They are then consumed, on the selfsame pattern of a diverting of the objective practical function into a mental manipulation and a sign-based calculus of a fetishistic type.

We have, properly speaking, to distinguish between two levels of this 'consumption': the 'neurotic' demand for the giving of medication, for anxiety-reducing medical care. This demand is just as objective as the demand which arises from an organic ailment, but it leads into 'consumption' in so far as the doctor no longer has any specific value at this level: he is substitutable, as anxiety-reducer or care-provider, for any other process of partial regression: alcohol, shopping or collecting (the consumer 'collects' the doctor and medicines). The doctor is consumed as one-sign-among-others (just as a washing machine may be consumed as a mark of status and ease – see Chapter 7).

At a deep level, then, what institutes 'medical consumption' is – beyond the neurotic logic of individuals – a social logic of status, which incorporates the doctor as sign (quite apart from any objective performance and on the same basis as any other value *attribute*) into a generalized system. We can see that it is on the abstraction (the reduction) of the medical function that medical consumption is established. We find this pattern of systematic abduction or rerouting [*détournement*] everywhere as the very principle of consumption.

19 Boorstin, *The Image*, p. 209.
20 This is why all forms of resistance to the introduction of advertising on TV or elsewhere are merely moralizing or archaic reactions. The problem lies at the level of the system of signification as a whole.
21 Boorstin, *The Image*, p. 213.
22 Ibid., p. 217.
23 Ibid., p. 219.

Chapter 8

1 The reference in the hymn is, however, not to the body, but to the soul (Tr.).
2 The original *cartes du tendre* were, of course, actual 'maps' or charts depicting the course of love (Tr.).
3 See also this exemplary text from *Vogue*:

> A new wind is blowing through the world of beauty, a fresher, freer, healthier, less hypocritical wind of *pride in one's body*. Not pretentiousness, which is vulgar. But the honest awareness that our bodies are worth accepting, caring for, loving, *if they*

> *are to be well used*. We are happy that our knees are more supple, we are delighted with the length of our legs, with our lighter feet … (for these we use a mask as we do for the face … we massage our toes with an extraordinary 'supersonic' cream, we find ourselves a good chiropodist … see how on page 72). We are all for the new body-spray perfumes, which give a satiny finish right down to our toes. Left, mules in South African ostrich-feathers with embroidery by Lamel (Christian Dior).

Etc.

4 In French. *le phrynéisme*. The reference here is to the Greek courtesan Phryne, who 'when she saw that in spite of the eloquence of her defender Hyperides she was going to be condemned, … unveiled her bosom, and by this sudden display of her charms so influenced her judges, that she was immediately acquitted' (*Lemprière's Classical Dictionary*, Bracken, London, 1984, p. 526) (Tr.).

5 The male equivalent of the *Elle* text is the advert for Le Président entitled 'No pity for executives?' This is an admirable text, which encapsulates all the themes we have analysed here (narcissism, the revenge of the neglected body, functional 'recycling'), except that here the masculine model centres on 'physical fitness' and social success, whereas the feminine model focused on 'beauty' and 'seduction'.

> Forty years old. Modern civilization commands him to be young. The paunch which was once a symbol of social success is now synonymous with decline and the scrapheap. His superiors, his subordinates, his wife, his secretary, his mistress, his children and the girl in the microskirt he's chatting to at his table outside the café (with who knows what in mind) all judge him on the quality and style of his clothes, his choice of tie and aftershave, the suppleness and slenderness of his body.
>
> He has to keep a watchful eye on everything: the crease in his trousers, his collar, his puns, his feet when he dances, his diet when he eats, his stamina when he is climbing stairs, his back when he makes a violent effort. If, only yesterday, efficiency in his work was enough, today *he is required to possess both physical fitness and elegance*.
>
> The myth of the healthy American businessman, part James Bond, part Henry Ford, confident and sure of himself, physically and psychologically well balanced, has taken its place in our civilization. Finding and keeping *dynamic* co-workers with pep and drive is the major concern of every business manager.
>
> The forty-year-old falls in with this image. *This neo-Narcissus of modern times* likes to take care of himself and tries to enjoy himself. He savours his diet, his medication, his physical training, the difficulty he has stopping smoking.
>
> Aware that his social success depends entirely on the image others have of him, *that physical fitness is his trump card*, the man of forty is looking for his second wind and his second youth.

There follows the advert for Le Président. There, it is chiefly fitness that is being: fitness, the magic word, that 'fairy godmother's gift' (after Narcissus, the fairies!), which managing directors, senior executives, journalists and doctors pursue 'in an air-conditioned, cocooned atmosphere' and 'using 37 sets of apparatus with pedals, wheels, weights, vibrations, levers and steel cables' (as one can see, both athleticism and phryneism, both 'fitness' and 'beauty', are partial to gadgetry).

6 In the technical sense of simulations where the conditions of weightlessness are simulated experimentally – or of mathematical models.

7 The truth of the body is desire. And this, being lack, cannot be shown. The most exhaustive exhibition of that desire merely highlights it as absence, and ultimately, merely censors it. Will we one day see photos in which erections are shown? This would still be done under the heading of fashion. The censors thus ultimately have nothing to fear, except from their own desire.

8 Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, p. 252.

9 On this point, see Chapter 6, section 'The Structural Models'.
10 Sexuality is no longer a celebration [*une fête*]. It is an erotic *festival*, with all that implies in terms of organization. Within the framework of that festival, everything is done also to revive 'polymorphous, perverse' sexuality. Cf. the first world fair of pornography in Copenhagen [this chapter, section 'The Sex-Exchange Standard'].
11 We find the same process in the 'consumption' of Technology. Without wishing to contest the enormous impact of technological progress on social progress, one can see how technology itself falls into the domain of consumption, dividing into a daily practice 'liberated' by innumerable 'functional' gadgets and a transcendent myth of (capital T) Technology, the combination of the two making it possible to head off all the revolutionary potentialities of a *total social* practice of technology. See *Utopie*, no. 2–3, May 1969, 'La Pratique sociale et la technique'.
12 The French verb *solliciter* contains an ambiguity, referring at times to a demand or even manipulation [the expression *solliciter des textes* implies forcing texts or documents to yield significations which they do not clearly contain (Tr.)], at times to solicitude and gratification. See Chapter 10, 'The Mystique of Solicitude'.
13 The Danish parliament (Tr.).
14 This line does not actually seem to appear in either of Rimbaud's 'Villes' poems (commonly known as 'Villes I' and 'Villes II') (Tr.).
15 This phrase occurs with slight variations of emphasis in two letters which Rimbaud wrote in May 1871. The first of these is to Georges Izambard, the second to Paul Demeny. Originals and translations of both letters are to be found in Wallace Fowlie's *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1966, pp. 302–11 (Tr.).

Chapter 9

1 It might be thought that time is, in this respect, opposed to all other objects, whose 'use-value' traditionally lies in being possessed, utilized, employed to advantage. But this is without doubt a profound error. The true use-value of objects is doubtless also to be consumed, to be expended 'as pure loss' – a 'symbolic' use-value which is everywhere scored out [*barrée*] and replaced by 'utilitarian' use-value.
2 But the goal of the operation here remains strictly individual. In the archaic festival, time is never expended 'for oneself': it is the time of collective prodigality.

Chapter 10

1 Twenty per cent of national income for France.
2 Advertising itself, as an economic process, may be regarded as a 'free celebration', financed by social labour but delivered to everyone 'with nothing apparently given in return' and presenting itself as collective gratification (see later in this chapter).
3 Cf. Lagneau in *Le Faire-Valoir*, 'Advertising is the wrapping up of an unbearable economic logic in the thousand seductive artifices of «exemption from payment», which negate it the better to allow it to operate.' G. Lagneau, *Le Faire-Valoir*, E.M.E., Paris, 1969.
4 On this problem, see the articles by J. Marcus-Steiff and P. Kende in the *Revue française de sociologie*, 1969, X, 3.
5 In German, the word *werben*, which means to ask for someone's hand in marriage and hence implies loving concern [*sollicitude amoureuse*], also means competition, rivalry and advertising (commercial solicitation).
6 Riesman et al., *The Lonely Crowd*, p. 41.
7 Ibid., p. 83.
8 To take an example, 'In fact,' writes a specialist in sales promotion, 'if, before it was presented to the public, Giscard d'Estaing's programme had been got into shape by an agency

like Publicis, using the methods that were so successful in the Saint-Gobain affair, then French voters would probably have backed him.' And he adds: 'When you think of all the trouble you take to win the public's favour when you launch a new bar of soap, bringing all the modern resources of radio, TV and cinema into play, you are amazed by the antiquated methods the government employ when they want to "sell" an economic and financial programme running into billions of francs to the mass of the French people.'

9 Riesman et al., *The Lonely Crowd*, p. 224ff.

10 Ibid., p. 225.

Chapter 11

1 'Objectless craving' has its counterpart in 'objectless raving'.

2 Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, p. 14.

3 Erostratus or Eratostratus was an Ephesian who burnt down the temple of Diana solely with the object of achieving eternal fame. The Ephesians subsequently passed a law making it illegal to mention his name (Tr.).

4 Economists and psychologists base their thinking wholly on equivalence and rationality: they postulate that, in all processes, the subject is always positively orientated, in a state of need, towards the object. If the need is satisfied, that is all there is to it. They forget that there is no 'satisfied need'; a completed process, where there is only positivity, is something which is never found: there is only desire and desire is ambivalent.

5 Hence the very logical (American) idea of a motel for the suicidal where, for a reasonable price, a 'suicide service', provided like any other social service (though not covered by social security!), ensures that you enjoy optimum conditions for death and undertakes to effect your suicide effortlessly, with a smile.

6 The original French text here is 'le malaise de la civilisation', the title of the standard French translation of Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (English: *Civilization and its Discontents*) (Jr.).

7 J.S. Mill, O*n Liberty*, ed. H.B. Acton, Dent/Dutton, London/New York, 1972, p. 124 (my italics, JB).

Conclusion

1 There have been at least three versions of this film. From what he says, Baudrillard is clearly not referring to the first of these (Stellan Rye, 1913) and it seems most likely that he is familiar with the 1926 film by the Dutch-born writer-director Henrik Galeen (who was also involved in the earlier production). A further German version was made in 1936 by the Chicago-born director Arthur Robison (Tr.).

2 Like all myths, this one also seeks to ground itself in an original event. In this case, it is the so-called 'Revolution of Affluence', a historical revolution of Well-Being, the last revolution of Western man after the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution and the Political Revolutions. Consumption thereby presents itself as the opening of a new era – the final era of achieved Utopia and the end of history.

3 Boorstin, *The Image*, p. 240.

4 Ibid., p. 83.

5 Ibid., p. 259.

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FOR A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SIGN

BY

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

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FOR A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SIGN

BY

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

CHARLES LEVIN

TELOS PRESS

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ISBN: 0-914386-23-9 cloth
0-914386-24-7 paper

Manufactured in the United States of America

Cover design by Don Powley

10016631 49

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

I

The essays in this volume span a period, the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Jean Baudrillard was preparing three other books for publication. In the first, *Système des objets* (1968),[1] he took literally and developed at length Lukacs' observation, at the beginning of his famous essay on reification, that the "problem of commodities. . .[is] the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects." For Baudrillard, as for his predecessor, this meant that the commodity was not just a problem in economics, but the nucleus of a semantic crisis which reticulated throughout the entire social system.

Lukacs had gone on to say that "only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them."[2] Baudrillard pursued this line of reasoning further in *La Société de consommation* (1970).[3] Here, he elaborated on the conclusion of his previous book that "consumption" has become a kind of labor, "an active manipulation of signs," a sort of *bricolage* in which the individual desperately attempts to organize his privatized existence and invest it with meaning. But the consumer proceeds through this strange world metonymically, as it were. What is consumed is not the object itself, but the *system* of objects, "the idea of a relation" that is actually "no longer lived, but abolished, abstracted and consumed" by the signifying system itself, of which the commodity is only one kind of differential term. It is this very condition of semiosis, engendered by the universalization of commodity relations, which privatizes experience in the first place. As we "consume" the code, in effect, we "reproduce" the system.

Thus, the alleged "consumer society" surrounds itself with signs of abundance, but abolishes wealth itself, annihilates the *experience* of abundance, by aborting the "concrete, relational dialectic" of social interchange through which real abundance comes into existence, and wealth can be lived. Here, Baudrillard takes issue with

1. *Le Système des objets* (Paris: Denöel-Gonthier, 1968). Henceforth referred to as S.O. in the text.
2. György Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 83.
3. *La Société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970). Henceforth referred to as S.C. in the text.

Sartre. Scarcity is not an objective, quantifiable condition against which lives are acted out in struggle, against which societies erect greater and more (or less) humane barriers. Rather it is this competition, the struggle with necessity itself (a gross ideological "form"), and the mythic odyssey of "growth" with which society exorcises this demon, that actually "produce" scarcity as the very principle of social structure.

In 1972, the essays which appear in this volume were published as *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*.[4] Many of them condense what is elaborated in the earlier books, but rough sketches of the themes which will preoccupy the later works emerge as the sequence progresses.

The Mirror of Production,[5] which appeared a year later, seems in a way to stand apart from the others in that it explicitly announces a break with Marxism. But this is misleading. In one sense it is true, as Mark Poster has said, that in *Notes For a Critique* Baudrillard "placed himself squarely within Marxist thought as one who was pursuing further the critique of political economy," whereas in *The Mirror of Production* "there are places where Marx is completely rejected."[6] In fact, however, there is no such clear-cut division. Although in *The Mirror of Production* Baudrillard utterly discards any hope that a robust critique is possible from a legitimately Marxist standpoint, he is still recognizably working through a set of problematics which is common to the tradition of Western Marxism. On the other hand, in *Système des objets*, where Baudrillard is most sanguine about adopting conventional Marxist categories, an attentive reader can hardly escape noticing how they are progressively more volatilized by the emerging frame of reference. And in *Notes For a Critique*, most of the distinctive features of Marxist theory are eventually thought through again as structurally implicated in political economy itself. Indeed, what Baudrillard means, in practical terms, when he claims to "extend the critique of political economy to the sign" is that he wishes to include Marx and positivism (with structuralism as the latter's archetypical modern representative), under the heading of political economy, in order to critique the whole lot in one go. So it would be simplifying matters to refer to a particular "conjuncture" in Baudrillard's work. A much more adequate and challenging term for denoting such a moment of inter-relatedness,

4. *Pour une critique de l'economie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). Further references to this translation will appear in the text.

5. *The Mirror of Production*, trans. and introduction by Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975). Henceforth referred to as M.P. in the text.

6. "Translator's Introduction" to *The Mirror of Production*, p. 13.

which has the advantage of not implying arbitrary closure, has already been coined: "commotion."[7] *Notes For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* is literally a commotion of ideas, sometimes inconsistent, issuing from a period of intense critical activity in which nothing was resolved. This is why I have chosen to append the word "notes" to the original title and to extend occasionally these introductory remarks to other works and writers subtending Baudrillard's discourse.

II

> . . . the once supposedly autonomous subject [is] emptied of any content, until it finally becomes a mere name with nothing to denominate. The total transformation of each and every realm of being into a field of means leads to the liquidation of the subject who is supposed to use them. This gives modern industrialist society its nihilistic aspect.
>
> —Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*[8]

There is no revolutionary substance inhering in people and things, fermenting liberty and peace, as subject and object, reason and nature traverse the battlegrounds and no man's lands of history. There are no "transcendental guarantees," as Marcuse once said; there is no exogenous dialectic. It has always been very tempting to stop right there, abjuring this religion without actually "giving up the ghost," without abandoning the original — indeed the source — of all "transcendental guarantees." The revolution, after all, must go on, and if it won't by itself, then I, *we*, must make it go on. As Marcuse asked: "Are you ready to take yourself as an autonomous subject, through your own revolutionary choice, independently of any 'historical mission,' independently of all 'transcendental guarantees' which, between you and me, are a lot of rubbish anyway, one of the luxuries dear Marx used to allow himself?"[9]

And so we have the autonomous subject, making free choices, independently. This is an indispensable idea, so fundamental that if we do away with it completely, we explode any recognizable version of "emancipation," as Habermas calls it — not to mention "revolution" — and implicitly, we abandon the possibility of critical theory.

A frequent problem with this notion of an autonomous subject has been that, of the many who have written in its name, not a few have

7. John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 223, note 12.

8. Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury, 1974), p. 93.

9. Quoted in Michel Bosquet, "Herbert Marcuse, professeur de liberté," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, August 6, 1979, p. 17.

written as if it were their *nom de plume*. Perhaps this fact explains, in part, the tyranny wrought, directly (or indirectly, through his epigones), by Marx himself. But Fichtean or Hegelian *hubris* is not the inevitable consequence of belief in a free and vigorous and creative subjectivity. Sartre did much to publicize the idea that nobody, neither the proletariat nor even he, in spite of his stature, could totalize the entire totality. Marcuse linked the idea of autonomy with a non-aggressive sensibility, rooting freedom in the negation of the split with nature, an "explosion of vital needs," as he called it, which transcends the inculcated needs of neo-capitalism.

But if the needs of a "radical sensibility" are intended to recall a harmonious understanding of nature as subjectivity, they nevertheless take the form of categorical imperatives issuing from an imperious reason. As Marcuse himself insisted: "The primary liberation cannot be 'spontaneous' because such spontaneity would only express the values and goals derived from the established system. Self-liberation is self-education but as such it *pre*supposes education by others.... Those who are educated have a commitment to use their knowledge to help men and women realize and enjoy their truly human capabilities."[10] Now, perhaps this explains the "need" for critical theory (or perhaps it doesn't); but it certainly casts the entire project into the whirl of an intolerable circle — one which is hardly resolved with appeals to the Second Thesis on Feuerbach. It is an intolerable circle not because it is a vicious circle, but because it is growing tiresome, and cannot be sustained indefinitely merely by being dubbed "epistemological."

When we have reached this impasse, which has been growing since the early 1970s to the point where it has turned into a major crisis, it becomes interesting to review what the author of the following group of essays has to say. Not that Jean Baudrillard has done much to stave off the crisis. If anything, he has contributed to it, in his own, somewhat *gauche* way. But this is primarily to his credit. There is too much at stake, and the political catastrophe which seems to be upon us now is too profound, for anyone, in the name of anything, to go on pretending, in prose form, that there is *a* theory, and that it is linked to *a* "praxis." For the ever-faithful, a simple argument will suffice: *solvitur ambulando*! The link between critique and political activity has all but polarized around a few issues, notably nuclear fission. The halls of academe are beset by exhaustion. The significant struggles of peoples all over the world have been swallowed and regurgitated in the form of an ever widening and ever more cynical

10. Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 47.

geopolitics, not to mention kneecapping. To those who complain that the war in Southeast Asia made the truth plainer to see, that *those* were heady days, one can only reply that nastiness, though now in many ways more subtle, is as easy to spot as ever; it has only grown more difficult to live with formulas that should have been buried in 1914.

So we are probably witnessing the demise of Marxism, not of capitalism (if, in reality, that word still adequately denotes the mess we are in).[11] But it is worth remembering: Marx was only a single individual (or perhaps even just a "decentered" subject!); "capitalism," on the other hand, is a whole system. Historical materialism would surely never have had it any other way.

Jean Baudrillard is not the only person who has faced this situation and come away unsilenced. But it is in the context of the kinds of issues raised here that he is best introduced, especially because it is the problematic of subjectivity and the terrible aporia of intervention-understanding which both link and divide him from the tradition of critical theory to which he owes so much. The reader will discover quickly that he has little rhetorical patience with the humanism to which that tradition, sometimes ambiguously (as in the case of Adorno), laid claim. For Baudrillard, as we shall see, the anthropology which many have partitioned off as Young Hegelian juvenilia, is not only essential to the whole Marxian corpus if it is to be taken seriously, but ultimately self-contradictory — and presently, in strategic terms, a sadly impotent response to a world in which what used to be called with confidence the practico-inert has lost its character as a determination of the real, through sheer animation and intimization. "The object," Baudrillard muses, "is the [castrated] household pet *par excellence*. It is the only 'being' whose qualities exalt my person instead of restricting it. And objects, in the plural, are the only existents whose coexistence is truly possible, since their differences do not pit them against each other, as is the case with the living, but converge docilely towards me, smoothly grafting onto my consciousness. They are what is most easily 'personalized,' while simultaneously remaining accountable" (S.O., p. 108). Further: "We can no longer lay claim to the myth of the Pact with the Devil, or the Sorcerer's Apprentice, which thematized the fatal contradiction between the individual being and his Double. And we have no corresponding myth, thematizing the peaceful coexistence, through paradigmatic declension, of the successive terms which define the

11. It certainly fails to conjure up the dimensions of the object domain that Baudrillard has constructed in his critique. Let us call it "neo-capitalism," affixing it to most of the world.

model of the 'personal.' The tragic duality had its great myths (which the Situationists have tried to resurrect again with the concept of the 'spectacle,' the 'society of the spectacle,' and radical alienation). All were linked to the notion of a human essence and the fatality of losing it, to Being and its Spectre. But the ludic ramification of the person into a spectre of signs and objects, nuances and differences, which constitute the basis of the consumption process and redefine the individual not as an alienated substance but as a moving difference — this novel process which is not analyzable in terms of the person and the alterity of the person, has not found an equivalent myth to retrace the Metaphysics of Consumption — a myth equivalent to that of the Double and of Alienation for the order of production. *But this is no accident.* Myths, like the faculties of speech, reflection, transcription, are bound up with transcendence, and disappear along with it" (S.C., pp. 310-311). If Lukacs was the extraordinary individual who literally deduced Marx's anthropology before the publication of the *Paris Manuscripts*, if Marcuse was the only member of the Frankfurt School who remained faithful to the vision of Promethean subjectivity that gave meaning to Marx's immense scholarly digressions, still, Baudrillard's impatience with dialectical synthetics owes more in spirit to their work than that of other, less Hegelian members of the critical tradition. His early books can be read as explorations of the social interior of Lukacs' philosophical categories. And, as we shall see, Baudrillard extends the theory of one-dimensionality to the limit beyond which emerge entirely new cognitive and ontological problematics.

It would be simplistic, of course, to put everything in terms of a cosmic contest between phenomenology and structuralism, however loosely understood; but this is the form in which the French elite has so often chosen to understand much of what goes on in the world (especially the subject-knowledge-action problem), and Baudrillard, on the fringes of this elite, inevitably had to confront it. And so, undoubtedly, it was the bitter pill of structuralism he was forced to swallow — and bitter it must have been after the apparent victory of "invariance" over the 1968 "explosion" (which, in some respects, was detonated by his own sociology students at Nanterre). As John Fekete puts it: In structuralism, "attention is shifted away from the ways in which human beings have altered and do alter and may yet alter their objectifications; in consequence, structuralism finds nothing to investigate but order, the codes of order, reflections upon order, and the experience of order."[12] Though Baudrillard agrees with this

12. Fekete, p. 197.

view, there is a sense in which the charge can be laid at his own door.

Before we examine this issue in more detail, however, we must be careful to distinguish Baudrillard from those who have turned to structuralism and its "avatars," not so much in order to explore the crisis of subjectivity itself as to resurrect and recuperate the old dogmas, the "historical mission" (or mystique), and the transcendental guarantees whose collapse fed the crisis in the first place. Althusser, for example, has jettisoned people completely from the scheme of things, and has replaced them with an epistemological prop that theoretically produces the algorithms of historical materialism in such a way that their tranquillity is imperturbable. The difficulty seems to have been that Marxism could try to unite theory and praxis in two ways: either with a theory of the subject, ontologically seminated, as it were, or as dogmatic science. When structuralism, with its then more naive scientistic aura, grew influential in the early 1960s, it naturally appealed to those who would opt for the latter orientation. Such is not the case with Baudrillard, whose appropriation of structuralism (or what he prefers to call semio-linguistics) is often precisely that: an act of aggression that virtually destroys its object.

Perhaps, for the moment, it will suffice to say that in *Système des objets,* Baudrillard initiated a peculiar kind of phenomenology, a phenomenology of reification, which in order to permit a more concrete elucidation of its serial and hierarchical structures, brackets consciousness itself. "We are verging on the point where consumption seizes life entirely, where activities concatenate in the same combinatory mode.... In this phenomenology of consumption, the general climatization of life, of social relations represent the accomplished, the 'consummate' stage in an evolution based on stark abundance, moving through the articulated networks of objects to the total conditioning of acts and of time, in the network of systematic ambience we find in the futuristic cities of drugstores, shopping malls, modern airports" (S.S., pp. 23-24).

"Man is rendered incoherent by the coherence of his structural projection," says Baudrillard (S.O., p. 69). In essence, then, he is proposing a phenomenology, if it is a phenomenology, of structuralism itself, in the form of the social world already analyzed structurally. But however we may choose to label it, the ploy allows him to dissect in minute detail the subterranean play of reification as an objective system in which people are to some extent already integrated in their activities and at the level of everyday life: "The code of political economy (both commodity form *and* sign form) does

not operate by alienating consciousness from contents. A parallel confusion arises in the view of primitive myths [where] the pregnant effects of mythic 'contents' are held to bind society together (through the 'cohesion' of 'belief' systems). But actually these myths make up a code of signs that exchange among themselves, integrating the group through the very process of their circulation. Likewise, the code of political economy rationalizes and regulates exchange, makes things communicate, but under the law of the code and through the control of meaning. The division of labor, the functional division of the terms of discourse, do not 'mystify' people, they socialize them and inform their exchange according to a general, abstract model. The very concept of the individual is the *product* of this general system of exchange. . . . And ideology, in its version as a superstructure of contents and consciousness, is, in these terms, itself an alienated concept" (p. 147).

So out the window goes a whole set of terms such as projection, introjection, sublimation, repression and especially their macrological complement, "superstructure." This diction, to be sure, provides everyone, including Baudrillard, with an occasionally useful shorthand. But it is also a language that delineates the shadow of a hidden human substance waiting in the wings to be liberated whole when the masquerade of alienation has ended. One has only to ask what it is that capitalism alienates to get all sorts of curious and primitive (though in fact very modern and occidental) answers. Man is an animal who makes himself. He defines himself through his work — give him back some real work. Man is a talking animal, a tool-making animal, a desiring animal, an unconscious animal, etc. And so the critical critics dance their way nimbly through a kind of essentializing evasion of the practical consequences implicit in their own vocabulary: some kind of compulsory therapy, or social engineering on a massive scale. Man at last becomes what he already was anyway by recovering in pristine form the activity that defines his nature; the social infrastructure is thus cleansed (or the other way around), and all the mucky confusion that normally froths atop is automatically eliminated.

On balance, Baudrillard has done well to spurn this mode of paying lip service to the historical subject. But this always ambiguous achievement depends, as we have already begun to see, on a reconceptualization of what critical theory has normally taken to be its object. Here, at least two imposing layers of congealed thought stand in the way.

To begin with, there is the ambiguous patrimony of Marxian sociology itself, which has always tended to be formal and schematic,

uncomfortable with the particular — due, no doubt, to its effort to remain consistent with a heritage of conflicting paradigms. The developed critique of political economy was concerned with dialectically unfolding the movement of the capitalist economy, thus exposing its internal contradictions. Apparently starting from an analysis of the commodity (its axiological formation), Marx derived an account in economic terms of the exploitation of labor by capital, revealing a crucial inequality in exchange. The concentrated accumulation of capital itself thereby threatened the existence of the very labor upon which its continued expansion depended. On the other hand, Marx persisted in understanding the movement of history in terms of a dynamic of class domination and overthrow (or mutual disintegration); or, alternatively, in terms of a dialectic of quantity and quality, in which expanding forces of production exploded their constricting social forms. The various models were never successfully coordinated: domination could not be reduced to the specific form of exploitation that Marx had unveiled in *Capital*, and the wage labor-capital relation projected a grainy image when enlarged to the grander proportions of history as class struggle. Inevitably, in addition to this problem of conflicting *representations*, there was the uncertain location of the subject, revolutionary or not, within the staggered interstices of these juxtaposed schemata. As Castoriadis has pointed out, Marx's various hypotheses about the historical drift of capital (for example, his "immiseration" thesis) never took into account the worker's struggle itself. Consequently, in spite of Marx's prediction, real wages have risen.

Now, it seems to have been the job of the Frankfurt School to inherit this bundle of contradictions in all its rich complexity, and then bequeath it to us. The problem was not that Horkheimer and Adorno failed to see inadequacies in the Marxian system, or that they shrank from admitting its failures, but rather how they chose to deal with these. As Richard Bernstein has pointed out: "We do not find in Horkheimer any systematic attempt to refine and develop a historically relevant critique of political economy. Instead, he simply refers to Marx."[13] True, considerable modifications of Marx seem to be implied in the attempt to addend Frankfurt theory, to mention one example; but there is a sense in which the unorthodoxies of the Frankfurt School amount to an elaborate *post bellum auxilium* that indirectly implies the basic rightness of the original Marxian analysis.

It seems clear that the culmination of the Frankfurt position in a purely "negative dialectics" stems from this paradox. Their attempt

13. Richard Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), p. 182.

to situate Marx within the general framework of the Enlightenment was not inaccurate as a loose explanation of revolutionary authoritarianism, but it was too broad to carry much critical edge. By reducing Marx to a moment in the history of conceptual double-cross that legitimizes the domination of nature, they totally failed to specify, in the immense theoretical apparatus Marx left behind, where his critique had fallen short, thus hypostatizing their own critical stance in the abstract tension of unresolved contradictions left over from the speculative philosophy of a bygone era. Marx was for them alternately the father of critical theory, the implications of whose work had to be fleshed out, especially at the superstructural level (and preserved from crude reductionism), or the apostle of the world as a workhouse. Their ambivalence seems to have led them to shun the possibility of an immanent critique of Marx, preferring purely external interrogations that juxtapose Marx with Nietzsche and Freud, and play them off against each other in the search for a perspective that is basically secure without being dogmatic. Nevertheless, Horkheimer and Adorno developed vigorous new themes for critical theory, generally as a result of their mistrust of mass culture and of instrumental reason. As Mark Poster pointed out, if Baudrillard and Habermas have anything in common, it is that both have found, in these avenues left open, a perspective from which to begin re-examining Marx's understanding of capitalism, and hence, the strengths and limits of his critique.

It is interesting to pursue the comparison with Habermas. Both have an ultimate interest in elucidating the possibility of a critique from which emancipation emerges as "the practical effect of a theory that does not improve the manipulation of things and of reifications."[14] For both, the critique of political economy succumbed to the latter abuse because Marx had effected a premature theoretical closure that forestalled criticism of the premises and values upon which the critique itself had been based. Both argue that Marx failed to theorize the role of culture and language. For Habermas, these new perspectives offer the possibility of reconstructing a philosophical anthropology by supplementing Marx's *homo faber*, and thereby, following Arendt, correcting Marx's tendency at the categorial level to reduce *praxis* to *techne*.

But here, Baudrillard breaks with the Frankfurt School. Like Habermas, he rejects any retreat to cultured subjectivity, with its meager siege ontology, but he is not interested in Habermas' "quasi-transcendental" reconstitution of the epistemological subject, either.

14. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 256.

For him, the re-entry of the language-culture orbit into the heart of the Marxian problematic eliminates the possibility of philosophical anthropology *tout court* as a viable standpoint for critical social theory. Rather, an adequate theorization of these dimensions within the framework of political economy produces an object domain that *in principle* generates no privileged standpoint because it itself has no causal center. Thus, what for Habermas offers the possibility of enriching and preserving the Marxian notion of an essential, rational human praxis, constituting history, for Baudrillard brings about the reverse — in fact, it serves only to explain its decompression, reducing history to an "immense genealogy of the forms of domination" (p. 120). Baudrillard's hypothesis of a "generalized political economy" stands on the same basis as Habermas' *Verstand*.

This returns us to the complex and ambiguous mediating role that structuralism plays in the constitution of this new object. Semiolinguistics, according to Baudrillard, describes the repressive mode of value generation, which is the very articulation of social control. In Baudrillard's view, "All the repressive and reductive strategies of power systems are already present in the internal logic of the sign, as well as those of exchange value and political economy." The structural process of signification "is in some ways akin to the notion of reification" (p. 163).

Here, Baudrillard wishes first to show that the analysis of value, which for Marx revealed a specific logic of exploitation, itself conceals a deeper logic of domination. What enabled Marx to discover surplus value was a dialectical play on the binary internal structure of the commodity, which political economy had already established as use value and exchange value. In exchange for the use value of productive labor, capital supplied an exchange value equivalent, under varying conditions, to the cost of the reproduction of labor power, but less than the exchange value of labor's product itself. Thus labor was a commodity constituting one epicenter in a system revolving around two poles, the other being money. Each in its way, labor and money, was an arch commodity. In a system where use values were otherwise exchanged in equivalence expressed in terms of exchange value, labor was the only commodity that did not receive its own equivalent in return for itself — that is, the internal polarity of the commodity labor was somehow alone, of all commodities in the system, staggered — except for money, which also contained a discoordinated polarity. In labor, the component of use value was disproportionate to its exchange value, in money, the reverse. Yet the tension of the two together, through their internal displacement, conferred a kind of delicate equilibrium on the system

as a whole. Quantities of labor provided the ultimate source of measurement of equivalencies between commodities, money the standard in terms of which their equivalence could be established. It was precisely these symmetrical imperfections internal to the commodity system that lent such beauty to the symmetry of the system as a whole.

Now the first complication arises in the tautology of the notion of labor and of its appropriation by capital as a use value. The system of commodities depends on the institution of private property. In this case, it must be assumed that the use value of labor power is the private property of the laborer — he is the *owner* of his own labor capacity, but unlike owners of other kinds of commodities, he is unable to fetch a fair price for the property he sells. This paints a nice picture of capital as theft — which it surely is (why not?) — but the idea is deduced somewhat illegitimately by presupposing private property in the labor power of the worker, precisely that which is supposed to be explained by the advent of capitalism, which in turn is explained by the commodification of labor. Either a person is his own private property or he is not. If he is, as Hobbes believed, then Marx's explanation of capitalism is possible, but it is also eternally true of all complex economic systems. Perhaps this lends a little more credence to Baudrillard's assertion, quoted above, that "The division of labor...and of terms of discourse do not 'mystify' people, they socialize them and inform their exchange according to a general abstract model. The very concept of the individual is the *product* of this general system of exchange."

But the problem goes deeper. Where does Marx get this concept of use value and what function does it serve in the model of capitalism he sets up? The answer is not univocal. On the one hand, use value is a kind of given — it is obvious, self-evident, transparent (whereas exchange value is opaque). Use value is a quality that is only arbitrarily commensurable with the quality of use value in other products — through the medium of exchange value (which makes these products commodities). But then all that Marx seems to be saying is that things can be used for various purposes. I can use my shoe to hammer a nail into a board in order to use the board as an umbrella.... In this case, use value for the most part would be a conventional system of signification. But Marx is claiming much more than this. Use value is "motivated." It is, in fact, created out of labor, *the* value-producing activity. It is a metaphysical entity, arising from a human essence, in a teleological schema, arbitrarily overlaid, suppressed and alienated by the conventional system of exchange value that is capitalism. When the latter is overthrown, use

value will resurge as a definite, positive value, a transhistorical human objectification.

I have, of course, simplified the picture of Marxian economics here, because Baudrillard is not concerned with refuting the labor theory of value *per se*, or Marx's explanation of the genesis of surplus value. What worries him is that the "dialectical" unfolding of the structure of the commodity (which looks to Baudrillard more like its structural articulation through the manipulation of binary oppositions) tacitly projects a *functional metaphysic*, which is the very foundation of political economy, *beyond* the system, as its anthropological horizon.

Baudrillard's argument boils down to the insight that the articulation of binary terms must always privilege one side of the opposition, as the means of setting the system in motion. Thus, in the commodity system, it is exchange value that is privileged over use value precisely because exchange value is the system's principle of circulation. Thus it is this very *structural* logic that allows Marx to imagine that use value is not itself structurally implicated in the "logic" of political economy. His critique thus stops short at grasping the form of the commodity, failing to seize its cultural implications. For Marx, use value is an independent and transcendent axiological category, repressed by the system of exchange value that has perverted the fundamental institution of social production. His discussion of the fetishism of the commodity points out the systematic privileging of exchange value, and some of its social implications, but fails to grasp the way in which the structure of the commodity as a whole embodies an ideological form that threatens to permeate the entire social world. The axiological centrality of labor is generated by the system of exchange value itself, and the abstraction and reduction of human exchange that this system entails finds its ideological alibi, to use Baudrillard's term, in the internal structure of the commodity, namely, in use value.

Use value conceptually embodies the reduction of activity in labor by abstractly specifying the meaning of that activity, and the forms of social exchange. Activity is increasingly defined as the production of use value required for the satisfaction of human needs. Interaction is then the circulation of use values necessary to bring about this satisfaction. As the methods of making use value grow more complex, a dialectic is set in motion that refines and multiplies needs, producing more complex modes of civilization. (Progress is the double articulation of consumption on production.) As this system ramifies, circulation problems arise, and exchange value as a total system is born. But it is feeble to single out exchange value as

the cause of all the resulting alienation, for according to this conceptual system, or anthropology, praxis and exchange have *already been reduced to a logic of abstract equivalence in the system of use value* (its circulation) and its purely functional coordination of this activity to the system of needs. Exchange value almost appears as an afterthought, a mere byproduct of complexity. But in a crucial sense, everything actually works the other way around. The need-utility relation is not a psychological and axiological bedrock upon which the excrescence of commodity fetishism is erected and from which it can simply be removed (through the rationalization of production), leaving everything else as it was. Rather, for Baudrillard, the cart must definitely be leading the horse, in this case at least — or why isn't the horse romping in the field? Thus, it is precisely the play of exchange value that induces the logic of utility and mobilizes the psychology of needs in order to perpetuate itself in its reduction of human activity to one or another articulation of the systemic adequation of production and consumption. Baudrillard is not thereby denying that certain things are needed and that others are useful.

Now the sociality of language immediately suggests itself in analogy to various features of the commodity system. It might occur to someone that commodities, for example, are like signs, signifying the labor put into them; and that, like the "reality" to which language purports ultimately to refer, the *referent* labor poses epistemological and ontological problems for the signifying (or commodity) system, which the latter therefore tries to occlude. In fact, this is precisely the kind of homolog that semioticians such as Julia Kristeva have proffered in order to explain the essence of "Marx's discovery." It is the standard theory of commodity fetishism as a kind of mystification or veiling of reality.

Baudrillard, however, manages to discover a much more intricate connection between the structural semiotic and the commodity system. If we think of words as the unity of sounds and concepts — i.e., as signs made up of a particular signifier and coordinated internally with a particular signified — then it is obvious that it is the signifier, the *form* of the sign, whether phonic or graphic, that makes the circulation of language possible. Thus, within the sign, the signifier attains a certain privilege over the signified, just as the form of the commodity, the exchange value term, tends to lord it over use value, the other side of the commodity. Furthermore, as the commodity form establishes a legitimizing link with real labor through the somewhat ambiguous mediation of utility, likewise the signifier attempts to suture its enigmatic connection with the world

(or the referent) through the *signified*. This sets up the signification process, in which meaning is structured through the formal interplay of signifiers, linked to signifieds as signs, and ultimately to the "world." But structuralism posits an arbitrary relation within this signifying chain, either internal to the sign, between signifier and signified, form and "content," or between the sign and reality, externally. The strategy here is to autonomize the formal systemic feature of communication in the way that political economy attempts to isolate the pure movement of exchange value, in order to constitute the object of a new "science." The arbitrary relation, whether inside or outside the sign, permits the signified or referent to stand in, as it were, for "meaning," while the signifier plays; to serve as a guarantee, backing up the reality that underlies the movement of the signifying form. In other words, like use value, the nether side of the structural equation of the sign functions as the alibi for its privileged term, revealing what for Baudrillard is the basic form of the ideological process: a binary reduction establishing a complementary (i.e., asymmetrical) relation between arbitrarily isolated terms, which institutionalizes a linear, non-reciprocal exchange. This is a pattern of domination that can be found inscribed everywhere: in production-consumption systems, or their ideologies, which strive to reduce all forms of social interchange to a univocal mediation of providing and surviving, where the act of giving and the act of receiving are separated and irreversible instances, like the presence-absence of the penis, the crudest articulation of desire. "It is because *the structure of the sign is at the very heart of the commodity form* that the commodity can take on, immediately, the effect of signification — not epiphenomenally, in excess of itself, as 'message' or connotation — but because its very form establishes it as a total *medium*, as a *system of communication* administering all social exchange. Like the sign-form, the commodity is a *code* managing the exchange of values. It makes little difference whether the contents of material production or the immaterial contents of significations are involved; it is the code that is determinant: the rules of the interplay of signifiers and exchange value" (p. 146).

Thus, as the formal, theoretical articulation of the repressive mode of value production, "structuralism" appears to Baudrillard as a kind of *pis-aller* of positivism. The latter, having failed to preserve the fact-value distinction against the demand for intellectual progress, has in effect resorted, via structuralism, to objectifying the arbitrary mechanism of value formation itself into a "scientific" methodology. The structures that it subsequently examines become a

sophisticated substitute for positivism's original, naively conceived plane of the Facts and the "given." The object and its domain must now be constituted, and objectivity once again becomes synonymous with a controlled strategy of projective penetration behind the perceived, the immediate. But the brittle mediations of structuralism retain the positivist maneuver of autonomizing and reifying partial systems, thus limiting its attempt to reintegrate object and value to an epistemological exercise that avoids their meaningful contextualization. In effect, structuralism seems to involve a cautious and somewhat static attempt to force a dialectic onto the contemplative stance of the old, "pure" positivism. For Baudrillard, it is precisely this mutation that allows structuralism, as a conceptual problematic with definite themes, to penetrate and fuse with those of political economy-Marxism to constitute the passive theoretical formalization of the "generalized political economy": "This economy of values is a *political* economy. It goes well beyond economic calculation and concerns all the processes of the transmutation of values, all those socially produced transitions from one value to another, from one logic to another logic of value that may be noted in determinate places and institutions — and so it also concerns the connection and implication of different systems of exchange and modes of production. The critique of this general political economy of value is today the only one that can recapture the spirit of Marx's analysis on a global level" (p. 122).

So it is the interpenetration and mutual reinforcement of these two major problematics that Baudrillard calls "the political economy of the sign." Generally speaking, each appeared to have adopted a rationalist model of the social structure. If Marx bequeathed in spite of himself the dualism of base and superstructure, structuralism tended to play into this by proclaiming, on the one hand, the materiality of culture, and on the other, the sometimes relative "autonomy of the superstructure." Each had a built-in affinity for one side of the infra-superstructure model that, in pursuing its own logic to the end, symptomatically reflected the general polarization of understanding in social theory. Of course, this problem was recognized before Baudrillard, and has been identified over and over again. What is peculiar and fruitful in his approach to this syndrome in critical theory is his discovery that the major conceptual limitations of political economy and its critique can only be sustained by borrowing from the limiting or circular dynamic of the other — cultural theory (which today is what Baudrillard broadly refers to as semio-linguistics); and vice versa. Thus, if Marxism inevitably reverts to a transhistorical axiology as the standpoint for its

analysis of the occlusion of the real in the movement of capitalist production, then it is the structural semiotic that reveals (or *is*: there is a genuine ambiguity here) why the critique of political economy can go on believing that its truth lies simply in the recovery of an essence that capitalism hides and represses without actually destroying. This nodal link is the "structural law of value." Structuralism describes, without consciously revealing, the logic that allows the social system with which Marx was concerned to harness its critique into a eulogizing apotheosis of its own legitimizing value system.

John Fekete has described the structuralist semiotic as "the theoretical complement to the neo-capitalist cultural semiosis of never-ending signifying practice...a positivism that accepts this semiosis as the eternal ontology of social being."[15] Baudrillard would agree. But what must now be obvious is that he has gone a step further by arguing that what is being described here is not so much the theoretical complement as the actual, *embodied form* of "everyday life in the modern world." In short, Baudrillard attempts to shift the stance of critical theory by understanding the social, in its totality, as emphatically mediated by the predominant forms of its own self-understanding. This conception may be reminiscent of Durkheim in many ways, but Baudrillard, as we have seen, radically denies any representational model of the social system, any theory of "ideology" as "reflection," however displaced or unevenly developed. In other words, his tendency to merge the forms of intellectual objectification with forms of social life utterly dissolves the distinction between base and superstructure.

Now, such an analysis, if carried off successfully, might indeed provide a fresh basis for conceptualizing subjectivity, one much less dependent on the old schema of rational behavior that Habermas has tried to reformulate. But the maneuver also appears to have unfortunate side effects. It constricts the untheorizable dimension, the gap, the preserve of non-identity that the inverted rationalist model of base and superstructure left unresolved even in its determinism as an open space where one could think alternative forms of living. Instead, Baudrillard projects this virtual space outward, into a no man's land of pure otherness, a hypothetical primitivism rooted in the anthropological evidence of a non-utilitarian, transgressive "symbolic exchange," the reciprocity of an unrationalized semantics of "ambivalence," a world before Weber's disenchantment and the coming of the white man.

As Baudrillard gradually fills out his picture of the "generalized

15. Fekete, p. 197.

political economy" that pervades the social system of advanced capitalism, he is compelled to counter-stress the urgent power of this radical otherness. Dialectical sublation only results in a reiterative sublimation, as in the case of Marx's idealism of use value. Radical *transgression* is the only alternative. Thus, *symbolic exchange* "haunts" the authoritarian structures of the political economy of the sign, while *ambivalence* perpetually threatens to deconstruct the reified processes of signification. But it grows increasingly difficult to locate anything within this world dominated by the movements of the general system or code, which consistently realizes and embodies them: "Parallel to the concepts of necessity, scarcity and need in the (vulgar or dialectical) materialist code, the psychoanalytic concepts of law, prohibition and repression are also rooted in the objectification of nature. . . . All the myths of a vengeful, bad, *castrating* nature take root here. . . . For only then does nature appear as an implacable necessity, 'the alienation of man's own body.' Marx adopted this law of necessity along with the Promethean and Faustian vision of its perpetual transcendence, just as psychoanalysis adopted the principle of castration and repression, prohibition and law (in the Lacanian version, by inscription in the order of the signifier). But in no sense is it a fundamental structure. Neither law nor necessity exists at the level of reciprocity and symbolic exchange, where the break with nature that leads to the irreversibility of castration — and consequently to the entire becoming of history (the operational violence of man against nature) and of the unconscious (the redemption of the symbolic debt owed for this operational violence) — has not occurred. In this sense law, which is called the foundation of the symbolic order and of exchange, results instead from the rupture of exchange and the loss of the symbolic. This is why there is properly neither necessity nor scarcity nor repression nor the unconscious in the primitive order, whose entire symbolic strategy aims at exorcising the apparition of the law" (M.P., pp. 60-61).

Marx had always assumed, as Baudrillard interprets him, that wherever the capitalist weed spread, the symbolic foliage of "backward" societies would be crowded out. The superstructure, so to speak, would be eviscerated in good time, leaving behind it a single level of determinations that led — or could be led — with relative logical clarity to a thoroughly rational future. Perhaps this was why Marx was never bothered by the manifest dualism of his own model: the trenchant rationality of the logic of production would simply rule out irrational social forms and expressions like so many meaningless, metaphysical propositions. Now there are strong echoes of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the

passage quoted above; but it is clear that Baudrillard's aim, especially in the attack on psychoanalysis, is to discredit their attempt to enrich the withered Marxist account of cultural mediations.

Thus Baudrillard radically confirms the theory of one-dimensionality in his vision of the potential reduction of all social, political, cultural, and economic mediations in a bi-univocal correspondence with the code (which becomes a kind of incarnation of a grandiose tautology — for the code is only the tendency toward this serial reduction itself). In effect, the latter is a principle of absolute translatability without loss of meaning, from one level of determinations to the next. It is this growing correspondence of one institutionally embodied convention with another, *ad infinitum* — as if all social existence were being rearticulated according to a single, crude recursive rule — that evokes bewilderingly the penetration of the signification process of commodities and the commodification of signification into the most intimate texture of social life, virtually "abstracting" it, as Baudrillard says. The possibilities for collective experience are progressively attenuated to the contemplative seizure of coded differences from a serial environment of sign-objects enveloping the consumer. The code is no longer that quaint collection of referents, like God, the Free World, the Father, the Family, the work ethic — increasingly less so, at any rate. It is more like an operationalization at the level of everyday life of that positivist ethos that Marcuse described in *One-Dimensional Man*: "Orienting itself on the reified universe of everyday discourse, and exposing and clarifying this discourse in terms of this reified universe, the analysis abstracts from the negative, from that which is alien and antagonistic and cannot be understood in terms of the established usage. By classifying and distinguishing meanings, and keeping them apart, it purges thought and speech of contradictions, illusions, and transgressions."[16]

III

"The shadow is in the end
no better than the substance."
—Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

An obvious and pertinent reaction to all this is to charge that the hypothesis of a generalized political economy has led Baudrillard to *reduce everything to ideology*, in a manner reminiscent of Rousseau in *The Discourse on Inequality*. There is clearly substance to this, especially given the way Baudrillard begins to resort to a version of

16. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 182.

the noble savage theme. Mikel Dufrenne, for one, has accused him of getting carried away with his argument in precisely this way.[17] But there is a sense in which this objection eventually turns against itself; for hidden behind the accusation that "everything has been reduced to ideology" lurks the assumption that "ideology" is something real that is also somehow *not* real, an isolatable feature in a larger field, which can be marked out as a distortion in relation to the rest; or conversely, that *within* the misty domain of the ideological there exists an enclave from whose vantage point clarity emanates, like a gifted light. Here, one can perhaps only make a choice, for, as Paul Piccone has pointed out: "If we once and for all get rid of the assumption that we have some direct pipeline to reality through science, revelation or metaphysics, then everything is ideological and the word itself, having no polar otherness, loses its meaning."[18]

This is precisely the point. And as Baudrillard's analysis progresses through the later essays in this book, one begins to sense that when the word "ideology" arises, it does so *faute de mieux*. Concurrently, he gradually abandons the metaphor of an elemental social "primary process" — a version of the unconscious heavily mediated by Lévi-Strauss, which he introduces early on in his studies of objects and consumption in order to convey his notion of a basic, "differential" logic underlying the exchange of signs and commodities. (This "logic" is of course derived from Mauss and Lévi-Strauss also, but with its center of gravity situated more in an imaginative counter-reading of Veblen and Bataille.) The overall shift away from split-level models is consistent with the fact that Baudrillard, though he dabbled with semiological approaches from the beginning, never subscribed to their more naive theory of ideology, which Roland Barthes had originally proposed.[19] Here, ideology was conceived as a sort of non-falsifiable myth, like Freud's unconscious, which is sharply demarcated from "reality" in that it is not susceptible to propositional truth testing or the principle of non-contradiction. (Thus, "reality" is the realm of the true and the false, — or even more radically, "everything that is the case;" whereas ideology is the a-logical dimension of dreams, myths, and even of ethics, if we follow the early Wittgenstein.)

Other sources of terminological confusion arise in the unfolding

17. Mikel Dufrenne, *Art et Politique* (Paris: Une Générale d'Editions, 1974), p. 59.

18. Paul Piccone, *Telos*, No. 31 (Spring 1977), p. 195.

19. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (Frogmore, St. Albans: Paladin, 1972). For his own reconsideration, see "Change the Object Itself: Mythology Today," in Stephen Heath, trans., *Image-Music-Text* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), pp. 165-169.

commotion of these essays — mostly deriving from a certain indigestion in Baudrillard's consumption of anthropology, in particular Lévi-Strauss's. In deference to Marx, there is a temporary and unconvincing effort to coordinate the role of the sign as social discriminant in the production of status and hierarchy with a conventional class analysis, which soon breaks down, and is abandoned. More crucially, Baudrillard has difficulty disengaging the category of symbolic exchange (as opposed to functional, economic and differential forms of activity and exchange) from its original Maussian and Lévi-Straussian context. Thus, the principle of reciprocity which for Baudrillard ruptures and transgresses the axiological determination and abstract finality of social exchange confronts us at the outset as that signification process most popularly associated with the alleged "exchange of women" in kinship structures. In "The Ideological Genesis of Needs," Baudrillard continues to refer to symbolic exchange as a *value*, but he has already begun to distinguish it from the "logic of signification" (sign value) and "consumption." For clarity's sake, the radical exclusion of symbolic, reciprocal, ambivalent, playful potentialities in the institution of the other forms is outlined schematically in "For A General Theory."

The "symbolic debt" owed Lévi-Strauss by Jean Baudrillard is large, but it is most profound in the way he takes inspiration from Lévi-Strauss' evident genius for reconceptualizing social institutions and structures as communication systems. Lévi-Strauss' habit of autonomizing static networks and then demonstrating their apparently endless capacity for internal variation provides Baudrillard with just the counter-model he needs to locate the socially passive, self-reproducing aspects hidden in the intricate, centerless web of the neo-capitalist world. Indeed, in a sense, it is Lévi-Strauss' communication model which gives Baudrillard an initial grip on the Marxian problematic, by providing a means of desituating the more ensconced critical perspectives of Lukacs and Marcuse. But while the status of the structuralist paradigm is often ambiguous in Baudrillard, it is always mediated with Bataille's excessiveness, his stress on *open* systems.

Indeed, in spite of the almost oppressive, seamless texture of the generalized political economy of the sign, the "world" is almost too open in Baudrillard: the potential for alternatives is massively posited, yet thoroughly and intentionally indeterminate. He abjures the quest for a *theorizable* Utopia — a possible subject and a possible world "demarcated" forever on the page. The question here is of a gaping lacuna in Baudrillard's discourse: "It is the symbolic

which . . . never ceases to dismantle the formal correlation of signifier and signified. But the symbolic, whose virtuality of meaning is so subversive of the sign, cannot, for this very reason, be named except by allusion, by infraction (*effraction*). For signification, which names everything in terms of itself, can only speak the language of values and of the *positivity* of the sign" (p. 161).

The originality of Baudrillard's work lies perhaps in the way it creates this hiatus, this gap, which is faithful to his own ambivalent "allusions" to the symbolic relation, and which opens up, beyond the field in which his work appears as an effect of discourse, in an intuition, as it were, of a transformative praxis with no instrumental relation to the world. Baudrillard utterly volatilizes the subject's *representational* link to "reality." We are confronted with the terrible internal bind of semiological criticism, over which Roland Barthes has recently mused: "Language, as performance of the language system (*langage*), is neither reactionary nor progressive. It is quite simply fascist: for fascism is not the prohibition of saying things, it is the *obligation* to say them. . . . The Utopia of language is recuperated by the Utopian language — which is just one genre among others. One might say that no writer who has taken up that solitary battle against the power of language has successfully avoided being recuperated by it, whether in the posthumous form of an inscription in the official culture, or in the present form of a fashion which imposes its image and proscribes his living up to what one awaits of him. There is no other alternative for such a writer than to displace himself — or to be stubborn — or to do both at the same time."[20]

Thus, through the sheer vigor of his attack on the sign and its amplified systems, Baudrillard has only reiterated for himself the dilemma posed by the historicity of all critique. But the problem he poses is not merely that the tools of critical theory must ultimately derive from what it takes as its object. What his work begins to call into question is the system-independence of critical theory as such. There are two aspects to this.

To begin with, critical theory is always threatened by the temptation to puff itself up into a kind of gigantic version of the sign, replete with its strategy of abstraction and reduction. This pitfall is implicit in the very activity of constructing a critical model of the "object," which in its claim to avoid passivity, must paradoxically stress its adequacy and therefore its identity with what it claims to transcend. But even the most aggressive model must in principle fall short of its object.

20. Roland Barthes, *Leçon* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp. 14, 25.

Now it is here that *praxis* has traditionally rushed in to the rescue. Unfortunately, what it brings with it, in its "dialectical unity" with theory, is the tacit assumption that critically informed intervention in the object will reduce the object in the image of the theory. The only hope is that this action can be made reciprocal — that *praxis* will be able to return to theory as an enlarging and enriching influence. There is certainly truth to be found in this formulation, but there is not enough of it to herald "the end of philosophy," as Marx had gambled. For what is also involved here is a circle of representations (what Baudrillard calls a "specular relation," or the "Imaginary") in which theory attempts to reduce reality through practice, and practice returns the complement by reducing theory to the terms of its own contingent field of possibilities. Furthermore, critical theory has failed to take into account its own role in system maintenance as a regulative feedback loop — a feature that does not usually appear in its model of the object precisely because it *constitutes* that feature in its distance from, or negation of, the object. In this view, the only difference between "critical" theory and systems theory is that the latter transforms the whole dilemma into a powerful operational principle (like Diamat).

It should be no surprise, then, that Baudrillard moves straight from his critique of the sign to a reality problematic in which he begins to take cybernetics, systems theory, communication theory and (as their archetype) McLuhanism ("the medium is the message") at their face value. Critical theory appeared to have started life lagging a step behind capitalism, because Marx and others had brilliant hallucinations of an otherness which was, in effect, only the projection of the system itself, through the medium of critique. As early as *Système des objets,* Baudrillard was alluding to this possibility as the "energist Imaginary," predicting that "perhaps. . . it will prove necessary to examine the structures of a cybernetic Imaginary, whose focal myth would be neither an absolute organicism nor an absolute functionalism, but the absolute interrelationality of the world" (S.O., p. 142).

In his articles on the media and the environment in this volume, Baudrillard begins to articulate this eventuality by playing with the metaphor of operational simulation models as the potential successor to the critical theory of ideology. For "ideology" has already surpassed itself, in its revolutionary bid for the social totality, by announcing that it has nothing to lose but its disguise, which it is quite willing to risk. A new era dawns in which the scandal of appearances appears to function for its own sake — in which at best it may be claimed that if something lies behind the cycle of simulacra, its char-

acter is formally undecipherable. Baudrillard evokes the disturbing possibility that capitalism has triggered a dynamic in which society begins to understand itself *critically*, to be sure, but only from the standpoint of the repressive system itself as it moves operationally to a "higher logical level," thus permitting detection of the simulation model which it is already leaving in its wake. It is no wonder, then, that in *L'échange symbolique et la mort,* where he seriously begins to advance these hypotheses, he characterizes his own posture in terms of Alfred Jarry's proto-surrealist contestation — "in short, theoretical violence," as he puts it, somewhat facetiously — alluding to Dr. Faustroll's "pataphysics," and comparing the ultimately self-defeating yet impenetrably tautological structure of neo-capitalism to the curious, galactic spiral on the bloated spherical belly of Ubu Roi.

Charles Levin

21. Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

CHAPTER ONE

SIGN-FUNCTION AND CLASS LOGIC [1]

1. Social Function of the Sign-Object

The Empiricist Hypothesis: Needs and Use Value

An analysis of the social logic which regulates the practice[2] (*pratique*) of objects according to diverse classes or categories[3] cannot help but be at the same time a critical analysis of the ideology of "consumption" that today underlies all practice relative to objects. This double analysis — that of the distinctive social function of objects and of the political function of the ideology that is attached to it — must be based upon an absolute precondition: the surpassing of a spontaneous vision of objects in terms of needs and the hypothesis of the priority of their use value.

This hypothesis, which is supported by lived evidence, assigns a functional status to objects, an instrumentality bound up with technical operations upon the world, and by the same token posits a mediating status for the "natural" anthropological needs of the individual. From this perspective objects are primarily a function of needs and take on their meaning in the economic relation of man to the environment.

This empiricist hypothesis is false. Far from the primary status of the object being a pragmatic one which would subsequently come to overdetermine a social value of the sign, it is the sign exchange value (*valeur d'échange signe*) which is fundamental — use value is often no more than a practical guarantee (or even a rationalization pure and simple). Such, in its paradoxical form, is the only correct sociological hypothesis. Below their concrete visibility (*évidence*),

1. Appeared in *Communications*, No. 13 (1969).

2. "Pratique," with certain exceptions that should be clear to the reader and are often indicated by *pratique* in parentheses, has generally been translated "practice." This distinguishes it from "praxis," a term regularly used in *Système des objects* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) but apparently later abandoned. Nevertheless, pratique does retain overtones of praxis and is not the same as usage in the simple utilitarian sense. Rather, it refers to a sort of operative mode, one of the various stances, or practical attitudes that may be reflected in one's use of objects. That there are various pratiques that may be focused simultaneously upon a single object should be made amply clear in the sections later in this chapter concerning the TV-object (see especially Ritual and Rational Practices). — *Translator's note.*

3. Baudrillard seems to use "catégorie" for "classe" (especially catégorie sociale-classe sociale) more often than would be usual in English. We have, however, used category quite strictly as a translation of catégorie because the latter has become a common term in structuralist writing. We cite from Piaget, *Le Structuralisme* (PUF), pp. 24-25: "Il s'agit de l'invention des 'catégories' (MacLane, Eilenberg, etc.), c'est-à-dire d'une classe d'éléments y compris les fonctions qu'ils comportent, donc accompagnée de morphismes." A rough translation: "It involves the invention of 'categories' (MacLane, Eilenberg, etc.), that is to say, a class of elements including the functions they bear with them, thus a class accompanied by morphisms." — *Trans.*

needs and functions basically describe only an abstract level, a manifest discourse of objects, in regard to which the largely unconscious social discourse appears fundamental. An accurate theory of objects will not be established upon a theory of needs and their satisfaction, but upon a theory of *social prestations*[4] and *signification.*

Symbolic Exchange: the "Kula" and the "Potlatch"

Alluding to primitive societies is undoubtedly dangerous — it is nonetheless necessary to recall that originally the consumption of goods (alimentary or sumptuary) does not answer to an individual economy of needs but is a social function of prestige and hierarchical distribution. It does not derive primarily from vital necessity or from "natural law," but rather from a cultural constraint. In summary, it is an institution. Goods and objects must necessarily be produced and exchanged (sometimes in the form of violent destruction) in order that the social hierarchy be manifest. Among the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski) the distinction between economic function and sign function (signification = fonction / signe) is radical: there are two classes of objects upon which two parallel systems are articulated — the *Kula*, a system of symbolic exchange founded upon the circulation, the progressive presentation (*le don en chaîne*) of bracelets, collars, finery, etc., about which a social system of values and status is organized — and the *Gimwali*, the commerce of primary goods.

In our societies this segregation has disappeared (with exceptions: dowries, gifts, etc.). Yet behind all the superstructures of purchase, market, and private property, there is always the mechanism of social prestation which must be recognized in our choice, our accumulation, our manipulation and our consumption of objects. This mechanism of discrimination and prestige is at the very basis of the system of values and of integration into the hierarchical order of society. The *Kula* and the *Potlatch* have disappeared, but not their principle, which we will retain as the basis of a sociological theory of objects — and this is undoubtedly all the more true to the extent that objects multiply and differentiate themselves. The fundamental conceptual hypothesis for a sociological analysis of "consumption" is *not* use value, the relation to needs, but *symbolic exchange* value,[5]

4. "Prestation" is rare in English or French. Baudrillard develops and uses it so extensively that it almost becomes a term. The sense is most succinctly expressed when he refers to "the mechanism of social prestation. . . a mechanism of discrimination and prestige." The word indicates a feeling of obligation to an irrational code of social behavior. — *Trans.*

5. It will later be made clear (cf. *For a General Theory*) that symbolic exchange is radically separate from all values. — *Trans.*

the value of social prestation, of rivalry and, at the limit, of class discriminants.

Conspicuous Consumption

The echo of this primordial function of objects is found enlarged in the notion of *conspicuous waste* (ostentatious prodigality, honorific consumption or expenditure) in the analysis of Thorstein Veblen.[6] Veblen shows that even if the primary function of the subservient classes is working and producing, they simultaneously have the function (and when they are kept unemployed, it is their only function) of displaying the *standing* of the Master. Women, the "people," servants are thus the exhibitors of status. These categories also consume, but in the name of the Master (vicarious consumption); their indolence and their superfluousness testify to his wealth and grandeur. Thus their function is no more economic than that of the objects in the *Kula* or the *Potlatch*, but is one of institution or preservation of a hierarchical order of values. From this perspective Veblen analyzes the condition of women in patriarchal society: just as the slave is not fed in order that he eat, but in order that he work, so one does not dress a woman luxuriously in order that she be beautiful, but in order that her luxury testify to the legitimacy or the social privilege of her master (such is also the case of "culture" which often functions for women as a social attribute: in the leisure classes especially, the culture of women is part of the group patrimony). This notion of *vicarious consumption* is crucial: it leads us back to the fundamental theorem of consumption, which is that the latter has nothing to do with personal enjoyment (although the woman is pleased to be beautiful), but that rather it is a restrictive *social institution* that determines behavior before even being considered in the consciousness of the social actors.

Going further, it may lead us to consider consumption, not as it presents itself — as generalized individual gratification — but as a social *destiny* affecting certain groups or social classes rather than others, or as opposed to others. If today, in modern democratic society, there no longer exist categories devoted *de jure* to prestigious, vicarious consumption, it might be asked whether behind the apparent social generalization of the process there are not classes devoted *in fact* to these mechanisms of prodigality — and which in that way re-establish the *timeless* function of the institution of value and social discrimination which belonged to consumption in preindustrial society under the apparent total availability of individual behaviors.

6. Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (Mentor, 1953).

According to Veblen, one of the major indications of prestige, apart from wealth and wasteful expenditure (dilapidation), is *waste of time*, exercised directly or by proxy (vicarious leisure). The world of objects does not escape this rule, this constraint of superfluousness. It is always present in their uselessness, their futility, their superfluousness, their decorativeness, and their non-functionality, in entire categories of objects (trinkets, gadgets, accessories) or for every object, in all its connotations and metabolism of forms, e.g., in the game of fashion, etc. In short, objects never exhaust themselves in the function they serve, and in this excess of presence they take on their signification of prestige. They no longer "designate" the world, but rather the being and social rank of their possessor.

The Functional Simulacrum

Today, however, this constraint of leisure, of non-instrumentality as the source of values, collides so markedly everywhere with an antagonistic imperative, that the current status of the everyday object results from the conflict, or rather, compromise, between two opposed moralities: an aristocratic morality of "*otium*" and a puritan work ethic. In fact, when one makes the object's function into its immanent rationale, one largely forgets to what degree this functional value is itself controlled by a social morality that no more wants the object to be unemployed than the individual. It must dedicate itself to "laboring," to "functioning" and to excusing itself, democratically so to speak, for its previous aristocratic status as a pure sign of prestige. This bygone status, founded upon ostentation and expenditure, is always present, but while clearly imprinted upon the effects of fashion and décor, it is most often doubled — to a variable degree — by a functional discourse that can serve as *alibi* for the function of *invidious distinction*. Thus objects lead a perpetual game which in fact results from a moral conflict, from a disparity of social imperatives: the functional object pretends to be decorative, it disguises itself with non-utility or with transvestite fashion — the futile and indolent object is charged with a practical reason.[7] At the limit is the gadget: pure gratuitousness under a cover of functionality, pure waste under cover of an ethic of practicality. In any case, all objects, even futile ones, are objects of labor: housekeeping, organizing, tinkering, repairing — everywhere *homo faber* is the double of *homo otiosus*. More generally, we would be dealing with (and this not only in the world of objects) a functional *simulacrum*

7. Thus, in the centrally heated country villa, the peasant bed-warming pan disguises its anachronistic "folklore" character: it is said to be "useful in winter all the same."

(*make-believe*), behind which objects would continue to enact their role of social discriminants. In yet another manner of speaking, objects are caught in the fundamental compromise[8] of having to signify, that is, of having to confer social meaning and prestige in the mode of *otium* and the game (an aristocratic and archaic mode with which the hedonist ideology of consumption tries to reestablish ties) and of having incidentally to submit to the powerful consensus of the democratic morality of effort, of doing and of merit.

One can imagine a state of society where this would result in two disjointed classes of objects: prestige/use or sign exchange value/use value — a disjunction bound to a strong hierarchical integration (a primitive society or ritual and caste). Once again, in our societies this most often results in an ambivalence on the level of each object.

It is important to read social obligation, the ethos of "conspicuous" consumption (direct or vicarious)[9] everywhere, beyond the practical evidence of objects and through the apparent spontaneity of behaviors, and so to grasp a permanent dimension of social hierarchy in the context of consumption, and today, in "standing," a morality which is still imperative.

So, under this paradoxical determination, objects are not the locus of the satisfaction of needs, but of a symbolic labor, of a "production" in both senses of the term: *pro-ducers* — they are fabricated, but they are also produced as a *proof*. They are the locus of consecration of an effort, of an uninterrupted performance, of a *stress for achievement*, aiming always at providing the continual and tangible proof of social value. They are a sort of secular *Bewährung*, probation, or prestation, which, under the inverse influences, is the heir of the principles that were the foundation of the Protestant ethic and which, according to Weber, motivated the capitalist spirit of production. The morality of consumption relays that of production, or is entangled with it in the same social logic of salvation.

2. Sociological Perspectives

Chapin: The Living-room Ladder

Various authors have tried to integrate objects as elements of a

8. It is a contradiction in every logic, for the two systems of value are incompatible. Only the "functionalist" industrial aesthetic can imagine a harmonious reconciliation of function and form, because it is unaware of the social contradictions of its employment (*exercise*). Cf. below, Luxury and the Ephemeral.

9. Here it is not a question of individual vanity that wishes to possess more beautiful objects than others: the latter derives from psychological living, from the conscious relation of rivalry. The social goal of ostentation and all the social mechanism of value are largely unconscious, and are exercised by the subjects without their own knowledge. The conscious games of prestige and rivalry are only the refraction of these finalities and constraints in consciousness.

social logic. As a general rule, however, they have only a walk-on role in sociological research. For the analysts of "consumption," objects are one of the preferred themes of the sociological para-literature, the alternative to advertising discourse. Nonetheless there is one systematic attempt to be noted, that of Chapin.[10] He defines status as "the position occupied by an individual or family according to the dominant standards of cultural goods, of net revenues, of material goods and of participation in group activities of the collectivity." Thus he has four scales. Then it was realized that the four components were in such close relation with the independent measure of the living-room furniture that the latter alone was sufficient for the statistical measurement of class. This "living-room scale" involves twenty-three items, in which the various objects are inventoried and accounted (so also are certain aspects relating to the ensemble: cleanliness, order, maintenance). This first exploration towards sociological goals is thus characterized by the most naive empiricism: the social strata are simply indexed upon a balance-sheet of objects. Now, this procedure is not strictly valid (its conclusions are imprecise in any case) except in a society of relative penury where buying power alone clearly separates the classes. Nor is it really valid except for the extremes. Furthermore, such fixed correlations would be unable to contain either the logic or the dynamic of stratification.

Rhetorical and Syntactic Analysis of the Environment

Having said this, if Chapin's scale were based on a more subtle analysis which inventoried the quality of objects, their material, their form, their stylistic nuance, etc., it could still be of some use, for, notwithstanding the objections made against Chapin, it is still not true that today everyone possesses virtually the same things. The study of models and series[11] shows a complex progression of differences and nuances, which means that the same category of objects (armchairs, shelving units, cars, etc.) can still reconstitute all the social disparities. But it is also clear that with the increase in standard of living, discrimination today has passed from possession, pure and simple, to the organization and the social usage (*pratique*) of objects. Thus a social classification must eventually be founded upon a more subtle semiology of the environment and of everyday practices. An analysis of interiors and of domestic spaces which was founded, not upon the inventory but upon the distribution of objects (centrality-eccentricity; symmetry-asymmetry; hierarchy-

10. F. Stuart Chapin, *Contemporary American Institutions* (New York: Harper, 1935). Ch. XIX: A Measurement of Social Status. Cf. also Dennis Chapman, *The Home and Social Status* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955).

11. Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des objects.*

deviance; promiscuity-distance), upon formal or functional syntagma, in short, an analysis of the syntax of objects, which endeavoured to bring out the organizational constants with reference to the type of habitation and the social category, as well as the coherence or contradictions of the discourse, would be a preparatory level for an interpretation in terms of social logic (on the condition that this "horizontal" topoanalysis was accompanied by a "vertical" semiology that would explore the hierarchical scale of each category of objects from the series to the model through all the significant differences).

The problem then will be on the one hand to make a coherence emerge between the relative position of a given object, or ensemble of objects on the vertical scale, and on the other hand the type of organization of the context in which it is found and the type of practices connected with it. The hypothesis of coherence will not necessarily be justified: there are barbarisms, lapses not only in the formal discourse but in the social discourse of objects. It is not only a question then, of noting them in the structural analysis, but of interpreting them in terms of logic and of social *contradictions.*

In summary: to what may a sociological analysis in this domain look forward? If it is to bring out a specular[13] or mechanical relation between a given configuration of objects and a given position on the social scale, as Chapin does, it is devoid of interest. It is well known that objects tell a great deal about the social status of their owner, but there we have a vicious circle: in the objects, one identifies a social category which has, in the final analysis, already been described on the basis of these objects (among other criteria). The recurring induction hides a circular deduction. The specific social practice, and thus sociology's true object, cannot be brought out by this operation.

Strategic Analysis of the Practice of Objects

Undoubtedly, in a preliminary phase one can consider objects themselves and their summation as indices of *social* membership. But it is much more important to consider them, as regards their choice, organization and practice, as the scaffolding for a *global structure* of the environment, which is simultaneously an active structure of behavior. This structure, then, will no longer be directly bound to a more or less pre-assigned, pre-inventoried status, but analyzed as an

12. For certain categories the differential scale is relatively impoverished (electric household gadgets, TV, etc.). For others (seats, wall units), the hierarchical paradigm of models and series will be rich.

13. "Spéculaire"; cf. note about Lacan below in "Toward a Political Economy of the Sign." —*Trans.*

element of the *social tactic* of individuals and groups, as the living element of their aspirations, which in a larger structure may then coincide with other aspects of this social practice (professional trajectory, education of children, place of residence, network of relations, etc.), but which may also be partly contradictory to them.[14]

What is evident in any case is that one can only speak of objects in terms other than themselves, in terms of social logic and strategy. Simultaneously, however, the analysis must be maintained upon a specific terrain, by determining what specific position is occupied by objects with respect to other systems of signs and what specific field of practices they constitute in the general structure of social behavior.

Is the Discourse of Objects Specific?

It seems that the norm of consumption attitudes is simultaneously distinction and conformity.[15] As a general rule it seems that there would be predominance of the membership group over the ideal reference group: one has "conformist" objects, peer objects.[16] But the problem remains posed: what is the specific position of objects (is there one?) with respect to this very general norm of consumption attitudes (*attitudes de consommation*)? Is there an iso-functionality, a redundance of various systems of signs and behavior, relative to consumption? Clothes, objects, habitations, recreation, cultural activities? Or relative autonomy? Thus today the sectors of clothing, household appliances, automobiles, and apartments all obey norms of accelerated renewal, but each according to its own rhythm — their relative obsolescence varying, moreover, depending on the social categories. But it may also be admitted that all other sectors together are opposed to "inhabiting" — the latter, though integral in the general process, nevertheless constitute a specific function which cannot be assimilated, either brutally or ideally, into the other aspects of consumption and fashion.[17] Reducing all sectors of distinctive signs to a synchronic and univocal relationship with the position on the social scale (or with the trajectory) would undoubtedly liquidate a whole rich field of contrasts, of ambiguities and of disparities. In other words, is the social practice of objects

14. Thus at every social level, giving education to children is an essential tactical element: but on certain levels this form of fulfillment conflicts with fulfillment through the possession of objects.

15. This is also the paradox of fashion: everyone outfits himself in distinctive signs that end up belonging to everyone. Riesman evaluates the paradox in successive types of civilizations: the *other-directed*, which is conformist, succeeds the *inner-directed*, which endeavors to distinguish itself.

16. Cf. on this point George Katona, *The Powerful Consumer* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960), and the notion of *inconspicuous consumption*.

17. See below, Luxury and the Ephemeral.

specific? Is it through these objects, rather than through one's children, friends, clothing, that one indicates a demand for conformity, for security, or rather, what sort of ambition, and through what category of objects? For at the heart of the objects themselves, from one category to another, one can hypothesize their relative autonomy and that of their practice, in the context of social attitudes. In apartments one often notices that from the point of view of status the configuration of the ensemble is not homogeneous — rarely are all objects of a single interior on the same wave-length. Do not certain objects connote a social membership, a factual status, while others a presumed status, a level of aspirations? Are there "unrealistic" objects, that is to say those which falsely register a contradiction of the real status, desperately testifying to an inaccessible standing (all else remaining equal, they are analogous to "escapist" behavior or to the utopian behaviors characteristic of critical phases of acculturation)? Conversely, are there witness-objects that, despite a mobile status, attest a fidelity to the original class and a tenacious acculturation?

The Formal Code and Social Practice

Thus there is never a place for listing an inventory of objects and the social significances (*significations*) attached to them: a code in such a case would hardly be more valuable than a "clef des songes." It is certain that objects are the carriers of indexed social significations, of a social and cultural hierarchy — and this in the very least of their details: form, material, colors, durability, arrangement in space — in short, it is certain that they constitute a code. But precisely for that reason there is every occasion to think that far from following the injunctions of this code undeviatingly, individuals and groups use it to their advantage, together with its imperative and distinctive repertory of objects, as is the case with any other institutional or moral code. That is to say, they use it in their own way: they play with it, they break its rules, they speak it with their class dialect.

This discourse must then be read in its class grammar, in its class inflections, in the contradictions with its own social situation which the individual or group directs through its discourse of objects. A correct sociological analysis must be exercised in the concrete syntax of object ensembles (equivalent to a story and liable to interpretation in terms of social destiny, just like the story of a dream in terms of unconscious conflicts) and in the lapses, incoherencies and contradictions of this discourse, which is never reconciled with itself (possible only in an ideally stable society — a near impossibility in our societies). On the contrary, this discourse always expresses in this

very syntax a neurosis of mobility, of inertia or of social regression. And finally, the object of sociological analysis lies in the ultimately disparate or contradictory relationship of this discourse of objects to other social conducts (professional, economic, cultural). That is to say that it must avoid a "phenomenological" reading (the "pictures" of objects brought back to characteristics or social types), and the merely formal reconstitution of a code of objects, which is never spoken as such in any case (although it hides a strict social logic), but is always restored and manipulated according to a logic peculiar to each social situation.

Thus objects, their syntax, and their rhetoric refer to social objectives and to a social logic. They speak to us not so much of the user and of technical practices, as of social pretension and resignation, of social mobility and inertia, of acculturation and enculturation, of stratification and of social classification. Through objects, each individual and each group searches out his-her place in an order, all the while trying to jostle this order according to a personal trajectory. Through objects a stratified society speaks[18] and, if like the mass media, objects seem to speak to everyone (there are no longer by right any caste objects), it is in order to keep everyone in a certain place. In short, under the rubric of objects, under the seal of private property, it is always a continual social process of value which leads the way. And everywhere and always, objects, in addition to utensils, are the terms and the avowal of the social process of value.

3. The Differential Practice of Objects

For all these reasons, because social stratification, mobility and aspirations are the keys to a sociological investigation of the "world" of objects, we would prefer to focus on the configuration of these latter in the rising, mobile, or "advanceable" classes that have a critical and uncertain status, in the so-called middle classes, the floating hinge of a stratified society, classes on the way to integration or acculturation, that is to say, which escape the destiny of social exclusion of the industrial proletariat or that of rural isolation, without however enjoying the advantage of inheriting an already acquired social situation. What interests us is the practice (and the psychological aspects ratifying it) that objects play in these social categories.

Mobility and Social Inertia

It is known that an essential problem in these mobile strata is the disparity between intentional mobility (aspirations) and real mobility (objective chances of social promotion). It is known also that these

18. Undoubtedly even a class society, as we will see later.

aspirations are not free, that they are a function of social inheritance and acquired position.[19] Past a certain threshold of mobility they do not even exist: there is absolute resignation. As a general rule they are relatively unrealistic: much more is hoped than it is possible to attain — *and* relatively realistic: the ambitious imagination is not given free rein (except in pathological cases). This complex psychological image itself rests upon the social actors' implicit interpretation of the objective sociological data. Industrial societies offer chances of mobility to the middle classes, but relative chances; in all but exceptional cases, the trajectory is short, social inertia is strong, and regression is always possible. Under these conditions it seems that:

—the motivation to ascend the social scale translates the interiorization of the norms and general schemes of a society of growth;

—but excessive aspirations in relation to real possibilities translate the disequilibrium, the profound contradiction of a society in which the "democratic" *ideology* of social progress often comes to compensate and overdetermine the relative inertia of social mechanisms. In other words, individuals *hope* because they "know" they can hope — they *do not hope too much* because they "know" that in fact this society opposes unconquerable barriers to free ascent — they *hope however a little too much* because they also live by a diffuse ideology of mobility and growth. Thus the level of their aspirations results exactly from a compromise between a realism nourished on facts and an unrealism sustained by an ambient ideology — a compromise which in turn reflects the internal contradiction of global society.

Now this compromise which the social actors realize in their future projects and in those respecting their children is first expressed in their objects.

Domestic Order and Public Verdict

Here we must raise a possible objection, which is that private property would create a special jurisdiction for objects which would absolutely distinguish the conduct relative to these private objects from all other conduct regulated by social constraints. "Private" and "social" are not mutually exclusive except in the everyday imagination, and if objects are apparently part of the domestic order, still we have seen that their meaning is only clarified by their relationship to the social constraint of conformity and mobility. More profoundly, the jurisdiction of the system of social values is imma-

19. Thus the proportion of workers who want their children to complete higher education is much lower than that of individuals belonging to the privileged classes.

nent in the domestic order. The private relationship hides a profound recognition and acceptance of the public *verdict*. At bottom individuals know themselves (if they do not feel themselves), to be judged by their objects, to be judged according to their objects, and each at bottom submits to this judgment, though it be by disavowal. Here it is a question of more than the imperative of conformity issuing from a limited group, or that of upward mobility issuing from global society: it is a question of an order in which each group or individual can only come to locate itself in the very movement which makes it exist socially. In the "private," in the "domestic" sphere (and so also in the environment of objects) in which the individual lives as a refuge zone, as an autonomous field of needs and satisfactions, below or beyond social constraints, the individual nevertheless always continues to evince or to claim a legitimacy and to assure it by signs. In the least of behaviors, through the least of objects, he or she translates the immanence of a jurisdiction which in appearance is rejected.

Ambiguous Rhetoric — Triumph and Resignation

Now, for the categories that interest us, this verdict is never positive: their progress on the social scale is always relative and often ludicrous. Above all, legitimacy, that is to say, the possibility of establishing their acquired situation as an intrinsic value, escapes them. It is this thwarted legitimacy (with respect to cultural, political, and professional life) which makes the middle classes invest in the private universe, in private property and the accumulation of objects with a dedication all the more fierce, autonomizing it all by default in trying to celebrate a victory, a true social recognition which escapes them.

That is what gives objects in this "milieu" a fundamentally ambiguous status: behind their triumph as signs of social promotion they secretly proclaim (or avow) social defeat. Their proliferation, their "stylization," their organization is anchored there in a rhetoric which, in the terms of P. Bourdieu, is quite fittingly a "rhetoric of despair."

The way in which objects present themselves to vision and wish to forestall the objections of value, the way in which they submit to the latent jurisdiction of social hierarchies, all the while repudiating them — this whole discourse of objects, which constitutes the lived drama of private property — also represents a *social* passion and feeds social emotionalism (*le pathétique*). Let us not forget that, *mutatis mutandis* the exhibition of the harvest, piled in heaps in their gardens by the Trobriand Islanders is always a provocation, a

competition, a challenge. But it is also a rite, destined to evince an order of values, a rule of the game, in order to be integrated by it. In the *Potlatch*, it is the insolent destruction of objects and wealth which is "the proof." In the private consumption and property which we know, and which are apparently established upon the individual order, this antagonistic social aspect of *prestation* seems to be exorcised, resolved. But such is not the case at all; it may even be that the processes of a society of "consumption" powerfully reactivate this function of objects as "displays of antagonism" (*exposants antagoniques*). In any case, something of these primitive practices still haunts contemporary objects and always makes their presence vehement, powerfully expressive, never neutral.

Stylistic Modalities

On the level of objects this "rhetoric of despair" is indicated by various stylistic modalities. They all derive from a logic (and an aesthetic) of simulation, a simulation of the bourgeois models of domestic organization. On the other hand, it must be pointed out that the reference models are not the contemporary upper classes insofar as these classes are part of a greater fiction. The reference model of the "mobile" classes is the traditional bourgeois order as it has been recognized since the Empire and Restoration, and which is itself an adaptation of earlier aristocratic models.

This "petty bourgeois" rhetorical order is governed by two essential modes: on the one hand, *saturation and redundance*; on the other, *symmetry and hierarchy*. Obviously there are numerous overlappings (thus symmetry is also redundancy, but it includes centrality). Nonetheless the two modes are quite distinct, the one (saturation-redundancy) expressing the inorganic, the other (symmetry-hierarchy) expressing the organic structure of this order. Let us point out that these modes of organization are not bound in essence to the bourgeois or the petty bourgeois order: they derive also from a more general anthropological or aesthetic analysis. But here they only interest us in a social definition, as the specific rhetoric of a given social category.

With respect to saturation, one knows that the bourgeois house is closed upon itself and full like an egg. Inheritance and accumulation are the signs of "status" and of ease. Along the same line, the petty bourgeois interior is indicated by congestion. True, it often lacks space but this shortage of space in turn gives rise to a compensating reaction: the less space one has, the more one accumulates (a little like the criterion of quantitative memory which is active in radio games in the absence of any "noble" cultural motivations).

Sometimes, on the other hand, it is certain rooms, certain corners of the house that are "full." What would have to be understood, then, is rather the various aspects of a play upon the full and the empty, a logistic which makes certain places into reserves, hoardings, or storehouses — formerly the attic and the cellar had an analogous role. A house or a room can thus be analyzed topographically, according to whether it displays stockpiling pure and simple, or aggregates of objects, residual and partial syntagma or syntactic conceptions of the ensemble. To reiterate, this method is uninteresting if it is not taken up again in a social logic: in the gamut from accumulation, despite penury, to planned architecture, each class has its modes of organization.

The Tactic of the Pot and Its Saucer

Here we consider redundancy, the whole baroque and theatrical covering of domestic property. The table is covered with a table cloth which itself is protected by a plastic table cloth. Drapes and double drapes are at the windows. We have carpets, slipcovers, coasters, wainscoting, lampshades. Each trinket sits on a doily, each flower in its pot, and each pot in its saucer. Everything is protected and surrounded. Even in the garden each cluster is encircled with wire-netting, each path is outlined by bricks, mosaics or flagstones. This could be analyzed as an anxious compulsion to sequestration, as an obsessional symbolism: the obsession of the cottage owner and small capitalist is not merely to possess, but to underline what he possesses two or three times. There, as other places, the unconscious speaks in the redundancy of signs, in their connotations and their overworking (*surcharge*).

But something else speaks there as well and it is important to draw other conclusions:

(1) The overworking of signs of possession, which here act as demonstration, can be analyzed as not only the intention to possess, but to show how *well*[20] one possesses. Now this demonstration, this overdetermination "of style" is always relative to the group: it not only has the psychological function of reassuring the owner of his possession, but also the sociological function of affiliating him with the whole class of individuals who possess in the same way. Thus the very signs of privacy act as signs of social adherence. Through this or that symbolic behavior (*comportement*), it is still the cultural imperative of class which speaks (this of course has nothing to do with political class consciousness).

20. Cf. Sartre's café waiter whose oversignificant actions are intended not so much to do something as to show how well it is done.

(2) On that basis it is interesting to refer the simultaneously anxious and triumphant character of the conduct of possession to the specific position of the middle class(es) on the social trajectory. How is it to be defined? It is a class which has gone far enough to interiorize the models of social success, but not far enough to avoid simultaneously interiorizing the defeat. It is distinguished from the proletariat by the connotation of what it possesses, by the over-valuing of its relative position, by excess. But at the same time it is distinguished from the upper classes by default, by emphasizing the *limits* of what it has attained and by the implicit consciousness that this is all it will ever be able to attain. Hence the double movement of triumph and resignation in this dark line, encircling all its objects as if to frame them and to ennoble them, the ensemble of which is a laborious challenge to inaccessible forms of possession. In a stratified society the middle class has been subjected to a compromise; this compromise is its true social class destiny and it is this sociologically definable compromise that is reflected in the simultaneously resigned and victorious ritual with which it surrounds its objects.

The "Taste" for the Bygone (l'Ancien)[21]

One can thus do a whole psychology or even psychoanalysis of bygone objects (obsession with authenticity, mystique of the past, of origins, "symbolic" density and other more or less conscious lived aspects). But what concerns us is the distinctive social function, which is indissociable on all levels from the lived psychological "substance" of the bygone.

The bygone object derives from the cultural baroque. Its "aesthetic" value is always a derived value: in it the stigmata of industrial production and primary functions are eliminated. For all these reasons the taste for the bygone is characterized by the desire to transcend the dimension of economic success, to consecrate a social success or a privileged position in a redundant, culturalized, symbolic sign. The bygone is, among other things, social success that seeks a legitimacy, a heredity, a "noble" sanction.

It will thus be characteristic of the privileged classes for whom it is important to transmute their economic status into inherited grace. But it is quite as characteristic of the salaried middle strata who also

21. "Bygone" is used as a translation of "l'Ancien" because there are major objections to the obvious choices of antique, old, prior, etc. It refers to an article that is sanctified because of belonging to another era, yet which exists in the present. Antique is close, but would exclude the pseudo-antique, the bourgeois kitsch of Louis XV or XVI bedsteads actually produced in Plattsburg (or Paris, for that matter). The simultaneous incarnation of petty bourgeois cravings for both old and new in the same object is too juicy to be missed. Baudrillard himself refers to it (note below). — *Trans.*

wish to consecrate their relative status as an absolute promotion (in relation to the lower classes) via the purchase of rustic furniture (mass-produced, but so what?). It will also be characteristic of the marginal sectors — intellectual and artistic — where a taste for the bygone will instead translate the refusal (or ashamed affiliation) of economic status and of the social dimension, a will to situate themselves outside all classes and in order to do so, a digging about in the stockpile of signs which are emblematic of a past prior to industrial production.[22]

Thus there would be no interest in noting a certain class with Haute Epoque, another with Industrial Rustic, yet another with authentic 18th-century peasant furniture, in order to build up a social stratification in terms of taste. This would still only reflect cultural constraints and laws of the market. The important thing is to see the specific social postulate expressed by the taste for the bygone at each level. From which social class is one being demarcated? What social position is being sanctioned? What class or class model is being aspired to? Beyond descriptive relations which simply expose a social level and a type of object or behaviors (*conduites*), one must perceive a cultural logic of mobility.[23]

Varnish and Lacquer

Other aspects come to confirm this cultural class compromise at the level of environment. There is a triumph of conditioning, of envelopment by an all-powerful puritan morality, of ritual hygiene; the triumph of varnish, polish, veneer, plating, wax, encaustic, lacquer, glaze, glass, plastic. It is a whole ethic of protection, care and cleanliness which converges with the disciplinary ritual of framing that we have already discussed (concentric circles and property: shutters, drapes, double drapes, wainscoting, plinths, wallpaper, table cloths, doilies, bedspreads, blotters). It is of the same order as the symmetrical arrangements, where things are duplicated in order to be reflected: yet another redundancy. An

22. Alternatively, in a whole panoply of fashionably "deviant" objects — monstrous, astonishing, bizarre, vicious — such as flourish today in the shop windows on the Left Bank. There is an entire hell of "unique" objects (or objects with limited distribution) in their usefulness or eccentricity, an entire hell of the luxury object that at heart dreams of the Faubourg St. Honoré. That is to say that its forced originality must be interpreted as the challenge of the marginal intellectual classes to all "legitimate" spheres privileged by industrial society.

23. The only ones to remain refractory — provisionally — to the baroque of the bygone are the peasants, whose aspirations pass toward the functional modern serial object via the rejection of signs of the past, and the workers because they still escape cultural mobility and have no worthwhile status to defend or to legitimize. On the 'bygone,' cf. *Système des objets*.

object does not exist literally unless it is thus repeated in itself, and if one can read the fundamental equation of property in this specular redundancy: A is A. The economic principle is sanctioned by symbolic appropriation (mirrors and looking-glasses): it is the formal logic of the "(petty) bourgeois"[24] environment. Of course this formal ordering has ideological value: as a Euclidean and Aristotelian logic, it tends to conjure social development into an order, to abolish its contradiction in a tautological ritual.

Symmetry (together with hygiene and morality) is the "spontaneous" middle class representation of culture. The game with asymmetry only consecrates this representation.

The Moral Fanaticism of Housekeeping

In this perspective, polish and varnish (like framing and symmetry) are the exaltation of a "trivial" cultural mode which is not that of beauty and ornamentation but the moral one of cleanliness and correction. The objects here are entirely equivalent to children in whom one must first instill good manners, who must be "civilized" by submitting them to the formal imperatives of politeness. Now, that is a *class* compromise: an obsession with the impeccable, a fanatic housekeeping, corresponds to the demand to surpass the strict necessity of use towards an appearance — an imperative of cultural promotion. But given the very strong work and merit ethos, this appearance cannot have an allure of gratuitousness or of pure prodigality. It will thus be the object of a continual doing, of a laborious domestic ritual, of a daily domestic *sacrifice*. The varnished object is satisfying for a vast socio-cultural category because it appears as the synthesis of a *conspicuous morality*, summarizing the two imperatives of the *prestation* of prestige (sign exchange value) and of the *prestation* of merit (productivity and use value), inconsistently on the formal level but according to a closely knit social logic.

This cultural status of the object enters into direct contradiction with its practical status. The housekeeping consciousness deactivates this contradiction in every way: "The varnished object is more beautiful; it lasts longer," and at the limit of the paradox: "The waxed, plasticized object stands up better; it requires less effort," when this solicitude is precisely that of effort, having the effect of making objects fragile and complicating their manipulation. In fact, housekeeping has only secondarily a practical objective (keeping objects ready for use): it is a manipulation of another order — sym-

24. It is a tendency that, in its principles of "discreteness" (objects are individual, distinct unities in their form and function) and redundancy, is opposed to the modern principles of the environment: fluidity, polyvalence, combinatory and mobile integration of elements.

bolic — that sometimes totally eclipses practical use (silverware that has to be regularly polished without ever appearing on the table). If the immense work of housewives (children and objects) never appears in the national accounts, it is undoubtedly because these accounts are too abstract to take into consideration anything other than formal social revenue production. But it is also because, in its profound intention, this labor does not emerge from an economic calculus but from a symbolic and statutory calculus dictated by the relative social class configurations.[25]

On the other hand, beyond the ethic of accomplishment that has just been analyzed, there is a true pathos in this fiercely dedicated solicitude: unlike the concrete use one has for objects and which is always defined (by their function), this solicitude is unlimited — it nourishes and devours itself according to the processes of an unhappy consciousness. In its perfectionist formalism it mimics art for art's sake precisely because it is neither true labor nor culture. It is a rhetoric, an outbidding of the signs of civilization, cut off from their cultural finality. It is the rhetoric of domestic salvation and not a rational domestic economy. Triumphant and suffering, unchangeable in its dogma and its ritual, alienated in its meaning, it is the veritable culture of everydayness.

The Prestige of the "Natural"

The logic of cultural differentiation is going to impose negation at a privileged level, the disavowal of these values of polish and varnish, of care in favor of the values of "frankness" (*franchise*), and of the "natural": the raw, matte, savage and neglected. This "frankness" of the object sanctioned by taste has nothing "natural" about it. On the contrary, it is deduced from lower-class devotion to the artificial, to the baroque affectation of decorum, to the moral values of the veiled, the clothed, the cared for, the preened, to the moral values of effort. Here "preparation" is a cultural fault. Propriety (repressive conditioning) and manners in the matter of objects, which in another age were the cultural signs of the bourgeoisie, are stigmatized as the distinctive marks of the petty bourgeois classes who have outfitted themselves with them. The essential function of the values of "sincerity," "authenticity," "starkness," — inner walls of bare concrete, unfinished timbers — is thus a function of discrimination (*distinction*), and their definition is first social.

Here again one is rationalizing, but less in terms of immediate practicality ("it is more practical," "that washes better") than in

25. The employment of domestic personnel for this purpose (maid, cleaning woman, housekeeper, etc.) is an essential social criterion. To have a maid is to leave the middle class.

terms of secondary functions ("direct contact," "warmer atmosphere"), and especially in terms of functional aesthetics ("abolition of décor," "truth of the object," "promotion of form," etc.). One allows it to be understood that, according to a continuous progress, objects would obey an internal aesthetic logic which would ultimately lead them to appear in their "truth," in the harmonious synthesis of their function and their form. This is the fundamental theory of design.[26] Now the hypothesis of a progressive advancement from model to model toward an ideal state of the environment — a hypothesis which secretly rests upon the representation of technological progress — implies a whole ideology, for it masks the social function of formal innovation, which is a function of cultural discrimination. Formal innovation materialized in objects does not have an ideal world of objects as its goal but rather, a social ideal, that of the privileged classes, which is the perpetual reassertion of their cultural privilege.

Formal Innovation and Social Discrimination

The priority of this social function of discrimination over the "aesthetic" function is visible in fashion, where at any moment the most aesthetically aberrant and arbitrary forms may be reactivated simply for the purpose of providing distinctive signs for a material which is always new.

So, the *paradigmatic oppositions* —varnished-matte, enveloped-stark, polished-rough — are not only the instruments of a semiological analysis of the world of objects, but are also *social discriminants*, characteristics which are not only formally distinct but socially distinctive. Of course their contextual value is relative, because the bareness of a wall may sometimes indicate poverty, unrefined misery, and other times evince a "savage" luxury.

To explain it another way, that which, at the level of a rational logic of models, is given as "universal," as completed beauty, as absolute truth of form and function, has at bottom no truth other than the relative and ephemeral one of its position in the social logic it imposes. This "universal" is still nothing more than a particular sign, an exhibitor of class. The effect of "beauty," of "naturalness," of "functionality" (in the ideal sense of functionalism) is registered in this class relationship and cannot be dissociated from it.

At a later stage, aesthetic privilege is no longer attached to varnish or rawness but to the liberty of freely combining all the terms: the lacquered coffer close beside the rough wood or smooth marble

26. Cf. below, Design and Environment. — *Trans.*

together with naked concrete.[27] At this avant-garde level, the exclusiveness, which pledged the petty bourgeois to artificial luster and the cultivated to "natural" starkness, is apparently lifted, so that here everything is salvaged, all combinations are possible. But once again, that which at the level of form appears to be a surpassing towards a universal position, takes on its true value in an inverse social signification: the universal term (synthesis of difference) once again becomes an effective factor of discrimination because only a few elect will be able to accede to this stage of the *aesthetic* combinatory. The others find themselves relegated to the *moral* manipulation of domestic objects. With respect to objects and their calculus (as other places), the universal once again is the title of nobility held by a specific category.

The aesthetic calculus is always submerged in social logic. In order to avoid taking this ideological process into account, designers exhaust themselves in popularizing audacious, "rational," "functional" forms, being all the while surprised that these forms do not spontaneously seduce the mass public. Yet behind their pious litany (educating public taste), these "popular" creators direct their unconscious strategy: beautiful, stylized, modern objects are subtly created (despite all reversed good faith) *in order not to be understood by the majority* — at least not straight away. Their social function is first to be distinctive signs, to be objects which will distinguish those who distinguish them. Others will not even see them.[28]

27. The mixture that today is in fashion everywhere, in advertising, decoration, clothing, testifies to the same "liberty": Mondrian-like geometricism coexists peacefully with the psychedelic version of art nouveau.

28. The same analysis can be made with respect to furniture (no longer according to the material, but to the function). The last word in functional furniture is the mobile element, which, stacked with a few cushions, can turn into a bed, seats, wall units, bookshelves, or anything at all (a pure object) at the whim of its owner. It is the Arch-furnishing, the totally polyvalent manifestation of an audacious, incontestably "rational" analytic formula. And this formula paradoxically revives those of the Middle Ages or of poor peasant living, where the same element — the trunk — would also serve as table, bench, cupboard, etc. The meaning, however, is evidently reversed: far from being a solution to poverty, the contemporary mobile element is the synthesis of all these differentiated functions and of all luxurious distinctions. It is the culmination of simplicity and upon the (bad) faith of this apparent simplicity its designers make of it the "popular" and economical solution of the future! The prices, which are always realistic, unpityingly translate the social logic: these simple forms are a costly refinement. Here again formal innovation is justified in terms of severity, economy, "structure," sometimes even in terms of penury and urgency: "If necessary, your bed can be turned into a dresser," etc. Why bother? It is only a game, and one that only plays upon necessity: fashion is pre-eminent here. Technical — real — innovation does not have at heart the goal of genuine economy, but the game of social distinction.

The Flux and Reflux of Distinctive Signs

This contradiction between rational economic logic and cultural class logic affects another essential aspect of objects: their status in time, their cycle of erosion and renewal.

The diverse categories of objects have a variable longevity: residence, furniture, electrical appliances, TV, linens, clothing, gadgets, wear out at different rates. But two distinct variables play upon the whole span of objects in calculating their lifetime and durability: one is their real rate of wearing out, registered in their technical structure and their material; the other, the value they take on as patrimony or inversely, the accelerated obsolescence due to fashion. What is important for us here is this second value and its relation to the respective situation of groups in a stratified and mobile industrial society. How does a given group distinguish itself by a more or less strong adhesion to the ephemeral or to the durable? What are the various responses of different groups on the social scale to fashion's demands for accelerated renewal of objects?

In effect fashion does not reflect a natural need of change: the pleasure of changing clothes, objects, cars, comes to sanction the constraints of another order psychologically, constraints of social differentiation and prestige. The effects of fashion only appear in socially mobile societies (and beyond a certain threshold of available money). Ascending or descending social status must be registered in the continual flux and reflux of distinctive signs. A given class is not lastingly assigned to a given category of objects (or to a given style of clothing): on the contrary, all classes are assigned to change, all assume the necessity of fashion as a value, just as they participate (more or less) in the universal imperative of social mobility. In other words, since objects play the role of exhibitors of social status, and since this status has become potentially mobile, the objects will always simultaneously give evidence not only of an acquired situation (this they have always done), but also of the potential mobility of this social status as such objects are registered in the distinctive cycle of fashion.

One might think that on account of their material presence, objects first have the function of enduring, of registering social status "in solidity."[29] This was the case in traditional society, where hereditary décor was evidence of social accomplishment and, at the limit, of the social eternity of an acquired situation. Then the description and social semantics of the environment could be relatively simple. And in a sense it is always thus: at whatever social level one is situated, there is always the tendency to perpetuate an

29. "...fonction de durer...'en dur.'" — *Trans.*

acquired situation in objects (and children). The objects with which one surrounds oneself first constitute a balance sheet, a testament (eventually resigned) to social destiny. On the other hand, they often appear to be symbolically framed and fixed on the wall, such as was once the case with school diplomas. A position and a destiny, thus the contrary of social mobility — this is what objects first present. Chosen, bought and arranged, they are part of the completed fulfillment, not of ascending performance. They encircle with their ascriptive dimension. Even when (only too frequently) they outbid social success, even when they seem to take an option on the future, still, it is never through his objects that social man accomplishes himself or is mobile. He falls back upon them, and objects often translate, at the very most, *his* frustrated social aspirations.

This function of the inertia of objects that results in a durable, sometimes hereditary status, is combatted today by that of having to signify social change. As one is elevated on the social scale, objects multiply, diversify and are renewed. Their accelerated traffic (circulation) in the name of fashion quickly comes to signify and to present a social mobility that does not really exist. This is already the meaning of certain mechanisms of substitution: unable to change the apartment, one changes the car. It is even clearer that the accelerated renewal of objects often compensates a disappointed aspiration to cultural and social progress. This is what makes the "reading" of objects complex: sometimes their mobility reflects the rising standing of a given social category by signifying it positively; sometimes, on the contrary, it comes to compensate the social inertia of a certain group or individual whose disappointed and thwarted desire for mobility comes to register itself in the artificial mobility of decor.

Here the whole ideology of fashion is in question. The formal logic of fashion imposes an increased mobility on all the distinctive social signs. Does this formal mobility of signs correspond to a real mobility in social structures (professional, political, cultural)? Certainly not. Fashion — and more broadly, consumption, which is inseparable from fashion — masks a profound social inertia. It itself is a *factor* of social inertia, insofar as the demand for real social mobility frolics and loses itself in fashion, in the sudden and often cyclical changes of objects, clothes and ideas. And to the illusion of change is added the illusion of democracy (which is similar but under another aspect). The constraint of the transitoriness of fashion is claimed to eliminate the possibility of *inheriting* distinctive signs; it is reputed to return the whole world to a position of equal opportunities at each instant of the cycle. In the face of the demands of fashion all objects can be recalled: this would suffice to create the equality of all in the face of objects. Now, this is quite obviously false: fashion, like mass culture, speaks to all in order to better return each one to his place. It is one of those institutions that best restores cultural inequality and social discrimination, establishing it under the pretense of abolishing it. It wishes to be beyond social logic, a kind of second nature: in fact, it is entirely governed by the social strategy of class. "Modern" transitoriness of objects (and other signs) is in fact the luxury of heirs.[30]

The Luxury of the Ephemeral

Here we will go a little outside the domain of objects, towards architecture, to illustrate what has just been said about fashion and social class distinction. Architecture is in fact a domain where the opposition ephemeral-durable is very evident to the imagination.

For a certain architectural avant-garde, the truth of the dwelling of the future is in ephemeral construction, in detachable, variable and mobile structures. A mobile society ought to have a mobile dwelling. And it is undoubtedly true that this is inscribed in the economic and social demands of modernity. It is true that the social deficit represented today (and increasingly in the future) by hard and durable lot construction is colossal: it contradicts the economic rationality and that of social exchanges, and the irreversible tendency toward more social mobility, flexibility of infrastructures, etc.[31] But if for all these reasons ephemeral architecture must one day be the collective solution, for the moment it is the monopoly of a privileged fraction whose cultural and economic standing permits it to question the myth of durability.

It is because generations of the bourgeoisie were able to enjoy the fixed secular decor of property that their heirs today can give

30. Fashion embodies a compromise between the need to innovate and the other need to change nothing in the fundamental order. It is this that characterizes "modern" societies. Thus it results in a game of change. In this game, the new and the old are functionally equivalent. If one adheres to lived psychology, one would see there two inverse tendencies: the need to change and the nostalgic need for old things. In fact, the function of the *new look* and of the *old fashion* is the alteration: at all levels, it is the result of a logical constraint of the system — old and new are not relative to contradictory needs: they are the "cyclical" paradigm of fashion. "Modern" is the new *and* the old, which no longer have temporal value. For the same reason, "modern" has nothing to do with actual practicality, with a real change, with a structural innovation. New and old, neologism and archaism are homogeneous in the game of changes.

31. Nevertheless, one would have to take into account the latent, psycho-collective functions of the "hard" and the solid — powerful functions of integration that also are included in the social budget.

themselves the luxury of renouncing uncut stone and exalting the ephemeral: this fashion belongs to them. By contrast, consider all the generations of lower classes whose chances in the past of acceding to cultural models and at the same time to durable property were null. To what would one wish them to aspire if not also to live the bourgeois model and to establish a derisory dynasty in turn, for themselves and their children, in the concrete of apartments or the rough-hewn stone of suburban houses? How can one today require that these "advanceable" classes not deify real estate and that they first accept the ideal character of these mobile structures? They are dedicated to desiring that which lasts and this desire only translates their cultural class destiny.

Reciprocally, the cult of the ephemeral is ideologically connoted by the privilege of the avant-garde: according to the eternal logic of cultural distinction, a privileged fraction savors the instantaneous and mobile character of architectural structures at the moment when others just gain access to the square between their walls. Only the privileged classes have the right to the reality (*actualité*) of models. The others will have the right to them when these models have already changed.

So if the ephemeral represents the truth of modernity in the logic of forms, if it represents the "formula of the future" for a harmonious and rational society, its meaning in the present cultural system is quite different. If, in its *logical* foundation, culture acts upon two terms: ephemeral-durable, neither of which can be autonomized (architecture will always be a game moving from one to the other) – in the *cultural class system*, on the contrary, this relation breaks out in two distinctive poles, one of which, the ephemeral, is autonomized as a superior cultural mode referring the other (the durable) to its obsolescence and to the aspirations of a naive majority.[32]

4. A Logic of Segregation

Those are only some elements of a logical analysis of social mechanisms that are articulated upon the distinctive function of objects (and of their practice). We base ourselves upon the *tactical* cultural elements of the middle class, opposing them to those of a privileged stratum. This is obviously an undue simplification, and a more penetrating analysis ought to tend towards establishing a more differentiated hierarchical classification, a more subtle stratification of the social pyramid.

32. Of course, there is also a question of price: the most audacious and thus the most ephemeral fashion is also the most costly in all domains. But the price only comes to sanction a *logical* process of discrimination.

However, all efforts in this direction, in the direction of a logical analysis in terms of stratification, risk making us forget a fundamental truth, which is that the sociological analysis cannot be merely a logical analysis, but is also an ideological, or political, analysis. In other words, the *distinguishing function* (*distinctive*) of objects (as well as of other systems of signs relevant to consumption) is fundamentally registered within (or flows into) a *discriminating function*: thus the logical analysis (in tactical terms of stratification) must also open onto a political analysis (in terms of class strategy).

Before generalizing these conclusions at the level of consumption, we wish to show how, at a simpler level – that of the very practice of the object -- these differences are far from punctuating a progressive social hierarchy, and result instead in a radical discrimination, in a de facto segregation that consecrates certain "classes" to certain signs and practices, and not others, guiding them in this vocation and destiny according to a whole social systematic. Then in consumption, in that dimension of generalized sign exchange, we will have a basis for seeing the locus of an intense political manipulation.

Objective Practice and Ritual Practice – The TV Object

We will take television for an example, but from a particular viewpoint, that of the TV object. On an early level, the studies of television in fact deliver some truths respecting the various correlations between rates of possession and amount of listening, on the one hand, and, on the other, socio-professional categories, income and levels of education.

On a more involved level, the studies incline toward the mode of listening (family, collective, individual, mixed) and the quality of attention (fascinated, curious, diffuse, passive, selective, distracted, etc.), always in relation to broadly defined social categories. All these studies deal with the relation of the user to the televised message, to the TV discourse, that is, to the images as mass medium. They largely omit the dimension of the object itself, of the television *set*. Now it is obvious that before being the vehicle of images, a transmitter addressing a receiver, the TV is first a "set" sold by a manufacturer to an individual. It is an object, bought and possessed. Undoubtedly its status is never just that, at any level of the social scale, but this primary status secretly induces a great number of ambiguous cultural behaviors in image reception. In other words, the demand is divided between that of an object (producer of images) and that of images (vehicles of meaning). These two exigencies are logically incompatible, although practice inextricably confuses

them. According to whether the TV is there as a TV object or as a means of communication, the TV discourse will itself be received as an object or as meaning. The *object (sign) status* is opposed to the *objective (rational and practical) status*. This distinction revives that of sign exchange value and use value. The whole social logic of culture is registered in this radical divergence. And it is the social theory of the sign-object that we wish to dwell on here, in the perspective of consumption.

The evidence according to which the television is bought for the purpose of cultural edification or for the simple pleasure of images (that is, as a function of a deliberated personal objective) is undoubtedly increasingly deceptive as one descends the social scale. More profoundly than interest or pleasure, which often merely ratify the social constraint, the index of conformity and prestige (and the term "index" must retain all its value as a moral injunction) is active, imposing the acquisition of the TV (like that of the refrigerator, car, or washing machine). As in John Stuart Mill, the possession of such and such an object is in itself a social service: as a certificate of citizenship the TV is a token of recognition, of integration, of social legitimacy. At this level of almost unconscious response it is the object that is in question, not its objective function — and it no longer has an objective function, but a *proof* function. It is a social exhibitor and is given value as such: it is exposed and overexposed. This can be seen in middle (and lower) class interiors, where the TV is enthroned on a sort of pedestal, focusing attention on it as an object.

One will be less astonished by the "passivity" experienced by the average TV viewer with respect to the content of TV messages if one considers that implicitly all his social activity is concentrated upon the effort of economic accumulation and especially upon the effort of performance, upon the symbolic payment, as of a toll, constituted by the acquisition of the object itself. It is because according to a naive evaluation, the purchase is considered as a satisfaction, and thus as a passive procedure, that a cultural "activity" is subsequently required of the user. This may be valid for the educated upper classes, but the contrary is true at a lower level: all the activity is invested in the appropriation of the object as sign and token on the one hand, as capital on the other — the use itself is then logically transformed into passive satisfaction, real usufruct, profit and benefit, and reward (*récompense*) for a completed social duty. Because the object has value conferred upon it as a token, it can only occasion a magical economy (cf. Mauss and the value of symbolic exchange). Because

the object is considered as capital, it can only occasion a quantitative profitability (*rentabilité*); in neither case can it give rise to an autonomous cultural activity, which derives from another system of values.

Because it is a token, the appropriation of the object is not prolonged by a rational practice, but logically, by its continual demonstration according to a quasi-religious process of ostentation. Because it is capital, the object must be able to produce revenue. In our modern industrial societies the object is rarely a pure fetish;[33] in general, the technical imperative of functionality is imposed. It is necessary to witness objects that are operating, or which serve some purpose. This does not so much resemble an objective rationale as a supplementary *mana*: if it does not work, the object loses its prestige potential. Once again use value is fundamentally an alibi for sign exchange value. The thing must serve a purpose: revenue production is a moral imperative, not an economic function. Also, it is logically in these same social categories where the TV object is sanctified as such apart from its function as communication, that one indulges in systematic, non-selective viewing. The TV is watched every evening, the disparate and successive programs are followed from beginning to end. Lacking a rational economy of the object, one deliberately submits to an irrational and formal economic norm: the absolute amount of use in hours. The apparent passivity of long hours of viewing thus in fact hides a laborious patience. Lacking qualitative selection, it is expressed by quantitative devotion (as in game shows relying on rote memorization and chance).[34] But this norm is not admitted as such: to do so would be to confront autonomous, superior cultural activities (that is, those that are not made subservient to that latent imperative of revenue production) and to be disqualified in advance. It will thus be preferable to present it as pleasure, interest, "free" distraction; spontaneous decision. But this alleged pleasure is a challenge to the profound objection — that of cultural inferiority — which undoubtedly will never be formulated (save clandestinely in ritual recriminations: "They bore us with this stuff" or, "They always show the same things"

33. This pure prestige value of the object as such, a magical prestation independent of its function, emerges in the limiting cases (which we gratuitously burden with the label "prelogical mentality," although it is quite simply a question of social logic), where, for example, a broken TV set, vacuum cleaner or watch, or a car out of gas are still prestige elements in the African bush.

34. This "economic fetishism" or the fetishism of revenue production in fact realizes a compromise between the impossibility — socially defined — of being autonomously culturally defined, and the injunction of an industrial (capitalist) society with a very strong economic imperative.

— simulacra indicating the superior cultural processes of judgment, selection, etc., by default).

"It must necessarily serve a purpose": thus for certain social categories this translates the uselessness of this object with respect to superior cultural ends. As concerns pleasure, it is the ritual rationalization of a procedure that does not wish to admit to itself that, through this object, it first obeys a social injunction of conformist ritual prestation. In summary, the quantification of viewing, linked to its "passivity," refers to a socio-economic imperative of revenue production, to the *object as capital*. But perhaps this "capitalization" still only comes to reinforce a more profound social constraint — that of symbolic prestation, of legitimation, of social credence, of *mana* — which attaches itself to the *object as fetish*.

All this outlines a cultural class configuration — that of a class where the autonomous and rational ends of a culture freely exercised by the mediation of an object are not even suspected, and yet are contradictorily internalized. It is that of a resigned and accultured class whose *demand for culture*, following a relative social promotion, is *conjured in objects and their worship* or at least in a cultural compromise governed by the economic and magical constraints of the collectivity. It is the face and very definition of *consumption*.

Other indices come to be associated with those of the volume and mode of listening, according to the same class determination. Consider the physical situation of the TV object in the house. At the lower level, the most frequent configuration has the set isolated in a corner on a pedestal (table, TV stand, shelf), possibly covered by a dust cover and topped by a knick-knack, outside viewing hours; the room, which was hardly conceived traditionally for this use (radio still did not disturb any aspect of its arrangement), is redistributed more or less as a field of vision: the TV logically condemns high, massive furniture, hanging lamps, etc. But most of the time at this level the TV constitutes an eccentric pole opposing the traditional centrality of the room. At an intermediate level, the set is lowered (at the same time as the furniture) to the height of armchair vision. It is on a low table or built into a cabinet console. It is no longer a pole, and reception no longer demands a posture of collective devotion: the room is less centered and so the set is less eccentric. At the limit, in very modern interiors of high standing, there is an integration into other furnishings or into the wall, a total eclipse of the object as furniture. The TV object ceases to be the object of a rite

(simultaneously the room is ventilated by independent spaces, luminous sources are concealed, etc.).

There are other significant aspects: ambient lighting — according to whether one recreates the fascinating vision of cinema in the darkness or whether the light is merely veiled or normal. Also, there is the dimension of behavior; whether there is free movement, or no one moving at all. All these scales of indices can be correlated with that principal one of volume and selectivity of use, to outline a coherent structure for each level of the social scale. But (and for us this is the important point), the process of inquiry and the empirical correlations, however subtle they may be, will never give us the image of a stratified society. The studies will describe to us transitively that whole *differential* gamut from one category to the next, from sanctified ostentation to selective use, from domestic rite to autonomous cultural exercise, without ever marking the *theoretical discrimination that opposes the ritual practices centered on the object to the rational practices centered on function and meaning*. Only a theory of culture can account for this theoretical bifurcation on which an antagonistic social strategy is established. Empirical studies only make, and can only make, apparent a logic of stratification (distinction-inclusion-transition by plateaus — a continuous ascent); theoretical analysis makes a class logic emerge (distinction-exclusion). *There are those for whom TV is an object, there are those for whom it is a cultural exercise:* on this radical opposition a cultural class privilege is established that is registered in an essential social privilege.

It is obvious that neither one of these two antagonistic cultural classes exists in its pure state: but the cultural class strategy does exist in the pure state.[35] *The social reality* (subject to empirical investigation) makes hierarchical dosages appear, respective statuses for each social "category." But the *social logic* (subject to a theoretical analysis of the cultural system) makes two opposed terms appear, not the two "poles" of an evolution, but the two exclusive terms of an opposition; and these are not only the two distinct terms of a formal opposition, but the two distinctive exclusive terms of a social opposition.

The Democratic Alibi: The "Universe" of Consumption

Of course, this cultural class logic is never manifest: on the contrary, consumption presents itself as a democratic social

35. Just as neither the bourgeoisie nor the proletariat has ever been alone, confronted by the other, nor have they ever existed in the pure state in real society. This does not hinder class logic and strategy from being defined, and from acting concretely according to this antagonistic model.

function; in that way it can act as a class institution. It presents itself as a function of human needs, and thus as a universal empirical function. Objects, goods, services, all this "responds" to the universal motivations of the social and individual anthropos. On this basis one could even argue (the leitmotiv of the ideologues of consumption) that its function is to correct the social inequalities of a stratified society: confronting the hierarchy of power and social origin, there would be a democracy of leisure, of the expressway and the refrigerator.

The cultural class logic in bourgeois society is always rooted in the democratic alibi of universals. Religion was a universal. The humanist ideals of liberty and equality were universals. Today the universal takes on the absolute evidence of concreteness: today the universal is human needs, and all the cultural and material goods that respond. It is the universal of consumption.

This ambiguity of consumption — that it seems to act as a factor of democratization in a society calling itself stratified, and this to function better as a class institution — finds its most vivid illustration in the *Reader's Digest Selection* survey of "the consumers' Europe:"[36] "221,750,000 consumers (Common Market and Great Britain)." Out of this gigantic economic tableau, which includes essential, directly comparable statistics with respect to lifestyles, habits of consumption, opinions, attitudes and goods possessed by the inhabitants of seven countries, Piatier draws a certain number of perspectives: "Thanks to complementary statistical reductions it was possible to systematically isolate the responses of group A (upper groupings) and to compare them to the ensemble of other groups."

"It seems that for the Common Market and Great Britain one can speak of a civilization of A's, or to employ a more picturesque expression, of a civilization of white collars; these latter (and this is one of the most interesting results of the *Selection* study) appear to represent a homogeneous group crossing all borders."

"Thus according to this hypothesis, the inhabitants of the seven countries would have a common model of consumption: in the process of development of consumption, group A could constitute a sort of directing schema towards which the rest of the population would gravitate as its revenues increased."

The indices of the ensemble that divide group A (upper groupings, liberal professions, heads of industry and commerce) from group non-A are: luxury equipment (dishwasher, tape recorder, camera, etc.), luxury foods, comfortable living quarters and automobile,

36. André Piatier, "Structures and Perspectives of European Consumption" (Paris, 1967), published by *Reader's Digest Selection*.

toiletries for women, basic household equipment (television, refrigerator, washing machine, etc.), cleaning products, everyday food, male toiletries and intellectual curiosity (voyages abroad, speaking a foreign language)!

So here it is a question of formalizing social realities (which are already deliberately simplified and reduced to formal indices of consumption) into an artificial scheme of stratification (A's and non-A's). The political, social, economic (structures of production and the market) and cultural — all these aspects are volatilized. At the individual-massified level only the quantifiable remains, the statistical balance sheet of goods of consumption taken as the absolute indicators of social essence.[37] Thus an elite is revealed that is not a bearer of values nor of power, but of objects, of a panoply of deluxe gadgets in which the "idea" of Europe is registered materially beyond ideologies. The European ideal thus defined will permit the systematic orientation and sanctioning of the confused aspirations of consuming masses: to be European will consist in passing from the trinity of television, refrigerator and washing machine to the sublime trinity of sports car, stereo system and country house.

Now in fact behind this group of A's, this directing schema of the European ideal, rests a European reality, which is the more or less forced solidarity of the industrial and technical Western European bourgeoisies in global competition. But this common strategy, this political International is hidden here by an International of standing. This very real solidarity disguises itself in the formal solidarity of the consuming masses (so much the more formal in that its indices, the goods of consumption, are more "concrete"). The Europe of trusts adopts the mask of the Europe of cubic inch displacement, the living room and ice cream.

The A's and the Non-A's

In fact this schema of international stratification aims above all towards a political operation of national integration appropriate to each of the countries concerned, under the symbol of "Europe" — and this not only by means of the bias of consumption but also by that of stratification. In fact, one could have schematized it into a complex model, but here the statistical craftiness is to schematize it into a simple and striking binary model: the group of A's and the Others, the non-A's. Thus, the old bogey of the duel between antagonistic classes is conjured away in a statistical dichotomy: there are still two terms, but they are no longer in conflict — they change into the two poles of a social dynamic. The effect (and objective) of

37. A much more suspect procedure than Chapin's scale of the living room, cited above.

this tactical division is to neutralize the extremes and hence any contradiction that might result on the social level: there is a model-level (directing schema) and — all the others. These latter, mixed in together by the statistics, no longer appear except as a population, an immense and virtual middle class that is already morally accultured to the displays of the privileged classes. No longer is there a radical distortion between the company president and ordinary salaried employees, because the latter, while statistically lost in the middle classes, see themselves with a "middle" standing and as having been promised that of the upper classes. From top to bottom of the scale, no one is inexorably cut off by distance. There are no more extremes, no more tension: the formal frontier between the A's and the non-A's is there only to better prime the aspiration toward the higher level and the illusion of a general regrouping to take place sooner or later in the paradise of A. For "Europe," it is clearly understood, can only be democratic.

The two groups are in formal opposition and virtual homogeneity: this stratification, simplified to the extreme, is the coronation of a statistically based integrating sociology. The whole logic of social contradiction is volatilized. This binary schema is a magic schema of integration: the arbitrary division of distinctive signs on the same scale allows the suggestion of an international model of distinction (the A's), all the while preserving an international model of democracy; the idea of Europe — which is in fact quite simply that of the virtual homogenization of all social categories under the beneficent constellation of objects.

There is a double mystification. On the one hand, there is the illusion of a "dynamic" of consumption, of an ascending spiral of satisfactions and distinctions toward a paradoxical summit where all would enjoy the same prestigious standing. This false dynamic is in fact entirely permeated by the inertia of a social system that is immutable in its discrimination of real powers. On the other hand, there is an illusion of a "democracy" of consumption. On the balance sheet of objects, one can formally gather together widely separated social categories: the real discrimination is made at the level of selective practices (choice, taste, etc.) and above all, of more or less strong adherence to the very values of consumption. This last point requires commentary.[38]

The study clarifies the disparities appearing between A and non-A in certain sectors: equipment, luxury food, and intellectual curiosity(!). In other sectors the authors note (triumphantly) the weak

38. Regarding "practices" as marks of social destiny, see above.

disparity between lifestyles of A's and non-A's, marked in such indices as regular food, basic equipment and toiletries. The disparity is weakest in the richest countries: Germany, Great Britain and the Netherlands. In Great Britain the average consumption of male toiletries for non-A's is even superior to that of A's! The criterion of "goods consumed" is thus not decisive: the fundamental inequality is elsewhere. Even if the inequality escapes the study, and is made more subtle,[39] one must search beyond figures, statistics and the study itself, for what it does not wish to express, for what it wishes to hide. Its secret is that consumption, with its false social appearance, veils the true political strategy, and is thus one of the essential elements of this strategy.

A Slave Morality

A whole new conception of class strategy is organized around the possession of cultural and material goods. One only pretends to universalize the criteria and values of consumption in order to better assign the "irresponsible" classes (without the power of decision) to consumption and thus to preserve the exclusive access of the directing classes to their powers. The formal frontier traced by the statisticians between A's and non-A's is quite fundamentally a social barrier, but it does not separate those who enjoy a higher standing from those who will enjoy it later. It distinguishes those who are *in addition* privileged consumers, those for whom the prestige of consumption is in a way the usufruct of their fundamental privilege (cultural and political), from those who are *consecrated* to consumption, triumphantly resigning themselves to it as the very sign of their social relegation, those for whom consumption, the very profusion of goods and objects, marks the limit of their social chances, those for whom the demands for culture, social responsibility, and personal accomplishment are resolved into needs and absolved in the objects that satisfy them. In this perspective, which is not legible at the level of the apparent mechanisms, consumption and the *values* of consumption are defined as the very criterion of a new discrimination: adherence to these values acts as a new morality for the use of slaves.

One must wonder whether social salvation by consumption, whether prodigality and sumptuous expenditure (formerly the appendage of chiefs and notables) is not today *conceded* to the lower and middle classes. For this selective criterion has long ago given way as the foundation of power to the criteria of production,

39. Thus the fact of acquiring a certain model a month or a day before others can constitute a radical privilege.

responsibility, and economic and political decision.

It must be asked whether certain classes are not consecrated to finding their salvation in objects, consecrated to a social destiny of consumption and thus assigned to a slave morality (enjoyment, immorality, irresponsibility) as opposed to a master morality (responsibility and power). Such are the heirs of the servile, subaltern classes, or of courtesans dedicated to *paraphernalia*.

In this sense it is absurd to speak of a consumer society as if consumption were a system of universal values appropriate to all men because of being founded upon the satisfaction of individual needs, when really it is an institution and a morality, and in this way an element of the strategy of power in any society, past or future.

Here sociology is most of the time both a dupe and an accomplice: it takes the ideology of consumption for consumption itself. Pretending to believe that objects and consumption (as formerly moral principles or religion) have the same meaning from top to bottom of the social scale, it accredits the universal myth of status and on this basis goes on sociologizing, pondering, stratifying and correlating things at statistics' whim.

Now what must be read and what one must know how to read in *upper class* superiority, in electric household equipment or in luxury food, is precisely *not* its advance on the scale of material benefits, but rather its *absolute privilege*, bound up in the fact that its pre-eminence is precisely not established in signs of prestige and abundance, but elsewhere, in the real spheres of decision, direction and political and economic power, in the manipulation of signs and of men. And this relegates the Others, the *lower* and *middle* classes, to phantasms of the promised land.

CHAPTER TWO

THE IDEOLOGICAL GENESIS OF NEEDS[1]

The rapturous satisfactions of consumption surround us, clinging to objects as if to the sensory residues of the previous day in the delirious excursion of a dream. As to the logic that regulates this strange discourse — surely it compares to what Freud uncovered in *The Interpretation of Dreams*? But we have scarcely advanced beyond the explanatory level of naive psychology and the medieval dreambook. We believe in "Consumption": we believe in a real subject, motivated by needs and confronted by real objects as sources of satisfaction. It is a thoroughly vulgar metaphysic. And contemporary psychology, sociology and economic science are all complicit in the fiasco. So the time has come to deconstruct all the assumptive notions involved — object, need, aspiration, *consumption* itself — for it would make as little sense to theorize the quotidian from surface evidence as to interpret the manifest discourse of a dream: it is rather the dream-work and the dream-processes that must be analyzed in order to recover the unconscious logic of a more profound discourse. And it is the workings and processes of an unconscious social logic that must be retrieved beneath the consecrated ideology of consumption.

1. Consumption as a Logic of Significations

The empirical "object," given in its contingency of form, color, material, function and discourse (or, if it is a cultural object, in its aesthetic finality) is a myth. How often it has been wished away! But the object is *nothing*. It is nothing but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around it, as such — the hidden logic that not only arranges this bundle of relations, but directs the manifest discourse that overlays and occludes it.

The Logical Status of Objects

Insofar as I make use of a refrigerator as a machine, it is not an object. It is a refrigerator. Talking about refrigerators or automobiles in terms of "objects" is something else. That is, it has nothing to do with them in their "objective" relation to keeping things cold or transportation. It is to speak of the object as functionally decontextualized:

1. Either as an object of psychic investment[2] and fascination, of

1. This piece first appeared in *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, 1969.

2. *Investissement*: this is the standard, and literal, French equivalent of Freud's *Besetzung*, which also means investment in ordinary German. The English, however,

passion and projection — qualified by its exclusive relation with the subject, who then cathects it as if it were his own body (a borderline case). Useless and sublime, the object then loses its common name, so to speak, and assumes the title of Object as generic proper name. For this reason, the collector never refers to a statuette or a vase as a beautiful statuette, vase, etc., but as "a beautiful Object." This status is opposed to the generic dictionary meaning of the word, that of the "object" plain and simple: "Refrigerator: an object that refrigerates. . ."

2. Or (between the Object, as proper name and projective equivalent of the subject, and the object, with the status of a common name and implement) as an object specified by its trademark, charged with differential connotations of status, prestige and fashion. *This* is the "object of consumption." It can just as easily be a vase as a refrigerator, or, for that matter, a whoopee cushion. Properly speaking, it has no more existence than a phoneme has an absolute meaning in linguistics. This object does not assume meaning either in a symbolic relation with the subject (the Object) or in an operational relation to the world (object-as-implement): it finds meaning with other objects, in difference, according to a hierarchical code of significations. This alone, at the risk of the worst confusion, defines the object of consumption.

Of Symbolic Exchange "Value"

In symbolic exchange, of which the gift is our most proximate illustration, the object is not an object: it is inseparable from the concrete relation in which it is exchanged, the transferential pact that it seals between two persons: it is thus not independent as such. It has, properly speaking, neither use value nor (economic) exchange value. The object given has symbolic exchange value. This is the paradox of the gift: it is on the one hand (relatively) arbitrary: it matters little what object is involved. Provided it is given,[3] it can fully signify the relation. On the other hand, once it has been given — and *because* of this — it is *this* object and not another. The gift is unique, specified by the people exchanging and the unique moment of the exchange. It is arbitrary, and yet absolutely singular.

As distinct from language, whose material can be dissassociated from the subjects speaking it, the material of symbolic exchange, the

have insisted on rendering this concept by coining a word that sounds more technical: cathexis, to cathect, etc. The term has been used here mainly to draw attention to the psychoanalytic sense, which varies in intensity and precision, of Baudrillard's *investissement, investir*. Loosely, Freud's concept involves the quantitative transfer of psychic energy to parts of the psyche, images, objects, etc. — *Trans.*

3. *Not* epistemologically given! — *Trans.*

objects given, are not autonomous, hence not codifiable as signs. Since they do not depend on economic exchange, they are not amenable to systematization as commodities and exchange value.

What constitutes the object as value in symbolic exchange is that one separates himself from it in order to give it, to throw it at the feet of the other, under the gaze of the other (*ob-jicere*); one divests himself as if of a part of himself — an act which is significant in itself as the basis, simultaneously, of both the mutual presence of the terms of the relationship, and their mutual absence (their distance). The ambivalence of all symbolic exchange material (looks, objects, dreams, excrement) derives from this: the gift is a medium of relation *and* distance; it is always love and aggression.[4]

From Symbolic Exchange to Sign Value

It is from the (theoretically isolatable) moment when the exchange is no longer purely transitive, when the object (the material of exchange) is immediately presented as such, that it is reified into a sign. Instead of abolishing itself in the relation that it establishes, and thus assuming symbolic value (as in the example of the gift), the object becomes autonomous, intransitive, opaque, and so begins to signify the abolition of the relationship. Having become a sign object, it is no longer the mobile signifier of a lack between two beings, it is 'of' and 'from' the reified relation (as is the commodity at another level, in relation to reified labor power). Whereas the symbol refers to lack (to absence) as a virtual relation of desire, the sign object only refers to the absence of relation itself, and to isolated individual subjects.

The sign object is neither given nor exchanged: it is appropriated, withheld and manipulated by individual subjects as a sign, that is, as coded difference. Here lies the object of consumption. And it is always of and from a reified, abolished social relationship that is "signified" in a code.

What we perceive in the symbolic object (the gift, and also the traditional, ritual and artisanal object) is not only the concrete manifestation of a total relationship (ambivalent, and total because it is ambivalent) of desire; but also, through the singularity of an object, the transparency of social relations in a dual or integrated group relationship. In the commodity, on the other hand, we perceive the opacity of social relations of production and the reality of the division of labor. What is revealed in the contemporary profusion of sign objects, objects of consumption, is precisely this

4. Thus the structure of exchange (cf. Lévi-Strauss) is never that of simple reciprocity. It is not two simple terms, but two *ambivalent* terms that exchange, and the exchange establishes their relationship as ambivalent.

opacity, the *total constraint of the code* that governs social value: it is the specific weight of *signs* that regulates the social logic of exchange.

The object-become-sign no longer gathers its meaning in the concrete relationship between two people. It assumes its meaning in its differential relation to other signs. Somewhat like Lévi-Strauss' myths, sign-objects exchange among themselves. Thus, only when objects are autonomized as differential signs and thereby rendered systematizable can one speak of consumption and of objects of consumption.

A Logic of Signification

So it is necessary to distinguish the logic of consumption, which is a logic of the sign and of difference, from several other logics that habitually get entangled with it in the welter of evidential considerations. (This confusion is echoed by all the naive and authorized literature on the question.) Four logics would be concerned here:

1. A functional logic of use value;
2. An economic logic of exchange value;
3. A logic of symbolic exchange;
4. A logic of sign value.

The first is a logic of practical operations, the second one of equivalence, the third, ambivalence, and the fourth, difference.

Or again: a logic of utility, a logic of the market, a logic of the gift, and a logic of status. Organized in accordance with one of the above groupings, the object assumes respectively the status of an *instrument*, a *commodity*, a *symbol*, or a *sign*.

Only the last of these defines the specific field of consumption. Let us compare two examples:

The wedding ring: This is a unique object, symbol of the relationship of the couple. One would neither think of changing it (barring mishap) nor of wearing several. The symbolic object is made to last and to witness in its duration the permanence of the relationship. Fashion plays as negligible a role at the strictly symbolic level as at the level of pure instrumentality.

The ordinary ring is quite different: it does not symbolize a relationship. It is a non-singular object, a personal gratification, a sign in the eyes of others. I can wear several of them. I can substitute them. The ordinary ring takes part in the play of my accessories and the constellation of fashion. It is an object of consumption.

Living accommodations: The house, your lodgings, your apartment: these terms involve semantic nuances that are no doubt

linked to the advent of industrial production or to social standing. But, whatever one's social level in France today, one's domicile is not necessarily perceived as a "consumption" good. The question of residence is still very closely associated with patrimonial goods in general, and its symbolic scheme remains largely that of the body. Now, for the logic of consumption to penetrate here, the exteriority of the sign is required. The residence must cease to be hereditary, or interiorized as an organic family space. One must avoid the appearance of filiation and identification if one's debut in the world of fashion is to be successful.

In other words, domestic practice is still largely a function of determinations, namely: symbolic (profound emotional investment, etc.), and economic (scarcity).

Moreover, the two are linked: only a certain "discretionary income" permits one to play with objects as status signs — a stage of fashion and the "game" where the symbolic and the utilitarian are both exhausted. Now, as to the question of residence — in France at least — the margin of free play for the mobile combinatory of prestige or for the game of substitution is limited. In the United States, by contrast, one sees living arrangements indexed to social mobility, to trajectories of careers and status. Inserted into the global constellation of status, and subjugated to the same accelerated obsolescence of any other object of luxury, the house truly becomes an object of consumption.

This example has a further interest: it demonstrates the futility of any attempt to define the object empirically. Pencils, books, fabrics, food, the car, curios — are these objects? Is a house an object? Some would contest this. The decisive point is to establish whether the symbolism of the house (sustained by the shortage of housing) is irreducible, or if even this can succumb to the differential and reified connotations of fashion logic: for if this is so, then the home becomes an object of consumption — as any other object will, if it only answers to the same definition: being, cultural trait, ideal, gestural pattern, language, etc. — anything can be made to fit the bill. The definition of an object of consumption is entirely independent of objects themselves and *exclusively a function of the logic of significations.*

An object is not an object of consumption unless it is released from its psychic determinations as *symbol*; from its functional determinations as *instrument*; from its commercial determinations as *product*; and is thus *liberated as a sign* to be recaptured by the formal logic of fashion, i.e., by the logic of differentiation.

The Order of Signs and Social Order

There is no object of consumption before the moment of its substitution, and without this substitution having been determined by the social law, which demands not only the renewal of distinctive material, but the obligatory registration of individuals on the scale of status, through the mediation of their group and as a function of their relations with other groups. *This scale is properly the social order,* since the acceptance of this hierarchy of differential signs and the interiorization by the individual of signs in general (i.e., of the norms, values, and social imperatives that signs are) constitutes the fundamental, decisive form of social control — more so even than acquiescence to ideological norms.

It is now clear that there is no autonomous problematic of objects, but rather the much more urgent need for a theory of social logic, and of the codes that it puts into play (sign systems and distinctive material).

The Common Name, the Proper Name, and the Brand Name

Let us recapitulate the various types of status of the object according to the specific and (theoretically) exhaustive logics that may penetrate it:

1. The refrigerator is specified by its function and irreplaceable in this respect. There is a necessary relation between the object and its function. The arbitrary nature of the sign is not involved. But all refrigerators are interchangeable in regard to this function (their objective "meaning").

2. By contrast, if the refrigerator is taken as an element of comfort or of luxury (standing), then in principle any other such element can be substituted for it. The object tends to the status of sign, and each social status will be signified by an entire constellation of exchangeable signs. No necessary relation to the subject or the world is involved. There is only a systematic relation obligated to all other signs. And in this combinatory abstraction lie the elements of a code.

3. In their symbolic relationship to the subject (or in reciprocal exchange), all objects are potentially interchangeable. Any object can serve as a doll for the little girl. But once cathected, it is *this* one and not another. The symbolic material is relatively arbitrary, but the subject-object relation is fused. Symbolic discourse is an idiom.

The functional use of the object occurs in relation to its technical structure and its practical manipulation. It relates to the common name: e.g., refrigerator. The use of the symbol-object occurs in the context of its concrete presence and through the proper name proper to it. Possession and passion baptize the object (in the metaphorical name of the subject), affixing their seal to it. The "consumption of the object occurs in the context of its brand name, which is not a proper name, but a sort of generic Christian name.[5]

2. Consumption as a Structure of Exchange and Differentiation

Of the Invalidity of the Notion of the Object and Need

We can see now that objects have no meaning except in those logical contexts that can mingle, often contradictorily, on the plane of one object alone; and that these various significations depend on the index and modalities of *commutation* possible within the framework of each logic. And so what possible meaning can any classification, definition, or categorization of objects in themselves have when the object (once again taken in the widest sense of the term) is commutable according to many rules (the rules of equivalence in the functional and economic domain; the rules of difference in the domain of signs; the rule of ambivalence in that of the symbolic)? Is it when the discourse of the conscious and the unconscious gets entangled in the object — the full discourse of denotation, the parallel discourse of connotation, the internal discourse of the subject and social discourse of relationship — even the entirely latent discourse, in the object, of the symbolic absence of the subject from himself and the other?[6] And what possible foundation could there be for all the possible theories of needs, more or less indexed as they are to these would-be categories and classifications of objects? In such an area of flux, empirical formalizations are devoid of meaning. The situation is reminiscent of Borges' zoological classification: "Animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor; (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, etc., etc.,. . . ."[7] All classifications of objects and needs are neither more logical nor less surrealist than this.

5. In the logic of the commodity, all goods or objects become universally commutable. Their (economic) practice occurs through their price. There is no relationship either to the subject or to the world, but only a relation to the market.

6. The same goes for food: as a "functional need," hunger is not symbolic. Its objective is satiation. The food object is not substitutable. But it is well known that eating can satisfy an oral drive, being a neurotic substitute for lack of love. In this second function, eating, smoking, collecting objects, obsessive memorization can all be equivalent: the symbolic paradigm is radically different from the functional paradigm. Hunger as such is not signified, it is appeased. Desire, on the other hand, is signified throughout an entire chain of signifiers. And when it happens to be a desire for something experienced as lost, when it is a lack, an absence on which the objects that signify it have come to be inscribed, does it make any sense to treat such objects literally, as if they were merely what they are? And what can the notion of need possibly refer to, in these circumstances?

7. Borges, cited in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1970), p. xv.

Need and Mana

To reduce the conceptual entity "object" is, by the same token, to deconstruct the conceptual entity "need." We could explode that of the subject as well.

Subject, object, need: the mythological structure of these three ideas is identical, triply elaborated in terms of the naive factuality and the schemas of a primary level psychology.

What speaks in terms of need is magical thinking. The subject and the object having been posited as autonomous and separated entities — as specular[8] and distinct myths — it then becomes necessary to establish their relation. This is accomplished, of course, with the concept of need. Incidentally — all else remaining equal — the concept resembles that of *mana*.[9] Conceiving exchange as an operation between two separated terms, each existing in isolation prior to the exchange, one has to establish the existence of the exchange itself in a double obligation: that of giving and that of returning. Thus it is necessary to imagine (as Mauss and the native apparently do) an immanent power in the object, the *hau*, whose force haunts the recipient of the object and incites him to divest himself of it. The insurmountable opposition between the terms of the exchange is thus reduced at the price of a tautological, artificial, magical, supplementary concept, of which Lévi-Strauss, in his critique, has worked out the economics in positing exchange directly as structure. Thus, the psychologist, economist, etc., having provided themselves with a subject and an object, can barely rejoin them but for the grace of need. But this concept can only explain the subject-object relation in terms of adequation, the functional response of subjects to objects, and vice versa. It amounts to a kind of functionalist nominalism, which precipitates the whole psycho-economic ideology of optimality, equilibrium, functional regulation

8. *Speculaire:* The adjective specular and the noun specularity occur often in Baudrillard's analyses of ideology. They deliberately recall the mirror-like relations of the Imaginary order, which is opposed to the Symbolic order in Lacanian psychoanalysis. For the best introduction to Lacan in English, see Anthony Wilden, *The Language of the Self* (New York: 1968) and *System and Structure* (London: 1972). The latter work is less informative with respect to Lacan specifically, but attempts a curious synthesis that may fruitfully be compared with Baudrillard's work. Wilden is more sympathetic toward traditional Marxist assumptions and to mainstream social science in the form of cybernetics, systems theory, etc. With the work of Lévi-Strauss, Lacan and others behind them, both have in common a concern for the apparently special or traditionally unaccountable status of *symbolic* exchange, a critique of the "digital bias" (Wilden) in the Western *epistème* (which, by definition, would include the 19th-century revolutionary critique of or version of political economy); and both attempt to reexamine such basic concepts as need, desire, the subject, object, etc. —*Trans.*

9. According to Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* (London: Routledge, 1970).

and adaptation of needs.

In fact, the operation amounts to defining the subject by means of the object and the object in terms of the subject. It is a gigantic tautology of which the concept of need is the consecration. Metaphysics itself has never done anything else and, in Western thought, *metaphysics and economic science* (not to mention traditional psychology) *demonstrate a profound solidarity,* mentally and ideologically, in the way they posit the subject and tautologically resolve its relation to the world. *Mana*, vital force, instincts, needs, choices, preferences, utilities, motivations: it is always a question of the same magical copula, the equal sign in "A = A." Metaphysics and economics jostle each other at the same impasses, over the same aporias, the same contradictions and dysfunctions, condemning each from the start to unlimited circular speculation by positing the autonomy of the subject and its specular reflection in the autonomy of the object.

The "Circle" of Power

But we know that the tautology is never innocent — no more than the finalism that underlies the entire mythology of needs. Such run-arounds are always the rationalizing ideology of a system of power: the dormant virtue of opium, the refrains of "Que Sera Sera": like Borges' animal categories ("included in the present classification"), or like the theological pronouncement: "When a given subject purchases such and such an object, this behavior is a function of his particular choices and preferences." At bottom, under the umbrella of the logical principle of identity, such admirable metaphors for the void sanction the circular principle of a system of power, the reproductive finality of the order of production. This is why economic science does not dispense with the concept of need. It could easily do so, for its calculations operate at the level of statistical demand. But the notion is urgently required for ideological support.

The *legitimacy* of production rests on a *petitio principii*, i.e., that people discover a posteriori and almost miraculously that they need what is produced and offered at the marketplace (and thus, in order that they should experience this or any particular need, the need must already exist inside people as a virtual postulation). And so it appears that this begging of the question — this forced rationalization — simply masks the *internal finality* of the order of production. To become an end in itself, every system must dispel the question of its real teleology. Through the meretricious legitimacy of needs and satisfactions, the entire question of the social and political finality of productivity is repressed.

One could object that this is not a forced rationalization, since the discourse of needs is the subject's spontaneous form of interpreting his relation to objects and to the world. But this is precisely the problem. In his attempt to recapture this discourse, the analyst of modern society reproduces the misconstruction of naive anthropology: *he naturalizes the processes of exchange and signification.*

Thus social logic itself escapes him. It is true that all magical thinking draws a certain measure of efficacy from the empirical manipulation and theoretical misunderstanding of its own procedures. Thus, speculation on needs converges with the long tradition of speculation on *mana*. It is mythical thought that reflects in the mirror of economic "rationality."

Interdisciplinary Neo-Humanism, or Psycho-Social Economics

It thus proves necessary to reconstruct social logic entirely. Nothing is more instructive in this regard than the adulterous relations that obtain between the economic and the social sciences. Virtuous thinkers have done their utmost for a generation now to reconcile these estranged disciplines (in the name of Man, their dada). They have striven to attenuate all that is profoundly inadmissible — *obscene* — for their disciplines in the very existence of the others and in the haunting memory of a knowledge that escapes them. Economics in particular can only delay the eruption, in the midst of its calculations, of a psychological logic of the unconscious or of an equally unconscious logic of social structures. The logic of ambivalence on the one hand, of difference on the other, are incompatible with the logic — sacred to economics — of equivalence. To foil their literally destructive influence, "economic science" will throw in its lot with desiccated and inoffensive forms of psychology and sociology, i.e., the latter as traditional disciplines — all in the name of pious interdisciplinary study. One never thinks, from this viewpoint, of introducing social or psychological dimensions of a specific nature: rather, one simply adds to the criteria of individual utility ("rational" economic variables) a pinch of "irrational" *individual* psychology (motivational studies, depth psychology) and some interpersonal social psychology (the individual *need* for prestige and status) — or simply a kind of global socio-culture. In short, one looks for *context*.

Some examples: certain studies (Chombart de Lauwe) reveal in the lower orders an abnormal consumption of meat: too little, or too much. As long as one consumes meat along the mean, one partakes of economic rationality. No problems. Otherwise, one produces the psychological: the need for prestige, conspicuous under- or over-consumption, etc. Hence, the social and the psychological are defined as the "economically pathological"! Another social analyst, Katona, discovers his "discretionary income" and his cultural implications with relish: he explores, beyond purchasing power, a "propensity to buy that reflects the motivations, the tendencies and the expectations of the clientele!"[10] Such are the maudlin illuminations of psycho-economics.

Or sometimes it is observed (when it becomes impossible to ignore) that the individual is never alone, that he is determined by his relation to others. And so Robinsonades are abandoned for micro-sociological *bricolage*. American sociology has somehow been arrested at this point. Even Merton, with his theory of the reference group, always works on groups that in fact are empirically given and with the empirical notion of aspiration as a lubricant of the social dynamic.

Psychologism goes hand in hand with culturalism, another benign version of a sociology that refuses to live dangerously: needs are functions of the particular history and culture of each society. This is the zenith of liberal analysis, beyond which it is congenitally incapable of thinking. The postulate of man endowed with needs and a natural inclination to satisfy them is never questioned. It is simply immersed in a historical and cultural dimension (very often defined in advance, and by other means); and then, by implication, impregnation, interaction, articulation or osmosis, it is recontextualized in a social history or a culture that is understood really as a second nature! All this culminates in overblown "character structures," cultural types writ large that are given as structures, though they are only empirical totalizations of distinctive traits, and — again — basically gigantic tautologies, since the "model" is composed of an admixture of the characteristic traits it is intended to explain.

Tautology is at work everywhere. Thus, in the theory of "consumption models": social situations can be as important as taste in determining the level of consumption (in France, sweets are inseparable from their use by parents as instruments of education). "It would thus be possible, when one got acquainted with the sociological significance of products, to paint the portrait of a society with the aid of the products that correspond to these norms. Reference groups and membership groups could be understood at the level of consumer behavior." Or, again, the concept of "role" in the work of Lazarsfeld and others: the good housekeeper is supposed

10. Chombart de Lauwe, *Pour une Sociologie des Aspirations* (Gonthier) and George Katona, *The Society of Mass Consumption*.

to do the washing herself, use a sewing machine, and refrain from using instant coffee. The "role" plays the same function in the relation of the subject to social norms as need does in relation to objects. The same circle and the same white magic.

In the end, it is discovered that you can break down the purchase of a car into a whole constellation of possible motivations: biographical, technical, utilitarian, psychosymbolic (overcompensation, aggressiveness), sociological (group norms, desire for prestige, conformism or originality). The worst of it all is that every one of these is equally valid. It would be difficult to imagine a case where any one wouldn't apply. Often they formally contradict each other: the need for security versus the need to take risks; the desire to conform versus the need to be distinctive, etc. And which are determinant? How do you structure or rank them? In an ultimate effort, our thinkers strain to make their tautology dialectical: they talk about ongoing interaction (between the individual and the group, from one group to another, from one motivation to another). But the economists, hardly fond of dialectical variables, quickly retreat to their measurable utilities.

The confusion is quite irreparable, in fact. Without entirely lacking in interest, the results obtained at these different levels of abstraction (needs, social aspirations, roles, models of consumption, reference groups, etc.) are partial and misleading. Psycho-social economics is a sort of near-sighted, cross-eyed hydra. But it surveys and defends something, for all that. It exorcises the danger of a radical analysis, whose object would be neither the group nor the individual subject at the conscious level, but social logic itself, for which it is necessary to create a *principle* of analysis.

We have already asserted that this logic is a logic of differentiation. But this is not a question, as should be clear by now, of treating prestige, status, distinction, etc., as motivations, a level that has been largely thematized by contemporary sociology. At any rate, it is little more than a para-sociological extension of the traditional psychological givens. There is no doubt that individuals (or individuated groups) are consciously or subconsciously in quest of social rank and prestige and, of course, this level of the object should be incorporated into the analysis. But the fundamental level is that of *unconscious* structures that organize the social production of differences.

The Logic of Sign Exchange: The Production of Differences

Even before survival has been assured, every group or individual experiences a vital pressure to produce themselves meaningfully in a system of exchange and relationships. Concurrently with the production of goods, there is a push to elaborate significations, meaning — with the result that the one-for-the-other exists before the one *and* the other exist for themselves.

The logic of exchange is thus primordial. In a way, the individual is non-existent (like the object of which we spoke at the beginning). At any rate, a certain language (of words, women, or goods) is prior to the individual. This language is a social form in relation to which there can properly speaking be no individuals, since it is an exchange structure. This structure amounts to a logic of differentiation on two simultaneous planes:

1. It differentiates the human terms of the exchange into partners, not individuated, but nevertheless distinct, and bound by the rules of exchange.

2. It differentiates the exchange material into distinct and *thus significant* elements.

This is true of language communication. It applies also to goods and products. Consumption is exchange. A consumer is never isolated, any more than a speaker. It is here that total revolution in the analysis of consumption must intervene: *Language cannot be explained by postulating an individual need to speak* (which would pose the insoluble double problem of establishing this need on an individual basis, and then of articulating it in a possible exchange). Before such questions can even be put, there is, simply, language — not as an absolute, autonomous *system*, but as a structure of exchange contemporaneous with meaning itself, and on which is articulated the individual intention of speech. Similarly, consumption does not arise from an objective need of the consumer, a final intention of the subject towards the object; rather, there is social production, in a system of exchange, of a material of differences, a code of significations and invidious (*statuaire*) values. The functionality of goods and individual needs only follows on this, adjusting itself to, rationalizing, and in the same stroke repressing these fundamental structural mechanisms.

The origin of meaning is never found in the relation between a subject (given a priori as autonomous and conscious) and an object produced for rational ends — that is, properly, the *economic* relation, rationalized in terms of choice and calculation. It is to be found, rather, in difference, systematizable in terms of a code (as opposed to private calculation) — a differential structure that establishes the social relation, and not the subject as such.

Veblen and Invidious Distinction

We should refer at this point to Veblen, who, even if he posited the logic of differentiation more in terms of individuals than of classes, of

prestige interaction rather than of exchange structure, nevertheless offers in a way far superior to those who have followed him and who have pretended to surpass him the discovery of a principle of total social analysis, the basis of a radical logic, in the mechanisms of differentiation. This is not a superadded, contextual variable, situationally given, but a relational variable of structure. All of Veblen's work illustrates how the production of a social classification (class distinctions and statutory rivalry) is the fundamental law that arranges and subordinates all the other logics, whether conscious, rational, ideological, moral, etc.

Society regulates itself by means of the production of distinctive material: "The end of acquisition is conveniently held to be the consumption of the goods accumulated. . .but it is only in a sense far removed from its native meaning that consumption of goods can be said to afford the incentive from which accumulation proceeds. . . . Possession of wealth confers honors: it is an invidious distinction."[11]

Leisure

"Conspicuous abstention from labor becomes the conventional index of reputability."[12] Productive labor is degrading: the tradition never dies; it is only reinforced as social differentiation increases in complexity. In the end, it takes on the axiomatic authority of an absolute prescription — even alongside the moral reprobation of idleness and the reactive valorization of labor so strong in the middle classes (and today recuperated ideologically by the ruling class itself): a *président directeur général* works a fifteen-hour day, devotedly — it is his token of *affected* servitude. In fact, this reaction-formation proves, to the contrary, the power of leisure-nobility value as a deep-seated, unconscious representation.

Leisure is thus not a function of a need for leisure in the current sense of enjoying free time and functional repose. It can be invested in activities, provided they do not involve economic necessity. Leisure may be defined as any consumption of unproductive time. Now, this has nothing to do with passivity: it is an *activity*, an *obligatory* social phenomenon. Time is not in this instance "free," it is sacrificed, wasted; it is the moment of a production of value, of an invidious production of status, and the social individual is not free to escape it. No one needs leisure, but everyone is called upon to provide evidence of his availability for *unproductive* labor. The consumption of empty time is a form of potlatch. Here, free time is a material of exchange

11. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Mentor, 1953), p. 35.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

and signification. Like Bataille's "accursed share,"[13] it assumes value in the exchange itself — or in destruction — and leisure is the locus of this symbolic operation.[14]

The style of contemporary leisure provides a kind of experimental verification: left to himself, the conditions for creative freedom at last realized, the man of leisure looks desperately for a nail to hammer, a motor to dismantle. Outside the competitive sphere, there are no autonomous needs. Spontaneous motivation doesn't exist. But for all that, he can't permit himself to do nothing. At a loss for something to do with his free time, he nevertheless urgently "needs" to do nothing (or nothing useful), since this has distinctive social value.

Even today, what claims the average individual, through the holidays and during his free time, is not the liberty to "fulfill" himself (in terms of what? What hidden essence will surge to the fore?). He must verify the uselessness of his time — temporal surplus as sumptuous capital, as wealth. Leisure time, like consumption time in general, becomes emphatic, trade-marked social time — the dimension of social salvation, productive of value, but not of economic survival.[15]

Veblen pushed the law of distinctive value very far: "the canon of honorific waste may, immediately or remotely, influence the sense of duty, the sense of beauty, the sense of utility, the sense of devotional or ritualistic fitness, and the scientific sense of truth."[16]

The Law of Distinctive Value and its Paradox

This law of value can play on wealth or on destitution. Conspicuous luxury or conspicuous austerity answer to the same fundamental rule. What appears as an insoluble formal contradiction at the level of the empirical theory of needs falls into place, arranged according to this law, in a general theory of distinctive material.

Thus, churches are traditionally more sumptuous in the fashionable districts, but class imperative can impose a type of

13. Georges Bataille, *La Part Maudite* (Les Editions de Minuit, 1967).
14. See the analysis of an analogous type of operation in the chapter below on The Art Auction.
15. "Free" time brings together the "right" to work and the "liberty" to consume in the framework of the same system: *it is necessary* for time to be "liberated" in order to become a sign-function and take on social exchange value, whereas labor time, which is constrained time, possesses only economic exchange value. Cf. Part I of this essay: one could add a definition of symbolic time to that of the object. It would be that which is neither economically constrained nor "free" as sign-function, but *bound*, that is, inseparable from the concrete act of exchange — a rhythm.
16. Veblen, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

ascetic religiosity: Catholic pomp becomes the fact of the lower classes whereas, among Protestants, the spareness of the chapel only testifies to the greater glory of God (and establishes the distinctive sign of the class as well). There are innumerable examples of this paradox of value — of spartan wealth. People manipulate the subtle starkness of modern interiors. You pay through the nose to eat practically nothing. To deny oneself is a luxury! This is the sophistry of consumption, for which the refusal to validate a value is merely a hierarchical nuance in its formal verification.[17]

It is important to grasp that behind all these alleged finalities — functional, moral, aesthetic, religious and their contradictions — a logic of difference and super-difference is at work. But it is always repressed, since it belies the ideal finality of all the corresponding behavior. This is social reason, social logic. It transverses all values, all materials of exchange and communication.

In principle, nothing is immune to this structural logic of value. Objects, ideas, even conduct are not solely practiced as use values, by virtue of their "objective" meaning, in terms of their official discourse — for they can never escape the fact that they may be potentially exchanged as signs, i.e., assume another kind of value entirely in the very act of exchange and in the differential relation to the other that it establishes. The differential function of sign exchange always overdetermines the manifest function of what is exchanged, sometimes entirely contradicting it, repossessing it as an alibi, or *even producing it as an alibi*. This explains how the differential function materializes indifferently in opposite or contradictory terms: the beautiful or the ugly, the moral or the immoral, the good or the bad, the ancient or the new. The logic of difference cuts across all formal distinctions. It is equivalent to the primary process and the dream work: it pays no heed to the principle of identity and non-contradiction.[18]

Fashion

This deep-seated logic is akin to that of fashion. Fashion is one of the more inexplicable phenomena, so far as these matters go: its

17. Cf. "universal" furniture (or "universal" clothing in Roland Barthes' study of fashion): as the epitome of all functions, it becomes once again opposable to them, and thus simply one more term in the paradigm. Its value isn't universal, but derived from relative distinction. Thus all the "universal" values (ideological, moral, etc.) become again — indeed, perhaps are produced from the outset as — differential values.

18. In relation to this one, the other functions are secondary processes. They certainly constitute part of the sociological domain. But the logic of difference (like the primary process) constitutes the proper object of genuine social science.

compulsion to innovate signs, its apparently arbitrary and perpetual production of meaning — a kind of meaning drive — and the logical mystery of its cycle are all in fact of the essence of what is sociological. The logical processes of fashion might be extrapolated to the dimension of "culture" in general — to all social production of signs, values and relations.

To take a recent example: neither the long skirt nor the mini-skirt has an absolute value in itself — only their differential relation acts as a criterion of meaning. The mini-skirt has nothing whatsoever to do with sexual liberation; it has no (fashion) value except in opposition to the long skirt. This value is, of course, reversible: the voyage from the mini- to the maxi-skirt will have the same distinctive and selective fashion value as the reverse; and it will precipitate the same effect of "beauty."

But it is obvious that this "beauty" (or any other interpretation in terms of chic, taste, elegance, or even distinctiveness) is nothing but the exponential function — the rationalization — of the fundamental processes of production and reproduction of distinctive material. Beauty ("in itself") has nothing to do with the fashion cycle.[19] In fact, it is inadmissible. Truly beautiful, definitively beautiful clothing would put an end to fashion. The latter can do nothing but deny, repress and efface it — *while conserving, with each new outing, the alibi of beauty.*

Thus fashion continually fabricates the "beautiful" on the basis of a radical denial of beauty, by reducing beauty to the logical equivalent of ugliness. It can impose the most eccentric, dysfunctional, ridiculous traits as eminently distinctive. This is where it triumphs — imposing and legitimizing the irrational according to a logic deeper than that of rationality.

3. The System of Needs and of Consumption as a System of Productive Forces

It would appear that a "theory of needs" has no meaning. Only a theory of the *ideological concept* of need would make any sense. Before certain false problems have been overcome and radically reformulated, any reflection on the genesis of needs would have as little foundation as, for example, a history of the will. A form of the chimerical dialectic of being and appearance, soul and body still persists in the subject-object of dialectic of need. Ideological speculation of this sort has always appeared as a "dialectical" game

19. Any more than originality, the specific value, the objective merit is belonging to the aristocratic or bourgeois class. This is defined by signs, to the exclusion of "authentic" values. See Goblot, *La Barrière et le Niveau* (Presse Universitaire de France, 1967).

of ceaseless interaction in a mirror: when it is impossible to determine which of two terms engenders the other and one is reduced to making them reflect or produce each other reciprocally, it is a sure sign that the terms of the problem itself must be changed.

So it proves necessary to examine how economic science — and behind it, the political order — operates the concept of need.

The Myth of Primary Needs

The legitimacy of the concept is rooted in the alleged existence of a vital anthropological minimum that would be the dimension of "primary needs" — an irreducible zone where the individual chooses himself, since he knows what he wants: to eat, to drink, to sleep, to make love, to find shelter, etc. At this level, he cannot, it is supposed, be alienated in his need as such: only deprived of the means to satisfy it.

This bio-anthropological postulate directly launches the insoluble dichotomy of primary and secondary needs: beyond the threshold of survival, man no longer knows what he wants. And it is here that he becomes properly "social" for the economist: i.e., vulnerable to alienation, manipulation, mystification. On one side of the imaginary line, the economic subject is prey to the social and the cultural; on the other, he is an autonomous, inalienable essence. Note that this distinction, by conjuring away the socio-cultural in secondary needs, permits the recuperation, behind the functional alibi of survival-need, of a level of individual essence: a human essence grounded in nature. Moreover, this all proves quite versatile as an ideology. It has a spiritualist as well as a rationalist version. Primary and secondary needs can be separated in order to refer the former back to animality, the latter to the immaterial.[20] Or one can simply reverse the whole procedure by positing primary needs as (alone) objectively grounded (thus rational), and treat the others as subjectively variable (hence irrational). But this ideology is quite coherent in its overall features, because it always defines man a priori as an essence (or a rationality) that the social merely obscures.

In fact, the "vital anthropological minimum" doesn't exist: in all societies, it is determined residually by the fundamental urgency of an excess: the divine or sacrificial share, sumptuous discharge, economic profit. It is this pre-dedication of luxury that negatively determines the level of survival, and not the reverse (which is an idealist fiction). Advantages, profits, sacrifice (in the sense of social wealth) and "useless" expenditures are all deducted in advance. And the priority of this claim works everywhere at the expense of the

20. On this point, see Ruyer, *La Nutrition Psychique*.

functional side of the balance sheet — at the expense, where necessary, of minimal subsistence.

There have never been "societies of scarcity" or "societies of abundance," since the expenditures of a society (whatever the objective volume of its resources) are articulated in terms of a structural surplus, and an equally structural deficit. An enormous surplus can coexist with the worst misery. In all cases, a certain surplus coexists with a certain poverty. But the crucial point is that it is always the production of this surplus that regulates the whole. The survival threshold is never determined from below, but from above. Eventually, one might hypothesize, there will be no survival at all, if social imperatives demand it: the newborn will be liquidated (like prisoners of war, before a new constellation of productive forces made slavery profitable). The Siane of New Guinea, enriched through contact with Europeans, squandered everything in feasts, without ceasing to live below the "vital minimum." It is impossible to isolate an abstract, "natural" stage of poverty or to determine absolutely "what men need to survive." It may please one fellow to lose everything at poker and to leave his family starving to death. We know it is often the most disadvantaged who squander in the most "irrational" way. The game flourishes in direct relation to underdevelopment. There is even a narrow correlation between underdevelopment, the size of the poor classes, and the tentacular spread of the church, the military, domestic personnel, and expensive and useless sectors in general.

Conversely, just as survival can fall well below the vital minimum if the production of surplus value requires it, the threshold of *obligatory* consumption can be set well above the strictly necessary — always as a function of the production of surplus value: this is the case in our societies, where no one is free to live on raw roots and fresh water. From which follows the absurdity of the concept of "discretionary income" (the complement of the "vital minimum" concept): "the portion of his income the individual is free to spend as he pleases." In what way am I more free buying clothing or a car than buying my food (itself very sophisticated)? And how am I free *not* to choose? Is the purchase of an automobile or clothing "discretionary" when it is the unconscious substitute for an unrealistic desire for certain living accommodations? The vital minimum today, the minimum of imposed consumption, is the standard package.[21] Beneath this level, you are an outcast. Is loss of status — or social non-existence — less upsetting than hunger?

21. English in the original. — *Trans.*

In fact, discretionary income is an idea rationalized at the discretion of entrepreneurs and market analysts. It justifies their manipulation of secondary needs, since, in their view, these don't touch on the essential. The line of demarcation between essential and inessential has quite a precise double function:

1. To establish and preserve a sphere of individual human essence, which is the keystone of the system of ideological values.

2. To obscure behind the anthropological postulate the actual productivist definition of "survival": during the period of (capital) accumulation, what is "essential" is what is strictly necessary for the reproduction of the labor force. In the growth phase, however, it is what is necessary to maintain the rate of growth and surplus value.

The Emergence of Consummativity:[22] *Need-Productive Force*

One can generalize this conclusion by saying that needs — such as they are — can no longer be defined adequately in terms of the naturalistidealist thesis — as innate, instinctive power, spontaneous craving, anthropological potentiality. Rather, they are better defined as a *function* induced (in the individual) by the internal logic of the system: more precisely, *not as a consummative force liberated* by the affluent society, but *as a productive force* required by the functioning of the system itself, by its process of reproduction and survival. In other words, there are only needs because the system needs them.

And the needs invested by the individual consumer today are just as essential to the order of production as the capital invested by the capitalist entrepreneur and the labor power invested by the wage laborer. It is *all* capital.

Hence, there is a compulsion to need and a compulsion to consume. One can imagine laws sanctioning such constraint one day (an obligation to change cars every two years).[23]

To be sure, this systematic constraint has been placed under the sign of choice and "liberty," and hence appears as entirely opposed to the labor process as the pleasure principle is to the reality principle. In fact, the "liberty" to consume is of the same order as the freedom offered by the labor market. The capitalist system was erected on this liberty — on the formal emancipation of the labor force (and not on the concrete autonomy of work, which it abolishes). Similarly, consumption is only possible in the abstraction of a system based on

22. *Consommativité:* Baudrillard's neologism obviously suggests a parallel with the term "productivity," and all that connotes. — *Trans.*

23. It is so true that consumption is a productive force that, by significant analogy, it is often subsumed under the notion of profit: "Borrowing makes money." "Buy, and you will be rich." It is exalted not as expenditure, but as investment and profitability.

the "liberty" of the consumer. It is *necessary* that the individual user have a choice, and become through his choice free at last to enter as a productive force in a production calculus, exactly as the capitalist system frees the laborer to sell, at last, his labor power.

And just as the fundamental concept of this system is not, strictly speaking, that of production, but of *productivity* (labor and production disengage themselves from all ritual, religious, and subjective connotations to enter the historical process of rationalization); so, one must speak not of consumption, but of *consummativity*: even if the process is far from being as rationalized as that of production, the parallel tendency is to move from subjective, contingent, concrete enjoyment to an indefinite calculus of growth rooted in the abstraction of needs, on which the system this time imposes its coherence — a coherence that it literally produces as a by-product of its productivity.[24]

Indeed, just as concrete work is abstracted, little by little, into labor power in order to make it homogeneous with the means of production (machines, energy, etc.) and thus to multiply the homogeneous factors into a growing productivity — so desire is abstracted and atomized into needs, in order to make it homogeneous with the means of satisfaction (products, images, sign-objects, etc.) and thus to multiply consummativity.

The same process of rationalization holds (atomization and unlimited abstraction), but the ideological role of the concept of need is expanded: with all its hedonist illusions, *need-pleasure* masks the objective reality of *need-productive force*. Needs and labor[25] are therefore two modalities of the same exploitation[26] of productive forces. The saturated consumer appears as the spellbound avatar of the wage laborer.

24. Hence, it is vain to oppose consumption and production, as is so often done, in order to subordinate one to the other, or vice versa, in terms of causality or influence. For in fact we are comparing two heterogeneous sectors: productivity, that is, and abstract and generalized exchange value system where labor and concrete production areoccluded in laws — the modes and relations of production; secondly, a logic, and a sector, that of consumption, which is entirely conceived in terms of motivations and individual, contingent, concrete satisfactions. So, properly speaking, it is illegitimate to confront the two. On the other hand, if one conceives of consumption as production, the production of signs, which is also in the process of systematization on the basis of a generalization of exchange value (of signs), then the two spheres are homogeneous — though, at the same time, not comparable in terms of causal priority, but homologous from the viewpoint of structural modalities. The structure is that of the mode of production.

25. Cf. *besoin* and *besogne*. Baudrillard here draws attention to the etymological connection between the French term for need and the archaic word *besogne*, which commonly referred to labor, a heavy burden, etc., as well as meaning to need. — *Trans.*

26. In both senses of the term: technical and social.

Thus it should not be said that "consumption is entirely a function of production": rather, *it is consummativity that is a structural mode of productivity*. On this point, nothing has really changed in the historical passage from an emphasis on "vital" needs to "cultural" needs, or "primary" needs to "secondary" ones. The slave's only assurance that he would eat was that the system needed slaves to work. The only chance that the modern citizen may have to see his "cultural" needs satisfied lies in the fact that the system needs his needs, and that the individual is no longer content just to eat. In other words, if there had been, for the order of production, any means whatever of assuring the survival of the anterior mode of brutal exploitation, there would never have been much question of needs.[27] Needs are curbed as much as possible. But when it proves necessary, they are instigated as a means of repression.[28]

Controlled Desublimation

The capitalist system has never ceased to make women and children work *first* (to whatever extent possible). Under absolute constraint, it eventually "discovered" the great humanitarian and democratic principles. Schooling was only conceded piece by piece, and it was not generalized until it had imposed itself on the system — like universal suffrage — as a powerful means of social control and integration (or as a means of acculturation to industrial society). During the phase of industrialization, the last pennyworth of labor power was extorted without compunction. To extract surplus value, it was hardly necessary to prime the pump with needs. Then capital, confronted by its own contradictions (over-production, falling rate of profit), tried at first to surmount them by totally restructuring its accumulation through destruction, deficit budgeting and bankruptcy. It thus averted a redistribution of wealth, which would have placed the existing relations of production and structures of power seriously in question. But as soon as the threshold of rupture had been reached, capital was already unearthing the individual *qua* consumer. He was no longer simply the slave as labor power. This

27. A hypothesis: labor itself did not appear as a productive force until the social order (the structure of privilege and domination) absolutely needed it to survive, since the power based on personal and hierarchical relations was no longer sufficient by itself. The exploitation of labor is a last resort for the social order. Access to work is still refused to women as socially subversive.

28. Nonetheless, this emergence of needs, however formal and subdued, is never without danger for the social order — as is the liberation of any productive force. Apart from being the dimension of exploitation, it is also the origin of the most violent social contradictions, of class struggle. Who can say what historical contradictions the emergence and exploitation of this new productive force — that of needs — holds in store for us?

was truly a "production." And in bringing it off, capital was only delivering up a new kind of serf: the individual as consumption power.[29]

This is the point of departure for an analysis of consumption at the political level: it is necessary to overcome the ideological understanding of consumption as a process of craving and pleasure, as an extended metaphor on the digestive functions — where the whole issue is naturalized according to the primary scheme of the oral drive. It is necessary to surpass this powerful imaginary preconception in order to define consumption *not only structurally as a system of exchange and of signs, but strategically as a mechanism of power*. Now, the question of consumption is not clarified by the concept of needs, nor by theories of their qualitative transformation, or their massive extension: these phenomena are no more than the characteristic effect, at the individual level, of a certain monopolistic productivity, of a totalitarian economy (capitalist or socialist) driven to conjuring up leisure, comfort, luxury, etc.; briefly, they are the ultimate realization of the private individual as a productive force. The system of needs must wring liberty and pleasure from him as so many functional elements of the reproduction of the system of production and the relations of power that sanction it. It gives rise to these private functions according to the same principle of abstraction and radical "alienation" that was formerly (and still today) the case for his labor power. In this system, the "liberation" of needs, of consumers, of women, of the young, the body, etc., is always really the *mobilization* of needs, consumers, the body.... It is never an explosive liberation, but a controlled emancipation, a mobilization whose end is competitive exploitation.

It would appear that even the most deep-seated forces, the unconscious instincts, can be mobilized in this way by the "strategy of desire." We are now at the very heart of the concept of controlled desublimation (or "repressive desublimation," as Marcuse would say). At the limit, retranscribed in this primary psychoanalysis, the consumer appears as a knot of drives (future productive forces) repressed by the system of ego defense functions. These functions must be "desublimated" — hence, the deconstruction of the *ego* functions, the conscious moral and individual functions, to the benefit of a "liberation" of the id and the super-ego as factors of integration, participation and consumption — to the benefit of a kind of total consuming immorality in which the individual finally submerges himself in a pleasure principle entirely controlled by production planning.

29. There is no other basis for aid to underdeveloped countries.

To sum up: man is not simply *there* first, equipped with his needs, and designated by nature to fulfill and finalize himself *qua* Man. This proposition, which smacks of spiritualist teleology, in fact defines the individual function in our society — the functional myth of productivist society. The whole system of individual values — this religion of spontaneity, liberty, creativity, etc. — is bloated with the productivist option. Even the vital functions are immediately "functions" of the system.

We must reverse the terms of the analysis, and abolish the cardinal reference to the individual, for even that is the product of this social logic. We must abandon the constitutive social structure of the individual, and even his lived perception of himself: for man never really does come face to face with his own needs. This is not only true of "secondary" needs (where the individual is reproduced according to the finalities of production considered as consumption power). It applies equally well to "survival" needs. In this instance, man is not reproduced as man: he is simply regenerated as a survivor (a surviving productive force). If he eats, drinks, lives somewhere, reproduces himself, it is because the system requires his self-production in order to reproduce itself: it needs men. If it could function with slaves, there would be no "free" workers. If it could function with asexual mechanical robots, there would be no sexual reproduction.[30] If the system could function without feeding its workers, there would be no bread. It is in this sense that we are all, in the framework of this system, survivors. Not even the instinct of self-preservation is fundamental: it is a social tolerance or a social imperative. When the system requires it, it cancels this instinct and people get excited about dying (for a sublime cause, evidently).

We do not wish to say that "the individual is a product of society" at all. For, as it is currently understood, this culturalist platitude only masks the much more radical truth that, in its totalitarian logic, a system of productivist growth (capitalist, but not exclusively) can only produce and reproduce men — even in their deepest determinations: in their liberty, in their needs, in their very unconscious — as productive forces. The system can only produce and reproduce individuals as elements of the system. It cannot tolerate exceptions.

30. Robots remain the ultimate and ideal phantasm of a total productivist system. Still better, there is integrated automation. However, cybernetic rationality is devouring itself, for men are necessary for any system of social order and domination. Now, in the final analysis, this amounts nonetheless to the aim of all productivity, which is a *political* goal.

Generalized Sign Exchange and the Twilight of "Values"

So today everything is "recuperable."[31] But it is too simple to argue that first there are needs, authentic values, etc., and then they are alienated, mystified, recuperated, or what have you. This humanitarian Manicheanism explains nothing. If everything is "recuperable," it is because everything in monopoly capitalist society[32] — goods, knowledge, technique, culture, men, their relations and their aspirations — everything is reproduced, from the outset, immediately, as an element of the system, as an integrated variable.

The truth is — and this has been recognized for a long time in the area of economic production — that use value no longer appears anywhere in the system. The determining logic of exchange value is, however, as ubiquitous as ever. This must be recognized today as the truth of the sphere of "consumption" and the cultural system in general. In other words, everything, even artistic, intellectual, and scientific production, even innovation and transgression, is immediately produced as sign and exchange value (relational value of the sign).

A structural analysis of consumption is possible to the extent that "needs," consumption behavior and cultural behavior are not only recuperated, but systematically induced and produced as productive forces. Given this abstraction and this tendency toward total systematization, such an analysis is entirely possible, if it in turn is based on an analysis of the social logic of production and the *generalized exchange* of signs.

31. The term itself has been "recuperated," for it presupposes an original purity and delineates the capitalist system as a maleficent instance of perversion, revealing yet another moralizing vision.

32. Or, more simply, in a system of generalized exchange.

CHAPTER THREE

FETISHISM AND IDEOLOGY: THE SEMIOLOGICAL REDUCTION [1]

The concepts of commodity fetishism and money fetishism sketched, for Marx, the lived ideology of capitalist society — the mode of sanctification, fascination and psychological subjection by which individuals internalize the generalized system of exchange value. These concepts outline the whole process whereby the concrete social values of labor and exchange, which the capitalist system denies, abstracts and "alienates," are erected into transcendent ideological values — into a moral agency that regulates all alienated behavior. What is being described here is the successor to a more archaic fetishism and religious mystification ("the opium of the people"). And this theory of a new fetishism has become the icing on the cake of contemporary analysis. While Marx still attached it (though very ambiguously) to a *form* (the commodity, money), and thus located it at a theoretically comprehensive level, today the concept of fetishism is exploited in a summary and empirical fashion: object fetishism, automobile fetishism, sex fetishism, vacation fetishism, etc. The whole exercise is precipitated by nothing more sophisticated than a diffuse, exploded and idolatrous vision of the consumption environment; it is the conceptual fetish of vulgar social thought, working assiduously towards the expanded reproduction of ideology in the guise of a disturbing attack on the system. The term fetishism is dangerous not only because it short-circuits analysis, but because since the 18th century it has conducted the whole repertoire of occidental Christian and humanist ideology, as orchestrated by colonists, ethnologists and missionaries. The Christian connotation has been present from the beginning in the condemnation of primitive cults by a religion that claimed to be abstract and spiritual; "the worship of certain earthly and material objects called fetishes. . . for which reason I will call it fetishism."[2] Never having really shed this moral and rationalistic connotation, the great *fetishist metaphor* has since been the recurrent leitmotiv of the analysis of "magical thinking," whether that of the Bantu tribes or that of modern metropolitan hordes submerged in their objects and their signs.

1. This article first appeared in *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* Vol. II (Autumn 1970).

2. De Brosses, *Du Culte des dieux fetiches* (1760).

As an eclecticism derived from various primitive representations, the fetishist metaphor consists of analyzing myths, rites and practices in terms of *energy*, a magical transcendent power, a *mana* (whose latest avatar would possibly be the libido). As a power that is transferred to beings, objects and agencies, it is universal and diffuse, but it crystallizes at strategic points so that its flux can be regulated and diverted by certain groups or individuals for their own benefit. In the light of the "theory," this would be the major objective of all primitive practices, even eating. Thus, in the animist vision, everything happens between the hypostasis of a force, its dangerous transcendence and the capture of this force, which then becomes beneficent. Aborigines apparently rationalized their experience of the group and of the world in these terms. But anthropologists themselves have rationalized their experience of the aborigines in these same terms, thus exorcising the crucial interrogation that these societies inevitably brought to bear on their own civilization.[3]

Here we are interested in the extension of this *fetishist metaphor* in modern industrial society, insofar as it enmeshes critical analysis (liberal or Marxist) within the subtle trap of a rationalistic anthropology. What else is intended by the concept of "commodity fetishism" if not the notion of a false consciousness devoted to the worship of exchange value (or, more recently, the fetishism of gadgets or objects, in which individuals are supposed to worship artificial libidinal or prestige values incorporated in the object)? All of this presupposes the existence, somewhere, of a non-alienated consciousness of an object in some "true," objective state: its use value?

The metaphor of fetishism, wherever it appears, involves a fetishization of the conscious subject or of a human essence, a rationalist metaphysic that is at the root of the whole system of occidental Christian values. Where Marxist theory seems to prop itself up with this same anthropology, it ideologically countersigns the very system of values that it otherwise dislocates via objective historical analysis. By referring all the problems of "fetishism" back to superstructural mechanisms of false consciousness, Marxism eliminates any real chance it has of analyzing the *actual process of ideological labor*. By refusing to analyze the structures and the mode of ideological production inherent in its own logic, Marxism is condemned (behind the façade of "dialectical" discourse in terms of

3. Being *de facto* rationalists, they have often gone so far as to saturate with logical and mythological rationalizations a system of representations that the aborigines knew how to reconcile with more supple objective practices.

class struggle) to expanding the reproduction of ideology, and thus of the capitalist system itself.

Thus, the problem of the generalized "fetishization" of real life forces us to reconsider the problem of the reproduction of ideology. The *fetishistic* theory of infrastructure and superstructure must be exploded, and replaced by a more comprehensive theory of productive forces, since these are *all structurally* implicated in the capitalist system — and not only in some cases (i.e., material production), while merely superstructurally in others (i.e., ideological production).

The term "fetishism" almost has a life of its own. Instead of functioning as a metalanguage for the magical thinking of others, it turns against those who use it, and surreptitiously exposes their own magical thinking. Apparently only psychoanalysis has escaped this vicious circle, by returning fetishism to its context within a perverse *structure* that perhaps underlies all desire. Thus circumscribed by its structural definition (articulated through the clinical reality of the fetish object and its manipulation) as a refusal of sex differences, the term no longer shores up magical thinking; it becomes an analytic concept for a theory of perversion. But if in the social sciences, we cannot find the equivalent — and not merely an analogical one — of this strict use of the term, *the equivalent of the psychoanalytic process of perverse structure at the level of the process of ideological production* — that is, if it proves impossible to articulate the celebrated formula of "commodity fetishism" as anything other than a mere neologism (where "fetishism" refers to this alleged magical thinking, and "commodity" to a structural analysis of capital), then it would be preferable to drop the term entirely (including its cognate and derivative ideas). For in order to reconstitute the *process of fetishization* in terms of structure, we would have to abandon the fetishist metaphor of the worship of the golden calf — even as it has been reworded by Marxists in the phrase "the opium of the people" — and develop instead an articulation that avoids any projection of magical or transcendental animism, and thus the rationalist position of positing a false consciousness and a transcendental subject. After Lévi-Strauss' analysis, the "totem" was overthrown, so that only the analysis of the totemic system and its dynamic integration retained any meaning. This was a radical breakthrough that should be developed, theoretically and clinically, and extended to social analysis in general. So, we started by meddling with received ideas about fetishism, only to discover that the whole theory of ideology may be in doubt.

If objects are not these reified agencies, endowed with force and *mana* in which the subject projects himself and is alienated — if fetishism designates something other than this metaphysic of alienated essence — what is its real process?

We would not make a habit of this, but here an appeal to etymology may help us sort through the confusion. The term "fetish" has undergone a curious semantic distortion. Today it refers to a force, a supernatural property of the object and hence to a similar magical potential in the subject, through schemas of projection and capture, alienation and reappropriation. But originally it signified exactly the opposite: a *fabrication*, an artifact, a labor of appearances and signs. It appeared in France in the 17th century, coming from the Portuguese *feitiço*, meaning "artificial," which itself derives from the Latin *factitius*. The primary sense is "to do (to make," *faire*), the sense of "to imitate by signs" ("act as a devotee," etc.; this sense is also found in "makeup" [*maquillage*], which comes from *maken*, related to *machen* and to make). From the same root (*facio, facticius*) as *feitiço* comes the Spanish *afeitar*: "to paint, to adorn, to embellish," and *afeite*: "preparation, ornamentation, cosmetics," as well as the French *feint* and the Spanish *hechar*, "to do, to make" (whence *hechizo*: "artificial, feigned, dummy").

What quickly becomes apparent is the aspect of faking, of artificial registering — in short, of a cultural sign labor — and that this is at the origin of the status of fetish object, and thus also plays some part in the fascination it exercises. This aspect is increasingly repressed by the inverse representation (the two still exist in the Portuguese *feitiço*, which as an adjective means artificial and as a noun an enchanted object, or sorcery), which *substitutes a manipulation of forces for a manipulation of signs* and a magical economy of transfer of signifieds for a regulated play of signifiers.

The "talisman" also is lived and represented in the animist mode as a receptacle of forces: one forgets that it is first an object marked by signs — signs of the hand, of the face, or characters of the cabal, or the figure of some celestial body that, registered in the object, makes it a talisman. Thus, in the "fetishist" theory of consumption, in the view of marketing strategists as well as of consumers, objects are given and received everywhere as force dispensers (happiness, health, security, prestige, etc.). This magical substance having been spread about so liberally, one forgets that what we are dealing with first is signs: a generalized code of signs, a totally arbitrary code of differences, *and that it is on this basis, and not at all on account of their use values or their innate "virtues," that objects exercise their fascination.*

If fetishism exists it is thus not a fetishism of the signified, a fetishism of substances and values (called ideological), which the fetish object would incarnate for the alienated subject. Behind this reinterpretation (which is truly ideological) it is a *fetishism of the signifier*. That is to say that the subject is trapped in the factitious, differential, encoded, systematized aspect of the object. It is not the passion (whether of objects or subjects) for substances that speaks in fetishism, it is the *passion for the code*, which, by governing both objects and subjects, and by subordinating them to itself, delivers them up to abstract manipulation. This is the fundamental articulation of the ideological process: not in the projection of alienated consciousness into various superstructures, but in the generalization at all levels of a structural code.

So it appears that "commodity fetishism" may no longer fruitfully be interpreted according to the paleo-Marxist dramaturgy of the instance, in such and such an object, of a force that returns to haunt the individual severed from the product of his labor, and from all the marvels of his misappropriated investment (labor and effectiveness). It is rather the (ambivalent) fascination for a form (logic of the commodity or system of exchange value), a state of absorption, for better or for worse, in the restrictive logic of a system of abstraction. Something like a desire, a perverse desire, the desire of the code is brought to light here: it is a desire that is related to the systematic nature of signs, drawn towards it, precisely through what this system-like nature negates and bars, by exorcising the contradictions spawned by the process of real labor — just as the perverse psychological structure of the fetishist is organized, in the fetish object, around a mark, around the abstraction of a mark that negates, bars and exorcises the difference of the sexes.

In this sense, fetishism is not the sanctification of a certain object, or value (in which case one might hope to see it disappear in our age, when the liberalization of values and the abundance of objects would "normally" tend to desanctify them). It is the sanctification of the system as such, of the commodity as system: it is thus contemporaneous with the generalization of exchange value and is propagated with it. The more the system is systematized, the more the fetishist fascination is reinforced; and if it is always invading new territories, further and further removed from the domain of economic exchange value strictly understood (i.e., the areas of sexuality, recreation, etc.), this is not owing to an obsession with pleasure, or a substantial desire for pleasure or free time, but to a progressive (and even quite brutal) systematization of these sectors,

that is to say their reduction to commutable sign values within the framework of a system of exchange value that is now almost total.[4]

Thus the fetishization of the commodity is the fetishization of a product emptied of its concrete substance of labor[5] and subjected to another type of labor, a labor of signification, that is, of coded abstraction (the production of differences and of sign values). It is an active, collective process of production and reproduction of a code, a system, invested with all the diverted, unbound desire separated out from the process of real labor and transferred onto precisely that which denies the process of real labor. Thus, fetishism is actually attached to the sign object, the object eviscerated of its substance and history, and reduced to the state of marking a difference, epitomizing a whole system of differences.

That the fascination, worship, and cathexis (*investissement*) of desire and, finally, even pleasure (perverse) devolve upon the system and not upon a substance (or *mana*) is clarified in the phenomenon, no less celebrated, of "money fetishism." What is fascinating about money is neither its materiality, nor even that it might be the intercepted equivalent of a certain force (e.g., of labor) or of a certain potential power: it is its *systematic nature*, the potential enclosed in the material for total commutability of all values, thanks to their definitive abstraction. It is the abstraction, the total artificiality of the sign that one "adores" in money. What is fetishized is the closed perfection of a system, not the "golden calf," or the treasure. This specifies the difference between the pathology of the miser who is attached to the fecal materiality of gold, and the fetishism we are attempting to define here as an ideological process. Elsewhere we have seen[6] how, in the *collection*, it is neither the nature of objects nor even their symbolic value that is important; but precisely the sense in which they negate all this, and deny the reality of castration for the subject through the systematic nature of the collective cycle, whose continual shifting from one term to another helps the subject to weave around himself a closed and invulnerable world that dissolves all obstacles to the realization of desire (perverse, of course).

Today there is an area where this fetishist logic of the commodity

4. In this system, use value becomes obscure and almost unintelligible, though not as an original value which has been lost, but more precisely as a *function derived from exchange value*. Henceforth, it is exchange value that induces use value (i.e., needs and satisfactions) to work in common with it (ideologically), within the framework of political economy.

5. In this way labor power as a commodity is itself "fetishized."

6. In my *Le Système des objects* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), pp. 103ff.

can be illustrated very clearly, permitting us to indicate more precisely what we call the process of ideological labor: the body and beauty. We do not speak of either as an absolute value (speaking of which, what is an absolute value?), but of the current obsession with "liberating the body" and with beauty.

This fetish-beauty has nothing (any longer) to do with an effect of the soul (the spiritualist vision), a natural grace of movement or countenance; with the transparency of truth (the idealist vision); or with an "inspired genius" of the body, which can be communicated as effectively by expressive ugliness (the romantic vision). What we are talking about is a kind of anti-nature incarnate, bound up in a general stereotype of *models of beauty*, in a perfectionist vertigo and controlled narcissism. This is the absolute rule with respect to the face and the body, the generalization of sign exchange value to facial and bodily effects. It is the final disqualification of the body, its subjection to a discipline, the total circulation of signs. The body's wildness is veiled by makeup, the drives are assigned to a cycle of fashion. Behind this *moral* perfection, which stresses a valorization of exteriority (and no longer, as in traditional morality, a labor of interior sublimation), it is insurance taken out against the instincts. However, this anti-nature does not exclude desire; we know that this kind of beauty is fascinating precisely because it is trapped in models, because it is closed, systematic, ritualized in the ephemeral, without symbolic value. It is the sign in this beauty, the mark (makeup, symmetry, or calculated asymmetry, etc.), which fascinates; *it is the artifact that is the object of desire*. The signs are there to make the body into a perfect object, a feat that has been accomplished through a long and specific labor of sophistication. Signs perfect the body into an object in which none of its real work (the work of the unconscious or psychic and social labor) can show through. The fascination of this fetishized beauty is the result of this extended process of abstraction, and derives from what it negates and censors through its own character as a system.

Tattoos, stretched lips, the bound feet of Chinese women, eyeshadow, rouge, hair removal, mascara, or bracelets, collars, objects, jewelry, accessories: anything will serve to rewrite the cultural order on the body; and it is this that takes on the effect of beauty. The erotic is thus the reinscription of the erogenous in a homogeneous system of signs (gestures, movements, emblems, body heraldry) whose goal is closure and logical perfection — to be sufficient unto itself. Neither the genital order (placing an external finality in question) nor the symbolic order (putting in question the

division of the subject) have this coherence: neither the functional nor the symbolic can weave a body from signs like this — abstract, impeccable, clothed with marks, and thus invulnerable; "made up" (*faict* and *fainct*) in the profound sense of the expression; cut off from external determinations and from the internal reality of its desire, yet offered up in the same turn as an idol, as the *perfect phallus for perverse desire*: that of others, and its own.[7]

Lévi-Strauss has already spoken of this erotic bodily attraction among the Caduvéo and the Maori, of those bodies "completely covered by arabesques of a perverse subtlety," and of "something deliciously provocative."[8] It suffices to think of Baudelaire to know how much sophistication alone conveys charm (in the strong sense), and how much it is always attached to the *mark* (ornamentation, jewelry, perfume) — or to the "cutting up" of the body into partial objects (feet, hair, breasts, buttocks, etc.), which is a profoundly similar exercise. It is always a question of substituting — for an erogenous body, divided in castration, source of an ever-perilous desire — a montage, an artifact of phantasmagorical fragments, an arsenal or a panoply of accessories, or of parts of the body (but the whole body can be reduced by fetishized nudity to the role of a partial object as well). These fetish objects are always caught in a system of assemblage and separation, in a code. Circumscribed in this way, they become the possible objects of a security-giving worship. This is to substitute the line of demarcation between elements-signs for the great dividing line of castration. It substitutes the significant difference, the formal division between signs, for the irreducible ambivalence, for the symbolic split (*écart*).

It would be interesting to compare this perverse fascination to that which, according to Freud, is exercised by the child or the animal, or even by those women "who suffice to themselves, who properly speaking love only themselves" and who for that reason "exercise the greatest charm over men not only for aesthetic reasons. . . but also on account of interesting psychological constellations." "The charm of a child," he says again, "lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-sufficiency and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals which seem not to concern themselves about us, such as cats and the large beasts of prey."[9] One would have to distinguish

7. Now this is how the body, re-elaborated by the perverse structure as phallic idol, manages to function simultaneously as the ideological model of socialization and of fulfillment. Perverse desire and the ideological process are articulated on the same "sophisticated" body. We will return to this later.

8. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Atheneum, 1975), p. 188.

9. Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914), in *Collected Papers*

between the seduction associated, in the child, the animal or the women-child, with *polymorphous perversity* (and with the kind of "freedom," of libidinal autonomy that accompanies it), and that linked to the contemporary commercialized erotic system, which precipitates a "fetishistic" perversion that is restricted, static and encompassed by models. Nevertheless, what is sought for and recognized in both types of seduction is another side or "beyond" of castration, which always takes on the aspect either of a harmonious natural state of unity (child, animal) or of a summation and perfect closure effected by signs. What fascinates us is always that which radically excludes us in the name of its internal logic or perfection: a mathematical formula, a paranoic system, a concrete jungle, a useless object, or, again, a smooth body, without orifices, doubled and redoubled by a mirror, devoted to perverse autosatisfaction. It is by caressing herself, by the autoerotic maneuver, that the striptease artist best evokes desire.[10]

What is especially important for us here is to demonstrate the general ideological process by which beauty, as a constellation of signs and work upon signs, functions in the present system simultaneously as the negation of castration (perverse psychic structure) and as the negation of the body that is segmented in its social practice and in the division of labor (ideological social structure). The modern rediscovery of the body and its illusions (*prestiges*) is not innocently contemporary with monopoly capitalism and the discoveries of psychoanalysis:

1. It is because psychoanalysis has brought the fundamental division of the subject to light through the body (but not the same "body"), that it has become so important to ward off this menace (of castration), to restore the individual (the undivided subject of consciousness). This is no longer achieved, however, by endowing the individual with a soul or a mind, but a body properly all his own, from which all negativity of desire is eliminated and which functions only as the exhibitor of beauty and happiness. In this sense, the current myth of the body appears as a process of *phantasmagorical rationalization*, which is close to fetishism in its strict analytical definition. Paradoxically, then, this "discovery of the body," which alleges itself to be simultaneous and in sympathy with psychoanalytic discoveries, is in fact an attempt to conjure away its revolutionary implications. The body is introduced in order to liquidate the

(New York: Basic Books, 1959), Vol. IV, p. 46.

10. Ideological discourse is also built up out of a redundancy of signs, and in extreme cases, forms a tautology. It is through this specularity, this "mirage within itself," that it conjures away conflicts and exercises its power.

unconscious and its work, to strengthen the one and homogeneous subject, keystone of the system of values and order.

2. Simultaneously, monopoly capitalism, which is not content to exploit the body as labor power, manages to fragment it, to divide the very expressiveness of the body in labor, in exchange, and in play, recuperating all this as individual needs, hence as productive (*consummative*) forces under its control. This mobilization of cathexes at all levels as productive forces creates, over the long term, profound contradictions. These contradictions are still political in nature, if we accept a radical redefinition of politics that would take into account this totalitarian socialization of all sectors of real life. It is for these reasons that the body, beauty and sexuality are imposed as new universals in the name of the rights of the new man, emancipated by abundance and the cybernetic revolution. The deprivation, manipulation and controlled recycling of the subjective and collective values by the unlimited extension of exchange value and the unlimited rival speculation over sign values renders necessary the sanctification of a glorious agency called the body that will become for each individual an ideological sanctuary, the sanctuary of his own alienation. Around this body, which is entirely positivized as the capital of divine right, the subject of private property is about to be restored.

So ideology goes, always playing upon the two levels according to the same process of labor and desire attached to the organization of signs (process of signification and fetishization). Let us consider this articulation of the semiological and ideological a little more closely.

Take the example of nudity as it is presented in advertising, in the proliferation of erotica, in the mass media's rediscovery of the body and sex. This nudity claims to be rational, progressive: it claims to rediscover the truth of the body, its natural reason, beyond clothing, taboos and fashion. In fact, it is too rationalistic, and bypasses the body, whose symbolic and sexual truth is not in the naive conspicuousness of nudity, but in the *uncovering* of itself (*mise à nu*), insofar as it is the symbolic equivalent of putting to death (*mise à mort*), and thus of the true path of desire, *which is always ambivalent*, love and death simultaneously.[11] Functional modern nudity does not involve this ambivalence at all, nor thus any profound symbolic function, because such nudity reveals a body *entirely positivized by sex* — as a cultural value, as a model of fulfillment, as an emblem, as a morality (or ludic immorality, which is the same thing) — and *not a body divided and split by sex*. The sexualized body, in this case, no

11. These terms are drawn from Georges Bataille, *L'Erotisme* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957).

longer functions, save on its positive side, which is that of:

- need (and not of desire);
- satisfaction (lack, negativity, death, castration are no longer registered in it);
- the *right* to the body and sex (the subversiveness, the social negativity of the body and sex are frozen there in a formal "democratic" lobby: the "right to the body").[12]

Once ambivalence and the symbolic function have been liquidated, nudity again becomes one sign among others, entering into a distinctive opposition to clothing. Despite its "liberationist" velleities, it no longer radically opposes clothing, it is only a variant that can coexist with all the others in the systematic process of fashion: and today one sees it everywhere acting "in alternation." It is this nudity, caught up in the differential play of signs (and not in that of eros and death) that is the object of fetishism: the absolute condition for its ideological functioning is the loss of the symbolic and the passing over to the semiological.

Strictly speaking, it is not even because (as has just been said) "once the symbolic function has been liquidated there is a passage to the semiological." In fact, it is the semiological organization itself, the entrenchment in a system of signs, that has the goal of reducing the symbolic function. *This semiological reduction of the symbolic properly constitutes the ideological process.* Other examples can illustrate this semiological reduction, this fundamental scheme of the process of ideology.

The Sun: The vacation sun no longer retains anything of the collective symbolic function it had among the Aztecs, the Egyptians, etc.[13] It no longer has that ambivalence of a natural force — life and death, beneficent and murderous — which it had in primitive cults or still has in peasant labor. The vacation sun is a completely positive sign, the absolute source of happiness and euphoria, and as such it is significantly opposed to non-sun (rain, cold, bad weather). At the same time as it loses all ambivalence, it is registered in a distinctive opposition, which, incidentally, is never innocent: here the

12. The whole illusion of the *Sexual Revolution* is here: society could not be split, divided and subverted in the name of a sex and a body whose current presentation has the ideological function of veiling the subject's division and subversion. As usual, everything holds together: the reductive function that this mythical nudity fulfills in relation to the subject divided by sex and castration is performed simultaneously on the macroscopic level of society divided by historical class conflicts. Thus the sexual revolution is a subsidiary of the industrial revolution or of the revolution of abundance (and of so many others): all are decoys and ideological metamorphoses of an unchanged order.

13. Cf. Alain Laurent in *Communications*, No. 10.

opposition functions to the exclusive benefit of the sun (against the other negativized sun). Thenceforth, from the moment it functions as ideology and as a cultural value registered in a system of oppositions, the sun, like sex, is also registered institutionally as the right to the sun, which sanctions its ideological functioning, and morally registered as a fetishist obsession, both individual and collective.

Masculine-Feminine: No being is assigned by nature to a sex. Sexual ambivalence (activity-passivity) is at the heart of each subject, sexual differentiation is registered as a difference in the body of each subject and not as an absolute term linked to a particular sexual organ. The question is not "having one or not." But this ambivalence, this profound sexual valence must be reduced, for as such it escapes genital organization and the social order. Once again, the ideological labor consists in semiologically reducing, in dispersing this irreducible reality into a great distinctive structure, masculine-feminine — into sexes that are full, distinct and opposed to one another. This structure leans on the alibi of biological organs (the reduction of sex as a difference to the difference of the sexual organs); and, above all, it is pegged to the grandiose cultural models whose function it is to separate the sexes in order to establish the absolute privilege of one over the other. If everyone is led, by this controlled structuration, to confuse himself with his own sexual status, it is only to resign his sex the more easily (that is, the erogenous differentiation of his own body) to the sexual segregation that is one of the political and ideological foundations of the social order.[14]

The Unconscious: The contemporary unconscious is diffused by the mass media, celebrated by semiology, but still given a substance that is individualized and personalized. Today, everyone "has" an unconscious: mine, yours, his. The structure and work of the unconscious is primarily a challenging of the conscious subject. Here, then, the possessive pronoun is itself semiologically reductive and ideologically effective insofar as it reduces this unconscious to a

14. The fact that from the very first this great structural opposition is a functional, hierarchical, logistic difference for the social order, the fact that if there must be two sexes it is so that one may be subjected to the other, makes clear the ambiguity of "sexual liberation." Since this "liberation" is that of everyone's sexual needs as assigned to his sex in the framework of the ideological-structural model of bisexuality, any reinforcement of sexual practices in this sense can only reinforce this structure and the ideological discrimination that it bears. In our "liberal" society of "mixedness," the separation between masculine and feminine models has never ceased to entrench and crystallize itself since the start of the industrial era. Today, in spite of pious, liberal pathos over the question, it is taking on ever more generalized forms.

simple oppositional term *vis-à-vis* consciousness. Together, they operate in the name of the individual (as the possessive case indicates), fundamentally to the advantage of the subject of consciousness. So, the "rediscovered" unconscious, generally exalted from the beginning, runs directly counter to its original meaning: initially structure and labor, it is transformed into a sign function, labor power and object of appropriation by a unified, autonomous subject, the eternal subject of consciousness and of private property. Henceforth, to each his own unconscious, his own symbolic deposit to exploit, his capital! And shortly, there will be the right to the unconscious, the *habeas corpus* of *homo cyberneticus*, that is, the transfer of bourgeois liberties into a domain that everywhere escapes them and which denies them. But the reason is clear: it is the transfer of social control to the domain of the irreducible. The revolution of the unconscious becomes the avatar of a new humanism of the subject of consciousness; and through the individualist ideology of the unconscious, fetishized and reduced by signs such as sex and sun to a calculus of pleasure and consumed satisfaction, each subject itself drains and monitors the movement and the dangerous labor of the unconscious for the benefit of the social order. The myth of the unconscious becomes the ideological solution to the problems of the unconscious.[15]

It is seen that the *semiological reduction* of the unconscious to a simple term opposed to consciousness implies a hierarchical subordination to consciousness, a reductive formalization of the unconscious to the benefit of consciousness, and thus an *ideological reduction* to the (capitalist) system of order and social values.

There is no conclusion to this preliminary analysis of the ideological process. In summary, the schemes that emerge are:

1. Homology, simultaneity of the ideological operation on the level of psychic structure and social structure. Here we find neither cause nor effect, neither super- nor infrastructure, nor the analytical privilege of one field or the other, of one agency or the other — *without risking causal distortion and desperate recourse to analogy.*

2. The process of ideological labor always aims toward reducing the process of real labor (the process of unconscious symbolic labor in the division of the subject, the process of labor of productive forces in the explosion of relations of production). This process is always a process of abstraction by signs, of substituting a system of distinctive oppositions for the process of real labor (the first moment: process of signification). But these oppositions are not neutral; they rank themselves hierarchically, privileging one of the terms (second moment: process of discrimination). Signification does not always carry discrimination with it (phonemic differences at the level of language), but discrimination always presupposes signification — the sign-function that reduces ambivalence and the symbolic.

3. Bifurcation, or marking by signs, is always accompanied by a *totalization via signs* and a formal autonomy of sign systems. Sign logic operates by internal differentiation and by general homogenization. Only labor on the homogeneous formal, abstract material of signs makes possible this closure, this perfection, this logical mirage that is the effectiveness of ideology. It is the abstract coherence, suturing all contradictions and divisions, that gives ideology its power of fascination (fetishism). This coherence is found in the erotic system as well as in the perverse seduction exercised by the system of exchange value, which is entirely present in even the very smallest of commodities.

4. This abstract totalization permits signs to function ideologically, that is, to establish and perpetuate real discriminations and the order of power.

15. Also, logically, this "liberation," like that of any other productive force, takes on the force of a moral imperative. Everyone is called upon (be it in the name of hygiene, even) to *become conscious of his unconscious*, not to let this productive potential lie fallow, to make his unconscious emerge in order to "personalize" it. Absurd, perhaps, but coherent with the logic of the ideological system.

CHAPTER FOUR

GESTURE[1] AND SIGNATURE: SEMIURGY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

The painting is a signed object as much as it is a painted surface. The paraph of the creator seems actually to increase its singularity. What does this signature indicate? The act of painting, the subject who paints. But it indicates that this subject entrenched at the heart of an object and the very act of painting is named by a sign. Imperceptibly, but radically, the signature introduces the *oeuvre* which is that of the painting. In certain modern works it is unique — no longer as an oeuvre, but as an object — until it bears this signature. Then it becomes a model to which an extraordinary, differential value is brought by a visible sign. But it is not a meaning value — the meaning peculiar to the painting is not in question here — it is a *differential* value, carried by the ambiguity of a sign that does not cause the work to be seen, but to be recognized and evaluated in a system of signs, and which, while differentiating it as a model, already, from another perspective, integrates it in a series, that of the works of the painter.

1. *Le gestuel* is difficult to translate: it is opposed to *geste* as its extension, not contradiction. Yet it is the latter that is usually translated as "gesture." Briefly, *le gestuel* refers to a sort of complex, or paradigm, of gestures, and this is the simplest way to grasp the term. However, constantly referring to "the gestural" is awkward in English, and various renderings are thus to be found in the text. There is another sense in which *le gestuel* refers to a congealment, petrifaction or crystallization of gestures, of single, relatively independent, unsolicited, physical actions into sequences that take on an almost magical, incantatory aspect. For clarification we have taken a brief passage from Baudrillard's *Le Système des objects* (Paris: 1968), pp. 57-58: "Still in the analysis of ambient values, when we broach the study of functional forms (that may be called forms drawn in profile, dynamic, etc.), we see that their stylization is inseparable from that of the *gestuel humain* (the complex of human gestures) that goes with them. Stylization always signifies the elision of muscular energy and of work. All the processes of the elision of primary functions to the profit of the secondary functions of relation and calculation, or of the elision of the drives to the profit of culture (*culturalité*) have for a practical and historical mediation at the level of objects the fundamental elision of the gestures of effort (*gestuel d'effort*), the passage from a *universal gestural paradigm of work* to a *universal gestural paradigm of control*. It is there that a millenarian status of objects, their anthropomorphic status, definitively comes to an end; in the abstraction of the sources of energy." And further along: "this profound, gestural relation of man to objects that epitomizes the integration of man with the world and with social structures...is still a constraint...a complex of gestures and of forces, of symbols and of functions, illustrated and stylized by human energy.... The splendor of this relation of conformity remains subordinated to the relational constraint." —*Trans.*

Thus the painted oeuvre becomes a cultural object by means of the signature. It is no longer simply read, but perceived in its differential value. A single aesthetic emotion often confuses the critical reading and the distinguishing signs of its physical identity.[2]

A certain fact may be of interest here: until the 19th century, the copy of an original work had its own value, it was a legitimate practice. In our time the copy is illegitimate, inauthentic: it is no longer "art." Similarly, the concept of the forgery has changed — or rather, it suddenly appears with the advent of modernity. Formerly painters regularly used collaborators or "negros": one specialized in trees, another in animals. The act of painting, and so the signature as well, did not bear the same mythological insistence upon authenticity — that moral imperative to which modern art is dedicated and by which it becomes modern — which has been evident ever since the relation to illustration and hence the very meaning of the artistic object changed with the act of painting itself.

It is useless to argue that the forgery, the copy of the counterfeit are unacceptable today because photographic technique has disqualified "photocopy" by hand. That sort of explanation is specious. Something else has changed: the conditions of signification of the oeuvre itself.

In a world that is the reflection of an order (that of God, of Nature or, more simply, of discourse) in which all things are representation, endowed with meaning and transparent to the language that describes them, artistic "creation" proposes only to describe. The appearance of things has the keys to the city,[3] being itself the signature of an order that is given there to be recognized and not to be analyzed. The oeuvre wishes to be the perpetual commentary of a given text, and all copies that take their inspiration from it are justified as the multiplied reflection of an order whose original is in any case transcendent. In other words, the question of authenticity does not arise, and the *work of art is not menaced by its double*. The various copies do not constitute a series in the modern sense of the word, whose model would be the original: all else remaining equal, original and copy are equivalent in a single finality, whose "reason" escapes them. In summary, it is impossible to circumvent the true source of values. *The Forgery does not exist*. Nor is the signature there in order to turn the oeuvre into a pure object, which has surged with emotional power from the act of painting. Even if he signs it

2. This is not peculiar to painting: this ambiguous apprehension defines the *consumption* of all cultural goods.

3. As is shown by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*.

(sometimes with a monogram), the artist does not attest to its truth: he is never more than the one who gives (*donateur*).

Today the conjuncture of values is entirely different: transcendence is abolished, the oeuvre becomes the original. Its meaning passes from the restitution of appearances to the act of inventing them. Value is transferred from an eminent, objective beauty to the singularity of the artist in his gesture.

And this new act is temporalized: it is the irreversible moment of invention to which other irreversible creative moments can only be subsequent. Here modernity begins. The modern oeuvre is no longer a syntax of various fragments of a general tableau of the universe, "in extension," where continuity and reversibility are active; rather, it is a succession of moments. The oeuvres no longer combine with one another to revive the model in its likeness (the world and its order) by means of their contiguity. They are only able to follow one another in order then to refer, by virtue of their difference and their discontinuity in time, to a quite different model, to the *subject-creator himself* in his unlikeness and his repeated absence. We are no longer in space but in time, in the realm of difference and no longer of resemblance, in the series and no longer in the order. This last point is essential. Once legitimacy is transferred to the act of painting, the latter can only prove itself untiringly: by this very fact it constitutes a series. Incidentally, since the final term of this series is no longer the world to be represented by the ever absent subject, it becomes essential to indicate this subject as such, and in the same act to declare the oeuvre as the object of this subject: that is the function of the signature, it is from that necessity that it derives its present privilege.

Otherwise, how could we explain the insistent mythological demand for authenticity in contemporary art — that each painting be the emanation of a unique moment, often sanctioned by the very day and hour of its execution, and by the signature? And how explain the fact that any contemporary oeuvre is constituted as a declension of objects — each painting being a discontinuous term of an indefinite series, and thus legible first, not in its relation to the world but in its relation to the other paintings by the same artist, its meaning being thus tied down to succession and repetition? What paradoxical law, in its very movement, bends authenticity to the constraint of seriality? Once again we can look for *de facto* determinations, the conditions of the market, for example, which chain the artist to his mannerism and to a cadence of production. And once again, this would be too simple.

In fact, *it is precisely because the series has become the constitutive dimension of the modern oeuvre that the inauthenticity of one of the elements of the series becomes catastrophic*. Each term in its specific difference is essential to the functioning of the series as such, and to the convergence of meaning from one term to the other toward the model (here the subject himself). If one defects, it is the rupture of an order. A false Soulages may well be worth another Soulages[4] but it throws suspicion on all Soulages. The code of recognition becomes suspect, and hence the integrity of meaning of the oeuvre itself. If you like, there is no longer a God today to separate out his elect. The work is no longer rooted in God (in the objective order of the world) but in the series itself. *The essential task then is to preserve the authenticity of the sign.*

Hence the mythical value taken on by that guarantee of vintage (*appellation contrôlée*): the signature. It becomes the veritable caption of our oeuvres. In the absence of fable, of the figures of the world and of God, it is that which tells us what the work signifies: the artist's gestures that are materialized in it (as in the other signs of the painting, moreover). For if the signature can fulfill that legible function of meaning, it is because in its allusive singularity as a sign it is fundamentally homogeneous with the combinatory order of signs which is that of the painting. In certain modern worsk it is graphically mixed with the content of the canvas, it becomes a rhythmic element and one may conceive of a painting that realizes and abolishes itself in its signature, which is only a signature. That is a limit, however, for — sign among signs — the signature always retains legendary values. If each sign of the painting retraces the subject in his act, only the signature designates him explicitly, giving us that particle of meaning, that reference and, hence, that security, which, in modern painting, is no longer given by the illegible truth of the world. The social consensus, and beyond that, of course, all the subtle combinations of supply and demand play upon the signature. But one can see that this myth is not purely and simply an effect of commercial orchestration. There is a conjunction of sign and name in the signature — a sign different from the other signs in the painting, but homogeneous with them; a name different from the names of other painters but complicit in the same game. It is through this ambiguous conjunction of a subjective series (authenticity) and an objective series (code, social consensus, commercial value), through this inflected sign, that the system of consumption can operate.

4. In the end, Soulages copies himself well and Fautrier admits he does not always know whether a given canvas is his work.

That is why the slightest attack upon this sign which is both authentic and accepted, unmotivated and codified, is felt as a profound attack upon the cultural system itself — and why today the forgery and the copy are viewed as sacrilege. In our time, moreover, there no longer remains any difference between copy and forgery (the forgery plays upon the signature and presents itself as authentic; the copy plays upon the content and avows itself a copy). If one admits that the value of the painting is established upon the gesture, it is clear that every copy is a forgery because it no longer simulates a content but an irreversible act (*geste*) of pictorial invention.

Today only the artist may copy himself. In a sense, *he is condemned to do so* and to assume, if he is logical, the serial character of creation. At the limit, he reproduces himself literally: "In Factum I and Factum II, Rauschenberg has done the same canvas twice, almost to the last daub, literally.... What seems a brush stroke thrown on as hurriedly as possible and followed by droplets in an entirely accidental fashion is in fact a very studied gesture which Rauschenberg is capable of executing repeatedly at will" (Otto Hahn, *Les Temps Modernes,* March 1964).

Here we find something like a truth of modern art: it is no longer the literality of the world, but the literality of the gestural elaboration of creation — spots, lines, dribbles. At the same time, that which was representation — redoubling the world in space — becomes repetition — an indefinable redoubling of the act in time. Moreover, the performance of Rauschenberg, that tautology of the gesture, marks only the paradoxical limit of a logical evolution. In his case, there is a sort of coquettishness (realist) or obsession (paranoid) in redoing his own canvas stroke for stroke; but in fact that literality is not necessary in order for repetition to take place. In any case, Rauschenberg knows that although his two paintings are identical, they are nonetheless different because they testify to two distinct moments and so retain their own individual value on the market. So this duplication retains nothing of a copy. *Subjectivity triumphs in the mechanical repetition of itself.* That is why this concern can be left to no one else.

What must be clearly understood is that this *formal literality of the gesture* carries a structural constraint of succession and of differentiation from one sign to another of the same canvas, and from one canvas to another. This constraint is at work everywhere in our oeuvres, even when their individual themes and techniques can be specified. In this sense, Rauschenberg's "doubled" canvas (and the analogous procedures of other serial painters) is misguided, insofar

as it tries, with photographic literalness, to exorcise, at the level of content, a seriality that is of a profoundly different order.

But then everything comes back to this question: what are the possibilities, for modern art, of retracing the actuality of our world (the everyday reality of objects, social reality and its conflicts)? What can be its critical value? Artists themselves are often divided between the ideology of pure gestural values (values of authenticity) and this other ideology, the critical necessity of regrasping reality. The same dilemma is posed for art critics, moreover, who have great difficulty reconciling a tangled paraphrase of the creative action (*gestuel*) with an analysis of objective significations.

In the light of what has just been said, this velleity of regrasping the world that is still new in contemporary art (recently again in pop art and the new portraiture) appears naive: it seems unaware of that systematic dimension according to which the modern gesture of painting is first organized — beside, or outside, or despite the conscious intentions of the artist. This velleity seems unaware that what is signified (and thus in a way domesticated) in contemporary art is no longer the world as substance and extension, but rather a certain temporality that is that of the subject in its self-indexing (and not the social individual of biographical data). There is a discontinuity and reconstitution of the subject from act to act, of which the signature is the socio-culturally encoded index. Modern art is actual (i.e., contemporary) in the strict sense of being "in the act" (*en acte*), from action to action: not contemporary with the world, but with itself and with itself alone in its own movement.[5] It changes gears according to a formal constraint of succession and plays upon variations and differences ("reading" the work will, most of the time, consist inversely in the decoding of these variations and differences).

Any function that one may wish to assign to art (among others, that of critical realism and of any form of commitment) must be measured with respect to this basic structure, and thus to this limit of meaning. Otherwise, the artist condemns himself to a pious ideology (which, on the other hand, is always the dominant ideology in matters of art): the eternal illusion of the philosophic consciousness, which makes him live his work as an absolute uniqueness that *confronts* the world and is responsible for bearing witness to it (for every philosophic consciousness is necessarily accompanied by a moral conscience).

5. Thus, no longer at the level of "creation" this time, but of appropriation, the collection of objects has no other temporality than that of the cycle that it constitutes: it is outside of "real" time.

Having said that, modern art is no less contemporary but its contemporaneity is neither direct nor critical: if it fully describes what we are, it does so by its very ambiguity.

Let us reconstruct this ambiguity. In a technical civilization of operatory abstraction, where neither machines nor domestic objects require much more than a controlling gesture (that gestural abstraction signifying a whole mode of relations and behavior), modern art in all its forms has for its primary function the salvation of the gestural moment, the intervention of the integral subject. It is the part of us, crushed by the technical habitus, that art conjures up in the pure gestural complex of the act of painting and its apparent liberty. Thus art (in its gesture) registers itself negatively as the sign of a lack. But this inscription that nourishes the most current ideology (that art is spontaneity, upsurge, living opposition to a mechanized universe) is not critical: it poses as a challenge confronting the world; but by default, it is stamped with nostalgic values, it compensates. And above all, it is caught up in its subjectivity, in its very act, by that seriality against which it registers itself in the external world. Despite this inscription, despite the sublime instantaneousness which it proclaims (in good faith, however: it seriously believes in it), subjectivity in action can only obey the same formal constraints of organization as the functional world. And here we have the truth of our modern art: if it bears witness to our time, it does so neither by direct allusion nor even in its pure gesture denying a systematized world — it is in testifying to the *systematic* of this full world by means of the inverse and homologous systematic of its empty gesture, a pure gesture marking an absence.

This serial dimension and this absence value are its absolute conditions of signification. Whether it assumes them or not, enacts them or evades them, it is in this that it is the only art possible. It is an art that is neither positive nor critical — contradictory (these are the two sides of the same illusion) but homologous and collusive: and thus, ambiguous. Most artists (and consumers) flee this contradiction. And even the acknowledgement of this systematic dimension may still be a detour to escape it. This is what one perceives in the mannerisms of the literal repetition of Andy Warhol, Rauschenberg, etc., by which they proclaim themselves painters of seriality and thus redirect this fundamental structure, turning it into an effect of fashion.

Before sinking into pure consumption, pop art will have had the merit of exposing these contradictions more clearly in the actual exercise of painting and in the latter's difficulties in deciding upon its

true object. Thus we read in Warhol: "The canvas is an absolutely everyday object, on the same plane as this chair or this poster." Let us applaud this democratic conception, but recognize that it is either very naive or in very bad faith. Even if art wishes to signify the "everyday," that is not what it is: that would be to confuse the thing and its meaning. Now, art is constrained to signify, it cannot even commit suicide in the everyday. In that wish to absorb art, there is simultaneously an American pragmatism (terrorism of the useful, blackmail of integration) and something like an echo of a mystique of sacrifice. Warhold adds: "Reality has no need of an intermediary, it is necessary only to isolate it from the surroundings, transfer it to the canvas." The whole question is there: for the "everydayness" of this chair (or of that slice of meat, car fender, or centerfold) is precisely its context, and singularly, the serial context of all similar, or slightly different, chairs, etc. Everydayness is difference in repetition. In isolating the chair on the canvas, I remove all its everydayness from it and at the same time remove from the canvas all the characteristics of an everyday object (which in the theorists' illusion ought to make it absolutely resemble the chair).

This is the stumbling block: art can neither be absorbed into the everyday (canvas equals chair) nor grasp the everyday as such (chair isolated on the canvas equals real chair). Immanence and transcendence are equally impossible: they are two faces of the same dream. In fact, the discourse of modern art is of another order: *it is to signify in the same mode as objects do in their everydayness, that is, in their latent systematic.* It is in this serial and differential organization, with its own temporality punctuated by fashion and the recurrence of behavior models, to which art currently testifies. This by continually proving itself in a gesture that is repeated according to a play of inessential and combinatory variations in turn permits art to be something other than absolute repetition. "I would like to be a machine," Andy Warhol says.

Of course, this formula is paradoxical, because there is no greater affectation for art than for it to pose as mechanical, nor a greater coquettishness for subjectivity than to dedicate itself to serial automatism. But it testifies all the same to a logical exigency and to the limiting condition of modern art: that of a subjectivity fascinated by a technical world that denies it, fascinated by the positivity of that world but which paradoxically can only absorb this world by repeating itself across serial diffractions.

The world in its objective systematic and art in its subjective systematic exchange their significations. This is their homologous

situation.[6] Art is assigned there in all lucidity: it can only signify the world on the basis of a structural affinity that simultaneously marks the fatal character of its *integration*.

Only recognition of this structural homology between a systematized world and an art that is itself serial in its most profound exercise[7] permits one to grasp this contradiction of modern art — which is deplored everywhere, even by artists themselves, as a fatality. Modern art wishes to be negative, critical, innovative and a perpetual surpassing, as well as immediately (or almost) assimilated, accepted, integrated, consumed. One must surrender to the evidence: art no longer contests anything, if it ever did. Revolt is isolated, the malediction "consumed." All the more reason there would seem to be, then, to abandon all nostalgia, resign negativity, and admit finally that it is in the very movement of its authenticity, in systematizing itself according to a formal constraint, in constituting itself according to a play of successive differences, that the work of art offers itself of its own initiative as immediately integrable in a global system that conjugates it like any other object or group of objects.

In this sense, modern works have indeed become everyday object: although laden with cultural connotations, they pose no problems to the environment. A modern painting, pop, abstract, a "tachiste," contradicts nothing: it enters into the play of the syntagmatic distribution of objects in space (in the modern interior) just as — and because it issues from the inventory of a circumscribed subjectivity — one sign passes into another, from one moment to another. Two chains cross: the necessary dimension of signification is also the "fatal" dimension of integration and consumption.

Modern art, midway between critical terrorism (ideological) and *de facto* structural integration, is quite exactly an *art of collusion vis-à-vis* this contemporary world. It plays with it, and is included in the game. It can parody this world, illustrate it, simulate it, alter it; it never disturbs the order, which is also its own. We are no longer dealing with the bourgeois art which, in its redundancy, presents beings and objects, reconciled with their image (all "representation" carries this ideology of reconciliation). In modern art it is a subjectivity which, unreconciled with the world, endeavors to

6. Moreover, this structural homology not only constitutes art as a series, but also the world itself as "mechanical." The world only really becomes mechanical from the moment it can no longer be evoked save mechanically.

7. And for which the reference to the world becomes secondary — just as the exercise of collection is valued above the thematic of the objects collected.

reconcile itself with its own image: it is a subjectivity whose redundancy, while committed in an implicit seriality, is dedicated to homologically illustrating the seriality of all other objects and the systematic of an increasingly well integrated world through its own withdrawal and defiance.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ART AUCTION: SIGN EXCHANGE AND SUMPTUARY VALUE

It may seem strange to be analyzing the ideological process somewhere other than in the traditional, political or cultural sanctuaries. But the point is precisely that the market for paintings and the auction sale of the work of art permit us to decipher the articulation, and thus the process, of ideological labor because they are situated in the contexts of economic power and the cultural field. The auction, this crucible of the interchange of values, where economic value, sign value and symbolic value transfuse according to the rules of the game, can be considered as an ideological matrix — one of the shrines of the political economy of the sign.

It is a question of decoding the birth of the sign form in the same way that Marx was able to uncover the birth of the commodity form in the *Critique of Political Economy*. In consumption generally, economic exchange value (money) is converted into sign exchange value (prestige, etc.); but this operation is still sustained by the alibi of use value. By contrast, the auction of the work of art has this notable characteristic: that economic exchange value, in the pure form of its general equivalent, money, is exchanged there for a pure sign, the painting. So it is an experimental terrain, simultaneously collective and institutional, for separating out the operation of this sign value.[1]

The decisive action is one of a simultaneous double reduction — that of exchange value (money) and of symbolic value (the painting as an *oeuvre*) — and of their transmutation into sign value (the signed, appraised painting as a luxury value and rare object) by expenditure and agonistic competition.

1. The Other Face of Political Economy

In expenditure, money changes meaning. This fact, established in the auction, can be transferred as a hypothesis to the whole sphere of consumption. The act of consumption is never simply a purchase (reconversion of exchange value into use value); it is also an expenditure (an aspect as radically neglected by political economy as by Marx); that is to say, it is wealth manifested, and a manifest destruction of wealth. It is that value, deployed beyond exchange

1. The very considerable problems posed by the analysis of use value will be taken up later in the chapter, Beyond Use Value.

value and founded upon the latter's destruction, that invests the object purchased, acquired, appropriated, with its differential sign value. It is not the quantity of money that takes on value, as in the economic logic of equivalence, but rather money spent, sacrificed, eaten up according to a logic of difference and challenge. Every act of purchase is thus simultaneously an economic act and a trans-economic act of the production of differential sign value.

Certainly in everyday consumption the specific (and fundamental) aspects of the auction are largely effaced: the direct experience of competition, the challenge, the agonistic community of peers, etc., which make it such a fascinating moment, the equivalent of poker or the *fête*. But behind the purchase (or individual reappropriation of use value) there always remains the moment of expenditure, which even in its banality presupposes something of a competition, a wager, a challenge, a sacrifice and thus a potential community of peers and an *aristocratic measure of value*. Let us not be mistaken: it is this, and not the satisfaction of needs, that occasionally turns consumption into a passion, a fascinating game, something other than functional economic behavior: it becomes the competitive field of the destruction of economic value for the sake of another type of value.

The process of production and systematization of economic exchange value has been described as essential, and in fact it is: political economy is this immense transmutation of all values (labor, knowledge, social relations, culture, nature) into economic exchange value. Everything is abstracted and reabsorbed into a world market and in the preeminent role of money as a general equivalent. This aspect of the analysis has been privileged (for historical and ideological reasons that have nothing to do with "scientific objectivity," and which should be analyzed more fully, even in Marx). Thus the equally essential, equally generalized process has been largely neglected — a process that is neither the inverse nor the residue nor the relay of production: that immense process of the transmutation of economic exchange value into sign exchange value. This is the process of *consumption* considered *as a system of sign exchange value*: not consumption as traditional political economy defines it (reconversion of economic exchange value into use value, as a moment of the production cycle), but consumption considered as the conversion of economic exchange value into sign exchange value. At this point, the field of political economy, articulated only through exchange value and use value, explodes and must be entirely re-analyzed as *generalized political economy*, which implies the

production of sign exchange value in the same way and in the same movement as the production of material goods and of economic exchange value. The analysis of the production of signs and of culture thus does not impose itself as exterior, ulterior, and "superstructural" in relation to that of material production; it imposes itself as *a revolution of political economy* itself, generalized by the theoretical and practical irruption of the political economy of the sign.

All efforts to autonomize this field of consumption (that is, of the systematic production of signs) as an object of analysis are mystifying: they lead directly to culturalism. But it is necessary to see that the same ideological mystification results from autonomizing the field of material production as a determining agency. Those who specify culture (sign production) in order to circumscribe it as superstructure are also culturalists without knowing it: they institute the same split as the cultural idealists, and constrict the field of political economy just as arbitrarily. If culture, consumption and signs must be analyzed as ideology this is not achieved by banishing them, or expelling them to an outer field, but, on the contrary, by integrating them into the very structures of political economy. Yet this implies that the traditional boundaries of political economy, canonized by bourgeois economic science as well as by Marxist analysis, should be disregarded. And the resistances to this are strong, for they are of all orders: theoretical, political, phantasmagorical. Yet today only a generalized political economy can define a revolutionary theory and practice.

Insofar as the market for paintings is specifically concerned, it may be said that it is the appropriation of the paintings as signs which acts as a factor of legitimation of economic and social power. But that gets us almost nowhere. We are still within the political vulgate: culture annexed and manipulated by the dominant class. The same is said of "needs," "consumption," leisure or sex. The dominant class would hold a sort of *jus primae noctis* over culture. Not content to exploit the "reserve of manpower," this class would exploit the reserve of signs, the system of values, in order to confuse the class conflict and mystify proletarian consciousness. But where do these signs originate? Are they already inherent in things, in a social nature, so that it is enough to forcibly appropriate them? Magical vision. And how can signs or myths be articulated upon an objective social and economic condition, in order to confuse its meaning? *There is little use in appealing to the "consciousness" argument!* Moreover, why would the dominant class have need of culture if the economic is truly the determining instance?

More profoundly, what is a signification? In what social relation is it produced? What is the mode of production of significations? The "capitalist" mode of production? Absurd.

Sign values are produced by a certain type of social labor. But the production of differences, of differential hierarchical systems, is not to be confused with the extortion of economic surplus value, nor does it result from it. Between the two, another type of labor intervenes which transforms economic value and surplus value into sign value: it is a *sumptuary* operation, devouring (*consummation*) and surpassing economic value according to a radically different type of exchange. Yet in a certain way it also produces a surplus value: domination, which is not to be confused with economic privilege and profit. The latter are in a way only the primary material and springboard for a *political* operation involving the transfiguration of power by signs. Domination is thus linked to economic power, but it does not "emanate" from it automatically and mysteriously; it issues from it through a reworking of economic value. As a result of having forgotten this very specific labor, Marxist analysis today finds itself in the same position with respect to the field of ideology as the bourgeois economists before (and since) Marx *vis-à-vis* material production: the *real* source of value and the *real* process of production are skipped over. It is from neglect of this social labor of sign production that ideology derives its transcendence; signs and culture appear enveloped in a "fetishism," a mystery equivalent to, and contemporaneous with that of the commodity.

Critical theorists of the political economy of the sign are rare. They are exiled, buried under Marxist (or neo-Marxist) terrorist analysis. Veblen and Goblot [2] are the great precursors of a cultural analysis of class which, beyond the "dialectical materialism" of productive forces, examines the *logic of sumptuary values* which assures and perpetuates through its code the hegemony of the dominant class, and, in a way, shelters the latter, through its "transsubstantiation" of values, from economic revolutions and their social repercussions.

In the economic order it is the mastery of *accumulation*, of the appropriation of surplus value, which is essential. In the order of signs (of culture), it is mastery of *expenditure* that is decisive, that is, a mastery of the transsubstantiation of economic exchange value into sign exchange value based on a monopoly of the code. Dominant classes have always either assured their domination over sign values from the outset (archaic and traditional societies), or endeavoured

2. Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* and Goblot, *La Barrière et le Niveau.*

(in the capitalist bourgeois order) to surpass, to transcend, and to consecrate their economic privilege in a semiotic privilege, because this later stage represents the ultimate stage of domination. This logic, which comes to relay class logic and which is no longer defined by ownership of the means of production but by the mastery of the process of signification; and which activates a mode of production radically different from that of material production (and which for this reason escapes "Marxist" analysis) is found in its entirety, though microscopically, in the art auction.

2. Difference from Economic Exchange

1. Like the game (poker, etc.), the art auction is always both a ritual and a unique event. The rules are arbitrary and fixed, yet one never knows exactly what will take place, nor afterward exactly what has happened, because it involves a dynamic of personal encounter, an algebra of individuals, as opposed to the economic operation where values are exchanged impersonally, arithmetically.

2. This personal character of the exchange implies the insularity (*unicité*) of the place (one cannot participate without being present), and above all, the concrete integrality (*unicité*) of the process (the time, order, rhythm, tempo are essential elements of the bidding). In the altercation and the out-bidding, each moment depends on the previous one and on the reciprocal relation of partners. Hence there is a specific development, which is different from the abstract time of economic exchange.

3. There is no interplay of supply and demand, as in the market, with a maximal approximation of the exchange value offered and the use value anticipated. The mercantile auction that reaches a point of equilibrium of supply and demand is found, for example, in a fish auction. But in the art auction, at the moment of bidding, exchange value and use value are no longer correlated according to an economic calculus. The anticipated use value (if there is one) does not increase during the auction. In fact, the particular activity of the auction institutes a specific relation and occurs outside use value. Once the latter has been put out of play, exchange value is no longer offered (in exchange for); it is wagered (*mise en jeu*). At once, it ceases to be exchange value and the whole situation is transferred out of the realm of the economic. It does not, however, cease to be an exchange, although it no longer takes the form of supply and demand, but of *reciprocal wager*. Thus the auction simultaneously institutes:

— a transmutation of value and of the economic coordinates;
— another type of social relation.

Transmutation of Value

In the crucial moment of the auction, money is nullified as a divisible exchange value and is transsubstantiated by its expenditure into an indivisible sumptuary value. Thus it becomes the homolog of the painting as a sign, a unique and indivisible object. There is no longer an equivalence, but an aristocratic *parity*[3] established between money, which has become a suptuary material through the loss of its economic exchange value, and the canvas, which has become a sign of prestige (hence an element of the restricted corpus that we call "painting") through the loss of its symbolic value.[4]

Social Relation

In the sumptuary act, money is nullified as a general equivalent, as form and so as a specific (capitalist) social relation regulated by this form. The social relation instituted in this act by the auction is still one of aristocratic parity (among partners). Contrary to commercial operations, which institute a relation of economic *rivalry* between individuals on the footing of formal *equality*, with each one guiding his own calculation of individual appropriation, the auction, like the fête or the game, institutes a concrete community of exchange among peers. Whoever the vanquisher in the challenge, the essential function of the auction is the institution of a community of the privileged who define themselves as such by agonistic speculation upon a restricted corpus of signs. Competition of the aristocratic sort seals their *parity* (which has nothing to do with the formal equality of economic competition), and thus their collective caste privilege with respect to all others, from whom they are no longer separated merely by their purchasing power, but by the sumptuary and collective act of the production and exchange of sign values.[5]

Here is the matrix of ideology — in the coherent logic of a system

3. Cf. the chapter below on Symbolic Value and Aesthetic Function.

4. "The price at which a canvas is sold is not the *measure* of its value in the same way as for an article of consumption. The price only has meaning at the very instant of sale, by the game of competition in which it is the relative equivalent of the absolute values and significations to which the painting refers." P. Dard and J. Michner, *Etude sur l'Exchange de Valeur*. In fact, it is no longer a price but a wager (*enjeu*). Moreover, for real players, money won in the game remains marked by it and cannot be spent for useful economic purposes: it must be put back into the game, poured back into it. "burned" — in a way, it is the *part maudite* of Bataille.

5. "Within this community there is a traffic of paintings on the basis of a *competition* among peers, while from the point of view of the global society, paintings are *retained* in and by this community — that is, the latter functions on the basis of a *social discrimination*. Yet this community presents itself as open by the competitive aspect of acquisition. . . . There we are at the frontiers of *strategies* of domination, where the possibility of individual mobility masks social discrimination." P. Dard and J. Michner, *Etude sur l'Echange de Valeur*.

of production, exchange and social relations that is radically different from the system of production, exchange and social relations based on the economic. Ideology is not a mysterious duping (*trucage*) of consciousness; it is a social logic that is substituted for another (and which resolves the latter's contradictions), thus changing the very definition of value. In our failure to recognize this, we have always reverted back to the rather embarrassing psychology of "interiorization." But whence arises this strange perversion of "consciousness" — mystifying itself, and abandoning itself of "ideological values" — when the social actors who are the subjects of this consciousness continue to produce their "objective" social relations? Indeed, when consciousness decides to flip over to the "objective" side, it becomes revolutionary, and we call it the *prise de conscience!* What a strange bourgeois novel psychology is — yet it profoundly infects revolutionary theory.

In fact, what is called the "psychology" of the art lover is also in its entirety a reduction from the system of exchange. The singularity that he asserts — that fetishist passion for the object lived as an elective affinity — is established on his recognition as peer, by virtue of a competitive act, in a community of the privileged. He is the equal of the canvas itself, whose unique value resides in the relation of parity, of statutory privilege, which, as a sign, it maintains with the other terms of the limited corpus of paintings. Hence, the "élitist" affinity between the amateur and the canvas that psychologically connotes the very sort of value, of exchange and of aristocratic social relation that is instituted by the auction. The passion of the amateur is ignited by the latent summation, by the exalting and continual obsession of all other amateurs, just as the fetishized value of the canvas, his *mana* is made from:

— its differential reference to all the other canvases in the same sublime sphere of status;

— its pedigree, its genealogy, that is, its signature and the cycles of its successive owners.

Thus, it is not the psychological relation of the individual to the object that gives birth to fetishism and that sustains the principle of exchange. "Object Fetishism" never supports exchange in its principle, but *the social principle of exchange supports the fetishized value of the object.*

3. Economic Power and Domination

There is another ideological reduction: that which makes the painting a commodity pure and simple. No, here it is not a question of the expanded reproduction of capital and of the capitalist class; it is a question of the production of a caste by the collective grace of a play of signs, and of the production of these signs by the destruction of economic value. Something similar to this sumptuary exchange and this aristocratic model, but weakened and geared down, diffuses through the whole system of consumption and provides its ideological efficacy. It seems absurd to speak of a "democratized" logic of caste. Yet consumption is instituted on the basis of the exchange of differences, of a distinctive material and thus of a potential community, which, however little remains of it — and precisely because nothing of it remains — is nevertheless articulated upon a fiction of aristocratic parity. The difference — a major one — between the aristocratic potlatch and consumption is that today differences are produced industrially, they are bureaucratically programmed in the form of collective models. They no longer arise in the personal reciprocity of challenge and exchange. Only the mass-mediatized simulacra (*simulacre*) of competition operate in the statutory rivalry. This latter no longer has the real, distinctive function that it still had in Veblen: the great dinosaurs of "*wasteful expenditure*" are changed into innumerable individuals pledged to a parody of sacrificial consumption, mobilized as consumers by the order of production. Expenditure has thus radically changed its meaning. The fact remains that it is because the collective phantom of lost (sumptuary) values is reactivated in expenditure and in mass-mediatized consumption, that this practice can be lived individually as gratification, as liberty, as fulfillment — and so act as ideology. Even the simulation model of a differential aristocratic code still acts as a powerful factor of integration and of control, as participation in the same "rule of the game." Everywhere prestige haunts our industrial societies, whose bourgeois culture is never more than the phantom of aristocratic values. Everywhere the magic of the code, the magic of an elective and selective community, fused together by the same rules of the game and the same system of signs, is collectively reproduced, beyond economic value and on the basis of it. Everywhere this process comes to penetrate class conflicts, everywhere — diluted over the entire extent of the society, whatever the economic status and class condition — it acts to the advantage of the dominant class. It is the keystone of domination. It is not automatically dismantled by the revolutionary logic of productive forces, by the "dialectical" process

of capital or by the traditional critique of political economy.

Only a critique of the political economy of the sign can analyze how the present *mode of domination* is able to regain, integrate and simultaneously take advantage of all the modes of production — not only of the capitalist mode of production, but of all "previous," "archaic" modes of production and exchange, infra- or trans-economic. Only such a critique can analyze how at the very heart of the economic the mode of domination reinvents (or reproduces) the logic and the strategy of signs, of castes, of segregation, and of discrimination; how it reinstates the feudal logic of personal relations or even that of the gift exchange and of reciprocity, or of agonistic exchange — in order simultaneously to thwart and crown the "modern" socio-economic logic of class. But perhaps economic exploitation and "class" domination are at bottom only a "historic" variant and a detour in the immense genealogy of the forms of social domination. Perhaps contemporary society is once again becoming primarily a society of domination by signs, hence giving rise to the total demand for a "cultural revolution," which implies the whole process of ideological production — the theoretical basis of which can only be given by a political economy of the sign.

4. Symbolic Value and the Aesthetic Function

What happens to symbolic value in this whole operation, to the value peculiar to the "work of art"? It does not appear anywhere. It is repudiated, absent. Parallel to the ascension of economic exchange value into sign value, there is a reduction of symbolic value into sign value. On either side, economic exchange value and symbolic value lose their own status and become *satellites* of sign value. At the level of paintings, manipulated as supersigns, symbolic value is resolved into an *aesthetic function*, that is, it only operates *inter linea*, behind the operation of the sign, as a reference-alibi, as a sublime rationalization of the sumptuary operation.[6]

Repudiated as symbolic labor, the painting acts as:

— distinctive material, the foundation of the "noble" and of restrained exchange;

— and as universal "aesthetic" value — it doubles itself as *an idea* of painting serving to legitimize the operation in the absolute.

But this absolute is an alibi. We have seen that the true value of the painting is its genealogical value (its "birth": the signature and the aura of its successive transactions: its pedigree). Just as the cycle

6. From that moment on, the economic can also serve as rationalization. The market for paintings is sometimes placed under the rubric of "love of art," sometimes under that of "good investment."

of successive gifts in primitive societies charges the object with more and more value, so the painting circulates from inheritor to inheritor as a title of nobility, being charged with prestige throughout its history. Here, by the very circulation of signs a sort of surplus value is produced which must be radically distinguished from economic surplus value. It does not create profit, but *legitimacy* and it is with this that the art lover identifies himself by his economic sacrifice in the auction. Thus for caste members the only real values are those produced and exchanged within the caste (similarly for Goblot's bourgeoisie, for whom originality, virtue, genius, etc., all the "universal" values, do not compare with regard to "distinction," the specific value of class — or of caste).

The caste of partners knows at bottom that the veritable status, the veritable legitimacy, the reproduction of the social relation, and so the perpetuation of the dominant class "in its essence," is enacted in the aristocratic manipulation of works as the material of sign exchange. At bottom it disdains the "aesthetic," "art," the symbolic, and "culture" which, as "universal" values, are barely good for collective consumption. Aesthetic enjoyment, spiritual commerce with the works, and the values labelled "absolute" are all that is left to those who cannot aspire to the privileged potlatch.[7]

The process of ideology in its totality thus acts on the simultaneous operation:

— of a system of restricted exchange upon a limited corpus and in the mode of aristocratic parity competition;

— of a system of exchange of "universal" values for the use of all, in the mode of formal equality.

Still in the realm of painting, it is interesting in this sense to confront the reciprocal function of the institution of the market and of the auction with the institution of the museum. One might believe that, by removing the works from this private parallel market to "nationalize" them, the museum returns them to a sort of collective ownership and so to their "authentic" aesthetic function. In fact, the museum acts as a *guarantee* for the aristocratic exchange. It is a double guarantee:

— just as a gold bank, the public backing of the Bank of France, is necessary in order that the circulation of capital and private speculation be organized, so the fixed reserve of the museum is necessary for the functioning of the sign exchange of paintings.

7. All else being equal, it is the same discrimination that dedicates the immense majority to use value in consumption, and to the functional enjoyment of products — the dominant class strategically reserves for itself the manipulation of exchange value, of capital and of surplus value.

Museums play the role of banks in the political economy of paintings:

— not content to act as an organic guarantee of speculation in art, the museum acts as an agency guaranteeing the universality of painting and so also the aesthetic enjoyment (a socially inessential value, it has been seen) of all others.

5. Conclusion

In the auction and the art market we wished to comprehend a sort of *nucleum* of the strategy of values, a sort of concrete space-time, strategic moment and matrix in the process of ideology, which latter is always the production of sign value and of coded exchange. This economy of values is a *political* economy. It goes well beyond economic calculation and concerns all the processes of the transmutation of values, all those socially produced transitions from one value to another, from one logic to another logic of value which may be noted in determinate places and institutions — and so it also concerns the connection and implication of different systems of exchange and modes of production. The critique of this general political economy of value is the only one which today can recapture Marx's analysis on a global level. And it is the only one which can make this "beyond value" (*au-dela de la valeur*) appear theoretically as a basis for the practical overthrow of political economy.

NB

Objects other than paintings, of course, could be analyzed in the same terms: for example, knowledge. The institutional space-time of the competitive community is then the examination, better yet the national entrance examination. It is there that the "transsubstantiation of profane knowledge into sacred knowledge" operates, that "bureaucratic baptism of knowledge" (Marx), whose function with respect to the baccalauréat, the social threshold of the caste, has been well analyzed by Goblot. The same operation of transmutation of knowledge as a universal value into knowledge as sign value, as a title of nobility, is accompanied by the same legitimation, the same discrimination of all the peers who participate in the white mass, in this *sacrament*. One could also analyze the academic congress (of scholars, of intellectuals, of sociologists) as places of transmission, of hereditary reproduction of the intelligentsia and of a privileged community on the basis of an agonistic debauch of signs. Conferences are almost as useful to the advancement of knowledge as horse races and parimutuels to the advancement of the equine race (horses and races, moreover, as well as the parallel market of sumptuary values, would be an excellent object for study).

CHAPTER SIX

FOR A GENERAL THEORY

I

"The Ideological Genesis of Needs" postulated four different logics of value:

— the functional logic of use value
— the economic logic of exchange value
— the differential logic of sign value
— the logic of symbolic exchange

with, for their respective principles: utility, equivalence, difference, ambivalence.

The study of "The Art Auction" explored a particular case of the strategy of values in the passage from economic exchange value to sign exchange value. Continuing from that point, it is tempting to lay out a hypothetical general conversion table of all values that could serve as an orientation table for a general anthropology.

Use Value (UV):
1. UV — EcEV
2. UV — SgEV
3. UV — SbE

Economic Exchange Value (EcEV)
1. EcEV — UV
2. EcEV — SgEV
3. EcEV — SbE

Sign Exchange Value (SgEV)
1. SgEV — UV
2. SgEV — EcEV
3. SgEV — SbE

Symbolic Exchange (SbE)
1. SbE — UV
2. SbE — EcEV
3. SbE — SgEV

Here there is no attempt at a theoretical articulation of these various logics. There is simply an attempt to mark out the respective fields and the transit from one to the other.

1. *UV — EcEV*: The field of the process of production of exchange value, of the commodity form (*forme-marchandise*) etc., described by political economy. Productive consumption.

2. *UV — SgEV*: The field of the production of signs originating in

the destruction of utility ("conspicuous consumption," sumptuary value). "Unproductive" consumption (of time as well, in conspicuous idleness and leisure), in fact productive of differences: it is functional difference playing as a statutory difference (semi-automatic vs. entirely automatic washing machine). Here, the advertising process of conferring value transmutes use goods (*biens d'usage*) into sign values. Here technique and knowledge are divorced from their objective practice and recovered by the "cultural" system of differentiation. It is thus the extended field of *consumption*, in the sense we have given it of production, systems and interplay of signs. Of course, this field also includes the production of signs originating from economic exchange value (see 5 below).

3. *UV — SbE*: The field of consumption (*consumation* as opposed to the usual French, *consommation*), that is, of the destruction of use value (or of economic exchange value, cf. 6), no longer, however, in order to produce sign values, but in the mode of a *transgression* of the economic, reinstating symbolic exchange. The presentation, the gift, the festival (*fête*).

4. *EcEV — UV*: This is the process of "consumption" in the traditional economic sense of the term, that is, the reconversion of exchange value into use value (by private individuals in the act of purchase or by production in the productive consumption). 4 and 1 are the two moments of the cycle of classical (and Marxist) political economy, which does not take into account the political economy of the sign. It is also the field of the consecration of exchange value by use value, of the transfiguration of the commodity form into the object form (cf. below, "Beyond Use Value").

5. *EcEV — SgEV*: The process of *consumption* according to its redefinition in the political economy of the sign. It includes the act of spending as production of sign value and, conjointly with 2, it comprises the field of sumptuary value. But here more accurately, we have the ascension of the commodity form into the sign form, the transfiguration of the economic into sign systems and the transmutation of economic power into domination and social caste privilege.

6. *EcEV — SbE*: While 2 and 5 describe the *transfiguration* of use value and exchange value into sign value (or again: of the object form and commodity form into sign form), 3 and 6 mark the *transgression* of these two forms (that is, of the economic) in symbolic exchange. According to our reformulation which implicates the sign form in the field of general political economy, 9 completes 3 and 6 as transgression of the sign form towards symbolic exchange.

There is no articulation between these three forms (which describe general political economy) and symbolic exchange. There is, on the contrary, a radical separation and transgression, an eventual deconstruction of these forms, which are *codes of value*. Accurately speaking, there is no symbolic "value," there is only symbolic "exchange," which defines itself precisely as something distinct from, and beyond value and code. All forms of value (object, commodity or sign) must be negated in order to inaugurate symbolic exchange. This is the radical rupture of the field of value.

7. *SgEv — UV*: Signs, like commodities, are at once use value and exchange value. The social hierarchies, the invidious differences, the privileges of caste and culture which they support, are accounted as profit, as personal satisfaction, and lived as "need" (need of social value-generation to which corresponds the "utility" of differential signs and their "consumption").

8. *SgEV — EcEV*: This involves the reconversion of cultural privilege, of the monopoly of signs, etc., into economic privilege. Coupled with 5, this reconversion describes the total cycle of a political economy in which economic exploitation based on the monopoly of capital and "cultural" domination based on the monopoly of the code engender one another ceaselessly.

9. *SgEV — SbE*: The deconstruction and transgression of the sign form towards symbolic exchange (cf. 3 and 6).

10, 11, and 12. *SbE — UV, EcEV, SgEV*: All three describe a single process, the inverse of the transgression described in 3, 6, and 9 — the process of breaking and reducing symbolic exchange, and the inauguration of the economic. Taken together, they amount to a kind of "cost analysis" of symbolic exchange under the abstract and rational jurisdiction of the various codes of value (use value, exchange value, sign value). For example: the objects involved in reciprocal exchange, whose uninterrupted circulation establishes social relationships, i.e., social *meaning*, annihilate themselves in this continual exchange without assuming any value of their own (that is, any appropriable value). Once symbolic exchange is broken, this same material is abstracted into utility value, commercial value, statutory value. The symbolic is transformed into the instrumental, either commodity or sign. Any one of the various codes may be specifically involved, but they are all joined in the single form of political economy which is opposed, as a whole, to symbolic exchange.

This "combined" interpretation of the matrix (*grille*) of values is only a first approach. It appears that certain correlations group together naturally, that certain are reversible, that certain values are

convertible into one another, that certain are exclusive of each other. Some function term by term, others in a more complex cycle. Their general principles — utility, equivalence, difference, and ambivalence — are difficult to articulate clearly. And above all, it should be borne in mind that this remains a combinatory exploration, with its merely formal symmetries. There is no organizing theory behind it.

II

A second phase consists in extracting some dominant articulation from this moving ensemble of production and reproduction, of conversion, transgression and reduction of values. The first that presents itself can be formulated thus:

$$\frac{\text{SgEV}}{\text{SbE}} = \frac{\text{EcEV}}{\text{UV}}$$

or: sign value is to symbolic exchange what exchange value (economic) is to use value.

That is to say that between symbolic exchange and sign value there is the same reduction, the same process of abstraction and rationalization (cf. "Fetishism and Ideology" concerning the body, the unconscious, etc.) as between the multiple "concrete" use values and the abstraction of exchange value in the commodity. Consequently, the form of the equation, if it is accepted, implies that an identical process is at work on both sides of the equation. This process is none other than that of political economy (traditionally directed upon the second relation: $\frac{\text{EcEV}}{\text{UV}}$). This implies analyzing the first relation in terms of a *political economy of the sign*, which is articulated in the political economy of material production and *countersigns* it in the process of ideological labor. This sign economy exists, more or less, in the form of theoretical linguistics and, more generally, semiology. But these latter carefully avoid placing their analyses under the rubric of *political* economy (which implies a *critique* of the political economy of the sign, following the same theoretical procedure as Marx). This, however, is what they amount to without knowing it: they are simply the equivalent, in the domain of signs and meaning, of classical bourgeois political economy *prior* to its critique by Marx.

If the political economy of the sign (semiology) is susceptible to a critique in the same way as classical political economy, it is because their form is the same, not their content: sign form and commodity form.

This second phase has moved from a matrix (*grille*) and from a more or less mechanical combinatory of values to a relation of forms and to an homology of the ensemble: it is a considerable advance, but not decisive. This relation effectively articulates the various logics of value; but if the homology is to be fully coherent, there must be a horizontal relation to reinforce the vertical one. Not only must sign value be to symbolic exchange what exchange value is to use value (the relation posited above), but also sign value must be to exchange value what symbolic exchange is to use value. That is:

$$\frac{\text{SgEV}}{\text{EcEV}} = \frac{\text{SbE}}{\text{UV}}$$

Now, if sign value and exchange value (sign form and commodity form) really are implicated, by reason of their logical form, in the framework of a general political economy, we can claim no affinity of the same order linking symbolic exchange and use value — quite the contrary, because the former implies the *transgression* of the latter, the latter the *reduction* of the former (cf. in 1, 3 and 10-12). The formula then is not coherent, so much the more so in that the integration of symbolic exchange as a factor homogeneous to the others in the relation does not take into account what has been posited: that the symbolic is not a value (i.e., not positive, autonomisable, measurable or codifiable). It is the ambivalence (positive and negative) of personal exchange — and as such it is radically opposed to all values.

II

These incoherencies finaly result in bursting the formula and in a general restructuring.

1. In place of the sign as global value, it is necessary to make its constituent elements, the signifier and the signified, appear.

2. Then, the definitive correlation between sign form and commodity form is established thus:

$$\frac{\text{EcEV}}{\text{UV}} = \frac{\text{Sr}}{\text{Sd}}$$

or: exchange value is to use value what the signifier is to the signified.

The horizontal implication — exchange value is to the signifier what use value is to the signified (i.e., the logical affinity of exchange value and the signifier on the one hand, and of use value and the signified on the other) — will emerge from the analysis of the respective vertical implications. On this basis, we will say that this homologous relation (this time coherent) describes the field of general political economy.

3. The homologous relation being saturated, symbolic exchange finds itself expelled from the field of value (or the field of general political economy). This corresponds to the radical definition as the alternative to and transgression of value.

4. The bar marking the process of reduction, or of rational abstraction, which (it is believed) separates use value from exchange value, and signified from signifier, is displaced. The fundamental reduction no longer takes place between UV and EV, or between signifier and signified.[1] It takes place between the system as a whole and symbolic exchange.

The bar which separates use value from exchange value, and that which separates the signified from the signifier is a line of formal logical implication. It does not radically separate these respective terms; rather, it establishes a structural relation between them (and similarly between exchange value and signifier, between use value and signified). In fact, *all these relations form a system in the framework of political economy.* And the logical organization of this entire system denies, represses and reduces symbolic exchange. The bar that separates all these terms from symbolic exchange is not a bar of structural implication, it is a line of radical exclusion (which presupposes the radical alternative of transgression). Thus we arrive at the following general distribution of terms:

$$\frac{\text{EcEV}}{\text{UV}} = \frac{\text{Sr}}{\text{Sd}} \Big/ \text{SbE} \quad \text{(symbolic exchange)}$$

that is to say, a single great opposition between the whole field of value (where the process of material production [commodity form] and the process of sign production [sign form] are articulated through the same systematic logic) and the field of non-value, of symbolic exchange.

General Political Economy / Symbolic Exchange

A critique of general political economy (or a critical theory of value) and a theory of symbolic exchange are one and the same thing. It is the basis of a revolutionary anthropology. Certain elements of this anthropology have been elaborated by Marxist analysis, but it has since proved unable to develop them to the critical point of departure.

The present theory posits three essential tasks, beginning from and going beyond Marxist analysis.

1. The extension of the critique of political economy to *a radical critique of use value,* in order to reduce the idealist anthropology which it still subtends, even in Marx (whether at the level of "needs" of individuals or at the level of the "use value of labor"). A critique of use value fetishism is necessary — an analysis of the object form in its relations to the commodity form.

1. We will return (in Towards a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign) to the problem of the referent, which only exists in an integrated relation to the signified (such that they are often confused).

2. The extension of the critique of political economy to the sign and to systems of signs is required in order to show how the logic, free play and circulation of signifiers is organized like the logic of the exchange value system; and how the logic of signifieds is subordinated to it tactically, as that of use value is subordinated to that of exchange value. Finally, we need a critique of signifier-fetishism — an analysis of the sign form in its relation to the commodity form. In the global relation

$$\frac{\text{EcEV}}{\text{UV}} = \frac{\text{Sr}}{\text{Sd}}$$

these two initial points aim towards a critical theory of the three terms which Marxist analysis has not yet mastered. In fact, strictly speaking, Marx offers only a critical theory of exchange value. The *critical* theory of use value, signifier, and signified remains to be developed.

3. A theory of symbolic exchange.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BEYOND USE VALUE

The status of use value in Marxian theory is ambiguous. We know that the commodity is both exchange value and use value. But the latter is always concrete and particular, contingent on its own destiny, whether this be in the process of individual consumption or in the labor process. (In this case, lard is valued as lard, cotton as cotton: they cannot be substituted for each other, nor thus "exchanged.") Exchange value, on the other hand, is abstract and general. To be sure, there could be no exchange value without use value — the two are coupled; but neither is strongly implied by the other: "In order to define the notion of commodity, it is not important to know its particular content and its exact destination. It suffices that before it is a commodity — in other words, the vehicle (support) of exchange value — the article satisfy a given social need by possessing the corresponding useful property. That is all."[1] Thus, use value is not implicated in the logic peculiar to exchange value, which is a logic of equivalence. Besides, there can be use value without exchange value (equally for labor power as for products, in the sphere outside the market). Even if it is continually reclaimed by the process of production and exchange, use value is never truly inscribed in the field of the market economy: it has its own finality, albeit restricted. And within it is contained, from this standpoint, the promise of a resurgence beyond the market economy, money and exchange value, in the glorious autonomy of man's simple relation to his work and his products.

So it appears that commodity fetishism (that is, where social relations are disguised in the qualities and attributes of the commodity itself) is not a function of the commodity defined *simultaneously* as exchange value and use value, but of exchange value alone. Use value, in this restrictive analysis of fetishism, appears neither as a social relation nor hence as the locus of fetishization. Utility as such escapes the historical determination of class. It represents an objective, final relation of intrinsic purpose (*destination propre*), which does not mask itself and whose transparency, as form, defies history (even if its content changes continually with respect to social and cultural determinations). It is

1. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I. I have been unable to find this passage in the exact form Baudrillard cites it. But see Marx's *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage, 1973), for example, at the bottom of p. 404. — *Trans.*

here that Marxian idealism goes to work; it is here that we have to be more logical than Marx himself — and more radical, in the true sense of the word. For use value — indeed, utility itself — is a fetishized social relation, just like the abstract equivalence of commodities. Use value is an abstraction. It is an abstraction of the *system of needs* cloaked in the false evidence of a concrete destination and purpose, an intrinsic finality of goods and products. It is just like the abstraction of social labor, which is the basis for the logic of equivalence (exchange value), hiding beneath the "innate" value of commodities.

In effect, our hypothesis is that needs (i.e., the system of needs) are the *equivalent of abstract social labor:* on them is erected the system of use value, just as abstract social labor is the basis for the system of exchange value. This hypothesis also implies that, for there to be a system at all, use value and exchange value must be regulated by an identical abstract logic of equivalence, an identical code. The code of utility is also a code of abstract equivalence of objects and subjects (for each category in itself and for the two taken together in their relation); hence, it is a combinatory code involving potential calculation (we will return to this point). Furthermore, it is in itself, as system, that use value can be "fetishized," and certainly not as a practical operation. It is always the systematic abstraction that is fetishized. The same goes for exchange value. And it is the *two* fetishizations, reunited — that of use value and that of exchange value — that constitute commodity fetishism.

Marx defines the form of exchange value and of the commodity by the fact that they can be equated on the basis of abstract social labor. Inversely, he posits the "incomparability" of use values. Now, it must be seen that:

1. For there to be economic exchange and exchange value, it is also necessary that the principle of utility has already become the reality principle of the object or product. To be abstractly and generally exchangeable, products must also be thought and rationalized in terms of utility. Where they are not (as in primitive symbolic exchange), they can have no exchange value. The reduction to the status of utility is the basis of (economic) exchangeability.

2. If the exchange principle and the utility principle have such an affinity (and do not merely coexist in the commodity), it is because utility is already entirely infused with the logic of equivalence, contrary to what Marx says about the "incomparability" of use values. If use value is not quantitative in the strictly arithmetical sense, it still involves equivalence. Considered as useful values, all

goods are already comparable among themselves, because they are assigned to the same rational-functional common denominator, the same abstract determination. Only objects or categories of goods cathected in the singular and personal act of symbolic exchange (the gift, the present) are strictly incomparable. The personal relation (non-economic exchange) renders them absolutely unique. On the other hand, as a useful value, the object attains an abstract universality, an "objectivity" (through the reduction of every symbolic function).

3. What is involved here, then, is an object form whose general equivalent is utility. And this is no mere "analogy" with the formulas of exchange value. The same logical form is involved. Every object is translatable into the general abstract code of equivalence, which is its rationale, its objective law, its meaning — and this is achieved independently of who makes use of it and what purpose it serves. It is functionality which supports it and carries it along as code; and this code, founded on the mere adequation of an object to its (useful) end, subordinates all real or potential objects to itself, without taking any one into account at all. Here, the economic is born: the economic calculus. The commodity form is only its developed form, and returns to it continually.

4. Now, contrary to the anthropological illusion that claims to exhaust the idea of utility in the simple relation of a human need to a useful property of the object, use value is very much a social relation. Just as, in terms of exchange value, the producer does not appear as a creator, but as abstract social labor power, so in the system of use value, the consumer never appears as desire and enjoyment, but as abstract social need power (one could say *Bedürfniskraft, Bedürfnisvermögen,* by analogy with *Arbeitskraft, Arbeitsvermögen*).

The abstract social producer is man conceived in terms of exchange value. The abstract social individual (the person with "needs") is man thought of in terms of use value. There is a homology between the "emancipation" in the bourgeois era of the private individual given final form by his needs and the functional emancipation of objects as use values. This results from an objective rationalization, the surpassing of old ritual and symbolic constraints. In a radically different type of exchange, objects did not have the status of "objectivity" that we give them at all. But henceforward secularized, functionalized and rationalized in purpose, objects become the promise of an ideal (and idealist) political economy, with its watchword "to each according to his needs."

At the same time, the individual, now disengaged from all collective obligations of a magical or religious order, "liberated" from his archaic, symbolic or personal ties, at last private and autonomous, defines himself through an "objective" activity of transforming nature — labor — *and* through the destruction of utility for his benefit: needs, satisfactions, use value.

Utility, needs, use value: none of this ever comes to grips with the finality of a subject up against his ambivalent object relations, or with symbolic exchange between subjects. Rather, it describes the relation of the individual to himself conceived in economic terms — better still, the relation of the subject to the economic system. Far from the individual expressing his needs in the economic system, it is the economic system that induces the individual function and the parallel functionality of objects and needs.[2] The individual is an ideological structure, a historical form correlative with the commodity form (exchange value), and the object form (use value). The individual is nothing but the subject thought in economic terms, rethought, simplified, and abstracted by the economy. The entire history of consciousness and ethics (all the categories of occidental psycho-metaphysics) is only the history of the political economy of the subject.

Use value is the expression of a whole metaphysic: that of utility. It registers itself as a kind of *moral law* at the heart of the object — and it is inscribed there as the finality of the "need" of the subject. It is the transcription at the heart of things of the same moral law (Kantian and Christian) inscribed on the heart of the subject, positivizing it in its essence and instituting it in a *final* relation (with God, or to some transcendent reality). In both cases, the circulation of value is regulated by a providential code that watches over the correlation of the object with the needs of the subject, under the rubric of functionality — as it assures, incidentally, the coincidence of the subject with divine law, under the sign of morality.

This is the same teleology that seals the essence of the subject (his self-identity through the recognition of this transcendent finality). It establishes the object in its truth, as an essence called use value, transparent to itself and to the subject, under the rational banner of utility. And this moral law effects the same fundamental reduction of all the symbolic virtualities of the subject and the object. A simple

2. By the same token, there is no fundamental difference between "productive" consumption (direct destruction of utility during the process of production) and consumption by persons in general. The individual and his "needs" are produced by the economic system like unit cells of its reproduction. We repeat that "needs" are a *social labor*, a productive discipline. Neither the actual subject nor his desire is addressed in this scheme. It follows that there is only productive consumption at this level.

finality is substituted for a multiplicity of meanings. And it is still the principle of equivalence that functions here as the reducer of symbolic ambivalence:

1. It establishes the object in a functional equivalence to itself in the single framework of this determined valence: utility. This absolute signification, this rationalization by identity (its equivalence to itself) permits the object to enter the field of political economy as a positive value.

2. The same absolute simplification of the subject as the subject of moral consciousness and needs permits him to enter the system of values and practices of political economy as an abstract individual (defined by identity, equivalence to himself).

Thus the functionality of objects, their moral code of utility, is as entirely governed by the logic of equivalence as is their exchange value status. Hence, functionality falls just as squarely under the jurisdiction of political economy. And if we call this abstract equivalence of utilities the object form, we can say that *the object form is only the completed form of the commodity form*. In other words, the same logic (and the same fetishism) plays on the two sides of the commodity specified by Marx: use value and exchange value.

By not submitting use value to this logic of equivalence in radical fashion, by maintaining use value as the category of "incomparability," Marxist analysis has contributed to the mythology (a veritable rationalist mystique) that allows the relation of the individual to objects conceived as use values to pass for a concrete and objective — in sum, "natural" — relation between man's needs and the function proper to the object. This is all seen as the opposite of the abstract, reified "alienated" relation the subject would have toward products as exchange values. The truth of the subject would lie here, in usage, as a concrete sphere of the private relation, as opposed to the social and abstract sphere of the market.[3] (Marx does provide a radical

3. Consumption itself is only apparently a concrete operation (in opposition to the abstraction of exchange). For what is consumed isn't the product itself, but its utility. Here the economists are right: consumption is not the destruction of products, but the destruction of utility. In the economic cycle, at any rate, it is an abstraction that is produced or consumed as *value* (exchangeable in one case, useful in another). No where is the "concrete" object or the "concrete" product concerned in the matter (what do these terms mean, anyway?): but, rather, an abstract cycle, a value system engaged in its own production and expanded reproduction. Nor does consumption make sense as a *destruction* (of "concrete" use value). Consumption is a labor of expanded reproduction of use value as an abstraction, a system, a universal code of utility — just as production is no longer in its present finality the production of "concrete" goods, but the expanded reproduction of the exchange value system. Only consumation (*consummation*) escapes recycling in the expanded reproduction of the value system — not because it is the destruction of substance, but because it is a transgression of the law and finality of objects — the abolition of their abstract finality. Where it appears to consume (destroy) products, consumption only consummates their utility. Consumption destroys objects as substance the better to perpetuate this substance as a universal, abstract form — hence, the better to reproduce the value code. *Consumation* (play, gift, destruction as pure loss, symbolic reciprocity) attacks the code itself, breaks it, deconstructs it. The symbolic act is the destruction of the value code (exchange and use), not the destruction of objects in themselves. Only this act can be termed "concrete," since it alone breaks and transgresses the abstraction of value.

analysis of the abstraction of the private individual as a social relation in another connection, however.) Against all this seething metaphysic of needs and use values, it must be said that abstraction, reduction, rationalization and systematization are as profound and as generalized at the level of "needs" as at the level of commodities. Perhaps this was not yet very clear at an anterior stage of political economy, when one could imagine that if the individual was alienated by the system of exchange value, at least he would return to himself, become himself again in his needs and in the moment of use value. But it has become possible today, at the present stage of consummative mobilization,[4] to see that needs, far from being articulated around the desire or the demand of the subject, find their coherence elsewhere: in a generalized system that is to desire what the system of exchange value is to concrete labor, the source of value. All the drives, symbolic relations, object relations and even perversions — in short, all the subject's *labor* of cathexis — are abstracted and given their general equivalent in utility and the system of needs, as all values and real social labor find their general equivalent in money and in coin. Everything surging from the subject, his body and his desire, is dissociated and catalyzed in terms of needs, more or less specified in advance by objects. All instincts are rationalized, finalized and objectified in needs — hence symbolically cancelled. *All ambivalence is reduced by equivalence.* And to say that the system of needs is a system of general equivalence is no metaphor: it means that we are completely immersed in political economy. This is why we have spoken of *fetishism of use value*. If needs were the singular, concrete expression of the subject, it would be absurd to speak of fetishism. But when needs erect themselves more and more into an abstract system, regulated by a principal of equivalence and general combinative, then certainly the same fetishism is in play. For this system is not only homologous to that of exchange value and the commodity; *it expresses the latter in all its depth and perfection.*

Indeed, just as exchange value is not a substantial aspect of the product, but a form that expresses a social relation, so use value can

4. See the chapter above on The Ideological Genesis of Needs.

no longer be viewed as an innate function of the object, but as a social determination (at once of the subject, the object, and their relation). In other words, just as the logic of the commodity extends itself indifferently to men and things and makes men (all obedient to the same law) appear only as exchange value — thus the restricted finality of utility imposes itself on men as surely as on the world of objects. It is illogical and naive to hope that, through objects conceived in terms of exchange value, that is, in his needs, man can fulfill himself *otherwise than as use value.* However, such is the modern humanist vulgate: through the functionality, the domestic finality of the exterior world, man is supposed to fulfill himself *qua man.* The truth is something else entirely. In an environment of commodities and exchange value, man is no more himself than he is exchange value and commodity. Encompassed by objects that function and serve, man is not so much himself as the most beautiful of these functional and servile objects. It is not only *Homo oeconomicus* who is turned entirely into use value during the process of capitalist production. This utilitarian imperative even structures the relation of the individual to himself. In the *process of satisfaction,* he valorizes and makes fruitful his own potentialities for pleasure; he "realizes" and manages, to the best of his ability, his own "faculty" of pleasure, treated literally like a productive force. Isn't this what all of humanist ethics is based on — the "proper use" of oneself?

In substance, Marx says: "Production not only produces goods; it produces people to consume them, and the corresponding needs." This proposition is most often twisted in such a way as to yield simplistic ideas like "the manipulation of needs" and denunciations of "artificial needs."[5] It is necessary to grasp that what produces the commodity system in its general form is the *concept* of need itself, as constitutive of the very structure of the individual — that is, the historical concept of a social being who, in the rupture of symbolic exchange, autonomizes himself and rationalizes his desire, his relation to others and to objects, in terms of needs, utility, satisfaction and use value.

Thus, it is not merely such and such a value that reduces symbolic

5. It should be pointed out that Marx's formulations in this domain (and the anthropology that they imply) are so vague as to permit culturalist interpretations of the type: "Needs are functions of the historical and social context." Or in its more radical version: "Needs are produced by the system in order to assure its own expanded reproduction" — that is, the sort of interpretation that takes into account only the multiple *content* of needs, without submitting the concept of need itself and the system of needs as form to a radical critique. [As in Marx's *Grundrisse*, p. 527, where both the "culturalist" and "more radical" position are mixed. —*Trans.*]

exchange, or emerges from its rupture; it is first the structural opposition of two values: exchange value and use value, whose logical form is the same, and whose dual organization punctuates the economic. We are faced here at a global anthropological level with the same schema of "semiological reduction" analyzed above in the section on "Fetishism and Ideology." In that study, we demonstrated the way in which this binary oppositive structuration constituted the very matrix of ideological functioning — from the fact that this structuration is never purely structural: it always plays to the advantage of one of the two terms. *Structural logic* always redoubles in a strategy (thus masculine-feminine, to the profit of the former, conscious-unconscious, to the advantage of consciousness, etc.).

Precisely the same thing is going on here. In the correlation:

$$\frac{EV}{UV} = \frac{Sr}{Sd}$$

use value and signified do not have the same weight as exchange value and signifier respectively. Let us say that they have a tactical value — whereas exchange value and signifier have strategic value. The system is organized along the lines of a functional but hierarchized bipolarity. Absolute preeminence redounds to exchange value and the signifier. Use value and needs are only an effect of exchange value. Signified (and referent) are only an effect of the signifier (we will return to this point later).[6] Neither is an autonomous reality that either exchange value or the signifier would express or translate in their code. At bottom, they are only simulation models, produced by the play of exchange value and of signifiers. They provide the latter with the guarantee of the real, the lived, the concrete; they are the guarantee of an objective reality for which, however, in the same moment, these systems qua systems substitute their own total logic. (Even the term "substitute" is misleading, in this context. It implies the existence somewhere of a fundamental reality that the system appropriates or distorts. In fact, there is no reality or principle of reality other than that directly produced by the system as its ideal reference.) Use value and the signified do not constitute an *elsewhere* with respect to the systems of the other two; they are only their alibis.

We have seen, in a first approximation, that the field of political economy generalizes and saturates itself through the system of use value (that is, the extension of the process of abstraction and productive rationality to the entire domain of consumption through the system of needs as system of values and productive forces). In this

6. In Toward a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign.

sense, use value appears as the completion and fulfillment of exchange value (of political economy in general). The fetishism of use value redoubles and deepens the fetishism of exchange value.

That is a starting point. But it is necessary to see that the system of use value is *not only* the double, transposition or extension of that of exchange value. It functions simultaneously as the latter's ideological guarantee (and once again, if this is so, it is because it is logically structured in the same way). It is understood, of course, that it is a naturalizing ideology we are concerned with here. Use value is given fundamentally as the instance (i.e., tribunal) before which all men are equal. On this view, need, leaving aside any variation in the means of satisfying it, would be the most equally distributed thing in the world.[7] Men are not equal with respect to goods taken as exchange value, but they would be equal as regards goods taken as use value. One may dispose of them or not, according to one's class, income, or disposition; but the *potentiality* for availing oneself of them nevertheless exists for all. Everyone is equally rich in *possibilities* for happiness and satisfaction. This is the secularization of the potential equality of all men before God: the democracy of "needs." Thus use value, reflected back to the anthropological sphere, reconciles in the universal those who are divided socially by exchange value.

Exchange value erases the real labor process at the level of the commodity, such that the latter appears as an autonomous value. Use value fares even better: it provides the commodity, inhuman as it is in its abstraction, with a "human" finality. In exchange value, social labor disappears. The system of use value, on the other hand, involves the resorption without trace of the entire ideological and historical labor process that leads the subject in the first place to think of himself as an individual, defined by his needs and satisfaction, and thus ideally to integrate himself into the structure of the commodity.

Thus, without ceasing to be a system in historical and logical solidarity with the system of exchange value, that of use value succeeds in naturalizing the latter and offers it that universal and atemporal guarantee without which the exchange value system simply couldn't reproduce itself (or doubtless even be produced in its general form).

Use value is thus the crown and scepter of political economy:

— In its lived reality: it is the immanence of political economy in

7. Here Baudrillard alludes to the rationalist lineage of anthropological substantialism. See the first paragraph of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, which Baudrillard parodies here. —*Trans.*

everyday life, down to the very act in which man believes he has rediscovered himself. He does not rediscover his objects except in what they serve; and he does not rediscover himself except through the expression and satisfaction of his needs — in what he serves.

— In its strategic value: ideologically, it seals off the system of production and exchange, thanks to the institution of an idealist anthropology that screens use value and needs from their historical logic in order to inscribe them in a formal eternity: that of utility for objects, that of the useful appropriation of objects by man in need.

This is why use value fetishism is indeed more profound, more "mysterious" than the fetishism of exchange value. The mystery of exchange value and the commodity can be unmasked, relatively — it has been since Marx — and raised to consciousness as a social relation. But value in the case of use value is enveloped in total mystery, for it is grounded anthropologically in the (self-) "evidence" of a naturalness, in an unsurpassable original reference. This is where we discover the real "theology" of value — in the order of finalities: in the "ideal" relation of equivalence, harmony, economy and equilibrium that the concept of utility implies. It operates at all levels: between man and nature, man and objects, man and his body, the self and others. Value becomes absolutely self-evident, "la chose la plus simple." Here the mystery and cunning (of history and of reason) are at their most profound and tenacious.

If the system of use value is produced by the system of exchange value as its own ideology — if use value has no autonomy, if it is only the *satellite* and *alibi* of exchange value, though systematically combining with it in the framework of political economy — then it is no longer possible to posit use value as an alternative to exchange value. Nor, therefore, is it possible to posit the "restitution" of use value, at the end of political economy, under the sign of the "liberation of needs" and the "administration of things" as a revolutionary perspective.

Every revolutionary perspective today stands or falls on its ability to reinterrogate radically the repressive, reductive, rationalizing metaphysic of utility. All critical theory depends on the analysis of the object form.[8] This has been absent from Marxist analysis. With all the political and ideological consequences that this implies, the result has been that all illusions converged on use value, idealized by opposition to exchange value, when it was in fact only the latter's naturalized form.

8. Critical theory must also take the sign form into account. We shall observe that an identical logic regulates the organization of the sign in the present-day system: it turns the signified (referent) into the *satellite* term, the *alibi* of the signifier, the play of signifiers, and provides the latter with a reality guarantee.

Marx and Crusoe

Marx says in Volume I of *Capital* (Part 1, Section 4): "So far as (a commodity) is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labor. It is as clear as noonday that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him.

"The mystical character of commodities does not originate, therefore, in their use value.

"The categories of bourgeois economy consist of. . .forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite historically determined mode of production, viz., the production of commodities. The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labor as long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes therefore, so soon as we come to other forms of production.

"Since Robinson Crusoe's experiences are a favorite theme with political economists, let us take a look at him on his island. . . . All the relations between Robinson and the objects that form this wealth of his own creation are here so simple and clear as to be intelligible without exertion, even to Mr. Baudrillard.[9] And yet those relations contain all that is essential to the determination of value."

Having quite justifiably played his joke at the expense of the bourgeois economists and their interminable Robinsonnades, Marx would have done well to examine his own use of the Crusoe myth. For by opposing the obscure mysticism of commodity value to the simplicity and transparency of Crusoe's relation to his wealth, he fell into a trap. If one hypothesizes (as Marxists do) that all the ideology of bourgeois political economy is summed up in the myth of Robinson Crusoe, then it must be admitted that everything in the novel itself agrees with the mystical theology and metaphysics of bourgeois thought, including (and above all) this "transparency" in man's relation to the instruments and products of his labor.

This ideal confrontation of man with his labor capacity (*Arbeitsvermögen*) and with his needs is not only abstract because it is separated out from the sphere of political economy and commercial social relations; it is abstract *in itself*: not abstracted from political economy, but abstract because it epitomizes the abstraction of political economy itself, that is, the ascension of exchange value via use value, the apotheosis of the economic in the providential finality of utility.

9. Any resemblance to a living person is purely coincidental.

Robinson Crusoe is the outcome of a total mutation that has been in progress since the dawn of bourgeois society (though truly theorized only since the 18th century). Man was transformed simultaneously into a productive force and a "man with needs." The manufacturers and the ideologues of Nature divided him between themselves. In his labor, he became a use value for a system of production. Simultaneously, goods and products became use values for him, taking on a meaning as functions of his needs, which were henceforth legalized as "nature." He entered the regime of use value, which was also that of "Nature." But this was by no means according to an original finality rediscovered: All these concepts (needs, nature, utility) were born together, in the historical phase that saw the systematization of both political economy and the ideology that sanctions it.

The myth of Robinson Crusoe is the bourgeois avatar of the myth of Terrestrial Paradise. Every great social order of production (bourgeois or feudal) maintains an ideal myth, at once a myth of culmination and a myth of origin. Theology supported itself on the myth of the fulfillment of man in the Divine Law; political economy is sustained on the great myth of human fulfillment according to the natural law of needs. Both deal in the same finality: an ideal relation of man to the world through his needs and the rule of Nature; and an ideal relationship with God through faith and the divine rule of Providence. Of course, this ideal vocation is lived from the outset as lost or compromised. But the finality tarries, and use value, entombed beneath exchange value, like the natural harmony of Earthly Paradise broken by sin and suffering, remains inscribed as an invulnerable essence to be disinterred at the last stage of History, in a promised future redemption. The logic and ideology are the same: under the sign of a bountiful nature, where the primitive hunting and gathering mode of production, anterior to the feudal mode, is highlighted, and from which serfdom and labor are made to disappear, the myth of Earthly Paradise describes the ideality of feudal relations (suzerainty and fealty of vassals). Likewise, the Crusoe myth describes, in a "transparent" isolation (where the anterior mode of agriculture and craftsmanship reappears, and the laws of the market and exchange disappear), the ideality of bourgeois relations: individual autonomy, to each according to his labor and his needs, moral consciousness bound to nature — and, if possible, some Man Friday, some aboriginal servant. (But if Crusoe's relations to his labor and his wealth are so "clear," as Marx insists, what on earth has Friday got to do with this setup?)

In fact, nothing is clear about this fable. Its evidence of simplicity and transparency is, as that of the commodity for Marx, "abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." There is nothing clear and natural in the fact of "transforming nature according to one's needs" or in "rendering oneself useful" as well as things. And there was no need for this moral law of use value to have escaped the critique of political economy: the whole system and its "mystery" were already there with Robinson on his island, and in the trumped-up immediacy of his relation to things.

CHAPTER EIGHT

TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SIGN

The critique of the political economy of the sign proposes to develop the analysis of the sign form, just as the critique of political economy once set out to analyze the commodity form.

Since the commodity comprises simultaneously exchange value and use value, its total analysis must encompass the two sides of the system. Similarly, the sign is at once signifier and signified; and so the analysis of the sign form must be established on two levels. Concurrently, of course, the logical and strategic analysis of the relation between the two terms is pressed upon us, thus:

1. Between the system of exchange value (EV) and that of use value (UV), or between the commodity form and the object form: this was the attempt in the preceding article.

2. Between the systems of the signifier and the signified (or between their respective codes, which define the articulation of sign value and the sign form).

In both cases, this (internal) relation is established as a hierarchical function between a dominant form and an alibi (or satellite) form, which is the logical crowning and ideological completion of the first.

1. The Magical Thinking of Ideology

The effect of this homological structuration of values in what can conveniently be called the fields of economy and of signification is to displace the whole process of ideology and to theorize it in radically different terms. Ideology can no longer be understood as an infra-superstructural relation between a material production (system and relations of production) and a production of signs (culture, etc.), which expresses and masks the contradictions at the "base." Henceforth, all of this comprises, with the same degree of objectivity, a general political economy (its critique), which is traversed throughout by the same form and administered by the same logic.

It should be recalled that the traditional vision of ideology still proves incapable of grasping the "ideological" function of culture and of signs — except at the level of the signified. This follows inevitably from its separation of culture (and signs) in the artificial distinction between the economic and the ideological, not to mention

the desperate contortions ("superstructure," "dialectic," "structure in dominance") that this entails. Thus, ideology (of such-and-such a group, or the dominant class) always appears as the overblown discourse of some great theme, content, or value (patriotism, morality, humanism, happiness, consumption, the family) whose *allegorical* power somehow insinuates itself into consciousnesses (this has never been explained) in order to integrate them. These become, in turn, the *contents of thought* that come into play in real situations. In sum, ideology appears as a sort of cultural surf frothing on the beachhead of the economy.

So it is clear that ideology is actually *that very form* that traverses both the production of signs and material production — or rather, it is the logical bifurcation of this form into two terms:

$$\frac{EV}{Sr} \quad / \quad \frac{UV}{Sd}$$

This is the functional, strategic split through which the form reproduces itself. It signifies that ideology lies *already whole in the relation of EV to UV, that is, in the logic of the commodity*, as is so in the relation of Sr to Sd, i.e., in the internal logic of the sign.

Marx demonstrated that the objectivity of material production did not reside in its materiality, but in its *form*. In fact, this is the point of departure for all critical theory. The same analytical reduction must be applied to ideology: its objectivity does not reside in its "ideality," that is, in a realist metaphysic of thought contents, but in its form.

The "critique" (not excluding here the Marxist critique of ideology) feeds off a magical conception of its object. It does not unravel ideology as form, but as content, as given, transcendent value — a sort of *mana* that attaches itself to several global representations that magically impregnate those floating and mystified subjectivities called "consciousnesses." Like the concept of need, which is presented as the link between the utility of an object and the demand of a subject, ideology appears as the relation between the projection of a consciousness and the ideality of — vaguely — an idea, or a value. Transposed from the analysis of material goods to collective representations and values, the same little magic footbridge is suspended between artificial, even metaphysical, concepts.[1]

In fact, ideology is the process of reducing and abstracting

1. It should be noted here that alienation itself is one of these magical concepts devoted to sealing up an artificial disjunction — here, the disjunction between the consciousness of the subject and his own ideal content (his rediscovered totality).

symbolic material into a form. But this reductive abstraction is given immediately as value (autonomous), as content (transcendent), and as a representation of consciousness (signified). It is the same process that lends the commodity an appearance of autonomous value and transcendent reality — a process that involves the misunderstanding of the form of the commodity and of the abstraction of social labor that it operates. In bourgeois (or, alas, Marxist) thought, culture is defined as a *transcendence of contents* correlated with consciousnesses by means of a "representation" that circulates among them like positive values, just as the fetishized commodity appears as a real and immediate value, correlated with individual subjects through "need" and use value, and circulating according to the rules of exchange value.

It is the cunning of form to veil itself continually in the evidence of content. It is the cunning of the code to veil itself and to produce itself in the obviousness of value. It is in the "materiality" of content that form consumes its abstraction and reproduces itself as form. That is its peculiar magic. It simultaneously produces the content and the consciousness to receive it (just as production produces the product and its corresponding need). Thus, it installs culture in a dual transcendence of values (of contents) and consciousness, and in a metaphysic of exchange between the two terms. And if the bourgeois vulgate enshrines it in this transcendence precisely in order to exalt it as *culture*, the Marxist vulgate embalms it in the very same transcendence in order to denounce it as *ideology*. But the two scriptures rejoin in the same magical thinking.[2]

Just about all contemporary thought in this area confounds itself on false problems and in endless controversies ensuing from artificial disjunctions:

1. The subject-object dichotomy, bridged by the magical concept of need. Things might run quite smoothly here if the general system of production-consumption were not disrupted by the insoluble problem of supply and demand. Can one still speak of autonomy of choice, or is it a question of manipulation? Perhaps the two perspectives can be synthesized? — mere pseudo-dialectic. It is all an eternal litany — and over a false problem anyway.

2. The infrastructure-superstructure dichotomy, which, as we have seen, covers over again the implacable disjunction between the materiality of contents and the ideality of consciousness, reuniting

2. Thus the "critical" denunciation of artificial needs and the manipulation of needs converges in the same mystification the unconditional exaltation of consumption.

the two thereby separated poles with the magical conception of ideology. Even here, matters would run more smoothly if the problem of the "determinant instance" were not held eternally in suspense (since it is usually "in the last instance" — it never actually appears on the stage), with all the acrobatics of "interaction," "dialectic," "relative autonomy" and "overdetermination" that follow in its wake (and whose interminable careers have redounded to the glory of generations of intellectuals).

3. The exploitation-alienation distinction, which reiterates this false problem at the level of political analysis. The infinite debate over whether exploitation is the ground of alienation or vice versa; or whether the second succeeds the first as "the most advanced stage of capitalism" — all this is absurd. Not for the first time, the confusion arises from an artificial separation — this time of the sign and the commodity, which are not analyzed in their form, but posed instead as contents (the one of signification, the other of production). Whence emerges the distinction between an "exploitation" of labor power and an "alienation by signs." As if the commodity and the system of material production "signified" nothing! As if signs and culture were not immediately abstract social production at the level of the code and models, in a generalized exchange system of values.

Ideology is thus properly situated on neither side of this split. Rather, it is the one and only form that traverses all the fields of social production. Ideology seizes all production, material or symbolic, in the same process of abstraction, reduction, general equivalence and exploitation.

1. It is because *the logic of the commodity and of political economy is at the very heart of the sign*, in the abstract equation of signifier and signified, in the differential combinatory of signs, that signs can function as exchange value (the discourse of communication) and as use value (rational decoding and distinctive social use).

2. It is because *the structure of the sign is at the very heart of the commodity form* that the commodity can take on, immediately, the effect of signification — not epiphenomenally, in excess of itself, as "message" or connotation — but because its very form establishes it as a total *medium*, as a *system of communication* administering all social exchange. Like the sign form, the commodity is a code managing the exchange of values. It makes little difference whether the contents of material production or the immaterial contents of signification are involved; it is the code that is determinant: the rules of the interplay of signifiers and exchange value. Generalized in the system of political economy, it is the code which, in both cases, reduces all symbolic *ambivalence* in order to ground the "rational" circulation of values and their play of exchange in the regulated equivalence of values.

It is here that the concept of alienation proves useless, by dint of its association with the metaphysic of the subject of consciousness. The code of political economy, which is the fundamental code of our society, does not operate by alienating consciousness from contents. A parallel confusion arises in the view of "primitive" myths as false stories or histories that consciousnesses recount to themselves. Here the pregnant effects of mythic contents are held to bind society together (through the "cohesion" of belief systems). But actually, these myths make up a code of signs that exchange among themselves, integrating the group through the very process of their circulation. Likewise, the fundamental code of our societies, the code of political economy (both commodity form and sign form) does not operate through the alienation of consciousness and contents. It rationalizes and regulates exchange, makes things communicate, but only under the law of the code and through the control of meaning.

The division of labor, the functional division of the terms of discourse, does not mystify people; it socializes them and informs their exchange according to a general, abstract model. The very concept of the individual is the product of this general system of exchange. And the idea of "totality" under which the subject (either that of consciousness or that of History) thinks itself in its ideal reference is nothing but the effect and the symptom of the system — the shadow that it wears. The concept of alienation involves a kind of wizardry in which consciousness thinks itself as its own ideal content (its rediscovered totality): it is an ideological concept. And ideology, in its version as a superstructure of contents of consciousness, is, in these terms, an alienated concept.

Today consumption — if this term as a meaning other than that given it by vulgar economics — defines precisely *the stage where the commodity is immediately produced as a sign, as sign value, and where signs (culture) are produced as commodities*. But this whole area of study is still occupied, "critically" or otherwise, by specialists of production (economy, infrastructure), or ideology specialists (signs, culture), or even by a kind of seamless dialectician of the totality. This partitioning of the object domain obscures even the simplest realities. If any progress is to be made at this point, "research" — especially Marxist research — must come to terms with the fact that nothing produced or exchanged today (objects, services,

bodies, sex, culture, knowledge, etc.) can be decoded exclusively as a sign, nor solely measured as a commodity; that everything appears in the context of a general political economy in which the determining instance is neither the commodity nor culture (not even the updated commodity, revised and reinterpreted in its signifying function, with its message, its connotations, but always as if there still existed an objective substrate to it, the potential objectivity of the *product* as such; nor culture in its "critical" version, where signs, values, ideas are seen as everywhere commercialized or recuperated by the dominant system, but again, as if there subsisted through all this something whose transcendence could have been rationalized and simply compromised — a kind of sublime use value of culture distorted in exchange value). The object of this political economy, that is, its simplest component, its nuclear element — that which precisely the commodity was for Marx — is no longer today properly either commodity or sign, but indissolubly both, and *both only in the sense that they are abolished as specific determinations, but not as form*. Rather, this object is perhaps quite simply the *object*,[3] the object form, on which use value, exchange value and sign value converge in a complex mode that describes the most general form of political economy.

2. The Metaphysics of the Sign

The meaning value of the sign asserts itself with the same apparent obviousness as the natural evidence of the value of the commodity to the predecessors of Marx. These, as they say, are "the simplest of matters," and yet they are the most mysterious. Like political economy before it, semiology accomplishes little more than a description of their circulation and structural functioning.[4]

We have seen, in the preceding study, that the abstraction of the exchange value system is sustained by the effect of concrete reality and of objective purpose exhaled by use value and needs. This is the strategic logic of the commodity; its second term acts as the satellite and alibi for the first. The present hypothesis is that the same analysis holds true for the logic and strategy of the sign, thus exploding the "scientific postulates" of semio-linguistics — the arbitrary character of the sign in particular, as originally defined by

3. For the specialized sense in which Baudrillard uses the term "object" here, see the penultimate discussion in this volume: Design and Environment: The Blitz of Political Economy. — *Trans*

4. Two types of analysis have grappled with this parallel fetishism of the commodity and the sign: the critique of political economy, or theory of material production, inaugurated by Marx, and critical semiology, or the theory of textual production, led more recently by the Tel Quel group.

Saussure and modified by Benveniste.

The arbitrariness of the sign does not reside in its non-motivation — in the commonplace that the signifier "table" has no "natural" vocation to signify the concept or the reality of the table (any more than *Tisch* in German, etc.); it is rooted in the very fact of positing an equivalence between such and such an Sr and such and such an Sd. In this sense, arbitrariness is total even in the case of the symbol,[5] where the principle of equivalence between signifier and signified is fully retained in their analogy. Arbitrariness arises from the fundamental institution of an exact correlation between a given "discrete" Sr and an equally discrete Sd. In other words, arbitrariness lies in the "discretion" which alone grounds the possibility of the equational relation of the sign, so that This equals this, and nothing else. This discretion is thus the very principle of the sign's rationality; it functions as the agent of abstraction and universal reduction of all potentialities and qualities of meaning (*sens*) that do not depend on or derive from the respective framing, equivalence, and specular relation of a signifier and a signified. This is the directive and reductive rationalization transacted by the sign — not in relation to an exterior, immanent "concrete reality" that signs would supposedly recapture abstractly in order to express, but in relation to all that which overflows the schema of equivalence and signification; and which the sign reduces, represses and annihilates in the very operation that constitutes it (the sudden crystallization of an Sr and an Sd). The rationality of the sign is rooted in its exclusion and annihilation of all symbolic ambivalence on behalf of a fixed and equational structure. The sign is a discriminant: it structures itself through exclusion. Once crystallized on this exclusive structure, the sign aligns its fixed field, resigns the differential, and assigns Sr and Sd each its sphere of systemic control. Thus, the sign proffers itself as full value: positive, rational, exchangeable value. All virtualities of meaning are shorn in the cut of structure.

This one-to-one assignation of Sr to Sd can be complicated quite easily into an equivocal or multivocal relation without violating the logic of the sign. A signifier may refer to many signifieds, or vice versa: the principle of equivalence, ergo of exclusion and reduction, which roots the arbitrariness of the sign, remains untouched. While still opposing itself as radically as ever to *ambivalence, equivalence*

5. The term "symbol" is here intended in the classic semio-linguistic sense of an analogical variant of the sign. In contrast, we will always use the term symbol (the symbolic, symbolic exchange) in opposition to and as a radical alternative to the concept of the sign and of signification.

has simply transmuted into *polyvalence*. Ambiguity itself is only the vacillation of a principle which, for all intents and purposes, rests intact. Nor does the "dissolve" effect (of signification) jeopardize the principle of the rationality of the sign — i.e., its reality principle. While retaining their discreteness, Sr and Sd are capable of multiple connections. But (through all these combinatory possibilities) the code of signification never ceases to monitor and systematically control meaning.

Only ambivalence (as a *rupture* of value, of another side or beyond of sign value, and as the *emergence of the symbolic*) sustains a challenge to the legibility, the false transparency of the sign; only ambivalence questions the evidence of the use value of the sign (rational decoding) and of its exchange value (the discourse of communication). *It brings the political economy of the sign to a standstill;* it dissolves the respective definitions of Sr and Sd — concepts emblazoned with the seal of signification; and since they assume their meaning through the process of signification in the classical sense, Sr and Sd would be doomed by the shattering of the semiologic. In the logic of ambivalence and of the symbolic, we are dealing with a process of the resolution of the sign, a resolution of the equation on which the sign is articulated, and which, in communicative discourse, *is never resolved:* integrated, opaque, never elucidated, the sign gives rise, in communicative discourse, to the same type of social mystery as that other medium, the commodity, which also depends on an abstract equation of all values.[6]

The critique of political economy, worked out by Marx at the level of exchange value, but whose total scope implies also that of use value, is quite precisely this *resolution* of the commodity and of its implicit equation — a resolution of the commodity as the form and code of general equivalence. It is this same critical resolution that must be extended to the field of signification, in a critique of the political economy of the sign.

3. The Mirage of the Referent

Where the sign presents itself as a unity of discrete and functional meaning, the Sr refers to an Sd, and the ensemble to a referent. The sign as abstract structure refers to a fragment of objective reality. It

6. The resolution of the sign entails the abolition of the Sr and the Sd as such, but not the abolition, toward some mystical nothingness, of the material and operation of meaning. The symbolic operation of meaning is also exercised upon phonic, visual, gestural (and social) material, but according to an entirely different logic, to the question of which we shall return later.

is, moreover, between these two terms that Benveniste, modifying Saussure, relocates the arbitrariness of the sign — which is between the sign and that which it designates, and not between the Sr and the Sd, which are both of a psychic nature and necessarily associated in the mind of the subject by a veritable consubstantiality. Thus: "What is arbitrary is that a certain sign, and not another, is applied to a certain element of reality, and not to any other. In this sense, and only in this sense, it is permissible to speak of contingency, and even in so doing we would seek less to solve the problem than simply to pinpoint it in order to set it aside provisionally. . . . The domain of arbitrariness is thus left outside the comprehension (logical intention) of the linguistic sign." [7]

But banishing arbitrariness to the exterior of the sign does no more than displace the problem; and to believe in the possibility of deferring it is here only another way of providing a solution which, far from being merely provisional and methodological, risks reviving its eternal metaphysical formulation.

For Saussure the internal contingency of the sign was an obstacle that always threatened the reciprocal coherence of the Sr and the Sd. Through the expulsion of the arbitrary, Benveniste attempts to rescue the inner organization and logical necessity of the sign (not to mention that of semio-linguistics). But this adjustment is only possible on the basis of a separation between the sign and reality (the referent). As we have seen, Benveniste seems quite content to refer the solution to the problem that this creates back to philosophy; but in fact he responds to the question himself, and very metaphysically, like all linguists and semiologists — with the concepts of "motivation" and of "arbitrariness."

In the end, the difficulty with Benveniste's analysis (and the analyses of others) comes down to the fact that things are just not cut out according to his idealist scheme. The scission (*coupure*) does not occur between a sign and a "real" referent. It occurs between the Sr as form and, on the other side, the Sd and the Rft, which are registered together as content — the one of thought, the other of reality (or rather, of perception) — under the aegis of the Sr. The referent in question here is no moral external to the sign than is the Sd: indeed, it is governed by the sign. It is carved out and projected as its function; its only reality is of that which is *ornamentally inscribed on the sign itself.* In a profound sense, the referent is the reflection of the sign, and this profound collusion, which depends on

7. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami, 1971).

form, is "instinctively" translated at the level of contents by the speaking subject. Benveniste declares: "For the speaking subject, there is complete adequation between language and reality. The sign recovers and commands reality; better still, it *is* that reality. . . ."[8] The poor speaker evidently knows nothing of the arbitrary character of the sign (but then, he probably isn't a semiologist)! Yet there is a certain truth to his naive metaphysic, for Benveniste's "arbitrary" link between the sign and reality has no more existence than the one postulated by Saussure between Sr and Sd.

So Benveniste's argument ultimately turns back on itself. For if one admits, with him, and against Saussure, that the Sd is consubstantial with the Sr, then so must be the referent (reality), since the Sd and Rft are both cut from the same cloth (as assigned to them by the Sr). The process of carving out and separation, of abstract formalization, is continuous from one end to the other of the chain — from Sr to Rft inclusive. In fact, it makes little difference whether one claims either:

1. That *motivation* is general throughout the chain: But then it is no longer the substantial motivation of the psychologistic type (that of content) that emanates somehow from the Rft toward the Sr; it is a kind of formal motivation "from on high" — it is the law of the code and the signifier that informs and determines (to the point of) "reality." The code becomes a veritable reality principle.

2. Or that it is *arbitrariness*, the conventionality of the sign, that reigns over the entire chain. Then the concrete ceases to exist, and the very perception of it hinges on the abstraction and the "discretion" of the Sr. The *spectre* of the Sr extends onto the world (in two senses: it "analyzes" it spectrally, and it haunts it).

The crucial thing is to see that the separation of the sign and the world is a fiction, and leads to a science fiction. The logic of equivalence, abstraction, discreteness and projection of the sign engulfs the Rft as surely as it does the Sd. This "world" that the sign "evokes" (the better to distance itself from it) is nothing but the effect of the sign, the shadow that it carries about, its "pantographic" extension. Even better: this world is quite simply the Sd-Rft. As we have seen, the Sd-Rft is a single and compact thing, an identity of content that acts as the moving shadow of the Sr. It is the reality effect in which the play of signifiers comes to fruition and deludes the world.

And now the homology between the logic of signification and the

8. *Ibid.*

logic of political economy begins to emerge. For the latter exploits its reference to needs and the actualization of use value as an anthropological horizon while precluding their real intervention in its actual functioning and operative structure. Or so it appears. Similarly, the referent is maintained as exterior to the comprehension of the sign: the sign alludes to it, but its internal organization excludes it. In fact, it is now clear that the system of needs and of use value is thoroughly implicated in the form of political economy as its completion. And likewise for the referent, this "substance of reality," in that it is entirely bound up in the logic of the sign. Thus, in each field, the dominant form (system of exchange value and combinatory of the Sr respectively) provides itself with a referential rationale (*raison*), a content, an alibi, and, significantly, in each this articulation is made *under the same metaphysical "sign," i.e., need or motivation.*

All of this venerable old psychology nourishes the semiological organism:

1. The referent, the "real" object, is the phenomenal object, the perceptual contents and lived experience of the subject — situated half way between phenomenology and Bergsonian substance opposed to form.

2. In a manner of speaking, this perceptual content emerges flush; it is shifted to the level of the sign by the signified, the content of thought. Between the two, one is supposed to glide in a kind of frictionless space from the perceptual to the conceptual, in accordance with the old recipes of philosophical idealism and the abstract associationism that was already stale in the 19th century.

And how is the articulation established between the sign and referent (or between the Sr and the Sd), subtly differentiated as they are (so subtly, in fact, as to preserve them in each other's image!)? We have already broached the term: it is by *motivation*. Whether it is in order to deny motivation, according to the Saussurian theory of the sign (to relativize it, to proportion it in the definition of the symbol), or simply to affirm it, like Benveniste in his critique of the Saussurian theory (justified, to be sure, but only from the internal perspective of semio-linguistics) — the only relation thinkable, the only concept under which the articulation of the phenomenal (psychological) and the sign can be thought is that of motivation. It is a hollow and somewhat supernatural concept. But it can hardly be otherwise, once one has granted this metaphysical representation of the referent, this abstract separation between the sign and the world. *Some* form of wizardry is required to rejoin them: and — what a coincidence! — it

is with this very term that political economy attempts to reunite the subject and the object it posits as separate: need. *Need, motivation:* one never escapes this circle. Each term conceals the same metaphysical wile. In the latter version, the term as a rather more logical resonance, in the other, a more psychological one; but let us not be mistaken here. The logical and the psychological are here indissolubly mixed: semiological motivation has all of psychology behind it. As to economic need, it is much more than a question of the "demand" of the subject: the entire logical articulation of economic science demands it as a functional postulate.

These concepts are not accidentally nebulous. Concepts are quite meaningless when they are busy bridging non-existent gaps. There is no distinction between the sign and the phenomenal referent, except from the metaphysical perspective that simultaneously idealizes and abstracts the sign and the *Lebenswelt,* the one as form, the other as content, in their formal opposition. Having provided itself with false distinctions, it cannot be expected to resolve them except with false concepts. But such distinctions are strategic and operational — that is the point. To resolve them (and to rupture the conceptual unreality, which would be the only means of resolving the false problem of the arbitrariness and motivation of the sign) would amount to shattering the possibility of all semiology.

The emptiness of the concepts in question evidently hides a strategy that can be analyzed simultaneously in the field of signification and of the economy. Motivation (need) only describes, behind the formal opposition between two terms, a kind of circuit, a sort of specular and tautological process between two modalities of the same form, via the *detour* of a self-proclaimed content; and the reproduction of a systematic abstraction (whether it be that of the exchange value or of the code of the signifier) via the detour of the real. We have seen that needs (UV system) do not constitute a qualitative, incommensurable concrete reality exterior to political economy, but rather a system that is itself induced by the EV system and which functions according to the same logic. If the two systems are in some way matched up in an identical form, then it is evident that the concept of need (like motivation) analyzes nothing at all. It only describes, through an illusory articulation, the general circulation of the same model and its internal operation. A typical rendition of this (necessarily) tautological definition of need might read: People appropriate a given object for themselves as use value "because they need it."

Benveniste's motivation partakes of the same circularity, the same

psychological tautology.

1. The sign derives its necessity from a psychological consensus that inescapably binds a given Sr to a given Sd (some fraction of the "real" of thought).

2. But: the objectivity of this "denoted" fraction of the real is evidently the perceptive consensus of (speaking) subjects.

3. And this is supported no less evidently by the psychological consensus that links any given Sr to a given Sd.

The circle that legitimates the sign by the real and which founds the real by the sign is strictly vicious; but this circularity is the very secret of all metaphysical (ideological) operationality.

Needs are not the actuating (*mouvante*) and original expression of a subject, but the functional reduction of the subject by the system of use value in solidarity with that of exchange value. Similarly, the referent does not constitute an autonomous concrete reality at all; it is only the extrapolation of the excision (*decoupage*) established by the logic of the sign onto the world of things (onto the phenomenological universe of perception). It is the world such as it is seen and interpreted through the sign — that is, *virtually excised and excisable* at pleasure. The "real" table does not exist. If it can be registered in its identity (if it exists), this is because it has already been *designated,* abstracted and rationalized by the separation (*decoupage*) which establishes it in this equivalence to itself. Once again, given this line of reasoning, there is no fundamental difference between the referent and the signified, and the spontaneous confusion which so often arises here can only be symptomatic: the referent has no other value than that of the signified, of which it wants to be the substantial reference *in vivo,* and which it only succeeds in extending *in abstracto.*[9] Thus the strategy repeats itself: the double aspect of the

9. This facsimile of the concrete concept (concept "en dur") only transliterates the fetish of realism, and of substance, the last stage of idealism fantasizing matter. (For more on "en dur," cf. J.-M. Lefebvre, *N.R.F.*, February 1970, No. 1: "The referent is not truly reality. . . it is the image we make of reality. It is a signified determined by an intention carried toward things (!) and not considered in its simple relation to the Sr, as is usual in linguistics. From the Sd-concept, I pass to the referent as a concrete approach to the world.") It is, however, on these intermingled vestiges of idealism and materialism, deriving from all the confines of Western metaphysics, that semiology is based. The position of Lefebvre is moreover characteristic of the cunning with which "reality" succeeds in resurrecting itself surreptitiously behind all semiological thought, however critical, in order to establish more firmly the strategy of the sign. It thus gives witness to the impossibility of escaping the metaphysical problems posed by the sign without radically challenging semiological articulation itself. In effect, Lefebvre says: "The referent is not reality (i.e., an object whose existence I can test, or control): we relate to it as real, but this intentionality is precisely an act of mind that belies its reality, which makes a fiction, an artificial construction out of it." Thus, in a kind of

commodity (UV/EV) in fact conceals a formal homogeneity in which use value, regulated by the system of exchange value, confers on the latter its "naturalist" guarantee. And the double face of the sign (Sr/Sd, generalizable into Sr/Sd — Rft) obscures a formal homogeneity in which Sd and Rft (administered by the same logical form, which is none other than that of the Sr), serve together as the reference-alibi — precisely the guarantee of "substance" for the Sr.

Saussure's sheet of paper theory of language (the double face of the sign one "cuts up") is thus perfectly idealist.[10] By giving the Sr and the Sd "in equivalence" as constitutive agencies (instances) of the sign, it veils the strategic apparatus of the sign, which rests precisely on the disparity of the two terms and on the fundamental circularity of the dominant term:

1. To summarize what we have so far, there is a metaphysic of the Sd-Rft, homologous with that of needs and use value. The Sd-Rft is taken for an original reality, a substance of value and recurring finality through the supporting play of signifiers (cf. the analysis of *Tel Quel*, in particular Derrida). Similarly, use value is given as origin and purpose (*finalité*), and needs as the basic motor of the economic — the cycle of exchange value appearing here as a necessary detour, but incompatible with true finalities.

2. In reality, this moral and metaphysical privilege of contents (UV and Sd-Rft) only masks the decisive privilege of form (EV and Sr). These two terms are respectively the last "Reason," the structural principle of the entire system, of which the former terms are only the detour. It is the rational abstraction of the system of exchange value and of the play of signifiers which commands the whole. But this fundamental strategy (of which it is impossible[11] here to demonstrate the operational repercussions at every level of contemporary society — from cybernetic programming to bureaucratic systems,

flight in advance, the referent is drained of its reality, becomes again a simulacrum, behind which, however, the tangible object immediately re-emerges. Thus, the articulation of the sign can gear down in infinite regress, while continually reinventing the real as its beyond and its consecration. At bottom, the sign is haunted by the nostalgia of transcending its own convention, its arbitrariness; in a way, it is obsessed with the idea of *total motivation*. Thus it alludes to the real as its beyond and its abolition. But it can't "jump outside its own shadow": for it is the sign itself that produces and reproduces this real, which is only its *horizon* — not its transcendence. Reality is the phantasm by means of which the sign is indefinitely preserved from the symbolic deconstruction that haunts it.

10. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York, 1959), p. 113.

11. Of course, it is not impossible at all. But such an analysis would depend for its full impact on our grasp of the whole process of development of the political economy of the sign. To this we shall return later.

and to the system of "consumption") is carefully hidden by the spreading out of the signification process over the two (or three) agencies (Sr, Sd, Rft), and the play of their distinction and of their equivalence.

4. Denotation and Connotation

The entire conceptual battery of semio-linguistics must be subjected to the same radical analysis as Marx applied to the concepts of classical political economy. And so we shift to the level of the message, where, as we shall see, the by now familiar metaphysics reappears in the concepts of denotation and connotation.

Denotation maintains itself entirely on the basis of the myth of "objectivity" (whether the denotation is that of the linguistic sign, the photographic analagon, iconic, etc.). Objectivity in this case is the direct adequation of an Sr to a precise reality. Even the difficulty which arises in the case of the image (i.e., its nondiscreteness, the fact that its Sr and Sd form a continuum, etc.) poses no fundamental challenge to the rule of the equivalence of the sign, i.e., that assignation of two terms which makes possible the further assignation of a fictive real to the contoured image (*decoupé*) of the sign — and thus to the rationalization and general control of meaning.

The Sd of connotation[12] is quite certainly amenable to the same analysis, since it also re-emerges as a "denotation effect" of the *new* process of "staggered" signification. Barthes' analysis of the advertisement for Panzani pasta, with its connotation of "Italianity" is an example.[13] "Italianity" is only apparently of the Sd, conceptual content, etc. In fact, it constitutes a code unto itself — a myth, if you wish. But myths are not comprised of content. They are a process of exchange and circulation of a code whose *form* is determinant. And so it is for the role of connotation here. And if it is the locus of ideology, this is not a question of its having grafted annex and parasitical significations onto an "objective" denotative process; nor that it has smuggled in parallel contents, foreign to the infrastructure of the sign that would otherwise constitute the process of denotation:[14]

12. In the "staggered scheme of connotation, the entire sign is transformed into the signifier of another signified: $\frac{Sr/Sd}{Sr}$ / Sd

[See Part IV of "Elements of Semiology," in Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology* (Boston, 1968), p. 89, and also his discussion of "Myth as a Semiological System," in *Mythologies* (Frogmore: St. Albans, 1973), esp. P. 115. — *Trans.*]

13. Roland Barthes, "Rhetorique de l'Image," in *Communications* 4 (1964).

14. It is no accident here if the mythical scheme of infrastructure and

what is involved here is precisely a free play of concatenation and exchange of Srs — a process of indefinite reproduction of the code (cf. "Fetishism and Ideology": ideology is bound to form, not content: it is the passion of the code).

Having said this, we can return to the process of denotation in order to show that it differs in no way from connotation: the denoted Sd, this objective "reality," is itself nothing more than a coded form (code of perception, "psychological" code, code of "realistic" values, etc.). In other words, ideology is as rife with the denotative as with the connotative process and, in sum, denotation is never really anything more than the most attractive and subtle of connotations.

As Barthes says in *S/Z*: "Denotation is not the first among meanings, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the *last* of the connotations (the one that seems both to establish and to close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature: doesn't a sentence, whatever meaning it releases, subsequent to its utterance, it would seem, appear to be telling us something simple, literal, primitive: something *true*, in relation to which all the rest is literature?" [15]

So it all parallels use value as the "denotative" function of objects. Indeed, doesn't the object have that air, in its "being serviceable," of having said something objective? This manifest discourse is the subtlest of its mythologies. A false ingenuity, and a perversion of objectivity is involved. Utility, like the literality of which Barthes speaks, is not a nature; it is a code of natural evidence which has the privilege over many other possible codes (the moral, the aesthetic, etc.) of appearing *rational*, while the others seem like mere rationalizations of more or less "ideological" purposes. Denotation or use value; objectivity or utility: it is always the complicity of the real with the code under the sign of evidence which generates these categories. And just as use value, the "literal" and ideal finality of the object, resurges continually from the system of exchange value, the effect of concreteness, reality and denotation results from the complex play of interference of networks and codes — just as white light results from the interference of the colors of the spectrum. So the white light of denotation is only the play of the spectrum — the chromatic ghost — of connotations.

Thus the denotation-connotation distinction appears unreal and

superstructure resurfaces at least implicitly in the field of signification: *denotative* infrastructure and *ideological* superstructure.

15. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York, 1974), p. 9.

itself ideological. It could, however, be restored in a paradoxical sense, exactly opposed to the current accepted use. For denotation distinguishes itself from other significations (connoted) by its singular function of effacing the traces of the ideological process by restoring its universality and "objective" innocence. Far from being the objective term to which connotation is opposed as an ideological term, denotation is thus (since it naturalizes the very process of ideology) *the most ideological term* — ideological to the second degree. It is the "superior myth" of which Barthes speaks. This is exactly the same ideological function we have discerned of use value in its relation to exchange value. Hence, the two fields reciprocally illuminate each other in the totality of the ideological process. [16]

5. Beyond the Sign: The Symbolic

A critique of the political economy of the sign implies certain perspectives of transcendence — a "beyond" of the signification process through which sign exchange value organizes itself; and thus also a "beyond" of semiology which, in its quite "objective innocence," simply details the functioning of sign exchange value.

In general, the critical perspectives of transcendence of the sign (of its abstract rationality, its "arbitrariness") are generated in the spirit of one of the two terms that comprise it: that is, either in the name of the Sd (of the Rft: same thing), which it is then necessary to liberate from the stranglehold of the code (of the Sr) — or in the name of the Sr, which must be liberated from that of the Sd.

The first perspective — the party of the Sd — is to be analyzed in

16. The analysis could be extended to the level of metalanguage (a system of signification staggered in reverse):

$$\frac{\frac{Sr\,/\,Sd}{Sd}}{Sr}$$

where the entire sign is transformed into the Sd of a new Sr. In the end, the signified of metalinguistic denotation is only an effect of the Sr, only a simulation model whose coherence derives from the regulated exchange of signifiers. It would be interesting to push, to the verge of paradox:

—The hypothesis (though it is scarcely even that) that the historical event is volatilized in its successive coding by the media; that it is invented and manipulated by the simple operation of the code. The historical event then appears as a combinatory effect of discourse;

—The hypothesis, in the same mode, at the metalinguistic level, that the object of a (given) science is only the effect of its discourse. In the carving out and separation of the field of knowledge the rationality of a science is established through its exclusion of the remainder (the same process, as we have seen, is involved in the institution of the sign itself): or, to take this even further, that this (scientific) discourse posits its object as a simulation model, purely and simply. It is known, after all, that a science is established in the last instance as the language-consensus of a scientific community.

the framework of Derrida's (and *Tel Quel*'s) critique of the primacy of the signified in the occidental process of meaning, which moralizes the sign in its content (of thought or of reality) at the expense of form, and confers an ethical and metaphysical status to meaning itself. This "natural philosophy" of signification implies an "idealism of the referent." It is a critique of the abstraction and arbitrariness of the sign in the name of "concrete" reality. Its phantasm is that of a total resurrection of the "real" in an immediate and transparent intuition, which establishes the economy of the sign (of the Sr) and of the code in order to release the Signifieds (subjects, history, nature, contradictions) in their actuating, dialectical, authentic truth. Today, this vision is developed largely in the critique of the abstraction of systems and codes in the name of authentic values (which are largely derived from the bourgeois system of individualist values). It amounts to a long sermon denouncing the alienation of the system, which becomes, with the expansion of this very system, a kind of universal discourse.

The temptation to criticize the Sr in the name of the Sd (Rft), to make of the "real" the ideal alternative to the formal play of signs, is congruent with what we have analyzed as the idealism of use value.[17] The salvation of UV from the system of EV, without realizing that UV is a satellite system in solidarity with that of EV: this is precisely the idealism and transcendental humanism of contents which we discover again in the attempt to rescue the Sd (Rft) from the terrorism of the Sr. The velleity of emancipating and liberating the "real" leaves intact the entire ideology of signification — just as the ideology of political economy is preserved *in toto* in the ideal autonomization of use value.

Because it confirms the separation which establishes the logic of the sign, every attempt to surpass the political economy of the sign which takes its support from one of its constituent elements is condemned to reproduce its arbitrary character (ergo, ideology) in the alternated mode of Sd or Sr.[18] Any basis for a crucial interrogation of the sign must be situated from the perspective of what it expels and annihilates in its very institution, in the respective emergence and structural assignation of the Sr and the Sd. The process of signification is, at bottom, nothing but a gigantic *simulation model of meaning*. Clearly, neither the real, the referent, nor some substance of value banished to the exterior shadow of the

17. See Beyond Use Value, in this volume.

18. The impasse is much more subtle in the case of the "liberation of the signifier." We shall return to this problem.

sign can abolish this process. It is the symbolic that continues to haunt the sign, for in its total exclusion it never ceases to dismantle the formal correlation of Sr and Sd. But the symbolic, whose virtuality of meaning is so subversive of the sign, cannot, for this very reason, be named except by allusion, by infraction (*effraction*). For signification, which names everything in terms of itself, can only speak the language of values and of the *positivity* of the sign.

Indeed, in the final analysis, the whole problem revolves around the question of the positivity of the sign, its "assumption of value" (*prise de valeur*). Of what is outside the sign, of what is other than the sign, *we can say nothing*, really, except that it is ambivalent, that is, it is impossible to distinguish respective separated terms and to positivize them as such. And we can say that in this ambivalence is rooted a type of exchange that is radically different from the exchange of values (exchange values or sign values). But this (symbolic) exchange is foreclosed and abolished by the sign in its simultaneous institution of: (1) a separation, a distinctive structure; and (2) a positive relation, a sort of structural copulation between the two terms, which clearly only eternalizes their separation. This copulation is objectified in the bar of structural inclusion between Sr and Sd (Sr/Sd).[19] It is then even further objectified and

19. All the arbitrariness and positivity of the sign is amassed on this line separating the two levels of the sign. This structural-inclusive copula establishes the process of signification as *positive* and occults its prior function — the process of reducing and abolishing meaning (or non-meaning: ambivalence); the process of misunderstanding and denegation with which, moreover, the sign never finishes. This line is in fact the barrier whose raising would signify the deconstruction of the sign, its resolution, and the dissolution of its constituent elements, Sr and Sd, as such. Lacan's formulation of the linguistic sign reveals the true meaning of this line: $\frac{S}{s}$. It becomes the line (barrier) of repression itself — no longer that which articulates, but that which censors — and thus the locus of transgression. This line highlights what the sign denies, that upon which the sign establishes itself negatively, and of which it is only, in its positive institution, the symptom.

However, Lacan's formula introduces this radically new line in terms of the *traditional* schema of the sign, maintaining the usual place of the Signified. This Signified is not the Sd-Rft of linguistics. It is the repressed. It still retains a sort of content, and its representation is always that of a substance, though no longer assigned term for term, but only coinciding at certain points with the metaphoric chain of Srs ("anchoring points" — *points de capiton*). [On "points de capiton" and other matters concerning Lacan, see Anthony Wilden, *The Language of the Self* (New York: Delta, 1968): "Perhaps language is in fact totally tautologous in the sense that it can only in the end talk about itself, but in any event, Lacan has suggested that there must be some privileged 'anchoring points,' points like the buttons on a mattress or the intersections of quilting, where there is a 'pinning down' (*capitonnage*) of meaning, not to an object, but rather by 'reference back' to a symbolic function" (p. 273). For Lacan's version of the Saussurian formula, see Jacques Lacan, "The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious," in Jacques Ehrmann, ed., *Structuralism* (New York, 1970). — *Trans.*]

positivized in the "R" of Hjemslev's formula: E R C.[20] It is this positive relation that makes a value of the sign. Whether it is understood to be arbitrary or motivated makes little difference. These terms divert the problem by inscribing it in an already established logic of the sign. Its true arbitrariness, or true motivation, is its positivization, which creates its rationality. And this is nothing other than the radical *reduction* of all ambivalence, through its dual abstraction. The motivation of the sign is thus purely and simply its strategy: structural crystallization and the liquidation of ambivalence by the "solidification" of value. And this motivation evidently functions by means of the arbitrariness of its form: foreclosure and reduction. The concepts of arbitrariness and motivation are thus hardly contradictory from a strategic (political) perspective.

Still, the arbitrariness of the sign is at bottom untenable. The sign value cannot admit to its own deductive abstraction any more than exchange value can. Whatever it denies and represses, it will attempt to exorcise and integrate into its own operation: such is the status of the "real," of the referent, which are only the simulacrum of the symbolic, its form reduced and intercepted by the sign. Through this mirage of the referent, which is nothing but the phantasm of what the sign itself represses during its operation,[21] the sign attempts to mislead: it permits itself to appear as totality, to efface the traces of its abstract transcendence, and parades about as the reality principle of meaning.[22]

According to the very different logic of linguistics, it is a question of the partition of two agencies (instances), where the *reference* is only representative of one. It appears on the contrary that to conceive the sign as censor, as a barrier of exclusion, is not to wish to retain for the repressed its position as signifiable, its position of latent value. Rather, it is to conceive it as that which, denied by the sign, in turn denies the sign's form, and can never have any place within it. It is a non-place and non-value in opposition to the sign. Barred (*barrée*) and deleted (*rayée*) by the sign, it is a symbolic ambivalence that only re-emerges fully in the total resolution of the sign, in the explosion of the sign and of value. The symbolic is not inscribed anywhere. It is not what comes to be registered beneath the repression barrier (line), the Lacanian Sd. It is rather what tears all Srs and Sds to pieces, since it is what dismantles their pairing off (*appareillage*) and their simultaneous carving out (*découpe*). See note 6 above.

20. See Roland Barthes, "Elements of Semiology," *op.cit.* ["It will be remembered that any system of signification comprises a plane of expression (E) and a plane of content (C) and that the signification coincides with the relation (R) of the two planes: E R C." – *Trans.*]

21. One could say that the referent becomes "symbolic" again, by a curious inversion – not in the radical sense of the term, but in the sense of a "symbolic" gesture, that is, its meager reality. Here the referent is *only* "symbolic," the principle of reality having passed over into the code.

22. Even exchange value could not exist in its pure state, in its total abstraction. It can only function under the cover of use value, where a simulacrum of totality is

As the functional and terrorist organization of the control of meaning under the sign of the positivity of value, signification is in some ways kin to the notion of reification. It is the locus of an elemental objectification that reverberates through the amplified systems of signs up to the level of the social and political terrorism of the bracketing (*encadrement*) of meaning. All the repressive and reductive strategies of power systems are already present in the internal logic of the sign, as well as those of exchange value and political economy. Only total revolution, theoretical and practical, can restore the symbolic in the demise of the sign and of value. Even signs must burn.

restored at the horizon of political economy, and where it resuscitates, in the functionality of needs, the phantom of precisely what it abolishes: the symbolic (*le symbolique*) of desire.

CHAPTER NINE

REQUIEM FOR THE MEDIA

Introit

There is no theory of the media. The "media revolution" has remained empirical and mystical, as much in the work of McLuhan as with his opponents. McLuhan has said, with his usual Canadian-Texan brutalness, that Marx, the spiritual contemporary of the steam engine and railroads, was already obsolete in his lifetime with the appearance of the telegraph.[1] In his candid fashion, he is saying that Marx, in his materialist analysis of production, had virtually circumscribed productive forces as a privileged domain from which language, signs and communication in general found themselves excluded. In fact, Marx does not even provide for a genuine theory of railroads as "media," as modes of communication: they hardly enter into consideration. And he certainly established no theory of technical evolution in general, except from the point of view of production — primary, material, infrastructural production as the almost exclusive determinant of social relations. Dedicated to an intermediate ideality and a blind social practice, the "mode of communication" has had the leisure for an entire century of "making revolution" without changing the theory of the mode of production one iota in the process.

Having admitted this much, and on condition (which is already a revolution by comparison to orthodox Marxism) that the exchange of signs is not treated as a marginal, superstructural dimension in relation to those beings whom the only "true" theory (materialist) defines as "producers of their real life" (i.e., of goods destined to satisfy their needs), it is possible to imagine two perspectives:

1. One retains the general form of Marxist analysis (dialectical contradiction between forces and relations of production), but admits that the classical definition of productive forces is too restricted, so one expands the analysis in terms of productive forces to the whole murky field of signification and communication. This involves setting loose in all their originality the contradictions born from this theoretical and practical extension of the field of political economy. Such a hypothesis is the point of departure for Enzensberger: "Monopoly capitalism develops the consciousness shaping industry more quickly and more extensively than other

1. Marshall McLuhan, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York, 1968), p. 5.

sectors of production; it must at the same time fetter it. A socialist media theory has to work at this contradiction."[2] But this hypothesis does little more than signal the virtual extension of the commodity form to all the domains of social life (and tardily, at that). It recognizes the existence, here and now, of a classical communication theory, a bourgeois political economy of signs and of their production (just as there existed one of material production as early as the 18th century). It is a class-bound theoretical discipline.[3] It has not been answered by any fundamental critique that could be seen as the logical extension of Marx's. Since the entire domain was relegated to the superstructure, this *critique of the political economy of the sign* was rendered unthinkable. Thus, at best, Enzensberger's hypothesis can do little more than try to vitiate the immense retardation of classical Marxist theory. It is only radical in the eyes of official Marxism, which is totally submerged in the dominant models, and would risk its own survival if it went even that far. *The radical alternative lies elsewhere.*

2. The production of meaning, messages and signs poses a crucial problem to revolutionary theory. Instead of reinterpreting it in terms of classical forces of production — that is, instead of merely generalizing an analysis that is considered final and stamped with the seal of approval by the "spokesmen of the revolution" — the alternative is to thoroughly disrupt the latter in the light of the eruption of this new problem into the theoretical field (an approach no self-respecting Marxist would take, even under the guise of a hypothesis).

In other words: perhaps the Marxist theory of production is irredeemably partial, and cannot be generalized. Or again: the theory of production (the dialectical chaining of contradictions linked to the development of productive forces) is strictly homogeneous with its object — *material* production — and is non-transferable, as a postulate or theoretical framework, to contents that were never given for it in the first place.[4] The dialectical form is

2. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," *The Consciousness Industry* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 96-128.

3. This political economy of the sign is structural linguistics (together with semiology, to be sure, and all its derivatives, of which communication theory will be discussed below). It is apparent that within the general ideological framework, structural linguistics is the contemporary master discipline, inspiring anthropology, the human sciences, etc., just as, in its time, did political economy, whose postulates profoundly informed all of psychology, sociology and the "moral and political" sciences.

4. In this case, the expression "consciousness industry" which Enzensberger uses to characterize the existing media is a dangerous metaphor. Unfortunately, it underlies his entire analytic hypothesis, which is to extend the Marxist analysis of the capitalist

adequate to certain contents, those of material production: it exhausts them of meaning, but unlike an archetype, it does not exceed the definition of this object. The dialectic lies in ashes because it offered itself as a system of interpreting the *separated* order of material production.

All in all, this point of view is quite logical. It accords a global coherence to Marxist analysis — an internal homogeneity that prevents certain elements from being retained and others from being excluded, according to a technique of *bricolage* of which the Althusserians are the most subtle artificers. On the other hand, we credit Marxism with a maximum coherence. And so we demand that this coherence be breached, for it is incapable of responding to a social process that far exceeds material production.[5]

Enzensberger: A "Socialist" Strategy

In the absence of a theory and a positive strategy, argues Enzensberger, the Left remains disarmed. It is content to denounce mass-media culture as an ideological manipulation. The Left dreams of a media takeover, sometimes as a *means* of nudging the revolutionary *prise de conscience* of the masses, sometimes as a *consequence* of radical change in social structures. But this is a contradictory velleity, reflecting quite straightforwardly the impossibility of integrating the media into a theory of infra- and superstructure. The media (and the entire domain of signs and communication, it should be added) remain a social mystery for the Left, according to Enzensberger, because the Left has failed to conceive of them as a new and gigantic potential of productive forces. The Left is divided between fascination and practice before this sorcery to which it also falls victim, but which it reproves morally and intellectually (here is that Left intellectual speaking through Enzensberger himself, making his autocritique). This ambivalence only reflects the ambivalence of the media themselves, without going beyond it or reducing it.[6] With a bold stroke of Marxist sociology, Enzensberger imputes this "phobia" of intellectuals and Left movements to their bourgeois or petty bourgeois origins: they defend themselves instinctively from mass culture because it snaps their cultural privilege.[7] True or false, perhaps it would be more valuable to ask, with respect to this mesmerized distrust, this tactical disarray and the Left intelligentsia's refusal to get involved with the media, precisely how much are Marxist preconceptions themselves to blame? The nostalgic idealism of the infrastructure? The theoretical allergy to everything that isn't "material" production and "productive labor"? "Revolutionary" doctrine has never come to terms with the exchange of signs other than as pragmatically functional use: information, broadcasting, and propaganda. The contemporary new look of left-wing public relations, and the whole modernist party subculture, are hardly designed to transform this tendency. They demonstrate quite sufficiently how bourgeois ideology can be generated independently of "social origin."

All of this, Enzensberger continues, results in a political schizophrenia of the Left. On one side, a whole (subversive) revolutionary faction abandons itself to apolitical exploration of new media (subculture, underground); on the other, militant political groups still live essentially through archaic modes of communication, refusing to "play the game," or to exploit the immense possibilities of the electronic media. Thus, he reproaches the students of May '68 for having regressed to artisanal means (referring to the hand presses of the Ecole des Beaux Arts) for spreading their slogans and for having occupied the Odéon, "steeped in tradition," instead of the ORTF.[8,9]

mode of production to the media, to the point of discovering a structural analogy between the following relations:

dominant class / dominated class
producer-entrepreneur / consumer
transmitter-broadcaster / receiver

5. In fact, Marxist analysis can be questioned at two very different levels of radicality: either as a system for interpreting the separated order of *material* production, or else as that of the separated order of *production* (in general). In the first case, the hypothesis of the non-relevance of the dialectic outside its field of "origin" must be logically pushed further: if "dialectical" contradictions between the productive forces and the relations of production largely vanish in the field of language, signs and ideology, *perhaps they were never really operative in the field of material production either,* since a certain capitalist development of productive forces has been able to absorb — not all conflict, to be sure — but revolutionary antagonisms at the level of social relations. Wherein lies the validity of these concepts, then, aside from a purely conceptual coherence?

In the second case, the concept of production must be interrogated at its very root (and not in its diverse contents), along with the separated form which it establishes and the representational and rationalizing schema it imposes. Undoubtedly it is here, at the extreme, that the real work needs to be done. [See Baudrillard's *Mirror of Production,* translated by Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975). — *Trans.*]

6. Enzensberger, *loc. cit.*, p. 96.

7. This genre of reductive determinism may be found in the works of Bourdieu and in the phraseology of the Communist Party. It is theoretically worthless. It turns the *mechanism* of democratization into a revolutionary value per se. That intellectuals may find mass culture repugnant hardly suffices to make it a revolutionary alternative. Aristocrats used to make sour faces at bourgeois culture, but no one ever said the latter was anything more than a class culture.

8. Most of the above references are to Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103.

9. French radio-TV headquarters. The ORTF is a highly centralized state-run monopoly.

Enzensberger attempts to develop an optimistic and offensive position. The media are monopolized by the dominant classes, which *divert* them to their own advantage. But the structure of the media remains "fundamentally egalitarian," and it is up to revolutionary praxis to disengage this potentiality inscribed in the media, but perverted by the capitalist order. Let us say the word: to liberate the media, to return them to their social vocation of open communication and unlimited democratic exchange, their true socialist destiny.

Clearly what we have here is an extension of the same schema assigned, since time immemorial, from Marx to Marcuse, to productive forces and technology: they are the promise of human fulfillment, but capitalism freezes or confiscates them. They are liberatory, but it is necessary to liberate them.[10] The media, as we can see, do not escape this fantastic logic of inscribing the revolution *inter alia* onto things. To set the media back to the logic of productive forces no longer qualifies as a critical act, for it only locks them more firmly into the revolutionary metaphysic.

As usual, this position bogs down in contradictions. Through their own (capitalist) development, the media assure that socialization is pushed to more and more advanced stages. Even though it is technically quite imaginable, there is no closed-circuit television for the happy few who could afford it, "because this would go against the grain of the structure" of the medium.[11] "For the first time in history, the media make possible the participation of the masses in a collective process that is social and socialized, participation in which the practical means are in the hands of the masses themselves."[12] But the "socialist movements must fight and will fight for their own wavelengths."[13] Why fight (above all for wavelengths), if the media realize themselves in socialism? If such is their structural vocation?

The existing order, says Enzensberger following Brecht (*Theory of Radio,* 1932), reduces the media to a simple "medium of distribution."[14] So they must be revamped into a true medium of communication (always the same dream haunts the Marxist imaginary: strip objects of their exchange value in order to restore their use value); and this transformation, he adds, "is not technically a problem." But:

10. Thus we find authority, the state and other institutions either devoid or full up with revolutionary content, depending on whether they are still in the grip of capital or the people have taken them over. Their form is rarely questioned.
11. Enzensberger, *op.cit.*, pp. 105, 108.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

1. It is false that in the present order the media are "purely and simply means of distribution." Once again, that is to treat them as the relay of an ideology that would find its determinations elsewhere (in the mode of material production); in other words, the media as marketing and merchandizing of the dominant ideology. It is from this perspective that the relation media producer-transmitter *versus* irresponsible, receptive masses is assimilated to that of capitalist versus salaried worker. But it is not as vehicles of content, but in their form and very operation, that media induce a social relation; and this is not an exploitative relation: it involves the abstraction, separation and abolition of exchange itself. The media are not *co-efficients,* but *effectors* of ideology. Not only is their destiny far from revolutionary; the media are not even, somewhere else or potentially, neutral or non-ideological (the phantasm of their technical status or of their social use value). Reciprocally, ideology does not exist in some place apart, as the discourse of the dominant class, *before* it is channeled through the media. The same applies to the sphere of commodities: nowhere do the latter possess ontological status independently of the form they take in the operation of the exchange value system. Nor is ideology some Imaginary floating in the wake of exchange value: it is the very operation of exchange value itself. After the *Requiem* for the dialectic, it is necessary to toll the *Requiem* of the infra- and superstructure.

2. It follows that when Brecht and Enzensberger assert that the transformation of the media into a true medium of communication is not technically a problem ("it is nothing more," says Brecht, "than the natural consequence of their technical development"), it is necessary to understand (but, contrarily, and without playing on words) that in effect it is quite correctly *not a technical problem,* since media ideology functions at the level of *form,* at the level of the separation it establishes, which is a *social* division.

Speech Without Response

The mass media are anti-mediatory and intransitive. They fabricate non-communication — this is what characterizes them, if one agrees to define communication as an exchange, as a reciprocal space of a speech and a response, and thus of a *responsibility* (not a psychological or moral responsibility, but a personal, mutual correlation in exchange). We must understand communication as something other than the simple transmission-reception of a message, whether or not the latter is considered reversible through

feedback. Now, the totality of the existing architecture of the media founds itself on this latter definition: *they are what always prevents response*, making all processes of exchange impossible (except in the various forms of response *simulation*, themselves integrated in the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact). This is the real abstraction of the media. And the system of social control and power is rooted in it.

To understand the term *response* properly, we must take it in an emphatic sense, by referring to an equivalent in "primitive" societies: power belongs to the one who can give and *cannot be repaid*. To give, and to do it in such a way that one is unable to repay, is to disrupt the exchange to your profit and to institute a monopoly. The social process is thus thrown out of equilibrium, whereas repaying disrupts this power relationship and institutes (or reinstitutes), on the basis of an antagonistic reciprocity, the circuit of symbolic exchange. The same goes for the media: they speak, or something is spoken there, but in such a way as *to exclude any response anywhere*. This is why the only revolution in this domain — indeed, the revolution everywhere: the revolution *tout court* — lies in restoring this possibility of response. But such a simple possibility presupposes an upheaval in the entire existing structure of the media.

No other theory or strategy is possible. All vague impulses to democratize content, subvert it, restore the "transparency of the code," control the information process, contrive a reversibility of circuits, or take power over media are hopeless — unless the monopoly of speech is broken; and one cannot break the monopoly of speech if one's goal is simply to distribute it equally to everyone. Speech must be able to exchange, give and repay itself[15] as is occasionally the case with looks and smiles. It cannot simply be interrupted, congealed, stockpiled, and redistributed in some corner of the social process.[16]

For the time being, we live in the era of non-response — of irresponsibility. "Minimal autonomous activity on the part of the spectator and voter," says Enzensberger. The mass medium *par excellence*, and the most beautiful of them all, is the electoral system: its crowning achievement is the referendum, where the

15. It is not a question of "dialogue," which is only the functional adjustment of two abstract speeches without response, where the "interlocutors" are never mutually present, but only their stylized discourses.

16. The occupation of the ORTF changed nothing in itself, even if subversive "contents" were "broadcast." If only those involved had scuttled the ORTF as such, for its entire technical and functional structure reflects the monopolistic use of speech.

response is implied in the question itself, as in the polls. It is a speech that answers itself via the simulated detour of a response, and here as well, the absolutization of speech under the formal guise of exchange is *the* definition of power. Roland Barthes has made note of the same non-reciprocity in literature: "Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness — he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*."[17]

Today, the status of the *consumer* defines this banishment. The generalized order of consumption is nothing other than that sphere where it is no longer permitted to give, to reimburse or to exchange, but only to take and to make use of (appropriation, individualized use value). In this case, consumption goods also constitute a mass medium: they answer to the general state of affairs we have described. Their specific function is of little import: the consumption of products and messages is the abstract social relation that they establish, the ban raised against all forms of response and reciprocity.

Thus, it is far from true that, as Enzensberger affirms, "for the first time in history, the media make possible a mass participation in a productive social process;" nor that "the practical means of this participation are in the hands of the masses themselves." As if owning a TV set or a camera inaugurated a new possibility of relationship and exchange. Strictly speaking, such cases are no more significant than the possession of a refrigerator or a toaster. There is no *response* to a functional object: its function is already there, an integrated speech to which it has already responded, leaving no room for play, or reciprocal *putting in play* (unless one destroys the object, or turns its function inside out).[18] So the functionalized object, like all messages functionalized by the media, like the operation of a referendum, controls rupture, the emergence of meaning, and censorship. As an extreme case, authority would provide every citizen

17. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York, 1974), p. 4.

18. Multifunctionality evidently changes nothing on this score. Multifunctionality, multidisciplinarity — polyvalence in all its forms — are just the system's response to its own obsession with centrality and standardization (uni-équivalence). It is the system's reaction to its own pathology, glossing over the underlying logic.

with a TV set without preoccupying itself with programming (assuming an authority that was not also obsessed by content and convinced of the ideological force of media "persuasion," and thus of the need to control the message). It is useless to fantasize about state projection of police control through TV (as Enzensberger has remarked of Orwell's *1984*): TV, by virtue of its mere presence, is a social control in itself. There is no need to imagine it as a state periscope spying on everyone's private life — the situation as it stands is more efficient than that: it is the *certainty that people are no longer speaking to each other*, that they are definitively isolated in the face of a speech without response.

From this perspective, McLuhan, whom Enzensberger scorns as a kind of ventriloquist, is much closer to a theory when he declares that "the medium is the message" (save that, in his total blindness to the social forms discussed here, he exalts the media and their global message with a delirious tribal optimism). *The medium is the message* is not a critical proposition. But in its paradoxical form, it has analytic value,[19] whereas the ingenuity of Enzensberger with regard to the "structural properties of the media" such that "no power can permit the liberation of their potentiality" turns out to be mysticism, although it wants to be revolutionary. The mystique of the socialist predestination of the media is opposite but complementary to the Orwellian myth of their terrorist manipulation by authority. Even God would approve of socialism: Christians say it all the time.

Subversive Strategy and "Symbolic Action"

It could be objected that the media did, after all, play a significant role in the events of May '68 in France, by spontaneously playing up the revolutionary movement. During at least one moment of the action, they were turned against the power structure. It is through this breach and on the possibility of this reversal that the subversive strategy of the American Yippies (e.g., Hoffman, Rubin) is founded, and on which a theory of "symbolic action" is elaborated in the world revolutionary movements: co-opt the media through their power to chain react; use their power to generalize information instantaneously. The assumption here of course is that the impact of the media

19. Enzensberger (pp. 118-119) interprets it this way: "The medium is the message" is a bourgeois proposition. It signifies that the bourgeoisie has nothing left to say. Having no further message to transmit, it plays the card of medium for medium's sake. — If the bourgeoisie has nothing left to say, "socialism" would do better to keep quiet.

is reversible, a variable in the class struggle that one must learn to appropriate. But this position should be questioned, for it is perhaps another rather large strategic illusion.

May '68 will serve well enough as an example. Everything would lead us to believe in the subversive impact of the media during this period. Suburban radio stations and newspapers spread the student action everywhere. If the students were the detonators, the media were the resonators. Furthermore, the authorities quite openly accused the media of "playing the revolutionary game." But this sort of argument has been constructed in the absence of analysis. I would say to the contrary that the media have never discharged their responsibilities with more efficiency, and that, indeed, in their function of *habitual* social control, they were right on top of the action. This is because, beneath the disarray of their routine content, they preserved their form; and this form, regardless of the context, is what inexorably connects them with the system of power. By broadcasting the events in the *abstract universality* of public opinion, they imposed a sudden and inordinate development on the movement of events; and through this forced and anticipated extension, they deprived the original movement of its own rhythm and of its meaning. In a word: they short-circuited it.

In the sphere of traditional politics (left- or right-wing),[20] where sanctified models and a kind of canonical speech are exchanged, the media are able to transmit without distorting the meanings intended. They are homogeneous with this kind of speech, as they are with the circulation of the commodity. But transgression and subversion never get "on the air" without being subtly negated as they are: transformed into models, neutralized into signs, they are eviscerated of their meaning.[21] There is no model of transgression, prototypical or serial. Hence, there is no better way to reduce it than to administer

20. This left-right distinction is just about meaningless from the point of view of the media. We should give credit where credit is due and grant them the honor of having contributed largely to its elimination. The distinction is interconnected with an order characterized by the *transcendence* of politics, and has nothing to do with what has announced itself in all sorts of forms as the *transversality* of politics. But let us not mistake ourselves, here: the media only help to liquidate this transcendence of politics in order to substitute their own transcendence, abstracted from the mass media form, which is thoroughly integrated and no longer even offers a conflictive structure (left-right). Mass media transcendence is thus reductive of the traditional transcendence of politics, but it is even more reductive of the new transversality of politics.

21. This form of so-called "disclosure" or "propagation" can be analyzed readily in the fields of science or art. Generalized reproducibility obliterates the processes of work and meaning so as to leave nothing but modelized contents (cf. Raoul Ergmann, "Le miroir en miettes," *Diogene*, no. 68, 1969; Baudouin Jurdant, "La vulgarisation scientifique," *Communications*, no. 14).

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it a mortal dose of publicity. Originally, this process might have left one impressed with the possibility of "spectacular" results. In fact, it was tantamount to dismantling the movement by depriving it of its own momentum. The act of rupture was transformed into a bureaucratic model at a distance — and such, in fact, is the ordinary labor of the media.[22]

All of this can be read from the derivation and distortion of the term "symbolic" itself. The action of March 22 at Nanterre was symbolic because it was transgressive: at a given time in a given place, an act of radical rupture was invented — or, to resume the analysis proposed above, a particular response was invented there, where the institutions of administrative and pedagogical power were engaged in a private *oratoria* and functioned precisely to interdict any answer. The fact of mass media diffusion and contagion had nothing to do with the symbolic quality of the action. However, today it is precisely this interpretation, stressing the imapct of disclosure, which suffices to define symbolic action. At the extreme, the subversive act is no longer produced *except as a function of its reproducibility.*[23] It is no longer created, it is produced directly as a *model,* like a gesture. The symbolic has slipped from the order of the very production of meaning to that of its *re*production, which is always the order of power. The symbolic becomes its own coefficient, pure and simple, and transgression is turned into exchange value.

22. It should be pointed out that this labor is always accompanied by one of selection and reinterpretation at the level of the membership group (Lazarsfeld's *two-step flow of communication*). This accounts for the highly relative impact of media contents, and the many kinds of resistance they provoke. (However we should ask ourselves whether these resistances are not aimed at the abstraction of the medium itself, rather than its contents: Lazarsfeld's double articulation would lead us to this conclusion, since the second articulation belongs to the network of *personal* relations, opposed to the generality of media messages.) Still, this "second" reading, where the membership group opposes its own code to the transmitter's (cf. my discussion of Umberto Eco's thesis towards the end of this article) certainly doesn't neutralize or "reduce" the dominant ideological contents of the media in the same way as it does the critical or subversive contents. To the extent that the dominant ideological contents (cultural models, value systems, imposed without alternative or response; bureaucratic contents) are homogeneous with the general form of the mass media (non-reciprocity, irresponsibility), and are integrated with this form in reduplicating it, they are, so to speak, overdetermined, and have greater impact. They "go over" better than subversive *contents*. But this is not the essence of the problem. It is more important to recognize that the *form* of transgression never "comes off" more or less well on the media: it is radically denied by the mass media form.

23. Thus, for Walter Benjamin, the reproduced work becomes more and more the work "designed" *for reproducibility*. In this way, according to him, the work of art graduates from ritual to politics. "Exhibition value" revolutionizes the work of art and its functions. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968).

Rationalist critical thought (i.e., Benjamin, Brecht, Enzensberger) sees this as a sign of decisive progress. The media simply actualize and reinforce the "demonstrative nature of no matter which political act" (Enzensberger). This evidently conforms with the *didactic* conception of the revolution and further with the "dialectic of coming to consciousness," etc. This tradition has yet to renounce the bourgeois Enlightenment. It has inherited all its ideas about the democratic (here revolutionary) virtues of spreading light (broadcasting). The pedagogical illusion of this position overlooks that — in aiming its own political acts at the media, and awaiting the moment to assume the media's mantle of power — the media themselves are in deliberate pursuit of the political act, in order to depoliticize it.

An interesting fact might be cited here as support: the contemporary eruption of tabloid trivia and natural disaster in the political sphere (which converges with Benjamin's notion of the graduation of the art object to the political stage by virtue of its reproducibility). There is a tidal wave in Pakistan, a black title fight in the U.S.; a youth is shot by a bistro owner, etc. These sorts of events, once minor and apolitical, suddenly find themselves invested with a power of diffusion that lends them a social and "historic" aura. New forms of political action have crystallized around this conflictualization of incidents that were hitherto consigned to the social columns. There is no doubt that, to a large extent, the new meanings they have taken on are largely the doing of the media. Such *faits divers* are like undeliberated "symbolic actions," but they take part in the same process of political signification. Doubtless, their reception is ambiguous and mixed; and if, thanks to the media, the political re-emerges under the category of *faits divers*, thanks to the same media the category of *faits divers* has totally invaded politics. Furthermore, it has changed status with the extension of the mass media: from a parallel category (descended from almanacs and popular chronicles), it has evolved into a total system of mythological interpretation, a closed system of models of signification from which no event escapes. Mass mediatization: that is its quintessence. It is no ensemble of techniques for broadcasting messages: it is the *imposition of models*. McLuhan's formula is worth re-examining here: "The medium is the message" operates a transfer of meaning onto the medium itself qua technological structure. Again we are confronted with technological idealism. In fact, the essential Medium is the Model. What is mediatized is not what comes off the daily press, out of the tube, or on the radio: it is what is reinterpreted by the sign form, articulated into models, and administered by the

code (just as the commodity is not what is produced industrially, but what is mediatized by the exchange value system of abstraction). At best, what can occur under the aegis of the media is a formal surpassing of the categories of *faits divers* and politics, and of their traditional separation, but only the better to assign them together to the same general code. It is strange that no one has tried to measure the strategic import of this forced socialization as a system of social control. Once again, the first great historical example of this was the electoral system. And it has never lacked revolutionaries (formerly among the greatest, today the least significant) who believed they could "do it" within the system. The general strike itself, this insurrectional myth of so many generations, has become a schematic reducing agent. That of May '68, to which the media significantly contributed by exporting the strike to all corners of France, was in appearance the culminating point of the crisis. In fact, it was the moment of its decompression, of its asphyxiation by extension, and of its defeat. To be sure, millions of workers went on strike. But no one knew what to do with this "mediatized" strike, transmitted and received as a model of action (whether via the media or the unions). Reduced to a single meaning, it neutralized the local, transversal, spontaneous forms of action (though not all). The Grenelle accords[24] hardly betrayed this tendency. They sanctioned *this passage to the generality of political action, which puts an end to the singularity of revolutionary action.* Today it has become (in the form of the calculated extension of the strike) the absolute weapon of the unions against wildcat strikes.

So far the electoral system and the general strike are also media, after a fashion. Playing on extensive formal socialization, they are the subtlest and stealthiest institutions of filtration, dismantling and censorship. They are neither exceptions, nor miracles.

The real revolutionary media during May were the walls and their speech, the silk-screen posters and the hand-painted notices, the street where speech began and was exchanged — everything that was an *immediate* inscription, given and returned, spoken and answered, mobile in the same space and time, reciprocal and antagonistic. The street is, in this sense, the alternative and subversive form of the mass media, since it isn't, like the latter, an objectified support for answerless messages, a transmission system at a distance. It is the

24. The Grenelle accords were worked out between Georges Séguy of the CGT and Georges Pompidou during the May '68 general strike. Although the monetary concessions involved were fairly broad, they missed the point, and were massively rejected by workers. — *Trans.*

frayed space of the symbolic exchange of speech — ephemeral, mortal: a speech that is not reflected on the Platonic screen of the media. Institutionalized by reproduction, reduced to a spectacle, this speech is expiring.

It is a strategic illusion to have any faith in the critical reversal of the media. A comparable speech can emerge only from the destruction of the media such as they are — through their deconstruction as systems of non-communication. Their liquidation does not follow from this, any more than the radical critique of discourse implies the negation of language as signifying material. But it certainly does imply the liquidation of the existing functional and technical structure of the media — of their operational form, so to speak — which *in toto* reflects their social form. At the limit, to be sure, it is the very concept of medium that disappears — and must disappear: speech exchanged dissolves the idea and function of the medium, and of the intermediary, as does symbolic land reciprocal exchange. It can involve a technical apparatus (sound, image, waves, energy, etc.) as well as a corporeal one (gestures, language, sexuality), but in this case, it no longer acts as a *medium*, as an autonomous system administered by the code. Reciprocity comes into being through the destruction of mediums per se. "People meet their neighbors for the first time while watching their apartment houses burn down."[25]

The Theoretical Model of Communication

Let us summarize the various hypotheses:

1. McLuhan (for memory's sake): The media make — indeed, they are — the revolution, independently of their content, by virtue of their technological structure alone. After the phonetic alphabet and the printed book comes the radio and the cinema. After radio, television. We live, here and now, in the age of instantaneous, global communication.

2. The media are controlled by power. The imperative is to strip them of it, whether by taking the media over, or reversing them by outbidding the spectacle with subversive content. Here, the media are envisioned as pure message. Their form is never called into question (any more than it is, in fact, by McLuhan, who views the medium only in its aspect as medium).

3. Enzensberger: the present form of the media induces a certain type of social relation (assimilative to that of the capitalist mode of production). But the media contain, by virtue of their structure and

25. Jerry Rubin. *Do It* (New York: Simon and Schuster), p. 234.

development, an immanent socialist and democratic mode of communication, an immanent rationality and universality of information. It suffices to liberate this potential.

We are only interested in Enzensberger's hypothesis (enlightened Marxist) and that of the radical American Left (leftists of the spectacle). The practice of the official Left, Marxist or otherwise, which is confounded with that of the bourgeoisie, will be left out of account here. We have analyzed these positions as *strategic illusions*. The cause of this failure is that both share with the dominant ideology the implicit reference to the same *communication theory*. This theory is accepted practically everywhere, strengthened by received evidence and a (highly scientific) formalization by one discipline, the semio-linguistics of communication, supported on one side by structural linguistics, by information theory on the other, swallowed whole by the universities and by mass culture in general (the mass mediators are its connoisseurs). The entire conceptual infrastructure of this theory is ideologically connected with dominant practice, as was and still is that of classical political economy. It *is* the equivalent of this political economy in the field of communications. And I think that if revolutionary practice has bogged down in this strategic illusion *vis-à-vis* the media, it is because critical analyses have been superficial and fallen short of radically identifying the ideological matrix that communication theory embraces.

Formalized most notably by Roman Jakobsen, its underlying unity is based on the following sequence:

TRANSMITTER – MESSAGE – RECEIVER
(ENCODER – MESSAGE – DECODER)

The message itself is structured by the code and determined by the context. A specific function corresponds to each of these "concepts": the referential, poetic, phatic, etc. [26] Each communication process is thus vectorized into a single meaning, from the transmitter to the receiver: the latter can become transmitter in its turn, and the same schema is reproduced. Thus communication can always be reduced to this simple unity in which the two polar terms are mutually exclusive. This structure is given as objective and scientific, since it follows the methodological rule of decomposing its object into simple elements. In fact, it is satisfied with an empirical given, an abstraction from lived experience and reality: that is, the ideological categories that express a certain type of social relation, namely, in

26. See Roman Jakobsen, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in T.A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1960), pp. 350-377.

which one speaks and the other doesn't, where one has the choice of the code, and the other only liberty to acquiesce or abstain. This structure is based on the same arbitrariness as that of signification (i.e., the arbitrariness of the sign): two terms are artificially isolated and artificially reunited by an objectified content called a message. There is neither reciprocal relation nor simultaneous mutual presence of the two terms, [27] since each determines itself in its relation to the message or code, the "intermedium" that maintains both in a respective situation (it is the code that holds both in "respect"), at a distance from one another, a distance that seals the full and autonomized "value" of the message (in fact, its exchange value). This "scientific" construction is rooted in a *simulation model* of communication. It excludes, from its inception, the reciprocity and antagonism of interlocutors, and the ambivalence of their exchange. What really circulates is information, a semantic content that is assumed to be legible and univocal. The agency of the code guarantees this univocality, and by the same token the respective positions of encoder and decoder. So far so good: the formula has a formal coherence that assures it as the only *possible* schema of communication. But as soon as one posits ambivalent relations, it all collapses. There is no code for ambivalence; and without a code, no more encoder, no more decoder: the extras flee the stage. Even a message becomes impossible, since it would, after all, have to be defined as "emitted" and "received." It is as if the entire formalization exists only to avert this catastrophe. And therein resides its "scientific" status. What it underpins, in fact, is the terrorism of the code. In this guiding schema, the code becomes the only agency that speaks, that exchanges itself and reproduces through the dissociation of the two terms and the univocality (or equivocality, or multivocality – it hardly matters: through the non-ambivalence) of the message. (Likewise, in the process of economic exchange, it is no longer people who exchange; the system of exchange value reproduces itself through them). So, this basic communication formula succeeds in giving us, as a reduced model, a perfect epitome of social exchange *such as it is* – such as, at any rate, the abstraction of the code, the forced rationality and terrorism of separation regulate it. So much for scientific objectivity.

The schema of separation and closure already operates, as we have noted, at the level of the sign, in linguistic theory. Each sign is

27. The two terms are so faintly present to each other that it has proven necessary to create a "contact" category to reconstitute the totality theoretically!

divided into a signifier and a signified, which are mutually appointed, but held in "respective" position: and from the depths of its arbitrary isolation, each sign "communicates" with all the others through a code called a language. Even here, a scientific injunction is invoked against the immanent possibility of the terms exchanging amongst each other symbolically, beyond the signifier-signified distinction — in poetic language, for example. In the latter, as in symbolic exchange, the terms *respond* to each other beyond the code. It is this response that we have marked out during the entire essay as ultimately deconstructive of all codes, of all control and power, which always base themselves on the separation of terms and their abstract articulation.

Thus the theory of signification serves as a nuclear model for communication theory, and the arbitrariness of the sign (that theoretical schema for the repression of meaning) takes on its political and ideological scope in the arbitrariness of the theoretical schema of communication and information. As we have seen, all of this is echoed, not only in the dominant social practice (characterized by the virtual monopoly of the transmission pole and the irresponsibility of the receiving pole, the discrimination between the terms of the exchange and the *diktat* of the code), but also in all the velleities of revolutionary media practice. For example, it is clear that those who aim to subvert media content only reinforce the autonomy of the message as a separated notion, and thus the abstract bipolarity of the term(inal)s of communication.

The Cybernetic Illusion

Sensible of the non-reciprocity of the existing process, Enzensberger believes that the situation can be mitigated by insisting that the same revolution intervene at the level of the media that once disoriented the exact sciences and the epistemological subject-object relation, which has been engaged in continuous "dialectical" interreaction ever since. The media would have to take into account all the consequences of interreaction, whose effect is to breach monopoly and permit everyone's integration in an open process. "The programs of the consciousness industry must subsume into themselves their own results, the reactions and the corrections that they call forth. . . . They are therefore to be thought of not as means of consumption but as means of their own production."[28] Now, this seductive perspective leaves the separated agency of the code and the message intact while it attempts, instead, to break down the

28. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, pp. 119, 127.

discrimination of the two poles of communication toward a more supple structure of role exchange and feedbac ("reversibility of circuits"). "In its present form, equipment like television or film does not serve communication but prevents it. It allows no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver; technically speaking, it reduces feedback to the lowest point compatible with the system."[29] Again, we fail to get beyond the categories of receiver and transmitter, whatever may be the effort to mobilize them through "switching." *Reversibility* has nothing to do with reciprocity. Doubtless it is for this deeper reason that cybernetic systems today understand perfectly well how to put this complex regulation and feedback to work without affecting the abstraction of the process as a whole or allowing any real "responsibility" in exchange. This is indeed the system's surest line of defense, since it thus integrates the contingency of any such response in advance.

As Enzensberger has demonstrated in his critique of the Orwellian myth, it no longer makes sense to conceive a megasystem of centralized control (a monitoring system for the telephone network would have to exceed it n times in size and complexity; hence, it is practically excluded). But it is a little naive to assume that the fact of media extension thus eliminates censorship. Even over the long haul, the impracticality of police megasystems simply means that present systems will integrate these otherwise useless metasystems of control by means of feedback and autoregulation. They know how to introduce what negates them *as supplementary variables*. Their very operation is censorship: megasystems are hardly required. Hence they do not cease to be totalitarian: in a way, they realize the ideal one might refer to as decentralized totalitarianism.

On a more practical level, the media are quite aware how to set up formal "reversibility" of circuits (letters to the editor, phone-in programs, polls, etc.), without conceding any response or abandoning in any way the discrimination of roles.[30] This is the social and political form of feedback. Thus, Enzensberger's "dialectization" of communication is oddly related to cybernetic regulation. Ultimately, he is the victim, though in a more subtle

29. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

30. Once again Enzensberger, who analyses and denounces these control circuits, nevertheless links up with idealism: "Naturally [!] such tendencies go against the grain of the structure, and the new productive forces not only permit, but indeed demand [!] their reversal." (*Ibid*, p. 108.) Feedback and interaction are the very logic of cybernetics. Underestimating the ability of the system to integrate its own revolutionary innovations is as delusory as underestimating the capacity of capitalism to develop the productive forces.

fashion, of the ideological model we have been discussing.

From the same perspective, Enzensberger would break down the unilateral character of communication, which translates simultaneously into the monopoly of specialists and professionals and that of the class enemy over the media, by proposing, as a revolutionary solution, that *everyone become a manipulator,* in the sense of active operator, producer, etc., in brief, move from receiver status to that of producer-transmitter. Here is a sort of critical reversal of the ideological concept of manipulation. But again, because this "revolution" at bottom conserves the category of transmitter, which it is content to generalize as separated, transforming everyone into his own transmitter, it fails to place the mass media system in check. We know the results of such phenomena as mass ownership of walkie-talkies, or everyone making their own cinema: a kind of personalized amateurism, the equivalent of Sunday tinkering on the periphery of the system.[31]

Of course, this isn't at all what Enzensberger has in mind. He is thinking of a press edited, distributed and worked by its own readers (as is the underground press, in part), of video systems at the disposal of political groups, and so on.

This would be the only way to unfreeze a blocked situation: "In the socialist movements the dialectic of discipline and spontaneity, centralism and decentralization, authoritarian leadership and anti-authoritarian disintegration has long ago reached a deadlock. Networklike communications models built on the principle of reversibility of circuits might give new indications of how to overcome this situation."[32] Thus it is a question of reconstituting a dialectical practice. But can the problem continue to be posed in dialectical terms? Isn't it the dialectic itself which has reached the moment of deadlock?

The examples Enzensberger gives are interesting precisely in that they go beyond a "dialectic" of transmitter and receiver. In effect, an immediate communication process is rediscovered, one not filtered through bureaucratic models — an original form of exchange, in fact, because there are *neither transmitters, nor receivers,* but only people responding to each other. The problem of spontaneity and organization is not overcome dialectically here: its terms are *transgressed.*

31. Evoking the possibility of an open free press, Enzensberger points to the Xerox monopoly and their exorbitant rental rates. But if everyone had his own Xerox — or even his own wavelength — the problem would remain. The real monopoly is never that of technical means, but of speech.

32. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

There is the essential difference: the other hypotheses allow the dichotomized categories to subsist. In the first case (media on the private scale), transmitter and receiver are simply reunited in a single individual: manipulation is, after a fashion, "interiorized."[33] In the other case (the "dialectic of circuits"), transmitter and receiver are simultaneously on both sides: manipulation becomes reciprocal (hermaphroditic grouping). The system can play these two variations as easily as it can the classic bureaucratic model. It can play on all their possible combinations. The only essential is that these two ideological categories be safe, and with them the fundamental structure of the political economy of communication.

To repeat, in the symbolic exchange relation, there is a simultaneous response. There is no transmitter or receiver on both sides of a message: nor, for that matter, is there any longer any "message," any corpus of information to decode univocally under the aegis of a code. The symbolic consists precisely in breaching the univocality of the "message," in restoring the ambivalence of meaning and in demolishing in the same stroke the agency of the code.

All of this should be helpful in assessing Umberto Eco's hypothesis.[34] To summarize his position: changing the contents of the message serves no purpose; it is necessary to modify the reading codes, to impose other interpretive codes. The receiver (who in fact isn't really one) intervenes here at the most essential level — he opposes his own code to that of the transmitter, he invents a true response by escaping the trap of controlled communication. But what does this "subversive" reading actually amount to? Is it still a reading, that is, a deciphering, a disengaging of a univocal meaning? And what is this code that opposes? Is it a unique minicode (an ideolect, but thus without interest)? Or is it yet another controlling schema of interpretation, rising from the ashes of the previous one? Whatever the case, it is only a question of textual variation. One example can illustrate Eco's perspective: the graffiti reversal of advertising after May '68. Graffiti is transgressive, not because it substitutes another content, another discourse, but simply because it responds, there, on the spot, and breaches the fundamental role of non-response enunciated by all the media. Does it oppose one code to

33. This is why the *individual* amateur cameraman remains within the separated abstraction of *mass* communication: through this internal dissociation of the two agencies (instances), the entire code and all of the dominant models sweep in, and seize his activity from behind.

34. Umberto Eco, *La Struttura assente* (Milan: Bompiani, 1968).

another? I don't think so: it simply smashes the code. It doesn't lend itself to deciphering as a text rivaling commercial discourse; it presents itself as a transgression. So, for example, the witticism, which is a transgressive reversal of discourse, does not act on the basis of another code as such; it works through the instantaneous deconstruction of the dominant discursive code. It volatilizes the category of the code, and that of the message.

This, then, is the key to the problem: by trying to preserve (even as one "dialectically transcends" them) *any separated instances of the structural communication grid*, one obviates the possibility of fundamental change, and condemns oneself to fragile manipulatory practices that would be dangerous to adopt as a "revolutionary strategy." What is strategic in this sense is only what radically checkmates the dominant form.

CHAPTER TEN

DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENT or HOW POLITICAL ECONOMY ESCALATES INTO CYBERBLITZ

Not all cultures produce objects: the concept is peculiar to ours, born of the industrial revolution. Yet even industrial society knows only the *product*, not the *object*. The object only begins truly to exist at the time of its formal liberation as a sign function, and this liberation only results from the mutation of this properly industrial society into what could be called our techno-culture,[1] from the passage out of a *metallurgic* into a *semiurgic* society. That is to say, the object only appears when the problem of its finality of meaning, of its status as message and as sign (of its mode of signification, of communication and of sign exchange) begins to be posed beyond its status as product and as commodity (beyond the mode of production, of circulation and of economic exchange). This mutation is roughed out during the 19th century, but the Bauhaus solidifies is theoretically. So it is from the Bauhaus' inception that we can logically date the "revolution of the object."

It is not a question of simple extension and differentiation, however extraordinary, of the field of products on account of industrial development. It is a question of a mutation of status. Before the Bauhaus there were, properly speaking, no objects; subsequently, and according to an irreversible logic, everything potentially participates in the category of objects and will be produced as such. That is why any empirical classification (Abraham Moles, etc.) is ludicrous. To wonder whether or not a house or a piece of clothing is an object, to wonder where the object begins, where it leaves off in order to become a building, etc. — all this descriptive typology is fruitless. For the object is not a thing, nor even a category; it is a status of meaning and a form. Before the logical advent of this object form, nothing is an object, not even the everyday utensils — thereafter, everything is, the building as well as the coffee spoon or the entire city. It is the Bauhaus that institutes this universal semantization of the environment in which everything becomes the object of a calculus of function and of signification. Total functionality, total semiurgy. It is a "revolution" in relation to

1. Echoing Galbraith's "techno-structure." Neo-capitalist, neo-industrialist, post-industrial: many terms can designate this passage from an industrial political economy to a *trans*-political economy (or *meta*-political economy).

the traditional mode, in which objects (for lack of a better word) are bound together and not liberated, have no status of their own and do not form a system among themselves on the basis of a rational finality (functionality).

This functionality inaugurated by the Bauhaus defines itself as a double movement of analysis and rational synthesis of forms (not only industrial, but environmental and social in general). It is a synthesis of form and function, of "beauty and utility," of art and technology. Beyond "style" and its caricatured version in "styling," the commercial kitsch of the 19th century and the modern style, the Bauhaus projects the basis of a rational conception of environmental totality for the first time. Beyond the genres (architecture, painting, furnishings, etc.), beyond "art" and its academic sanction, it extends the aesthetic to the entire everyday world; at the same time it is all of technique in the service of everyday life. The possibility of a "universal semiotic of technological experience"[2] is in effect born of the abolition of the segregation between the beautiful and the useful. Or again from another angle: the Bauhaus tries to reconcile the social and technical infrastructure installed by the industrial revolution with the superstructure of forms and meanings. In wishing to fulfill technology (*la technique*) in the finality of meaning (the aesthetic), the Bauhaus presents itself as a second revolution, the crowning perfection of the industrial revolution, resolving all the contradictions that the latter had left behind it.

The Bauhaus is neither revolutionary nor utopian. Just as the industrial revolution marked the birth of a field of political economy, of a systematic and rational theory of material production, so the Bauhaus marks the *theoretical extension of this field of political economy* and the practical extension of the system of exchange value to the whole domain of signs, forms and objects. At the level of the mode of signification and in the name of *design*, it is a mutation analogous to that which has taken place since the 16th century on the level of the mode of material production and under the aegis of political economy. The Bauhaus marks the point of departure of a veritable *political economy of the sign*.

The same general schema emerges: on the one hand, nature and human labor are disengaged from their archaic constraints, liberated as productive forces and as objects of a *rational calculus of production*. On the other, the whole environment becomes a

2. Jeremy J. Schapiro, "One Dimensionality: The Universal Semiotic of Technological Experience," in Paul Breines, ed., *Critical Interruptions* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970).

signifier, objectified as an element of signification. Functionalized and liberated from all traditional implications (religious, magical, symbolic), it becomes the object of a rational calculus of signification.

The Operation of the Sign

Behind the transparency of the object in relation to its function, behind that universal moral law imposed upon it in the name of design, behind that functional equation, that new "economy" of the object that immediately adopts aesthetic value, behind the general scheme of synthesis (art-technique, form-function), a whole labor of dissociation and abstract restructuration in fact takes place:

1. The dissociation of every complex subject-object relation into simple, analytic, rational elements that can be recombined in functional ensembles and which then take on status as the environment. For it is only on that basis that man is separated from something he calls the environment, and confronted with the task of controlling it. Ever since the 18th century the concept of nature has emerged as a *productive force to be mastered*. That of the environment only shifts it and intensifies it to mean a *mastery of signs*.

2. A generalized division of labor at the level of objects. Analytic fragmentation into 14 or 97 functions, an identical technical response reuniting several functions of the same object, or the same function in several objects, etc. — in short, the whole analytic grid that permits disassembling and reassembling an ensemble.

3. Even more fundamental is the semiological (dis)articulation of the object, from which the latter takes on the force of a sign. And when we say that it becomes a sign, it is according to the strictest definition: it is articulated into a "signifier" and a "signified," it becomes the signifier of a rational, objectifiable "signified" that is its function. This differs sharply from the traditional symbolic relation, where things have meaning, but a meaning that does not come to them from an objective "signified" to which they refer as "signifier." Such, in contrast, is the modern status of the sign-object, which in this respect obeys the linguistic schema: "functionalized" means also "structuralized," that is to say, split into two terms. Design emerges simultaneously as the project of their ideal articulation and the aesthetic of resolution of their equation. For aesthetic is nothing other than that which, as if by excess, seals this *operational semiology*.

In fact, aesthetics in the modern sense of the term no longer has

anything to do with the categories of beauty and ugliness. Critics, the public and designers all mix up the two terms beauty and aesthetic value indiscriminately, but they are logically incompatible (the confusion is strategic: in a system dominated by fashion, that is, by sign exchange value, it allows the conservation of the aura of a pre-industrial value, that of style).

A thousand contradictory definitions of beauty and of style are possible. One thing is certain: they are never a calculus of signs. They come to an end with the system of functional aesthetics, as the earlier modes of economic exchange (barter, gift exchange) perished with the rise of capitalism, and with the institution of a rational calculus of production and exchange. The category of the aesthetic succeeds that of beauty (liquidating it) as the semiological order succeeds the symbolic order. Contemporary aesthetics, once the theory of the forms of beauty, has become the theory of a generalized compatibility of signs, of their internal coherence (signifier-signified) and of their syntax. Aesthetic value connotes the internal functionality of an ensemble, it qualifies the (eventually mobile) equilibrium of a system of signs. It simply translates the fact that its elements *communicate* amongst themselves according to the economy of a model, with maximal integration and minimal loss of information (a harmonized interior in the tonality of blue, or "playing" upon the blues and greens; the crystalloid structures of the residential ensemble; the "naturalness" of "green spaces"). The aesthetic is thus no longer a value of style or of content; it no longer refers to anything but to communication and sign exchange. It is an idealized semiology, or a semiological idealism.[3]

In the symbolic order of style frolics a forever unresolved ambivalence — but the semio-aesthetic order is one of operational resolution, of an interplay of referrals, of equivalence and of controlled dissonances. An "aesthetic" ensemble is a mechanism without lapses, without fault, in which nothing compromises the interconnection of the elements and the transparency of the process: that famous absolute *legibility* of signs and messages — the common ideal of all manipulators of codes, whether they be cyberneticians or designers. This aesthetic order is a cold order. Functional perfection exercises a cold seduction, the functional satisfaction of a demonstration and an algebra. It has nothing to do with pleasure, with beauty (or horror), whose nature is conversely to rescue us from the demands of rationality and to plunge us once more into an

3. As early as 1902 Bernadetto Croce was writing an "Aesthetic as Science of Expression and *General Linguistic*".

absolute childhood (not into an ideal transparency, but into the illegible ambivalence of desire).

This operation of the sign, this analytic dissociation into the functional duo signifier-signified, always caught in an ideological scheme of synthesis, is found even in the key concepts of design. It is at the bottom of all the current systems of signification (media, political, etc.), just as the operational bifurcation use value-exchange value is at the foundation of the commodity form and of the whole of political economy.[4] All possible valences of an object, all its ambivalence, which cannot be reduced to any model, are reduced by design to two rational components, two general models — utility and the aesthetic — which design isolates and artificially opposes to one another. It is useless to emphasize the hot-housing (*le forçage*) of meaning, the arbitrariness of circumscribing it by these two restrained finalities. In fact, they form only a single one: they are two dissociated forms of the same rationality, sealed by the same system of values. But this artificial separation then permits evoking their reunification as an ideal scheme. Utility is separated from the aesthetic, they are *named* separately (for neither has any reality other than *being named separately*), then they are ideally reunited and all contradictions are resolved by this magical operation. Now, the two equally arbitrary agencies exist only to mislead. The real problem, the real contradictions are at the level of form, of sign exchange value; but it is precisely these that are obscured by the operation. Such is the ideological function of design: with the concept of the "functional aesthetic," it proposes a model of reconciliation, of formal surpassing of specialization (division of labor at the level of objects) by a universally enveloping value. Thus it imposes a social scheme of integration by the elimination of real structures. The functional aesthetic that conjugates two abstractions is thus itself no more than a superabstraction that consecrates the system of sign exchange value by delineating the utopia behind which the latter dissimulates. The operation of the sign, the separation of signs, is something as fundamental, as profoundly *political,* as the division of labor. Bauhaus theory, like semiology, ratifies this operation and the resultant division of labor of meaning, in the same way that political economy sanctifies economic separation as such, and the material division of labor that flows from it.

The term design must be given all its etymological scope. It can be unfolded in three senses: sketch (*dessin*), plan (*dessein*), and design

4. But this fundamental operation of *form* is what is never mentioned, in either case.

(*design*). In all three cases one finds a scheme of rational abstraction: graphic for the sketch, reflexive and psychological for the plan (conscious projection of an objective) and more generally, for design: passage to sign status, sign-operation, reduction and rationalization into sign elements, transfer to the sign function.

From the beginning, this process of signification is systematic: the sign never exists apart from a code and a language. Thus, the semiotic revolution (as in its time the industrial revolution) concerns virtually all possible practices. Arts and crafts, forms and techniques both plastic and graphic (keeping to domains that have obvious affinity with design, but once again the term goes far beyond the plastic and architectural), which until then were singular and distinct, are synchronized, and homogenized according to the same model. Objects, forms, and materials that until then spoke their own group dialect, which only emerged from a dialectical practice or an original style, now begin to be thought of and written out in the same tongue, the rational esperanto of design.[5] Once functionally liberated, they begin to make signs, in both sense of the phrase (and without a pun): that is, they simultaneously *become* signs and communicate among themselves. Their unity is no longer that of a style or practice, it is that of a system. In other words, as soon as the object is caught up in the structural rationality of the sign (cloven into a signifier and signified), it is simultaneously hooked into a functional syntax (like the morpheme in a syntagm), and assigned to the same general code (like the morpheme in a language). The whole rationality of the linguistic system regains possession of it. On the other hand, if we speak mainly of "structural" linguistics and of the "functionalism" of design, it must be seen that:

1. If the structural vision (signifier-signified, language-speech) is imposed in linguistics it results from, and is contemporaneous with, a purely functionalist vision of language (strictly finalized as a method of communication). The two are the same thing.

2. With "design," objects are also born simultaneously to functionality and to sign status. In the same instant, this restrained and

5. In his own way, using Marcusian terms, Schapiro (*op.cit.*) gives a similar analysis, but with more stress on machinery and technology: "The evolution of modern design is an essential component of the process of one-dimensionality (and indeed serves as an index of the latter's temporal development), since it derives from the machine process the forms for creating a total (totalitarian) environment in which technological experience defines and closes the experiential and aesthetic universe" (p. 161). Totalizing abstraction, undimensional homogeneity, certainly, but the machine or technology are neither the *causes* of this process nor its original models. Technological mutation and semio-linguistic mutation (passage to the abstraction of the code) are the two concurrent aspects of the same passage to structural-functional rationality.

rational finality assigns them to structural rationality. Function and structure involve the same "revolution." This means that functional "liberation" amounts to nothing more than being assigned to a code and a system. Once again, the homology is immediately visible in the liberation of labor (or of leisure, or of the body, etc.), which is never more than their assignment to the system of exchange value.

Let us summarize the essential characteristics of the homology (of the same logical process, even if they are separated chronologically) between the emergence of a political economy of the sign and that of political economy (of material production):

1. Political economy: Under the cover of utility (needs, use value, etc., the anthropological reference of all economic rationality), it institutes a coherent logical system, a calculus of productivity in which all production is resolved into simple elements, in which all products are equivalent in their abstraction. This is the logic of the commodity and the system of exchange value.

2. The political economy of the sign: Under the cover of functionality (objective finality, homologous to utility), it institutes a certain mode of signification in which all the surrounding signs act as simple elements in a logical calculus and refer to each other within the framework of the system of sign exchange value.

In the two cases, use value (utility) and functionality, the one given as final reference of political economy, the other of design, serve in fact only as the concrete alibi for the same process of abstraction. Under the pretext of producing maximal utility, the process of political economy generalizes the system of exchange value. Under the pretext of maximizing the functionality of objects (their legibility as meaning and message, that is in the end their use value as sign), design and the Bauhaus generalize the system of sign exchange value.

Just as a product's utility, unattainable when no coherent theory of needs is capable of establishing it, is revealed to be simply its utility for the system of exchange value — so an object's functionality, illegible as a concrete value, no longer qualifies anything other than the coherence of this sign-object with all the others, its commutability and thus its functional adaptation to the system of sign exchange value. Thus the functionality of an object (of a line, of a form) in an oblique architecture is not to be useful or equilibrated, but to be oblique (or vertical by contrast). It is the coherence of the system that defines the aesthetic-functional value of the elements, and this value is an exchange value insofar as it always refers to a model as general equivalent (same abstraction as for economic exchange value).

It is no accident if this homology is even reflected on the ethical level. Like the capitalist revolution that instituted the "spirit of enterprise" and the basis of political economy as early as the 16th century, the Bahaus' revolution is *puritan*. Functionalism is ascetic. This fact is revealed in the sobreity and geometric lines of its models, its phobia of décor and artifice, in short, in the economy of its discourse. But this is only what one might call the writing effect (which moreover has once again become a rhetoric like any other) of the fundamental doctrine: that of rationality in which the functional liberation of the object has the effect of establishing an ethic of objects just as the emancipation of labor as a productive force has the consequence of establishing a work ethic. Three centuries apart [6] an identical morality (and an identical psychoiogy) corresponds to an identical logic. And the terms in which Weber (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) analyzes the rational economic calculus as worldly asceticism are, *mutatis mutandis*, entirely valid for the rational calculus of signs.

The Crisis of Functionalism

Before analyzing how this crisis is lived today by designers, it must be seen that its elements have always been present. It is derived from the will of functionalism to impose itself in its order (like political economy in its order) as the *dominant rationality*, susceptible to giving account of everything and to directing all processes. From the outset, this rationality, which is of necessity blind to its own arbitrariness, gives birth to an "irrational" or "fantasy" counter-discourse, which circulates between the two poles of kitsch and surrealism (the one a subtle accomplice of functionality, the other directly antagonistic, while they are not mutually exclusive: surrealism plays very much upon a derision of kitsch and kitsch often adopts surrealist values).

The surrealist object emerges at the same epoch as the functional object, as its derision and transgression. Although they are overtly dys- or para-functional, these phantasmic objects nevertheless presuppose — albeit in a contradictory sense — the advent of functionality as the universal moral law of the object, and the advent of this object itself, separated, autonomous and dedicated to the transparency of its function. When one ponders it, there is something unreal and almost surreal [7] in the fact of reducing an object to its

6. Rather, these are *logical* guideposts to mark what in fact was a continuous historical process. However, the moment of formal theorization (which the Bauhaus is for the political economy of the sign) always marks a crucial point in the historical process itself.

7. Similarly, there is something immediately Kafkaesque in the reduction of man to his (bureaucratic) function.

function: and it suffices to push this principle of functionality to the limit to make its absurdity emerge. This is evident in the case of the toaster, iron or "undiscoverable objects" of Carelman.[8] But the calculus of human aspirations in the large ensemble is also stunning and justifies the presence of both sewing machine and umbrella on the dissection table of Lautrémont.

Thus surrealism too is born *a contrario* from the advent of the object and from the extension of the functional (and semantic) calculus to the whole field of everydayness. In this sense, the Bauhaus and surrealism are inseparable, like the monstrous, anomic critical discourse of objects with respect to the rational discourse of objects. (Yet little by little, this subversive discourse grows quickly more customary and will come to be integrated into the functionalized universe as an anomalous variant. In its banal version it enters our whole environment in homeopathic doses.)

Magritte's shoe-foot, his woman in a dress of skin (or nude dress) hung in a closet, men with a chest of drawers, or anthropomorphic machines: everywhere surrealism plays upon the *distance* instituted by the functionalist calculus between the object and itself, or between man and his own body, upon the distance between any term and the abstract finality that is imposed upon it, upon the cleavage that makes men and things suddenly find themselves split apart as signs and confronted with a transcendental "signified": their function. Fusion of the skin of breasts and the folds of a dress, of toes and the leather of a shoe: surrealist imagery plays with this split by denying it, but on the basis of separate terms separately legible in the collage or superimpression. That is to say that it does not restore a symbolic relationship, where there would be no room for the concept of separation, because the relation is integrated in reciprocity and exchange. In surrealism the symbolic relation no longer appears except as the phantasm of subject-object adequation. The surrealist metaphor defines itself as a compromise formation, as a short-circuit between the two orders of functionality (here transgressed and made ridiculous) and the symbolic (distorted and made into a phantasm). It seizes the moment when the object is still stuck in anthropomorphism and has not yet given birth to its pure functionality, that is, the moment when the object is on the way to absorbing man into

8. Jacques Carelman, *Catalogue d'objets introuvables*. [English version: *Catalog of Fantastic Things* (New York: Ballantine Books). In fact these things (like a double-headed hammer which will work in both directions, or for either left- or right-handed carpenters) might be found in joke stores — "gimmick" might be an accurate translation. — *Trans.*]

its functional unreality but has not yet done so. In depicting their contamination to the extreme, surrealism illustrates and denounces the gap between subject and object. It is a revolt against the new reality principle of the object. To the rational calculus, which "liberates" the object in its function, is opposed surrealism, which liberates the object *from* its function, returning it to free associations from which will re-emerge not the symbolic (in which the respective crystallization of subject and object does not take place), but subjectivity itself, "liberated" in the phantasm.

As subjective poetry, where the primary and combinatory processes of dreaming come to upset the functional combinatory, surrealism thus briefly and contradictorily illuminates the growth crisis of the object, which is the generalized abstraction of life under the sign of the functional object. As celebration of the agony of a despairing subjectivity, all nonsense verse (that of Lewis Carroll, for example, a precursor of surrealism) negatively illustrates, through its revolt and parody, the irreversible institution of a political economy of meaning, of a sign form and an object form structurally linked to the commodity form. (In their time, the Romantics represented a similar reaction to the industrial revolution and to the first phase of the development of political economy.)

But the surrealist transgression itself still corresponds to a relative extension of the political economy of the sign. It acts upon figurative, formal objects, upon the contents and the "signifieds" of representation. Today, when functionalism has graduated from the isolated object to the system (hyper-rationality quite as Kafkaesque as the other), when the still almost artisanal functionalism of the Bauhaus is surpassed in the cybernetic and mathematical design of the environment, surrealism can survive only as a folklore. From this moment, we are beyond the object and its function. A "being beyond" the subject in the contemporary systems of relations and information already corresponds to this "being beyond" the object. The hybrid game of the surrealists, legitimate between the face of the object and of man, between function and desire (both instances, separated in reality, still celebrate their impossible conjunction in the surreal) — that subtle mixture of a functional logos with a dismembered, disunited logic of the symbolic that haunts it, resulting in the illogic of a phantasmagoric representation, is resolved when confronted with the cybernetic order. Nothing retains the place of the critical, regressive-transgressive discourse of Dada and of surrealism.

After surrealism, the outburst of abstraction (dreamlike, geometric or expressionist — Klee, Kadinski, Mondrian, Pollock) corresponded to an ever-advancing systematization of the rational order — this was the last critical tirade of art, for where are we today? Presently art limits itself to a kinetic or lumino-dynamic manipulation, or to the psychedelic staging of a flaccid surrealism — in short, to a combinatory, which is the very image of that of real systems, to an aesthetic operationality (whose biblical specimen is the "New Artistic Spirit" of Schoeffer), which is in no way distinguished from that of cybernetic programs. The hyper-reality of systems has absorbed the critical surreality of the phantasm. Art has become, or is on the way to becoming, total design, *metadesign*.

The mortal enemy of design is kitsch. Ostensibly destroyed by the Bauhaus, it always rises again from its ashes. That is because it has the whole "economic system" behind it, say the designers; whereas they have only their virtue. So, in 1967, in an article in *Esthétique Industrielle*[9] Abraham Moles analyzes the crisis of functionalism as the overflowing of the sober rationality of design, and of its strict ethos of function, through the irrational proliferation of consumption goods. The "absolute consumer mentality promoted by the economic machine" progressively buries the functionalist blueprint under a jumble of neo-kitsch. Functionalism suffers from this contradiction and dies.

In fact, this analysis absolves design of any internal contradiction: the fault then lies in an "obsession with status" and a "strategy of desire." But Moles (with many others) forgets that the system (and the whole process of consumption that it implies) is also rational and perfectly consistent with itself. It triumphantly fulfills the claims of functionality. It is precisely through the "anarchic production" denounced by our virtuous functionalist academics that it suffices to its goal, which is its own survival and extended reproduction. So there is no contradiction: the model of rationality was originally and still remains fundamentally economic; it is normal that the functionality of the economic system embody it. Hard and pure design can do nothing, for rationality based on calculation *is precisely the kind that inspires it*. From the very beginning, it rests on the same basis of rational abstraction as the economic system. Undoubtedly this rationality may be potentially absurd, but for both design and consumption in the same way. Their apparent contradiction is only the logical debt of their deep-rooted complicity.

9. This review which originally had the name "Esthétique Industrielle" has changed title several times since its first publication in 1952 and is presently called *Design Industry*. — *Trans.*

The Crisis of Functionalism

So, designers complain of being misunderstood and of their ideal being disfigured by the system? All puritans are hypocrites.

This crisis must in fact be analyzed on an entirely different level, the level of semiology, the elements of which we have explained above. In summary, the formula of the Bauhaus is: for every form and every object there is an objective, determinable *signified* — its function. This is what is called in linguistics the level of *denotation*. The Bauhaus claims to strictly isolate this nucleus, this level of denotation — all the rest is coating, the hell of *connotation*: residue, superfluity, excrescence, eccentricity, ornamentation, uselessness. Kitsch. The thing denoted (functional) is beautiful, the connoted (parasitical) is ugly. Better yet: the thing denoted (objective) is true, the connoted is false (ideological). In effect, behind the concept of objectivity, the whole metaphysical and moral argument of truth is at stake.[10]

Now today this postulate of denotation is in the process of breaking up. It is finally beginning to be seen (in semiology as well) that it is arbitrary, not merely an artifact of a method, but a metaphysical fable. *There is no* truth of the object, and denotation is never more than the most beautiful of connotations. This is not only theoretical: designers, urban technologists and programmers of the environment are confronted daily (if they pose themselves a few questions) with the demise of objectivity. The function(ality) of forms, of objects, becomes more incomprehensible, illegible, incalculable every day. Where is the centrality of the object, its functional equation, today? Where is its directing function, where are the parasitic functions? Who can tell, when now the economic, the social, the psychological and the metapsychological are so inextricably mixed together? Can anyone demonstrate beyond a doubt that a particular "superfluous" form, a given "irrational" trait does not find its echo elsewhere, after all (in the unconscious, for all I know), in some more subtle equilibrium, and thus does not in some way have a functional justification?[11] In this systematic logic (for functionality is nothing

10. The Platonic and Kantian heritage of functionalism is striking: morality, aesthetics and truth are confused in the same ideal. The functional is the synthesis of pure reason and practical reason. Or again: the functional is the beautiful plus the useful. Utility itself is simultaneously that which is moral and that which is true. Stir up the whole thing, and we have the Platonic holy trinity.

11. In any case, something else radically escapes any calculus of function: ambivalence, which acts such that any positive function is in the same movement denied and decomposed, annulled according to a logic of desire for which a unilateral finality never exists. This level is beyond even functional complexity. Were one to have achieved a perfect computation of even contradictory functions, this ambivalence would forever remain insoluble, irreducible.

other than a *system of interpretation*), everything is potentially functional and nothing is in fact. The guiding utopia turns upon itself. And it is not surprising that, as things gradually lose this quality of objective finality, it is transferred to the system itself which, in its process of reproduction, completes on its own terms what remains. In the end, the system becomes the only bearer of active functionality, which it redistributes to its elements. It alone is admirably "designed," and its own finality envelops it like an egg.[12]

If there is no further absolute utility of the object, it is also the end of the superfluous, and the whole theoretical edifice of functionalism crumbles. This works to the interests of fashion, which plays entirely upon connotation, not encumbering itself with objective denotation (though it claims to). With its unstable, "irrational" rhetoric, and sanctioned only by the *contemporaneity* of signs, fashion appropriates the whole system. And if functionalism defends itself weakly against fashion, it is because the latter expresses the total systematic potential, while functionalism, rooted in the metaphysic of denotation, expresses only a particular case, which it arbitrarily privileges according to a universal ethic. Once a sign calculus has been instituted nothing can oppose its generalization. Neither rational nor irrational any longer exists. The Bauhaus and design claim to control the process by mastery of the signifieds (the objective evaluation of functions), but in fact it is the play of signifiers that carries the process forward (the play of sign exchange value). Now the latter is unlimited, and escapes all control (as in political economy, with respect to the system of exchange value: it invades all spheres, despite any opposition by liberal and pious souls who believe themselves able to circumscribe it).

Such is the crisis of functionalism. Nothing can successfully oppose whatever form enters the unlimited combinatory of fashion — whose only function, therefore, is its sign function. Even the forms created by design do not escape. And if "styling," which the Bauhaus believed it had disqualified, re-emerges through design without the latter ever being truly able to eliminate its traces and regain control of itself in its severity, it is because what appears pathological to it is already contained in the logic of its own design (i.e., plan, project). If our era nostalgically salvages all the kitsch of the 19th century, despite the Bauhaus revolution, it is because in fact this *already*

12. It is known that the egg is one of the ideal tendencies of design — a formal stereotype, as "kitsch" as any other. This means that the finality of the system is quite simply *tautological*. But the completed stage of development of function is tautology — the perfect redundancy of the "signified" succumbing to the vicious circle of the "signifier" — an egg.

belongs to it. The floral motif on the sewing machine or the metro entrance is a regressive compromise, but by its resurgence today it takes on a surrealist value of fashion and it is logical: surrealism in a way only formalizes the hybrid production of commercial kitsch as an artistic transgression. Today, pure design spurns the floral motif but it carries the naturist ideology much deeper: the branching (*étoilé*) structures of organic bodies serve as models for an entire city. There is no radical difference between the two. Everywhere, ever since the concept was born, nature, whether taken as décor or as a structural model, remains as the projection of a *social* model. And the branching structure is always that of capital.

But if design is immersed in fashion, one must not complain, for this is the mark of its triumph. It is the mark of the territorial scope established by the political economy of the sign, whose first rational theorization was design and the Bauhaus. Everything that today wishes to be marginal, irrational, insurrectionary, "anti-art," anti-design, etc., from pop to psychedelic or to street art — everything obeys the same economy of the sign, whether it wants to or not. All of it is design. Nothing escapes design: that is its fate.

So we are discussing much more than a crisis. It is pointless to deplore the fate (*fatalité*) of consumption as Abraham Moles does, and to refer appeals to a neo-functionalism that puts into play "the stimulation of fantasy and of the imagination by a systematic effort"! This neo-functionalism can only be a re-semantization (resurrection of signifieds),[13] and thus a recycling of the same contradictions. More likely, neo-functionalism will be the image of neo-capitalism, that is, an intensification of the play of signifiers, a mathematization and cybernetization of the code. "Humanist" neo-functionalism has no chance when faced with operational metadesign. The era of function and of the signified has revolved, the era of the signifier and the code is beginning.

The Environment and Cybernetics: The Highest Stage of Political Economy

This revolution of the sign inaugurated by the Bauhaus was at least foreseen by it and has since been brought relatively to light by the analysts of design. In *Critique* (November 1967), Van Lier sees clearly that "these new forms and their operation . . . refer gradually to the very extremities of the system," and that functionality is not

13. "Social" design will be redone with human contents, or alternatively the game, playfulness, the "free" combinatory, etc. will be reintroduced. But make no mistake: it is still the "game" which is taken into account, the game as a particular function, a liberal-modernist variant of the same code.

utility but "transforming things into reciprocal information, permitting them to become signs, creating significations," and he adds as if it were self-evident, "food of all culture and of all humanity." The eternal humanist metaphor: the more signs there are, the more messages and information there are, the more one communicates — the better it is. Having revealed the advent of sign value and its indefinite extension on the basis of rational productivity, he sees in it, without hesitation, an absolute progress for humanity. It is an analogous reaction to that which sees the industrial upsurge more or less in the long run as abundance and happiness for all. This was the 19th century illusion with respect to material production. In the 20th century, it takes off again with even more strength in sign productivity. Now we have cybernetic idealism, blind faith in radiating information, mystique of information services and the media.

In both cases the fundamental error is the same: only the *use value* aspect of the product or sign is retained, and the industrial (or semiurgic) mutation is understood exclusively in terms of an infinite multiplication of use values (signs as messages). Profusion of goods and profusion of signs in the interest of maximal consumption and maximal information. Account is never taken of the fact that this mutation institutes first and above all a system of *exchange value*, a generalized abstract social form that is by no means "the food of all culture and all humanity." This idealism of content (of production or of signification) never takes form into account. This idealism of messages forgets that it is the hegemony of the code that is installed behind their accelerated circulation. In fact, the two quite simply forget political economy and its strategic, political social dimension, in order to be situated from the outset in the transparent sphere of value. This optimism can seem to be in good faith, it can take on the benign air of the designer who plans, for his small part, to contribute to increased information by his creativity, or the prophetic air of McLuhan, who exalts the "already present" global communication. Everywhere, this ideology of communication becomes mistress, a myth in which cybernetics presents itself as neo-humanism. The profusion of messages in a way replaces the profusion of goods (the myth of abundance) in the imaginary (*imaginaire*) of the species.

Everywhere the ideologues of use value have been the accomplices and henchmen of the political extension of the system of exchange value. Thus, in the order of material goods, consumption came to perform the function of reviving the system of production, not by being the apotheosis of use value, but as the blind social constraint of

satisfaction. Thanks to consumption, the system not only succeeds in exploiting people by force, but in making them *participate* in its multiplied survival. This is a considerable advance. But this participation only takes on its whole fantastic scope at the level of signs. It is there that the entire strategy of "neo-capitalism" is articulated in its originality: in a semiurgy and an operational semiology, which are only the developed form of controlled participation.

From this perspective, in which the production of signs seen as a system of exchange value takes on an entirely different meaning than in the naive utopia of their use value, design and the environmental disciplines can be considered as one of the branches of mass communication, a gigantic ramification of human and social engineering. From this moment on, our true environment is the universe of communication.[14] It is in this that it differs radically from the 19th century concepts of "nature" or of "milieu." While these latter referred to physical, biological (determinism of substance, of heredity and of species) or "socio-cultural" (the "milieu") laws, environment is from the beginning a network of messages and signs, its laws being those of communication.

The environment is the autonomization of the entire universe of practices and forms, from the everyday to the architectural, from the discursive to the gestural and the political, as a sector of operations and calculation, as sending-receiving of messages, as space-time of communication. The practical concept of design — which in the final instance is analyzed as the production of communication (man to signs, signs among themselves, men among themselves) — corresponds to the theoretical concept of environment. Here one must be made to communicate — that is to say, participate — not by the purchase of material goods but in the data-processing mode, by the circulation of signs and messages. That is why the environment, like the market (which is its economic equivalent) is a virtually universal concept. It is the concrete summary of the whole political economy of the sign. Design, which is the corresponding practice of this political economy, is generalized proportionately, and if it began by being applied only to industrial products, today it embraces and logically must embrace all sectors. Nothing is more false than the limits that a "humanistic" design wishes to fix for itself; in fact, everything belongs to design, everything springs from it, whether it says so or not: the body is

14. Paradoxically (and undoubtedly symptomatically) the British Ministry of the Environment presides over almost all sectors, *except* the media.

designed, sexuality is designed, political, social, human relations are designed, just as are needs and aspirations, etc. This "designed" universe is what properly constitutes the environment. Like the market, the environment is in a way only a logic: that of (sign) exchange value. Design is the imposition of this sign exchange value at all levels of models and operational practices. Once again it is the practical triumph of the political economy of the sign and the theoretical triumph of the Bauhaus.

Like public relations, human relations and the psycho-sociology of enterprise, like planning and participation, marketing and merchandizing strive to produce a relationship, to restore it where the social relations of production make it problematic. Similarly, the task, the strategic function of design in the contemporary system, is to produce communication between men and an environment which never exists precisely save as a foreign agency (still like the market). Like many other ideological concepts, "environment" designates by antiphrasis that from which one is separated; it designates the end of the proximate world. Beings and things are held as far away from one another as possible. And the mystique of the environment is proportionate to the moat between man and nature which the system digs deeper every day, whether it likes it or not. This split, this fundamentally broken and dissociated relationship (in the image of social relations) between man and his environment is the *raison d'être* and the site of design. There it tries desperately to restore meaning, to restore transparency by means of a great deal of information, and "comprehension" by means of a great number of messages. If one considers it carefully, the philosophy of design, echoed by the whole theory of the environment, is in the end the *doctrine of participation and of public relations extended to all of nature*. Nature (which seems to become hostile, wishing by pollution to avenge its exploitation) must be made to participate. With nature, at the same time as with the urban world, it is necessary to recreate communication by means of a multitude of signs (as it must be recreated between employers and employees, between the governing and the governed, by the strength of media and of planning). In short, it must be offered an industrial contract: protection and security — incorporating its natural energies, which become dangerous, in order to regulate them better. For of course all this only aims at the better and better alignment of this participant nature (which is contradicted and recycled by intelligent design), along the norms of a rational hyperproductivity.

Such is the political ideology of design, which attains its global

scope today in the discourse of environment. From Gropius to Universitas [15] there is a continuous succession of stages toward what could be termed a metadesign, a meta-political economy which is to neo-capitalism what the classic liberal economy was to capitalism.

If one speaks of environment, it is because it has already ceased to exist. To speak of ecology is to attest to the death and total abstraction of nature. Everywhere the "right" (to nature, to the environment) countersigns the "demise of." This gradual destruction of nature (as vital and as ideal reference) is strictly linked to what we have called the gradual decline of the signified in the analysis of the contemporary sign (of an objective, real referent, of the denoted function, of the truth of the world as the real guarantee of the sign — a little like its gold backing. The gold of the signified-referent has disappeared; it is the end of the gold exchange standard. The sign is no longer convertible into its reference value, as is seen in the trend of the current international situation, where there is no longer anything but the free interrelation of floating currencies). The great signified, the great referent Nature, is dead, replaced by environment, which simultaneously designates and designs its death and the restoration of nature as simulation model (its "reconstitution," as one says of orange juice that has been dehydrated). And what we have said about nature — that it was always the projection of a social model — is of course also valid for the environment. The passage from a concept of nature that is still objectifiable as a reference, to the concept of environment in which the system of circulation of signs (sign exchange value) abolishes all reference, or even becomes its own referent, designs (i.e., sketches) the passage between societies. We pass from a society that is still contradictory, non-homogeneous, and not yet saturated with political economy; from a society in which the refractory models of transcendence, conflict and surpassing still exist; where a human nature is shredded but still present (cf. the affinity of Marxism itself with a substantialist anthropology of needs and nature), and where there is still a history with its revolutionary theory, etc., to a cybernetized society. We enter a social environment of synthesis in which a total abstract communication and an immanent manipulation no longer leave any point exterior to the system. It is the end of traditional political economy, and simultaneously the commencement of the meta-political economy of a society that has become its own pure environment. (It is this that McLuhan has outlined, in the exalted mode.) As Mitscherlich says:

15. An internationally founded project "for a post-technological society" inaugurated by the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

"Insofar as manipulation of the environment succeeds, there simultaneously succeeds a manipulation of man, who has himself become an object of manipulation, that is to say, simple environment."

The social control of air, water, etc., in the name of environmental protection evidently shows men entering the field of social control a little more deeply themselves. That nature, air, water become rare goods entering the field of value after having been simply productive forces, shows men themselves entering a little more deeply into the field of political economy. At the limit of this evolution, after natural parks, there may be an "International Foundation of Man" just as in Brazil there is a "National Indian Foundation": "The National Indian Foundation is in a position to assure the preservation of the indigenous population in the best conditions, as well as (*sic*) the survival of the animal and vegetable species that have lived alongside them for thousands of years." (Of course this institution disguises and sanctions genocide and massacre: one liquidates and reconstitutes — same schema.) Man no longer even confronts his environment: he himself is virtually part of the environment to be protected.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONCERNING THE FULFILLMENT OF DESIRE IN EXCHANGE VALUE

There was a raid on a U.S. department store several years ago. A group occupied and neutralized the store by surprise, and then invited the crowd by loudspeaker to help themselves. A symbolic action! And the result? Nobody could figure out what to take — or else they took insignificant items they could easily have filched on any normal shopping day.

If you had fifty million dollars, what would you do with it? Chaos.

Faced with the disposal of free time at will, the same immediate panic surfaces in us. How do we get rid of it?

And we could adduce further examples, such as the French 400-meter runner in the European championships, who, 100 meters from the finish line, wilts in his final effort and finishes third. "When I sensed I was going to win," he said afterward, "something inside me broke." Or the French tennis player at a tournament in Spain: two sets ahead and the match in hand with an ailing opponent, he blows the match point and goes down to defeat — "irresistibly," one could say -- and to the general amazement of the spectators. Not to mention Poulidor, the eternal runner-up whose fame is derived precisely from this chronic incapacity to wrap up victory.

When we say of someone that he "almost" won, that he fell just short of winning, what is supposed to have been missed? Don't these phrases indicate in a way that victory would have been the worst thing that could have happened to him, that victory would have been failure?

These are just slips of the will, of the drive for appropriation and satisfaction, performance and supremacy, which is supposed to be the deepest of human motivations. Freud advanced the exploration of human psychology immensely, taking such minutiae as his starting point. But the fantastic perspectives thus revealed have scarcely ruffled the composure of general anthropology, economic "science," or the "humanities." Psychoanalysis itself has helped to circumscribe these anomalies with depth psychology ("everybody has his unconscious and its *his* business"). And so, almost miraculously, we find they have no equivalent in social or political practice, where an essentially fail-safe rationality reigns supreme. It is this indefatigability of general postulates about man in economic, social and

political matters that we shall interrogate from the categorical perspective of exhaustion and failure.

The more or less experimental and limiting case of the department store shows that once exchange value has been neutralized, use value disappears with it. When the demand for always more utility and satisfaction is confronted with the possibility of its immediate realization, it evaporates. The whole package of motivations, needs and rationality that is so conveniently supposed to constitute human nature simply flies apart. Beyond the transparency of economics, where everything is clear because is suffices to "want something for your money," man apparently no longer knows what he wants.

Some hypotheses:

— Objects, and the needs that they imply, exist precisely in order to resolve the anguish of not knowing what one wants.

— What isn't mediated by the abstraction of exchange value cannot exist as a "spontaneous" and "concrete" value either — such as utility, for example. Both axiological levels are equally abstract and make common sense. There is no use value without exchange value. Once the latter is neutralized in the gift process, or gratuity, prodigality, expenditure, then use value itself becomes unintelligible.

— This idea applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to sign exchange value. What isn't mediated by statutory social competition, the exchange of differential signs, or by *models*, has no value. With respect to signs, the use value-exchange value distinction is virtually obliterated. If "sign use value" is defined as differential satisfaction, a sort of qualitative surplus value anticipated through a choice, a preference, a semiological calculation; and if sign exchange value is defined as the general form (the code) that regulates the interplay of models; then it becomes clear the extent to which use value issues directly from the functioning of the code and exchange value system. The process is the same in the so-called economic order: hence the abstractness of use value, which only appears already mediatized by the exchange value system (as commodity form) and simultaneously by the models and code (where it appears as sign form).

Thus, today exchange value and sign exchange value mingle inextricably.[1] The completed system (at bottom that of "con-

1. The Veblen effect (I am buying this because it is more expensive) is a significant limiting case in which the economic (quantitative) is converted into sign-difference. Here one can conceptualize the emergence of "need" starting from the pure outbidding of exchange value (cf. also the art auction as the locale of transition between spheres of value). In the case of signs, the Veblen effect becomes the absolute rule: fashion knows only pure and ascending differentiation.

sumption" as the ultimate stage of political economy) depends on liberty, not only at the level of production (liberty to buy and sell labor power), but also, in a second moment, which is by now concurrent, at the level of consumption (freedom of choice). The abstraction of the sign exchange system (i.e., models and their internalization in semiological calculation) is necessarily combined with the systematic abstraction of production and economic exchange (i.e., capital, money, exchange value)

The sign is the apogee of the commodity. Fashion and the commodity are a single, identical form. The differentiation of the commodity is inscribed, from the outset, in the form of sign exchange value (and not in a quantitative logic of profit). The commodity achieves its apotheosis when it is able to impose itself as a code, that is, as the geometric locus of the circulation of models, and hence as the total medium of a culture (and not only of an economy).

Exchange value is realized in sign exchange value. Sign exchange value and exchange value are definitively realized in use value.

This trinomial delineates a total, coherent universe of value where man is supposed to fulfill himself through the final satisfaction of his needs. According to rational calculation, he is reputed to be continuously raising his rate of value production. Relayed from one summit to the other of the great axiological triangle, he can effectively only hope to transcend himself, to positivize himself, in values. His movement traces the boundaries of a value world that has coincided for centuries with the definition of humanism.

This triangulation of value defines a full, positive world, relentlessly completed by the plus sign: the logic of surplus value (inseparable from value). It is a world in which man is incapable of selling himself short. Hence, the value process is equivalent to a *phantasmic organization*, in which desire is fulfilled and lack resolved; in which desire is achieved and performed; and in which the symbolic dimension and all difference are abolished. Value is totalitarian. It excludes ambivalence, as well as any relation in which man would cease to complete himself in value, or index himself according to the law of equivalence and surplus value. But ambivalence haunts the sphere of value everywhere. It is what resurges, though covertly, in failure.

The crowd fails to react positively to the absolute availability of the commodity (that is, by responding with spontaneous appropriation); it fails to obey the categorical imperative of need; it even fails to understand what it wants and simply take what is offered. In fact, gratuity eliminates supply in the economic sense of the term, and

abolishes demand in the same stroke. So the latter is based only in the logic of value. Outside this logic, man has "need" of nothing. What we need is what is bought and sold, evaluated and chosen. What is neither sold nor taken, but only given and returned, no one "needs." The exchange of looks, the present which comes and goes, are like the air people breathe in and out. This is the metabolism of exchange, prodigality, festival — and also of destruction (which returns to non-value what production has erected, valorized). In this domain, value isn't even recognized. *And desire is not fulfilled there in the phantasm of value.*

What comes to light in this inability to just grab consumer goods, as in the case of the slackening athlete, is that the official imperative, orchestrated as individual need (the need to win, etc.), has displaced something else, which is precisely the contrary demand: to lose, misplace, dispossess oneself, or give up. And this isn't some masochistic reversal of a more fundamental economy aimed toward value, performance and achievement, but the inverse and radical necessity of lack (*manque*). Every fulfillment of desire in value returns to this contrary extremity, because with the termination of satisfaction, it alone preserves the subject's questioning concerning his own desire. Such is the foundation of ambivalence.

Taking has never been a sufficient condition for enjoyment. It is necessary to be able to receive, to give, to return, to destroy — if possible, all at once. The realization process of value dissolves all this into an impoverished, unilateral and positive modality, dispossessing the subject of his symbolic insistence: (1) the refusal to fulfill desire, or *lack*; and (2) the necessity of a relationship unmediated by the systemic logic of value, or *symbolic exchange*.

Enjoyment is radical, value is sublime; so this radical symbolic insistence is sublimated in value. The commodity is the incarnation of the sublime in the economic order. The radical demand of the subject is sublimated there in the ever renewed positivity of his demand for objects. But behind this sublime realization of value, there lies something else. Something other speaks, something irreducible that can take the form of violent destruction, but most frequently assumes the cloaked form of deficit, of the exhaustion and refusal of cathexis, of resistance to satisfaction and refusal of fulfillment. Viewing the contemporary economic situation as a whole, all this begins to look like a tendency we might want to call the *falling rate of enjoyment*. According to a mysterious counter economy of lost opportunity, it is this lively, basic denial of value, this latent violence toward the principle of identity and equivalence,

this vacillation beyond satisfaction which, in the last instance, assures the subject in his being. And this is not metapsychology. Rather, it is on account of having rejected all these considerations *en bloc* as "meta"-psychology that the contemporary human sciences and economics must watch their rational edifice founder without even being able to account for the reversal.[2]

We have been speaking of syndromes of lost opportunity and illusive pleasure: is this the death instinct talking through us? — preserving ubiquitously and perennially a radical difference, against the unitary phantasm of value? Perhaps. But any discourse in terms of a death instinct verges too close on metapsychology of the subject, forgetting that what is preserved in the splitting of the subject, and the subject's failure to satisfy his desire, is, along with the recognition of castration, the symbolic potentiality of exchange. Lack is always that in terms of which we miss others, and through which others miss us. In the value process (whether the investment be commercial or phantasmic), no one misses anyone, nothing is anything, because everything is equivalent to something, and everyone is assured of equalling at least himself. Only value is exchanged (which is to say, transformed into itself) — only value, and individuals and things as terms of value, according to the law of equivalence. Thus one could say that what preserves the potentiality of exchange, of a reciprocity where individuals truly emerge in their difference and their lack, is Eros — the death instinct being, inversely, that which tends to the abolition of the symbolic in the repetitive cycle of value. From this perspective, the sublime and repetitive world of the commodity could well be considered the field in which the death instinct attains its fulfillment.

2. The film *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* is a very fine example, from a social and political point of view, of this ubiquitous counter-economy. The hero is an adolescent in a rehabilitation center who deliberately renounces a decisive victory in a running contest in order to avoid spreading any of the glory to his institutional oppressors. By losing, he preserves his own truth: here, failure merges with class revolt. Admittedly, in this story, the failure is explicitly deliberate, but it is not difficult to see how "accidental" lapses and physical slips may acquire virtually the same meaning of denial and resistance. In his own way, the 400 meter runner mentioned above calls into question the exchange value system — whose forms are not limited to dominating the salaried worker and the consumer. By running to win, athletes reactivate the competitive value system: they work to reproduce it in "exchange" for the satisfactions of personal prestige. Exploitation is as intense here as at the level of selling one's labor power. It is this bogus exchange mechanism that failure unconsciously causes to break down. In this sense, every "psychological dysfunction" *vis-à-vis* "normality" (which is only the law of the capitalist milieu) is open to a *political* reading. Today politics has no particular sphere unto itself, nor any definition. It is time to discover the latent forms, the displacements and condensations — briefly, the "work" (as in "dream-work") of politics.

But we are never going to get very far quibbling over where to pin these labels. The essential is to grasp that what is speaking, beneath the "objective" process of value, does not speak contradictorily (in the sense of a dialectical contradiction). Ambivalence is not the dialectical negation of value: it is the incessant potentiality of its annulment, of the *destruction of the illusion of value*. It is not with an opposing code that the ambivalent and symbolic confront the discourse of value. Against value's positive transcendence, the symbolic opposes its radicality. Against the logic of sublimation and generality (of abstraction) are opposed the radicality of the non-fulfillment of desire and symbolic exchange.

It remains now to analyze the revolutionary illusion of those responsible for "Operation Super Market." Their hypothesis evidently went something like this: "We are going to suspend the rules of the capitalist game by neutralizing exchange value. We are going to return commodities to their pure use value, thus demystifying consciousness and restoring the clarity of people's relationship to their 'real' needs." Revolution, "hic et nunc." Such is the inspired logic of the purest philosophical Marxism: first, the sharp distinction between use value and exchange value (to the greater philosophical and humanist glory of use value); and then the rationalist theory of mystification. Their conclusion: If people can't spontaneously rediscover a liberated use value, it must be because they are so disciplined in self-repression and the *habitus* of capitalism, it must be because they have so completely internalized the law of exchange value that they are unable to desire a thing when it is simply offered to them.

This overlooks the fact that desire has little vocation to fulfillment in "liberty," but rather in the rule — not in the transparency of a value content, but in the opacity of the code of value. This is the desire of the code, and this desire "needs" to rescue the rules of the game — it requires them — in order to fulfill itself. It is with this investment of the rule by desire, with its own fulfillment in view, that the social order makes its pact. It is this desire that the social order exploits in order to reproduce itself. Here, the phantasm and the institution come together — the political order of power and the fetishized order of perversion (the fulfillment of desire). The phantasm of value is also the phantasm of order and the law.

The "rule" mentioned above is, in our society, the law of exchange value. If there is no longer a set of rules to play by, the game is no longer interesting, for then even cheating and stealing are ruled out. (After all, the latter practices are counter-dependent on the straight

rules of the economic game.) If, then, consumption is only possible within the rules, and if desire is only fulfilled fetishistically, the suspension of the rules, instead of clearing the way for wild pleasure, simply prohibits it. The price of things becomes, then, essential, though no longer simply in the quantitative sense, as in exchange value, nor only differentially, as in the "Veblen effect," but as law, as *fetishized form* — a crucial feature of the commodity economy and of the psychic economy of value. The price of things then becomes the guarantor of the psychic economy of value. One may well prefer this equilibrium to free and wild consumption. But for this one pays the additional price of pleasure, whose "rate" falls in proportion with the cycle of expanded reproduction of satisfaction.

Likewise, the athlete who can't stop himself from losing is partly doing this to preserve the very possibility of battling, without the rules of which it would be difficult to run competitions at all.[3] Once again, safeguarding the rules turns out to be a more fundamental imperative than winning itself. Each participant implicitly obeys this structure of exchange, this collective and unconscious function.[4]

So the issue is clearly not "mystified consciousness," nor whatever illusion the aforementioned revolutionaries had about the liberatory suspension of exchange value. They failed to see that there is no contradiction between exchange value and the satisfaction of desire — on the contrary. To be sure, such a contradiction would make the thought of revolution much simpler to grasp, but it is only possible from the perspective of an axiological idealism, and the idealization of use value in particular. In effect, this position is betrayed by its own, powerful sublimation, which leads its adherents to underestimate the radicality of the law of value, and hence the radicality of its transgression. Having approached the problem so gingerly, they have, in effect, proposed a reformist strategy that contests value at only a relatively superficial level. Then, they are taken aback by the lack of "mass" reaction to their initiative. We can be quite sure they impute this to the fact that their action was too radical, and place their hope in the maturation of the people's consciousness. It never occurs to them for an instant that this passivity might have been due to the fact that their action was too reformist — and that instead of

3. The ideology of sports is a mixture of this implicit "law" and the law of the stronger.

4. A competitor, a runner for example, who won straightaway, every time — such a case would be a serious exception to the law of exchange, something like incest or sacrilege, and, in the extreme, the collectivity would have to suppress it. Another example of the same sort of thing would be the complete collection, to which not a thing remained to be added: this would be a kind of death.

interpreting it as revolutionary passivity, they would do better to understand it as resistance to reformism.

In other words, this negative reaction of the liberated consumers has perhaps less to do with their submission to the system of exchange value, and more with their resistance to use value, insofar as the latter is at bottom only a ruse of exchange value. Through this refusal to play the use value game, everything happens as though the public had already sniffed out this yet more subtle mystification.

In the final analysis, what is this use value that comes unto them, naked? From where does this offertory emanate, and who gives it? What is this gratuitousness of the content of products, and is it enough to establish the transparency and gratuity of a *social relation?* One thinks not. The unilateral gift is as cold as charity. Granted and submitted to, it is one with the deeper logic of the system, which revolutionary symbolic action therefore manages to escape as ineffectively as the zeal of the shopping public. In the blinding light of revealed use value, no one saw that to abolish the commodity form, pricelessness does not suffice. Radically undermining the logic of exchange value requires more than re-establishing the autonomy and gratuity of use value; it is necessary to restore the possibility of returning, that is, to change the form of social relations. If no counter-gift or reciprocal exchange is possible, we remain imprisoned in the structure of power and abstraction.[5] Such was the case in the example under review. By preserving, in the absence of a radical analysis, a certain level of value (use value), and by experimenting at this level, the "liberators" have also preserved a certain level of power and manipulation. Having played with value, they have inevitably extracted a little surplus from it, in the form of domination.

Hence the negative reaction to this sudden *conferred* profusion, the defensive reaction to the form of the instituted relation, to the non-reciprocity of the situation. This is the defensive reaction of those who "prefer to pay and owe nothing to anyone" — a class reaction that is at bottom perhaps more lucid than that of the liberators, in that they may have sensed, quite correctly, in the unilateral form of the gift and in its content (self-proclaimed liberated use value), one of the many avatars of the system.

To break the circuit of exchange value, it is necessary to restore

5. The unilateral gift is the inverse of the exchange gift. The latter is the basis of reciprocity, whereas the former founds superiority. Only the privileged, like the feudal lord, can allow themselves to receive without returning, without providing a counter-gift, because their rank protects them against challenge and loss of prestige.

exchange itself — not value (not even use value). In fact, use value implies the rupture of exchange for the same reason that exchange value does, namely, it entails the object completed as value and the individual objectified in his relation to this value. In symbolic exchange, however, the object, or the full value that it was, returns again to nothing (consider the ambivalence of the Latin term *res*). It is that something which, through being given and returned, is, as such, annulled, and marks in its presence or absence the movement of the relationship. The "object," this *res nulla*, has absolutely no use value, it is good for nothing. Thus, only that which assumes its meaning through continual reciprocal exchange eludes exchange value, in the gift and counter-gift, in the ambivalence of an open relationship, and *never in a final relation of value*.

In the present case, the "negative reaction" is tantamount to a radical demand for a revolution that would liberate — not objects and their value — but the exchange relationship itself, the reciprocity of a speech that everywhere today is being eradicated by the terrorism of value.

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The Mirror of Production

Jean Baudrillard

The Mirror of Production

by Jean Baudrillard

Translated with "Introduction"

by Mark Poster

TELOS PRESS • ST. LOUIS

Published originally as *Le Miroir de la Production*.
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ISBN: 0-914386-06-9

Library of Congress: 74-82994

Manufactured in the United States of America.

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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

For some time now many of us have harbored the knowledge or at least the suspicion that Marxism is an inadequate perspective for the critical analysis of advanced society. We have toyed with syntheses, those of the Frankfurt School, of the Italian phenomenological Marxists, of the Freudo-Marxists, of the French existential Marxists without completely satisfying results. Radicals who prefer action to theory also bear witness to the impasse of Marxism by their frantic flight from advanced society under the changing banner of some Hero of the colonized peoples, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevarra, Mao and now Stalin himself. In this conjuncture Jean Baudrillard, in *The Mirrow of Production*, has attempted a radical deconstruction of Marxism along with an alternative standpoint for today's radicalism.

In *The Mirror of Production* (1973), Baudrillard marshalls his earlier analyses from *Le systèm des objets* (1968), *La société de consommation* (1970) and *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (1972) for a systematic critique of Marxism. His compelling conclusion is that Marx's theory of historical materialism, whether it is attributed to the *1844 Manuscripts*, to the *German Ideology*, to *Capital*, or to the entire corpus, is too conservative, too rooted in the assumptions of political economy, too dependent on the system of ideas that it seeks to

overthrow to provide a framework for radical action. The fatal weakness in Marx comes not from his effort to outline a revolutionary social theory—Baudrillard does not dispute this imperative—but in the failure of historical materialism to attain this end.

For Baudrillard the conceptual grounds upon which Marx laid his critique of political economy were the "forms" of production and labor, forms that Marx did not subject to criticism and which were, in origin, those of political economy itself. When Marx unmasked an anthropology of needs and of use value behind the system of exchange value he was not transcending political economy but merely seeing its reverse side. Selecting representative quotes from the entire scope of Marx's texts, from the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* to the *Notes on Wagner*, Baudrillard argues that Marx's effort to plumb the "apparent movement of political economy" in order to reverse its theoretical flow in which use value derived from exchange value, far from dismantling political economy, only completed and "interiorized" it. Hence Marx's argument against "abstract labor" by reference to "concrete" labor still relied on the rationalist Western concept of labor itself. In both cases "social wealth" is still conceived in terms of a universal activity of man, i.e., labor, that imposes an arbitrary, rationalist intentionality on all human activity. Benjamin Franklin and Marx agree that "man" is a "tool-making" animal.

New Left theorists have not often systematically interrogated Marx himself. The theory of historical materialism has not often been analyzed to see if its emphases and directions might not systematically

obscure the contemporary social field. It is precisely this task that Baudrillard sets for himself and his judgment is severe: "...Marxism assists the ruse of capital. It convinces men that they are alienated by the sale of their labor power; hence it censors the much more radical hypothesis that they do not have to be the labor power, the 'unalienable' power of creating value by their labor." Far from transcending political economy, Marxism, to Baudrillard, strengthens and extends its most basic propositions. Man is conceptualized as a producing animal just as in political economy, except that Marx wants to liberate his productive potential. This still leaves us with a metaphor or "mirror" of production through which alone every aspect of social activity is intelligible. And so contemporary French theorists remain trapped in this conceptual cage: Althusser sees theory as a "production," Deleuze and Guattari give us an unconscious that is a "producer" of desire, the *Tel Quel* group refers to textual "production."

But it was political economy that erected that "phantasm," in Baudrillard's words, of labor as the human essence. To whatever extent Marx was able to demystify its liberal usage, to extract it from the hegemony of bourgeois rule, he still turned it over to the working class, imposed it on them, as their central means of self-comprehension. Baudrillard would like to liberate the workers from their "labor power," to have them, if they are to represent a radical alternative to the present system, think themselves under another sign than that of production.

Marx's concept of labor is, in its deepest levels, identified with that of political economy. Man is confronted by nature as a natural necessity which he

must act upon. Man does this by investing nature with value, a value that he then extracts. The scheme is one in which labor power utilizes technology to compel nature to yield its riches for human enjoyment. Both political economy and Marxism are at one here. Baudrillard points out that there is no symbolic exchange in this perspective, there is no reciprocal play of meanings and acts. Labor and nature are both reduced to "values" that require the proper means (technology) to actualize. Political economy might idealize labor into an individualist morality whereas historical materialism might materialize it in a notion of fulfillment: But both participate in the same anthropology of man seeking his telos in the conquest of nature, an anthropology that becomes mystifying when the system begins to create ecological catastrophes. Baudrillard argues that "By positing use value as the beyond of exchange value, one locks all transcendence into the single, internal alternative of the field of value. But qualitative production is now the realm of rational, positive finality; the transformation of nature is now the place of its objectification as a productive force under the sign of utility (the same is simultaneously true of human labor). Even before the stage of exchange value and of the equivalent time of abstract social labor, labor and production already constitute an abstraction, a reduction and an outrageous rationalization in the relation to the richness of symbolic exchange." A utilitarian hypothesis encompases the human project and nature, one that is arbitrary and unjustified, in both political economy and its critique.

What is at stake in Baudrillard's critique of Marx is the gravitational center of the system of political

economy. For Marx, the primary place (determinant instance) of capitalism is in the structure of the means of production and the relations of production. Over against political economy, which sought the deep structure of capitalism in the process of exchange value, in the determination of the price of the commodity through the "free" intercourse of demands and supplies, Marx shifted the center toward the "real" act of the production and the consumption of products. But for Baudrillard, in both cases the real logic is the same: it is the investment of things with value; it is the placing of a sign on a thing and the logic of this process of signification is the true essence of capital. The difference between Marx and political economy is not as great as their agreement. The Marxist critique unmasked the "abstractions" of exchange value in favor of the "concrete" processes of use value, of production and labor. But Marx's concepts were not at all radical; they did not reach the root of the matter. All Marx did was to set forth the repressed side of the equations of political economy. Instead of the shadows of the market place, we are sent to an equally obscure underside of the system: the place of production. Following this displacement of the center of the system to its "human side," Marx unravelled the threads of the entire social field through the "mirror of production," at the same time unmasking the exploitative nature of the system. Instead of the "justice" of exchange equivalence, we have the unjust extraction of surplus-value fom the laborer, or, alternatively, the alienation of his life energies. In the process of Marx's analysis, however, the social sphere is

filtered, inexorably, through the concepts of production and labor which become the unquestioned metaphysical reference points of social reality.

The problem is not that Marx is an economic determinist, that he does not value highly enough the "finer" aspects of human culture. It is not a question of replacing a "materialist" theory with an "idealist" one. Rather, the problem is that he did not penetrate the central logic of political economy, which is, to Baudrillard, its logic of signification. Marx theorized the origin of political economy as a transformation of the mode of production and relations of production. But there has been a second decisive change in political economy that Marx did not recognize and this involved a "process of social abstraction" that refers not to the commodity but to the sign. The chief merit of Baudrillard's thought is to articulate a critique of the political economy of the sign which he regards as the dominant social form of advanced capitalism. Political economy had generated its mode of signification from the outset, during the Renaissance, but Marx was unable to theorize this object because first, like Ricardo and the others, he was tied to the mirror of production, and, second, because his discourse, like theirs, was representational and hence incapable of seeing the radically new form of social exchanges.

Baudrillard employs the concepts of contemporary structural linguistics to develop his critique. Structuralists break down the linguistic sign into a signifier (a language term), a signified (an intended meaning), and a referent (an object pointed to by the signifier). Structuralists merely theorize the signifier, in search of its systematic quality,

relegating the signified and the referent to an obscure horizon of their science. What they have been able to do is to show that signifiers have become abstracted from the subject (the signified) and from the social world of objects (the referent). While they claim this situation is natural and inevitable, Baudrillard argues that the essence of political economy is precisely this separation; the increasing autonomization of the signifier not simply in the realm of language but in all aspects of social exchange. Marx foresaw that capitalism would corrupt all values, moral, cultural, sexual, etc., by the force of the exchange value of the commodity. Baudrillard asserts that the strategy of the capitalist system is to generate this abstract structure of signification of which the commodity is merely one example. What happens in political economy is this: "the signified and the referent are now abolished to the sole profit of the play of signifiers, of a generalized formalization where the code no longer refers back to any subjective or objective 'reality,' but to its own logic. The signifier becomes its own referent and the use value of the sign disappears to the profit only of its commutation and exchange value. The sign no longer designates anything at all. It approaches in its truth its structural limit which is to refer back only to other signs. All reality then becomes the place of a semilogical manipulation, of a structural simulation. And whereas the traditional sign . . . is the object of a conscious investment, of a rational calculation of signifieds, here it is the code that becomes the instance of absolute reference." Here we are beyond the stable bourgeois world of the nineteenth century where the consumer carefully weighed his money against the value of the

commodity, carefully estimated his need against his resources. This stable, comfortable, knowable world where words clearly referred to things, where ideas represented reality, where values corresponded to needs, where commodities had unquestioned value, was the world of Marx and his thought. There could simply not be articulated a "revolution" in underarm deodorants, the incorporation (imaginary or real) of personal qualities through the purchase of commodities, or a "clean bomb." Baudrillard's critique of the sign allows him to render the situation of advanced capitalism with much more concreteness than traditional Marxism. Whole realms of contemporary protest (Blacks, Women, Youth, etc.) and critique (consumption, sex, language, the media, etc.) can be seen better in relation to the repressiveness of the code than in relation to the mode of production. The dramatic tension in the system comes from its difficulty in reproducing the code, while production itself becomes merely an ideological support of the system. (It delivers the goods.)

In *Le systém des objets*, Baudrillard analyzed consumption through a critique of the sign. The prejudice in favor of production as the active moment and consumption as passive originated with the political economy but was confirmed by Marx. This productivist ideology produces an absence in social theory: it cannot account for the articulated complexity of a symbolic exchange in consumption. Baudrillard asserts that consumption is as "active" an exchange as production. In consumption there is an active appropriation of signs, not the simple destruction of an object. What is consumed is not

simply a material object that satisfies an all too rational need, but a symbolic meaning in which the consumer places himself in a communication structure where an exchange occurs which is profoundly tied to the whole system of political economy. In order for the system to be reproduced there must be not simply the reproduction of labor power but the continuous reproduction of the code.

To Baudrillard, the present system of signs in consumption entails a serious distortion of human exchange. Under political economy, every level of social exchange is reduced from symbolic reciprocity to the "terrorism" of the "code." Baudrillard's critique of political economy leads not simply to another productivist ideology, but penetrates the system in a radical way: the abstraction from the symbolic reciprocity of exchanges to the abstract, discontinuous manipulation of the code. It is the very genius of political economy, a genius that makes it immune to traditional Marxist critiques, that the signs exchanged in communication have no referent. Capitalism detaches the signifier from the signified, making the signifier its own signified. What is crucial about, say, a given underarm deodorant, is not that it has a given exchange value or a given use value, not that the workers who produced it were alienated or exploited. The secret of this commodity is that it can totally transcend all of these "referents," that it can become a totally detached object of exchange and that the person who consumes it can find a "meaning" in it to be appropriated that is totally divorced from the mechanisms of production and distribution. What is consumed is not a thing, laden with materiality and the complex cycle that finally derives from labor and nature, but

purely and simply an element in a code.

There can be no internal contradiction endangering the system of monopoly capital because, as long as it controls the code, consumption can be indefinitely extended. There is no referent against which to define a finitude of needs because the code is its own referent and there is no end to the consumption of the code. As long as the code is not dismantled, there will be no difficulty for the system in getting workers to produce. Hence production is no longer the locus of the contradiction. In Baudrillard's analysis, the very form of social meanings becomes the central articulation of social theory, not as a pure form but as a structured form that is in movement, in transition. His theory avoids the mistake of having the theoretical model divided into aspects (economic, politics, ideology) that are those of the dominant ideology itself. He is adept at exposing the pitfalls of historical materialism when it seeks to comprehend pre-capitalist structures: for example, Godelier's stumbling acrobatics in his concepts of structure in dominance and determinant instance.

Yet, there are serious difficulties with Baudrillard's position. Over against the sign structure of political economy, its code, he counterposes something that he calls "symbolic exchange." Henri Lefebvre has argued that capitalism's structure employs "signals" increasingly in order to command integration and acceptance. By collapsing the signified into the signifier, the signal leaves no room for judgment or criticism, as in the statement "We are in the Free World." He opposed the spoken word (*la parole*) to signals denoting a free structure of face-to-face discourse. Baudrillard moves in the

same direction as Lefebvre, with many of the same difficulties. Advanced capitalism creates places of "non-marked" terms (Blacks, women, youth, those on welfare). These groups are defined by their lack of responsibility, and hence, they are at a "zero point" of the code where their speech does not count. Thus, they are in a truly radical position because they must oppose not simply an inequality in the code, but the code itself. And they do so, as in the French events of May, 1968, by a spontaneous resort to *la parole*.

In the act of speech there is a reciprocal giving and taking of meanings that transcend the abstraction and manipulation of the sign. There is a discharge of energy and meaning, a pure loss as well as a gain. This is the essence of symbolic exchange to Baudrillard. In political economy, on the contrary, there is never a loss; everything, even war, always results in an accumulation of value, a re-investment. This is the secret of capitalism as compared with other systems: its inexorable growth. Even when it tries to give some of its value away, to share power through participation becomes co-optation. Symbolic exchange is simply impossible as the system was designed precisely to destroy it through a long process of abstraction and separation. Yet, this celebration of *la parole* implies a false assumption about the total presence of the exchangers. It implies an ontology of centered presence; as Baudrillard says, "we are always totally there." Perhaps there is some dialectic of presence and absence that could account for miscomprehension as well as for symbolic exchange in social interactions. But Baudrillard had not given it to us.

There are strong echoes of the Frankfurt School in

Baudrillard. He designates the same groups as Marcuse as the radical edge of the system; he employs Marcuse's concepts like repressive desublimation; and he speaks like Marcuse of a "refusal" as the revolutionary act. But there are still more theoretical affinities with Habermas. The resort to symbolic exchange is like the German's effort to complement the concept of labor with the concept of symbolic interaction, to addend Weber to Marx. Yet, with the background of French structuralism, Baudrillard is able to re-conceptualize the structure of society in a way in which Habermas is not. For the latter, symbolic interaction is added to labor, whereas for Baudrillard the whole theoretical object shifts in its nature. In a later phase of his thought, Habermas employs a notion of an ideal-speaking situation, enlisting a concept of communication in the critical theory of society. This, of course, is very close to the concept of *la parole* in Baudrillard and both suffer from serious weaknesses in political implication. In sum, there are deep confluences in two of the main centers of contemporary critical theory.

For Baudrillard, as for the Frankfurt School, there is a major problem of defining the limits of Marx's achievement. In France, Baudrillard's reading of Marx's texts is unusual in that it does not divide them up, favoring one group or another. Instead, he criticizes Marx on the basis of a claim against themes that exist throughout the corpus. While in the 1950s in France there was a fascination with the early texts, especially the *1844 Manuscripts*, by humanists, Catholics, existentialists and independent Marxists, the more recent trend, that of Althusser's circle, has been to reject the early Marx in favor of a "mature" Marx who is placed at a later

and later date in his career. By stressing the unity of the texts, even if it is a unity to be criticized, Baudrillard returns us to an integral view of Marx.

Baudrillard's attitude toward Marx is deeply ambivalent. In *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* he placed himself squarely within Marxist thought as one who was pursuing further the critique of political economy. But in *The Mirror of Production* there are places where Marx is completely rejected. This comes through in the sections he devotes to epistemology, sections that conclude each chapter. His effort is to call into question the nature of the theoretical model of historical materialism, not simply its contents. The charge against Marx is not so much that he imposed his concept of production on precapitalist societies where it has no place, but that historical materialism becomes ideological when it forgets its historical limits and pretends to universality, an error that is characteristic of the whole tradition of Western thought. The problem is not simply one of a lapse of memory, a momentary theoretical slippage, but, Baudrillard argues, one that is implicit in the deepest epistemological premises of Marx. The first error derives from Marx's Hegelianism which asserts an overly absolute truth value to historical materialism because capitalism creates the conditions for universal, scientific knowledge. Ironically, this is the Althusserian position that attributes to Marxist knowledge the quality of finality. All of history can be objectively read by Marxism because of a favored historical position. With this claim Marxism gives up its own self-relativization: it is dependent upon a certain historical conjuncture, but at the same time, this conjuncture affords it an

absolute priority over all previous ages. Marxism becomes ideological not where Althusser thinks, in its relation to practice, but in its truth claims, its scientificity. This problem has been raised many times before and needs no commentary here.

But there is a second difficulty that Baudrillard outlines. Marx erects a "model" of social structure and social change and Baudrillard objects to the analytic nature of Marxist concepts. Not only does capitalism fail to provide a standpoint for a universal theory, but it does not even offer the critical theorist the perspective from which to comprehend earlier societies. It is illegitimate for Marxism to project its notion of the mode of production onto earlier social systems. In this charge Baudrillard has placed himself on theoretical thin ice.

He wants to say that the Marxist model misses the radicality of the difference between earlier societies and capitalism as well as the radicality that would make a difference between capitalism and a future society all because of its analytic model. The model of production prevents a sighting of the symbolic nature of exchanges in primitive society; it absorbs that society into its own likeness and projects a vision of it back only in its relative difference, its underdeveloped mode of production. But to claim that this inadequacy in Marxism is due to the analytic nature of its concepts and to claim that a standpoint in the present, however critical, provides no basis for illuminating past structures courts the danger of pure relativism. The difficulty that Baudrillard presents is that of how to make radical discontinuities intelligible. He wants to claim a deep rupture between primitive society and political economy; but historical, analytic models make

intelligible only continuities or relative differences.

For his own part, Baudrillard presents a history of social systems that in barest outline goes from pre-industrial societies of symbolic exchange, to political economy, and then to a third phase in which the full development of political economy is reached in the complete negation of symbolism. A fourth stage is implied in which we return to symbolism. This history is marked by discontinuity and itself implies an analytic of signification systems; but neither of these elements are theorized by Baudrillard. In other words, the incompleteness and obscurities of his critique of the epistemology of historical materialism return and emerge in his own standpoint. The direction of his critique is well taken: the inherent teleology in Marxism and its overly continuous model are open to attack. But Baudrillard has not shown us the way toward a discontinuous model that avoids finalizing all history in the present but allows for some sort of totalization, however fragmentary, that provides for a critical standpoint that can illuminate current practice. His failure here leaves him with only an empty invocation for a spontaneous overthrow of the code à la May, 1968.

All in all, Baudrillard's hypothesis of a critique of the political economy of the sign offers a promising direction for radical theory. It combines semiology with a notion of everyday life that increasingly appear to offer the best options for theoretical development.

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PREFACE

A specter haunts the revolutionary imagination: the phantom of production. Everywhere it sustains an unbridled romanticism of productivity. The critical theory of the *mode* of production does not touch the *principle* of production. All the concepts it articulates describe only the dialectical and historical genealogy of the *contents* of production, leaving production as a *form* intact. This form reemerges, idealized, behind the critique of the capitalist mode of production. Through a strange contagion, this form of production only reinforces revolutionary discourse as a language of productivity. From the liberation of productive forces in the unlimited "textual productivity" of *Tel Quel* to Deleuze's factory-machine productivity of the unconscious (including the "labor" of the unconscious), no revolution can place itself under any other sign. The general formula is that of a productive Eros. Social wealth or language, meaning or value, sign or phantasm—everything is "produced" according to a "labor." If this is the truth of capital and of political economy, it is taken up whole by the revolution only to capital's benefit. The capitalist system of production is to be subverted in the name of an authentic and radical productivity. The capitalist law of value is to be abolished in the name of a de-alienated hyperproductivity, a productive hyperspace. Capital develops the

productive forces but also restrains them: they must be liberated. The exchange of signifieds has always hidden the "labor" of the signifier: let us liberate the signifier and the textual production of meaning! The unconscious is surrounded in social, linguistic, and Oedipal structures: let us give it back its brute energy; let us restore it as a productive machine! Everywhere productivist discourse reigns and, whether this productivity has objective ends or is deployed for itself, it is itself the form of value. It is the leitmotif both of the system and of a radical challenge—but such a consensus is suspect. If the discourse of production is only a revolutionary metaphor—the detour and return of a concept which, in essence, emanates from political economy and obeys its reality principle—then this metaphor is dangerous if it is to designate a radical alternative. Or if the alternative is not radical and its contamination by productivist discourse signifies more than a metaphoric infection, the virtual impossibility of thinking beyond or outside the general scheme of production, then it is in counter-dependence on the dominant scheme.[1]

But isn't this dominant scheme, which metaphorizes all azimuths, itself merely a metaphor? Is the reality principle it imposes anything but a code, a cipher, or a system of interpretation? Marx shattered the fiction of *homo economicus*, the myth which sums up the whole process of the naturalization of

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1. Evidently Marx played an essential role in the rooting of this productivist metaphor. It was he who definitively radicalized and rationalized the concept of production, who "dialectized" it and gave it its revolutionary title of nobility. And it is in large part by unconditional reference to Marx that this concept pursues its prodigious career.

the system of exchange value, the market, and surplus value and its forms. But he did so in the name of labor power's emergence in action, of man's own power to give rise to value by his labor (*pro-ducere*). Isn't this a similar fiction, a similar naturalization—another wholly arbitrary convention, a simulation model bound to *code* all human material and every contingency of desire and exchange in terms of value, finality, and production? If so, production would be nothing but a code imposing this type of decipherment, *the* decipherment, where there is properly neither finality, cipher, nor value. In rational terms, this gigantic secondary elaboration hallucinates man's predestination for the objective transformation of the world (or for the "production" of oneself: today's generalized humanist theme—it is no longer a question of "being" oneself but of "producing" oneself, from conscious activity to the primitive "productions" of desire. Everywhere man has learned to reflect on himself, to assume himself, to *posit himself* according to this scheme of production which is assigned to him as the ultimate dimension of value and meaning. At the level of all political economy there is something of what Lacan describes in the mirror stage: through this scheme of production, this *mirror* of production, the human species comes to consciousness [*la prise de conscience*] *in the imaginary*. Production, labor, value, everything through which an objective world emerges and through which man recognizes himself objectively—this is the imaginary. Here man is embarked on a continual deciphering of himself through his works, finalized by his shadow (his own end), reflected by this operational mirror, this sort of ideal of a productivist ego. This process occurs not

only in the materialized form of an economic obsession with efficiency determined by the *system* of exchange value, but more profoundly in this *overdetermination by the code*, by the mirror of political economy: in the identity that man dons with his own eyes when he can think of himself only as something to produce, to transform, or bring about as value. This remarkable phantasm is confused with that of representation, in which man becomes his own *signified* for himself and enjoys himself as the *content* of value and meaning in a process of self-expression and self-accumulation whose form escapes him.

It is further clarified (despite the exegetical prowess of structuralist Marxists) that the analysis of the form representation (the status of the sign, of the language that directs all Western thought)—the critical reduction of this form in its collusion with the order of production and political economy—escaped Marx. It is no longer worthwhile to make a radical critique of the order of representation in the name of production and of its revolutionary formula. These two orders are inseparable and, paradoxical though it may seem, Marx did not subject *the form production to a radical analysis any more than he did the form representation.* These are the two great unanalyzed forms of the imaginary[2] of political economy that imposed their limits on him. The discourse of production and the discourse of representation are the mirror by which the system of political economy comes to be reflected in the imaginary and reproduced there as the determinant instance.

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2. A term developed by Jacques Lacan and later used by C. Castoriadis to denote collective values that provide for unitary meaning but are logically unprovable. [Translator's note]

I. THE CONCEPT OF LABOR

In order to achieve a radical critique of political economy, it is not enough to unmask what is hidden behind the concept of consumption: the anthropology of needs and of use value. We must also unmask everything hidden behind the concepts of production, mode of production, productive forces, relations of production, etc. All the fundamental concepts of Marxist analysis must be questioned, starting from its own requirement of a radical critique and transcendence of political economy. What is axiomatic about productive forces or about the dialectical genesis of modes of production from which springs all revolutionary theory? What is axiomatic about the generic richness of man who is labor power, about the motor of history, or about history itself, which is only "the production by men of their material life?" "The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life."[1]

The liberation of productive forces is confused with the liberation of man: is this a revolutionary

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1. *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1947), p. 16.

formula or that of political economy itself? Almost no one has doubted such ultimate evidence, especially not Marx, for whom men "begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence..."[2] (Why must man's vocation always be to distinguish himself from animals? Humanism is an *idée fixe* which also comes from political economy—but we will leave that for now.) But is man's existence an end for which he must find the means? These innocent little phrases are already theoretical conclusions: the separation of the end from the means is the wildest and most naive postulate about the human race. Man has needs. Does he have needs? Is he pledged to satisfy them? Is he labor power (by which he separates himself as means from himself as his own end)? These prodigious metaphors of the system that dominates us are a fable of political economy retold to generations of revolutionaries infected even in their political radicalism by the conceptual viruses of this same political economy.

Critique of Use Value and Labor Power

In the distinction between exchange value and use value, Marxism shows its strength but also its weakness. The presupposition of use value—the hypothesis of a concrete value beyond the abstraction of exchange value, a human purpose of the commodity in the moment of its direct relation of utility for a subject—is only the effect of the system of exchange value, a concept produced and

2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

developed by it.[3] Far from designating a realm beyond political economy, use value is only the horizon of exchange value. A radical questioning of the concept of consumption begins at the level of needs and products. *But this critique attains its full scope in its extension to that other commodity, labor power.* It is the concept of production, then, which is submitted to a radical critique.

We must not forget that according to Marx himself the revolutionary originality of his theory comes from releasing the concept of labor power from its status as an unusual commodity whose insertion in the cycle of production *under the name of use value* carries the X element, a differential extra-value that generates surplus value and the whole process of capital. (Bourgeois economics would think instead of simple "labor" as one factor of production among others in the economic process.)

The history of Marx's concept of the use value of labor power is complex. With the concept of labor, Adam Smith attacked the Physiocrats and the exchangists. In turn, Marx deconstructed labor into a double concept of labor power commodity: abstract social labor (exchange value) and concrete labor (use value). He insisted on the need to maintain these two aspects in all their force. Their articulation alone could help decipher objectively the process of capitalist labor. To A. Wagner, who reproached him for neglecting use value, Marx replied: ". . . the *vir obscurus* overlooks the fact that even in the analysis of the commodity I do not stop at the double manner in which it is represented, but

3. Cf. Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

immediately go on to say that in this double being of the commodity is represented *the two-fold character of the labor* whose product it is: *useful labor*, i.e., the concrete modes of the labors which create use values, and *abstract labor, labor as expenditure of labor power*, irrespective of whatever 'useful' way it is expended. . . that in the development of the *value form of the commodity*, in the last instance of its money form and hence of *money*, the *value* of a commodity is represented in the *use value* of the other, i.e., in the natural form of the other commodity; that surplus value itself is derived from *a 'specific' use value of labor power* exclusively pertaining to the latter, etc., etc., that thus for me use value plays a far more important part than it has in economics hitherto, however, that it is only ever taken into account where this springs from the analysis of a given economic constellations, not from arguing backwards and forwards about the concepts or words 'use value' and 'value' " (emphasis added).[4]

In this passage it is clear that the use value of labor, losing its "naturalness," takes on a correspondingly greater "specific" value in the *structural* functioning of exchange value. In maintaining a kind of dialectical equilibrium between concrete, qualitative labor and abstract, quantitative labor, Marx gives logical priority to exchange value (the given economic formation). But in so doing, he retains something of the *apparent movement of political economy*: the concrete positivity of use value, a kind of concrete antecedent within the structure of political economy. He does not radicalize the schema to the point of reversing

4. "Notes on Wagner," in *Theoretical Practice* 5 (Spring, 1972), pp. 51-52.

this appearance and revealing use value *as produced by the play of exchange value.* We have shown this regarding the products of consumption; it is the same for labor power. The definition of products as useful and as responding to needs is the most accomplished, most internalized expression of abstract economic exchange: it is its subjective closure. The definition of labor power as the source of "concrete" social wealth is the complete expression of the abstract manipulation of labor power: the truth of capital culminates in this "evidence" of man as producer of value. Such is the twist by which exchange value retrospectively originates and logically terminates in use value. In other words, the signified "use value" here is still a code effect, the final precipitate of the law of value. Hence it is not enough to analyze the operation of the quantitative abstraction of exchange value *starting from* use value, but it is also necessary to bring out the condition of the possibility of this operation: the production of the concept of the use value of labor power itself, of a specific rationality of productive man. Without this generic definition there is no political economy. In the last instance, this is the basis of political economy. This generic definition must be shattered in unmasking the "dialectic" of quantity and quality, behind which hides the definitive structural institution of the field of value.

The Concrete Aspect of Labor: The "Dialectic" of Quality and Quantity

"The quantitative aspect of labor could not emerge until it was universalized during the 18th century in Europe. . . Until then, the different forms of activity were not fully comparable. . .labor

appeared then as diverse qualities."[5] During the historical epoch of the artisanal mode of production, qualitative labor was differentiated in relation to its process, to its product, and to the destination of the product. In the subsequent capitalist mode of production labor is analyzed under a double form: "While labor which creates exchange values is *abstract, universal* and *homogeneous*, labor which produces use values is concrete and special and is made up of an endless variety of kinds of labor according to the way in which and the material to which it is applied."[6] Here we rediscover the moment of use value: concrete, differentiated, and incommensurable. In contrast to the quantitative measure of labor power, labor use value, remains nothing more or less than a qualitative potentiality. It is specified by its own end, by the material it works on, or simply because it is the expenditure of energy by a given subject at a given time. The use value of labor power is the moment of its actualization, of man's relation to his useful expenditure of effort. Basically it is an act of (productive) *consumption*; and in the general process, this moment retains all its uniqueness. At this level labor power is incommensurable.

There is, moreover, a profound enigma throughout the articulation of Marx's theory: how is surplus value born? How can labor power, by definition qualitative, generate a measurable actualization? One would have to assume that the "dialectical" opposition of quantity and quality expresses only an

5. Pierre Naville, *Le nouveau léviathan* (Paris: Riviàrè, 1954), p. 371.

6. Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1904), p. 33.

apparent movement.

In fact, the *effect* of quality and of incommensurability once again partakes of the *apparent* movement of political economy. What produces the universalization of labor in the eighteenth century and consequently reproduces it is not the reduction of concrete, qualitative labor by abstract, quantitative labor but, from the outset, the structural articulation of the two terms. Work is really universalized at the base of this "fork," not only as market value but as human value. Ideology always thus proceeds by a binary, structural scission, which works here to universalize the dimension of labor. By dividing (or redividing into the qualitative structural effect, a *code* effect), quantitative labor spreads throughout the field of possibility. Henceforth there can be only labor—qualitative or quantitative. The quantitative still signifies only the commensurability of all forms of labor in abstract value; the qualitative, under the pretext of incommensurability, goes much further. It sinigifes *the comparability of all human practice in terms of production and labor*. Or better: the abstract and formal universality of the commodity labor power is what supports the "concrete" universality of qualitative labor.

But this "concrete" is an abuse of the word. It seems opposed to the abstract at the base of the fork, but in fact the fork itself is what establishes the abstraction. The autonomization of labor is sealed in the play of the two—from the abstract to the concrete, from the qualitative to the quantitative, from the exchange value to the use value of labor. In this structuralized play of signifiers, the fetishism of labor and productivity crystallizes. 7

7. There is a further great disjuncture through which the

And what is this concrete aspect of labor? Marx says: "The indifference as to the particular kind of labor implies the existence of a highly developed aggregate of different species of concrete labor, none of which is any longer the predominant one. So do the most general abstractions commonly arise only where there is the highest concrete development, where one feature appears to be jointly possessed by many, and to be common to all."[8] But if one type of labor no longer dominates all others, it is because labor itself dominates all other realms. Labor is substituted for all other forms of wealth and exchange. Indifference to determined labor corresponds to a much more total determination of social wealth by labor. And what is the conception of this social wealth placed entirely under the sign of labor, if not use value? The "richest concrete development" is the qualitative and quantitative multiplication of use values. "The greater the extent to which historic needs—needs created by production itself, social needs—needs which are themselves the offspring of social production and intercourse, are posited as *necessary*, the higher the level to which real wealth has become developed. Regarded *materially*, wealth consists only in the manifold variety of needs." Is

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critique of political economy is articulated: the split between the technical and the social division of labor, which is subject to the same analysis. Transfiguring the technical division as both sides of the social division, it thus preserves the fiction of an ideal distribution of labor, of a concrete "non-alienated" productivity; and it universalizes the technical mode or technical reason. Thus the dialectic of productive forces-relations of production: everywhere the "dialectical" contradiction ends up as a Moebius band. But meanwhile this contradiction has circumscribed and universalized the field of production.

8. *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, op. cit.*, pp. 298-299.

9. *Grundrisse*, trans. M. Nicolaus (London: Pelican, 1973),

this not the program of advanced capitalist society? Failing to conceive of a mode of social wealth other than that founded on labor and production, Marxism no longer furnishes in the long run a real alternative to capitalism. Assuming the generic schema of production and needs involves an incredible simplification of social exchange by the law of value. Viewed correctly, this fantastic proposition is both arbitrary and strange with respect to man's status in society. The analysis of all primitive or archaic organizations contradicts it, as does the feudal symbolic order and even that of our societies, since all perspectives opened up by the contradictions of the mode of production drive us hopelessly into political economy.

The dialectic of production only intensifies the abstractness and separation of political economy. This leads us to the radical questioning of Marxist theoretical discourse. When in the last instance Marx defines the dialectical relation of abstract-concrete as the relation between "scientific representation and real movement" (what Althusser will analyze precisely as the *production* of a theoretical object), this theoretical production, itself taken in the abstraction of the representation, apparently only redoubles its object (in this case, the logic and movement of political economy). Between the theory and the object—and this is valid not only for Marxism—there is, in effect, a dialectical relation, in the bad sense: they are locked into a speculative dead end.[10] It becomes impossible to think outside the form production or the form representation.

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p. 527.

10. We will return to this reciprocal neutralization of the theory and the object when we deal with the relations between Marxist theory and the workers' movement.

Man's Double "Generic" Face.

In fact the use value of labor power does not exist any more than the use value of products or the autonomy of signified and referent. The same fiction reigns in the three orders of production, consumption, and signification. Exchange value is what makes the use value of products appear as its anthropological horizon. The exchange value of labor power is what makes its use value, the concrete origin and end of the act of labor, appear as its "generic" alibi. This is the logic of signifiers which produces the "evidence" of the "reality" of the signified and the referent. In every way, exchange value makes concrete production, concrete consumption, and concrete signification appear only in distorted, abstract forms. But it foments the concrete as its ideological ectoplasm, its phantasm of origin and transcendence [*dépassement*]. In this sense need, use value, and the referent "do not exist."[11] They are only concepts produced and projected into a generic dimension by the development of the very system of exchange value.

By the same token, the double potentiality of man as needs and labor power, this double "generic" face of universal man, is only man as produced by the system of political economy. And productivity is not primarily a generic dimension, a human and social kernel of all wealth to be extracted from the husk of capitalist relations of production (the eternal empiricist illusion). Instead, all this must be overturned to see that the abstract and generalized development of productivity (the developed form of political economy) is what makes the *concept of*

11. This does not mean *that they have never existed.* Hence we have another paradox that we must return to later.

production itself appear as man's movement and generic end (or better, as the concept of man as producer).

In other words, the system of political economy does not produce only the individual as labor power that is sold and exchanged: it produces the very conception of labor power as the fundamental human potential. More deeply than in the fiction of the individual freely selling his labor power in the market, the system is rooted in the identification of the individual with his labor power and with his act of "transforming nature according to human ends." In a work, man is not only quantitatively exploited as a productive force by the *system* of capitalist political economy, but is also metaphysically overdetermined as a producer by the *code* of political economy.[12] In the last instance, the system rationalizes its power here. *And in this Marxism assists the cunning of capital. It convinces men that they are alienated by the sale of their labor power, thus censoring the much more radical hypothesis that they might be alienated as labor power, as the "inalienable" power of creating value by their labor.*

If on the one hand Marx is interested in the later fate of the labor power objectified in the production process as abstract social labor (labor as its exchange value), Marxist theory, on the other hand, never challenges human capacity of production (energetic, physical, and intellectual), this productive potential of every man in every society "of transforming his environment into ends useful for the individual or the society," this *Arbeitsvermögen*. Criticism and

12. Similarly for nature: there is not only the exploitation of nature as a productive force, but overdetermination of nature as referent, as "objective" reality, by the code of political economy.

history are strangely arrested before this anthropological postulate: a curious fate for a Marxist concept.

The same fate has befallen the concept of need in its present operation (the consumption of use value). It presents the same characteristics as the concrete aspect of labor: uniqueness, differentiation, and incommensurability—in short, "quality." If the one can be defined as "a specific type of action that produces its own product," the other is also defined as "a specific kind of tendency (or other psychologistic motivation, since all of this is only bad psychology) seeking its own satisfaction." Need also "decomposes both matter and form. . . into infinitely varied types of consumption." In concrete labor man gives a useful, objective end to nature; in need he gives a useful, subjective end to products. Needs and labor are man's double potentiality or double generic quality. This is the same anthropological realm in which the concept of production is sketched as the "fundamental movement of human existence," as defining a rationality and a sociality appropriate for man. Moreover, the two are logically united in a kind of ultimate perspective: "In a higher stage of community society. . . work will not be simply a means of living but will become the prime, vital need itself."[13]

Radical in its *logical* analysis of capital, Marxist theory nonetheless maintains an *anthropological* consensus with the options of Western rationalism in its definitive form acquired in eighteenth century bourgeois thought. Science, technique, progress, history—in these ideas we have an entire civilization that comprehends itself as producing its own

13. *1844 Manuscripts.* [I have not been able to locate this quotation. Translator's note]

development and takes its dialectical force toward completing humanity in terms of totality and happiness. Nor did Marx invent the concepts of genesis, development, and finality. He changed nothing basic: nothing regarding the *idea* of man *producing* himself in his infinite determination, and continually surpassing himself toward his own end.

Marx translated this concept into the logic of material production and the historical dialectic of modes of production. But differentiating modes of production renders unchallengeable the evidence of production as the determinant instance. It generalizes the economic mode of rationality over the entire expanse of human history, as the generic mode of human becoming. It circumscribes the entire history of man in a gigantic simulation model. It tries somehow to turn against the order of capital by using as an analytic instrument the most subtle ideological phantasm that capital has itself elaborated. Is this a "dialectical" reversal? Isn't the system pursuing *its* dialectic of universal reproduction here? If one hypothesizes *that there has never been and will never be anything but the single mode of production ruled by capitalist political economy*—a concept that makes sense only in relation to the economic formation that produced it (indeed, to the theory that analyzes this economic formation)—then even the "dialectical" generalization of this concept is merely the *ideological* universalization of this system's postulates.

Ethic of Labor; Esthetic of Play

This logic of material production, this dialectic of modes of production, always returns beyond history to a generic definition of man as a dialectical being; a notion intelligible only through the process of the

objectification of nature. This position is heavy with consequences to the extent that, even through the vicissitudes of his history, man (whose history is also his "product") will be ruled by this clear and definitive reason, this dialectical scheme that acts as an implicit philosophy. Marx develops it in the *1844 Manuscripts*; Marcuse revives it in his critique of the economic concept of labor: "...labor is an ontological concept of human existence as such." He cites Lorenz von Stein: "Labor is...in every way the actualization of one's infinite determinations through the self-positing of the individual personality [in which the personality itself] makes the content of the external world its own and in this way forces the world to become a part of its own internal world."[14] Marx: "Labor is *man's coming-to-be for himself* within *externalization* or as *externalized* man...[that is], the *self-creation* and self-objectification [of man]."[15] And even in *Capital*: "So far therefore as labor is a creator of use-value, is useful labor, it is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race; it is an external nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and nature, and therefore no life."[16] "Labor is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and nature. He

14. "On the Concept of Labor," *Telos* 16 (Summer, 1973), pp. 11-12.

15. Easton and Guddat, eds., *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Anchor, 1969), pp. 322 and 332.

16. *Capital* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House), Vol. I, pp. 42-43.

opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants."[17] The dialectical culmination of all of this is the concept of nature as "the inorganic body of man:" the naturalization of man and the humanization of nature.[18]

On this dialectical base, Marxist philosophy unfolds in two directions: an ethic of labor and an esthetic of non-labor. The former traverses all bourgeois and socialist ideology. It exalts labor as value, as end in itself, as categorical imperative. Labor loses its negativity and is raised to an absolute value. But is the "materialist" thesis of man's generic productivity very far from this "idealist" sanctification of labor? In any case, it is dangerously vulnerable to this charge. In the same article, Marcuse says: "...insofar as they take the concept of 'needs' and its satisfaction in the world of goods as the starting point, all economic theories fail to recognize the full factual content of labor.... The essential factual content of labor is not grounded in the scarcity of goods, nor in a discontinuity between the world of disposable and utilizable goods and human needs, but, on the contrary, in an essential excess of human existence beyond every possible situation in which it finds itself and the world."[19] On this basis he separates off play as a secondary activity: "In the structural sense, within the totality of human existence, labor is necessarily and

17. *Ibid.*, p. 177.

18. Engels, always a naturalist, goes so far as to exalt the role played by work in the transition from ape to man.

19. Marcuse, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

eternally 'earlier' than play: it is the starting point, foundation, and principle of play insofar as play is precisely a breaking off *from* labor and a recuperation *for* labor."[20] Thus, labor alone founds the world as objective and man as historical. In short, labor alone founds a real dialectic of transcendence [*dépassement*] and fulfillment. Even metaphysically, it justifies the painful character of labor. "In the last analysis, the burdensome character of labor expresses nothing other than a negativity rooted in the very essence of human existence: man can achieve his own self only by passing through otherness: by passing through 'externalization' and 'alienation'."[21] I cite this long passage only to show how the Marxist dialectic can lead to the purest Christian ethic. (Or its opposite. Today there is a widespread contamination of the two positions on the basis of this transcendence of alienation and this intra-worldly asceticism of effort and overcoming where Weber located the radical germ of the capitalist spirit.) I have cited it also because this aberrant sanctification of work has been the secret vice of Marxist political and economic strategy from the beginning. It was violently attacked by Benjamin: "Nothing was more corrupting for the German workers' movement than the feeling of swimming with the current. It mistook technical development for the current, the direction it believed it was swimming in. From there, there was only one step to take in order to imagine that industrial labor represented a political performance. With German workers the old Protestant ethic of work celebrated, in a secular form, its resurrection.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

The Gotha Program bore traces of this confusion. It defined work as 'the source of all wealth and culture.' To which Marx, even worse, objected that man possesses only his labor power, etc. However, the confusion spread more and more: and Joseph Dietzgen announced, 'Work is the Messiah of the modern world. In the amelioration of labor resides the wealth that can now bring what no redeemer has succeeded in'."[22] Is this "vulgar" Marxism, as Benjamin believes? It is no less "vulgar" than the "strange delusion" Lafargue denounced in *The Right to Be Lazy:* "A strange delusion possesses the working classes of the nations where capitalist civilization holds its sway."[23] Apparently, "pure and uncompromising" Marxism itself preaches the liberation of productive forces under the auspices of the *negativity* of labor. But, confronted by the "vulgar" idealism of the gospel of work, isn't this an "aristocratic" idealism? The former is positivist and the latter calls itself "dialectical." But they share the hypothesis of man's productive vocation. If we admit that it raises anew the purest metaphysics,[24] then the only difference between "vulgar" Marxism and the "other" Marxism would be that between a religion of the masses and a philosophical theory—not a great deal of difference.

Confronted by the *absolute* idealism of labor, dialectical materialism is perhaps only a *dialectical* idealism of productive forces. We will return to this

22. Walter Benjamin, *Poésie et révolution* (Paris: Denoël, 1971), p. 283.

23. Paul Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy*, trans. C. Kerr (Chicago: Kerr, 1917), p. 9.

24. Such as conceiving man as the union of a soul and a body -- which gave rise to an extraordinary "dialectical" efflorescence in the Christian Middle Ages.

to see if the dialectic of means and end at the heart of the principle of the transformation of nature does not already virtually imply the autonomization of means (the autonomization of science, technology, and labor; the autonomization of production as generic activity; the autonomization of the dialectic itself as the general scheme of development).[25]

The regressive character of this work ethic is evidently related to what it represses: Marx's chief discovery regarding the double nature of labor (his discovery of abstract and measurable social labor). In the fine points of Marxist thought, confronting the work ethic is an esthetic of non-work or play itself based on the dialectic of quantity and quality. Beyond the capitalist mode of production and the quantitative measure of labor, this is the perspective of a definitive qualitative mutation in communist society: the end of alienated labor and the free objectification of man's own powers. "In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. . . . Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that

25. But this autonomization is the key which turns Marxism toward Social Democracy, to its present revisionism, and to tis total positivist decay (which includes bureaucratic Stalinism as well as Social Democratic liberalism).

development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis."[26] Even Marcuse, who returns to the less puritanical (less Hegelian) conceptions, which, however, are totally philosophical (Schiller's esthetic philosophy), says that "Play and display, as principles of civilization, imply not the transformation of labor but its complete subordination to the freely evolving potentialities of man and nature. The ideas of play and display now reveal their full distance from the values of productiveness and performance. Play is *unproductive* and *useless* precisely because it cancels the repressive and exploitative traits of labor and leisure. . ."[27]

This realm beyond political economy called play, non-work, or non-alienated labor, is defined as the reign of a finality without end. In this sense it is and remains an *esthetic,* in the extremely Kantian sense, with all the bourgeois ideological connotations which that implies. Although Marx's thought settled accounts with bourgeois morality, it remains defenseless before its esthetic, whose ambiguity is more subtle but whose complicity with the general system of political economy is just as profound. Once again, at the heart of its strategy, in its analytic distinction between quantity and quality, Marxist thought inherits the esthetic and humanistic virus of bourgeois thought, since the concept of quality is burdened with all the finalities—whether those concrete finalities of use value, or those endless ideal and transcendent finalities. Here stands the defect of

26. *Capital, op.cit.,* III, pp. 799-800.

27. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Vintage, 1962), p. 178.

all notions of play, freedom, transparence, or disalienation: it is the defect of the *revolutionary imagination* since, in the ideal types of play and the free play of human faculties, we are still in a process of repressive desublimation. In effect, the sphere of play is defined as the fulfillment of human rationality, the dialectical culmination of man's activity of incessant objectification of nature and control of his exchanges with it. It presupposes the full development of productive forces; it "follows in the footsteps" of the reality principle and the transformation of nature. Marx clearly states that it can flourish only when founded on the reign of necessity. Wishing itself beyond labor but *in its continuation*, the sphere of play is always merely the esthetic sublimation of labor's constraints. With this concept we remain rooted in the problematic of necessity and freedom, a typically bourgeois problematic whose double ideological expression has always been the institution of a reality principle (repression and sublimation, the principle of labor) and its formal overcoming in an ideal transcendence.

Work and non-work: here is a "revolutionary" theme. It is undoubtedly the most subtle form of the type of binary, structural opposition discussed above. The end of the end of exploitation by work is this reverse fascination with non-work, this reverse mirage of free time (forced time-free time, full time-empty time: another paradigm that fixes the hegemony of a temporal order which is always merely that of production). Non-work is still only the repressive desublimation of labor power, the antithesis which acts as the alternative. Such is the sphere of non-work: even if it is not immediately conflated with leisure and its present bureaucratic

organization, where the desire for death and mortification and its management by social institutions are as powerful as in the sphere of work; even if it is viewed in a radical way which *represents it* as other than the mode of "total disposability" or "freedom" for the individual to "produce" himself as value, to "express himself," to "liberate himself" as a (conscious or unconscious) authentic *content*, in short, as the ideality of time and of the individual as an empty form to be filled finally by his freedom. The finality of value is always there. It is no longer inscribed in *determined* contents as in the sphere of productive activity; henceforth it is a *pure form*, though no less determining. Exactly as the pure institutional form of painting, art, and theater shines forth in anti-painting, anti-art, and anti-theater, which are emptied of their contents, the pure form of labor shines forth in non-labor. Although the concept of non-labor can thus be fantasized as the abolition of political economy, it is bound to fall back into the sphere of political economy as the sign, and only the sign, of its abolition. It already escapes revolutionaries to enter into the programmatic field of the "new society."

Marx and the Hieroglyph of Value

Julia Kristeva writes in *Semiotica:* "From the viewpoint of social distribution and consumption (of communication), labor is always a value of use or exchange... Labor is measurable according to the value which it is, and not in any other way. Value is measured by the quantity of time socially necessary for production. But Marx clearly outlined another possibility: *work could be apprehended outside value*, on the side of the commodity produced and circulating in the chain of communication. Here

labor no longer represents any value, meaning, or signification. It is a question only of a *body* and a *discharge*. . ."[28]

Marx writes, "The use values, coat, linen, etc., i.e., the bodies of commodities, are combinations of two elements—matter and labor. . . We see, then, that labor is not the only source of material wealth, of use-values produced by labor, as William Petty puts it, labor is its father and the earth its mother. . . Productive activity, if we leave out of sight its special form, viz., the useful character of the labor, is nothing but the expenditure of human labor-power."[29]

Is there a conception of labor in Marx different from that of the production of useful ends (the canonical definition of labor as value in the framework of political economy and the anthropological definition of labor as human finality)? Kristeva attributes to Marx a radically different vision centered on the body, discharge, play, anti-value, non-utility, non-finality, etc. She would have him read Bataille before he wrote—but also forget him when it is convenient. If there was one thing Marx did not think about, it was discharge, waste, sacrifice, prodigality, play, and symbolism. Marx thought about *production* (not a bad thing), and he thought of it in terms of value.

There is no way of getting around this. Marxist labor is defined in the absolute order of a natural necessity and its dialectical overcoming as rational activity producing value. The social wealth produced is *material*; it has nothing to do with

28. Julia Kristeva, "La sémiotique et la production," *Semiotica* 2. [I have not been able to complete this reference. Translator's note]

29. *Capital, op.cit.*, I, pp. 43-44.

symbolic wealth which, mocking natural necessity, comes conversely from destruction, the deconstruction of value, transgression, or discharge. These two notions of wealth are irreconcilable, perhaps even mutually exclusive; it is useless to attempt acrobatic transfers. According to Bataille, "sacrificial economy or symbolic exchange is exclusive of political economy (and of its critique, which is only its completion). But this is just to render to political economy what belongs to it: the concept of labor is consubstantial with it and therefore cannot be switched to any other analytical field. Above all, it cannot become the object of a science that pretends to surpass political economy. "The labor of the sign," "productive inter-textual space," etc., are thus ambiguous metaphors. There is a choice to be made between value and non-value. Labor is definitely within the sphere of value. This is why Marx's concept of labor (like that of production, productive force, etc.) must be submitted to a radical critique as an *ideological* concept. Thus, with all its ambiguities, this is not the time to generalize it as a *revolutionary* concept.

The quotations from Marx to which Kristeva refers do not at all carry the meaning she gives them. The genesis of wealth by the genital combination of labor-father and earth-mother certainly reinstates a "normal" productive reproductive scheme—one makes love to have children but not for pleasure. The metaphor is that of genital, reproductive sexuality, not of a discharge of the body in enjoyment! But this is only a trifle. The "discharge" of human power Marx speaks of is not a discharge with a pure waste, a symbolic discharge in Bataille's sense (pulsating, libidinal): it is still an economic, productive, finalized discharge precisely because, in

its mating with the other, it begets a productive force called the earth (or matter). It is a useful discharge, an investment, not a gratuitous and festive energizing of the body's powers, a game with death, or the acting out of a desire. Moreover, this "discharge of the body" does not, as in play (sexual or otherwise), have its response in other bodies, its echo in a nature that plays and discharges in exchange. It does not establish a symbolic exchange. What man gives of his body in labor is never *given* or *lost* or *rendered* by nature in a reciprocal way. Labor only aims to "make" nature "yield." This discharge is thus immediately an investment of value, a *putting into value* opposed to all symbolic *putting into play* as in the gift or the discharge.

Kristeva poses the problem of redefining labor beyond value. In fact, as Goux has shown, for Marx the demarcation line of value cuts between use value and exchange value. "If we proceed further, and compare the process of producing value with the labor-process, pure and simple, we find that the latter consists of the useful labor, the work, that produces use-values. Here we contemplate the labor as producing a particular article; we view it under its qualitative aspect alone, with regard to its end and aim. But viewed as a value creating process, the same labor-process presents itself under its quantitative aspect alone. Here it is a question merely of the time occupied by the laborer in doing the work; —of the period during which the labor-power is usefully expended."[30] Hence the abstraction of value begins only in the second stage of exchange value. Thus use value is separated from the sphere of the production of value: or the realm

30. *Ibid.*, I, p. 195.

beyond value is confounded with the sphere of use value (this is Goux's interpretation, in which he extends this proposition to the use value of the sign). As we have seen, this is a very serious idealization of the process of concrete, qualitative labor and, ultimately, a compromise with political economy to the extent that the entire theoretical investment and strategy crystallizes on this line of demarcation within the sphere of value, leaving the "external" line of closure of this sphere of political economy in the shadows. By positing use value as the realm beyond exchange value, all transcendence is locked into this single alternative within the field of value. Qualitative production is already the realm of rational, positive finality; the transformation of nature is the occasion of its objectification as a productive force under the sign of utility (the same is true simultaneously of human labor). Even before the stage of exchange value and the equivalence through time of abstract social labor, labor and production constitute an abstraction, a reduction, and an extraordinary rationalization in relation to the richness of symbolic exchange. This "concrete" labor carries all the values of repression, sublimation, objective finality, "conformity to an end," and rational domestication of sexuality and nature. In relation to symbolic exchange, this *productive Eros* represents the real rupture which Marx displaces and situates between abstract quantitative labor and concrete qualitative labor. The process of "valorization" begins with the process of the useful transformation of nature, the instauration of labor as generic finality, and the stage of use value. The real rupture is not between "abstract" labor and "concrete" labor, but between symbolic exchange and work (production, economics). The abstract

social form of labor and exchange is only the completed form, overdetermined by capitalist political economy, of a scheme of rational valorization and production inaugurated long before which breaks with every symbolic organization of exchange.[31]

Kristeva would gladly be rid of value, but neither labor nor Marx. One must choose. Labor is defined (anthropologically and historically) as what disinvests the body and social exchange of all ambivalent and symbolic qualities, reducing them to a rational, positive, unilateral investment. The productive Eros represses all the alternative qualities of meaning and exchange in symbolic discharge toward a process of production, accumulation, and appropriation. In order to question the process which submits us to the destiny of political economy and the terrorism of value, and to rethink discharge and symbolic exchange, the concepts of production and labor developed by Marx (not to mention political economy) must be resolved and analyzed as

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31. For example, look at this passage from Marx on the social hieroglyph: "Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later one, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language" (*Capital, op.cit.*, I, p. 74). This entire analysis of the mystery of value remains fundamental. But rather than being valid only for the product of labor in distribution and exchange, it is valud even for the product of labor (and for labor itself) taken as a "useful object." Utility (including labor's) is already a socially produced and determined hieroglyphic abstraction. The whole anthropology of "primitive" exchange compels us to break with the natural evidence of utility and to reconceive the social and historical genesis of use value as Marx did with exchange value. Only then will the hieroglyph be totally deciphered and the spell of value radically exorcized.

ideological concepts interconnected with the general system of value. And in order to find a realm beyond economic value (which is in fact the only revolutionary perspective), then the *mirror of production* in which all Western metaphysics is reflected, must be broken.

Epistemology I:

In the Shadow of Marxist Concepts

Historical materialism, dialectics, modes of production, labor power—through these concepts Marxist theory has sought to shatter the abstract universality of the concepts of bourgeois thought (Nature and Progress, Man and Reason, formal Logic, Work, Exchange, etc.). Yet Marxism in turn universalizes them with a "critical" imperialism as ferocious as the other's.

The proposition that a concept is not merely an interpretive hypothesis but a translation of universal movement depends upon pure metaphysics. Marxist concepts do not escape this lapse. Thus, to be logical, the concept of history must itself be regarded as historical, turn back upon itself, and only illuminate the context that produced it by abolishing itself. Instead, in Marxism history is transhistoricized: it redoubles on itself and thus is universalized. To be rigorous the dialectic must dialectically surpass and annul itself. By radicalizing the concepts of production and mode of production at a given moment, Marx made a break in the social mystery of exchange value. The concept thus takes all its strategic power from its irruption, by which it dispossesses political economy of its imaginary universality. But, from the time of Marx, it lost this advantage when taken as a principle of explication.

It thus cancelled its "difference" by universalizing itself, regressing to the dominant form of the code (universality) and to the strategy of political economy. It is not tautological that the concept of history is historical, that the concept of dialectic is dialectical, and that the concept of production is itself produced (that is, it is to be judged by a kind of self-analysis). Rather, this simply indicates the explosive, mortal, present form of critical concepts. As soon as they are constituted as universal they cease to be analytical and the religion of meaning begins. They become canonical and enter the general system's mode of theoretical representation. Not accidentally, at this moment they also take on their scientific cast (as in the scientific canonization of concepts from Engels to Althusser). They set themselves up as expressing an "objective reality." They become signs: signifiers of a "real" signified. And although at the best of times these concepts have been practiced as concepts without taking themselves for reality, they have nonetheless subsequently fallen into the *imaginary of the sign*, or the *sphere of truth*. They are no longer in the sphere of interpretation but enter that of *repressive simulation*.

From this point on they only evoke themselves in an indefinite metonymic process which goes as follows: man is historical; history is dialectical; the dialectic is the process of (material) production; production is the very movement of human existence; history is the history of modes of production, etc. This scientific and universalist discourse (code) immediately becomes imperialistic. All possible societies are called on to respond. That is, consult Marxist thought to see if societies "without history" are something other than "pre"-historical, other than a chrysalis or larva. The dialectic of the

world of production is not yet well developed, but nothing is lost by waiting—the Marxist egg is ready to hatch. Moreover, the psychoanalytic egg is in a similar condition. What we have said about the Marxist concepts holds for the unconscious, repression, Oedipal complex, etc., as well. Yet here, it is even better: the Bororos[32] are closer to primitive processes than we are.

This constitutes a most astonishing theoretical aberration—and a most reactionary one. There is *neither a mode of production nor production* in primitive societies. There is *no dialectic* and *no unconscious* in primitive societies. These concepts analyze only our own societies, which are ruled by political economy. Hence they have only a kind of boomerang value. If psychoanalysis speaks of the unconscious in primitive societies, we should ask about what represses psychoanalysis or about the repression that has produced psychoanalysis itself. When Marxism speaks of the mode of production in primitive societies, we ask to what extent this concept fails to account even for our own historical societies (the reason it is exported). And where all our ideologues seek to finalize and rationalize primitive societies according to their own concepts—to encode the primitives—we ask what obsession makes them see this finality, this rationality, and this code blowing up in their faces. Instead of exporting Marxism and psychoanalysis (not to mention bourgeois ideology, although at this level there is no difference), we bring all the force and questioning of primitive societies to bear on Marxism and psychoanalysis. Perhaps then we will break this fascination,

32. The Bororos are a South American society studied by Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques*. [Translator's note]

this self-fetishization of Western thought. Perhaps we will be finished with a Marxism that has become more of a specialist in the impasses of capitalism than in the roads to revolution, finished with a psychoanalysis that has become more of a specialist in the impasses of libidinal economy than in the paths of desire.

The Critique of Political Economy Is Basically Completed

Comprehending itself as a form of the rationality of production superior to that of bourgeois political economy, the weapon Marx created turns against him and turns his theory into the dialectical apotheosis of political economy. At a much higher level, his critique falters under his own objection to Feuerbach of making a radical critique of the *contents* of religion but in a completely religious *form*. Marx made a radical critique of political economy, but still in the form of political economy. These are the ruses of the dialectic, undoubtedly the limit of all "critique." The concept of critique emerged in the West at the same time as political economy and, as the quintessence of Enlightenment rationality, is perhaps only the subtle, long-term expression of the system's expanded reproduction. The dialectic does not avoid the fate of every critique. Perhaps the inversion of the idealist dialectic into a materialist dialectic was only a metamorphosis; perhaps the very logic of political economy, capital, and the commodity is dialectical; and perhaps, under the guise of producing its fatal internal contradiction, Marx basically only rendered a descriptive theory. The logic of representation—of the duplication of its object—haunts all rational discursiveness. Every critical theory is haunted by this surreptitious

religion, this desire bound up with the construction of its object, this negativity subtly haunted by the very form that it negates.

This is why Marx said that after Feuerbach the critique of religion was basically completed (cf. *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*) and that, to overcome the ambiguous limit beyond which it can no longer go (the reinversion of the religious form beneath the critique), it is necessary to move resolutely to a different level: precisely to the critique of political economy, which alone is radical and which can definitively resolve the problem of religion by bringing out the true contradictions. *Today we are exactly at the same point with respect to Marx.* For us, *the critique of political economy is basically completed.* The materialist dialectic has exhausted its content in reproducing its form. At this level, the situation is no longer that of a critique: it is inextricable. And following the same revolutionary movement as Marx did, we must move to a radically different level that, beyond its critique, permits the definitive resolution of political economy. This level is that of symbolic exchange and its theory. And just as Marx thought it necessary to clear the path to the critique of political economy with a critique of the philosophy of law, the preliminary to this radical change of terrain is the critique of the metaphysic of the signifier and the code, in all its current ideological extent. For lack of a better term, we call this the critique of the political economy of the sign.

II. MARXIST ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE DOMINATION OF NATURE

In the 18th century, the simultaneous emergence of labor as the source of wealth and needs as the finality of produced wealth is captured at the zenith of Enlightenment philosophy in the appearance of the concept of Nature, around which gravitates the entire rationality of the system of political economy.

As late as the 17th century, Nature signified only the totality of laws founding the world's intelligebility: the guarantee of an order where men and things could exchange their meanings [*significations*]. In the end, this is God (Spinoza's "*Deus sive natura*"). Subject and world already have respective positions (as they had since the great Judeo-Christian rupture, to which we will return), but not in the sense of a mastery or exploitation of Nature, or conversely as the exaltation of an original myth. The rule for the autonomous subject confronting Nature is to form his practice so as to achieve an equilibrium of significations.

All this is shattered in the 18th century with the rise and "discovery" of Nature as a potentiality of *powers* (no longer a totality of *laws*); as a primordial source of life and reality lost and recovered, repressed and liberated; and as a deed projected into an atemporal past and an ideal future. This rise is

only the obverse of an event: Nature's entry into the era of its technical domination. This is the definitive split between subject and Nature-object and their simultaneous submission to an operational finality. Nature appeared truly as an essence in all its glory but under the sign of the *principle of production*. This separation also involves the *principle of signification*. Under the objective stamp of Science, Technology, and Production, Nature becomes the great Signified, the great Referent. It is ideally charged with "reality"; it becomes *the* Reality, expressible by a process that is always somehow a process of labor, at once *transformation* and *transcription*. Its "reality" principle is this operational principle of an industrial structuration and a significative pattern.[1]

From the outset, this process rests on two separated terms whose separation, however, is complicitous: confronted by Nature "liberated" as a productive power, the individual finds himself "liberated" as labor power. Production subordinates Nature and the individual simultaneously as economic factors of production and as respective

1. This is why each product of labor will always be both a commodity and the *sign* of operable Nature and of its operation. In the framework of political economy, each product, besides its use value and exchange value, signifies and verifies the operationality of Nature and the "naturalness" of the process of production. This is why the commodity always has a value-sign, a coded value element. (It is not a question here of connotations of meaning that are grafted on during the stage of consumption. It is at the level of production itself that the commodity signifies, that it *represents* the principle of production and operationalization of Nature.) And, in the exchange of products, it is not only economic values but the code, this fundamental code, that circulates and is reproduced. Similarly, in the institution of labor power, man becomes not only economically operational but also the effect-referential of this operationality-sign.

terms of the same rationality—a transparency in which production is the mirror, directing articulation and expression in the form of a code.

For a long time, even in myth, production has been thought of in the mode of human reproduction. Marx himself spoke of labor as the father and the earth as the mother of produced wealth. This is false. In productive labor man does not make children with Nature. Labor is an objective transformation based on carving out and technically abstracting the subject and the object. Their relation is based only on the equivalence of the two terms as productive forces. What unifies them "dialectically" is the same abstract form.

Thus Nature gains force as ideal reference in terms of the very reality of its exploitation. Science presents itself as a project progressing toward an objective determined in advance by Nature. Science and Technology present themselves as revealing what is inscribed in Nature: not only its secrets but their deep purpose. Here the concept of Nature appears in all its ambiguity:

– It expresses only the finality of the domination of Nature inscribed in political economy. *Nature is the concept of a dominated essence* and nothing else. In this sense, it is Science and Technology that fulfill the essence of Nature by indefinitely reproducing it as separated.

– However, they do this in the name of a finality supposed to be Nature itself.

Hence the same concept operates in both cases: a factor of production and a model of finality; a servile, metaphorical instance of freedom; a detached, metaphorical instance of the totality. And it is by being sublimated and repressed that Nature becomes a metaphor of freedom and totality. Every-

thing that speaks in terms of totality (and-or "alienation") under the sign of a Nature or a recovered essence speaks in terms of repression and separation. Everything that invokes Nature invokes the domination of Nature.

The Moral Philosophy of the Enlightenment

All the major concepts (those worthy of a capital letter) depend on the same operation. The "People," for example, whose ideal reference emerges with the collapse of traditional community and the urban concentration of destructured masses. Marxist analysis unmasked the myth of the People and revealed what it ideally hides: wage earners and the class struggle. On the other hand, Marxism only partially dislocated the myth of Nature and the idealist anthropology it supports. Marx indeed "denaturalized" private property, the mechanisms of competition and the market, and the processes of labor and capital; but he failed to question the following naturalist propositions:

—the useful finality of products as a function of needs;

—the useful finality of nature as a function of its transformation by labor.

The functionality of Nature structured by labor, and the corresponding functionality of the subject structured around needs, belong to the anthropological sphere of use value described by Enlightenment rationality and defined for a whole civilization (which imposed it on others) by a certain kind of abstract, linear, irreversible finality: a certain model subsequently extended to all sectors of individual and social practice.

This operational finality is arbitrary in such a way that the concept of Nature it forgets resists inte-

gration within it. It looks as if forcefully rationalized Nature reemerges elsewhere in an irrational form. Without ceasing to be ideological, the concept splits into a "good" Nature that is dominated and rationalized (which acts as the ideal cultural reference) and a "bad" Nature that is hostile, menacing, catastrophic, or polluted. All bourgeois ideology divides between these two poles.

The same split occurs simultaneously at the level of man, through his idealist simplification as an element of the economic system. Starting with the 18th century, the idea of Man divides into a naturally good man (a projection of man sublimated as a productive force) and an instinctively evil man endowed with evil powers. The entire philosophical debate is organized around these sham alternatives, which result simply from the elevation of man to an economic abstraction. Marxism and all revolutionary perspectives are aligned on the optimist vision. They preserve the idea of an innate human rationality, a positive potentiality that must be liberated, even in the latest Freudo-Marxist version in which the unconscious itself is reinterpreted as "natural" wealth, a hidden positivity that will burst forth in the revolutionary act.

This dichotomy also occurs at the level of labor power. When exploited, labor power is good: it is within Nature and is normal. But, once liberated, it becomes menacing in the form of the proletariat. This contradiction is averted by assimilating the proletariat to a demonic, perverse, destructive Nature. Thus the dichotomy in the idea of Nature which expresses the profound separation in the economic order is admirably recuperated at the ideological level as a principle of moral order and social discrimination.

Fetishized for better or for worse, such is the true "alienation" of Nature and of the corresponding idea of Man. When at the same time he brands Nature and himself with the seal of production, man proscribes every relation of symbolic exchange between himself and Nature. It is this proscribed ambivalence that reemerges in the ambiguity of Nature and in man's own moral contradiction.

Marxism has not disencumbered itself of the moral philosophy of the Enlightenment. It has rejected its naive and sentimental side (Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre), its cloying and fantastic religiosity (from the noble savage and the Age of Gold to the sorcerer's apprentice), but it holds onto the religion: the moralizing phantasm of a Nature to be conquered. By secularizing it in the economic concept of scarcity, Marxism keeps the idea of Necessity without transforming it. The idea of "natural Necessity" is only a *moral* idea dictated by political economy, the ethical and philosophical version of that bad Nature systematically connected with the arbitrary postulate of the economic. In the mirror of the economic, Nature looks at us with the eyes of necessity.

Marx says, "Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants: but, at the same time, the forces in production which satisfy these wants also increase."[2] What is not recognized here—and what allies Marx with the foundations of political economy—is that in

2. *Capital, op.cit.*, III, pp. 799-800.

his symbolic exchanges primitive man *does not guage himself in relation to Nature*. He is not aware of Necessity, a Law that takes effect only with the objectification of Nature. The Law takes its definitive form in capitalist political economy; moreover, it is only the philosophical expression of Scarcity. Scarcity, which itself arises in the market economy, is not a *given* dimension of the economy. Rather, it is what *produces and reproduces* economic exchange. In that regard it is different from primitive exchange, which knows nothing of this "Law of Nature" that pretends to be the ontological dimension of man.[3] Hence it is an extremely serious problem that Marxist thought retains these key concepts which depend on the metaphysics of the market economy in general and on modern capitalist ideology in particular. Not analyzed or unmasked (but exported to primitive society where they do not apply), these concepts mortgage all further analysis. The concept of production is never questioned; it will never radically overcome the influence of political economy. Even Marxism's transcending perspective will always be burdened by counter-dependence on political economy. Against Necessity it will oppose the mastery of Nature; against Scarcity it will oppose Abundance ("to each according to his needs") without ever resolving either the arbitrariness of these concepts or their idealist overdetermination by political economy.

The political order is at stake here. Can the quantitative development of productive forces lead to a revolution of social relations? Revolutionary hope is

3. Cf. Marshall Sahlins,"La première société d'abondance," *Les Temps Modernes* (October, 1968), pp. 641-680.

based "objectively" and hopelessly on this claim. Even for Marcuse in *The End of Utopia*, the due date of revolution is at hand given our technological potentials: quantitative change is possible as of now. Even when the situation has clearly drifted enormously far from revolution and the dominant social relations support the very development of productive forces in an endless spiral, this dialectical voluntarism, for which Necessity exists and must be conquered, is not shaken. Scarcity exists and must be abolished; the Productive Forces exist and must be liberated; the End exists and only the means need be found. All revolutionary hope is thus bound up in a Promethean myth of productive forces, but this myth is only the space time of political economy. And the desire to manipulate destiny through the development of productive forces plunges one into the space time of political economy. The wish to abolish scarcity is not furthered by restoring an integrated productivity. The *concept* of Scarcity itself, the concept of Necessity, and the concept of Production must be exploded because they rivet the bolt of political economy. No dialectic leads beyond political economy because it is the very movement of political economy that is dialectical.

Lycurgus and Castration

Parallel to the concepts of Necessity, Scarcity, and Need in the (vulgar or dialectical) materialist code, the psychoanalytic concepts of Law, Prohibition, and Repression are also rooted in the objectification of Nature.

Vernant cites the story of Lycurgus.[4] Lycurgus

4. *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* (Paris: Maspero, 1966), p. 205.

kills his son Dryas or, in other versions, cuts off his foot believing he is trimming a vine. In another story, Phylacus makes his son impotent while trimming a tree or butchering livestock. Hence the violence against nature (the rupture of exchange with and symbolic obligation toward it) is immediately expiated. All the myths of a vengeful, bad, *castrating* nature take root here. And this is no mere metaphor, as the story clearly indicates. The rupture is immediately the foundation of *castration*, of the Oedipus complex (in this case parental, since the father emasculates the son), and of Law. For only then does Nature appear as an implacable necessity, "the alienation of man's own body." Marx adopted this Law of Necessity along with the Promethean and Faustian vision of its perpetual transcendence, just as psychoanalysis adopted the principle of castration and repression, prohibition and law (in the Lacanian version, by inscription in the order of the Signifier). But in no sense is it a fundamental structure. Neither Law nor Necessity exist at the level of reciprocity and symbolic exchange, where the break with nature that leads to the irreversibility of castration—and consequently to the entire becoming of history (the operational violence of man against nature) and of the unconscious (the redemption of the symbolic debt owed for this operational violence)—has not occurred. In this sense law, which is called the foundation of the symbolic order and of exchange, results instead from the rupture of exchange and the loss of the symbolic. This is why there is properly neither Necessity nor Scarcity nor Repression nor the Unconscious in the primitive order, whose entire symbolic strategy aims at exorcizing the apparition of Law.[5]

5. And the incest taboo? Already this all-powerful concept

Under the sign of Necessity and Law, the same fate—sublimation—awaits Marxism and psychoanalysis. We have seen how materialism's reference to "objective" Necessity led it to fantasize in its revolutionary perspectives the reverse schemes of Freedom and Abundance (the universality of needs and capacities) which are only the sublimated counterparts of Law and Necessity. Similarly, the analytic reference to the Unconscious, product of repression and prohibition, leads to the same step (today psychoanalysis is being short-circuited on a very large scale, and this turning away cannot be called accidental): an ideal reference to a "liberation" of the Unconscious and to its universalization by removing repression.[6] In this case as well, an ideal-revolutionary sublimation of a *content* results from accepting an essential *form* given as irreducible. But this form is merely the specific abstraction of an order that has cancelled symbolic relation in favor of operational violence, symbolic exchange in favor of

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has lost its legitimacy. Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), and also d'Oritgues, *L'Oedipe africain* (Paris: Plon, 1966), etc.

6. That is, to the universalization of a positivized libido and Eros that are "liberated" as value, by which revolutionaries rejoin all the culturalist neo-Freudians in an optimistic, moralizing vision. But the other, strictly Freudian perspective (normally connoting "pessimism") is based on the economic interpretation (the Nirvana principle and a resolution of tensions). Although this interpretation takes the problem of death into account, it contradicts all traditional humanism (idealist or revolutionary), resting instead on a conception of man in terms of instincts. This "materialist" vision is also moral and is secretly directed by Law, an instance of sublimation and repression, and hence the finality of a resolution of these instincts either in the transgression of this Law (the pleasure principle) or in repression (Nirvana principle). In neither case can a resolution of Law be envisioned.

the Law of castration and value—or, better, it has cancelled the actualization of the death impulse and the ambivalence in exchange in favor of a productive Eros split into a symbolic violence of the Unconscious.

Judaeo-Christian Anti-Physis

This separation from Nature under the sign of the principle of production is fully realized by the capitalist system of political economy, but obviously it does not emerge with political economy. The separation is rooted in the great Judaeo-Christian dissociation of the soul and Nature. God created man in his *image* and created Nature for man's *use*. The soul is the spiritual hinge by which man is God's image and is radically distinguished from the rest of Nature (and from his own body): "Uniquely in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever known. In absolute contrast to ancient paganism and oriental religions, Christianity not only institutes a dualism of Man and Nature but also affirms that God's will is that man exploit Nature according to his own ends."[7]

Rationality begins here. It is the end of paganism, animism and the "magical" immersion of man in nature, all of which is reinterpreted as superstition. ("Rational" Marxism makes the same error by reinterpreting it in terms of the "rudimentary" development of productive forces.) Hence although science, technology, and material production subsequently enter into contradiction with the cultural order and the dogmas of Christianity, nonetheless their condition of possibility remains the Christian postulate of man's transcendence of

7. *Science* (Paris), March, 1967.

nature. This is why a scientific movement does not emerge in Greece. Greek rationality remains based on a conformity with nature radically distinguished from the Christian rationality and "freedom" based on the separation of man and nature and on the domination of nature.

This separation immediately establishes not a work ethic (of material domination and production) but an ethic of asceticism, suffering, and self-mortification: an "other-worldly" ethic of sublimation, in Max Weber's expression. Not a productive morality but a fixed order is outlined, in which well-being is to be "earned." And this is an *individualist* enterprise. The passage from the ascetic to the productive mode, from mortification to labor, and from the finality of welfare to the secularized finality of needs (with the Puritan transition at the origin of capitalism where work and rational calculation still have an ascetic, intra-worldly character and an orientation toward well-being) changes nothing in the principle of separation and sublimation, repression and operational violence. Well-being and labor are both well within the realm of ends and means. From ascetic practices to productive practices (and from the latter to consumer practices) there is thus *desublimation*; but the desublimation is only a metamorphosis of repressive sublimation. The ethical dimension is secularized under the sign of the material domination of nature.

Christianity is thus on the hinge of a rupture of symbolic exchanges. The ideological form most appropriate to sustain the intensive rational exploitation of nature[8] takes form within Christian-

8. Yet it was repeatedly intersected by contradictory, heretical currents, which in their protest were always attached to

ity during a long transition: from the 13-14th century when work begins to be imposed as value, up to the 16th century when work is organized around its rational and continuous scheme of value—the capitalist productive enterprise and the system of political economy, that secular generalization of the Christian axiom about nature. But this revolution of the rational calculus of production which Weber noted is not the beginning; it is prefigured in the Christian rupture. Political economy is only a kind of actualization of this break.

Epistemology II:

Structural Limits of the Marxist Critique

The above discussion poses a serious methodological question (which will arise again later in the discussion of the Marxist interpretation of earlier societies). Basing the intelligibility of the contradictions of political economy on the structural givens of the finished system (capital), Marxist analysis cannot

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"naturism": a rehabilitation of nature, a beyond of Christianity most often expressed only by a nostalgia for the origins of Christianity. From St. Francis of Assisi with his Christ-like angelicism (all creatures praise God, etc.)—but St. Francis was a sort of fire fighter for the Catholic Church quenching the flames of the Cathar and pantheist heresies that threatened to engulf the whole Western world—to Spinoza with his subtle and impious pantheism (God is everywhere in Nature, thus he is nowhere) and all the Adamite sects that preached the refusal of labor and the resurrection of the body, and dreamt of abolishing the very finality of the Christian order (its principle of transcendence and sublimation) in their immediate demand for the end of the whole world and for "Paradise now." Against all these naturalist, pantheistic, mystical, libertarian and millenarian heresies, the Church always defended, along with the original break with nature, a morality of effort and merit, of labor and works, which was coupled with the evolution of the order of production and connected with the political dimension of power.

account for these basic coordinates of economic rationality—because the system of political economy tends to project itself retrospectively as a model and subordinates everything else to the genealogy of this model. When Marxism takes up its critique it does not question this retrospective finality. Thus in the strict sense, it analyzes only the conditions of the model's *reproduction*, of its production as such: of the separation that establishes it.[9] The analysis of the production of *the economic as finality and as universal principle of reality*, the analysis of the production of the *production principle*, escapes Marxism since it moves only within the structural field of production. By presupposing the axiom of the economic, the Marxist critique perhaps deciphers the *functioning* of the *system* of political economy; but at the same time it reproduces it as a model. By pretending to illuminate earlier societies in the light of the present structure of the capitalist economy, it fails to see that, abolishing their difference, it projects onto them the spectral light of political economy.

Marx affirmed that it is on the basis of a critical return to its own contradictions that (our) culture becomes capable of grasping earlier societies. Thus we must conclude—and thereby grasping the *relativity* of Marxist analysis—that in Marx's time

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9. Likewise, structural linguistics cannot account for the emergence of language as a *means of communication*: it can only analyze its functioning, and thus its reproduction, as such. But this destination of language, which linguistics takes as an axiom, is merely an extraordinary reduction of language (and hence of the "science" that analyzes it). And what operates in this "science," in the last instance, is the reproduction of this arbitrary model of language. Similarly, the structural analysis of capital only leads back to its principle of logical reality (in which "science" itself participates).

the system of political economy had not yet developed all its contradictions, hence that even for Marx radical critique was not yet possible nor was the real comprehension of earlier societies. Marx himself could not encroach on the system's total logic. Only at a certain stage of development and saturation of the system can critique go to its *roots*. In particular, the fundamental determinations of the economic (form production and form representation), the break they establish in relation to symbolic exchange, and the way a radical revolution of social relations is sketched starting from them can be read only after political economy has invaded all fields of social and individual practice, far beyond the field of material production. It is useless to question Marx about these matters. Analyzing one phase and only one phase of the general process, his critique goes only so far and can only be extrapolated regarding the remainder. Marxism is the projection of the class struggle and the mode of production onto all previous history; it is the vision of a future "freedom" based on the conscious domination of nature. These are extrapolations of the economic. To the degree that it is not *radical*, Marxist critique is led despite itself to reproduce the roots of the system of political economy.

III. HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND PRIMITIVE SOCIETIES

Having analyzed the rewriting of Nature according to the code of production, it is also necessary to analyze the *rewriting of History through the mode of production*. In fact, the two projects are intertwined since the crucial point of the "materialist" decipherment is societies "without history." Moreover, it is not a matter of rewriting but simply of writing. The schema of production does not reinterpret a nature present outside it; the schema of the mode of production does not reinterpret a history already there. Instead, the concepts of production and mode of production themselves "produce" and "reproduce" the concepts of Nature and History as their space time. The model produces this double horizon of extent and time: Nature is only its extent and History only its trajectory. They do not need somehow to have their own names because they are only emanations of the code, referential simulations that acquire the force of reality and behind which the code legislates. These are the "laws of Nature" and the "laws of History." A third instance recovers the other two: their apparent movement is to be read in the Dialectic, which also takes the force of law. These are the "laws of the Dialectic" that govern History (and indeed Nature, for Engels). All these concepts

are articulated under the sign of materialism in a critical perspective, according to the *critical illusion*. This is not a perspective in the Nietzschean sense, which consists in deconstructing the imaginary universality of the solidest conceptual edifices (the subject, rationality, knowledge, history, dialectics) and restoring them to their relativity and symptomality, piercing the truth *effect* by which every system of interpretation doubles itself in the imaginary: in short, by unmasking ideology—in the present case, ideology under the materialist and dialectical sign of production. The logos and the pathos of production must be reduced according to this radical perspectivism.

Structural Causality and the Primitives

Economic anthropology bears witness to the impossibility of accounting for societies without history, writing, or relations of production (one wonders with horror how they could exist without them). We will use as a reference Marxist anthropological thought, specifically Godelier's in "Sur les sociétés précapitalistes," and "L'anthropologie économique," in *L'anthropologie, science des sociétés primitives?*[1]

With all its concepts, this thought tackles a dangerous object and risks being analyzed in return if it does not quickly master that object (all critical analysis must aspire to this—but then what becomes of science?). Hence the object must be approached without dogmatism. "The causality of the economy cannot be presented as the genesis of social superstructures outside the bosom [!] of the economic infrastructure."[2] "It is hard to see what

1. (Paris: Denoël, 1971).
2. *Ibid.* [I have not been able to locate the page references

secret alchemy can make the economy become kinship, or for what mysterious reason the economic could be (badly) hidden under kinship."[3] (But who forces Godelier to seek it there? Perhaps there is nothing hidden at all, and he merely enjoys hide-and-seek.) Does this doctrinal agility augur lacerating revision of concepts? Hardly. Immediately, one reads: "Thus, the relations of kinship function both as elements of the infrastructure and as superstructure."[4] What could this possibly mean? The "mysterious" reason is clearly the will to preserve the distinction between the infrastructure and the superstructure; without which historical materialism collapses. All the rest is only reformist scrupulosity.

By an adjustment of the concept of mode of production, Marxist anthropology thus seeks from beginning to end to preserve materialist orthodoxy against the heresy of primitive societies. "The economist easily distinguishes the productive forces in these societies that rest on hunting, fishing, etc. The relations of production, on the contrary, do not appear separated from social, political, religious or kinship relations."[5] Logically, if there are no longer relations of production (since they are not definable as such), there is no longer any mode of production. And how can it be admitted that we can deal with "productive forces" before any relations of production have hatched? This is hardly a Marxist position. If the productive forces are only the emanation or exercise of preexisting relations,[6] there is no sense in

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for any of the quotes from Godelier. Translator's note]

3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Cf. Sahlins, *op.cit.*

implanting this concept as such. Furthermore, the concept must "produce," come what may; the separation of productive forces and relations of production must be saved, relieved of keeping the relations of production on ice, if they are not still "to appear as separated." This facile cleverness saves the "dialectical" grid which establishes the economy as the determinant instance. But the only dialectic here is that of the reproduction fo the theory through the formal simulation of its object.

The theory results in a perfect sophism of recovery, undoubtedly the masterpiece of a structuralist materialism with "scientific" pretentions! "The fundamental task of economic anthropology is to analyze the role of the economy as *determinant in the last instance,* and, relative to the modes of production and the historical epochs, the dominant role of social structures which at the same time fix the non-economic functions."[7] Dominant? Determinant? What can this mean if not the remodeling of the infra-superstructure determinist causality into a more flexible causality allowing the retention of economic determinism? Clarifying this, moreover, Marx writes: "This much, however, is clear, that the middle ages could not live on Catholicism, nor the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the mode in which they gained a livelihood that explains why here politics, and there Catholicism, played the chief part."[8] Finally (argues Godelier), no society can exist without economics; hence, economics is the determinant instance (if so, then many things can take the role of determinant instance: for example, language). In any case, here is the extreme

7. Godelier, *op.cit.*
8. *Capital, op.cit.,* I, p. 82n..

limit of the theoretical adjustment by which Godelier risks showing how nothing essential has changed: "Under certain conditions, kinship *is* economy, and religion can function directly as a relation of production."[9] This is as much as saying that he cannot imagine the primacy of anything except through the primacy of the economy. And certainly this is linked to the primacy of history: "As soon as humanity exists [!], the functions of economics, kinship, and ideology exist with a determined content and form. This content and this form are transformed with history and by it... In sum, anthropology and history turn up as two complementary fragments of the single science of history."[10] Godelier exhibits a theoretical mania for fragmenting the object into functions in order then to dialecticize them "historically"—in fact, to structuralize them under the hegemony of one of them—and to reconcile the whole under the sign of science! All this is false. It is the paranoid idealist projection of a rationalizing machine where all concepts are mutually engendered according to an apparent dialectical movement (production, economy, science, history) but in fact finalized by a science which sees only separation and which, to be fulfilled, projects an imaginary anthropology of separated functions. Productivism, scientism, and historicism all fashion for anthropology an object in their own image, dislocated so that it responds to their own theoretical manipulation.

In this regard Godelier innocently affirms that "For reasons internal to his scientific practice, the anthropologist must question the ideology that

9. Godelier, *op.cit.*
10. *Ibid.*

beleaguers the interior of his scientific practice."[11] But what if this "scientific" practice by itself was already this ideology? In that case there is no need for interrogation. But the specificity of the anthropological object is precisely the impossibility of defining the economic and the mode of production as a separated instance. The very least requirement would thus be to reexamine the whole matter *starting from this non-separation.* This is impossible for a "science" that can only "dialectically" (to the hierarchical advantage of one instance) synthesize its object, having carefully dismantled it. No ideology is more profound than this one so profound that it eludes Marxist-scientific good will. The Copernican revolution has not yet occurred in anthropology; and in its geocentric or egocentric discourse bourgeois and Marxist Western thought continues to describe the *apparent* movement of primitive exchanges.

Surplus and Anti-Production

Everywhere Godelier's position is full of abrupt postulations and ambiguous extrapolations. For example, "One can say in general that in a primitive society the producers control their means of production and their own labor; that production is oriented more toward the satisfaction of needs than toward the search for a profit; that exchange, when it exists, operates according to culturally determined principles of equivalence between goods and services which circulate among the partners of the exchange."[12] There are no producers; there are no "means of production" and no objective labor,

11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*

controlled or not. There are no needs and no satisfactions that orient them: this is the old illusion of subsistence economy! And exchange does not operate according to principles of equivalence, even "culturally determined" ones. The exchange-gift, to be exact, operates not according to the evaluation or equivalence of exchanged goods but according to the antagonistic reciprocity of persons. All this is more or less fraudulently exported from our political economy. Even if the intention is to nuance the structure and modalities of primitive "economy," the result is to inscribe it in the same discourse as ours: with the same code. It means looking at primtive society from the wrong end.

Consider the production of a surplus. There is ever-renewed amazement at the fact that primtives do not produce a surplus "whereas they could produce one"! It is impossible to think this non-growth, this non-productive desire. The West, as is logical with regard to its own assumptions, always thinks of it as an anomaly, a *refusal* to produce. If the primitives "produce," it is incomprehensible that they do not produce more (production implies the expanding reproduction of productive forces; the truth of production is productivity, a quantitative growth function). The solution must be that they produce "only for their needs." But this is to fall from Charybdis to Scylla, since needs themselves are an undefined function and it is completely arbitrary to arrest them at the threshold of a basic minimum of survival, which has no strict economic justification and derives directly from moral philosophy: from a distinct opposition we have reinvented starting from a moral conception of the superfluous and the artificial (and from the functionalist vision of the instinct for self-

preservation). The savages are "nature." When they have "enough," they stop "producing." This formula contains both perplexed admiration and racist commiseration. Moreover, it is false. The savages fritter away their resources in feasts and risk living "beneath the basic minimum." And although he shows very well how in their festive exchanges the Siane pour back the extra that comes from contact with white civilization, Godelier persists in affirming that "in nearly every case, primitive societies produce a surplus but they do not."[13] Or better yet: "this surplus remains in a potential state"![14] "It seems that they have no reason to produce it." In fact, this concept makes no sense for them. How could reasons to produce a surplus occur to them? Only the anthropologist has good reasons to produce it so that he can discreetly impute it to the savages and then dejectedly verify their bewildering indifference in this regard. Subsistence plus surplus: only the presupposition of production permits this quantitative reduction to additional functions *neither of which* makes sense in primitive exchange.

Subsistence, basic minimum, needs—these are only some of the magical concepts to which the anthropologist has recourse in resolving the impossible economic equation of primitive societies. Other variables help correct the infrastructural equation: the "social," the "cultural," the "historical" (the same desperate patching-up as in our modernist neo-economics). "The simple correlation, at other times assumed, between the existence

13. *Ibid.*

14. Marx says: "By thus acting in the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway" (*Capital, op.cit.*, I, p. 177).

of a surplus, leisure time, invention of culture [!], and the progress of civilization, today no longer appears to be based on the facts and demands a reinterpretation of the conditions of the evolution of social life and history." But this "correlation" demands nothing at all, especially not to be mended and corrected by categories derived from the same discourse. This totally artificial construct simply calls for being deconstructed into its terms. The conclusion would then be reversed. The infrastructure is not adequate. It can be mixed with the socio-cultural—but this is equally abstract since, strictly speaking, the socio-cultural specified as such designates only what is left over from the infrastructure. Godelier's mistake is wanting like Baron Münchhausen, to get out of the vessel by pulling himself up by the hair: "The productivity of labor is measured not only in technical terms. . .it depends even more on social conditions."[16] Hence, there is something "social" in primitive societies which prevents technology from developing and producing a surplus.[17] These acrobatics of the reduction of factors and the remixing "in the dominant" is only conceptual violence. We now know that it is even more destructive than missionaries or venereal disease.[18]

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15. Godelier, *op.cit.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. It is useless to insist on the *political* consequences of this aberration. All neo-imperialist politics is inspired by it. Hence, it is necessary to "eliminate" these social and cultural obstacles in order to pave the way for "modern" technological growth.

18. The symbolic itself does not escape this structural reconstruction. Godelier says: "It is because kinship functions here directly, internally, as an economic, political, and ideological relation, that it functions as the *symbolic* form in which the content of social life is expressed, as the general language of men

Having contested the correlation between surplus and culture, Godelier quickly recaptures it for his account in a different form: "These economies do not limit themselves to the production of subsistence goods; they produce a surplus destined for the functioning of social structures (kinship, religion, etc.)."[19] These societies seem to be sustained according to manuals of modern economics: they obey the same rationality of choice, calculation, allocation of resources, etc. (an imagery that is, moreover, as false for our societies as for the primitives). Hence they subsist, and they then begin to exist "socially." Here again is the absurd attempt to make a separate function out of the "social." Primitive "society" does not exist as an instance apart from symbolic exchange; and this exchange never results from an "excess" of production. It is the opposite: to the extent that these terms apply here,

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between themselves and with nature." The symbolic is thus conceived as a form expressing contents (as language, but according to the traditional linguistic vision). This allows Godelier to concede predominance to it (societies with "symbolic predominance"—Terray) without, however, renouncing the contents and separated functions which remain, under "symbolic" *expression*, the true instance of reference (the economic in particular) which is ready to emerge at the right moment "under the pressure of productive forces." "It is not kinship that is mysteriously transformed into political relations. It is the political function *present in the old relations of kinship* that is developed on the base of new problems." Here we have a new version as mysterious as the other but which resolves the problem by an appeal to principle.

Thus conceived, the symbolic mode, a correlative to others in the array of instances, is no longer at all opposed to the economic mode (one could say that primitive societies "produce" the symbolic as ours "produce" the economic). The symbolic is assigned a functional office and isolated as a category. It is assigned a structural position as a satellite term of the economic: in short, it is emptied of its meaning.

19. Godelier, *op.cit.*

"subsistence" and "economic exchange" are the *residue* of symbolic exchange, a *remainder.* Symbolic circulation is primordial. Things of functional use are *taken from* that sphere (ultimately the substraction will be null and everything will be symbolically consumed). Nothing remains because survival is not a principle. *We* have made it one. For the primitives, eating, drinking, and living are first of all acts that are exchanged: if they are not exchanged, they do not occur.

But the "residual" is still too arithmetic. In fact, there is a certain type of exchange, symbolic exchange, where the relation (not the "social") is tied, and *this exchange excludes any surplus:* anything that cannot be exchanged or symbolically shared would break the reciprocity and institute power. Better yet, *this exchange excludes all "production."* The exchanged goods are apportioned and limited, often imported from far away according to strict rules. Why? Because, given over to individual or group production, they would risk being proliferated and thereby break the fragile mechanism of reciprocity. Godelier says that "Everything happens as if primitive societies had instituted *scarcity.*"[20] But this "scarcity" is not the quantitative, restrictive scarcity of a market economy: it is neither privative nor antithetical to "abundance." It is the condition of symbolic exchange and circulation. It is not the socio-cultural realm that limits "potential" production; instead, exchange itself is based on non-production, eventual destruction, and a process of continuous *unlimited* reciprocity between *persons*, and inversely on a strict

20. *Ibid.*

limitation of exchanged *goods*. It is the exact opposite of our economy based on unlimited production of goods and on the discontinuous abstraction of contractual exchange. In primitive exchange, production appears nowhere as an end or a means: the meaning occurs elsewhere. It is not there as (even underlying) potential. On the contrary, in its accumulative finality and its rational autonomy (production is always end and means), it is continually negated and volatilized by reciprocal exchange which consumes itself in an endless operation.

Godelier ignores all this and colors the objects of exchange with his schema. "At first they function [note the obsession with functionality!] as commodities; then, at the interior [?], as objects of gift and prestige... The same object thus changes function, but the second of these two functions is dominant."[21] (Implication: the first function is determinant!) Thus, the code of Marxist anthropology is saved by multi-functional superimposition! From here one can easily go on to disentangle by simple decantation our own historical stage (we have never left it), in which political economy (and with it its materialist critique) is finally able to recognize what is its own. "Thus one understands better why, from Antiquity to our own day, these objects are stripped more and more of their dominant trait as objects to be given, and why they become specialized in the dominant mode of commercial objects while preserving a traditional aspect."[22] The term "stripped" indicates the profound theoretical racism of these categorizations, which intend only to produce in the course of history what these objects

21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*

already were in the matrix of an archaic economy without being known as such—what historical materialism makes them into: objects of production. For all these objects and men lost in their primitive limbo, this is the *baptism of production*: the baptism of labor and value for nature and goods lost in the gratuity of their richness; the baptism of the economic, of the mode of production, and of the determinant instance for all these exchanges that knew neither instance, determination, nor economic rationality. The materialist missionaries have arrived.

Magic and Labor

The same blind determinism-in-several-instances leads to the same kind of incomprehension of magic: "For primitive man, labor is experienced and thought as the interior and indivisible unity of magic and technical knowledge."[23] In other words, the Trobrianders "know" that it is necessary to work in their gardens, but they think that this work is not enough and that magic is indispensable in order to guarantee the harvest. Magic is basically only insurance on the productive forces of nature! "By his magical practices, man thinks he can insert himself in the natural order's chain of necessary causalities."[24] In nature he sees forces "that he spontaneously endows with human attributes." He conceives of it "by analogy with society, as a network of intentional relations" where the rituals and magical practices were designed to underhandedly influence these forces, etc. This vulgar rewriting of magic is always dominated by the prejudice of a separated

23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*

nature and man, a separated nature and society then rethought "by analogy" and by the image of a primitive (naive-mischievous, rational-irrational) who compels nature to produce by transforming it through labor or manipulating it through signs. Projected here is the worst Western psychology, our own melange of rational pragmatism and superstitious obsession. It is hard to imagine for what "mysterious reason," as Godelier says, control of forces could coexist with a rational operation, if not by his own magic of "the interior and indivisible unity" above. It is not true for archaic agriculture, as Vernant demonstrates in *Travail et nature dans la Gréce ancienne:* nor, *a fortiori*, for the primitive hunter or farmer. Like the Greek peasant, the primitive "contributes much less to the harvest by his pains than by the periodic repetition of rites and festivals."[25] Neither land nor effort is a "factor of production." Effort is not "invested labor power" recovered many times over in value at the end of a production process. It is in a different form as full of ritual as the exchange-gift *lost* and *given* without economic calculation of return and compensation. And the fruits of the harvest are not its "equivalent." As by an excess, they maintain exchange (the symbolic coherence of the group with the gods and nature). Moreover, part of the harvest will immediately be returned as first-fruits in the process of sacrifice and consumption in order to preserve this symbolic movement. Above all, it must never be interrupted because nothing is ever taken from nature without being returned to it. Primitive man does not chop one tree or trace one furrow without

25. Vernant, *Travail et nature dans la Grèce ancienne.* [I have been unable to complete this citation. Translator's note]

"appeasing the spirits" with a counter-gift or sacrifice. This taking and returning, giving and receiving, is essential. It is always an actualization of symbolic exchange through gods. The final product is never aimed for. There is neither behavior aiming to produce useful values for the group through technical means, nor behavior aiming at the same end by magical means. (This is really why there is no scarcity. Scarcity only exists in our own *linear* perspective of the accumulation of goods. Here it suffices that the *cycle* of gifts and counter-gifts is not interrupted.) And it is simply absurd to define primitive activity as abstract subjectivity (utility) or objective transformation (labor or suppletory magic). Magic in the sense that we understand it, as a direct objective appropriation of natural forces, is a concept only negatively determined by our rational concept of labor. To articulate magic and labor in one "interior and indivisible unity" only seals their disjunction. It ultimately disqualifies primitive symbolic practices as irrational in opposition to rational labor.

As in the case of objects, a simple observation of historical decantation produces the materialist stage of the "real" domination of nature. Marx says, "All mythology masters and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in and through imagination, hence it disappears as soon as man gains mastery over the forces of nature. . . : is Achilles possible side by side with powder and lead? Or is the *Iliad* at all compatible with the printing press and steam press?"[26] This crushing argument masks the entire problematic of the symbolic under a functionalist,

26. *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy, op.cit.*, pp. 310-311.

finalist retrospective view of mythology (and magic) in which it only awaits man's rational and technical domination in order to disappear.[27]

Epistemology III:

Materialism and Ethnocentrism

We must now pose again the problem of the general epistemology of historical materialism.

1. Marx outlined the formula for it, precisely in relation to labor, in the *Grundrisse:* "The conception of labor in this general form—as labor as such—is also immeasurably old. Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, 'labor' is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction... This example of labor shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity—precisely because of their abstractness—for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historical relations, and possess then full validity only for and within these relations."[28] What does it mean to say "valid for all epochs" but "fully applicable only for some"? This is the same mystery as the simultaneous subordination of infra- and superstructure, and the dialectical coexistence of a dominance and a determination in the last instance. If "the institution of the individual as laborer, in this nudity, is itself a historical product" (Marx), if "labor is not a real

27. Besides the fact that mythology is here simply relegated to an illusory and provisional superstructure, it is completely untrue that the "real" domination of nature makes the "imaginary" disappear, for the good reason that it generates a fundamental contradiction connected with its abstractness and its very rationality, which primitive symbolic exchange, *which is more concrete in this respect,* does not have.

28. *Grundrisse, op.cit.,* pp. 103-105.

category of tribal economy,"[29] then how could the concept of labor be applicable because of "its very abstractness"? This abstraction is precisely what creates the problem. At the same time that it produces the abstract universality of labor (of labor power), our epoch produces the universal abstraction of the *concept* of labor and the retrospective illusion of the validity of this concept for all societies. Concrete, actual, limited validity is that of an *analytic* concept; its abstract and unlimited validity is that of an *ideological* concept. This distinction concerns not only labor but the whole conceptual edifice of historical materialism: production, productive forces, mode of production, infrastructure (not to mention the dialectic and history itself). All these concepts are in fact historical products. Beyond the field that produced them (especially if they want to be "scientific"), they are only the metalanguage of a Western culture (Marxist, to be sure) that speaks from the height of its abstraction.

2. Nevertheless, it is not a matter of a simple exportation or extrapolation of concepts. Marx clarifies his approach in the same passage. "Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relation, the comprehension of its structure, thereby allows insights into the structure and relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along with it, whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it, etc. Human anatomy contains a key to the

29. M. Sahlins, *op.cit.*, p. 679.

anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known."[30]

Althusser saw in this passage a theoretical revolution in relation to navie genetic evolutionism. This is certainly so, and evolutionism is dead. But isn't this retroactive structuralism still an ideological process, now in the sense of a *structural reconstruction through a simulation model* instead of empiricist, finalist evolutionism? First, it is not certain that the comparison with the anatomy of the ape is anything more than a metaphor. What guarantees the permanence of the same scheme of intelligibility when one goes from the bio-anatomical sphere to the human one of symbolism and historical societies? Nothing is less certain: this is no more certain than that the adult can comprehend the child only in terms of the adult. In any case, in the presupposition of this continuity there is a (positivist) alignment of all analytic approaches with those of the so-called exact sciences. If one does not admit this hypothesis and maintains a specificity of meaning and of the symbolic, Marxism contains a *miscomprehension* of a rupture far more profound than the one Althusser detects.

But let us return to the central argument. Does the capitalist economy retrospectively illuminate medieval, ancient, and primitive societies? No: starting with the economic and production as the determinant instance, other types of organization are illuminated only in terms of this model and not in their specificity or even, as we have seen in the case of primitive societies, *in their irreducibility to*

30. *Grundrisse, op.cit.*, p. 105.

production. The magical, the religious, and the symbolic are relegated to the margins of the economy. And even when the symbolic formations expressly aim, as in primitive exchange, to prevent the emergence with the rise of economic structures of a transcendent social power that would escape the group's control, things are arranged nonetheless so as to see a determination by the economic in the last instance. Models never go beyond their shadows. Be it infinitely diversified and complicated, a model of political economy never permits us to go beyond political economy or to grasp what is on this side of it (or elsewhere).[31] Marx's phrase "bourgeois society, etc." is symptomatic. It assumes productivity in all societies, at least a kernel of it, from which the model of political economy can radiate. If this were true, political economy would be totally correct. If it is not true, this structural implantation of the mode of production can only make the specific reality of a given type of society burst into satellitized, disjointed categories (then rearticulated in terms of relative autonomy and dominance). Science will be vindicated, but at what price? The old finalism is not dead. It has simply moved from a finality of contents (traditional evolutionism) to a structural finality of the model and the analysis itself.

3. We have a new objection to deal with: it is not the model of political economy itself that permits the illumination of earlier societies; it is the *analysis of their contradictions* (which for Marx is the same

31. The impossibility for historical materialism of going beyond political economy toward the past as evidenced by its incapacity to decipher primitive societies, applies as well for the future by the same logic. It appears more and more incapable of outlining a revolutionary perspective truly beyond political economy. It flouders "dialectically" in the impasses of capital, just as it flounders in the miscomprehension of the symbolic.

thing as the analysis of their structures). (Let us say in passing that the metaphor of the ape is worthless—certainly the ape's anatomical structure cannot be illuminated starting from the "contradictions" of human anatomy.) In the same passage Marx says: "Although it is true, therefore, that the categories of bourgeois economics possess a truth for all other forms of society, this is to be taken only with a grain of salt. They can contain them in a developed, or stunted, or caricatured form etc., but always with an essential difference. The so-called historical presentation of development is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself, and, since it is only rarely and only under quite specific conditions able to criticize itself...it always conceives them one-sidedly. The Christian religion was able to be of assistance in reaching an objective understanding of earlier mythologies only when its own self-criticism had been accomplished to a certain degree... Likewise, bourgeois economics arrived at an understanding of feudal, ancient, oriental economics only after the self-criticism of bourgeois society had begun."[32] Hence the crisis and the analysis of the crisis is what permits the comprehension of earlier societies in their difference and originality. Although this appears incontestable, it still participates in the critical and dialectical illusion.

Western culture was the first to critically reflect upon itself (beginning in the 18th century). But the effect of this crisis was that it reflected on itself also as a culture *in the universal*, and thus all other cultures were entered in its museum as vestiges of its

32. *Grundrisse, op.cit.*, p. 106.

own image. It "estheticized" them, reinterpreted them on its own model, and thus precluded the radical interrogation these "different" cultures implied for it. The limits of this culture "critique" are clear: its reflection on itself leads only to the universalization of its own principles. Its own contradictions lead it, as in the previous case, to the world-wide economic and political imperialism of all modern capitalist and socialist Western societies. The limits of the materialist interpretation of earlier societies are the same. Those who have discovered primitive and savage arts have proved their good will and have shown all the lucidity one could ask about the art's originality and complexity. Without bias, they have attempted to "relocate" these "works" into their magical and religious "context." In the kindest yet most radical way the world has ever seen, they have placed these objects in a museum by implanting them in an esthetic category. But these objects are not art at all. And, precisely their non-esthetic character could at last have been the starting point for a *radical perspective* on (and not an *internal critical* perspective leading only to a broadened reproduction of) Western culture. Hence in the materialist interpretation there is only a replacement of "art" by "economics," "the esthetic virus" by "the virus of production and the mode of production." What has been said of the one applies equally to the other. The analysis of the contradictions of Western society has not led to the comprehension of earlier societies (or of the Third World). It has succeeded only in exporting these contradictions to them.[33] We agree with Marx when he says

33. At times not even the contradictions have been exported but very simply the *solution*, that is, the productivist model. But are not the contradictions part of the definition and functioning

that there is a correlation between the analysis of our society's contradictions and the comprehension of earlier societies, but only if we note the *partial* level at which they both remain within historical materialism. The blindness about primitive societies is necessarily linked to a weakness in the radical critique of political economy. This explains why, having failed to subvert the foundations of political economy, historical materialism results only in reactivating its model at a world-wide level (even if this model is dialectical and charged with contradictions). Through its most "scientific"[34]

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of the productivist model?

34. The most advanced bourgeois thought also exports its models (its viruses) under the cover of the most "objective" critical epistemology. "For if the final aim of anthropology is to contribute to a better knowledge of objectified thought and its mechanisms, it is in the last resort immaterial whether in this book the thought processes of the South American Indians take place through the medium of theirs. What matters is that the human mind, regardless of the identity of those who happen to be giving it expression, should display an increasingly intelligible structure as a result of the double reflexive forward movement of two thought processes acting one upon the other, either of which can in turn provide the spark or tinder whose conjunction will shed light on both. And should this light happen to reveal a treasure, there will be no need of an arbitrator to parcel it out, since, as I declared at the outset, the heritage is untransferable and cannot be split up" (Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. J. and D. Weightman [New York: Harper and Row, 1969], pp. 13-14). This is the extreme of liberal thought and the most beautiful way of preserving the initiative and priority of Western thought within "dialogue" and under the sign of the universality of the human mind (as always for Enlightenment anthropology). Here is the beautiful soul! Is it possible to be more impartial in the sensitive and intellectual knowledge of the other? This harmonious vision of two thought processes renders their *confrontation* perfectly inoffensive, by denying the difference of the primitives as an element of rupture with and subversion of (our) "objectified thought and its mechanisms."

inclinations toward earlier societies, it "naturalizes" them under the sign of the mode of production. Here again their anthropological relegation to a museum, a process originated in bourgeois society, continues under the sign of its critique.

IV. ON THE ARCHAIC AND FEUDAL MODE

The Slave

The status of the slave is analyzed by Marxist theory retrospectively, starting from the status of the salaried worker. The latter does not dispose of his labor, nor of the product of his labor; but he does dispose of his labor power, which he can alienate (although not his person which is his property). For his part, the slave disposes neither of the one nor the other. Thus he is being defined as a function of the distinction between labor and labor power (*which will be developed later*), as the sum of these two elements alienated to the master. And the specificity of slavery resides, by deduction, in the master's ownership of the slave's labor power. But this is only an analytic reconstruction. Because one reunites two elements consequently separated, it does not follow that their sum clarifies the earlier state. The radical difference is precisely that *they were not separated* and that what comes to pass from the separation is not readable through anticipation, except by an abuse of analytical power. We are faced again with a presumption of the economic through the grid labor-labor power. The symbolic relation master-slave is conceived as a kind of husk whose "real" kernel will be extracted in the thread of history (in fact, in the thread of the theoretical model that will

impose this principle of reality). What is lost in this process is everything that is exchanged in the master-slave relation and everything not reducible to the alienation-exploitation of a labor power.

The fact that the slave is not separated from the master in the manner of the free laborer implies that the master is not separated from the slave in the manner of the free proprietor (or employer). Neither the one nor the other has the respective status of the individual and individual liberty neither confronts one another as such—which is the definition of alienation. A relation of reciprocity exists between them—not in the modern and psychological sense of a bi-univocal relation of two individualized subjects, that is, in the individualism-altruism context that circumscribes our morality—but in the sense of an *obligation*, of a structure of exchange and obligation where the specification of the terms of exchange in autonomous subjects, where the partition (as we know it), does not yet exist. This is the level of the symbolic and not of autonomous subjects of exchange, nor of an object of exchange (labor power, nourishment, protection) autonomizable as a commodity.[1] Instead, there is a dual structure in which neither the abstraction of value nor the imaginary identity of subjects comes into play.

The free worker finds his identity in the mirror of his labor power. His property, his "liberation" as a worker, signifies his accession to privatized

1. The same problem applies to the domestic "labor" of women in patriarchal society. There is neither juridical individuality nor a contract; nor possible autonomization of labor and its product *as a value* beyond the personal relation and the reciprocal obligation. The desire to assimilate these prestations with the exercise or the exploitation of labor power amounts to a political abstraction.

individuality, that is, to alienation. He is alienated not insofar as he sells his labor power, but insofar as he is an owner, "disposing" of it as if it were his own goods. For finally what is it that allows me to dispose of myself if not "privation" (the right of the privatized individual who is isolated from others)? This is an exorbitant privilege, which the master never had over the slave, since it is only with slave-trading, that is, when slavery is included within a market economy, that the master "disposes" of the slave to the point of being able to alienate him like other commodities. When one analyzes this stage, it is already a market economy that one is analyzing and not the stage that is specific to slavery. In the original relation, the slave, or rather the relation master-slave, is *unalienable* in the sense that neither the master nor the slave are alienated from each other, nor is the slave alienated from himself as is the free worker in the private disposition of his labor power.

In every sense, "liberation" is thus characterized as the process of the interiorization of the separation, of the interiorization of a subjective, abstract essence (in this case, labor power) over which the identity of the subject comes to fix itself. The stave's status is not of this kind. He is *connected* and the sovereignty of the master is not the transcendence of authority as we know it; it is a personal domination that must not be confused with the scheme of master subject and of slave object (which is our form of rational and contractual exchange in which each subject is an object for the other). Domination, as distinct from alienation and exploitation, does not involve the objectification of the dominated, but an obligation that always carries an element of reciprocity.

We have a tendency to reinterpret the relation of slavery (or servitude) as the maximum limit of exploitation and alienation in comparison to our economic configuration and our psychology of subject and object. We consider the passage to salaried labor as "liberation" and objective, historical progress. Yet this view participates in the illusion of Western humanist rationality, a rationality incarnated in the thread of history by the abstract, political State which, when instituted, attributes all earlier forms of domination to the irrational. But it is not true that domination is only an archaic and barbaric form of power. The concept of power with all that it implies about the abstraction and alienation of social relations, about exploiter-exploited relations, etc., has value, strictly speaking, only when applied to our kind of social organization. To project it indiscriminately on earlier forms of domination, explaining the differences as some historical underdevelopment, is to miscomprehend all that the earlier formations can teach us about the symbolic operation of social relations.

The Artisan

The status of the artisan is defined not only by the ownership of his "labor power" (as distinct from the slave) but, as distinct from the salaried worker, by the ownership of his "instruments of production." He controls his "means of production" and the process of his "labor." Only the distribution and commercialization of the product escape him—not wholly however, since if the process of production develops in the framework of an integrated community (the corporation), the processes of distribution and consumption always take place in

the cadre of integrated personal relations (self-subsistence, family, tribe, village, neighborhood). This determination is at least as important as the strict "juridical ownership of the means of production" in defining the artisanal mode.[2] At the stage of artisan exchange, there is still a collective mode to personal relations in which the circulation of products, though mediated by money, still does not have the general equivalence of commodities, just as the people who make the exchanges still do not have the status of equivalence with respect to a market. That is the basic definition of the artisan class: a mode of social relations in which not only is the process of production controlled by the producer but in which the *collective process remains internal to the group,* and in which producers and consumers are the same people, above all defined through the reciprocity of the group. This situation can be illustrated by the example of language. Language is not produced by certain people and consumed by others; everyone is at the same time a producer and a consumer. In fact, there are neither producers nor consumers and what is established is not the general equivalence of individuals *vis-à-vis* language, but an immediate reciprocity of exchange *through language.*[3]

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2. In a certain way, the moment of consumption remains of the artisan type even in the system of our political economy. The user who consumes enters into personal relationship with the product and directly recovers its "use value," just as the process of artisan labor preserves the use value of the labor power of the artisan. But this personal exchange in consumption is restricted for us to the level of the privatized individual. This also remains the only moment that seems to avoid exchange value, hence it is invested today with a very strong psychological and social charge.

3. Language is thus not a "means" of communication (no more than the tool is a "means" of production for the artisan or

In the primitive exchange gift, the status of goods that circulate is close to language. The goods are neither produced nor consumed as values. Their function is the continuous articulation of the exchange. The situation is not completely the same in artisanal exchange since goods there already have a finality of use and a value. But something remains of the personal quality of the exchange that does not permit distinguishing production and consumption as two separated functions. Just as one cannot speak of the relation of the blacksmith to his hammer, or of the relation of the peasant to the plow or his land, as a relation to "means of production," so the relation of the artisan to his work is not one "productive force" applied to the other "forces of production." It is clear moreover that neither the product, nor the instrument, nor the operation itself can be dissociated from the personal relationship in which they occur. All the categories above only serve to rationalize the situation.

It is even false to say that in artisanal work the artisan is "master of his labor" and "product of his labor." For he is not in the situation of an autonomous individual, in a position of "control," that is, of productive exteriority. To define "work" as a process of concrete labor, in opposition to industrial labor, is not enough. It is *something other than labor*. Just as there is no separation between the sphere of producers and the sphere of consumers, so there is no true separation between labor power and the product, between the position of the subject and of the object. The artisan lives his work as a relation

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the primitive). Nor are individuals thinkable as separated terms outside the exchange of language. At this level, language is a symbolic form and it is so not, as is generally thought, in its coded signification function, nor in its structural agency.

of symbolic exchange, abolishing the definition of himself as "laborer" and the object as "product of his labor." Something in the material that he works is a continuous response to that which he does, escaping all productive finality (which purely and simply transforms materials into use value or exchange value). There is something that eludes the law of value and bears witness to a kind of reciprocal prodigality. In his work, what he bestows is lost and given and rendered, expended and resolved and abolished, but not "invested."

All of this is clarified further through the problem of the work of art about which historical materialism, fixated in the scheme of production, has only been able to comment with respect to its mode of socio-historical determination, mechanistic or structural, never being able to account for the moment of its operation and of its radical difference. But this is also true, to a lesser extent, of artisanal work (according to etymology, "demiurge"), which draws a radical difference between work and labor. *Work is a process of destruction as well as of "production,"* and in this way work is symbolic. Death, loss and absence are inscribed in it through this dispossession of the subject, this loss of the subject and the object in the scansion of the exchange. Starting from the concepts of production and labor, we will never grasp what happens there in the negation of labor, the negation of the law of value, in the destruction of value. The work of art and to a certain extent the artisanal work bear in them the inscription of the loss of the finality of the subject and the object, the radical compatibility of life and death, the play of an ambivalence that the product of labor as such does not bear since it has inscribed in it only the finality of value.

The world of production, our world, has eliminated this ambivalence. To project it everywhere else is a theoretically fraudulent operation, but also a failure to the extent that it annihilates its object in order to avoid its radical contradiction. All materialist writing bears the stigmas of the rigidity and the silence that it imposes on its object.

In relation to the Greek city, J.-P. Vernant suggests a very important series of elements pertaining to the status of the demiurge and labor.

The unity of the polis is not based on a distribution of tasks, a division of labor, a functional differentiation, but on a "philia," a political community of citizens defined as peers. There is no human or social function of labor. "The social bond is established beyond the craft at that level where the citizens can reciprocally love one another."[4] The term "division of labor" itself is anachronistic here. It assumes a representation of the craft in relation to production in general, a functional differentiation into abstract, rational elements which is not the case. There is a distribution of tasks as a function of needs and capacities; each "labor" maintains its particular destination and does not have its meaning in reference to other "labor," but uniquely in its end, in the need of the user. The activity of labor is seen exclusively as a function of the use value of the manufactured product. It places the producer and the user in a more or less direct relationship. A personal bond of dependence, a relation of service, seems to be established between them. "From the perspective of use value, the product is not viewed as a function of the human labor that created it, as

4. Vernant, "Le travail et la pensée technique," in *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs, op.cit.*

crystallized labor. On the contrary, it is labor that is seen as a function of the product, as appropriate for the satisfaction of a given need of the user."[5] Demiurgical labor does not produce "value." It is a response to a demand (the need of the user) and is exhausted in this response. Articulated by the demand of the other, and articulating this demand, the object does not take on the status of value (sum of accumulated labor) that could circulate beyond this relation and enter as such into other equivalences. By way of summary, the problem is one of the best use of things, not of their transformation through labor. (Praxis, a noble activity, is always one of use, as distinct from poesis which designates fabrication. Only the former, which plays and acts, but does not produce, is noble.) The result is that in no way does "productivity" emerge. The division of tasks is never considered as a means of organizing production in order to obtain a maximum productivity from a given quantity of labor. Similarly, there is no "technical" autonomization of the instruments of labor. They do not have a technical status like our means of production, their *techne* is connected. They have neither technical thought, nor thought oriented toward indefinite progress.

All these facts converge toward one point: the inadequacy of the concepts of labor, production, productive force, and relations of production in accounting for, let us say, pre-industrial organization (the same holds also for feudal or traditional organization). However, an objection can be made against Vernant. Breaking with the primacy of pro-

5. *Ibid.* [I have not been able to locate the page reference. Translator's note]

duction and denouncing the tendency to impose it in a context where it does not apply, Vernant transfers the emphasis to needs and the finality of personal use. It is these elements that define wealth and it is in them that the personal relation (on which social relations are based) is centered (and not in production, which is not significant). In the polis, two persons are united under the sign of use value, rather than in our economy, where the relation is put under the sign of exchange value. In effect, this defines, for us, the service relation.[6] But it is necessary to see that the notion of service is still strongly impregnated by our categories: economic categories since it simply effects a transfer of exchange value to use value; psychological categories since it preserves the separation of the producer and the user, putting them simply in an intersubjective relation. "Personal" exchange is, in this case, only a psychological dimension that comes to connote or to overdetermine properly economic exchange. (We see this today with the "personalization" of exchanges, the psychological designation of a relation as that of two equivalent economic subjects.) And "service" is only a moralized, altruistic scheme that preserves the respective position of the subjects while seeking to go beyond it.

Symbolic reciprocity is very different from this. *The symbolic must never be confused with the psychological.* The symbolic sets up a relation of exchange in which the respective positions cannot be autonomized:

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6. Moreover, it is this notion of service that is everywhere used as an excuse to revive the present system of exchange value, that is, the fiction (it can only be a fiction for us) of a personal exchange mediated only by use value.

—neither the producer and his product;
—nor the producer and the user;
—nor the producer and his "concrete" essence, his labor power;
—nor the user and his "concrete" essence, his needs;
—nor the product and its "concrete" finality, its utility.

All these distinctions, which are evident in psychology and political economy, are excluded by symbolic relations.

Abstract social labor creating exchange value by the mediation of the whole system of capital is the formula of our political economy. Labor-use value creating product-use value in a direct relation of producer and user is the formula of the artisan mode according to Vernant. This is still an economic formula. In our contemporary ideology of service it functions in the first instance purely and simply as a bonus and excuse, just as use value in general serves as an excuse for exchange value. Symbolic relations call both formulas into question. To the extent that Vernant restricts the originality of the artisan form as in the second formula, he allows himself to avoid its specifically symbolic character, its irreducibly non-economic nature.

The materialist rewriting of the slave or the artisan (of the slave or feudal-artisanal mode) has serious consequences to the extent that schemas of "liberation" and transcendence, which are in reality repressive schemas, develop from it. We have seen how the reinterpretation of slavery in terms of the expropriation of labor power led to considering its reappropriation by the "free" laborer as absolute progress in the human order. This relegates servi-

tude to an absolute barbarism, fortunately overcome thanks to the development of productive forces. This ideology of freedom remains the weak point of our Western rationality, including Marxism.

Similarly, the conception of the artisan as "master of his labor and of his production," as "subject of the system of labor"[7] immediately implies the utopia of *a Golden Age of productive labor*. But, there is no "labor;" there is only the division of labor and the sale of labor power. The truth of labor is its capitalist definition. Starting from this definition, the illusion is established of labor that *would be nothing but labor*, one that can be reappropriated in the totality of its process, as an artisanal alternative to the capitalist system. In fact, this alternative remains imaginary. It makes no reference at all to what is symbolic in the mode of the artisan, but to the artisan revised and corrected in terms of the mastery and autonomy of the producer. But such mastery is absurd since its definition encloses itself in terms of labor and use value. The individual who "controls" his labor is an idealization of this basic constraint. It is simply the slave who has become *his own master*, since the master-slave couple is interiorized in the same individual without ceasing to function as an alienated structure. He "disposes" of himself; he is his own usufruct. This is self-management at the level of the individual producer, but self-management as we know is nothing but the metamorphosis of productive management. In its collective form, it outlines today the Golden Age of social-productivism. The self-management of the artisan is only the Golden Age of the small,

7. Pierre Rolle, *Introduction à la sociologie du travail* (Paris: Larousse, 1970), p. 148.

individual producer, the apotheosis of the "instinct of workmanship."

But this nostalgic view of the artisan is not the deed of a few esthetes or intellectuals. All worker demands that transcend wage demands even a little aim, in this sense, at a reappropriation of the labor process, if not of the product. Through working conditions, "job enrichment," the questioning of assembly-line work, the control of work rates and investments, etc., it is always a matter of becoming again "the subject of the labor system." Proudhon had envisaged "the polyvalence by which the worker, accomplishing the whole cycle of production, would become once again the master of the complete process." Whether this demand today is individual (it gets stranded in the potter or the neo-artisan), communal or collective, it is always the ideal of a reappropriation of labor and this ideal depends on sublimation. It perpetuates, under the autonomy of the laborer, the principle of the sublimation of labor. It is contemporaneous, in the shadow of the industrial system and its constraints, with the manipulated resurrection of the body and sexuality in which each becomes again the master of his body and the free agent of his pleasure, at once interiorizing the sexual *function* and reinvesting the body as the *instrument of the production* of pleasure. Once again there is outlined a Golden Age of functional and productive Eros. In both cases, we have repressive desublimation.[8]

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8. The phantasm of leisure as an autonomous activity and the phantasm of a purely technical division of labor as a social ideal of transparency obviously depend on the same schema. One can even ask oneself if the perspective that Marx outlines of a realm beyond the division of labor is nothing but a *polyvalent* extension of the autonomous status of the individual artisan:

Does the freedom to "function" sexually constitute a revolution? Does the mastery of the process of production constitute a revolution? One thing is certain: autonomous or not, master of himself or not (individually or collectively), labor can only inscribe in production a sublimated Eros, or in the case of the phantasm of self-management, a repressively desublimated Eros.

Epistemology IV:

Marxism and Miscomprehension

"The idea that in all societies the relations of production, and consequently, politics, law, religion, etc., presuppose that in all societies the same articulation of human activities exists, that technology, law, politics, and religion are always necessarily separated and separable; it is to extrapolate to the totality of history the structuration of our own society, which is inevitably meaningless outside of it." This summarizes the critique that we have made, in the sense that it aims less at the contents of the analysis than at the form, less at any particular conclusion than at the "scientific" tendency itself.[9] The dialectical structuring of

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"...in communist society...society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic" (*The German Ideology, op.cit.*, p. 22). It is an ideal of freedom and of disposability, an ideal of the achievement of a subject, a humanist project that would not contradict bourgeois, liberal thought in its better moments. And who will rule "the general production?"

9. Cardan, pseudonym for Cornélius Castoriadis, editor of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 1949-1965. [Translator's note]

categories which remain in a latent state, with its latent hierarchy placing the determinant instance at the heart of the process of development, as separated functions, as distinctive oppositions ruled by the code, whether traditional or Marxist, carries an incurable *ethnocentrism of the code*. It is at this price that "materialist" analysis aspires to be a science, to be intelligible; but this intelligibility is that of its own code. From the outset it labors in fact to reproduce it, while at the same time compressing its object, scotomizing it, arming itself against it with a whole system of defenses and miscomprehensions. It works *in the imaginary* like the man who, having lost his key in a dark alley, looks for it in a lighted area because, he says, that it is the only place where he could find it. Thus, historical materialism does not know how to grasp earlier societies in their symbolic articulation. It only finds in them what it could find under its own light, that is, its artificial mode of production.

This miscomprehension is not a peripheral or secondary weakness. (The deepest racist avatar is to think that an error about earlier societies is politically or theoretically less serious than a misinterpretation of our own world. Just as a people that oppresses another cannot be free, so a culture that is mistaken about another must also be mistaken about itself. This is only another way of formulating Marx's equation between the level of the analysis of contradictions and the comprehension of the specificity of other societies.) In effect, the miscomprehension, moving from societies "without history" to archaic or feudal formations, nurtures a *theoretical, political and strategic miscomprehension of capitalist formations themselves.* It is a shortcoming of historical materialism in accounting

for the strategic configuration of modern societies which echoes in its incapacity to account for the symbolic organization of earlier formations. And it does not help to say that "it has other fish to fry." That is, historical materialism has the critique of the capitalist economy and its relations of production as its object and primitive societies, kinship, language and the symbolic, are not its province. Historical materialism must be held responsible, *by its own standards*, for the carelessness and error that it perpetuates in all these domains for through these miscomprehensions, to which it is an accomplice, its own object then eludes it. It is the contradictions of this object, repressed and mystified, that become the basis for analyzing historical materialism rather than that which analyzes them. It therefore is not a matter of accidental or venal shortcomings: the repression of the symbolic nourishes all the rationalist political illusions, all the *dreams of political voluntarism*, that are born in the terrain of historical materialism.

Along with Cardan one can offer the still more radical hypothesis that not only have the categories of historical materialism no meaning outside of our society, but that *perhaps in a fundamental way they no longer have any meaning for us*. To the extent that they function at the interior of our reality principle, which is the principle of separation (this is where its analytic—indeed, "scientific"—efficacy resides), they blind us along the line of separation itself, along this fracture of the symbolic, along this place (or non-place: utopia) beneath (or beyond) the economy and the internal contradictions of the mode of production. Materialist logic, seeing only the contradictions that are accessible to dialectical or structural schemas, perhaps sees only the

symptoms, at the interior of the system, of that rupture which founds the system itself. The political significance of this critique is that the struggle at the level of these contradictions-symptoms does not touch their basis, which is separation. This struggle is only an accomodation that launches the well-known cycle of the extended reproduction of the contradictions and the system itself. The "dialectical" revolution in the order of the mode of production is only perhaps the symptomatic discourse of the separation. Historical materialism prohibits itself from seeing this. It is incapable of thinking the process of ideology, of culture, of language, of the symbolic in general. It misses the point not only with regard to primitive societies, but it also fails to account for the radicality of the separation in our societies, and therefore the radicality of the subversion that grows there.

V. MARXISM AND THE SYSTEM OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

A Euclidean Geometry of History?

Historical materialism emerges in a society ruled by the capitalist mode, a stage of actualization knotted by contradictions connected to the mode of production and to the final catastrophe of the class struggle. It wishes to decipher the ultimate phase of political economy and aims at its abolition. A theoretical reason and a universal practice, a dialectic of productive forces and relations of production, a continuous logic of contradiction, a homogenous space of positivity and negativity—all of this (and the concept of history itself) is organized according to the idea that, with the mode of capitalist production, the universal process approaches its truth and its end. Earlier modes of production are never envisaged as autonomous or definitive; it is unthinkable that history could have been arrested with them. The dialectic limits them to being no more than successive phases in a process of revolution that is also a cumulative process of production. The capitalist mode does not escape this inexorable logic, but it assumes, nonetheless, an absolute privilege to the extent that the other modes of production have only cleared the way for the fundamental contradiction between the production of social wealth and the production of social

relations, and for the possibility for men finally to resolve their social existence *in its real terms*. In earlier formations, men blindly produced their social relations at the same time as their material wealth. The capitalist mode is the moment when they become conscious of this double and simultaneous production, when they aim to take it under rational control. No earlier society had posed this question in these terms; hence, none could resolve it. They could not have knowledge of the end of history because they lived neither historically nor within the mode of production. This is why they were really only precursors; their truth was already beyond them in the future concept of history, and in its content, the determination of the social relation by material production. This concept would appear only in the final stages of capitalism and in its critique, illuminating in one stroke the entire earlier process. Capital is thus an end and all history is gathered in the final process of its abolition. Or better, it is the only mode of production whose critique becomes possible in its real terms; this is why the revolution that puts an end to it is definitive.

Behind all of this there lie two postulates:

—A process of historical development is already there in all earlier societies (a mode of production, contradictions, a dialectic) but they do not produce a concept of it and hence do not transcend it.

—The moment of becoming conscious of the process (the production of the critical concept connected to the conditions of the capitalist formation) is also the decisive stage of its revolution.

All of this is perfectly Hegelian and one can raise questions about the type of necessity that makes the fundamental contradiction connected to the determinant instance of the economy, which is already

"objectively" at work in earlier societies, become manifest at the same time as the discourse capable of founding it theoretically (historical materialism). As if by chance, the *reality* of the mode of production enters the scene at the moment when someone is discovered who invents the *theory* of it. As if by chance, at the same moment that the class struggle enters its overt and decisive phase, it discovers the theory that takes account of it scientifically and objectively (whereas the blind and latent class struggles in earlier societies only produced ideologies). This conjunction is a little too neat and irresistibly evokes the Hegelian trajectory in which the saga of Spirit is completely illuminated retrospectively, only to culminate in the discourse of Hegel himself.

This conjunction of analysis and "objective reality" ("Communism is the movement of the real itself") is only the materialist variant of our culture's pretention to the privilege of being closer than any other culture to the universal, closer to the end of history or truth. This rationalist eschatology, which takes its bearings on the irreversibility of a linear temporality of accumulation and unveiling is *par excellence* that of science. The phantasm of science is double: on the one hand, there is an "epistemological break" that relegates all other thought to a senseless prehistory of knowledge and, simultaneously, on the other hand, there is a linear accumulation of knowledge, hence of truth as a final totalization. This procedure allows our society to think itself and live itself as superior to all others. It is not only *relatively* more advanced by the fact that our society succeeds them, but *absolutely* more advanced because, as the holder of the *theory* of this objective finality of science or history, it reflects itself *in the universal*, taking itself as end and, hence

retrospectively, as the principle of explication of earlier formations.

The materialist theory of history cannot escape from ideology. We have arrived at the moment of objectivity, the truth of history, the revolutionary denouement. But what authorizes science in its scorn of magic or alchemy, for example, in this disjunction of a truth to come, of a destiny of objective knowledge, hidden from the infantile miscomprehension of earlier societies? And what authorizes the "science of history" to claim this disjunction of a history to come, of an objective finality that robs earlier societies of the determinations in which they live, of their magic, of their difference, of the meaning that they attribute to themselves, in order to clarify them in the infrastructural truth of the mode of production to which we alone have the key? The culmination produced by Marxist analysis, in which it illuminates the demise of all contradictions, is *simply the emergence of history*, that is, a process in which everything is always said to be resolved at a later date by an accumulated truth, a determinant instance, an irreversible history. Thus, history can only be, at bottom, the equivalent of the ideal point of reference that, in the classical and rational perspective of the Renaissance, allows the spatial imposition of an arbitrary, unitary structure. And historical materialism could only be the Euclidean geometry of this history.

It is only in the *mirror* of production and history, under the double principle of indefinite accumulation (production) and dialectical continuity (history), only by the arbitrariness of the *code*, that our Western culture can reflect itself in the universal as the privileged moment of truth (science) or of revolution (historical materialism). Without this

simulation, without this gigantic reflexivity of the concave (or convex) concept of history or production, our era loses all privileges. It would not be any closer to any term of knowledge or any social truth than any other.

Here, it is not a question of an ideal vantage point on historical materialism. Rather it is a matter of knowing if historical materialism (history made dialectical by the mode of production) does not itself constitute an ideal vantage point, that is, the point of view of a reductive ideality of all social formations, including our own. This is why it is important to begin with this *ethnological reduction* and to strip our culture, including its materialist critique, of the absolute privilege that it gives itself by the imposition of a universal code (the strategic element of this code being the conjunction, under the sign of truth, of theory and reality, or of "critical" theory and "real" contradictions).

Returning to Marx, Althusser develops this theory of a moment of history (our own) when science exists in an immediate form of consciousness, when truth can be read in an open book of phenomena. In opposition to all prevous modes, says Althusser, the capitalist mode constitutes "the exceptional, specific present in which *scientific abstractions exist in the state of empirical realities.* The historical epoch of the foundation of the science of Political Economy does seem here to be brought into relationship with experience itself (*Erfahrung*), i.e., with the straightforward reading of the essence in the phenomenon. Or, if you prefer, the sectional reading of the relationship with the essence of a particular epoch of human history in which the generalization of commodity production and hence of the category commodity appears simultaneously as the absolute

condition of possibility and the immediate given of this direct reading from experience."[1] In the citation on the anatomy of the ape and in the analysis of Aristotle's concept of value, Marx evidences this position: "It requires a fully developed production of commodities before, *from experience* alone, the *scientific truth* springs up. . ."[2] If it is in the epistemological break that Marxist discourse is founded as science, this break is only possible "in a society in which the commodity form has become the general form of the produce of labor."[3] Hence (Althusser): "If the present form of capitalist production has produced scientific truth itself in its invisible reality (*Wirklichkeit, Erscheinung, Erfahrung*), in its self-consciousness, its own phenomenon is therefore its own self-criticism in act (*en acte*)—then it is perfectly clear why the present's retrospection of the past is no longer ideology but true knowledge, and we can appreciate the *legitimate epistemological primacy of the present over the past.*"[4]

To this Marxist scientific position, one can object in two ways:

1. One can admit that the epistemological break which, made possible by a certain historical process and in its own turn making possible the scientific analysis of this process, marks not a "critical" rupture but a vicious circularity. Through the generalized commodity form, historical materialism clarifies all the significations of our society as regulated by the generalized commodity form (either by

1. *Reading Capital*, trans. B. Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1972), p. 124.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

the mode of production, or by the dialectic of history. It does not matter by which concept this circularity is known. In all cases, "science," beginning with its break, only describes the coincidence of the state of affairs that produced it and the scientific model that it outlines.). Is this the dialectic? Not at all. It is the self-verification of a model that is achieved through the adequacy of the rational (itself) and the real. In fact, this break of which Marxism avails itself is equivalent, as in all "science," to the establishment of a principle of rationality that is only the rationalization of its own process.

2. Instead of contesting historical materialism on its own explanation of itself (the pretension of being a scientific discourse founded on a certain historical development), one can agree with it. But with the addition that, strictly speaking, in Marx's time, the commodity form had not at all attained its generalized form, and has had a long history *since Marx*. Thus Marx was not in a historical position to speak scientifically, to speak the truth. In that case, another break imposes itself, one that would risk making Marxism appear as a theory of a surpassed stage of commodity production, hence, as an ideology. At least, if one wanted to be scientific!

In the first case one challenges completely the validity of Marxist concepts (history, dialectic, mode of production, etc.) as an arbitrary model that verifies itself, like any self-respecting model, by its own circularity. One challenges historical materialism in its form and it falls to the level of an ideology. In the second case, one preserves the fundamental *form* of the Marxist critique of political economy but forces its *content* to break out beyond that of material production alone. In this hypothesis one

can admit that, since Marx, there has been just such an extension of the sphere of productive forces, or better, of the sphere of political economy (in which consumption as the production of signs, needs, knowledge, sexuality, is directly integrated, or on the way toward integration, as productive forces). In brief, so many things have erupted in the "infra-structure" that the distinction infra-superstructure breaks down and today contradictions emerge at all levels. Something in the capitalist sphere has changed radically, something Marxist analysis can no longer respond to. Hence, in order to survive it must be revolutionized, something which certainly has not been done since Marx.

This hypothesis is distinguished from the first by maintaining that everything can still be explained by a critique of political economy (but one that is generalized) and in the perspective of historical materialism (the instance of production). But, extended to all domains and extracted radically from its economistic tendency. This hypothesis, which pushes Marx to the limit, may still not be tenable. It is possible that the extension of the sphere of productive forces, which amounts to a radicalization of the concept, is such that the concept itself would have to go. What would become of the key concepts of historical materialism—infra-superstructure, ideology, dialectic of the relations of production, surplus value, class and class struggle—when confronted by this generalized political economy? Do they maintain such a coherence among themselves and *with the historical era in which they were born* that they become useless, even mystifying for us? Perhaps political economy is inseparable from the theory of the determinant instance of *material* production, in which case the Marxist

critique of political economy is not extendable to a generalized theory.

The Third Phase of Political Economy

In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx drew up a kind of genealogy of the system of exchange value:

1. Only the surplus of material production is exchanged (in archaic and feudal production, for example). Vast sectors remain outside the sphere of exchange and commodities.

2. The entire volume of "industrial" material production is alienated in the exchange (capitalist political economy).

3. Even what is considered unalienable (divided, but not exchanged)—virtue, love, knowledge, consciousness—also falls into the sphere of exchange value. This is the era of "general corruption," of "universal venality," "the time when each object, physical or moral, is brought to market as a commodity value in order to be priced at its exact value."

The schema is clear, beyond what Marx partially foresaw. Between phase 1 and phase 2 there is the birth of capital, a decisive change not only regarding the *extension* of the sphere of exchange, but also its repercussions at the level of social relations. Between phase 2 and phase 3, by contrast, Marx and Marxism see only a kind of extensive effect. The "infrastructural" mutation which sets the present mode of production and social relations into place, is achieved in phase 2—phase 3 represents only the "superstructural" effect in the domain of "non-material" values. With Marx, and against him in some ways, we think that it is necessary to give this genealogy all of its analytical force.

There is a decisive mutation between phase 2 and phase 3. Phase 3 is as revolutionary in relation to phase 2 as phase 2 is in relation to phase 1. To the third power of the system of political economy corresponds a new type of social relations, a type that is different from the contradictions of phase 2, which is properly that of capital (and of *Capital*). In Marx's projection this new phase of political economy, which in his time had not yet fully developed, is immediately neutralized, drawn into the wake of phase 2, in terms of the market and "mercantile venality." Even today the only "Marxist" critique of culture, of consumption, of information, of ideology, of sexuality, etc. is made in terms of "capitalist prostitution," that is, in terms of commodities, exploitation, profit, money and surplus value. That is, terms characteristic of phase 2 and though reaching their full value there they only serve as a *metaphorical reference* when transferred as a principle of analysis to phase 3. Even the Situationists, without doubt the only ones to attempt to extract this new radicality of political economy in their "society of the spectacle," still refer to the "infrastructural" logic of the commodity. From this derives their fidelity to the proletariat, which is logical if, behind the organization of the spectacle, the exploitation of labor power is still determinant—the spectacle being only an immense connotation of the commodity. But this is illogical if the concept of the spectacle is taken *as that of the commodity*, as Marx did in his time, in all its radicality as a generalized process of social abstraction in which "material" exploitation is only one particular phase. In this hypothesis, it is the form-spectacle that is determinant since one begins with *the most*

developed structural phase.[5] This step truly overturns perspectives regarding politics, revolution, the proletariat and social classes. But this is to accept or to allow at any rate that a revolution has occurred in the capitalist world without our Marxists having wanted to comprehend it. The objection that our society is still largely dominated by the logic of commodities is irrelevant. When Marx set out to analyze capital, capitalist industrial production was still largely a minority phenomenon. When he designated political economy as the determining sphere, religion was still largely dominant. The theoretical decision is never made at the quantitative level, but at the level of a structural critique.

This mutation concerns the passage from the form-commodity to the form-sign, from the abstraction of the exchange of material products under the law of general equivalence to the operationalization of all exchanges under the law of the code. With this passage to *the political economy of the sign*, it is not a matter of a simple "commercial prostitution" of all values (which is the completely romantic vision from the celebrated passage of the *Communist Manifesto*: capitalism tramples on all human values—art, culture, labor, etc.—in order to make money; the *romantic critique* of profit). It is a matter of the passage of all values to exchange-sign value, under the hegemony of the code. That is, of a structure of control and of power much more subtle and more totalitarian than that of exploitation. *For the sign is much more than a connotation of the commodity*, than a semiological supplement to

5. With his concept of "reification," Lukács, without doubt, constituted the only critical line of theoretical development among Marx and the Situationists.

exchange value. It is an operational structure that lends itself to a structural manipulation compared with which the quantitative mystery of surplus value appears inoffensive. The super-ideology of the sign and the general operationalization of the signifier—everywhere sanctioned today by the new master disciplines of structural linguistics, semiology, information theory, and cybernetics—has replaced good old political economy as the theoretical basis of the system. This new ideological structure, that plays on the hieroglyphs of the code, is much more illegible than that which played on productive energy. This manipulation, that plays on the faculty of producing meaning and difference, is more radical than that which plays on labor power.

The *form*-sign must not be confused with the *function* of social differentiation by signs, which, for its part, is contemporaneous with the drama of the bourgeois class, a moneyed class nostalgic for caste values. Since the French moralists of the 17th century, there has been a long literature on the social psychology of distinction and prestige that is connected with the consolidation of the bourgeoisie as a class and that today is generalized to all the middle classes and the petty bourgeoisies. (This literature finds its philosophical resonance in the "dialectic" of being and appearance.) The important question is not this one but rather that of the symbolic destruction of all social relations not so much by the ownership of the means of production but by *the control of the code*. Here there is a revolution of the capitalist system equal in importance to the industrial revolution. And it would be absurd to say that this logic of the sign concerns only the ruling class or the middle class

which is "hungry for distinction," the proletariat being free of it thanks to the materiality of its practice. This would be like saying that the theory of the form-commodity was good for the industrial and urban classes, but that the peasants and artisans (the vast majority in Marx's day) had nothing to do with it. The form-sign applies to the whole social process and it is largely unconscious. One must not confuse it with the *conscious* psychology of prestige and differentiation, just as one must not confuse the form-commodity, the abstract and general structure of exchange value, with the *conscious* psychology of profit and economic calculation (where classical political economy remains).

Against those who, fortified behind their legendary materialism, cry idealism as soon as one speaks of signs, or anything that goes beyond manual, productive labor, against those who have a muscular and energetic vision of exploitation, we say that if the term "materialist" has a meaning (one that is critical, not religious) it is we who are the materialists. But it does not matter. Happy are those who cast longing eyes at Marx as if he were always there to give them recognition. What we are attempting to see here is to what point Marxist logic can be rescued from the limited context of political economy in which it arose, so as to account for *our* contradictions. This is on the condition that it give to its theoretical *curvature* the flexibility that it lost long ago in favor of an instrumentalism, of a fixed linearity. We are attempting to rescue it from the limited dimensions of a Euclidean geometry of history in order to test its possibility of becoming what it perhaps is, a truly *general* theory. Once again, this is only an exploratory hypothesis. It postulates a dialectical continuity between the

political economy of the commodity and the political economy of the sign (hence of the critique of the one and of the other). The guarantee of this continuity, properly speaking, is not the Marxist postulate of the mode of production. The radical hypothesis no longer accepts this fundamental concept, seeing it as an arbitrary aspect of a certain model. At bottom, the question is posed as follows:

—Are we always within the capitalist mode of production? If the answer is yes, we readily accept classical Marxist analysis.

—Are we within a *later* mode, so different in its structure, in its contradictions and in its mode of revolution, that one must distinguish it radically from capitalism (while maintaining that it is always a question of a mode of production which is determinant as such)?

—Are we, quite simply, within a mode of production at all, and *have we ever been in one?*

Concerning the present phase of political economy, Marxist thought gives us only analyses centered on monopolistic capitalism. In effect, this is the only point which imposes the necessity to theorize something that Marx merely foresaw. But the various theoreticians (Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, etc.) analyzed it according to the principle of the least theoretical effort, keeping as close as possible to classical concepts and limiting the problem to its infrastructural and political givens (the end of competition, the control of the market, imperialism). But the monopolist stage signifies much more than an extension of the competitive phase of capitalism. It signifies a complete restructuring and a different logic.

What happens when the system becomes monopolistic? In his account in *The Poverty of*

Philosophy, Marx goes back to a citation from Ricardo: "Commodities which are *monopolized,* either by an individual, or by a company, vary according to the law which Lord Lauderdale has laid down: they fall in proportion as the sellers augment their quantity, and rise in proportion to the eagerness of the buyers to purchase them; their price has no necessary connexion with their natural value; but the price of commodities, which are subject to competition, and whose quantity may be increased in any moderate degree, will ultimately depend, not on the state of demand and supply, but on the increased or diminished cost of their production."[6] (Thus, of labor time.) Thus, when the system becomes monopolistic, labor time and production costs cease to be the decisive criteria (and become surplus value?). But one does not go as far with the law of supply and demand, defined by literal thought as a *natural* equilibrium of the two terms. Their correlation is not free, no more than the market itself. It is the control of demand (Galbraith) that becomes the strategic articulation. Whereas the competitive system still acted at a contradictory and perilous level in the exploitation of labor power, the monopolistic system transfers its strategy to a level where the dialectic no longer operates. In the monopolistic system, there is no longer any dialectic of supply and demand; this dialectic is short-circuited by a calculation of foreseeable equilibrium. The monopolistic system (the techno-structure according to Galbraith) is supported throughout by a myth of competition,[7] the

6. *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1936), p. 42.

7. From this comes the artificial oligopoly on which the real

hegemony of production is supported throughout by a fiction of a dialectic of supply and demand. But there is more to it than this. In the planned cycle of consumer demand, the new strategic forces, the new structural elements—needs, knowledge, culture, information, sexuality—have all their explosive force defused. In opposition to the competitive system, the monopolistic system institutes *consumption* as control, as the abolition of the contingency of demand, as planned socialization by the code (of which advertising, style, etc. are only glaring examples). The contradictions do not end here, but are functionally integrated and neutralized by processes of differentiation and redistribution (processes which the competitive system, in the area of labor power, did not have at its disposal). Thus consumption, which characterizes the monopolistic era, implies something quite different from a phenomenology of affluence: it signifies the passage, by its contradictions, to a mode of strategic control, of predictive anticipation, of the absorption of the dialectic, and of the general homeopathy of the system.

Demand and need correspond more and more to a mode of simulation. These new productive forces no longer pose questions to the system: they are an anticipated response, controlled in their very emergence. The system can afford the luxury of contradiction and dialectic through the play of signs. It can indulge itself with all the signs of revolution. Since it produces all the responses, it annihilates the

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monopoly is stablized. Just as bipartisanism is the optimal political form for the functioning of monopoly power by a single class, so peaceful coexistence of two powers (soon three) is the stabilized form of world imperialism.

question in the same blow. Only with the imposition and monopoly of the code is this possible. Whatever one does, one can only respond to the system in its own terms, according to its own rules, answering it with its own signs. the passage to this stage thus constitutes something more than the end of competition. It means that one goes from a system of productive forces, exploitation, and profit, as in the competitive system dominated in its logic by social labor time, to a gigantic operational game of question and answer, to a gigantic combinatory where all values commutate and are exchanged according to their operational sign. The monopolistic stage signifies less the monopoly of the means of production (which is never total) than *the monopoly of the code.*

This stage is accompanied by a radical change in the functioning of the sign, in the *mode of signification*. The finalities of prestige and distinction still corresponded to a traditional status of the sign, in which a signifier referred back to a signified, in which a formal difference, a distinctive opposition (the cut of a piece of clothing, the style of an object) still referred back to what one could call the use value of the sign, to a differential profit, to a lived distinction (a signified value). This is still the classical era of signification with its referential psychology (and philosophy). It is also the *competitive* era in the manipulation of signs. The form-sign describes an entirely different organization: the signified and the referent are now abolished to the sole profit of the play of signifiers, of a generalized formalization in which the code no longer refers back to any subjective or objective "reality," but to its own logic. The signifier becomes its own referent and the use value of the

sign disappears to the benefit of its commutation and exchange value alone. The sign no longer designates anything at all. It approaches its true structural limit which is to refer back only to other signs. All reality then becomes the place of a semiurgical manipulation, of a structural simulation. And, whereas the traditional sign (also in linguistic exchanges) is the object of a conscious investment, of a rational calculation of signifieds, here it is the code that becomes the instance of absolute reference, and, at the same time, the object of a perverse desire.[8]

There is a total homology with the sphere of the commodity. The "traditional" commodity (up to the era of competitive capitalism) is at once exchange value and real use value. The proper and final relation of the subject with the produced object, the consumptive finality of the product, still exists, just as the use value of the signified in the classical organization of the sign. Already there is a general equivalence of production (the abstraction of exchange value), but not a general equivalence of consumption since the products maintain a concrete finality. With monopolistic capitalism, the same mutation occurs in the sphere of the sign; the final reference of the products, their use value, completely disappears. Needs lose all their autonomy; they are coded. Consumption no longer has a value of enjoyment per se; it is placed under the constraint of an absolute finality which is that of production. Production, on the contrary, is no longer assigned any finality other than itself. This total reduction of the process to a single one of its

8. Cf. Baudrillard, "Fétishisme et idéologie," *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 2 (Fall, 1970).

terms, in which the others are only excuses (use value is the excuse for exchange value; the referent is the excuse for the code) designates more than an evolution of the capitalist mode: it is a mutation. Through the elevation of production to a total abstraction (production for its own sake), to the power of a code, *which no longer even risks being called into question by an abolished referent*, the system succeeds in neutralizing not only consumption, but production itself as a field of contradictions. Productive forces as a referent ("objective" substance of the production process) and thus also as a revolutionary referent (motor of the contradictions of the mode of production) lose their specific impact, and the dialectic no longer operates between productive forces and relations of production, just as the "dialectic" no longer operates between the substance of signs and the signs themselves.[9]

Contradiction and Subversion: The Displacement of the Political

With the generalization of political economy, it becomes more and more evident that its first principle is not in the exploitation of labor as a productive force, where Marxist analysis examined it, but in the imposition of a form, of a general code of rational abstraction, in which capitalist rationalization of material production is only a particular case. The domestication of language in the code of

9. Economically, this process culminates in the virtual international autonomy of finance capital, in the uncontrollable play of floating capital. Once currencies are extracted from all productive cautions, and even from all reference to the gold standard, general equivalence becomes the strategic place of the manipulation. Real production is everywhere subordinated to it. This apogee of the system corresponds to the triumph of the code.

signification, the domestication of all social and symbolic relations in the schema of representation, are not only contemporary with political economy, *they are its very process*. And it is here, in these "superstructural" realms today that it presents its form and radicalizes itself. The capitalist system, tied to profit and to exploitation, is only the inaugural modality, the infantile phase of the system of political economy. The schema of value (exchange and use) and of general equivalence is no longer limited to the area of "production": it has permeated the spheres of language, of sexuality, etc. The form has not changed (hence one can speak of a political economy of the sign, of a political economy of the body, *without metaphor*). But the center of gravity has been displaced; the epicenter of the contemporary system is no longer the process of material production.

This is not to say that, at bottom, the political economy of language, of the sign, of representation did not begin well before that of material production. If the quantitative operationalization of productive forces has been able to serve, for nearly two centuries, as the fundamental reference, this is perhaps only an apparent movement. For a much longer period, the operationalization of the code has been fundamental (division, abstraction, functional systematization and structural arrangement). It is this that unfolds today in all its consequences. But it is not a matter of changing the determinant instance and reversing the priorities: this would be a regression to a naive idealism that privileges the contents of representation whereas a naive materialism privileges the contents of production. There is nothing to choose between these two alternatives. The system itself does not present this difficulty: it

comprises neither materialism nor idealism, nor infrastructure nor superstructure. It proceeds according to its form and this form carries along all of them at the same time: production and representation, signs and commodities, language and labor power. It is its own determination in the last instance. It is on this form that today is inscribed, at all levels, terror and social abstraction.

The truly capitalist phase of forced socialization through labor and the intensive mobilization of productive forces has been overturned. We have now a *desublimation of productive forces*, not by the lessening of the contradictions between the logic of the system and the world, but, on the contrary, through its logical process of expanded reproduction. Everything happens as if industrial coercion, disciplined concentration, the more and more extensive integration of the masses in the apparatus of production since the 19th century, the planned crystallization of all energies into material production were only a provisional solution, gigantic but temporary, for a project of rationalization and social control whose scope largely overcomes this phase. Surplus value, profit, exploitation—all these "objective realities" of capital have no doubt worked to mask the immense social domestication, the immense controlled sublimation of the process of production, appearing only as the *tactical* side of the process. The system is reproduced today through a reverse tactic: no longer one of general mobilization, but of techno-structural rationalization, that has as its effect the corruption of all the categories, or rather, a greater and greater fraction of the productive social time of all categories. It is no longer in the sphere of productive exploitation, but in the "demobilized," the repressively "desubli-

mated" sphere, in relation to production, that the contradictions today emerge.

After forced industrialization and direct exploitation come prolonged education, studies subsidized for twenty-five years, endless personal development, and recycling: everything is apparently destined to multiply and differentiate social productivity. In fact, the system needs this sophistication, this versatility, this truly unlimited personal development, but only for a statistically limited group at a very high social level. At most, it is achieved by a very mobile group of versatile technocrats who assume all decision-making functions, and by a mass of disqualified persons, who are on their own and socially irresponsible while having the illusion of participation and personal growth.[10] All the institutions of "advanced democracy," all "social conquests" concerning growth, culture, personal and collective creativity, all of this is, as it has always been, simply the right of private property, the real right of the few. And for everyone else there are day-care centers and nurseries, institutions of social control in which the productive forces are deliberately neutralized. For the system no longer needs universal productivity; it requires only that everyone play the game.

This leads to the paradox of social groups who are compelled to fight for a place in the circuit of work and of productivity, the paradox of generations who are left out or placed off limits by the very development of the productive forces. The reverse of capitalism's initial situation.[11] From this circum-

10. This division is already in effect at the level of the *grandes écoles* and the universities.

11. For example, in the United States the establishment of an indefinite salary-unemployment that neutralizes entire groups as producers while maintaining them as consumers. It is no

stance new contradictions are born. For if the exploited class bore a violent contradiction it was still in the order of an integration, of a socialization, brutal and forced, but nevertheless one of socialization in the order of the general productive system. Revolt emerged against the integration of labor power as a factor of production. The new social groups, de facto dropouts, on the contrary, proved the incapacity of the system to "socialize the society" in its traditionally strategic level, to dynamically integrate them, even by violent contradiction at the level of production. And it is on the basis of their *total irresponsibility* that these marginal generations carry on the revolt. This revolt can remain ambiguous if it is experienced as anomie and as defeat, if it occupies by default the marginal position assigned to it by the system or if it is institutionalized as marginal. But it is enough that it radically adopts this forced exteriority to the system in order to call the system into question, no longer as functioning in the interior but from the exterior, as a fundamental structure of the society, as a code, as a culture, as an interiorized social space. The whole system of production would then be disinvested; it would teeter on this social void that it itself produced. All its positivity would crumble on this non-place, on this disaffected zone and those who are left alone would return their total disaffection to the system. Subversion is born there, an *elsewhere*,

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longer a question of the strategy of "the reserve army of capital," but of testing everyone and, as in school (this society puts everyone in school) of having ready and available (at a cost of enormous financial "sacrifices," but who does not make them for the reproduction of the system?) a whole social group who becomes the idle and parasitic clients of the system. There is no longer savage exploitation but tutellage and exile.

whereas contradiction operates at the *interior* of the system.[12]

Hence there is a major role for students, youth who are disqualified in advance, voluntarily or not, as well as all types of social groups, of regional communities, ethnic or linguistic, because, by the process of the centralization and technocratic pyramidalization of the system, they fall into marginality, into the periphery, into the zone of disaffection and irresponsibility. Excluded from the game, their revolt henceforth aims at the rules of the game. Desocialized, they defeat the capitalist social *reality principle*, and not merely their exploitation by the system. Segregated, discriminated against, satellitized—they are gradually relegated *to a position of non-marked terms* by the structuration of the system as a code. Their revolt thus aims at the abolition of this code, this strategy composed of distinction, separations, discriminations, oppositions that are structured and hierarchized.

The Black revolt aims at race as a code, at a level much more radical than economic exploitation. The revolt of women aims at the code that makes the feminine a non-marked term. The youth revolt aims at the extremity of a process of racist discrimination in which it has no right to speak. The same holds for all those social groups that fall under the structural bar of repression, of relegation to a place where they lose their meaning. This position of revolt is no longer that of the economically exploited; it aims

12. But we can always ask if this demobilization, this virtual lockout, answers the secret demands of the calculation of productivity, hence of the system itself in its reproduction (since it goes so far as to finance unproductive marginality) or if it constitutes, through disinvestment and growing defection, a model of subversion.

less at the extortion of surplus value than at the imposition of the code, which inscribes the present strategy of social domination.

The more the system becomes concentrated, the more it expels whole social groups. The more it becomes hierarchized according to the law of value (sign or commodity) the more it excludes whoever resists this law. So it was that madness was confined (Michel Foucault) at the threshold of Western rationality. Today it is the same for all civil society, which has become a place of confinement where tranquillized man is closely watched. Everywhere behind the factory and the school, the suburb or the office, the museum or the hospital, it is the asylum and the ghetto that are profiled as the purest form of a truly rationalized society.

This terrorist rationality has produced, in the course of centuries, the radical distinction of the masculine and the feminine with the "racial" inferiorization and sexual objectification of the feminine. No culture but ours has produced this systematic abstraction in which all the elements of symbolic exchange between the sexes have been liquidated to the profit of a binary functionality. And this separation, which has taken on all of its force with capitalist political economy, is not reabsorbed at the present time. Sexual hyperactivism, equalization of the sexes, "liberation of desire," in short, the "Sexual Revolution," gives only the illusion of symbolic destructuring under the sign of sex as a differential mark, as an index of status and as a function of pleasure. It is this mark that the women's revolt (or the gay liberation) aims at, not the claims, democratic and rationalist, of political or sexual rights to equality (the equivalent of the salary claims of the worker). Not the accession of women to

power, that is, the turning of the code to their favor, but the abolition of the code. Marxism has either ignored this subversion of the political economy of sex, that is, the imposition of the law of value in the sexual domain, the imposition of the phallus, the masculine, as the general sexual equivalent, or else it has "dialectically" subordinated it to economic contradictions, allowing all of its radicality to escape.

The same observations hold for racial discrimination. No other culture besides ours has produced the systematic distinction of Black and White. And this distinction applies not as an afterthought but as a structural element which is reproduced ever more dynamically today under the appearances of faltering liberal universalism. And the objectification of the Black as such is not that of exploited labor power, but an objectification by the *code*. One can easily verify that it is sustained by a whole arsenal of significations, irreducible to economic and political determinations. The emancipated or embourgeoisified Black remains a Black, just as the proletarianized immigrant remains first of all an immigrant, as the Jew remains a Jew. Again the code re-emerges with more violence in everything that would seem to suppress it. In Marxist terms, the superstructure is imposed with more force as the contradictions connected to the infrastructure are resolved, which is to say the least, paradoxical. Here again, the autonomization of the Black as the principle of revolution, as well as the autonomization of women as sex or of the proletariat as class, only renews the racial or sexual code, the game of political economy, simply by displacing the marked term.

The other form of discrimination against youth is not at all a secondary effect of class domination or economic exploitation, but the most explosive consequence of the present system. The hierarchical monopoly over decision-making circumscribes more and more under the zero term of social significance. Youth occupies the most critical non-place of the code, but not as an age group. If its revolt has repercussions everywhere, it is because this non-place crosses all social categories. In the economy, in politics, in science and in culture, today it is irresponsibility that is crucial. It is a revolt of those who have been pushed aside, who have never been able to speak or have their voices heard.

Speech itself is defined as an incessant response (responsibility), in which all social transcendence is dissolved. Against the spoken word, political economy, throughout its history, supports *discourse* in which everything that is exchanged is put under the instance of the code. At the side of all the discriminations, the markings and demarkings of which we have spoken, the system produced a fundamental separation of the signifier from signified. Through it and the whole logic of communications that it institutes, the system has succeeded, slowly but inexorably, in neutralizing the symbolic power of the spoken word. Binary structuring, the abstraction of representational discourse, the general equivalent and foreclosure of the code—these are the elements of the logic of the system.[13] The insurrectional practice of the past few years has given new voice to

13. Linguistics and semiology administer, by "scientific" analyses, this social exclusion of the spoken word. They defend the code because in its the life and death of the system is played out not in a sensational way, but in a political way nonetheless.

the spoken word and eclipses traditional contradictions.

These revolts do not profile class struggle. But capitalism and its weakness evolve. Buried until now under the "determinant instance" of the mode of production, they surface according to the logic of the expanded reproduction of the system. The ethnic and linguistic minorities, repressed and enslaved in the thread of history by bureaucratic centralization; the oppression of women, children, youth, also the elderly; the whole cycle of repression and adjustment organized within the nuclear family as the structure of the reproduction of the order of production; polymorphous, non-genital, "perverse" sexuality, liquidated or submerged by the genital principle of sexual reality; nature as a productive force subjected to total spoilation—in these cases and in others the process of capitalism crosses the entire network of natural, social, sexual and cultural forces, all languages and codes. In order to function, capitalism needs to dominate nature, to domesticate sexuality, to rationalize language as a means of communication, to relegate ethnic groups, women, children and youth to genocide, ethnocide and racial discrimination. One must not see here, as in rigid Marxism, simple excrescences or even attempts at diversion from the fundamental theme that still would remain as always the "class struggle." In this doctrinaire confusion there is a mystification of Marxist thought which, by circumscribing the economy as the fundamental determination, allows mental, sexual, and cultural structures to function efficaciously. But, if capitalism has, through the centuries, played on all the "superstructural" ideologies in order to let the steam out of economic con-

traditions today the strategy is reversed. The system now plays on the economic reference (well-being, consumption, but also working conditions, salaries, productivity, growth) as an alibi against the more serious subversion that threatens it in the symbolic order. It is the economic sphere, with its partial contradictions that today acts as an ideological factor of integration. By making itself an accomplice of this diversion, Marxism is very simply exploited by capitalism as a force in ideological labor (spontaneous and benevolent). Everything that today gives priority to the economic field in salary claims or theorizing the economy as the last instance (Séguy or Althusser) is "objectively" idealist and reactionary.

The radical subversion is *transversal* to the extent that it crosses the contradictions connected with the mode of production, and *non-dialectical* to the extent that there is no dialectical negativity in the relation between a repressed, non-marked term and a marked term. There can only be transgression of the line and deconstruction of the code.[14] This subversion telescopes "traditional" contradictions. But they do not converge since they are separated by a strategic mutation of the system. A conjuncture of the working class and the students (or, the idle young and the workers) under the pious invocation of a common exploitation is impossible. The respective demands diverge, and they diverge more and more despite the desperate efforts of the student and Leftist movement in "politicizing" their subversion by an immersion in the working class. On the one

14. But one can also aim to simply pass to the other side of the line in order to become the marked term, to change positions without breaking the code: The "White" Black man, etc.

hand are the workers who obstinately defend, on the basis of the salary system and their integration in the industrial system, their "right to work" and the advantages the system yields them.[15] On the other are the Leftists, the social groups (of sex, age, race, ethnicity, language, culture, knowledge—all "superstructural" criteria that are historically overcome according to the rationalist perspective of the class struggle) who are demobilized, demarked, excluded, and in whom the ethic of the system crumbles. Between these two forces the gap grows larger and cannot be bridged. The working class is no longer the gold standard of revolts and contradictions. There is no longer a revolutionary subject of reference. The hope to dialecticize, to articulate a subversive movement which calls the system into question as code, as a total language of repression and separation, together with the class contradictions that call the system into question as a mode of production and exploitation, is simply part of the reveries of political voluntarism.

However, something else appears at the very level of the production process. Here also a secret defection lurks and expands as the ulcer of capitalism. Everywhere the work ethic, the secular "instinct of workmanship," the ethic of individual and collective sublimation of the labor process (paradoxically reactivated today by the unions and the "workers' party") are dislocated. One sees (in May, 1968, "Never Work," but also in strikes at Fiat, at Usinor with its strike for the sake of striking, without bread and butter demands) practices

15. Until now they appear archaic in front of technocratic reformism: choice of work schedule, job enrichment, anti-assembly line. The unions resist innovation perhaps justly, but on a conservative basis.

emerge that not only deny exploitation, but work itself as the principle of reality and rationality, as *axiomatic*. It is no longer then a question of an internal, dialectical negativity in the mode of production, but a refusal, pure and simple, of production as the general axiomatic of social relations. Without any doubt, the refusal is hidden in salary and corporativist demands; in midstream it is transposed into a carefully asphyxiated and channeled radical[16] denegation by the Parties and the unions, for whom, just as for the system itself, economic demands are the ideal means of control and manipulation. This is what gives the new left or hippie movement its meaning. Not the open revolt of a few, but the immense, latent defection, the endemic, masked resistance of a silent majority, but one nostalgic for the spoken word and for violence. Something in all men profoundly rejoices in seeing a car burn. (In this sense, youth is only the exponential category of a latent process in the entire social expanse, without exception for age or "objective" condition.) On the other hand, the new left commits suicide if it pretends to have statistical significance, to become a mass "political" force. Here it is irremediably lost at the level of representation and of traditional political contradiction (the same holds true for the American counter-culture).

Political Revolution and "Cultural" Revolution

During the last hundred years, capitalism has been able to prevent serious social and political changes by absorbing contradictions when they were posed only at the level of material production. Contradition only becomes radical when, as is the case

16. This would mean that traditional contradictions no longer have any apparent meaning. But perhaps they never had?

today, it reaches a level of total social relations. It is by expanding the field of social abstraction to the level of consumption, signification, information and knowledge, by expanding its jurisdiction and control to the whole field of culture and daily life, even to the unconscious, that the system has resolved the partial contradictions connected with economic relations of production. Through a restoration that has taken a century to accomplish, capitalism, by radicalizing its own logic, also has succeeded in radically altering the Marxist definitions of contradiction and revolution.

The "cultural revolution," which corresponds to the radicalized logic of capital, to "in depth" imperialism,[17] is not the developed form of all economic-political revolution. It acts on the basis of a reversal of "materialist" logic. Against the materialist postulate according to which the mode of production and the reproducion of social relations are subordinated to relations of material production, one can ask if it is not the *production* of social relations that determiens the mode of material *reproduction* (the development of productive forces and relations of production). A genealogy of social relations shows many criteria of domination other than the private ownership of the means of production. Species, race, sex, age, language, culture, signs of either an anthropological or cultural type—all these criteria are criteria of *difference,* of signification and of code. It is a simplistic hypothesis that makes them all "descendants" in the last instance of economic exploitation.

17. The economic and political planetary extension of capitalism is only the "extensive" modality of this deepening of capital. Moreover, it is to this level that the analysis of "imperialism" is in general limited.

On the contrary, it is truer to say that this hypothesis is itself only the rationalization of an order of domination reproduced through it. A domination that plays the economic as a tactic, a detour and an alibi. Today the essential fact is no longer profit or exploitation. *Perhaps it was never so even in the Golden Age and Iron Age of capitalism.*

It is directly at the level of the production of social relations that capitalism is vulnerable and en route to perdition. Its fatal malady is not its incapacity to reproduce itself economically and politically, but its incapacity to reproduce itself *symbolically*. The symbolic social relation is the uninterrupted cycle of giving and receiving, which, in primitive exchange, includes the consumption of the "surplus" and deliberate anti-production whenever accumulation (the thing not exchanged, taken and not returned, earned and not wasted, produced and not destroyed), risks breaking the reciprocity and begins to generate power. It is this symbolic relation that the political economy model (of capital), whose only process is that of the law of value, hence of appropriation and indefinite accumulation, *can no longer produce*. It is its radical negation. What is produced is no longer symbolically exchanged and what is not symbolically exchanged (the commodity) feeds a social relation of power and exploitation.

It is this fatality of symbolic disintegration under the sign of economic rationality that capitalism cannot escape. One can also say, with Cardan, that its fundamental contradiction is no longer between the development of productive forces and relations of production, but in the impossibility of having people "participate." However, the term "participation" has a connotation that is much too contractual and rationalist to express the nature of

the symbolic. Let us say that the system is structurally incapable of liberating human potentials except as *productive* forces, that is, according to an operational finality that leaves no room for the reversion of the loss, the gift, the sacrifice and hence for the possibility of symbolic exchange.

The example of consumption is significant. The feudal system died because it could not find the path to rational productivity. The bourgeoisie knew how to make the people work, but it also narrowly escaped destruction in 1929 because it did not know how to make them consume. It was content, until then, to socialize people by force and exploit them through labor. But the crisis in 1929 marked the point of asphyxiation: the problem was no longer one of production but one of circulation. Consumption became the strategic element; the people were henceforth mobilized as consumers; their "needs" became as essential as their labor power. By this operation, the system assured its economic survival at a fantastically expanded level. But something else is at play in the strategy of consumption. By allowing for the possibility of expanding and consuming, by organizing social redistribution (social security, allotments, salaries that are no longer defined as the strict economic reproduction of labor power) by launching advertising, human relations, etc., the system created the illusion of a symbolic participation (the illusion that something that is taken and won is also redistributed, given, and sacrificed). In fact, this entire symbolic simulation is uncovered as leading to superprofits and super-power. In spite of all its good will (at least among those capitalist who are aware of the necessity of tempering the logic of the system in order to avoid an explosion in the near future), it

cannot make consumption a true *consummation*, a festival, a waste. To consume is to start producing again. All that is expended is in fact invested; nothing is ever totally lost. Even when coffee stocks burn, when enormous wealth is squandered in war, the system cannot stop having this lead to a widening reproduction. It is caught in the necessity of producing, accumulating, making a profit. Its assistance to developing countries is returned in multiple profits. Even if the liberal experts denounce, as they have for twenty years, the catastrophe that will come at the end of this process, the rich nations cannot reduce (even if they clearly wanted to), at the cost of *real* sacrifices, the gulf that separates them from the Third World. And this also means that each individual, each consumer, is locked into the profitable manipulation of goods and signs for his own interest. He can no longer really *waste his time* in leisure.[18] Inexorably, he reproduces, at his own level, the whole system of political economy: the logic of appropriation, the impossibility of waste, of the gift, of loss, the inexorability of the law of value.

There is the same conjuncture at the political level. Power consists in the monopoly of the spoken word; the spoken word (decision, responsibility) is no longer exchanged. But this situation is explosive; those who have power know it. And we see them desperately attempting to divest themselves of a portion of the spoken word, of redistributing a part of the responsibilities in order to avoid a boomerang of the kind that occurred in May, 1968. But they *cannot do it*. They would like to have participation, but participation is revealed each time as being only

18. Cf. Baudrillard, *La société de consommation* (Paris: Denoël, 1970).

a better tactic for the wider reproducton of the system. The more autonomy is given to everyone, the more decision-making is concentrated at the summit.[19] Just as in 1929, when the system almost died from an inability to circulate production, so today it is perishing from an inability to circulate the spoken word. Because it is a system of production, it can only reproduce itself. It can no longer achieve any symbolic integration (the reversibility of the process of accumulation in festivals and waste, the reversibility of the process of production in destruction, the reversibility of the process of power in exchange and death).

At all levels, the system is sick from desublimation, from liberalization, from tolerance, while seeking to transcend itself in order to survive. Consumption, satisfaction of needs, sexual liberation, women's rights, etc., etc.—it is prepared to grant anything in order to reduce social abstraction so that people will play the game. But it cannot do it, once again, because this liberalization is only hyper-repressive. Needs which were once contingent and heterogeneous are homogenized and definitively rationalized according to the models of the system. Sexuality, which was once repressed, is liberated as a game of signs. It objectifies sexuality as the functionality of the body and the profitability of the pleasure principle. Information is liberated, but only in order to be better managed and stylized by the media. Everywhere the pressure of the system of political economy is heightened. The final avatars are anti-pollution and job enrichment. Here also the

19. The autonomy of the faculties is, as we know, the best means of aligning them with capitalist productivity, just as the independence of colonial nations was the best means of perpetuating and modernizing their exploitation.

system seems to slacken its limits and restore nature and work in their dignity: a desublimation of productive forces in relation to traditional exploitation. But we know very well that a symbolic relation of man to nature or to his work will not reemerge here. There will only be a more flexible and reinforced operationality of the system.

We are faced with coding, super-coding, universalization of the code, proliferating axiomatization of the capitalist system (Deleuze). But against the triumphant abstraction, against the irreversible monopolization, the demand arises that nothing can be given without being returned, nothing is ever won without something being lost, nothing is ever produced without something being destroyed, nothing is ever spoken without being answered. In short, what haunts the system is the symbolic demand.

The Economic as Ideology and Simulation Model

Against subversion by the symbolic, which to some degree arises under the label "cultural revolution," the capitalist system has every interest in diverting it through "closetting" the contradictions within the economic realm. Autonomizing the economic is an ideological strategy. Bourdieu describes[20] the same phenomenon in relation to scholarly and cultural systems. The scholarly and cultural systems are permitted to have formal autonomy (which is theorized as transcendence and is presented as a democratic and universal truth—equality of instruction and culture for each—while class structure is reversed for the order of production). It is through this autonomy effect and behind this simulacrum of

20. *La réproduction* (Paris: Minuit, 1970).

transcendence that the system better carries out its ideological function and renews most efficaciously the dominant social relations. One can ask if it serves only to reproduce them and if it is not the place of a *specific production* of class domination. For this implies a reversal of the terms of analysis: the economic can appear in our societies as the most important place of the equalization of opportunity, of the least conservatism of social relations, etc. (historically, since the appearance of the bourgeoisie, the economy has always played the role of the springboard of emancipation as compared to the more conservative juridical, religious, and cultural structures). And perhaps it is the scholarly and cultural systems that play the decisive role in the *production* of social relations, while the economic only relays and shifts them in their *reproduction.*

In any case, the ideological process, as it emerges in Bourdieu's analysis, has not changed and it can be generalized as follows: ideology always proceeds by an autonomization of a partial totality; all autonomized partial totalities immediately have an ideological value. This is the way Bourdieu treats the scholarly system. But *all* partial fields, in particular the economic, can, for the same reason, act as ideological fields, once erected as an autonomous instance (and even determinant). But the autonomization of the economic sphere is common to capitalism and to Marxism.

1. All autonomized partial social fields become, at the same time, the place of a universalist and egalitarian myth: religion was in its time; scholarly and cultural systems are today; consumption as a function isolated from production is rapidly becoming one. But the economic sphere affirms itself in its autonomy when faced with the religious,

the cultural, etc., as the sphere of social *rationality*, as the *universal* instance of productivity (here again the Marxists are no different from the bourgeois economists), and thus as an egalitarian myth. Each is equal in rights before the objective reason of production.

2. The economic sphere is supported by science. For all detached fields as such secrete a myth of rigor, of objectivity, of truth. Objectivity and truth are only the *effect* of the parcellization of a field of knowledge, of its autonomization under certain rules. Being closed off from everything else by a perfect and fragmented knowledge, that is the imaginary of the exact sciences, and the desire of science is nothing but the fascination with miscomprehension. Political economy as a science of the detached is thus properly ideological and the critique of political economy, when it wishes itself to be "scientific" (materialist), only serves to reinforce its object as a detached abstraction. There are no economic truths, or better, we have fashioned the truth of the economic as an arbitrary instance.

3. All partial fields, including the economic, are the fields of contradiction which are also partial. The place of the fundamental contradiction—the place of politics today—is the line of separation between the partial fields. And revolution is not the resolution of partial contradictions, but the abolition of this line. The internal contradictions in the partial fields are the echo of the separation that haunts them. It is their point of origin. They are thus ambiguous: at the same time that they manifest an obsession with non-separation, they reinforce the separations by autonomizing them as *internal* contradictions. Their resolution can never go beyond the separation, which is why it is never final.

They are resolved in a flight from the partial system under the obsession with separation (others would say with castration). Such is the process of political economy; such is the *imaginary* of political economy (Cardan).

The whole materialist critique of ideology, the denunciation of the autonomization of the values of consciousness, of culture, of the simulation of a reality principle of ideas, this whole critique *is turned back against materialism in an integral way*, that is, against the autonomization of the economic insofar as it is a (determinant) instance.

The economic appears everywhere as the theorization of the rupture with symbolic exchange, as the institution of a detached field that then becomes the vector of a total reorganization of social life. It is the simulation of a universal finality of calculation and productive rationality, the simulation of a *determination* whereas symbolic exchange knows of neither determination nor end. It is the simulation of a *reality* of this instance, of an economic reality principle that goes on to universalize itself on the basis of the very principle of separation. Today this *model* is found in its completed form with operational models, with the simulation of situations having the purpose of prediction and control, with operational artifacts replacing reality and the code of the reality principle.[21]

Cardan says, "The rationality of modern society is only in its form: it is the syllogism of growth, camouflaged as the historical dialectic of the

21. Thus idealist simulation and materialist simulation are joined. Their common schema is the separation of instances under the jurisdiction of one of them (the same schema as in the semiological reduction). Cf. *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse, op.cit.*

development of productive forces. But in this syllogism, the premises borrow their content from the imaginary. And the prevalence of the syllogism as such, the obsession with a rationality detached from everything else, constitutes an imaginary to the second degree. Modern pseudo-rationality is a form of the imaginary in history. It is arbitrary in its ultimate ends as long as these ends do not reveal any rationality. And it is arbitrary when it posits itself as end (this holds for logical reason and for "dialectical" reason). In this respect, the modern world is prey to a systematic delirium, of which the autonomization of unfettered technology (and bureaucracy) is the most immediately perceptible and menacing form... The economy exhibits, in the most striking fashion, the domination of the imaginary at all levels."

The symbolic is the abolition of the imaginary of political economy (and of all other detached fields). In this sense, the cultural revolution is no longer tied to the economic-political revolution. It cuts through the economic-political as a partial revolutionary discourse and, in a certain rationalizing and mystifying way. A revolution that aims at the totality of life and social relations will be made also and primarily against the autonomization of the economic, of which the last ("revolutionary" and materialist) avatar is the autonomization of the mode of production under the form of a determinant instance. Because today the system has no better strategy than that of the dialectic of political economy, the cultural revolution must make itself against the economic-political revolution.

Marxist Theory and the Workers' Movement: The Concept of Class

This revolutionary potentiality, this subversion directed against the axiomatic of productive rationality itself (including its internal contradictions) is no longer accounted for by a Marxist analysis of class and mode of production. Marxism is incapable of theorizing *total* social practice (including the most radical form of Marxism) except to reflect it in the mirror of the mode of production. It cannot lead to the dimensions of a revolutionary "politics." From our current position, Marxist analysis, in its revolutionary rationality, no longer illuminates either modern societies or primitive societies.

Retrospectively, moreover, it is necessary to ask *if it has not always been thus*, if already in Marx's time the theory of the mode of production did not effect an extraordinary simplification of social practice. If it no longer accounts for the present mode of revolution, did it, at least for a given moment of history (the "classical" capitalist phase) account for fundamental contradictions? Did the mode of production (and with it class and class struggle) have its hour of truth?

The sacrilegious hypothesis is here imposed that the conjuncture in the 19th century of Marxist theory and the workers' movement perhaps had not been the miracle of history—the greatest event in history, says Althusser—*but a process of reciprocal reduction and neutralization.* The objective historical result was the choking of both in the Leninist *political* mixture, later in the Stalinist bureaucracy, and today in the most vulgar reformist empiricism. These are the stages of a long decline that it would be too simple to impute to a few distortions

along the way. The deep logic of this decline forces us to return beyond Stalin, beyond Lenin, etc., back to the crucial point of the thought of Marx himself, back to the original event, which is always conceived as irrevocably revolutionary, of the dialectical conjuncture of his theory and the objective social practice of a class called the proletariat. We have so lived in the providential shadow of this event that the idea that this fusion was not necessary, nor necessarily the best, has never truly been formulated. Social revolt and the movement of the theory, each indexing themselves on the other, each *verifying* themselves in the thread of history, were universalized as historical reason, under the sign of the dialectical revolution. But they were lost as society's radical difference.

In effect, the fusion was not made between a radical revolt and a radical theory, both of them "primitive" and non-determined (as was the case in the insurrectional movements of the 19th century up to the Commune of 1871 and again in May, 1968) but between two terms that were already distinct and slanted by each other. If you wish, this is dialectical but it is necessary to see that what is dialecticized, that upon which Marxist theory hinges, is a social reality "specified" as a class, as an objective and conscious organization, as a proletariat. What is grasped in theory as proletarian organization is a well-determined social critique in terms of a mode of production, relations of production and class. On one side there is an "objective" and organized class and on the other side there is a rational and structured theory (as much in its materialist content as in its dialectical form)—it is between these two terms, each rationalized in the image of the other, that the dialectic of revolution has been short-

circuited. It is difficult to evaluate all that has been repressed and eliminated in this operation which brings out once and forever, under the sign of materialism, history, and the dialectic, the *revolutionary reality principle.* Let us say that everything that a "pleasure principle" and a radicality of revolt would reveal and can still be read in the insurrectionists of the 19th century, in the destruction of machines, in pre-Marxist utopian and libertarian discourse, in the cursed poets or in the sexual revolt, and that aimed, well beyond material production, at a total symbolic configuration of life and social relations is destroyed by the abstract configuration of political economy—that it is this whole primitive and radical movement that Marxist *theory* and socialist *organization*, in their miraculous conjunction, have dialecticized by treating it, under a class status and a "historical" content, as the development of productive forces. They rationalized it into a relation of antagonistic forces *at the interior* of a single social field, magnetized by political economy.

But this revolt implied something different from a *dialectic of forces*. It implied the irruption of a radical *difference,* something far different from surplus value and the exploitation of labor power which is the corruption of all social relations by the unilateral rationality of production and universal socialization under the law of value. And the operation, if one looks at it closely, consisted in a "dialectical" rehabilitation of the status of the producer, towards which the revolt aimed, and of which Marxist theory itself made the point of departure of the social revolution. Marxism makes a revolutionary detour and a promise of liberation out of a process of destructuring and repression.

(Nietzsche is right: the workers have elevated into a cardinal value the very sign of their slavery, just as the Christians did with suffering.) And this revolution is no longer for the here and now: it becomes a historical finality. Positivized under the sign of progress by the bourgeoisie, or dialecticized under the sign of revolution by Marxism, it is always the case of an imposition of a meaning, the rational projection of an objective finality opposing itself to the radicality of desire which, in its non-meaning, cuts through all finality.

In relation to the situation created by massive industrialization, concentration-camp discipline, the rigid training of generations of artisans and peasants beginning in the 19th century, in relation to the situation of destructuring and revolt, Marxist theory and workers' organization have achieved overall a labor of historical rationalization, a certain kind of *secondary elaboration*: the valorization of labor as the source of social wealth, the valorization of the process of the rational development of productive forces, a *process* that was confused with the revolutionary *project* (surely through a "dialectical" negativity, but behind which was hidden irrevocably the confusion of this same class with labor as the social ethic of class).

The ethic of rational labor, which is of bourgeois origin and which served historically to define the bourgeoisie as a class, is found renewed with fantastic amplitude at the level of the working class, also contributing *to define* it as a class, that is to circumscribe it in a status of historical representability.

Respect for the machine, protection for work instruments, implying virtual propriety (some kind of human right in opposition to legal right) and the

future appropriation of the means of production, institutes the working class in a productivist vocation that takes the place of the historic vocation of the bourgeoisie. The fact that in the revolutionary project these means of production are restored to the disposition of those who produce, under the sign of social appropriation and self-management, only gives an eternal quality to the process of production, beyond all changes in the mode of production. The "class of laborers" is thus confirmed in its idealized status as a productive force even by its revolutionary ideal. It reflects upon itself as "the most precious human capital," as the myth of origin of social wealth.

In the guise of historical materialism, the idealism of production ends by giving a positive definition to the revolutionary class. The class is then *defined in the universal*, according to the universality of labor power. It falls back upon an essence which in fact it was assigned by the bourgeois class and which defines it, in its historical being, by the universality of capital. Capital and labor power then encounter each other as respective values, equally founded in the universal.[22] In this encounter of classes where each has its objective, historical *reference*, the bourgeois class always prevails. For this concept of class belongs to it and when it succeeds in trapping the proletariat in it, it has already won the game. The concept of class is a universalist and rationalist

22. This confusion is instituted once again by the fact that besides the *exchange value* of labor power—the level of exploitation and dialectical contradiction—Marxist theory preserves a level of the *use value* of labor, a level that is irreducible to the positivity of value, that is, a mirror of a human positivity of labor where the proletarian class, sliding from the negative to the positive, comes to recognize itself. Use value, once again, plays a dirty trick on Marxist theory.

concept, born in a society of rational production and of the calculation of productive forces. In a sense, there has always been and there will always be only one class, the bourgeoisie. This capitalist bourgeois class is defined not only by the ownership of the means of production, but by the rational *finality* of production. To make a class of the proletariat is hence to enclose it in an order of definition (characterized by "class consciousness" as "the subject of history")[23] in which the model remains

23. In this regard, the very beautiful dialectic of Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* takes on a totally ambiguous meaning. The rational vocation of the class as the subject of history, the articulation of this process through the consciousness that the class has of itself—in these notions the path is paved for hypostasizing the being of class, for the triumph of the reality principle and the representability of the class, hence, really for the triumph of the Party. At one level this dialectical and "spontaneous" collective class consciousness seems to contradict the bureaucratic process (this is why the Stalinists, always superficial, violently attacked it). But at a more profound level, there is a collusion between a *rationalist* theory of class consciousness and the formal *rationality* of the bureaucracy. It is no accident that Lukácsian theory, dialectical and spontaneist, appears at the moment when the bureaucratic monopoly of the Party was historically reinforced. It did not object fundamentally to this process since, fixing a reflected essence, a class rationality, a for-itself as the subject of history, it necessarily presented a logic of representation and identification together with an ideal instance (in some way the "ego ideal" of the class). This instance can only be the organization and the Party. To the imaginary subject of history corresponds profoundly the paranoic machine of the bureaucracy. (In the same way, the idealization of the conscious subject is contemporary, through all of Western history, with the extension of rational control by the State. It is the same operation that rebounds at the level of the class with Lukács.) He returned to Stalinism to write *The Destruction of Reason* in order to denouce the irrationality of fascism. But fascism is only irrational for bourgeois democracy. In fact, it incarnates an extreme of paranoic Reason, an extreme that "dialectical Reason" cannot argue against when it falls into the imaginary transcendence of a subject, of the proletarian class. Upon such an abstraction one can only build (and with Stalin, logically, will

that of the bourgeoisie. Accession to the status of class is equivalent to a rationalization of the "workers' movement" and its revolt, equivalent to aligning it in the general rationality of the industrial order. Thus "class against class" can well signify antagonism at the level of the relation to the *means* of production, but this in no way breaks the *finality* of productivity itself. On the contrary, but dialecticizing it from within, this schema serves only to extend the process of political economy to infinity.

If the class struggle has a meaning, it is not in the encounter of one class with another. (When the structure is reversed and the proletarian class triumphs, as in the East, nothing changes profoundly, as we know, in social relations.) This meaning can only be the radical refusal of letting itself be enclosed in the being and consciousness of class. For the proletariat, it is to negate the bourgeoisie because the latter assigns it a class status. It must not negate itself insofar as it is deprived of the means of production (which is, unfortunately, the "objective" Marxist definition of class); it negates itself insofar as it is defined in terms of production and political economy. Can the proletariat have a meaning if it defines itself in terms

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be built) totalitarianism, that is, the total taking in charge, the total control of the class by an organizational instance under the sign of Reason. Class consciousness, that idealist vision, yields but one mode of objective existence: the Party. It is not class consciousness, in its own movement, that bestows the Party or the organization as the dialectical mediation of its practice. It is the bureaucracy itself which, in line with the extension of its power, secretes class consciousness as its ideology. When he writes *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács is not anti-Stalinist; he is within the same movement as Stalinism. He gives the bureaucracy its philosophy of history, a reflexive philosophy of class as subject by which the triumphant bureaucracy can proceed historically to idealize its totalitarian practice.

of productive forces, labor, historical rationality, etc.? Evidently not. In this framework, the proletariat (or any other possible class) is pledged to enter into the rational dialectic of a form and a content (on the one hand, the structure of classes, on the other, its own class values, when these are not its class "interests"!). It is pledged to a *finality of class* that perfectly encloses it in the dialectical game of capitalist society.

Better still, by reinforcing itself in its being, in proportion to the development of the class struggle, it reinforces the power of the ruling class, and its degraded opposition serves the reformist impulse of the capitalist system, when it does not reveal itself as even more conservative in the realm of values. This is where we are today.

To what can we impute the historical blockage of the "revolutionary double negation" (the proletariat was well-born from the bourgeoisie, but it has not been born of itself as a class)? Lenin, even Stalin, the demise of the proletariat itself—are these dialectical accidents? Quite simply, the problem is the conjuncture of a revolutioanry theory aiming at the abolition of classes, outlined by Marx, with a revolutionary subject (the real and historical class of salaried workers). One cannot even say that the proletariat has slowly turned against itself. It has *logically* produced the substantialization of the social revolt in a theoretically untranscendable class, which was soon fixed in its being by the organization. Starting from there, the proletarian class and Marxist theory began *mutually to justify one another* and hence to *neutralize* each other. And the project of transforming life, as much the demand of Marx as that of the actual revolt, has placidly become the victory of the proletariat.

Revolution as Finality: History in Suspense

Along with the mode of production, the concept of history constitutes another index of this dialectical rationalization. It is a homologous concept developed in a social structure at the time of the theorization of the mode of production (once again, the imposition, during the Renaissance, of a perspectival convergence as the reality principle of space, serving as a reference).

One can speak of a millenarian element in Marx:[24] communism as a "proximate future," an imminent revolution. This "utopian" exigency dates from the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, the *1844 Manuscripts*, the *Theses on Feuerbach*, and the *Manifesto*. After the failures of 1848, there was a reconversion. Communism was no longer an immediate possibility of the present situation; it could become a real possibility only much later, *at the end of a period in which the necessary historical conditions will have been created.*[25] With *Capital*, one moves from the revolutionary utopia to a fully historical dialectic, from an immediate and radical revolt to an objective consideration of the situation. It is necessary that capitalism "mature," that it inwardly become a social system through its own negation. Hence there is a *logical and historical necessity*, a dialectical long march in which the negativity of the proletariat does not have an immediate effect on itself as a class but instead has a long-term effect on the process of capital. Engaged in this long "objective" detour, the

24. We are referring to the work of Kalivoda, *Marx et Freud* (Paris: Editions anthropos,1971).

25. The same holds in Christian history; the Christian concept of historicity is born from the failure of the parousia.

proletariat begins to reflect upon itself as the negation and as the subject of history.[26]

The effort of Marxism then diverges from its radical exigency toward the study of historical laws. The proletariat no longer leaps out of its shadow; it grows larger in the shadow of capital. The revolution is housed in an implacable process of evolution at the end of which the laws of history require man to liberate himself as a social creature. The Marxist perspective does not abandon its radical exigency but it becomes a *final* exigency. There is a conversion from the here-and-now to an asymptotic fulfillment, a *deferred due date*, indefinitely put off, which, under the sign of a historical reality principle (the objective socialization of society achieved by capital; the dialectical process of maturation of the "objective" conditions of the revolution), confirms the transcendence of an *ascetic* communism, a communism of sublimation and hope. In the name of an always renewed future—future of history, future of the dictatorship of the proletariat, future of capitalism and future of socialism—it demands more and more the sacrifice of the immediate and permanent revolution. Ascetic in relation to its own revolution, communism in effect profoundly suffers from not "taking its desires as reality."[27] (The transcendent dimension, the sublimation, is the same as

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26. Socialism in a single country will be the realization of this qualification in which the proletariat is situated, of this substantialization of negativity in which history as the *final* dimension becomes the objective dimension. At first the negative subject of the historical dialectic, it is then simply the positive subject of a positivist history of the revolution. This great slippage is only possible and only explained by the passage from utopia to the historical "epoché."

27. One of the famous statements of the students during May, 1968. [Translator's note]

that of orthodox Christianity in opposition to the millenarian sects who wanted immediate fulfillment, here below. As we know, sublimation is repressive. It is the basis fo the power of the Church.)

The revolution becomes an *end,* not in any sense the radical exigency that presumes, instead of counting on a final totalization, that man is *already totally there* in his revolt. Such is the meaning of utopia, if one distinguishes it from the dreaming idealism to which the "scientific ones" take pleasure in reducing it, only the better to bury it. It rejects the schema, *diluting* the contradictions. This ideal structuration, that has room for a "Reason" of history, for a conscious and logical organization of *deferred* revolution—this dialectic very rapidly falls into the pure and simple schema of end and means. *The Revolution as "end" is in fact equivalent to the autonomization of the means.* What has happened is clear: it has the effect of stifling the current situation, of exorcizing immediate subversion, of diluting (in the chemical sense of the term) explosive reactions in a long term solution.

"Man should know to be satisfied with the perspective of his liberation. This is why 'revolutionary romanticism,' revolt 'hic et nunc' will continue to thrive until the Marxist perspective ceases to be only a perspective" (Kalivoda). But, starting from the moment when Marxism enters into the game of the objectivity of history, when it resigns itself to the *laws* of history and the dialectic, can it be anything more than a "perspective"? In the era when Marx began to write, workers were breaking machines. Marx did not write for them. He had nothing to say to them. In his eyes they were even wrong; it was the industrial bourgeoisie that was revolutionary. Theoretical

lag does not at all explain it. This immanent revolt of the workers who broke machines has remained without explanation. With his dialectic, Marx was content to see them as mere babes in the woods. But the whole workers' movement until the Commune lived by this utopian exigency of immediate socialism (Dégacque, Courderoy, etc.). And they *were* such even in their defeat. For utopia is never written for the future; it is always already present. Marx himself, speaking of the future, speaks of it as a transcended phase. But from what Olympian point of view can one judge him correct *in advance*? The failure of these movements (in contrast to the "Marxist" revolutions of the 20th century) is not a valid argument. That would simply involve invoking the "reason" of history, an objective end that would not be able to account for the specificity of a social speech that is not finalized by a future dimension. It is there, in the verdict of history, that international communism today looks for the only proof of its truth, that is, even more than before, in a dialectical reason, but also in the immanence of the facts. At this level history is no longer even a process; it is simply a trial. And revolt is always condemned in a legal proceeding.

The Radicality of Utopia

In fact, Marx is right, "objectively" right, but this correctness and this objectivity were won, as in all science, only at the cost of a *miscomprehension*, a miscomprehension of the radical utopias contemporary with the *Manifesto* and *Capital*. In saying that Marx "objectively" theorized capitalist social relations, the class struggle, the movement of history, etc., one has claimed too much. In effect, Marx "objectified" the convulsion of a social order,

its current subversion, the speech of life and death, the liberator of the very movement, in a long-term dialectical revolution, in a spiraling finality that was only the endless screw of political economy.[28]

The cursed poet, non-official art, and utopian writings in general, by giving a current and immediate content to man's liberation, should be the very speech of communism, its direct prophecy. They are only its bad conscience precisely because in them something of man is *immediately* realized, because they object without pity to the "political" dimension of the revolution, which is merely the dimension of its final postponement. They are the equivalent, at the level of discourse, of the savage social movements that were born in a symbolic situation of rupture (symbolic—which means non-universalized, non-dialectical, non-rationalized in the mirror of an imaginary objective history). This is why poetry (not Art) was fundamentally connected only with the utopian socialist movements, with "revolutionary romanticism," and never with Marxism as such. It is because the content of liberated man is, at bottom, of less importance than the abolition of the separation of the present and the future. The abolition of this form of time, the dimension of sublimation, makes it impossible to pardon the idealists of the dialectic, who are at the same time the realists of politics. For them the

28. It is not true that Marx "dialectically transcended" utopia by conserving its "project" in a "scientific" model of revolution. Marx wrote of *the Revolution according to the law.* He did not make a dialectical synthesis of its *necessary* date of maturity and the impassioned, immediate utopian exigency of the transfusion of social relations, because it is futile to claim a dialectic between these two antagonistic positions. What historical materialism did transcend while conserving was quite simply political economy.

revolution must be distilled in history; it must come on time; it must ripen in the sun of the contradictions. That it could be there immediately is unthinkable and *insufferable*. Poetry and the utopian revolt have this radical presentness in common, this denegation of finalities; it is this actualization of desire no longer relegated to a future liberation, but demanded here, immediately, even in its death throes, in the extreme situation of life and death. Such is happiness; such is revolution. It has nothing to do with the political ledger book of the Revolution.

Contrary to Marxist analysis which posits man as dispossessed, as alienated and relates him to a total man, a total Other who is Reason and who is for the future (which is utopian, but in the bad sense of the term), which assigns to man a project of totalization, *utopia*, for its part, *would have nothing to do with the concept of alienation.* It regards every man and every society as already totally there, at each social moment, in its symbolic exigency. Marxism never analyzes the revolt, or even the movement of society except *as an intricate ornament of the revolution*, as a reality on the way toward maturation. This is a racism of perfection, of the finished stage of reason. It throws everything else into a nothingness of things transcended.[29] Marxism is still profoundly a philosophy, even its "scientific" stage, through all that remains in it of a vision of alienation. In terms of "alienation," the other side of "critical" thought is always a total essence that haunts a divided existence. But this metaphysics of the totality is not

29. One takes a long time to outline the sketch of a work which, once completed, would be returned to oblivion and nothingness. But this is all wrong for the sketch already contains the whole work, and this alone is the work.

at all opposed to the present reality of the division. It is complementary to it. For the subject, the prospect of recovering his transparence or his total "use value" at the end of history is just as religious a vision as the reintegration of essences. "Alienation" remains the imaginary of the subject, even of the subject of history. The subject will not become again a total man; he will not rediscover himself; today he has lost himself. The totalization of the subject is still the end of the end of the political economy of consciousness, confirmed by the identity of the subject, just as political economy is confirmed by the principle of equivalence. Instead of deluding men with a phantasm of their lost identity, of their future autonomy, this notion itself must be abolished.

What an absurdity it is to pretend that men are "other," to try to convince them that their deepest desire is to become "themselves" again! Each man is totally there at each instant. Society also is totally there at each instant. Courderoy, the Luddites, Rimbaud, the Communards, the people of the savage strikes, those of May, 1968—in every case the revolution does not speak indirectly; they are the revolution, not concepts in transit. Their speech is symbolic and it does not aim at an essence. In these instances, there is speech before history, before politics, before truth, speech before the separation and the future totality. He is truly a revolutionary who speaks of the world as non-separated.

There is no possible or impossible. The utopia is here in all the energies that are raised against political economy. But this utopian violence does not accumulate; it is lost. It does not try to accumulate itself as does economic value in order to abolish death. It does not grasp for power. To enclose the "exploited" within the single historical possibility of

taking power has been the worst diversion the revolution has ever taken. One sees here to what depths the axioms of political economy have undermined, pervaded and distorted the revolutionary perspective. Utopia wants speech against power and against the reality principle which is only the phantasm of the system and its indefinite reproduction. It wants only the spoken word; and it wants to lose itself in it.

Revised Edition

Jean Baudrillard

Symbolic Exchange and Death

Translated by Iain Hamilton Grant

Symbolic Exchange and Death

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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

© Editions Gallimard, Paris 1976

First published 1976 in French as *L'échange symbolique et la mort*
© SAGE Publications 1993 English translation
Introduction and Bibliography © Mike Gane 1993
Introduction © Mike Gane and Nicholas Gane 2017

First published in English 1993. Reprinted 1995, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007

This revised edition published 2017

This translation is published with financial support from the French Ministry of Culture

Published in association with *Theory, Culture & Society*, Goldsmiths, University of London

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2016955370

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-0759-1
ISBN 978-1-4739-0758-4 (pbk)

Editor: Natalie Aguilera
Editorial assistant: Delayna Spencer
Production editor: Rachel Burrows
Marketing manager: Sally Ransom
Cover design: Wendy Scott
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the UK

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Introduction: *Symbolic Exchange and Death* Today

Mike Gane and Nicholas Gane

Jean Baudrillard has been a divisive figure within the English-speaking disciplines of sociology and cultural studies. On one side, followers of Baudrillard have embraced his attack on the orders of economic value that underpin contemporary Western culture; while on the other, critics have dismissed Baudrillard as someone whose playful and poetic attack on core concepts such as the social, class, and the real is not worthy of serious consideration. The text of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, first published in French in 1976, has been central to the reception of Baudrillard within these two camps, for it has been seen either as providing a brilliant analysis of the shifting forms of value and exchange that are central to the assault of Western culture on 'symbolic' forms of otherness, or as a frivolous attempt to dispense with social problems and inequalities in favour of the analysis of the 'hyperreal'; an approach which, for some, can be characterised as postmodernism at its worst. What unites both these readings within much of the secondary literature on Baudrillard, however, is that they tend to focus on part of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* – Chapter 2 on 'The Order of Simulacra' – rather than the whole of this text (indeed many critics of Baudrillard appear to have read little else) and its relation to his other writings. This introduction will argue that such a partial reading of Baudrillard is a mistake, for it is only by locating the genealogy of value which is core to this chapter of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (of which the theory of hyperreality is merely a part) within the broader arguments of the book and of Baudrillard's early work more generally that full significance of this work can be understood. A key point that has often been missed is that *Symbolic Exchange and Death* is framed by an opening chapter on production that advances a devastating critique of the field of political economy. This chapter, which has been widely neglected, addresses questions of money, labour, exchange, and the market, and provides a powerful resource for thinking critically about the current logic of post-crisis capitalism and its associated pro-market (neoliberal) forms of governance. While many have turned to the work of Michel Foucault to think historically about neoliberalism, Baudrillard's critique of Western notions of value and exchange, if developed alongside his work on death and fate, offers a radical alternative to current understandings of neoliberalism. Given this, and the current

impasse on the political Left in the face of a strengthening neoliberal order, the time to read Baudrillard carefully, and the text of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* in particular, is now.

The Early Works: From *The System of Objects* to *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1968–76)

In order to grasp the basis of Baudrillard's early work, it is important to outline the logic of four publications: *The Object System*, *The Consumer Society*, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, and *The Mirror of Production*. To this we can now add his writings for Utopie, the journal he and a small group edited from 1967–78, collected under the title *Utopia Deferred*. The general frame of these works is the Marxist conception of society and culture as arising from and resting on an economic base, its mode of production, and its superstructures. But against thinkers such as Althusser, who asserted the simple model of class struggle emerging out of the contradictions of capitalist economics, Baudrillard's early writings provide a new challenge: to show that consumer society involved new ways of social integration and created a massive de-radicalising effect on the agents of revolution (as classically identified). Baudrillard's answer was to introduce a new term – sign-exchange – in order to mark the emergence of consumerism proper.

In order to follow Baudrillard's logic here it is necessary to work with two elementary terms: use-value (utility) and exchange value (in terms of market price). Marxist theory holds that within the economic form of the market, a surplus over and above that which goes to labour is produced. This is surplus-value extracted from labour and realised in profit, interest, rent, and taxation. Underlying this is the labour theory of value, with its moral overtones of usefulness, and puritanical virtues, and the necessary support of the idea that there are basic human needs that require satisfaction. To this, Baudrillard adds the idea of sign-exchange, conceived as the purchase of something beyond utility, its status, and aesthetic or luxury value, for with the passage from a utilitarian culture to a consumer culture the consumption of sign-values takes precedence. With this development, the commodity-system becomes the object-system; a series of commodities altered by having been designed and valued in part for aesthetic value (Baudrillard here points to the significance of the Bauhaus). Working within the Marxist frame, Baudrillard argues that this new consumerism had become the principal form of bourgeois class rule, but not in a simple and straight forward way. In an essay of 1969 (included in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*) he explains:

> Now what must be read and what one must know how to read in *upper class* superiority, in electric household equipment or in luxury food, is precisely *not* its advance on the scale of material benefits, but rather its *absolute privilege*, bound up in the fact that its pre-eminence is precisely not established

> in signs of prestige and abundance, but elsewhere, in the real spheres of decision, direction and political and economic power, in the manipulation of signs and of men. And this relegates the Others, the *lower* and *middle* classes, to phantasms of the promised land. (1981: 62, emphasis original).

The definition of a consumer society follows logically: the predominance in consumption of 'images, signs, consumable models' (1997: 191). A consumer society is one in which signs are manipulated and consumed.

Baudrillard's discomfort with this framework, however, becomes apparent at various points in his early work. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard employs a range of anthropological ideas (from Mauss, Malinowski and Bataille) in order to question the naturalness of fundamental notions of utility and need. This move signals an important change in his theoretical thinking. Baudrillard does not follow the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss which involves using semiotics to analyse 'elementary' forms of kinship, religious and cultural systems, or that of Godelier to analyse modes of production. For Baudrillard these actually de-nature the object of analysis. It is precisely the inverse strategy that is adopted as Baudrillard's attention shifts instead to questions of ritual, sacrifice, potlatch, kula, and above all the gift. These become the primordial constituent elements of culture and that are theorised by the general concept of symbolic exchange. Indeed, Baudrillard argues that conceptions of utility and need arise with the dominance of the philosophical frame of political economy and are not natural at all. The retrospective projection of categories of production to earlier formations in the guise of scientific analysis (historical materialism) is a mystification. Baudrillard writes (1981: 128–9, emphasis original):

The present theory posits three essential tasks, beginning from and going beyond Marxist analysis:

1. The extension of the critique of political economy to a *radical critique of use-value* …
2. The extension of the critique of political economy to the sign and to the system of signs is required in order to show how the logic, free play and circulation of signifiers is organised like the logic of the exchange value system; and how the the logic of signifieds is subordinated to it tactically … Finally, we need a critique of signifier-fetishism … Strictly speaking Marx offers only a critical theory of exchange value. The *critical* theory of use-value, signifier, and signified remains to be developed.
3. A theory of symbolic exchange.

Through the course of *The Mirror of Production* and *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard adds to this agenda by calling for a new mode of theorising that 'will bring all the force and questioning of primitive societies to bear on Marxism and psychoanalysis' (1975: 108) as well as political economy as a whole (see below). Baudrillard calls this new mode of work *fatal theory*.

It is clear, then, that the idea of the symbolic is present in Baudrillard's work from the beginning. Indeed, one of Baudrillard's earliest points of

concern is the modern tendency to reduce the symbolic to a semiotic system of distinctive oppositions that at the same time denatures it (see 1981: 88–101). At the end of *The System of Objects*, for example, he writes that 'Traditional symbolic objects (tools, furniture, the house itself) were the mediators of a real relationship or a directly experienced situation, and their substance and form bore the clear imprint of the conscious or unconscious dynamic of that relationship. They were thus *not arbitrary* … Such objects are not consumed. *To become an object of consumption, an object must first become a sign*' (1996: 200, emphasis original). A structural analysis of consumerism is possible because it is a system of arbitrary signs, of objects eviscerated of substance, and of which exchange value is the determining logic. Fetishism in this context becomes the fetishism of the sign-system. Thus, paradoxically, it is the symbolic object which is primary, whereas fetishism belongs to a secondary order of generalised exchange of sign-values. Baudrillard gives the example of rings worn on fingers. He observes that the wedding ring is 'a unique object, symbol of the relationship of the couple … [it] is made to last and to witness in its duration the permanence of the relationship. The ordinary ring is quite different: it does not symbolize a relationship. It is a non-singular object, a personal gratification, a sign in the eyes of others. I can wear several of them. I can substitute them … [it] takes part in the play of my accessories and the constellation of fashion. It is an object of consumption' (1981: 66).

In his writings from 1968 to 1976, Baudrillard's main object is to identify the new phenomenon of the logic of the sign, and this is contrasted with three other kinds of signification: the logic of use-value, the logic of exchange value and, most importantly, the logic of *symbolic exchange*. He says these are various kinds of logic 'that habitually get entangled … in the welter of evidential considerations' (1981: 66). It initially appears that the features of symbolic exchange are held as relatively obvious, whereas it is sign-exchange and consumption that have to be clarified and developed. But gradually it becomes clear that the problem of Marxist discourse is what lies beyond productive labour – that is what is radically useless beyond 'the repressive and exploitative traits of labour and leisure' (2006: 120). Baudrillard quickly identifies an inversion of work into non-work or play that is immediately aestheticized. He writes: if Marxist thought 'settled accounts with bourgeois morality [it] remains defenceless against bourgeois aesthetics, the ambiguity of which is more subtle, but whose complicity with the general system of political economy is also more profound' (2006: 120). Baudrillard uses the story of Robinson Crusoe to question the idea that once bourgeois disciplines are withdrawn the era of freedom and culture will emerge as a natural process. What emerges in this story is rather like the image of the lifting or annihilation of a superstructure of exchange value: what emerges is not a natural freedom, but the constraints of a cultural system of use-values, and with Friday colonial values (1981: 140–42). Baudrillard pushes this logic to forge a new position: in primitive societies

where the symbolic order rules, there is no real, no necessity, no production, no scarcity, no unconscious, no law (see 1975: 60).

It gradually becomes clear that Baudrillard's programme involves the elaboration of a theory of symbolic exchange that becomes the basis of an alternative to political economy and which demands a way of thinking of its own. In the works of 1968–73 the logic of symbolic exchange is discussed as if it is just one logic among a set of four. In the build up to the book *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, the conception of symbolic exchange is dramatically radicalised, and comes to be seen as antagonistic to the other three. In the place of the semiotic method of analysis another is developed out of the rather weak notion of ambivalence. Rather than developing the notion of ambivalence as is the case with Bataille's analysis (see 1981: 97–8), Baudrillard begins to work out at great length and in surprising ways Marcel Mauss's concept of gift exchange. This shift to an anthropological thematic developed within a Durkheimian scheme immediately extracts the theme from its rationalism and its relation with rules of sociological method (which strictly prohibit the generalising of thematics in this way). But Baudrillard is insistent that such symbolic processes are not to be confined to so-called primitive societies. Indeed, he adopts Durkheim's thesis that these processes are constraining just as consumption is constraining and not to be analysed as the free play of individual choice.

Baudrillard, however, is also interested in the nature of power and this can be seen in his remarks about the class structure that sits behind the sign system. At the end of *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, he introduces a new idea about power. In a discussion of the media he suggests one of its important constituent features is the fact that it appears as a one-way process, where information and messages are provided for a passive audience. He states:

> We must understand communication as something other than the simple transmission-reception of a message, whether or not the latter is considered reversible through feedback. Now the totality of the existing architecture of the media founds itself on this latter definition: *they are what always prevents response*, making all processes of exchange impossible (except in the various forms of response simulation, themselves integrated into the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact). This is the real abstraction of the media. And the system of social control and power is rooted in it (1981: 169–70, emphasis original).

Baudrillard underlines that this conception is taken from the general idea of symbolic exchange: 'To give, and to do it in such a way that one is unable to repay is to disrupt the exchange to your profit … The social process is thus thrown out of equilibrium, whereas repaying disrupts the power relationship and institutes (or reinstitutes), on the basis of an antagonistic reciprocity, the circuit of symbolic exchange' (1981: 170). Thus, at this point he is working with two quite different conceptions of power: the one based on a Marxist theory of class, and the second based on the Maussian theory of the gift. This new perspective is developed in an important discussion at the

end of *Mirror of Production*, and this idea is extended to the economy and to a thesis that capitalism faces a problem not of production or reproduction, but specifically its 'incapacity to reproduce itself *symbolically*' (1975: 143, emphasis original). He emphasises that it 'is this symbolic relation that the political economy model (of capital) … *can no longer produce*. It is its radical negation' (1975: 143).

From the Early Writings to *Symbolic Exchange and Death*

Baudrillard's book *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, first published in French in 1976, registers a seismic shift in his work as the notion of the unilateral gift (not Bataille's mode of consumption, nor the simple humiliation of labour) as the source of power is placed not only in the mechanisms of the media, but at the heart of the economy and the welfare system of modern states. All of his previous theory is reorganised on this basis, as the materialist theory of class power through physical control of repression and capital is relegated to a secondary position in his work from this point. Indeed, Marxist conceptions of economic determinism and its political economy are identified as masking what is actually taking place in a mutation of capital itself. In so far as this is a mask it is, he claims, happily accepted by the ruling elites as a cynical legitimation, and the proletariat will find its place in the system, along with the communist parties. Baudrillard suggests not only that production ceases to play a leading role (it is succeeded by reproduction through the code) but also that what is really decisive is that this is a form of (second-order) simulacrum. He argues that it is capital that gives to labour the gift of work, and that exchange in terms of wages, salaries and forms of income received by labour for work done masks this fact. Baudrillard here moves to a new and more fundamental critique of capital: it does not take, it *gives*, and in such a way that the gift cannot be returned in a form which will annul the symbolic debt. Importantly, the proletariat cannot provide a symbolic counter-gift which cancels power, and for this reason power is entrenched in its symbolic fortress: capital (a point we will return to below).

In order for this crucial argument to work a number of problems have to be overcome. The first set of problems concerns Baudrillard's theory of the gift, and this leads to the question of what is meant by symbolic exchange and the symbolic order of which the gift is just one instance. The second set of problems relate to the nature of the simulacra that are produced in this scenario by the processes of capital itself. The third set of problems concerns those of opposition, resistance, revolution to capital and its culture. These problems aside, what is significant in this discussion is the fact that Baudrillard does not believe that there are some societies based on symbolic exchange and some that are not. In the preface to *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, he declares that 'Symbolic exchange is no longer the organising principle of modern society. Of course, the symbolic

haunts modern social institutions in the form of their own death' (p. 22). What is significant in modern capitalist societies is that symbolic exchange is blocked, and with this the reciprocity of symbolic exchange is broken as it can no longer take place and be resolved. What occurs in the failure of symbolic reproduction is the appearance of *simulacra*. For Baudrillard, the whole thrust of resistance and revolution is to challenge this blocked resolution with a symbolic event which will shake the order to its foundations. However, Baudrillard also observes that the revolution itself, including Marxism, has been caught up in simulacra. Indeed, his view is that capitalism is an abnormal, indeed pathological, system, and the opposition has been absorbed within it.

The specific problem concerning the theory of the gift here is that it is evidently not registered in sign-exchange: it takes place rather in the sphere of ritual with its explicit forms of obligation. Baudrillard insists, following Mauss, that the gift is not something which is simply gratuitous and superficial. He draws on anthropology to argue instead that societies where the gift is evident are highly rule governed, not least because the return of the gift is obligatory. The rhythm of gift-exchange is cyclical in a mode characterised by challenge and reversibility. The importance of the return of the gift in the form of the counter-gift is that it contains the potential to cancel power. In his critique of Godelier in *Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard declares: 'The exchanged goods are apportioned and limited, often imported from far away according to strict rules. Why? Because given over to individual or group production, they would risk being proliferated and thereby break the fragile mechanism of reciprocity. …' (1975: 79). But how does Baudrillard account for the gift as a process in a de-ritualised society? His answer is surprising: that modern capitalism is in fact feudalism pushed to the limit. Here, he advances Marx's idea that labour has become a service: this is 'not, however, a "regression" of capital towards feudalism, but rather the dawn of its real domination, solicitation and total conscription of the "person"' (p. 13). This idea is a crucial move, and Baudrillard later develops it as the basis for a critique of human capital theory. The gift from capital is the gift of work but the conception of work is radically altered in the new situation: it is no longer productive. Baudrillard points, for example, to the suggestion of the negative tax (the proposition that everyone receive an income as a right). This for many on the political Left was regarded as a step in the right direction, but for Baudrillard it is the stamp of complete domination in a new form.

The second set of problems relates to the way in which the symbolic order is reduced by a new one, called in some places a semiotic order, or again as orders of simulacra and simulation. If Baudrillard starts this work with a consideration of political economy (see below), it is clear that he regards this a simulacral model in the sense that it reduces the symbolic order to the play of signs. In his consideration of the orders of simulacra since the Renaissance he places this development in between the baroque period (characterised by the counterfeit, the mirror and theatre, masks,

trompe l'oeil) and the monopoly code of mass media. The industrial is the second order of simulacra, and this way of proceeding has the advantage of being able to theorise the conception of the 'real' at each stage, since this is not stable but evolves through different forms. Fundamental to his idea of the symbolic order is the thesis that it does not produce a reality as such; what counts as 'reality' only emerges with simulacra. Beyond the industrial stage is the third order, or the idea that a new binary coding emerges that has a profound effect across all spheres – not just the 0/1 of the code, but all alternating systems as found for example in politics (two parties), in fashion, and in economics (the duopoly). This latter, he argues, is the most stable monopoly form as a single giant organisation tends to be vulnerable to collapse. It is this observation that made Baudrillard famous as he asked the question in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: 'Why has the World Trade Centre in New York got *two* towers?' (p. 90; on 9/11 as a symbolic event, see Baudrillard, 2013).

The third set of questions concern the opposition to and rebellion against simulacra. It is the same question as the nature of the revolution against capital, since the two are part and parcel of the same formation. The bourgeoisie, he argues, is the only class as such that has existed, and capitalism for a time the only mode of production that has existed. By contrast, the proletariat has never been a revolutionary class, and Baudrillard argues that it has already passed away into the mass. This does not mean, however, that there has been no revolutionary resistance to capital, or that such resistance is dead. Because symbolic reversal is blocked the system is continuously under threat as it attempts to impose its semiotic order. Indeed, the symbolic shows itself in all the messianic cults and movements that demand 'paradise now' – often involving considerable sacrifice and martyrdom. The imposition of the linear over cyclical time by semiotic culture was achieved only with difficulty, as was the discipline involved in industrialism. In fact, he argues, even modern security and safety systems have faced long and tenacious opposition because they too are forms of modern discipline.

Baudrillard's position, by way of response, was to align himself with the utopians, hence the adherence to the Utopie group. His writings from 1966 critique and reject all attempts at controlling the utopian challenge, postponing it, organising or planning it bureaucratically. Utopia is in fact one of the first signatures of the symbolic in his writings. Baudrillard's key 1971 piece on utopia (which originally had no title) has been translated into English twice: once as 'Utopia: the smile of the Cheshire Cat' (Baudrillard, 2001a: 59–60) and again as 'Utopia Deferred …' (Baudrillard, 2006: 61–2). The title of this second translation became the title of the collection in English translation – in French its title is Le Ludique et le Policier (2001b). What is odd is that this particular essay specifically critiques the notion of deferring utopia. In fact, the French is 'L'utopie a été renvoyée dans l'idéalisme par un siècle et demi de pratique dialectique triomphante' (2001: 39) – 'Utopia has been propelled back (renvoyée)

into idealism by a century and a half of triumphant dialectical practice'. He continues: 'Today it is beginning to get the better of all revolutionary definitions and dispatches (renvoyér) all the models of the revolution back to their bureaucratic idealism'. In other words, utopian theory is that which rejects the bureaucratic organisation of the revolution, 'it does not inscribe itself in the future'.

Symbolic Exchange, Death and Political Economy

This fundamental question of life and death lies at the heart of the argument of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. For Baudrillard, death is a cultural rather than a physical form, and through the course of this text he draws a distinction between primordial cultures in which physical 'real' biological death is not known as the symbolic cycles of life and renewal are continuous, and the modern world in which death is stripped of its symbolic significance and becomes increasingly meaningless (a position Baudrillard develops from the work of Max Weber, see Gane, N., 2002: 131–50). Baudrillard here advances Freud's notion of the death drive as pulsion and presents it as a fundamental Manichean duality that undoes all semiotic psychology and psychoanalysis. Baudrillard places Freud's death drive at the centre of his theorising, and argues, as stated above, that modern social institutions are haunted by their own death as all societies are founded upon a principle of symbolic exchange; a principle that in capitalist society is diverted or perverted but which nonetheless has the capacity to irrupt in unpredictable ways and potentially lead this type of society towards its demise. Baudrillard sees the reversibility of exchange in what he calls *sacrifice*, which is a form of the gift that contains the potential to undo and reverse capitalist power structures that are founded upon economic principles of accumulation.

This belief in the continued threat of the symbolic to the stability of advanced capitalist cultures is accompanied by a highly nuanced analysis of capitalism itself which traces a shift beyond its industrial form (tied to class and the social) to a new world of code, simulation and indeterminacy. This marks the beginning of a new neoliberal order in which the code, including most importantly *price*, becomes paramount and the market becomes, in Hayekian terms, *the* meta-information processor to operate upon cybernetic principles. This development is concealed behind what Baudrillard calls the '*second life*' of political economy which remains tied to concepts of economic value that belong to an earlier stage of capitalism. Baudrillard insists that it is a mistake to be seduced by this second coming as 'Capital no longer belongs to the order of political economy: it operates with political economy as its simulated model' (p. 23). This is to say that the whole of political economy, indeed most of modern science, creates a culture based upon the 'real' and on 'value' while in practice capital itself has long since escaped this system but at the same time continues to use it to its advantage. For as

opposed to the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (which is the object of political economy), we now live in a world dominated by the free play of the 'monetary sign' that is beyond reference to any 'real' of production or even a monetary referent in the form of a gold standard. In this world, the idea of a 'real' value (of equities, of commodities, of houses, of anything) is meaningless as what matters instead is not value *per se* but 'infinite speculation'.

Baudrillard argues that this new world is marked by the emergence of a 'brothel of capital': 'a brothel not for prostitution, but for substitution and commutation'. He advances a three stage genealogy that leads to this present: first, value as natural (as it was for the Physiocrats, who tied value to land and labour); second, value as produced (as something social not natural); and third, the collapse of the commodity form of value and the emergence of a new order based upon the play of monetary signs that is largely post-social in basis. This third order is marked by the separation of capital from class and, with this, the implosion of the social into the mass. This, perhaps, can be called the neoliberal moment, and Baudrillard himself asks: 'are we still within a capitalist mode? It may be that we are in a hyper-capitalist mode, or in very different order' (p. 32). Again, the question of money is central as Baudrillard accompanies this analysis by documenting a shift beyond the gold standard to 'hot money and generalised flotation' and then to a new world of 'cool money' that is based upon 'an intense but non-affective relativity of terms'. In this world, money becomes more than simply a medium in the McLuhan sense as it is rather 'circulation itself', or in Baudrillard's terms 'the realised form of the system in its twisting abstraction'. In this new situation, money breaks from the political-economic concepts of use-value and exchange-value and becomes a transversal form that crosses into everything else and enters its own orbit. Baudrillard observes that this logic of 'high intensity flotation' is the 'purest expression of the system'.

Baudrillard develops this theory of the tranversalism of the monetary sign, which is disengaged from all previous certainties of the 'real', into a more general diagnosis of what today would be called neoliberal society; a society within which 'individuals, disinvested as subjects and robbed of their fixed relations, are drifting, in relation to one another, into an incessant mode of transferential fluctuations …' (p. 24). The failure of the political Left to recognise and confront this new situation lies, for Baudrillard, in their nostalgia for previous forms of capital, and for their association with ideas of class and the social. He declares that a way forward beyond this nostalgia is to treat economic conceptions of scarcity and abundance, as well as the alternation between political parties and the alternation between economic boom and slump, as tools of the system itself – and as things to which the system is ultimately indifferent. The problem, he argues, lies in the naturalisation of political economy, which expresses everything in terms of production and value without recognising the need to question precisely these concepts. Here, Marxism, ironically, is part of the problem: 'Economics,

preferably in its Marxian variety, becomes the explicit discourse of a whole society, the vulgate of every analysis' (p. 55). What is needed, for Baudrillard, is to recognise and address the challenge of a new situation in which 'everything operates or breaks down through the effects of the code' (p. 54), and, beyond this, to question the ways in which symbolic forms continue to haunt this order. Baudrillard points to two main options here. First, he observes that the fragility of the capitalist system increases in proportion to its 'ideal coherence'. This raises the possibility of what he calls a 'catastrophic strategy'; one that pushes the system as far as possible within its own internal logic to exploit its resulting vulnerabilities. Second, he argues that this can be combined with an appeal to the disruptive basis of symbolic forms. He declares: 'Only symbolic disorder can bring an interruption in the code' (p. 25). Baudrillard here sees subversive potential in poetic, enigmatic and singular forms that cannot easily be captured by any system, and raises the prospect of a pataphysics – or a science of imaginary solutions – that works to show that the (neoliberal) present is by no means irreversibly closed.

Concluding Remarks

These concerns feed into, and are modified by, Baudrillard's later writings. His essay *Carnival and Cannibal* (2010) [originally 2004], for example, breaks with the optimistic view that the symbolic cultures of the third world will eventually take their revenge on the semiotic cultures of the first and second worlds. Baudrillard presents a new hypothesis that concerns the nature of the semiotic order: on the one hand it may itself be subject to internal duality and the transparition of evil; while on the other hand, the semiotic may itself be seen as itself a symbolic form, a new and unprecedented form of challenge. In so doing, Baudrillard returns to the question of the emergence of the category of the real; a question that lies at the heart of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. This category is bound up with the logic of simulacra, and the precession of simulacra since it is within this precession that the real emerges in a sequence seen as producing an order of scientific truths in the context of technological practice engaged in the disenchantment of the world, the elimination of seduction, evil, and fate. Thus posed, Baudrillard focusses on the struggle of the symbolic order against this new formation (called here 'semiotic', for the cultural modification originated before and extended far beyond purely scientific endeavours). Fundamental however to all structures is gift exchange and it is here that the power of capital is located: the gift that cannot be returned. Capital provides for the proletariat, and only by its own death can the proletariat return an equivalent challenge. Baudrillard is careful to distinguish between all the elements of the symbolic order and those of the semiotic order, and draws a distinction between the fragment (symbolic) and the fractal (semiotic). But there is something else here. In

this logic there is the eventual appearance of third and fourth order simulacra, those which move through new technologies into the virtual. This is not simply a shift from real to hyperreal, but is a shift or move away from, or a break indeed with the whole complex of symbolic and semiotic formations up to the emergence of third and fourth order simulacra.

Thus, the new hypothesis suggests that the emergence of a new virtual world produced by new technologies involves a new challenge, for it attacks the 'real' itself. It is then a challenge in its final phases to the whole package of the symbolic and semiotic reality complex involving sign and representation, base and superstructure. Baudrillard expresses this as shift from a world in which humanity faces the original gift of having been created in nature without having been consulted to a virtual world in which humanity itself begins to disappear. He says 'our entire technical universe, even in its most excessive elements, would then assume a high symbolic value as a response to the original gift (the original crime) that is the existence of the world without us, without our having been consulted' (2010: 86).

So what does this change of position amount to? Three major consequences are in evidence. The first is that globalisation, the irreversible triumph of American power produces a new situation. It is no longer a form of capitalism. Its space-time formation is non-Euclidean. Going beyond the traditional forms of domination (master-slave dialectic) the new situation is one in which there is no longer an oppositional formation, an alternative culture that might be victorious in the struggle against it. He registers this change by introducing the concept of hegemony: global power has attained a hegemonic position in which alternatives to the system, including symbolic ones, are rendered impotent. The epoch of domination, with its promise of triumphant struggle in the Third World (2010: 28) as an alternative to the ruling order is over: this is irreversible.

The second is that the hegemonic power has attained such confidence of its own position that it comfortably absorbs critique within its own discourse. It eliminates evil (it is the Empire of the Good); and thus, given its hegemony, it can itself speak evil in a way that disables all critique – an idea that can be traced to *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. But where does this leave evil or what Baudrillard calls the 'intelligence of evil'? There is the evil which appears as terrorism (which even includes natural events). And there is also the evil which produces itself stubbornly and even stupidly in the refusal of the unilateral gift. The attempt to usher in a universe without evil is bound to fail; evil inevitably reappears and is the key to understanding the new hegemony. The basic epistemology of this new position is laid out in *The Intelligence of Evil* (Baudrillard, 2005).

Third, Baudrillard alters his approach by introducing the terms carnivalisation and masquerade to incorporate the new scenario of simulacra – terms that cannot be found in *The Intelligence of Evil*, and is the mark of the new problematic. This new focus presents Baudrillard's general theory of Western imperialism as a frame for his analysis of globalisation. It is not primarily economics or technology that is at work in a simple process of Western

domination. It is a strategy of an 'operational simulation' by which all other cultures are 'disneyfied' by a double process of cannibalisation (by the host culture) and carnivalisation (by American cultural hegemony). Hegemony asserts itself 'no longer through exporting techniques, values, ideologies but through the universal extrapolation of a parody of these values … Global power is the power of the simulacrum' (Baudrillard, 2011: 66; 2010: 21). This new frame unifies the whole of the theory which has been latent in his writings since his early 1968 essay on modernity (see Baudrillard, 1987).

As a final word it is not sufficient simply to point to the already significant legacy of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* – its impact on the American art scene, on 'postmodernism', on the reaction to terrorism and '9/11' (the World Trade Centre as symbol is analysed in this 1976 work) and on the films like the *Matrix* series but to its future as a resource for the analysis of the career of current phases of the neoliberal world. Its importance here is not one that derives from a critique of neoliberal doctrines, for there is no analysis of Ordoliberalism, or Gary Becker in the style of Michel Foucault's (2008) famous lectures on the history of neoliberal reason. Baudrillard's contribution comes, first, in terms of an analysis of the semiotic powers of institutional and cultural forms such as markets, money and capital (which remain haunted by their symbolic others); and second, through an engagement with the emergence of the phenomenon as witnessed. Baudrillard was prepared for the moment of 'deregulation' itself not as liberalism but as liberation of elements from the system of the consumer society bringing with it a spectacular reversal of the beneficiaries of 'welfare socialism': from the poor to the rich and the dissolution of the 'social'. If alienation is no longer a class phenomenon it reappears with the introjection of entrepreneurialism into the individual fashioned as human capital. For Baudrillard, all this was prefigured in the simple but devastating shift to the arrogant style of advertising employed by the Banque Nationale de Paris in the early 1970s: 'I am interested in your money – fair's fair – lend me your money and you may profit from my bank' (p. 68, the advert itself can be found 2006: 210). In one of his last texts written in April 2005 Baudrillard again referred to this advert as a turning point as it 'encapsulates the ignominy of capital far better than any critical analysis … It wasn't a denunciation, a critical analysis. It came from the dominant power and enjoyed complete immunity' (2011: 37).

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Introduction to the First Edition

Mike Gane

Symbolic Exchange and Death, published in France in 1976, is without doubt Jean Baudrillard's most important book. It appeared alongside works by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault in Gallimard's prestigious series Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines. It is remarkable in many respects that it has taken some years for the full impact of Baudrillard's work to be felt in English-speaking cultures, and then under something of a misunderstanding. For various complex reasons Baudrillard's name is associated with postmodernism, indeed he has often been called the 'high priest of postmodernism', yet it is clear that Baudrillard's own relationship with postmodernism is hardly positive. The interest in postmodernism has certainly served Baudrillard for there is enormous curiosity in establishing just what Baudrillard's position is if it is not postmodern. The translation and publication of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* will be decisive in this respect.

The great interest in Baudrillard's work in recent years has led to a sudden flood of translations, and this has not been without its own problems, for works written at many years' distance have appeared in English as contemporaneous publications. The first work to appear in translation was *The Mirror of Production* in 1975 (French original 1973) followed in 1981 by *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (originally 1972). Parts of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* became available in 1981 in journal article form, and in 1983 in the collection *Simulations* by Semiotext(e) in New York, a publishing house which subsequently published *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983, originally 1978), *Forget Foucault* (1987, originally 1977), and *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1988, originally 1987). Two books of selected writings, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (1988) and *Revenge of the Crystal* (1990), are now available in English, as are *Seduction* (1990, originally 1979), *Fatal Strategies* (1990, originally 1983), *Cool Memories* (1990, originally 1987) and *Transparency of Evil* (1993, originally 1990). The year 1993 will also see the publication of *Baudrillard Live*, a selection of interviews. The question arises therefore of how to make sense of this corpus and how does *Symbolic Exchange and Death* figure in it?

First of all some background on Jean Baudrillard himself. He was born in Reims in 1929. His formation and early teaching experience was as a Germanist. He wrote an early thesis on Nietzsche and Luther, and was particularly interested in the work of Hölderlin. His first publications were literary critical essays in *Les temps modernes* (1962–63). He was also

interested in photography (an edited book of photographs was published in 1963), an interest he still maintains (in December 1992 there was an exhibition of his photographs in a gallery on the Champs-Élysées). In the 1960s he was the principal translator of the works of Peter Weiss into French, but he also translated Brecht and a sociological work on Third World millenarian movements by Wilhelm Mülhmann. In the 1960s he converted to sociology under the influence of Henri Lefebvre and Roland Barthes. Most of his university teaching career was at Nanterre in Paris. In the late 1960s he was associated with *Utopie* and later with *Traverses*, both radical journals outside the orthodox organisation of the left. He was deeply influenced by situationism but was never attached in any formal manner. In the 1970s he began to travel, to the USA, about which he wrote the book *America* (1988, originally 1986), but also more widely, as is partially documented in his *Cool Memories*. Initially, his main axis of travel in Europe was Paris–Milan–Barcelona, which today has become Paris–Berlin–Madrid. He has recently spent time in Berlin as well as Argentina and Brazil, and has made a rare visit to Britain: he reckons to spend about half of his time out of France. It comes as no surprise that Baudrillard has a growing world reputation, indeed he was the subject of a recent conference (in Montana in 1990, published as *Jean Baudrillard*, Stearns and Chaloupka, 1992), and that in recent surveys he ranks in the leading half-dozen French intellectuals in terms of citations and translations.

The flood of translations of Baudrillard's works has been accompanied by commentaries from writers such as Fredric Jameson, Douglas Kellner and Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. By and large these writers have tried to link Baudrillard's ideas with postmodernism. Jameson used Baudrillard to fill out a conception of postmodernism as the cultural formation of 'late capitalism'. In effect this line was taken a great deal further by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. Douglas Kellner first presented Baudrillard as the major postmodern theorist but later altered the thesis, admitting that in reality Baudrillard's writings were generally extremely hostile to postmodernism. Kellner's book on Baudrillard (1989) is an attempt to argue that he is a dangerous writer whose position needs to be entirely rejected. Yet there is still a sense in which the relation to Baudrillard is one of repulsion and attraction. Even Kellner points to the 'insightful' and 'brilliant' analyses in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Kellner, 1989:102).

Baudrillard's position in *The System of Objects* (1968), but even more so in *The Consumer Society* (1970), seems influenced by a Marxist point of view. But there is a violent reaction to Marxism in *The Mirror of Production* (1973) that leads to the new synthesis that is explored in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976). A formula in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981, originally 1972), the 'semiological reduction of the symbolic properly constitutes the ideological process' (p. 98), can be taken as a key statement of Baudrillard's object. It was at that time very clearly considered an analysis of crucial processes within capitalist society: an 'ideological reduction to the (capitalist) system of order and social

values' (p. 100). Certainly in the years leading up to 1972 Baudrillard seemed to be working within a Marxist framework: he referred to the capitalist mode of production as the basis of the social formation. In 1970, with his book *The Consumer Society*, it was clear that unlike more orthodox Marxists he saw that affluence and consumption has profound consequences for social structure and cultural integration. Marxists like Althusser talked of the key role of social class reproduction in the family and the school ('ideological apparatuses of the State'), Baudrillard talked of the power of consumption and repressive ambience in a line of thought influenced by Barthes, Marcuse and McLuhan.

It became clear, however, that the critical base, the theoretical position, from which Baudrillard undertook his analyses was somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand there is in this period a gesture to the importance of the proletarian position. There is also increasing reference to the significance of an order higher than that of the semiotic culture. He called this the 'symbolic order', a more radical if more primordial basis. At first the symbolic order is discussed with reference to the famous analysis of gift-exchange by Marcel Mauss (see Baudrillard, 1981, originally 1972: 64ff.). This is an initial study, the first of a long series of oppositions between the symbolic and the semiotic order. Thus it is essential to clarify the nature of these two concepts. Of course this cannot be done definitively since many of the concepts have been modified through the course of Baudrillard's subsequent evolution. It is Baudrillard's own account of the sacred culture defined by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915), it is that defined by Max Weber as the enchanted world of traditional societies, it is the fatalistic culture of peasants. For Baudrillard Marx was not sufficiently radical in his analysis, it was not use-value which should have been contrasted with exchange-value, but symbolic exchange which should have been contrasted with commodity exchange. Baudrillard's reading of Marx suggests that his conception of communism was trapped within the matrix of the cultural order of rationalisation and therefore could not be other than its (bad) mirror-image. Like Mauss, Baudrillard suggests the superiority of the symbolic order over the semiotic order (the obligation of gift over the cash nexus) while witnessing the apparent destruction of the former by the latter. Against the Marxists, Baudrillard appears more radical, and more primitive. But there are surprises. Baudrillard does not simply document the course of the destruction of the symbolic order but analyses the ironic evolution of the semiotic order itself.

If we turn to *Symbolic Exchange and Death* we can follow the analyses of the *ideological process*. Chapter 1, on capitalism and production, is perhaps a crucial analysis. It is curious in many respects. It is written in a highly rhetorical style, playful, wilfully malicious. Although the analyses of simulation, fashion, sexuality, death, are likely to be more celebrated, this first chapter in a sense is more fundamental – yet the text is both assertive, dogmatic and at the same time illusive. The writing is in the main unsupported by any burden of evidence or any attempt at systematic argument,

as if a highly perverse dialectical mania had grasped the writer. First of all Baudrillard presents the thesis that in order to grasp the nature of modern capitalism it must be thought of not as a mode of production but as a code dominated by the 'structural law of value'. This term is obviously developed from Marx's own law of value, but here it detaches itself from economics and becomes a mechanism which invades all cultural spheres. In other words all spheres can be analysed as the process of the political economy of the sign. Baudrillard insists in fact that the development of modern society is uneven, and like Weber argues that the process first attacks art, politics and culture and then the economy itself. The economy, after having passed through a specific phase of simulation known as the capitalist mode of production (the phase of the factory, etc.), undergoes an ironic logic since the mode of production inverts itself and begins to destroy the very separations it was built upon. Capital itself proceeds to destroy the hierarchy of base and superstructure, of production and reproduction, of labour and capital.

There are two steps in the argument which must be examined. The first is the argument concerning the nature of the change of the terms within the capitalist mode of production. The second is the argument concerning the relation between the symbolic order and capitalism. The character of the former argument is perhaps best grasped as process occurring at an already advanced stage of the destruction of the natural economy of primitive symbolic exchange (the argument follows on from that presented in *The Mirror of Production*). For Baudrillard the primitive society has no 'mode of production', indeed perhaps industrial factory capitalism is the only 'mode of production' that has existed as such. However, once the structural law of value attacks the elements of the system the code becomes determinant, ending any order of causation between the spheres of production and consumption. Hence the historical dialectic between them comes to an end. Baudrillard produces the irony of the Althusserian version of Marx which suggested that reproduction (class struggle) was determinant in history, for Baudrillard suggests that when reproduction becomes dominant, labour and production change their sense, they lose their finality, that is, they lose their rationality as purposeful work as they become reproduced for the sake of the reproduction of work itself. This idea reflects the great change that has occurred in Western societies in relation to the meaning of the term alienation. When this happens all elements in the system are affected as the proletariat is incorporated into the social order; trade unions, strikes, revolts such as May '68 lose their claim to justice and radicality. Indeed, the organisations and theoreticians who mark time with insistence on the centrality of 'production' and 'labour' – and those who believe in 'the use-value of their labour power – the proletariat – are virtually the most mystified and the least susceptible to this revolt' (p. 52 below). Baudrillard reorganises the theory of resistance and revolt from one based on internal system contradiction (Marx) to that of exclusion and excommunication (Durkheim and Mauss).

The second element in the argument is the scope and role Baudrillard gives to the symbolic order within the capitalist system. It almost appears as a replacement for the notion of a social infrastructure, and on occasions Baudrillard has formulations which approach this image. It is a mistake, then, to think that *Symbolic Exchange and Death* is simply about the 'ideological process' of the reduction of the symbolic by the semiotic. It is also about the irruption of the symbolic within the semiotic. The challenge, the stake is, he says, a dimension 'immanent in the code' (p. 60 below). In an analysis which at first sight appears slightly facile, the terms Baudrillard uses to analyse capitalism reverse all previous conceptions. The capitalist presents the gift of work to the proletarian. Because the proletarian cannot return this gift and cannot cancel it he cannot cancel the power of the capitalist. But the position and order of the capitalist is vulnerable none the less, since Baudrillard claims nothing can evade symbolic obligation, indeed not even the system itself: terrorism, the taking of hostages, sacrificial martyrdom, are challenges to the system which pass into the symbolic order. If there is a strategy in Baudrillard's work perhaps this is where it is discussed: the fundamental challenge to the semiotic system will be in the form of a gift which it will not be able to return (pp. 58–65 below).

The chapters which follow study themes directly related to the apparent destruction of the symbolic by the semiotic order. The chapter on simulation discusses the genealogy of the orders of simulation from the counterfeit, through production proper to the hyperreal order itself. Chapter 3 examines the case of fashion and the fashion cycle which is crucial to the analysis of consumer society and the commutation of all cultural elements, even the most apparently critical, to the code of fashion and its temporality. Chapter 4 examines the body and sexuality. Here the 'phallus exchange standard' operates as a cultural parallel with the law of value determining a specific destruction of the radical difference between the sexes and the symbolic exchanges based on it. In the next chapter, on death, Baudrillard presents a genealogy of the dead, the destruction of the original unities of life and death and the rituals which integrated the relations between generations in traditional societies. In the final chapter Baudrillard uses Saussure against Saussure. The great analyst of the sign, the originator of structural linguistics and semiology, Saussure also wrote voluminous notebooks on the hidden anagrams in classical literature. Baudrillard argues that this provides a clue to reading such poetry not as accumulation but as sacrificial, cyclical, as prestation and cancellation (extermination). This chapter also includes a critique of the Freudian analysis of jokes seen as complicit with the order of accumulation and repression.

After *Symbolic Exchange and Death* was published in 1976 Baudrillard published a number of brilliant short articles and reviews – a critical review of Foucault, a critique of the architecture of the Pompidou Centre, etc., as well as a set of poems called *L'ange de stuc* (*The Stucco Angel*). His next major work was *Seduction*, published in 1979. This developed the theme of the opposition of seduction to the semiotic and masculine principle of

production; it suggested a return of the principle of seduction in consumer society, but in a changed form, that of the ludic, a cool seduction. In 1983 Baudrillard published *Fatal Strategies*, which charted the collapse of agency in a society dominated by the code and the phenomena which accompanied the disappearance of the constraints of the dialectic. It became clear that a crucial influence on Baudrillard, apart from Marx, Freud, Saussure and Mauss, was Nietzsche. The latter's anti-modernist aphoristic style was evident in Baudrillard's *Cool Memories*, published in 1987, one of Baudrillard's most successful works. In recent years Baudrillard has published *Transparency of Evil*, *The Illusion of the End* and a collection of articles on the Gulf War. These works continue the analysis of the apparent destruction of the symbolic by the semiotic and the subsequent ironic evolution of the semiotic order; they still draw on the theory and analyses of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, in fact at points are almost unintelligible without a knowledge of that text. Indeed, in a recent interview (1991), Baudrillard drew attention to the fact that in France *Symbolic Exchange and Death* was

> the last book that inspired any confidence … Everything is deemed brilliant, intelligent, but not serious. There has never been any real discussion about it. I don't claim to be tremendously serious, but there are nevertheless some philosophically serious things in my work! In the fine arts milieu I was received fairly well, but with such misunderstanding! (Baudrillard, 1993:189)

Certainly with this English translation it is evident that many of the misunderstandings that have surrounded the writings of Baudrillard, perhaps far beyond the fine arts milieu, will find they have no textual basis. More than that of course, the publication of this translation brings to the English-speaking public a document which has already had enormous indirect influence. For those who have wished that Baudrillard would express his argument in more orthodox terms, this is undoubtedly the text where he attempted to do precisely that.

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Preface

Symbolic exchange is no longer the organising principle of modern society. Of course, the symbolic haunts modern social institutions in the form of their own death. Indeed, since the symbolic no longer rules these social forms, they experience it only as this haunting, and as a demand forever blocked by the law of value. Even though a certain idea of revolution has, since Marx, attempted to find a way past the law of value, it long since became a revolution in accordance with the Law. Even psychoanalysis gravitates around this haunting, which it fends off while at the same time circumscribing it within an individualised unconscious, thus reducing it, under the Law of the Father, to the obsessional fear of castration and the Signifier. Always the Law. However, beyond the topologies and economics, both libidinal and political, gravitating around a materialist or desiring-production on the stage of value, an outline of social relations emerges, based on the extermination of value. For us, the model of this relation harks back to primitive formations, but this radical utopia is slowly beginning to intrude at every level of contemporary society; this intoxicating revolt no longer has anything to do with the laws of history, nor even – but we will have to wait for a later stage for this to appear, since it is a recent phantasy – with the 'liberation' of a 'desire'.

In this light, other theoretical events, such as Saussure's anagrams and Mauss's gift-exchange, assume cardinal importance. In the long run, these hypotheses are more radical than Marx's or Freud's, whose interpretations are censored by precisely their imperialism. The anagrams or gift-exchanges are not merely transitory phases within the disciplines of linguistics and anthropology, nor are they inferior forms compared to the vast machinations of the unconscious and the revolution. Here one predominant form emerges, from which Marxism and psychoanalysis, though they may not be aware of it, derive. This form is equally dismissive of political and libidinal economy, outlining instead a beyond of value, a beyond of the law, a beyond of repression and a beyond of the unconscious. This is taking place here and now.

When Freud proposes the theory of the death drive, this is the one theoretical event of the same order as the anagram and the gift, provided we radicalise it against Freud himself. Indeed we must switch the targets of each of these three theories, and turn Mauss against Mauss,

Saussure against Saussure and Freud against Freud. The principle of reversibility (the counter-gift) must be imposed against all the economistic, psychologistic and structuralist interpretations for which Mauss paved the way. The Saussure of the *Anagrams* must be set against Saussurian linguistics, against even his own restricted hypotheses concerning the anagram. The Freud of the death drive must be pitched against every previous psychoanalytic edifice, and even against Freud's version of the death drive.

At the price of paradox and theoretical violence, we witness that the three hypotheses describe, in their own respective fields (but this propriety is precisely what the general form of the symbolic annihilates), a functional principle sovereignly outside and antagonistic to our economic 'reality principle'.

Everywhere, in every domain, a single form predominates: reversibility, cyclical reversal and annulment put an end to the linearity of time, language, economic exchange, accumulation and power. Hence the reversibility of the gift in the counter-gift, the reversibility of exchange in the sacrifice, the reversibility of time in the cycle, the reversibility of production in destruction, the reversibility of life in death, and the reversibility of every term and value of the *langue* in the anagram. In every domain it assumes the form of extermination and death, for it is the form of the symbolic itself. Neither mystical nor structural, the symbolic is inevitable.

The reality principle corresponded to a certain stage of the law of value. Today the whole system is swamped by indeterminacy, and every reality is absorbed by the hyperreality of the code and simulation. The principle of simulation governs us now, rather than the outdated reality principle. We *feed* on those forms whose finalities have disappeared. No more ideology, only simulacra. We must therefore reconstruct the entire genealogy of the law of value and its simulacra in order to grasp the hegemony and the enchantment of the current system. A structural revolution of value. This genealogy must cover political economy, where it will appear as a second-order simulacrum, just like all those that stake everything on the real: the real of production, the real of signification, whether conscious or unconscious.

Capital no longer belongs to the order of political economy: it operates with political economy as its simulated model. The entire apparatus of the commodity law of value is absorbed and recycled in the larger apparatus of the structural law of value, thus becoming part of the third order of simulacra (see below). Political economy is thus assured a *second life*, an eternity, within the confines of an apparatus in which it has lost all its strict determinacy, but maintains an effective presence as a system of reference for simulation. It was exactly the same for the previous apparatus – the natural law of value – which the system of political economy and the market law

of value also appropriated as their imaginary system of reference ('Nature'): 'nature' leads a ghostly existence as use-value at the core of exchange-value. But on the next twist of the spiral, use-value is seized as an alibi within the dominant order of the code. Each configuration of value is seized by the next in a higher order of simulacra. And each phase of value integrates the prior apparatus into its own as a phantom reference, a puppet reference, a simulated reference.

A revolution separates each order from its successor: these are the only genuine revolutions. We are in the third order, which is the order no longer of the real, but of the hyperreal. It is only here that theories and practices, themselves floating and indeterminate, can reach the real and beat it to death.

Contemporary revolutions are indexed on the immediately prior state of the system. They are all buttressed by a nostalgia for the resurrection of the real in all its forms, that is, as second-order simulacra: dialectics, use-value, the transparency and finality of production, the 'liberation' of the unconscious, of repressed meaning (the signifier, or the signified named 'desire'), and so on. All these liberations provide the ideal content for the system to devour in its successive revolutions, and which it brings subtly back to life as mere phantasmas of revolution. These revolutions are only transitions towards generalised manipulation. At the stage of the aleatory processes of control, even revolution becomes meaningless.

The rational, referential, historical and functional machines of consciousness correspond to industrial machines. The aleatory, non-referential, transferential, indeterminate and floating machines of the unconscious respond to the aleatory machines of the code. But even the unconscious is reabsorbed by this operation, and it has long since lost its own reality principle to become an operational simulacrum. At the precise point that its *psychical* reality principle merges into its *psychoanalytic* reality principle, the unconscious, like political economy, also becomes a model of simulation.

The systemic strategy is merely to invoke a number of floating values in this hyperreality. This is as true of the unconscious as it is of money and theories. Value rules according to the indiscernible order of generation by means of models, according to the infinite chains of simulation.

Cybernetic operativity, the genetic code, the aleatory order of mutation, the uncertainty principle, etc., succeed determinate, objectivist science, and the dialectical view of history and consciousness. Even critical theory, along with the revolution, turns into a second-order simulacrum, as do all determinate processes. The deployment of third-order simulacra sweeps all this away, and to attempt to reinstate dialectics, 'objective' contradictions, and so on, against them would be a futile political regression. You can't fight the aleatory by imposing finalities,

you can't fight against programmed and molecular dispersion with *prises de conscience* and dialectical sublation, you can't fight the code with political economy, nor with 'revolution'. All these outdated weapons (including those we find in first-order simulacra, in the ethics and metaphysics of man and nature, use-value, and other liberatory systems of reference) are gradually neutralised by a higher-order general system. Everything that filters into the non-finality of the space-time of the code, or that attempts to intervene in it, is disconnected from its own ends, disintegrated and absorbed. This is the well known effect of recuperation, manipulation, of circulating and recycling at every level. 'All dissent must be of a higher logical type than that to which it is opposed' (Anthony Wilden, *System and Structure* [London: Tavistock, 1977], p. xxvii). Is it at least possible to find an even match to oppose third-order simulacra? Is there a theory or a practice which is subversive because it is more aleatory than the system itself, an indeterminate subversion which would be to the order of the code what the revolution was to the order of political economy? Can we fight DNA? Certainly not by means of the class struggle. Perhaps simulacra of a higher logical (or illogical) order could be invented: beyond the current third order, beyond determinacy and indeterminacy. But would they still be simulacra? Perhaps death and death alone, the reversibility of death, belongs to a higher order than the code. Only symbolic disorder can bring about an interruption in the code.

Every system that approaches perfect operativity simultaneously approaches its downfall. When the system says 'A is A', or 'two times two equals four', it approaches absolute power and total absurdity; that is, immediate and probable subversion. A gentle push in the right place is enough to bring it crashing down. We know the potential of tautology when it reinforces the system's claim to perfect sphericity (Ubu Roi's belly).

Identity is untenable: it *is* death, since it fails to inscribe its own death. Every closed or metastable, functional or cybernetic system is shadowed by mockery and instantaneous subversion (which no longer takes the detour through long dialectical labour), because all the system's inertia acts against it. Ambivalence awaits the most advanced systems, that, like Leibniz's binary God, have deified their functional principle. The fascination they exert, because it derives from a profound denial such as we find in fetishism, can be instantaneously reversed. Hence their fragility increases in proportion to their ideal coherence. These systems, even when they are based on radical indeterminacy (the loss of meaning), fall prey, once more, to meaning. They collapse under the weight of their own monstrosity, like fossilised dinosaurs, and immediately decompose. This is the fatality of every system committed by its own logic to total perfection and therefore to a total defectiveness, to absolute infallibility and therefore irrevocable

breakdown: the aim of all bound energies is their own death. This is why the only strategy is *catastrophic*, and not dialectical at all. Things must be pushed to the limit, where quite naturally they collapse and are inverted. At the peak of value we are closest to ambivalence, at the pinnacle of coherence we are closest to the abyss of corruption which haunts the reduplicated signs of the code. Simulation must go further than the system. Death must be played against death: a radical tautology that makes the system's own logic the ultimate weapon. The only strategy against the hyperrealist system is some form of pataphysics, 'a science of imaginary solutions'; that is, a science-fiction of the system's reversal against itself at the extreme limit of simulation, a reversible simulation in a hyperlogic of death and destruction.[1]

The symbolic demands meticulous reversibility. *Ex-terminate* every *term*, abolish value in the term's revolution against itself: that is the only symbolic violence equivalent to and triumphant over the structural violence of the code.

A revolutionary dialectic corresponded to the commodity law of value and its equivalents; only the scrupulous reversion of death corresponds to the code's indeterminacy and the structural law of value.[2]

Strictly speaking, nothing remains for us to base anything on. All that remains for us is theoretical violence – speculation to the death, whose only method is the radicalisation of hypotheses. Even the code and the symbolic remain terms of simulation: it must be possible to extract them, one by one, from discourse.

Notes

1. Death is always equally what waits at the *term* of the system, and the symbolic *extermination* that stalks the system itself. It is not that there are two words to designate the finality of death internal to the system, the one in-scribed everywhere in its operational logic, and the other a radical counter-finality ex-scribed on the system as such, but which haunts it everywhere: only the term of death, and it alone, figures on both sides. This ambiguity can already be discerned in the Freudian death-drive. Rather than an ambiguity, however, it simply translates the proximity of complete perfection and immediate defectiveness.
2. Death ought never to be understood as the real event that affects a subject or a body, but as a *form* in which the determinacy of the subject and of value is lost. The demand of reversibility puts an end to determinacy and indeterminacy at the same time. It puts an end to bound energies in stable oppositions, and is therefore in substantial agreement with theories of flows and intensities, whether libidinal or schizo. The unbinding of energies is, however, the very form of the current system, which consists in a strategic drift of value. The system can be connected and disconnected, but all the freed energies will one day return to it: this is how the concepts of energy and intensity come about. Capital is an energetic and intense system. Hence the impossibility of distinguishing the libidinal economy from the political economy (see Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* [tr. I.H. Grant, London: Athlone, 1992]) of the system

of value; and the impossibility of distinguishing capitalist schizzes from revolutionary schizzes (see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia I* [tr. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane, London: Athlone, 1984]). For the system is master: like God it can bind or unbind energies; what it is incapable of (and what it can no longer avoid) is reversibility. Reversibility alone therefore, rather than unbinding or drifting, is fatal to it. This is exactly what the term symbolic 'exchange' means.

1
The End of Production

The Structural Revolution of Value

Saussure located two dimensions to the exchange of terms of the *langue*, which he assimilated to money. A given coin must be exchangeable against a real good of some value, while on the other hand it must be possible to relate it to all the other terms in the monetary system. More and more, Saussure reserves the term *value* for this second aspect of the system: every term can be related to every other, their *relativity*, internal to the system and constituted by binary oppositions. This definition is opposed to the other possible definition of value: the relation of every term to what it designates, of each signifier to its signified, like the relation of every coin with what it can be exchanged against. The first aspect corresponds to the structural dimension of language, the second to its functional dimension. Each dimension is separate but linked, which is to say that they mesh and cohere. This coherence is characteristic of the 'classical' configuration of the linguistic sign, under the rule of the commodity law of value, where designation always appears as the finality of the structural operation of the *langue*. The parallel between this 'classical' stage of signification and the mechanics of value in material production is absolute, as in Marx's analysis: use-value plays the role of the horizon and finality of the system of exchange-values. The first qualifies the concrete operation of the commodity in consumption (a moment parallel to designation in the sign), the second relates to the exchangeability of any commodity for any other under the law of equivalence (a moment parallel to the structural organisation of the sign). Both are dialectically linked throughout Marx's analyses and define a rational configuration of production, governed by political economy.

A revolution has put an end to this 'classical' economics of value, a revolution of value itself, which carries value beyond its commodity form into its radical form.

This revolution consists in the dislocation of the two aspects of the law of value, which were thought to be coherent and eternally bound as if by a natural law. *Referential value is annihilated, giving the structural play of value the upper hand*. The structural dimension becomes autonomous by excluding the referential dimension, and is instituted upon the death of reference. The systems of reference for production, signification, the affect, substance and history, all this equivalence to a 'real' content, loading the sign with the burden of 'utility', with gravity – its form of representative equivalence – all this is over with. Now the other stage of value has the upper hand, a total

relativity, general commutation, combination and simulation – simulation, in the sense that, from now on, signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real (it is not that they just happen to be exchanged against each other, they do so *on condition* that they are no longer exchanged against the real). The emancipation of the sign: remove this 'archaic' obligation to designate something and it finally becomes free, indifferent and totally indeterminate, in the structural or combinatory play which succeeds the previous rule of determinate equivalence. The same operation takes place at the level of labour power and the production process: the annihilation of any goal as regards the contents of production allows the latter to function as a code, and the monetary sign, for example, to escape into infinite speculation, beyond all reference to a real of production, or even to a gold-standard. The flotation of money and signs, the flotation of 'needs' and ends of production, the flotation of labour itself – the commutability of every term is accompanied by speculation and a limitless inflation (and we really have *total liberty* – no duties, disaffection and general disenchantment; but this remains a magic, a sort of magical obligation which keeps the sign chained up to the real, capital has freed signs from this 'naïvety' in order to deliver them into pure circulation). Neither Saussure nor Marx had any presentiment of all this: they were still in the golden age of the dialectic of the sign and the real, which is at the same time the 'classical' period of capital and value. Their dialectic is in shreds, and the real has died of the shock of value acquiring this fantastic autonomy. Determinacy is dead, indeterminacy holds sway. There has been an extermination (in the literal sense of the word) of the real of production and the real of signification.[1]

I indicated this structural revolution of the law of value in the term 'political economy of the sign'.[2] This term, however, can only be regarded as makeshift, for the following reasons:

1. Does this remain a political-economic question? Yes, in that it is always a question of value and the law of value. However, the mutation that affects it is so profound and so decisive, the content of political economy so thoroughly changed, indeed annihilated, that the term is nothing more than an allusion. Moreover, it is precisely *political* to the extent that it is always the *destruction* of social relations governed by the relevant value. For a long time, however, it has been a matter of something entirely different from economics.
2. The term 'sign' has itself only an allusive value. Since the structural law of value affects signification as much as it does everything else, its form is not that of the sign in general, but that of a certain organisation which is that of the code. The code only governs certain signs however. Just as the commodity law of value does not, at a given moment, signify just any determinant instance of material production, neither, conversely, does the structural law of value signify any pre-eminence of the sign whatever. This illusion derives from the fact that Marx developed the one in the shadow of the commodity, while Saussure developed the

> other in the shadow of the linguistic sign. But this illusion must be shattered. The commodity law of value is a law of equivalences, and this law operates throughout every sphere: it equally designates the equivalence in the configuration of the sign, where one signifier and one signified facilitate the regulated exchange of a referential content (the other parallel modality being the linearity of the signifier, contemporaneous with the linear and cumulative time of production).

The classical law of value then operates simultaneously in every instance (language, production, etc.), despite these latter remaining distinct according to their sphere of reference.

Conversely, the structural law of value signifies the indeterminacy of every sphere in relation to every other, and to their proper content (also therefore the passage from the *determinant* sphere of signs to the *indeterminacy* of the code). To say that the sphere of material production and that of signs exchange their respective contents is still too wide of the mark: they literally disappear as such and lose their specificity along with their determinacy, to the benefit of a form of value, of a much more general assemblage, where designation and production are annihilated.

The 'political economy of the sign' was also consequent upon an extension of the commodity law of value and its confirmation at the level of signs, whereas the structural configuration of value simply and simultaneously puts an end to the regimes of production, political economy, representation and signs. With the code, all this collapses into simulation. Strictly speaking, neither the 'classical' economy nor the political economy of the sign ceases to exist: they lead a secondary existence, becoming a sort of phantom principle of dissuasion.

The end of labour. The end of production. The end of political economy. The end of the signifier/signified dialectic which facilitates the accumulation of knowledge and meaning, the linear syntagma of cumulative discourse. And at the same time, the end of the exchange-value/use-value dialectic which is the only thing that makes accumulation and social production possible. The end of the linear dimension of discourse. The end of the linear dimension of the commodity. The end of the classical era of the sign. The end of the era of production.

It is not *the* revolution which puts an end to all this, it is *capital itself* which abolishes the determination of the social according to the means of production, substitutes the structural form for the commodity form of value, and currently controls every aspect of the system's strategy.

This historical and social mutation is legible at every level. In this way the era of simulation is announced everywhere by the commutability of formerly contradictory or dialectically opposed terms. Everywhere we see the same 'genesis of simulacra': the commutability of the beautiful and the ugly in fashion, of the left and the right in politics, of the true and the false in every media message, the useful and the useless at the level of objects, nature and culture at every level of signification. All the great

humanist criteria of value, the whole civilisation of moral, aesthetic and practical judgement are effaced in our system of images and signs. Everything becomes undecidable, the characteristic effect of the domination of the code, which everywhere rests on the principle of neutralisation, of indifference.[3] This is the generalised brothel of capital, a brothel not for prostitution, but for substitution and commutation.

This process, which has for a long time been at work in culture, art, politics, and even in sexuality (in the so-called 'superstructural' domains), today affects the economy itself, the whole so-called 'infrastructural' field. Here the same indeterminacy holds sway. And, of course, with the loss of determination of the economic, we also lose any possibility of conceiving it as the determinant agency.

Since for two centuries historical determination has been built up around the economic (since Marx in any case), it is there that it is important to grasp the interruption of the code.

The End of Production

We are at the end of production. In the West, this form coincides with the proclamation of the commodity law of value, that is to say, with the reign of political economy. First, nothing is *produced*, strictly speaking: everything is *deduced*, from the grace (God) or beneficence (nature) of an agency which releases or withholds its riches. Value emanates from the reign of divine or natural qualities (which for us have become retrospectively confused). The Physiocrats still saw the cycles of land and labour in this way, as having no value of their own. We may wonder, then, whether there is a genuine *law* of value, since this law is *dispatch* without attaining rational expression. Its form cannot be separated from the inexhaustible referential substance to which it is bound. If there is a law here, it is, in contrast to the commodity law, a *natural* law of value.

A mutation shakes this edifice of a natural distribution or dispensing of wealth as soon as value is *produced*, as its reference becomes labour, and its law of equivalence is generalised to every type of labour. Value is now assigned to the distinct and rational operation of human (social) labour. It is measurable, and, in consequence, so is surplus-value.

The critique of political economy begins with social production or the mode of production as its reference. The concept of production alone allows us, by means of an analysis of that unique commodity called labour power, to extract a *surplus* (a surplus-value) which controls the rational dynamics of capital as well as its beyond, the revolution.

Today everything has changed again. Production, the commodity form, labour power, equivalence and surplus-value, which together formed the outline of a quantitative, material and measurable configuration, are now things of the past. Productive forces outlined another reference which, although in contradiction with the relations of production, remained a

reference, that of social wealth. An aspect of production still supports both a social form called capital and its internal critique called Marxism. Now, revolutionary demands are based on the abolition of the *commodity* law of value.

Now we have passed from the commodity law of value to the structural law of value, and this coincides with the obliteration of the social form known as production. Given this, are we still within a capitalist mode? It may be that we are in a hyper-capitalist mode, or in a very different order. Is the form of capital bound to the law of value in general, or to some specific form of the law of value (perhaps we are really already within a socialist mode? Perhaps this metamorphosis of capital under the sign of the structural law of value is merely its socialist outcome? Oh dear …)? If the life and death of capital are staked on the *commodity* law of value, if the revolution is staked on the mode of production, then we are within neither capital nor revolution. If this latter consists in a liberation of the social and generic production of man, then there is no longer any prospect of a revolution since there is no more production. If, on the other hand, capital is a *mode of domination*, then we are always in its midst. This is because the structural law of value is the purest, most illegible form of social domination, like surplus-value. It no longer has any references within a dominant class or a relation of forces, it works without violence, entirely reabsorbed without any trace of bloodshed into the signs which surround us, operative everywhere in the code in which capital finally holds its purest discourses, beyond the dialects of industry, trade and finance, beyond the dialects of class which it held in its 'productive' phase – a symbolic violence inscribed everywhere in signs, even in the signs of the revolution.

The structural revolution of value eliminated the basis of the 'Revolution'. The loss of reference fatally affected first the revolutionary systems of reference, which can no longer be found in any social substance of production, nor in the certainty of a reversal in any truth of labour power. This is because labour is not a *power*, it has become one *sign* amongst many. Like every other sign, it produces and consumes itself. It is exchanged against non-labour, leisure, in accordance with a total equivalence, it is commutable with every other sector of everyday life. No more or less 'alienated', it is no longer a unique, historical 'praxis' giving rise to unique social relations. Like most practices, it is now only a set of signing operations. It becomes part of contemporary life in general, that is, it is framed by signs. It is no longer even the suffering of historical prostitution which used to play the role of the contrary promise of final emancipation (or, as in Lyotard, as the space of the workers' enjoyment [*jouissance*] which fulfils an unremitting desire in the abjection of value and the rule of capital).[4] None of this remains true. Sign-form seizes labour and rids it of every historical or libidinal significance, and absorbs it in the process of its own reproduction: the operation of the *sign*, behind the empty allusion to what it designates, is to replicate itself. In the past, labour was used to designate the reality of a social production and a social objective of accumulating wealth. Even capital and

surplus-value exploited it – precisely where it retained a use-value for the expanded reproduction of capital and its final destruction. It was shot through with finality anyway – if the worker is absorbed in the pure and simple reproduction of his labour power, it is not true that the process of production is experienced as senseless repetition. Labour revolutionises society through its very abjection, as a commodity whose potential always exceeds pure and simple reproduction of value.

Today this is no longer the case since labour is no longer productive but has become reproductive of the *assignation to labour* which is the general habit of a society which no longer knows whether or not it wishes to produce. No more myths of production and no more contents of production: national balance sheets now merely retrace a numerical and statistical growth devoid of meaning, an inflation of the signs of accountancy over which we can no longer even project the phantasy of the collective will. The pathos of growth itself is dead, since no-one believes any longer in the pathos of production, whose final, paranoid and panic-stricken tumescence it was. Today these codes are detumescent. It remains, however, more necessary than ever to reproduce labour as a social ritual [*affectation*], as a reflex, as morality, as consensus, as regulation, as the reality principle. The reality principle *of the code*, that is: an immense *ritual of the signs of labour* extends over society in general – since it *reproduces* itself, it matters little whether or not it *produces*. It is much more effective to socialise by means of rituals and signs than by the bound energies of production. You are asked only to become socialised, not to produce or to excel yourself (this classical ethic now arouses suspicion instead). You are asked only to consider value, according to the structural definition which here takes on its full social significance, as one term in relation to others, to function as a sign in the general scenario of production, just as labour and production now function only as signs, as terms commutable with non-labour, consumption, communication, etc. – a multiple, incessant, twisting relation across the entire network of other signs. Labour, once voided of its energy and substance (and generally disinvested), is given a new role as the model of social simulation, bringing all the other categories along with it into the aleatory sphere of the code.

An unnervingly strange state of affairs: this sudden plunge into a sort of secondary existence, separated from you by all the opacity of a previous life, where there was a familiarity and an intimacy in the traditional process of labour. Even the concrete reality of exploitation, the violent sociality of labour, is familiar. This has all gone now, and is due not so much to the *operative* abstraction of the *process* of labour, so often described, as to the passage of every *signification* of labour into an *operational* field where it becomes a floating variable, dragging the whole imaginary of a previous life along with it.

Beyond the autonomisation of production as *mode* (beyond the convulsions, contradictions and revolutions inherent in the mode), the *code* of production must re-emerge. This is the dimension things are taking on today, at the end of a 'materialist' history which has succeeded in

authenticating it as the real movement of society. (Art, religion and duty have no real history for Marx – only production has a history, or, rather, it *is* history, it grounds history. An incredible fabrication of labour and production as historical reason and the generic model of fulfilment.)

The end of this religious autonomisation of production allows us to see that all of this could equally have been *produced* (this time in the sense of a stage-production and a scenario) fairly recently, with totally different goals than the internal finalities (that is, the revolution) secreted away within production.

To analyse production as a code cuts across both the material evidence of machines, factories, labour time, the product, salaries and money, and the more formal, but equally 'objective', evidence of surplus-value, the market, capital, to discover the rule of the game which is to destroy the logical network of the agencies of capital, and even the critical network of the Marxian categories which analyse it (which categories are again only an appearance at the second degree of capital, its *critical* appearance), in order to discover the elementary signifiers of production, the social relations it establishes, buried away forever beneath the historical illusion of the producers (and the theoreticians).

Labour

Labour power is not a 'power', it is a definition, an axiom, and its 'real' operation in the labour process, its 'use-value', is only the reduplication of this definition in the operation of the code. It is at the level of the sign, never at the level of energy, that violence is fundamental. The *mechanism* of capital (and not its law) plays on surplus-value – the non-equivalence of the salary and labour power. Even if the two were equivalent, even if salaries were abolished (for the sale of labour power), man would still be marked by this axiom, by this destiny of production, by this sacrament of labour which sets him apart like a sex. The worker is no longer a man, nor even a woman: it has its own sex, it is assigned this labour power as an end, and marked by it as a woman is marked by her sex (her sexual definition), as a Black is by the colour of his or her skin – all signs and nothing but signs.

We must distinguish what belongs to the *mode* and what belongs to the *code* of production. Before becoming an element of the commodity law of value, labour power is initially a status, a structure of obedience to a code. Before becoming exchange-value or use-value, it is already, like any other commodity, the *sign* of the operation of nature as value, which defines production and is the basic axiom of our culture and no other. This message, much more profoundly than quantitative equivalences, runs beneath commodities from the outset: to remove indeterminacy from nature (and man) in order to submit it to the determinacy of value. This is confirmed in the constructionist mania for bulldozers, motorways, 'infrastructures', and in the civilising mania of the era of production, a mania for leaving no fragment unproduced, for countersigning everything with production,

without even the hope of an excess of wealth. Producing in order to mark, producing in order to reproduce the marked man. What is production today apart from this terrorism of the code? This is as clear for us as it was for the first industrial generations, who dealt with machines as with an absolute enemy, harbingers of total destructuration, before the comforting dream of a historical dialectic of production developed. The Luddite practices which arose everywhere to some extent, the savagery of attacking the instrument of production (primarily attacking itself as the productive force), endemic sabotage and defection bear lengthy testimony to the fragility of the productive order. Smashing machines is an aberrant act if they are the *means* of production, if any ambiguity remains over their future use-value. If, however, the *ends* of this production collapse, then the respect due to the means of production also collapses, and the machines appear as their true end, as direct and immediate operational signs of the social relation to death on which capital is nourished. Nothing then stands in the way of their destruction. In this sense, the Luddites were much clearer than Marx on the impact of the irruption of the industrial order, and today, at the *catastrophic* end of this process, to which Marx himself has misled us in the *dialectical* euphoria of productive forces, they have in some sense exacted their revenge.

We do not mean to invoke the prestige that may attach to a particular type of labour when we say that labour is a sign, nor even the sense of improvement signified by wage labour for the Algerian immigrant in relation to his tribal community, or for the Moroccan kid from the High Atlas Mountains whose only dream is to work for Simca, or for women in our own society. In this case, labour refers to a strict value: betterment or a different status. On the contemporary stage, labour no longer emerges from this referential definition of the sign. There is no longer any proper signification of a particular type of labour or of labour in general, but a system of labour where jobs are exchanged. No more 'right man in the right place',[5] an old adage of the scientific idealism of production. There are no more interchangeable but indispensable individuals in a determinate labour process, since the labour process itself has become interchangeable: mobile, polyvalent and intermittent structures of absorption, indifferent to every object and even to labour itself, when understood according to its classical operation and applied solely to localise each individual within a social nexus where nothing converges except perhaps within the immanence of this operational matrix, an indifferent paradigm which identifies every individual according to a shared radical, or a syntagma which links them into an indefinite combinatory mode.

Labour (even in the guise of leisure), like a primary repression, pervades every aspect of life in the form of a control, a permanent occupation of spaces and times regulated according to an omnipresent code. Wherever there are people, they must be *fixed*, whether in schools, factories, on the beach, in front of the TV, or being retrained. Generalised and permanent mobilisation. Such labour is not, however, productive in

the sense of 'original': it is nothing more than the mirror of society, its imaginary, its fantastic reality principle. Perhaps its death drive.

This is the tendency of every current strategy that turns around labour: 'job enrichment,'[6] flexitime, mobility, retraining, continuing education, autonomy, worker-management, decentralisation of the labour process, even the Californian utopia of domestic cybernetics. Your quotidian roots are no longer savagely ripped up in order to hand you over to the machine – you, your childhood, your habits, your relationships, your unconscious drives, and even your refusal to work are integrated into it. You will easily find a place for yourself amongst all of this, a personalised job, or, failing that, there is a welfare provision calculated according to your personal needs. In any case, you will no longer be abandoned, since it is essential that everyone be a terminal for the entire system, an insignificant terminal, but a term none the less – not an inarticulate cry, but a term of the *langue* and at the terminus of the entire structural network of the language. The very choice of work, the utopia of a tailor-made job, signifies that the *die is cast*, that the structure of absorption is total. Labour power is no longer brutally bought and sold, it is designed, marketed and turned into a commodity – production re-enters the sign system of consumption.

An initial step of this analysis was to conceive the sphere of consumption as an extension of the sphere of the forces of production. We must now do the reverse. The entire sphere of production, labour and the forces of production must be conceived as collapsing into the sphere of 'consumption', understood as the sphere of a generalised axiomatic, a coded exchange of signs, a general lifestyle. In this way knowledge, the sciences, attitudes (D. Verres, *Le discours du capitalisme* [Paris: L'herne, 1971], p. 36: 'Why not consider the attitudes of the workforce as one of the resources to be managed by the boss?'), but also sexuality and the body, the imagination (ibid., p. 74: 'The imagination is all that remains bound to the pleasure principle, whereas the psychical apparatus is subordinated to the reality principle' (Freud). We must put a stop to this waste. The imagination should be realised as a force of production, it should be invested. The slogan of technocracy is: 'Power to the Imagination!'). The same goes for the unconscious, the revolution, and so on. True, all this is in the process of being 'invested' and absorbed into the sphere of value, but not so much market value as accountable value; that is, it is not mobilised for the sake of production, but indexed, allocated, summoned to play the part of a functional variable. It has become not so much a force of production as several pieces on the chessboard of the code, caught in the same game-rules. The axiom of production now tends to be reduced to *factors*, the axiom of the code reduces everything to a *variable*. One leads to equations and balance sheets of forces, and the other tends towards mobile and aleatory sets, which neutralise whatever escapes or resists them by *connection* and not by annexation.

This goes much further than Taylorism, or the Scientific Organisation of Labour (SOL), but its spectre marks an essential milestone of investment by the code. Two phases can be distinguished.

The 'pre-scientific' phase of the industrial system, characterised by maximum exploitation of labour power, is succeeded by the phase of machinery and the preponderance of fixed capital, where 'objectified labour appears not only in the form of product, or of the product employed as the means of labour, but in the form of the force of production itself (Marx, *Grundrisse* [tr. Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973], p. 694). This accumulation of objectified labour which supplants living labour as a force of production is subsequently multiplied to infinity by the accumulation of knowledge: 'The accumulation of knowledge and of skill, of the general productive forces of the social brain, is thus absorbed into capital, as opposed to labour, and hence appears as an attribute of capital, and more specifically of *fixed capital*' (ibid., p. 694).

In the phase of machinery, the scientific apparatus, the collective labourer and the SOL, the 'production process has ceased to be a labour process in the sense of a process dominated by labour as its governing unity' (ibid., p. 693). There is no longer any 'original' force of production, only a general machinery transforming the forces of production into capital; or, rather, a machinery which *manufactures both the force of production and labour power*. The whole social apparatus of labour is forestalled by this operation. The collective machinery has begun to produce social goals directly, and this is what produces production.

The hegemony of dead labour over living labour. Primitive accumulation merely accumulates dead labour to the point that it can reabsorb living labour. Or, in other words, it becomes capable of controlling the production of living labour for its own ends. This is why the end of primitive accumulation marks the decisive turning point of political economy: the transition to the preponderance of dead labour, to crystallised social relations incarnated in dead labour, weighing down on society in its entirety as the code of domination itself. Marx's greatest error was to have retained a belief in the innocence of machines, the technical process and science – all of which were supposedly capable of becoming living social labour once the system of capital was liquidated, despite the fact that this is precisely what the system is based on. This pious hope springs from having underestimated death in dead labour, and from thinking that death is overcome in the living, beyond a certain crucial point, by a sort of historical somersault of production.

Marx had, however, sensed this while noting that 'objectified labour confronts living labour within the process itself as the power which *rules* it; a power which, as the appropriation of living labour, is the form of capital' (*Grundrisse*, p. 693 [J.B.'s emphasis]). This also becomes apparent in the formula according to which, at a certain stage of capital, man '*steps to the side of the production process*, instead of being its chief actor' (ibid., p. 705). This formula goes well beyond political economy and its critique, since it literally signifies that it is a matter no longer of a production process, but of a process of exclusion and relegation.

We must again draw out all the consequences of this. When production attains this circularity and turns in on itself, it loses every objective

determination. It incants itself as myth while its own terms have become signs. Simultaneously, when this sphere of signs (including the media, information, etc.) ceases to be a specific sphere for representing the unity of the global process of capital, then we must not only say with Marx that 'the production process has ceased to be a labour process' (ibid., p. 693), but that 'the process of capital itself has ceased to be a production process'.

With the hegemony of dead labour over living labour, the whole dialectic of production collapses. Following the same basic schema as the central oppositions of rationalist thought (truth and falsity, appearance and reality, nature and culture), all the oppositions according to which Marxism operates (use-value/exchange-value, forces of production/relations of production) are also neutralised, and in the same way. Everything within production and the economy becomes commutable, reversible and exchangeable according to the same indeterminate specularity as we find in politics, fashion or the media. The indeterminate specularity of the forces and relations of production, of capital and labour, use-value and exchange-value, constitutes the dissolution of production into the code. Today the law of value no longer lies so much in the exchangeability of every commodity under the sign of a general equivalent, as it does in a much more radical exchangeability of all the categories of political economy (and its critique) in accordance with the code. All the determinations of 'bourgeois' thought were neutralised and abolished by the materialist thought of production, which has brought everything down to a single great historical determination. In its turn, however, this too is neutralised and absorbed by a revolution of the terms of the system. Just as other generations were able to dream of pre-capitalist society, we have begun to dream of political economy as a lost object. Now, even its discourse carries some referential force only because it is a lost object.

Marx:

> On the whole, types of work that are consumed as services and not as products separable from the worker hence not capable of existing as commodities independently of him … are of microscopic significance when compared with the mass of capitalist production. They may be entirely neglected, therefore, and can be dealt with under the category of wage-labour. (C*apital* [tr. Ben Fowkes, Harmondsworth: Penguin. 1976], Vol. 1, pp. 1044–5)

This chapter of C*apital* was never written: the problem posed by this disjunction, which confirms that between productive and unproductive labour, is utterly insoluble. Every Marxist definition of labour is split, but this was happening from the outset. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx says: 'Labour becomes productive only by producing its own opposite [that is, capital]' (p. 305n), from which we may logically conclude that if labour comes to reproduce itself, as is the case today within the compass of the 'collective labourer', it ceases to be productive. This is the unforeseen consequence of a definition which did not even consider that capital might take root in something other than the 'productive', precisely, perhaps, in labour voided of its productivity, in 'unproductive' labour, somehow neutralised, where capital simply eludes the dangerous determinacy of 'productive'

labour and can begin to establish its total domination. By misunderstanding 'unproductive labour', Marx concedes the real undefined character of labour on which the strategy of capital is based.

'Production for unproductive consumption is quite as productive as that for productive consumption; always assuming that it produces or reproduces capital' (*Grundrisse*, p. 306n). According to Marx's own definition, there is a paradox here which results from an increasing sector of human labour becoming unproductive without apparently preventing capital from consolidating its dominance. In fact, however, this is all rigged in advance – there are not two or three types of labour,[7] capital itself whispered these pedantic distinctions to Marx, while never being stupid enough to believe in them itself, always merely 'naïvely' overlooking them. There is only one sort of labour (a fundamental definition in fact), and as luck would have it this is the one that Marx let slip through his fingers. Today all labour falls under a single definition, that bastard, archaic and unanalysed category of service-labour, and not the supposedly universal classical definition of 'proletarian' wage-labour.

This is not service-labour in the feudal sense, since labour has lost the sense of obligation and reciprocity that it had in the feudal context, but in the sense that Marx indicates: in service, prestation is inseparable from the prestator – an archaic aspect in the *productivist* vision of capital, but one that's fundamental if capital is grasped as a system of domination, as a system of 'infeudation' to a labouring society, that is, to a certain type of political society for which labour is the rule of the game. This is where we are (if we weren't already there in Marx's time): the reduction of every labour to a service, labour as pure and simple presence/occupation, consumption of time, *prestation* of time. We make an 'act' of labour as we make an act of presence or an act of allegiance. In this sense, prestation is in fact inseparable from the prestator. The service rendered conjoins the body, time, space and grey matter. Whether this produces or not is a matter of indifference as regards this personal indexation. Surplus-value disappears, of course, and the meaning of wages changes (we will come back to this later). It is not, however, a 'regression' of capital towards feudalism, but rather the dawn of its *real* domination, solicitation and total conscription of the 'person'. This is the tendency of every effort to 'retotalise' labour, making it into a total service where the prestator may be more or less absent, but increasingly personally involved.

In this sense labour can no longer be distinguished from other activities, particularly from its opposing term of free time, which, because it implies the same mobilisation and the same investment (or the same productive disinvestment), is today just as much a *service rendered*,[8] which, in accordance with any standard of justice, should merit a wage (this is not absolutely impossible).[9] In short, it is not only the imaginary distinction between productive and unproductive labour which is shaken up, but also the distinction between work and rest itself. There is quite simply no more labour in the specific sense of the term, so Marx ultimately did well not to write his chapter of C*apital*: it was condemned from the outset.

It is at precisely this moment that workers become 'agents of production'. This slippage of terminology – such things have their own importance – ironically signifies the status of one who produces nothing. The semi-skilled worker was no longer a labourer, but merely a worker facing the total indifferentiation of labour, no longer struggling over the content of labour nor over specific wages, but struggling over the generalised form of labour and the political wage. The formation of the 'agent of production' is accompanied by his liberation from the most abstract form – much more abstract than the old semi-skilled worker, exploited to death: the *mannequin of labour* appeared, the lowest common denominator, the dumb waiter of labour's unreality principle. A pleasant euphemism: we no longer work, but merely perform 'acts of production'. This is the end of production-culture, hence the *a contrario* appearance of the term 'productive'. This 'productive agent' is no longer characterised by its exploitation, nor by its being raw material in a labour process; it is characterised by its mobility and interchangeability, by being an insignificant inflection of fixed capital. The 'agent of production' designates the ultimate status of Marx's worker who, as he said, 'steps to the side of the production process'.

The current phase, where 'the process of capital itself ceases to be a process of production', is simultaneously the phase of the disappearance of the factory: society as a whole takes on the appearance of a factory. The factory must disappear as such, and labour must lose its specificity in order that capital can ensure the extensive metamorphosis of its form throughout society as a whole. We must therefore formally recognise the disappearance of the determinate sites of labour, a determinate subject of labour, a determinate time of social labour, we must formally recognise the disappearance of the factory, labour and the proletariat if we want to analyse capital's current and real dominance.[10] The chain-store stage of society or the factory superstructure, the virtual reserve army of capital, is at an end. The principle of the factory and labour explodes and scatters over every aspect of society in such a way that the distinction between the two becomes 'ideological'. It becomes one of capital's traps for maintaining the factory's specific and privileged presence in the revolutionary imaginary. Labour is everywhere, because there is no more labour. Labour now reaches its definitive, completed form, its *principle*, which supports and confirms the principles elaborated in the course of history in those other social spaces that preceded manufacturing industry and served as a model for it: the asylum, the ghetto, the general hospital, the prison – all the sites of enclosure and concentration that our culture has hidden in its march to civilisation. Today, all these determinate sites are themselves losing even their own limits, they are spread throughout global society since the asylum form, carceral form and discrimination have begun to invest the whole social space, every moment of real life.[11] All these things – factories, asylums, prisons, schools – still exist, and will no doubt continue to exist for an indefinite period, as warning signs, to divert the reality of the domination of capital into an imaginary materiality. There have always been

churches to hide the death of God, or to hide the fact that God was everywhere, which amounts to the same thing.

There will always be animal reserves and Indian reservations to hide the fact that they are dead, and that we are all Indians. There will always be factories to hide the death of labour, the death of production, or the fact that they are everywhere and nowhere at once. For there is nothing with which to fight capital today in *determinate* forms. On the contrary, should it become clear that capital is no longer determined by something or other, and that its secret weapon is the reproduction of labour as imaginary, then capital itself would be close to exhaustion.

Wages

Labour, which in its completed form has no relation to any determinate production, is also without any equivalent in wages. Wages are equivalent to labour power only from the perspective of the quantitative reproduction of labour power. When they become the sanction of the status of labour power, the sign of obedience to the rule of the game of capital, wages no longer possess any such meaning. They are no longer in any proportional or equivalence relation at all,[12] they are a sacrament, like a baptism (or the Extreme Unction), which turns you into a genuine citizen of the political society of capital. Beyond the economic investment which constitutes the worker's wage-revenue for capital (end of the salariat as exploitation, beginning of the salariat as the 'actionariat' of capitalist society – the worker's strategic function slides towards consumption as obligatory social service), it is the other sense of the term 'investment' which brings it into the current phase of wage-status: capital invested the worker with a wage just as one used to be invested with a charge or a responsibility. But capital also invested the worker as one might 'invest' a town, totally occupying it and controlling all access.[13]

It is not solely by means of wage-revenue that capital charges producers to keep money in circulation and thus to become real reproducers of capital, but more fundamentally by means of the wage-status by which they are turned into purchasers of goods in the same way that capital itself is the purchaser of labour. Every user uses consumer objects reduced to the functional status of the production of services, just as capital uses labour power. Everyone is thus invested with the fundamental mentality of capital.

On the other hand, as soon as wages are detached from labour power, nothing (not even the unions) stands in the way of an unlimited and maximal wage demand. If there is a 'right price' for a certain *quantity* of labour force, a price can no longer be fixed on consensus and global participation. The traditional wage demand is only a negotiation over the *producer's conditions*. The maximalist demand is an offensive form of the wage-earner's reversal of his status as a reproducer, a *status* to which he is condemned by means of the wage. It is a challenge. The wage-earner

wants everything. His method is not only to aggravate the economic crisis of the system but to turn every political constraint that the system imposes against it.

The maximalist slogan runs: 'maximum wage for minimum labour'. The political result of this escalating reversal might indeed be to send the system into orbit, in accordance with its own logic of labour as enforced presence. For wage-earners operate no longer as producers, but rather in terms of non-production, a role assigned them by capital. Neither do they operate dialectically, their interventions are *catastrophic*.

The less there is to do, the more wage increases must be demanded, since the minimal job is a more obvious sign of an absurdity than that of enforced presence. This is the 'class' that capital transforms in its own image: even robbed of its exploitation, the use of its labour power, it couldn't pay capital too much for this *denial of production*, this loss of identity, this debauchery. The exploited can demand only the minimum, but lower their status and they are free to demand everything.[14] The striking thing about this is that capital can follow into these fields with relative ease. It is not too much for the unions to make those wage-earners without consciousness aware of the wage-labour equivalence which capital itself has abolished. It is not too much for the unions to channel this unlimited wage-blackmail into the wholesome straits of negotiation. Without the unions, the workers would immediately demand 50 per cent, 100 per cent or 200 per cent increases – and perhaps get them! There are examples of this in the United States and Japan.[15]

Money

The homology Saussure established between labour and the signified on the one hand, and wages and the signifier on the other, is a kind of matrix which can be used as a base from which to survey political economy in its entirety. Today, however, the contrary proves to be the case: signifiers are severed from signifieds and wages are severed from labour. The escalating play of the signifier parallels the escalation of wages. Saussure was right: political economy is a language [*langue*], and the same mutation that affects linguistic signs when they lose their referential status also affects the categories of political economy. The same process ramifies in two other directions.

1. Production is severed from every reference or social finality. It then enters a growth phase. We must not interpret this growth as an acceleration, but in another sense, as something which marks and brings about the end of production. This is characterised by a significant divergence between production, on the one hand, and a relatively contingent and autonomous consumption, on the other. When, after the crisis of 1929, and especially after the Second World War, consumption began to be literally 'planned', that is, took on the force at once of a myth and

of a controlled variable, we enter a phase where neither production nor consumption retains any proper determinations nor respective ends. Both become caught in a cycle or spiral, they are overcome by a confusion propagated by growth which leaves the traditional social objectives of production and consumption well behind. This process has only itself as an end. It no longer targets needs or profits. It is not an acceleration of productivity, but a structural inflation of the signs of production, an oscillation and proliferation of every sign, including monetary signs. It is the era of rocket launching programmes, Concorde, and total war strategies, of the proliferation of industrial estates, social or individual infrastructural facilities, training programmes and recycling, etc. – production for production's sake in accordance with a constraint of reinvestment at any cost (reinvestment no longer operating as the rate of surplus-value). The crowning achievement of this reproductive planning promises to be anti-pollution measures, where the entire 'productive' system will recycle and therefore eliminate its own waste products. This huge equation adds up to zero; not nothing, however, because the dialectic of pollution and anti-pollution 'produces' inchoate aspirations to growth without end.

2. The monetary sign is severed from every social production and then enters a phase of speculation and limitless inflation. Inflation is to money what the escalation of wages is to the sale of labour power, and what growth is to production. In each case, the same split releases the same burst of frantic activity and the same virtual crisis: the splitting of wages and the 'right price' of labour power, and the splitting of money and real production, both result in the loss of a system of reference. Abstract social labour time on the one hand and the gold-standard on the other lose their function as indices and criteria of equivalence. Wage inflation and monetary inflation (as well as growth) are therefore of the same type and are inseparable.[16]

Purged of finalities and the *affects* of production, money becomes speculative. From the gold-standard, which had already ceased to be the representative equivalent of a real production but still retains traces of this in a certain equilibrium (little inflation, the convertibility of money into gold, etc.), to hot money and generalised flotation, money is transformed from a referential sign into its structural form – the 'floating' signifier's own logic, not in Lévi-Strauss's sense, where it has not yet discovered its signified, but in the sense that it is well rid of every signified (every 'real' equivalent) as a brake to its proliferation and its unlimited play. Money can thus be reproduced according to a simple play of transfers and writings, according to an incessant splitting and increase of its own abstract substance.

Hot money: a name given to Euro-dollars, doubtless in order to characterise the senseless circulations of the monetary sign. Now, however, we should more accurately say that money has become 'cool', this term

designating, following McLuhan and Riesman, an intense but non-affective relativity of terms, a play sustained purely by the rules of the game, the commutation of terms and the exhaustion of these commutations. By contrast, 'hot' characterises the referential phase of the sign, with its singularity and the opacity of its signified in the real, its very powerful affect and its minimal commutability. We are right in the middle of the sign's cool phase. The current system of labour is cool, every structural assemblage is, generally speaking, cool, while both 'classical' production and labour, hot processes *par excellence*, have been replaced by unlimited growth bound to a disinvestment of the contents and process of labour, which are cool processes.

Coolness is the pure play of the values of discourse and the commutations of writing. It is the ease and aloofness of what now only really plays with codes, signs and words, the omnipotence of operational simulation. To whatever extent affects or systems of reference remain, they remain hot. Any 'message' keeps us in the hot. We enter the cool era when the medium becomes the message. And this is precisely what has taken place with money. Once a certain phase of disconnection has been reached, money is no longer a medium or a means to circulate commodities, it is *circulation itself*, that is to say, it is the realised form of the system in its twisting abstraction.

Money is the first 'commodity' to assume the status of a sign and to *escape use-value*. Henceforth, it intensifies the system of exchange-value, turning it into a visible sign, and in this way makes the transparency of the market (and therefore of rarity too) visible. Today, however, money sanctions a further step: *it also escapes exchange-value*. Freed from the market itself, it becomes an autonomous simulacrum, relieved of every message and every signification of exchange, becoming a message itself and exchanging amongst itself. Money is then no longer a commodity since it no longer contains any use-value or exchange-value, nor is it any longer a general equivalent, that is, it is no longer a mediating abstraction of the market. Money circulates at a greater rate than everything else, and has no common measure with anything else.

We could of course say that this has always been the case that since the first light shone on the market economy, money circulated at the highest rate and drew every other sector into this acceleration. And throughout the history of capital there is a distortion of all the different levels (financial, industrial, agricultural, but also consumer goods, etc.) according to the speed at which it circulates. These distortions still persist today, as the resistance of national currencies (bound up with a market, a production and a local equilibrium) to international speculative currencies testifies. It is, however, the latter that is leading the offensive, because it is what circulates at the highest rate, it is what drifts and floats: a simple play of flotation can ruin any national economy. In accordance with a differential rate of rotation, every sector is thus directed by this high intensity flotation which, far from being a baroque, epiphenomenal process ('What is the

Stock Market for?'), is the purest expression of the system. We discover this scenario everywhere: in the inconvertibility of currencies into gold, or in the inconvertibility of signs into their systems of reference; in the floating and generalised convertibility of currencies amongst themselves, or in the mobility and the endless structural play of signs. But we also discover this in the flotation of all the categories of political economy once they lose their gold-reference, labour power and social production: labour and non-labour, labour and capital, become commutable, all logic has dissolved; and we discover this in the flotation of all the categories of consciousness where the *mental equivalent of the gold-standard*, the subject, has been lost. There are no more authorities to which to refer, under whose jurisdiction producers could exchange their values in accordance with controlled equivalents: the end of the gold-standard. There are no more authorities to which to refer, under whose aegis a subject could exchange objects dialectically, or exchange their determinations around a stable identity in accordance with definite rules: the end of the conscious subject. (We are tempted to say that this is the reign of the unconscious.) The logical consequence of this is, if the conscious subject is the mental equivalent of the gold-standard, then the *unconscious is the mental equivalent of speculative currency and hot money.* Today, individuals, disinvested as subjects and robbed of their fixed relations, are drifting, in relation to one another, into an incessant mode of transferential fluctuations: flows, connections, disconnections, transference/counter-transference. Society as a whole could easily be described in terms of the Deleuzian unconscious,[17] or of monetary mechanics (or indeed in the Riesmanian terms of 'other-directedness', which is already, unfortunately in Anglo-Saxon and therefore barely schizophrenic terms, the flotation of identities). Why privilege the unconscious here (even if it is orphan and schizophrenic)? The unconscious is that mental structure contemporaneous with the most radical, current phase of dominant exchange; it is contemporaneous with the structural revolution of value.

Strikes

Within a system of production, strikes were historically justified as organised violence for purposes of snatching a fraction of surplus-value, or else power, from the opposing violence of capital. Today this form of the strike is dead:

1. It is dead because capital is in a position to leave every strike to continue until it rots, precisely because we are no longer in a system of production (maximalisation of surplus-value). Profits be damned so long as the reproduction of *the form of social relations* is saved!
2. It is dead because such strikes change nothing fundamental: contemporary capital merely redistributes itself, a matter of life or death for it. At best, strikes merely snatch only what, in the end, capital would have conceded anyway.

So if relations of production, and with them the class struggle, fall into orchestrated social and political relations, then clearly all that can intervene in this cycle is what escapes the organisation and definition of class as:

– a *representative* historical agency;
– a *productive* historical agency.

Only those who escape the swings and roundabouts of production and representation can disrupt these mechanisms and provoke, from the depths of their blinded state, a return to the 'class struggle', which might indeed mark the end of this struggle as a locus within the 'political'. It is here that the intervention of immigrants in recent strikes[18] takes on meaning.

Because millions of workers find themselves, by means of the mechanics of discrimination, deprived of all representative authority, their appearance on the Western stage of the class struggle carries the crisis of representation to a crucial level. Kept classless by society as a whole, including the unions (and, on this point, with the economic-racial complicity of their 'rank and file': for the organised proletarian 'class', centred on its relations with political-economic forces with the bourgeois capitalist class, the immigrant is 'objectively' an enemy of the class), the immigrants play, through the action of this social exclusion, the role of analysts of the relation between workers and the unions, and, more generally, of the relation between the 'class' and every representative authority of the 'class'. They are deviant as regards the system of political representation and of every authority who claims to speak in their name.

This situation will not last: unions and bosses have sensed the danger and have begun to reintegrate the immigrants as 'temporary full citizens', full-time extras on the stage of the 'class struggle'.

The Autopsy of the Unions The Renault strike of March–April 1973 constituted a general repetition of this crisis. Apparently confused, uncoordinated, manipulated and, in the final analysis, a failure (except for the extraordinary terminological victory that consisted in the replacement of the once taboo term 'semi-skilled worker' with the term 'agent of production'!), this strike was in reality the beautiful swan song of the unions, caught between their rank and file and the bosses. From the outset it was a 'savage' strike, unleashed by semi-skilled immigrant workers. The CGT,[19] however, had a weapon ready to counter this accidental war: namely spreading the strike to other factories or to other sectors of the workforce, thus taking advantage of the now ritual spring mass demonstrations. Yet even this mechanism of control, which had been repeatedly tested ever since 1968, which the unions counted they could rely on for generations to come, let them down this time. Even the non-savage rank and file (at Seguin, Flins and Sandouville) were sometimes on strike and sometimes back at work (which is also important), without paying heed to the 'advice' from their unions. The unions were constantly being caught off-guard. The workers wanted nothing to do with whatever the unions won from management and put before them.

Those concessions they drew from the workers in order to relaunch negotiations with management were rejected by the management, who then closed down the factories. Management appealed to the workers while ignoring the unions, and in fact deliberately forced the crisis in order to force the unions to retreat: couldn't they control *all* the workers? The unions' social legitimacy, and even their existence, was at issue. Hence the bosses' (and all levels of government) adoption of a 'hard line'. It was no longer a question of a test of strength between the organised (unionised) proletariat and the bosses, but of a *test of representativity* for the unions, under pressure from both the rank and file *and* management. Such tests result from every savage strike over the last few years sparked off by non-union personnel, rebellious youth, immigrants: the classless.

The stakes at this level are extraordinary. The entire edifice of society threatens to collapse with the unions' legitimacy and representativity. Adjudicators and other mediating bodies no longer count for much. Even the police are useless without the unions if the latter cannot police the factories and elsewhere. In May '68, it was the unions who saved the regime, but now their knell is being sounded. The import of the stakes is profoundly expressed in the utter confusion of events such as the Renault strike and May '68 (and this holds good for student demonstrations just as it does for the Renault strikes). To strike or not to strike. Where do we stand on this? No-one can decide any more. What are the objectives? Where are the enemy? What are we talking about? The Geiger counters that the unions, parties and micro-groups used to measure the masses' readiness for combat are thrown into turmoil. The student movement is too fluid for the hands of those who would like to structure it according to their own objectives: don't they have any objectives? In any case, it did not want to *become objectified behind its back*. The workers went back to work without gaining a thing, while eight days beforehand they had refused when they were offered palpable benefits. In fact, this confusion is similar to what happens in dreams: it betrays a resistance or a censorship acting on the dream-content itself. Here it betrays something of vital importance, something difficult, however, for the proletarians themselves to accept: the social struggle has been *displaced* from the traditional, external enemy of the class, management and capital, onto the internal class enemy, the proper representative authority for the class, the party or the union. These are the authorities to which the workers delegate their power, which is turned against them under the form of management or government delegations of power. Capital itself only alienates labour power and its product, its only monopoly is *production*. Parties and unions alienate social power from the exploited and have a monopoly on *representation*. Calling them into question is a revolutionary historical development. But this development is paid for by a loss of clarity, a loss of resolution, an apparent regression, the absence of continuity, logic and objectives, etc. This is because everything becomes uncertain when it is a matter of confronting one's own repressive agency, of driving the unionist, shop steward, official or spokesperson *from*

one's own head. But the confusing character of spring '73 indicates precisely that we have fundamentally located the problem: the unions and parties are dead, all that remains for them to do is die.

The Corrupted Proletariat The crisis of representation is the crucial *political* aspect of the latest social movements. In itself, this crisis may prove fatal to the system, and already we can see the emerging outline (in the unions themselves) of its formal overcoming (its recuperation) in a generalised schema of *self-management*. No more delegation of power – everyone will be fully responsible for production! The new ideological generation is coming! But it will have a great deal to do, because this crisis is intricately bound up with another crisis, deeper still, which touches production itself, the very system of productivity. And there again, indirectly of course, the immigrants are in the position of analysts. Just as they analyse the 'proletariat's' relation to its representative agencies, they analyse the *workers' relation to their own labour power*, their relation to themselves as a productive force (and not only to a few of them, selected as representative authorities). This is because they have recently been extracted from a non-productivist tradition; because they had to be socially destructured in order to be thrown into the process of Western labour, and because, in return, it is they who thoroughly destructure the general process and morality of production which dominates Western societies.

It is just as if their forced recruitment into the European market provoked an increasing corruption of the European proletariat as regards labour and production. It is no longer simply a matter of 'clandestine' practices of resistance to labour (go-slows, wastage, absenteeism, etc.), which have never stopped. This time the workers downed tools openly, collectively and spontaneously, just like that, suddenly, asking for nothing, negotiating nothing, to the great despair of both unions and management, and started work again just as spontaneously, *as a group*, the following Monday. Neither failure nor victory, it was not a strike, it was just a *'stoppage'*, a euphemism which says far more than the term 'strike'. The whole discipline of labour collapses, all the moral norms and practices that industrial colonisation has imposed on Europe for two centuries disintegrate and are forgotten with apparent ease, without the 'class struggle' strictly speaking. Discontinuity, latitudinarianism, indiscipline as regards working hours, indifference with regard to wage pressure, to surplus, promotion, accumulation, forecasting. You do only what you have to, then stop and go back to it later. This is exactly the behaviour that inhabitants of 'developing countries' were reproached for by the colonists, who found it impossible to train the inhabitants to obey value and labour, rational and continuous time, the concept of saving wages, and so on. It is only by sending them abroad that the inhabitants were finally integrated into the labour process. And it is at precisely this point that Western workers start to 'regress' more and more into the behaviour of 'underdeveloped' inhabitants. It is not that seeing the Western proletariat in the grip of corruption constitutes a revenge

for colonisation in its most advanced form (importing manual labour), although one day it might have to be the turn of the proletariat to be exported to the developing countries in order to relearn the historical and revolutionary values of labour.

There is a direct relation between the ultra-colonisation of immigrant workers (since the colonies were not profitable where they were, they had to be imported) and the industrial de-colonisation which affects every sector of society (everywhere, in schools and in factories, we move from the *hot* phase of the investment of labour to *the cynical and cool execution of tasks*). Because they have most recently left their 'savage' indifference for 'rational' labour, these immigrants (and the young or rural semi-skilled workers) are in a position to analyse Western society with the recent, fragile, superficial and arbitrary collectivisation enforced by labour, this collective paranoia, which has spawned a morality, a culture and a myth. We have forgotten that it was only two centuries ago that this industrial discipline was imposed, at unprecedented cost, on the West itself, that it has never quite succeeded and is beginning to crack dangerously (it will barely have lasted as long, indeed, as overseas colonisation).

Strike for Strike's Sake Strike for strike's sake is the true condition of the contemporary struggle. Unmotivated, with neither objective nor political referent, it is the oppositional response adopted against a production which is also unmotivated, with neither a referent, nor a social use-value, nor any other finality than its own – *production for production's sake*, in short, a system which has become only a system of *reproduction*, revolving around itself in a gigantic tautology of the labour process. Strike for strike's sake is the complementary tautology, but, since it unveils a new form of capital corresponding to the final stage of the law of value, it is also subversive.

Strikes have at last ceased to be a means, and only a means, of putting pressure on the relation of *political* forces and the power game. It becomes an end. Even on their own ground they negate, by means of a radical parody, the sort of finality without end that production has become.

In production for production's sake, there is no more waste. We have no use for this term, which means something only in a restricted utilitarian economy. It relies on a pious critique of the system. Concorde, the space programme, etc., are not a waste of resources; on the contrary, since the system, having reached this high point of 'objective' futility, produces and reproduces *labour itself.* Besides, this is precisely what everyone (including the workers and the unions) demands of it. Everything revolves around jobs (the social is just a matter of job creation), and in order to keep their jobs, the British unions are prepared to transform Concorde into a supersonic bomber. Inflation or unemployment? Long live inflation! Labour, like social security, has come to be just another consumer good to be distributed throughout society. The enormous paradox is that the less labour becomes a productive force, the more it becomes a *product*. This is not the least important characteristic of the current mutations of the capitalist system, the revolution from the specific stage of

production to the stage of reproduction. It has less and less need of labour power in order to function and grow, while there are increasing demands on it to produce more and more labour.

Corresponding to the absurd circularity of a system where one labours only to produce more labour is the demand for strikes for strikes' sake (at any rate, this is the point at which the majority of 'protest' strikes have today come to an end). 'Pay us for the days we are on strike' basically means 'pay us in order that we may *reproduce* strikes for strikes' sake'. This is the reversal of the absurdity of the system in general.

Today, *all* products, labour included, are beyond both use and futility. There is no more productive labour, only reproductive labour. In the same way there is no more 'productive' or 'unproductive' consumption, only a *reproductive* consumption. Leisure is as productive as labour, factory labour as 'unproductive' as leisure or the service industries, it is irrelevant what formula we use. *This indifference precisely marks the phase of the completion of political economy. Everyone is reproductive*; that is, everyone has lost the concrete finality which once marked them out from one another. Nobody produces any more. Production is dead, long live reproduction!

The Genealogy of Production The system currently reproduces capital according to its most rigorous definition, as the *form of social relations*, rather than in its vulgar sense as money, profits and the economic system. Reproduction has always been understood as, and determined by, an 'increasing' reproduction of the mode of production, even though it became necessary to conceive of the mode of production as a modality (and not the only one) of the *mode of reproduction*. Productive forces and the relations of production, the sphere of material productivity in other words, are perhaps only one of many possible, and therefore historically relative, conjunctions of the process of reproduction. Reproduction is a form which far outstrips economic exploitation, and so the play of productive forces is not its necessary condition.

The historical status of the 'proletariat' (the industrial wage-earners) is primarily one of incarceration, concentration and exclusion. The seventeenth-century incarceration described by Foucault[20] expands grotesquely in the age of industrial manufacture. Didn't 'industrial' labour (which, unlike cottage industries, is collective, controlled, and stripped of the means of production) evolve within the first great *hôpitaux généraux*? In the beginning, society, in the process of rationalisation, incarcerated its idle, its wanderers, its deviants, gave them an 'occupation' and fixed them, imposed its rational principle of labour on them. But these outcasts contaminated the process of rationalisation in turn, and the rupture produced when society instituted its principle of rationality spilled over the whole of the society of labour: the Great Confinement is a model in miniature, later generalised in the industrial system of every society that, under the sign of labour and productivist finality, became a concentration camp, a detention centre or a prison.

Instead of extending the concepts of the proletariat and exploitation to racial or sexual oppression and such like, we should ask ourselves if it is not the other way round. What if the fundamental status of the worker, like the mad, the dead, nature, beasts, children, Blacks and women, was initially to be not *exploited* but *excommunicated*? What if he was initially not deprived and exploited but discriminated against and branded?

My hypothesis is that there has never been a genuine class struggle except on the grounds of this discrimination: sub-humans struggle against their status as beasts, against the abjection of the caste division that condemns them to the sub-humanity of labour. This lies behind every strike and every revolt, and today it is still behind the most 'wage-related' demonstrations. Hence their virulence. Having said that, today the proletarian is a 'normal' being, the worker has been promised the dignity of a full 'human being', and, moreover, in accordance with this category, he seizes onto every dominant discrimination: he is racist, sexist and repressive. As regards today's deviants and whoever is discriminated against, no matter what their social standing, he has sided with the bourgeoisie and the normal human being. How true: the fundamental law of this society is not the law of exploitation, but the *code of normality*.

May '68: The Illusion of Production The first shockwaves of this transition from production to pure and simple reproduction took place in May '68. They struck the universities first, and the faculty of human sciences first of all, because that was where it became most evident (even without a clear 'political' consciousness) that *we were no longer productive*, only reproductive (and that lecturers, science and culture were themselves only relays in the general reproduction of the system). All this was experienced as total futility, irresponsibility ('What are sociologists for?'), as a relegation, and provoked the student movement of '68 (rather than the absence of prospects, since there are always plenty of prospects *in reproduction* – it was rather the places, the spaces where something actually *happens* that had ceased to exist).

These shockwaves are still being felt. They cannot but reach the very limits of the system, as soon as entire sectors of society topple from the rank of *productive forces* to the pure and simple status of *reproductive forces*. Although this process was first felt in the cultural sectors of science, justice and the family – the so-called 'superstructural' sectors – it is clear today that it is progressively affecting the entire so-called 'infrastructural' sector: a new generation of partial, savage and occasional strikes since '68 testify no longer to the 'class struggle' of a proletariat attached to production, but to the revolt of those who, even in the factories, are attached to reproduction.

Nevertheless, in this same sector there are marginal, anomic groups who are the first to register these effects: young semi-skilled workers brought directly from rural areas into the factories, immigrants, non-union members; and so on. For all the above mentioned reasons, the 'traditional', organised and unionised proletariat have looked likely to be the last to

react, since it is they who can entertain the *illusion of 'productive' labour* for longest. The consciousness of being, in relation to everyone else, the true 'producers' and, albeit at the cost of the exploitation, nevertheless being at the very source of social wealth is a 'proletarian' consciousness which is reinforced and sanctioned by the organisation, constituting what is certainly the most solid *ideological* defence against the destructuration of the current system which, far from turning whole strata of the population into proletarians or, as Marxian theory proper has it, expanding the exploitation of 'productive' labour, aligns everybody under the same reproductive worker status.

'Productive' manual workers, more than anybody else, thrive on the *illusion of production* just as they experience their leisure under the illusion of freedom.

As long as these things are experienced as sources of wealth or satisfaction, as use-value, then the worst, most alienated and exploited labour is bearable. As long as we can still discover a 'production' corresponding (even if this is only in the imagination) to individual or social needs (this is why the concept of need is so fundamental and so mystifying), the worst individual or historical situations are bearable because *the illusion of production is always the illusory coincidence of production and use-value.* Those who today believe in the use-value of their labour power – the proletariat – are virtually the most mystified and the least susceptible to this revolt which grabs people from the depths of their total futility and the circular manipulation which turns them into pure markers of senseless reproduction.

The day that this process spreads to all of society, May '68 will assume the form of a general explosion, and the problem of the link between the students and the workers will no longer be posed: it merely betrays the gulf that separates those in the current system who still believe in their own labour force and those who no longer believe in it.

Political Economy as a Model of Simulation

From now on political economy is the *real* for us, which is to say precisely that it is the sign's referential, the horizon of a defunct order whose simulation preserves it in a 'dialectical' equilibrium. It is the real, *and therefore* the imaginary, since here again the two formerly distinct categories have fused and drifted together. The code (the structural law of value) uses the systematic reactivation of political economy (the restricted market law of value) as our society's imaginary-real. Furthermore, the appearance of the restricted form of value is an attempt to obscure its radical form.

Profit, surplus-value, the mechanics of capital and the class struggle: the entire critical discourse on political economy is staged as a referential discourse. The mystery of value is enacted on stage (of course, the mystery has simply acquired a new value: the structural law of value has become mysterious): everyone agrees as to the 'determining instance' of economics, and

this has become 'obscene'.[21] This is a provocation. Capital no longer looks to nature, God or morality, but strictly to political economy and its *critique* for its alibis, and lives through its own denunciation from within itself – feedback or a dialectical stimulus. Hence the essential role played by Marxian analysis in designer capital.

The same scenario is played out in economics as Bourdieu and Passeron describe it, taking place in the academic system whose alleged autonomy enables it to reproduce the class structure of society very efficiently. Similarly, the alleged autonomy of political economy (or rather its value as a determining agency) enables it to reproduce, just as efficiently, capital's symbolic function, its real domination over life and death established by the code, and which is continually stirring up political economy as a medium, an alibi and a fig-leaf.

A machine has to function if it is to reproduce relations of production. A commodity must have a use-value in order to sustain the system of exchange-value. This was the first-level scenario. Simulation is today at the second level: a commodity must function as an exchange-value in order better to hide the fact that it circulates like a sign and reproduces the code.[22]

Society has to reproduce itself as class society, as class struggle, it must 'function' at the Marxian-critical level in order the better to mask the system's real law and the possibility of its symbolic destruction. Marcuse pointed out a long time ago that dialectical materialism was getting out of hand: far from being deconstructed by the forces of production, the relations of production from now on submit to the forces of production (science, technology, etc.) and find a new *legitimacy* in them. There again, we must pass on to the second level: the social relations of symbolic domination utterly submit to the mode of production (both the forces of production *and* the relations of production), where we find, in the apparent movement of political economy *and the revolution*, a new legitimacy and the most perfect alibi.

Hence the necessity of resurrecting and dramatising political economy in the form of a movie script, to screen out the threat of symbolic destruction. Hence the kind of crisis, the perpetual simulacrum of a crisis, we are dealing with today.

In the aesthetic stage of political economy, the finality–without–end of production, the ethical, ascetic myth of accumulation and labour collapses. Capital, to avoid the risk of bursting from these liquefied values, thus becomes nostalgic once more for its great *ethical* epoch when production had a meaning, the golden age of shortages and the development of the forces of production. In order to re-establish finalities and to reactivate the principle of economics, we must generate shortages once again. Hence ecology, where the danger of absolute scarcity reinstates an ethic of energy conservation.

Hence the crisis of energy and raw materials, a real blessing for a system which, in the mirror of production, only reflects a fluctuating, empty form. The crisis will enable the return of a lost referentiality to

the economic code, and will give the principle of production a gravity that evaded it. We will rediscover a taste for ascesis, that pathetic investment born of lack and deprivation.

The whole recent ecological turn had already taken up this process of regeneration during the crisis – no longer a crisis of overproduction as in 1929 – of the involution of the system, recycling its lost identity.[23] A crisis no longer of *production*, but of *reproduction* (hence the impossibility of grasping how much truth and how much simulacrum there may be in this crisis). Ecology is production haunted by shortages and using itself as a resource, once more discovering a natural necessity where the law of value is tried out again. But ecology is too slow. A sudden crisis, as happened with oil, constitutes a more energetic therapy. The less oil there is, the more we will become aware of how much production there is. From the moment that the place of raw materials is noted again, labour power will also resume its rightful place, and the entire mechanism of production will become intelligible once more. Production has been given another chance.

So don't panic. On the eve of the intensive mobilisation of labour power, when the ethics of labour power threatened to collapse, the crisis of material energy came at the right time to mask the truly catastrophic destruction of the *finality* of production, and displaced it onto a simple *internal contradiction* (but we know that the system thrives on its contradictions).

There is still an illusion in thinking that the capitalist system, at a certain threshold of increased reproduction, passes irreversibly from a strategy of shortage to a strategy of abundance. The current crisis proves that this strategy is reversible. The illusion still comes from a naïve faith in a *reality* of shortage or a *reality* of abundance, and therefore from the illusion of a real opposition between these two terms. When these two terms are quite simply alternatives, the strategic definition of neo-capitalism is to pass into not a phase of abundance (consumption, repressive desublimation, sexual liberation, etc.) but a phase of *systematic alternation* between the two terms – shortage and abundance – because neither retains a reference, nor therefore an antagonistic reality, and therefore because the system is indifferent to which one it employs.

The indeterminacy affecting terms, the neutralisation of a *dialectical opposition into a pure and simple structural alternation*, produces the characteristic effect of an *uncertainty surrounding the reality of the crisis*. Everyone tries to stave off the unbearable simulacrum-effect – characteristic of everything that issues from the systematic operation of the code – as a conspiracy. It is comforting to think that it was 'great capital' that provoked the crisis, because it restores a *real* political-economic agency and the presence of a (hidden) *subject* of the crisis, and therefore an historical truth. The terror of the simulacrum is over. So much the better: it is better to have the omnipresent political-economic fatality of capital than not, so long as it is clearly true. Better the *economic* atrocities of capital – profit, exploitation – than to face up to the situation we are in, where everything operates or breaks down through effects of the code. Misconstrual [*méconnaissance*] of the 'truth' of

this global domination (if there is a global domination) is proportional to the crisis itself, where it is revealed for the first time on a massive scale.

The 1929 crisis was still a crisis of capital, measured by its rates of reinvestment, surplus-value and profit, a crisis of (over)production measured by the social finalities of consumption. The crisis is resolved by regulating demand in an endless exchange of finalities between production and consumption. From now on (and conclusively after the Second World War), production and consumption cease to be opposed and possibly contradictory poles. At a stroke, the entire economic field loses all internal determinacy along with the very possibility of a crisis. It no longer survives except as a process of economic simulation at the fringes of a process of reproduction, into which it is entirely absorbed.[24]

Have there ever been real shortages to grant the economic principle a reality, so that today we could say that it is disappearing and no longer functions save as a myth, an alternative myth, moreover, to that of abundance? In the course of history, have shortages ever had a *use-value*, an irreducible economic finality, so that today we could say that it has disappeared in the cycle of reproduction, merely consolidating the code's hegemonic control over genuine matters of life and death? We are saying that in order for the economy to *produce itself* (and this is all it ever produces), it needs this dialectical tension between scarcity and abundance. For the system to reproduce itself, however, it now requires only the *mythical operation of the economy*.

It is because the entire economic sphere has been defused that everything can be expressed in terms of political economy and production. Economics, preferably in its Marxian variety, becomes the explicit discourse of a whole society, the vulgate of every analysis. Sociologists, human scientists, etc. (even Christians, especially Christians of course), turn to Marxism as *the* discourse to which they refer. A whole new Divine Left is rising. Everything has become 'political' and 'ideological' by the same endless drift of the operation of integration. The newsflash is political, sport is political, not to mention art: reason is everywhere on the side of the class struggle. The entire latent discourse of capital has become manifest, we notice a widespread jubilation secure in the assumption of this 'truth'.

May '68 marked the decisive step in the *naturalisation of political economy*. Because the shock of May '68 shook the system down to the depths of its symbolic organisation, it has given urgency to a vital transition from 'superstructural' (moral, cultural, etc.) ideologies to an ideologisation of the infrastructure itself. By giving official status to oppositional discourse, capital will consolidate its power under cover of economic and political legislation. Political economy, *Marxian* political economy, has sealed the rift of May '68, just as the unions and the left-wing parties 'negotiated' the crisis on the ground. The hidden referent of economics and politics has therefore been dug up only in order to retrieve a catastrophic situation, and today it continues to be circulated, generalised and desperately reproduced, since the catastrophic situation opened up by May '68 is not over.

If we dared, we would say that economics and its critique are only superstructural; we will not dare, however, since to do so would only be to twist this old image around – where would the infrastructure be then? Etc. It would also provide economics with a chance to reappear one day in accordance with the see-saw effect which itself belongs to the code. We have been tricked too often with the infrastructure to start this mask-play up again. The system itself has put an end to infra- and superstructural determinations. Today it pretends to take political economy as the infrastructure because Marx kindly whispered this alternative strategy to it, but actually capital has never really functioned on this imaginary distinction, it is not that naïve. Its potency comes directly from its simultaneous development at every level, and from never having *fundamentally* posed itself the question of determination, the cunning distinction of agencies, or 'ideology'. It has never confused itself with production, as did Marx and every subsequent revolutionary who believed and still believes in production, confusing their phantasies with their lunatic hopes. For its part, capital is content to extend its laws in a single movement, inexorably occupying all the interstices of life without confusing its priorities. If it has set men to work, capital has also impelled them to culture, needs, languages and functional idioms, information and communication; it directs them to rights, to liberty and sexuality, it forces the instinct of preservation and the death instinct upon them; it has set them up everywhere in accordance with myths that are simultaneously opposed and indifferent. This is its only law: indifference. To set up a hierarchy of agencies would be far too dangerous a game, and would run the risk of backfiring. No, better to level out, neutralise, cover over and indifferentiate, which is what it knows how to do; that's how it follows its law. But it also dissimulates this fundamental process under the 'determinant' mask of political economy.

In the immense polymorphous machine of contemporary capital, the symbolic (gift and counter-gift, reciprocity and reversal, expenditure and sacrifice) no longer counts for anything, nature (the great referential of the origin and substance, the subject/object dialectic, and so on) no longer counts, political economy itself only survives in a brain-dead state, but all these phantoms continue to plague the operational field of value. Perhaps here, on an immense scale, we can discern the echo of what Marx drew to our attention: every event first passes through an historical existence before being revived under a parodical form. In our day, however, these two phases telescope, since good old materialist history has itself become a process of simulation, no longer even offering the chance of a grotesque, theatrical parody: today the terror based on things voided of their substance exerts itself directly, and simulacra immediately anticipate every determination of our lives. Now, rather than theatre and the imaginary, there is a fierce strategy of neutralisation that no longer leaves any significant place for a Napoleon III-type slapstick, an historical farce which, to Marx's mind, is effortlessly overcome by *real* history. It is a different matter as regards the simulacra which eliminate both ourselves and history simultaneously.

But perhaps all this arises from a general illusion in Marx concerning the possibilities for a *revolution* of the system. He had clearly seen the extent to which there already lurked in capital in his own time a capacity for it to undermine its own bases and go 'into overdrive'. He clearly saw that capital tended to reduce, if not totally eliminate, the labour power in its processes, and substitute a dead labour power for it. Since, however, he thought that living labour power was the objective, historical and necessary foundation of capital, he could only think that it was digging its own grave. The illusion is that capital buried labour power. More subtly, however, it turns labour power into the second term of a stable opposition with capital. It makes this rupturing *energy* which should shatter the relations of production into a *term* homogeneous with the relations of production, in a simulation of opposition under the sign of dead labour. From now on a single hegemonic agency (dead labour) divides into capital and living labour. The antagonism is resolved by a binary apparatus of coded operativity. But what, you might ask, of surplus-value and production? Alright, capital doesn't give a damn. Without lending capital a Marxist's intuition (even though Marx did everything he could to *alert* capital to what was waiting for it: if it persisted in playing on the terrain of production, it was heading for its death in the short term – the economy was a fatal trap for capital), everything happened as if it had clearly understood Marx on this point and had, in consequence, 'chosen' to liquidate production so as to go onto another kind of strategy. I am saying that everything happens *as if*, because it is not completely certain that capital ever had this productivist view of itself (Marx was basically the only one who had, and he projected this phantasy onto it as an historical truth); it is more likely that it only ever *played* at production, even if this meant that production had to be abandoned at a later stage, were it to draw capital into fatal contradictions. Has capital ever taken production seriously? Don't be so stupid: at the height of the seriousness of production, capital is doubtless only a simulation.

That is why the only acts that accompany capital's real domination are situated in the field of this radical indeterminacy and break with this dissuasive economic strategy.

We will not destroy the system by a direct, dialectical revolution of the economic or political infrastructure. Everything produced by contradiction, by the relation of forces, or by energy in general, will only feed back into the mechanism and give it impetus, following a circular distortion similar to a Moebius strip. We will never defeat it by following its own logic of energy, calculation, reason and revolution, history and power, or some finality or counter-finality. The worst violence at this level has no purchase, and will only backfire against itself. We will never defeat the system on the plane of the *real*: the worst error of all our revolutionary strategies is to believe that we will put an end to the system on the plane of the *real*: this is their imaginary, imposed on them by the system itself, living or surviving only by always leading those who attack the system to fight amongst each other on the terrain of reality, *which is always the reality of the system*.

This is where they throw all their energies, their imaginary violence, where an implacable logic constantly turns back into the system. We have only to do it violence or counter-violence since it thrives on symbolic violence – not in the degraded sense in which this formula has found fortune, as a violence 'of signs', from which the system draws strength, or with which it 'masks' its material violence: symbolic violence is deduced from a logic of the symbolic (which has nothing to do with the sign or with energy): reversal, the incessant reversibility of the counter-gift and, conversely, the seizing of power by the unilateral exercise of the gift.[25]

We must therefore displace everything into the sphere of the symbolic, where challenge, reversal and overbidding are the law, *so that we can respond to death only by an equal or superior death*. There is no question here of real violence or force, the only question concerns the challenge and the logic of the symbolic. If domination comes from the system's retention of the exclusivity of the gift without counter-gift – the gift of work which can only be responded to by destruction or sacrifice, if not in consumption, which is only a spiral of the system of surplus-gratification without result, therefore a spiral of surplus-domination; a gift of media and messages to which, due to the monopoly of the code, nothing is allowed to retort; the gift, everywhere and at every instant, of the social, of the protection agency, security, gratification and the solicitation of the social from which nothing is any longer permitted to escape – then the only solution is to turn the principle of its power back against the system itself: the impossibility of responding or retorting. *To defy the system with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death*. Nothing, not even the system, can avoid the symbolic obligation, and it is in this trap that the only chance of a catastrophe for capital remains. The system turns on itself, as a scorpion does when encircled by the challenge of death. For it is summoned to answer, if it is not to lose face, to what can only be death. The system must *itself commit suicide in response to the multiplied challenge of death and suicide.*

So hostages are taken. On the symbolic or sacrificial plane, from which every moral consideration of the innocence of the victims is ruled out, the hostage is the substitute, the alter-ego of the 'terrorist' – the hostage's death for the terrorist's. Hostage and terrorist may thereafter become confused in the same sacrificial act. The stakes are death without any possibility of negotiation, and therefore return to an inevitable overbidding. Of course, they attempt to deploy the whole system of negotiation, and the terrorists themselves often enter into this exchange scenario in terms of this calculated equivalence (the hostages' lives against some ransom or liberation, or indeed for the prestige of the operation alone). From this perspective, taking hostages is not original at all, it simply creates an unforeseen and selective relation of forces which can be resolved either by traditional violence or by negotiation. It is a tactical action. There is something else at stake, however, as we clearly saw at The Hague over the course of ten days of incredible negotiations: no-one knew what could be negotiated, nor could they agree on terms, nor on the possible equivalences of the exchange.

Or again, even if they were formulated, the 'terrorists' demands' amounted to a radical denial of negotiation. It is precisely here that everything is played out, for with the impossibility of all negotiation we pass into the symbolic order, which is ignorant of this type of calculation and exchange (the system itself lives solely by negotiation, even if this takes place in the equilibrium of violence). The system can only respond to this irruption of the symbolic (the most serious thing to befall it, basically the only 'revolution') by the real, physical death of the terrorists. This, however, is its defeat, since their death was their stake, so that by bringing about their deaths the system has merely impaled itself on its own violence *without really responding to the challenge that was thrown to it*. Because the system can easily compute every death, even war atrocities, but cannot compute the death-challenge or symbolic death, since this death has no calculable equivalent, it opens up an inexpiable overbidding by other means than a death in exchange. Nothing *corresponds* to death except death. Which is precisely what happens in this case: *the system itself is driven to suicide in return*, which suicide is manifest in its disarray and defeat. However infinitesimal in terms of relations of forces it might be, the colossal apparatus of power is eliminated in this situation where (the very excess of its) derision is turned back against itself. The police and the army, all the institutions and mobilised violence of power whether individually or massed together, can do nothing against this lowly but symbolic death. For this death draws it onto a plane where there is no longer any response possible for it (hence the sudden structural liquefaction of power in '68, not because it was less strong, but because of the simple symbolic displacement operated by the students' practices). The system can only die in exchange, defeat itself to lift the challenge. Its death at this instant is a symbolic response, but a death which wears it out.

The challenge has the efficiency of a murderer. Every society apart from ours knows that, or used to know it. Ours is in the process of rediscovering it. The routes of symbolic effectiveness are those of an alternative politics.

Thus the dying ascetic challenges God ever to give him the equivalent of this death. God does all he can to give him this equivalent 'a hundred times over', in the form of prestige, of spiritual power, indeed of global hegemony. But the ascetic's secret dream is to attain such an extent of mortification that even God would be unable either to take up the challenge, or to absorb the debt. He will then have triumphed over God, and become God himself. That is why the ascetic is always close to heresy and sacrilege, and as such condemned by the Church, whose function it is merely to preserve God from this symbolic face-to-face, to protect Him from this mortal challenge where He is summoned to die, to sacrifice Himself in order to take up the challenge of the mortified ascetic. The Church will have had this role for all time, avoiding this type of catastrophic confrontation (catastrophic primarily for the Church) and substituting a rule-bound exchange of penitences and gratifications, the impressario of a system of equivalences between God and men.

The same situation exists in our relation to the system of power. All these institutions, all these social, economic, political and psychological mediations, are there so that no-one ever has the opportunity to issue this symbolic challenge, this challenge to the death, the irreversible gift which, like the absolute mortification of the ascetic, brings about a victory over all power, however powerful its authority may be. It is no longer necessary that the possibility of this direct symbolic confrontation ever takes place. And this is the source of our profound boredom.

This is why taking hostages and other similar acts rekindle some fascination: they are at once an exorbitant mirror for the system of its own repressive violence, and the model of a symbolic violence which is always forbidden it, the only violence it cannot exert: its own death.

Labour and Death

Other societies have known multiple stakes: over birth and kinship, the soul and the body, the true and the false, reality and appearance. Political economy has reduced them to just one: production. But then the stakes were large, the violence extreme and hopes too high. Today this is over. The system has rid production of all real stakes. A more radical truth is dawning, however, and the system's victory allows us to glimpse this fundamental stake. It is even retrospectively becoming possible to analyse the whole of political economy as having nothing to do with production, as having stakes of life and death. A symbolic stake.

Every stake is symbolic. There have only ever been symbolic stakes. This dimension is etched everywhere into the structural law of value, everywhere immanent in the code.

Labour power is instituted on death. A man must die to become labour power. He converts this death into a wage. But the economic violence capital inflicted on him in the equivalence of the wage and labour power is nothing next to the symbolic violence inflicted on him by his definition as a productive force. Faking this equivalence is nothing next to the equivalence, *qua* signs, of wages and death.

The very possibility of quantitative equivalence presupposes death. The equivalence of wages and labour power presupposes the death of the worker, while that of any commodity and any other presupposes the symbolic extermination of objects. Death makes the calculation of equivalence, and regulation by indifference, possible in general. This death is not violent and physical, it is the indifferent consumption of life and death, the mutual neutralisation of life and death survival, or death *deferred*.

Labour is slow death. This is generally understood in the sense of physical exhaustion. But it must be understood in another sense. Labour is not opposed, like a sort of death, to the 'fulfilment of life', which is the idealist view; labour is opposed *as a slow death* to a violent death. That is the symbolic reality. Labour is opposed as deferred death to the immediate

death of sacrifice. Against every pious and 'revolutionary' view of the 'labour (or culture) is the opposite of life' type, we must maintain that the only alternative to labour is not free time, or non-labour, it is sacrifice.

All this becomes clear in the genealogy of the slave. First, the prisoner of war is purely and simply put to death (one does him an honour in this way). Then he is *'spared'* [*épargné*] and *conserved* [*conservé*] (=*servus*), under the category of spoils of war and a prestige good: he becomes a slave and passes into sumptuary domesticity. It is only later that he passes into servile labour. However, he is no longer a 'labourer', since labour only appears in the phase of the serf or the *emancipated* slave, finally relieved of the mortgage of being put to death. Why is he freed? Precisely in order to work.

Labour therefore everywhere draws its inspiration from deferred death. It comes from deferred death. Slow or violent, immediate or deferred, the scansion of death is decisive: it is what radically distinguishes two types of organisation, the economic and the sacrificial. We live irreversibly in the first of these, which has inexorably taken root in the *différance* of death.

The scenario has never changed. Whoever works *has not been put to death*, he is refused this honour. And labour is first of all the sign of being judged worthy only of life. Does capital exploit the workers to death? Paradoxically, the worst it inflicts on them is refusing them death. It is by deferring their death that they are made into slaves and condemned to the indefinite abjection of a life of labour.

The substance of labour and exploitation is indifferent in this symbolic relation. The power of the master always primarily derives from this suspension of death. Power is therefore never, contrary to what we might imagine, the power of putting to death, but exactly the opposite, that of allowing to live – a life that the slave lacks the power to give. The master confiscates the death of the other while retaining the right to risk his own. The slave is refused this, and is condemned to a life without return, and therefore without possible expiation.

By removing death, the master removes the slave from the circulation of symbolic goods. This is the violence the master does to the slave, condemning him to labour power. There lies the secret of power (in the dialectic of the master and the slave, Hegel also derives the domination of the master from the deferred threat of death hanging over the slave). Labour, production and exploitation would only be one of the possible avatars of this power structure, which is a structure of death.

This changes every revolutionary perspective on the abolition of power. If power is death *deferred*, it will not be removed insofar as the *suspension* of this death will not be removed. And if power, of which this is always and everywhere the definition, resides in the act of giving without being given, it is clear that the power the master has to unilaterally grant life will only be abolished if this life can be given to him – *in a non-deferred death*. There is no other alternative; you will never abolish this power by staying alive, since there will have been no reversal of what has been given. Only the surrender of this life, retaliating against a deferred death with an immediate

death, constitutes a radical response, and the only possibility of abolishing power. No revolutionary strategy can begin without the slave putting his own death back at stake, since this is what the master puts off in the *différance* from which he profits by securing his power. Refuse to be put to death, refuse to live in the mortal reprieve of power, refuse the duty of this life and never be quits with living, in effect be under obligation to settle this long-term credit through the slow death of labour, since this slow death does not alter the future of this abject dimension, in the fatality of power. Violent death changes everything, slow death changes nothing, for there is a rhythm, a scansion necessary to symbolic exchange: something has to be given in the same movement and following the same rhythm, otherwise there is no reciprocity and it is quite simply not given. The strategy of the system of power is to *displace* the time of the exchange, substituting continuity and mortal linearity for the immediate retaliation of death. It is thus futile for the slave (the worker) to give little by little, in infinitesimal doses, to the rope of labour on which he is hung to death, to give his life to the master or to capital, for this 'sacrifice' in small doses is no longer a sacrifice – it doesn't touch the most important thing, the *différance* of death, and merely distils a process whose structure remains the same.

We could in fact advance the hypothesis that in labour the exploited renders his life to the exploiter and thereby regains, by means of this very exploitation, a power of symbolic response. There was counter-power in the labour process as the exploited put their own (slow) death at stake. Here we agree with Lyotard's hypothesis on the level of libidinal economics: the intensity of the exploited's enjoyment [*jouissance*] in their very abjection. And Lyotard is right. Libidinal intensity, the charge of desire and the surrendering of death are always there in the exploited,[26] but no longer on the properly symbolic rhythm of the immediate retaliation, and therefore total resolution. The enjoyment of powerlessness (on sole condition that this is not a phantasy aimed at reinstating the triumph of desire at the level of the proletariat) will never abolish power.

The very modality of the response to the slow death of labour leaves the master the possibility of, once again, repeatedly, giving the slave life through labour. The accounts are never settled, it always profits power, the *dialectic* of power which plays on the splitting of the poles of death, the poles of exchange. The slave remains the prisoner of the master's dialectic, while his death, or his distilled life, serves the indefinite repetition of domination.

This domination increases as the system is charged with neutralising the symbolic retaliation *by buying it back through wages*. If, through labour, the exploited attempts to give his life to the exploiter, the latter wards off this restitution by means of wages. Here again we must take a symbolic radiograph. Contrary to all appearances and experience (capital buys its labour power from the worker and extorts surplus labour), capital *gives* labour to the worker (and the worker himself gives capital to the capitalist). In German this is *Arbeitgeber:* the entrepreneur is a 'provider of labour'; and *Arbeitnehmer:* it is the capitalist who gives, who has the initiative of the gift,

which secures him, as in every social order, a pre-eminence and a power far beyond the economic. *The refusal of labour, in its radical form, is the refusal of this symbolic domination* and the humiliation of being bestowed upon. The gift and the taking of labour function directly as the code of the dominant social relation, as the code of discrimination. Wages are the mark of this poisonous gift, the sign which epitomises the whole code. They sanction this unilateral gift of labour, or rather *wages symbolically buy back the domination exercised by capital through the gift of labour.* At the same time, they furnish capital with the possibility of confining the operation to a contractual dimension, thus stabilising confrontation on economic ground. Furthermore, wages turn the wage-earner into a 'consumer of goods', reiterating his status as a 'consumer of labour' and reinforcing his symbolic deficit. To refuse labour, to dispute wages is thus to put the process of the gift, expiation and economic compensation back into question, and therefore to expose the fundamental symbolic process.

Wages are no longer 'grabbed' today. You too are given a wage, not in exchange for labour, but so that you spend it, which is itself another kind of labour. In the consumption or use of objects, the wage-consumer finds herself reproducing exactly *the same symbolic relation of slow death as she undergoes in labour.* The user experiences exactly the same *deferred* death in the object (she does not sacrifice it, she 'uses' it and 'uses' it functionally) as the worker does in capital. And just as wages buy back this unilateral gift of labour, the price paid for the object is only the user buying back the object's deferred death. The proof of this lies in the symbolic rule which states that what falls to you without charge (lotteries, presents, gambling wins) must not be devoted to use, but spent as pure loss.

Every domination must be bought back, redeemed. This was formerly done through sacrificial death (the ritual death of the king or the leader), or even by ritual inversion (feasts and other social rites: but these are still forms of sacrifice). This social game of reversal comes to an end with the dialectic of the master and the slave, where the reversibility of power cedes its place to a dialectic of the reproduction of power. The redemption of power must always, however, be simulated, and this is done by the apparatus of capital where formal redemption takes place throughout the immense machine of labour, wages and consumption. Economics is the sphere of redemption *par excellence*, where the domination of capital manages to redeem itself without ever really putting itself at stake. On the contrary, it diverts the process of redemption into its own infinite reproduction. This is perhaps where we find the necessity of economics and its historical appearance, at the level of societies so much more vast and mobile than primitive groups, where the urgency of a system of redemption which could be measured, controlled and infinitely extended (which rituals cannot be) all at the same time, and which above all would not put the exercise and heredity of power back into question. Production and consumption are an original and unprecedented solution to this problem. By simulating redemption in this new form, the slide from the symbolic into

the economic allows the definitive hegemony of political force over society to be secured.

Economics miraculously succeeds in masking the real structure of power by reversing the terms of its definition. While power consists in unilateral giving (of life in particular, see above), a contrary interpretation has been successfully imposed: power would consist in a unilateral taking and appropriation. Under cover of this ingenious retraction, real symbolic domination can continue to do as it will, since all the efforts of those under this domination will rush into the trap of *taking back* from power what it has taken from them, even 'taking power' themselves, thus blindly pushing on along the lines of their domination.

In fact, labour, wages, power and revolution must all be read against the grain:

- labour is not exploitation, it is given by capital;
- wages are not grabbed, capital gives them too – it does not buy a labour power, it buys back the power of capital;[27]
- the slow death of labour is not endured, it is a desperate attempt, a challenge to capital's unilateral gift of labour;
- the only effective reply to power is to give it back what it gives you, and this is only symbolically possible by means of death.

However, if, as we have seen, the system itself deposes economics, removes its substance and its credibility, then, in this perspective, doesn't it put its own symbolic domination back into question? No, since the system brings about the overall reign of its power strategy, the gift without counter-gift, which becomes fused with deferred death. The same social relations are set up in the media and in consumption, where we have seen ('Requiem pour les Media' [*Utopie*, 4, 1971]) that there is no possible response or counter-gift to the unilateral delivery of messages. We were able to interpret (CERFI's project concerning automobile accidents) auto-slaughter as

> the price that the collective pays to its institutions…: the State's gifts inscribe a 'debt' in the collective accounts book. Gratuitous death is then merely an attempt to absorb this deficit. The blood on the roads is a desperate form of compensation for the State's tarmac gifts. The accident thus takes its place in the space that institutes a symbolic debt towards the State. It is likely that the more this debt grows, the more marked will be the tendency towards the accident. Every 'rational' strategy for curbing this phenomenon (prevention, speed limits, rescue services, repression) is effectively negligible. They simulate the possibility of integrating the accident into a rational system, and are therefore incapable of grasping the root of the problem: balancing a symbolic debt which founds, legitimates and reinforces the collective dependency on the State. On the contrary, these 'rational' strategies accentuate the phenomenon. In order to avert the effects of accidents, they propose to institute more mechanisms, more state institutions, supplementary 'gifts', which are simply means of aggravating the symbolic debt.

In this way the struggle is everywhere opposed to a political authority (cf. Pierre Clastres, *Society against the State* [tr. R. Hurley and A. Stein,

New York: Zone Books, 1990]), which sets all the power it can draw from its showers of gifts – the survival it maintains and the death it withdraws – above the struggle in order to stockpile and then distil it for its own ends. Nobody really accepts this bonus forever, you give what you can,[28] but power always gives more so as to serve better, and an entire society or a few individuals can go to great lengths, even their own destruction, to put an end to it. This is the only absolute weapon, and the mere collective threat of it can make power collapse. Power, faced with this symbolic 'blackmail' (the barricades of '68, hostage-taking), loses its footing: since it thrives on my slow death, I will oppose it with my violent death. And it is because we are living with slow death that we dream of a violent death. Even this dream is unbearable to power.

Notes

1. If it were only a question of the ascendancy of exchange-value over use-value (or the ascendancy of the structural over the functional dimension of language), then Marx and Saussure have already signalled it. Marx almost turns use-value into the medium or the alibi, pure and simple, of exchange-value. His entire analysis is based on the principle of equivalence at the core of the system of exchange-value. But if *equivalence* is at the core of the system, there is no *indeterminacy* in the global system (there is always a dialectical determinacy and finality of the mode of production). The current system, however, is itself based on indeterminacy, and draws impetus from it. Conversely, it is haunted by the death of all determinacy.
2. [See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, tr. Charles Levin, St Louis, MO: Telos, 1972 – tr]
3. Theoretical production, like material production, loses its determinacy and begins to turn around itself, slipping abysally [*en abyme*] towards a reality that cannot be found. This is where we are today: undecidability, the era of *floating theories*, as much as floating money. No matter what perspective they come from (the psychoanalytic included), no matter with what violence they struggle and claim to rediscover an immanence, or a movement without systems of reference (Deleuze, Lyotard, etc.), all contemporary theories are floating and have no meaning other than to serve as signs for one another. It is pointless to insist on their coherence with some 'reality', whatever that might be. The system has removed every secure reference from theory as it has from any other labour power. Theory no longer has any use-value, the theoretical mirror of production has also cracked. So much the better. What I mean is that the very undecidability of theory is an effect of the code. Let there be no illusions: there is no schizophrenic 'drift' about this flotation of theories, where flows pass freely over the body without organs (of what, capital?). It merely signifies that any theory can from now on be exchanged against any other according to variable exchange rates, but without any longer being invested anywhere, unless it is the mirror of their writing.
4. [Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, tr. I.H. Grant, London: Athlone, 1992 – tr]
5. [In English in the original – tr.]
6. [In English in the original – tr.]
7. Marx, that cunning Jesuit, was not far from recognising this with his concept of the collective labourer:

   > The product is transformed from the direct product of the individual producer into a social product, the joint product of a collective labourer, i.e., a combination of workers, each of whom stands at a different distance from the actual manipulation of the object of labour. With the progressive accentuation of the co-operative

> character of the labour process, there necessarily occurs a progressive extension of the concept of *productive labour*, and of the concept of the bearer of that labour, the *productive worker.* In order to work productively, it is no longer necessary for the individual himself to put his hand to the object; it is sufficient for him to be an organ of the collective labourer, and to perform any one of its subordinate functions. The definition of productive labour given above, the original definition, is derived from the nature of material production itself, and it remains correct for the collective labourer, considered as a whole. But it no longer holds good for each member taken individually. (C*apital*, pp. 643–4 [J.B.'s emphases])

8. Free time is, so to speak, a form of 'complex labour', in the sense that, as opposed to simple labour, it accords with the definition of service: solidarity of the prestation and the prestator, non-equivalence to a time of abstract social labour, non-equivalence to a wage which reproduces labour power. Marx would have been able to see this were he not myopically concerned with productive labour and the multiple distinctions which together tend to salvage the subject of history: the productive worker. 'The reification of labour power, driven to perfection, would shatter the reified form by cutting the chain that ties the individual to the machinery', writes Marcuse. '[Automation] would open the dimension of free time as the one in which man's private and societal existence would constitute itself (Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964], p. 37). Instead of phantasising over free time, Marcuse understood that the system, throughout the technical progress and automation, produces free time as the extreme reification of labour power, as the accomplished form of abstract social labour time, simply by being the inverted simulation of non-labour.

   Job training, qualification and education, etc., are other forms of complex labour. There is also a temptation to analyse them in terms of surplus-value, of the reinvestment by capital of science, training and research, of a constant capital superadded to the ordinary worker. Adam Smith writes: 'A man educated at the expense of much labour and time … may be compared to one of those expensive machines' (*The Wealth of Nations* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976] Vol. 1, p. 118). This is an error. Instruction, education and training are not long-term investments. They are rather the direct social relation of domestication and control. Capital doesn't look for any complex labour in this, but indulges in absolute waste, sacrificing an enormous part of its 'surplus-value' in the reproduction of its hegemony.
9. Paid unemployment already provides an example of this (one year of severance pay in France at the time of writing). In certain other countries, however, it has been replaced by a 'negative taxation' scheme, which provides for a basic minimum wage for all, housewives, the handicapped, the young unemployed, to be deducted from *eventual* paid labour. Unemployment quite simply disappears here as a critical conjunction (with all the political implications it used to have). Labour becomes an *option*, while wages become a certificate of existence, an automatic inscription in the social apparatus. Capital still remains as wages, but this time in its pure form – freed from a labour (as the signifier, following Saussure's analogy, was freed from the signified) which was only an occasional content of capital.
10. Throughout the social evolution of housing, we can see how capital's strategy has displaced itself from an economic process to an extensive process.

    In the beginning, workers' housing was simply a 'dorm', a branch of the factory, a functional site for the reproduction of labour power, a strategic site for both manufacture and business. Housing was not invested with the form of capital.

    Gradually, housing is invested as a space-time marked by a direct and generalised process of the control of social space. It becomes a site of reproduction, not of labour, but *of the habitat itself as a specific function*, as a direct form of social relation; no longer the reproduction of the worker, but of the inhabitant herself, the *user.* After the proletariat, the 'user' has become the ideal type of the industrial slave. The user of goods, of words, the user of sex, the user of labour herself (the worker, or the 'agent of production',

becomes the user of the factory and of her labour as individual and collective equipment, as a *social* service), the user of transport, but also the user of her life and death.

This decentred, extensive strategy, this all-out attack, the use or appropriation of use-value is the ultimate form of the self-management of social control.

11. Thus the Californian utopia of the cybernetic disintegration of the 'tertiary metropolis': home-based computer labour. Labour is pulverised into every pore of society and everyday life. As well as labour power, the space-time of labour also ceases to exist: society constitutes nothing but a single continuum of the processes of value. Labour has become a way of life. Nothing can reinstate the factory walls, the golden age of the factory and class struggle against the ubiquity of capital, surplus-value and labour, against their inevitable disappearance as such. The worker merely nourishes the imaginary of the struggle, just as the cop nourishes the imaginary of repression.
12. The concept of surplus-value has simply lost any meaning as regards a system which, from reproducing labour power in order to generate profit and surplus-value, has now become reproductive of life in its entirety through advanced redistribution or reinjection of every equivalent of social surplus labour. From this point on, surplus-value is everywhere and nowhere. Capital no longer has any 'incidental expenses', nor on the other hand has it any 'profit' in the sense of a unilateral extortion. The law of the system requires that you give yourself up to its redistributions in order that it circulates and that each and everyone, caught in the tightly woven net of this incessant redistribution, might become a manager, while the whole group becomes able to manage its own surplus-value, thus implicating oneself fundamentally within the everyday political order of capital. And just as, viewed from the point of view of capital, surplus-value has lost all meaning, it has also lost all meaning from the point of view of the exploited. The distinction between a fraction of labour returning as a wage and a remainder called surplus-value has lost all meaning from the point of view of the worker who used to reproduce her labour power as a wage, but now reproduces her entire life in a generalised process of labour.
13. [Baudrillard is playing on the French term *investissement*, used to translate Freud's *Besetzung*, rendered in English as 'cathexis'. The French term covers the political and libidinal economic sense of 'investment' as well as the military sense of the 'occupation' of hostile territory – tr]
14. Other parallel forms of maximalist reversal: equal wages for all, the struggle against qualifications. All these forms seek the end of the division of labour (the end of labour as social relation) and the end of the law of equivalence in the field of wages and labour power, which is of fundamental importance for the system. Therefore they indirectly target the very form of political economy.
15. This same phenomenon arises in the 'developing' countries. There is no upper limit to the cost of raw materials once they, outside the grasp of economics, become the sign and the gauge of the acceptance of a global political order, a peaceful planetary co-existence where the developing countries are forcibly socialised under the great powers. The escalation of prices then becomes a challenge, not only to the wealth of the Western countries, but also to the political system of peaceful co-existence in the face of a single predominant global political class. Whether this class is capitalist or communist is of minor importance.

    Before the oil crisis, the Arabs made traditional wage demands: petrol must be sold at the right price. Now, however, these demands have turned around and become unlimited and maximal.
16. The energy crisis gave both 'types' of inflation an alibi and a perfect deterrent in one go. From this point on, inflation as a structural crisis internal to the system may be plausibly blamed on the 'overvaluation' of energy and raw materials by the countries that produce them. Disaffection with the productivist system, which, amongst other things, is expressed in the maximal wage challenge, may be counteracted by the threat of poverty, that is, by threatening *the use-value of the economic system* itself.

17. [See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia I*, tr. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane, London: Athlone, 1984, for an exposition of the 'Deleuzian unconscious' – tr.]
18. This intervention, however, is not exclusive of any other group *deprived of social representation*. When young women, high school students, homosexuals and even 'proles' become 'savages', or if we admit that basically the unions do not represent them at all, but only themselves, then we all in like manner become 'immigrants'. On the other hand, these groups might cease to be 'immigrants'. There are then no 'immigrants as such', and they do not constitute a new historical subject, a neo-proletariat who would take over as the other.
19. [Confédération générale du travail, the French Trades Union Congress – tr.]
20. [For an exposition of the Great Confinement, see Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, tr. Richard Howard, London: Tavistock, 1967 – tr.]
21. As an illustration of this, we might analyse an advert for the Banque Nationale de Paris (BNP), which reads: 'I am interested in your money – fair's fair – lend me your money and you may profit from my bank.'

    To begin with, this is the first time that capital (in its front line institution, namely international finance capital) has so clearly and openly stated the law of equivalence and, surprisingly, in the form of an advertising slogan. These things are usually unstated; commercial exchange is seen as immoral, and all publicity tries to cover this up as a matter of urgency. We may therefore be sure that this candour is a second-degree mask. Secondly, its apparent aim is to convince people on economic grounds to do themselves a good turn and take their money to the BNP. Its real strategy remains unofficial, however: to convince people by this 'man to man' capitalist openness, saying 'let's not be sentimental about this', 'no more of the ideology of dependence', 'cards on the table', etc., and so to seduce people by means of the obscenity of revealing the hidden, immoral law of equivalence. This is a 'macho' complicity where men share the obscene truth of capital. Hence the smell of lechery about his advert, the salaciousness and smuttiness of the eyes glued to your money as if it were your genitals. The technique used by the advert is a perverse provocation which is much more subtle than the simplistic seduction of the smile (such as was the theme of the Société Générale's [a bank – tr.] counter-offensive: 'It is not the banker who should smile, but the client'). People are seduced by the obscenity of the economic, taken to the level of the perverse fascination that the very atrocity of capital exercises on them. From this perspective the slogan quite simply signifies: 'I am interested in your arse – fair's fair – lend me your buttocks and I'll bugger you', which is not to everyone's distaste.

    Behind the humanist morality of exchange there is a profound desire for capital, a vertiginous desire for the law of value; and this complicity, both economic and non-economic, is what the advert, perhaps without knowing it, seeks to recover, testifying to an *intuition* for politics.

    Thirdly, the advertising executives could not have been unaware that this advert, with its vampiric image, scared the middle classes, so that to emphasise their lecherous complicity with this direct attack would provoke negative reactions. Why did they take this risk? Here we have the strangest trap: the advert was made to consolidate the resistance to the law of profit and equivalence so as to be better able to impose the equivalence of capital, profit, and the economic in general (the 'fair's fair') *at a time when this is no longer true*, when capital has displaced its strategy and so is able to state its 'law' since it is no longer its truth. Announcing this law is nothing more than a supplementary mystification.

    Capital no longer thrives on the rule of any economic law, which is why the law can be made into an advertising slogan, falling into the sphere of the sign and its manipulation. The economic is only the quantitative theatre of value. This, as well as the fact that the role of money in all this is only a pretext, is expressed by the advert in its own way.

    Hence the commutability of the advert itself, which can operate at every level, for example:

– I am interested in your unconscious – fair's fair – lend me your phantasies and you may profit from my analysis;
– I am interested in your death – fair's fair – take out a life insurance policy and I will make your death into a fortune;
– I am interested in your productivity – fair's fair – lend me your labour power and you may profit from my capital;

and so on. This advert could serve as a 'general equivalent' for all real social relations.

Finally, if the advert's basic message is not equivalence, a = a, fair's fair (no-one is fooled, as the advertising executives *well know*), could it be surplus-value (the fact that the operation ends up, for the banker and for capital, showing the equation: a = a + a')? The advert can barely conceal this truth, and everyone can sense it. Capital slips in and out of the shadows here, almost unmasking itself, but it is not serious since what the advert really says comes neither from the order of quantitative equivalence, nor from surplus-value, but from the order of the tautology:

not: a = a

nor: a = a + a'

but: A *is* A

That is: a bank is a bank, a banker is a banker, money is money, and you can have none of it. While pretending to state the economic law of equivalence, the advert actually states the tautological imperative, the fundamental rule of domination. For whether a bank is a bank, or indeed whether a table is a table, or whether 2 + 2 = 4 (and not 5 as Dostoyevsky had it), is the real capitalist credence. When capital says 'I am interested in your money', it feigns profitability in order to secure credibility. This credibility comes from the economic order (creditability), while the *credence* attached to the tautology sums up in itself the identity of the capitalist order and comes from the symbolic order.

22. So just as there had been (for Marx as well) a naturalist phantasy of use-value, there is for us today an economistic phantasy of exchange-value.

For us, in the structural play of the code, exchange-value plays the same role as use-value used to play in the market law of value, the role of the simulacrum of reference.

23. The American Senate has gone to the extent of calculating what it would cost to bring water back to the purity it had before the European conquest of the Americas (the '1491 standard', Christopher Columbus having landed, as we know, in 1492): $350 million. These millions matter little, however, since what the Senators are in fact calculating is the cost of bringing the system itself back to the original purity of primitive accumulation, the golden age of labour power. The 1890, or indeed 1840, standard?

In like fashion, the current monetary system dreams of gold and a gold standard to stabilise and regenerate fiduciary values. The current state of affairs is that free and unlimited speculation on the grounds of the loss of the gold-referent edges closer every moment to catastrophe: an arbitrariness and an inflation of such proportions that the authority of money itself is toppled and loses all its credibility. Again we have a cyclical regeneration by means of reference; a 'critical' regeneration is necessary in order to prevent financial exchanges from reaching the limits of unreality, where they would be destroyed.

24. There are, of course, contradictions remaining between the structural and the market law of value, just as, in a previous phase, there were between the law of the market and resistant pre-capitalist values (which contradictions have not completely disappeared). In this way, the ultimate end of the system is the control of death: death is one of the structural markings of life, it also clashes with economic imperatives and a traditional logic of profit (the enormous cost of long-term care, hospitalisation, and so on). A compromise results from this, an absurd equilibrium (we can afford to keep 35 per cent of all leukaemia sufferers alive). Assessing the marginal costs of death. Anything above this level and we let them die. But this is not cynical economics, on the contrary, the economy prevents the system from following the conclusions of its own logic and barring people's access to death.

There is in fact a constant play between the two forms of value, controlled by a strategy aiming at intensifying the crisis. And although the crisis seems to require a solution, it is this solution *already*.

25. The gift, under the sign of gift-exchange, has been made into the distinguishing mark of primitive 'economies', and at the same time into the alternative principle to the law of value and political economy. There is no worse mystification. The gift is our myth, the idealist myth correlative to our materialist myth, and we bury the primitives under both myths at the same time. The primitive symbolic process knows nothing of the gratuity of the gift, it knows only the challenge and the reversibility of exchanges. When this reversibility is broken, precisely by the unilateral possibility of giving (which presupposes the possibility of stockpiling value and transferring it in one direction only), then the properly symbolic relation is dead and power makes an appearance: it will merely be deployed thereafter throughout the economic apparatus of the contract. It is our (operational) fiction, our metaphysics, the idea that it is possible to accumulate stock-value in its head (capital), to make it increase and multiply: this is the trap of the accumulation and capital. It is equally our fiction, however, to think that we may relinquish it absolutely (with the gift). The primitives know that this possibility does not exist, that the arresting of value on one term, the very possibility of isolating a segment of exchange, one side of the exchange, is unthinkable, that everything has a compensation, not in the contractual sense, but in the sense that the process of exchange is unavoidably reversible. They base all their relations on this incessant backfire, ambivalence and death in exchange, whereas we base our order on the possibility of separating two distinct poles of exchange and making them autonomous. There follows either the equivalent exchange (the contract) or the inequivalent exchange that has no compensation (the gift). But both, as we shall see, obey the same dislocation of the process and the same autonomisation of value.
26. This is no doubt especially true in the phase of physical abjection and savage exploitation, in capitalist 'prostitution' under the market law of value. How much of this remains in our phase, the structural law of value?
27. This is particularly clear when wages are unilaterally bestowed, imposed in 'negative taxation' without any labour in return. The wage-earner without equivalence: in this trans-economic contract, we see a pure domination and pure subservience to the gift and the premium emerge.
28. That is *symbolic exchange*. We must emphasise that it stands opposed to the entire liberal or Christian humanist ideology of the gift. The gift is the source and even the essence of power. Only the counter-gift, the reversibility of symbolic exchange, abolishes power.

2
The Order of Simulacra

The Three Orders of Simulacra

There are three orders of simulacra, running parallel to the successive mutations of the law of value since the Renaissance:

- The *counterfeit* is the dominant schema in the 'classical' period, from the Renaissance to the Industrial Revolution.
- *Production* is the dominant schema in the industrial era.
- Simulation is the dominant schema in the current code-governed phase.

The first-order simulacrum operates on the natural law of value, the second-order simulacrum on the market law of value, and the third-order simulacrum on the structural law of value.

The Stucco Angel

The counterfeit (and, simultaneously, fashion) is born with the Renaissance, with the destructuration of the feudal order by the bourgeois order and the emergence of overt competition at the level of signs of distinction. There is no fashion in a caste society, nor in a society based on rank, since assignation is absolute and there is no class mobility. Signs are protected by a prohibition which ensures their total clarity and confers an unequivocal status on each. Counterfeit is not possible in the ceremonial, unless in the form of black magic and sacrilege, which is precisely what makes the mixing of signs punishable as a serious offence against the very order of things. If we take to dreaming once more – particularly today – of a world where signs are certain, of a strong 'symbolic order', let's be under no illusions. For this order has existed, and it was a brutal hierarchy, since the sign's transparency is indissociably also its cruelty. In feudal or archaic caste societies, in *cruel* societies, signs are limited in number and their circulation is restricted. Each retains its full value as a prohibition, and each carries with it a reciprocal obligation between castes, clans or persons, so signs are not arbitrary. The arbitrariness of the sign begins when, instead of bonding two persons in an inescapable reciprocity, the signifier starts to refer to a disenchanted universe of the signified, the common denominator of the real world, towards which no-one any longer has the least obligation.

The end of the *obligatory* sign is succeeded by the reign of the *emancipated* sign, in which any and every class will be able to participate.

Competitive democracy succeeds the endogamy of signs proper to status-based orders. With the transit of values or signs of prestige from one class to another, we simultaneously and necessarily enter into the age of the *counterfeit*. For from a limited order of signs, the 'free' production of which is prevented by a prohibition, we pass into a proliferation of signs according to demand. These multiple signs, however, no longer have anything to do with the restricted circulation of the obligatory sign, but counterfeit the latter. Counterfeiting does not take place by means of changing the nature of an 'original', but, by extension, through completely altering a material whose clarity is completely dependent upon a restriction. Non-discriminatory (the sign is nothing any longer if not competitive), relieved of every constraint, universally available, the modern sign nevertheless still simulates necessity by giving the appearance that it is bound to the world. The modern sign dreams of its predecessor, and would dearly love to rediscover an *obligation* in its reference to the real. It finds only a *reason*, a referential reason, a real and a 'natural' on which it will feed. This designatory bond, however, is only a simulacrum of symbolic obligation, producing nothing more than neutral values which are exchanged one for the other in an objective world. Here the sign suffers the same fate as labour, for just as the 'free' worker is only free to produce equivalents, the 'free and emancipated' sign is only free to produce equivalent signifieds.

The modern sign then finds its value as the simulacrum of a 'nature'. This problematic of the 'natural' and the metaphysics of reality was, for the bourgeoisie since the Renaissance, the mirror of both the bourgeois and the classical sign. Even today there is a thriving nostalgia for the natural referent of the sign, despite several revolutions which have begun to shatter this configuration (such as the revolution of production when signs ceased to refer to a nature and referred instead to the law of exchange, passing into the market law of value). We will come back to these second-order simulacra.

It is with the Renaissance, then, that the forgery is born along with the natural, ranging from the deceptive finery on people's backs to the prosthetic fork, from the stucco interiors to Baroque theatrical scenery. The entire classical era was the age of the theatre *par excellence*. The theatre is a form that gripped social life in its entirety as well as all architecture from the Renaissance on. From these incredible achievements with stucco and Baroque art we can unravel the metaphysics of the counterfeit, as well as the new ambitions of Renaissance man. These latter consist in an earthly *demiurgy*, the transubstantiation of all nature into a single substance, a theatrical sociality unified under the sign of bourgeois values, beyond differences of blood, rank or caste. Stucco is the triumphant democracy of all artificial signs, the apotheosis of the theatre and fashion, revealing the unlimited potential of the new class, as soon as it was able to end the sign's exclusivity. The way is clear for unheard of combinations, for every game, every counterfeit – the Promethean designs of the bourgeoisie are first engrossed in the *imitation of nature*, before it throws itself into *production*.

In the churches and palaces, stucco embraces all forms, imitates all materials: velvet curtains, wooden cornices, and fleshy curves of the body. Stucco transfigures all this incredible material disorder into a single new substance, a sort of general equivalent for all the others, accruing a theatrical prestige, since it is itself a representative substance, a mirror of all the others.

But simulacra do not consist only of the play of signs, they involve social relations and a social power. Stucco may appear to be extolling the expansion of science and technology, but it is also and especially bound to the Baroque, which is in turn bound to the matter of the Counter-Reformation and to the hegemony of the political and mental world which, for the first time, the Jesuits tried to institute in accordance with a modern conception of power.

There is a direct relation between the Jesuits' mental obedience (*perinde ac cadaver*) and the demiurgic ambition to exorcise the natural substance of things in order to replace it with a synthetic substance. Just as man submits to organisation, so things take on the ideal functionality of the corpse. Technology and technocracy are already fully operative in the notion of an ideal counterfeit of the world, expressed in the invention of a universal substance and a universal combinatory of substances. To reunify the world, split asunder after the Reformation, under a homogeneous doctrine, to universalise the world under a single word (from New Spain to Japan: the Missions), to constitute a *State* political *élite* with one and the same centralised strategy: such are the Jesuits' objectives. To do this, they will need to create efficient simulacra, such as the organisation's apparatus, as well as bureaucratic, theatrical (the great theatre of the Cardinals and the Grey Eminences), training and educational machinery, which aims, for the first time in a systematic fashion, to fashion an ideal nature on the model of the child. The stucco cladding of Baroque architecture is a major apparatus of the same order. All this issues from the productivist rationality of capital, but it already bears witness, not in production but in the counterfeit, to the same project of universal control and hegemony, to a social schema in whose foundations the internal coherence of a system already operates.

In the Ardennes there used to live an old cook for whom the construction of tiered cakes and the science of *pâtissrie*-sculpture had given him the arrogance to attempt to capture the world as God had left it (that is, in its natural state), to eliminate all its organic spontaneity and replace it with a single polymorphous material: reinforced concrete. Concrete furniture, chairs, chests of drawers, concrete sewing machines; and outside, in the courtyard, an entire orchestra, including the violins, in concrete. Everything in concrete! Concrete trees planted out with genuine leaves, a reinforced concrete boar with a real boar's skull inside it, concrete sheep covered in real wool. At last Camille Renault discovered the original substance, the pastry from which the diversity of things are distinguished solely by 'realistic' nuances such as the boar's skull and the leaves on the trees. Doubtless, however, this was only a concession from the demiurge to his visitors, for it was with a delighted smile that this good eighty-year-old god welcomed them to his creation. He sought no quarrel with divine creation, he simply

remodelled it in order to make it more intelligible. There was no Luciferian revolt, no will-to-parody, nor a partisan and retro affinity with 'naïve' art. The Ardennes cook simply reigned over a unified mental substance (for concrete is a *mental* substance: like the concept, it enables phenomena to be ordered and separated at will). His project was not so far removed from the stucco builders of Baroque art, nor very different from projecting an urban community on to the terrain of a large contemporary group. The counterfeit still only works on substance and form, not yet on relations and structures, but at this level, it is already aiming at control of a pacified society, cast in a synthetic substance which evades death, an indestructible artifact that will guarantee eternal power. Isn't it a miracle that with plastics, man has invented an undegradable matter, thus interrupting the cycle which through corruption and death reverses each and every substance on the earth into another? Even fire leaves an indestructible residue of this substance outside the cycle. Here is something we did not expect: a simulacrum in which the project of a universal semiotics is condensed. This has no longer anything to do with the 'progress' of technology or the rational aims of science. It is a project which aims at political and mental hegemony, the phantasy of a closed mental substance like the Baroque stucco angels whose wing-tips touch in a curved mirror.

The Automaton and the Robot

A world separates these two artificial beings. One is the theatrical mechanical and clockwork counterfeit of man where the technique is to submit everything to *analogy* and to the simulacrum-effect. The other is dominated by a technical principle where the machine has the upper hand, and where, with the machine, *equivalence* is established. The automaton plays the man of the court, the socialite, it takes part in the social and theatrical drama of pre-Revolutionary France. As for the robot, as its name implies, it works; end of the theatre, beginning of human mechanics. The automaton is the *analogon* of man and remains responsive to him (even playing draughts with him!). The machine is the *equivalent* of man, appropriating him to itself as an equal in the unity of a functional process. This sums up the difference between first- and second-order simulacra.

We must not be fooled by 'figurative' resemblance. Like God, the automaton questions nature (if not the mystery of the soul), the dilemma of being and appearance: what underlies nature; what is within us; what is behind appearances? Only the counterfeit of man allows these questions to be asked. Every metaphysics of man as the protagonist in the *natural theatre* of creation is embodied in the automaton before disappearing with the French Revolution, and the automaton has no other destiny than to be compared with the living man – with the aim of being more natural than him – whose ideal image the automaton is. The automaton is man's perfect double, even down to the subtlety of its gestures, in the workings of its

organs and intelligence, almost inducing anxiety when we perceive that there is no difference between them, and that therefore the automaton has no need of a soul since it possesses an ideally naturalised body. Because this would be sacrilege, the difference between them is still maintained, as in the case of an automaton so perfect that on stage the illusionist mimicked its staccato movements in order that at least, even if the roles were reversed, confusion would be impossible. Thus the automaton's questions remain open, making it an optimistic mechanics, even if the counterfeit always retains a diabolical connotation.[1]

There is nothing like this with the robot. The robot no longer questions appearances, its only truth is its mechanical efficiency. It no longer needs to resemble man, to whom it is inevitably compared. The infamous metaphysical difference which gives the automaton mystery and charm no longer exists: the robot emphasises this difference for its own benefit. Being and appearance are founded on a single substance of production and labour. The first-order simulacrum never abolishes the difference: it presupposes the dispute always in evidence between the simulacrum and the real (a particularly subtle game in *trompe-l'oeil* painting, but all art thrives on this difference). The second-order simulacrum simplifies the problem by the absorption of appearances, or by the liquidation of the real, whichever you prefer. In any case it erects a reality without images, without echo, without mirrors, without appearances: such indeed is labour, such is the machine, such is the entire industrial system of production in that it is radically opposed to the principle of theatrical illusion. No more semblance or dissemblance, no more God or Man, only an immanent logic of the principle of operativity.

After this, robots and machines can proliferate – this is even their law – as automata, being sublime and singular mechanisms, have never done. Men themselves only began to proliferate when, with the Industrial Revolution, they took on the status of machines: freed of all semblance, freed even from their double, they grew increasingly similar to the system of production of which they were nothing more than the miniaturised equivalent. The simulacrum's revenge, which gave rise to the myth of the sorcerer's apprentice, did not take place with the automaton; on the contrary, this is the law of the second order, from which there still proceeds a hegemony of the robot, of the machine, of dead labour over living labour. This hegemony is necessary to the cycle of production and reproduction. It is with this reversal that we leave the counterfeit in order to enter into (re)production. We are leaving natural law and its play of forms in order to enter the market law of value and its calculations of forces.

The Industrial Simulacrum

A new generation of signs and objects arises with the Industrial Revolution – signs with no caste tradition that will never have known restrictions on their

status, and which will never have to be *counterfeits*, since from the outset they will be *products* on a gigantic scale. The problem of their specificity and their origin is no longer posed: technics is their origin, they have meaning only within the dimension of the industrial simulacrum.

That is, the series: the very possibility of two or *n* identical objects. The relation between them is no longer one of an original and its counterfeit, analogy or reflection, but is instead one of equivalence and indifference. In the series, objects become indistinct simulacra of one another and, along with objects, of the men that produce them. The extinction of the original reference alone facilitates the general law of equivalences, that is to say, *the very possibility of production*.

The entire analysis of production will be swept aside if we stop regarding it as an original process, as *the* process at the origin of all the others, but conversely as *a* process which reabsorbs every original being and introduces a series of identical beings. Up to this point, we have considered production and labour as potential, as force and historical process, as a generic activity: an energetic-economic myth proper to modernity. We must ask ourselves whether production is not rather an intervention, a *particular* phase, *in the order of signs* – whether it is basically only one episode in the line of simulacra, that episode of producing an infinite series of potentially identical beings (object-signs) by means of technics.

The fabulous energies at work in technics, industry and economics should not hide the fact that it is at bottom only a matter of attaining this indefinite reproducibility, which is a definite challenge to the 'natural' order, and ultimately only a 'second-order' simulacrum and a somewhat weak imaginary solution to the question of world mastery. In relation to the era of the counterfeit, the double, the mirror and the theatre, games of masks and appearances, the serial and technical era of reproduction is basically an era of less ambitious scope (the following era of simulation models and third-order simulacra is of much more considerable dimensions).

Walter Benjamin, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [in *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, London: Jonathan Cape, 1970], was the first to draw out the essential implications of the principle of reproduction. He shows that reproduction absorbs the process of production, changes its goals, and alters the status of the product and the producer. He shows this in the fields of art, cinema and photography, because it is there that new territories are opened up in the twentieth century, with no 'classical' tradition of productivity, placed from the outset under the sign of reproduction. Today, however, we know that all material production remains within the same sphere. Today we know that it is at the level of reproduction (fashion, the media, advertising, information and communications networks), at the level of what Marx rather carelessly used to call the *faux frais* of capital (immense historical irony!), that is, in the sphere of simulacra and the code, that the unity of the whole process of capital is formed. Benjamin was also the first (with McLuhan after him) to grasp technology as a medium rather than a 'productive force'

(at which point the Marxian analysis retreats), as the form and principle of an entirely new generation of meaning. The mere fact that any given thing can simply be reproduced, as such, in an exemplary double is already a revolution: one need only think of the stupefaction of the Black boy seeing two identical books for the first time. That these two technical products are *equivalent* under the sign of necessary social labour is less important in the long term than the *serial* repetition of the same object (which is also the serial repetition of individuals as labour power). Technique as a medium gains the upper hand not only over the product's 'message' (its use-value) but also over labour power, which Marx wanted to turn into the revolutionary message of production. Benjamin and McLuhan saw more clearly than Marx, they saw that the real message, *the real ultimatum, lay in reproduction itself.* Production itself has no meaning: its social finality is lost in the series. Simulacra prevail over history.

Moreover, the stage of serial reproduction (that of the industrial mechanism, the production line, the growth of reproduction, etc.) is ephemeral. As soon as dead labour gains the upper hand over living labour (that is to say, since the end of primitive accumulation), serial production gives way to generation through models. In this case it is a matter of a reversal of origin and end, since all forms change from the moment that they are no longer mechanically reproduced, but *conceived according to their very reproducibility*, their diffraction from a generative core called a 'model'. We are dealing with third-order simulacra here. There is no more counterfeiting of an original, as there was in the first order, and no more pure series as there were in the second; there are models from which all forms proceed according to modulated differences. Only affiliation to the model has any meaning, since nothing proceeds in accordance with its end any more, but issues instead from the model, the 'signifier of reference', functioning as a foregone, and the only credible, conclusion. We are dealing with simulation in the modern sense of the term, where industrialisation is only its initial form. Modulation is ultimately more fundamental than serial reproducibility, distinct oppositions more than quantitative equivalences, and the commutation of terms more than the law of equivalences; the structural, not the market, law of value. Not only do we not need to search for the secrets of the code in technique or economics, it is on the contrary the very possibility of industrial production that we must seek in the genesis of the code and the simulacrum. Every order subsumes the previous order. Just as the order of the counterfeit was captured by the order of serial reproduction (look at how art passed entirely into 'machinality'), so the entire order of production is in the process of toppling into operational simulation.

The analyses of both Benjamin and McLuhan stand on the borders of reproduction and simulation, at the point where referential reason disappears and production is seized by vertigo. These analyses mark a decisive advance over Veblen and Goblot, who, describing, for example, the signs of fashion still refer to a classical configuration where signs constitute a distinct material having a finality and are used for prestige, status and social

differentiation. The strategy they deploy is contemporaneous with Marx's strategy of profit and commodity, at a moment where they could still speak of a use-value of the sign, or quite simply of economics at all, because there was still a Reason of the sign and a Reason of production.

The Metaphysics of the Code

> The mathematically minded Leibniz saw in the mystical elegance of the binary system where only the zero and the one count, the very image of creation. The unity of the Supreme Being, operating by means of a binary function against the nothing, was sufficient ground, he thought, from which all things could be made.
>
> Marshall McLuhan

The great man-made simulacra pass from a universe of natural laws into a universe of forces and tensions, and today pass into a universe of structures and binary oppositions. After the metaphysics of being and appearance, after energy and determinacy, the metaphysics of indeterminacy and the code. Cybernetic control, generation through models, differential modulation, feedback, question/answer, etc.: this is the new *operational* configuration (industrial simulacra being *mere operations*). Digitality is its metaphysical principle (Leibniz's God), and DNA is its prophet. In fact, it is in the genetic code that the 'genesis of simulacra' today finds its completed form. At the limits of an ever more forceful extermination of references and finalities, of a loss of semblances and designators, we find the digital, programmatic sign, which has a purely *tactical* value, at the intersection of other signals ('bits' of information/tests) and which has the structure of a micro-molecular code of command and control.

At this level, the question of signs and their rational destinations, their 'real' and their 'imaginary', their repression, reversal, the illusions they form of what they silence or of their parallel significations, is completely effaced. We have already seen the signs of the first order, complex signs with a wealth of illusion, change with the advent of machines into crude, dull, industrial, repetitive, echoless, functional and efficient signs. There is a still more radical mutation as regards the code's signals, which become illegible, and for which no possible interpretation can be provided, buried like programmatic matrices, light years, ultimately, from the 'biological' body, black boxes where every command and response are in ferment. End of the theatre of representation, the space of the conflicts and silences of the sign: only the black box of the code remains, the molecule emitting signals which irradiate us, networking questions/answers through us as identifying signals, and continuously tested by the programme we have hardwired into our own cells. Whether it is prison cells, electronic cells, party cells or microbiological cells we are dealing with, we are always searching for the smallest indivisible element, the organic synthesis of which will follow in accordance with the givens of the code. The code

itself is nothing other than a genetic, generative cell where the myriad intersections produce all the questions and all the possible solutions from which to select (for whom?). There is no finality to these 'questions' (informational signals, impulses) other than the response which is either genetic and immutable or inflected with minuscule and aleatory differences. Even space is no longer linear or unidimensional but *cellular*, indefinitely generating the same signals like the lonely and repetitive habits of a stir-crazy prisoner. The genetic code is the perpetual jump in a floppy disk, and we are nothing more than VDUs [*cellules de lecture*]. The whole aura of the sign and signification itself is determinately resolved: everything is resolved into inscription and decoding.

Such is our third-order simulacrum, such is the 'mystical elegance of the binary system of zero and one', from which all beings issue. Such also is the status of the sign at the end of signification: DNA or operational simulation.

This is all perfectly summed up by Thomas Sebeok in 'Genetics and Semiotics' (*Versus*):

> Innumerable observations confirm the hypothesis that the internal world of the organic descends directly from the primordial forms of life. The most remarkable fact is the omnipresence of the DNA molecule. The genetic material of all the earth's known organisms is in large part composed of the nucleic acids DNA and RNA, whose structure contains information transmitted through reproduction from one generation to the next, and furthermore endowed with the capacity to reproduce itself and to imitate. In short, the genetic code is universal, or almost. Decoding it was an immense discovery to the extent that it showed that 'the two languages of the great polymers, the languages of nucleic acid and protein, correlate directly' … The Soviet mathematician Liapunov demonstrated in 1963 that every living system transmits a small but precise quantity of energy or matter containing a great volume of information through channels laid down in advance. This information is responsible for the subsequent control of large quantities of energy and matter. From this perspective numerous biological and cultural phenomena (storing, feedback, channelling messages and so on) can be conceived as manifestations of information processing. In the final analysis, information appears in large part to be the repetition of information, but still another kind of information, a kind of control which seems to be a universal property of terrestrial life, irrespective of its form or substance.
>
> Five years ago I drew attention to the convergence of genetics and linguistics as autonomous but parallel disciplines in the larger field of the science of communication (which is also a part of zoosemiotics). The terminology of genetics is full of expressions taken from linguistics and communication theory …, which emphasised both the principal similarities and the important differences in the structure and function of genetic and verbal codes … Today it is clear that the genetic code must be considered as the most basic semiotic network, and therefore as the prototype of all the other systems of signification used by the animals, including man. From this point of view, molecules, which are systems of quanta of, and which act as stable vehicles of physical information, zoosemiotic and cultural systems including language, constitute a continuous chain of stages, with ever more complex energy levels, in the context of a unique and universal evolution. It is therefore possible to describe both language or living systems from a unifying cybernetic point

> of view. For the moment, this is only a useful and provisional analogy. … A reciprocal rapprochement between genetics, animal communication and linguistics may lead to a complete science of the dynamics of semiosis, which science may turn out, in the final analysis, to be nothing other than a definition of life.

So the outline of the current strategic model emerges, everywhere taking over from the great ideological model which political economy was in its time.

We find this again, under the rigorous sign of 'science', in Jacques Monod's *Chance and Necessity* [tr. Austyn Wainhouse, London: Collins, 1970]. The end of dialectical evolution. Life is now ruled by the discontinuous indeterminacy of the genetic code, by the *teleonomic* principle. Finality is no longer at the end, there is no more finality, nor any determinacy. Finality is there in advance, inscribed in the code. We can see that nothing has changed – the order of ends has ceded its place to molecular play, as the order of signifieds has yielded to the play of infinitesimal signifiers, condensed into their aleatory commutation. All the transcendental finalities are reduced to an instrument panel. This is still to make recourse to nature however, to an inscription in a 'biological' nature; a phantasm of nature in fact, as it has always been, no longer a metaphysical sanctuary for the origin and substance, but this time, for the code. The code must have an 'objective' basis. What better than molecules and genetics? Monod is the strict theologian of this molecular transcendence, Edgar Morin its ecstatic supporter (DNA = ADoNaï!). In each of them, however, the phantasm of the code, which is equivalent to the reality of power, is confused with the idealism of the molecule.

Again we find the hallucination or illusion of a world reunited under a single principle – a homogeneous substance according to the Counter-Reformation Jesuits. With Leibniz and his binary deity as their precursor, the technocrats of the biological (as well as the linguistic) sciences opt for the genetic code, for their intended programme has nothing to do with genetics, but is a social and historical programme. Biochemistry hypostatises the ideal of a social order governed by a kind of genetic code, a macromolecular calculus by the PPBS (Planning Programming Budgeting System), its operational circuits radiating over the social body. Here techno-cybernetics finds its 'natural philosophy', as Monod said. The biological and the biochemical have always exerted a fascination, ever since the beginnings of science. In Spencer's organicism (bio-sociologism) it was operative at the level of second and third order structures (following Jacob's classification in *The Logic of Life* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989]), while today, in modern biochemistry, this applies to the level of fourth-order structures.

Coded similarities and dissimilarities: the exact image of cyberneticised social exchange. We need only add the 'stereospecific complex' to reinject the intracellular communication that Morin will transform into a molecular Eros.

Practically and historically, this means that social control by means of the *end* (and the more or less dialectical *providence* that ministers to the

fulfilment of this end) is replaced with social control by means of prediction, simulation, programmed anticipation and indeterminate mutation, all governed, however, by the code. Instead of a process finalised in accordance with its ideal development, we are dealing with generative *models*. Instead of prophecy, we fall subject to 'inscription'. There is no radical difference between the two. Only the schemata of control change and, it has to be said, reach a fantastic degree of perfection. From a capitalist productivist society to a neo-capitalist cybernetic order, aiming this time at absolute control: the biological theory of the code has taken up arms in the service of this mutation. Far from 'indeterminate', this mutation is the outcome of an entire history where God, Man, Progress and even History have successively passed away to the advantage of the code, where the death of transcendence benefits immanence, which corresponds to a far more advanced phase of the vertiginous manipulation of social relations.

In its infinite reproduction, the system puts an end to the myth of its origin and to all the referential values it has itself secreted in the course of its process. By putting an end to the myth of its origin, it puts an end to its internal contradictions (there is no longer a real or a referential to which to oppose them) and also puts an end to the myth of its end, the revolution itself. With the revolution you could still make out the outline of a victorious human and generic reference, the original potential of man. But what if capital wiped generic man himself off the map (in favour of genetic man)? The revolution's golden age was the age of capital, where myths of the origin and the end were still in circulation. Once these myths were short-circuited (the only threat that capital had ever faced historically came from this *mythical* demand for rationality which pervaded it from the start) in a *de facto* operationality, a non-discursive operationality – once it became its own myth, or rather an indeterminate, aleatory machine, something like a *social genetic code* – capital no longer left the slightest opportunity for a determinate reversal. This is the real violence of capital. However, it remains to be seen whether this operationality is itself a myth, whether DNA is itself a *myth*.

This effectively poses the problem of the discursive status of science once and for all. In Monod, this discourse is so candidly absolutised that it provides a perfect opportunity for posing the problem:

> Plato, Heraclitus, Hegel, Marx …: these ideological edifices, represented as a priori, were in reality a posteriori constructions designed to justify preconceived ethico-political theories. … For science, objectivity is the only a priori postulate of objectivity, which spares, or rather forbids it from taking part in this debate. [*Chance and Necessity*, p. 98]

However, this postulate is itself a result of the never innocent decision to objectify the world and the 'real'. In fact, it postulates the coherence of a specific *discourse*, and scientificity is doubtless only the space of this discourse, never manifest as such, whose simulacrum of 'objectivity' covers over this political and strategic speech. Besides, Monod clearly expresses the arbitrariness of this discourse a little further on:

> It may be asked, of course, whether all the invariants, conservations and symmetries that make up the texture of scientific discourse are not fictions substituted for reality in order to obtain a workable image. … A logic itself founded upon a purely abstract, perhaps 'conventional', principle of identity – a convention with which, however, human reason seems to be incapable of doing without. [ibid., p. 99]

We couldn't put it more clearly: science itself determines its generative formula and its discourse model on the basis of a faith in a conventional order (and moreover not just any order, but the order of a total reduction). But Monod quickly glosses over this dangerous hypothesis of 'conventional' identity. A rigid basis would serve science better, an 'objective' reality for example. Physics will testify that identity is not only a postulate, but that it is *in things*, since there is an 'absolute identity of two atoms when they are found to be in the same quantitative state'. So, is it convention or is it objective reality? The truth is that science, like any other discourse, is organised on the basis of a conventional logic, but, like any other ideological discourse, requires a real, 'objective' reference within the processes of substance in order to justify it. If the principle of identity is in any way 'true', even if this is at the infinitesimal level of two atoms, then the entire conventional edifice of science which draws its inspiration from it is also 'true'. The hypothesis of the genetic code DNA is also true and cannot be defeated. The same goes for metaphysics. Science explains things which have been defined and formalised in advance and which subsequently conform to these explanations, that's all that 'objectivity' is. The ethics that come to sanction this objective knowledge are just systems of defence and misconstrual [*méconnaissance*] that aim to preserve this vicious circle.[2]

As Nietzsche said: 'Down with all hypotheses that have allowed belief in a real world.'

The Tactile and the Digital

Regulation on the model of the genetic code is in no way limited to effects in the laboratory or the exalted visions of theoreticians: these models invest life at its most banal level. Digitality is among us. It haunts all the messages and signs of our society, and we can clearly locate its most concrete form in the test, the question/answer, the stimulus/response. All content is neutralised by a continuous process of orchestrated interrogations, verdicts and ultimatums to be decoded, which this time no longer come from the depths of the genetic code but still possess the same tactical indeterminacy – the cycles of meaning become infinitely shorter in the cycles of the question/answer, the bit or the return of a minuscule quantity of energy/information to its point of departure. This cycle merely describes the perpetual reactualisation of the same models. The equivalent of the total neutralisation of signifieds by the code is the instantaneous verdict of fashion or of every billboard or TV advertising message. Everywhere supply devours demand, the question devours the answer, either absorbing and regurgitating it in a

decodable form, or inventing it and anticipating its predictable corroboration. Everywhere the same '*scenario*' of 'trials and errors' (the burden of which, in laboratory tests, is borne by guinea-pigs), the scenario of the spectrum of choices on offer or the multiple choice ('test your personality'). The test is everywhere the fundamental social form of control, which works by infinitely dividing practices and responses.

We live in a *referendum* mode precisely because there is no longer any *referential*. Every sign and every message (objects of 'functional' utility just as much as fashion features or any televised information, polls or discussions) is presented to us as a question/answer. The entire communications system has passed from a complex syntactic structure of language to a binary system of question/answer signals – perpetual testing. Tests and referenda are, as we know, perfect forms of simulation: the question induces the answer, it is *designated* in advance. The *referendum*, then, *is only an ultimatum:* the unilateral question is precisely not an interrogation any more, but the immediate imposition of a meaning which simultaneously completes the cycle. Every message is a verdict, delivered like the verdict of polling statistics. The simulacrum of distance (or indeed of contradiction) between the two poles is nothing but a tactical hallucination, like the reality effect on the interior of the sign itself.

Benjamin provides this test-function at the concrete level of the technical apparatus:

> The artistic performance of the screen actor is presented by a camera, with a twofold consequence. The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the camera-man, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor composes with the material supplied him constitutes the completed film … Hence, the performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical tests. This is the first consequence of the fact that the actor's performance is presented by means of the camera. Also, the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during the performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of the critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor. The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing.

[Note:] The expansion of the field of the testable which mechanical equipment brings about for the actor corresponds to the extraordinary expansion of the field of the testable brought about for the individual through economic conditions. Thus, vocational aptitude tests become constantly more important. What matters in these tests are segmental performances of the individual. The film shot and the vocational aptitude test are taken before a committee of experts. The camera director in the studio occupies a place identical with that of the examiner during aptitude tests.

[T]he work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality.

It promoted a demand for the film, the distracting element of which is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator. ('The Work of Art', pp. 230, 240)

Contemplation is impossible, images fragment perception into successive sequences and stimuli to which the only response is an instantaneous yes or no – reaction time is maximally reduced. The film no longer allows you to contemplate it, it interrogates you directly. According to McLuhan, it is in this sense that the modern media demand greater immediate participation,[3] incessant response and total plasticity (Benjamin compares the cameraman's operation to the surgeon's: tactility and manipulation). Messages no longer have an informational role, they test and take polls, ultimately so as to control ('contra-role' in the sense that all your responses are already inscribed in the 'role', on the anticipated register of the code). Editing [*montage*] and encoding in fact demand that the recipient dismantle [*démonte*] and decode in accordance with the same process. Every reading of a message is thus nothing more than a perpetual test of the code.

Every image, every media message and also every surrounding functional object is a test. That is to say, in all the rigour of the term, it triggers response mechanisms in accordance with stereotypes or analytic models. The object today is no longer 'functional' in the traditional sense of the term; it doesn't serve you, it *tests* you. It no longer has anything to do with yesterday's object, any more than 'mediatised' information has with the 'reality' of facts. Both object and information already result from a selection, an edited sequence of camera angles, they have already tested 'reality' and have only asked those questions to which it has responded. Reality has been analysed into simple elements which have been recomposed into scenarios of stable oppositions, just as the photographer imposes his own contrasts, lighting and angles onto his subject (any photographer will tell you that no matter what you do it is enough to catch the original from a good angle at the moment or inflection that turns it into the *exact response* to the instantaneous test of the apparatus and its code); exactly like the test or referendum when they translate a given conflict or problem into a question/answer game. Thus tested, reality tests you in return according to the same score-card, and you decode it following the same code, inscribed in its every message and object like a miniature genetic code.

You already test the mere fact that everything is presented today according to a spectrum or range, since it imposes selectivity on you. This conforms to the global usage we have of the surrounding world of *reading* and selective decoding – we live less as users than as readers and selectors, reading cells. But beware, since by the same token you are yourself constantly selected and tested by the medium itself. Just as we select a sample for purposes of a survey, the media frame and cut sample receivers by means of beamed messages which are in fact a network of selected questions. By a circular operation of experimental modifications and incessant interference, like nervous, tactile and retractile impulses, probing an object by means of short perceptual sequences until it has been localised and

controlled, the media localise and structure not real, autonomous groups, but samples, modelled socially and mentally by a barrage of messages. 'Public opinion' is evidently the finest of these samples – not an unreal but a hyperreal political substance, the fantastic hyperreality which survives only by editing and manipulation by the test.

The irruption of the binary question/answer schema is of incalculable importance. Dislocating all discourse in a now bygone golden age, this schema short-circuits every dialectic of the signifier and the signified, a representative and a represented. There are no longer any objects whose signifieds are their functions, with opinion that 'representative' representatives would vote for, and the real interrogation to which the answer responds (and there are especially no longer any questions to which there are no answers). This entire process is dislocated: the contradictory processes of the true and the false, the real and the imaginary are abolished in this hyperreal logic of the *montage*. Michel Tort provides a fine analysis of this in his book on the Intelligence Quotient:

> The question as such does not determine its response in the form in which it was posed, it is the meaning given to it by the person to whom it was posed and also the idea the interrogated subject forms of the most appropriate tactic to adopt in order to respond according to the idea he forms of the interrogation's expectations. [*Le quotient intellectual*, Paris: Maspéro, 1974]

Tort again:

> The artifact is something other than a controlled transformation of the object for purposes of knowledge: it is a savage intervention in reality, at the end of which it is impossible to distinguish what in this reality arises out of objective knowledge and what results from the technical intervention (the medium). The IQ is such an artifact.

No more true and false since we can no longer find any gap between question and answer. In the light of these tests, intelligence, like opinion and more generally every process of signification, is reduced to the 'capacity to produce contrasting reactions to an increasing range of appropriate stimuli'.

This whole analysis directly reflects McLuhan's formula 'The Medium is the Message'. It is in fact the medium, the very mode of editing, cutting, questioning, enticement, and demand by the medium that rules the process of signification. So we can understand why McLuhan saw an era of *tactile* communication in the era of electronic mass-media. In this we are closer in effect to the tactile than we are to 'the visual universe, where there is greater distance, and reflection is always possible. At the moment that touching loses its sensory, sensual value for us ('touching is an interaction of the senses rather than a simple contact between a skin and an object'), it is possible that it might once more become the schema of a universe of communication – but this time as a field of *tactile* and *tactical* simulation where the message becomes a 'message', a tentacular enticement, a test. In every field we are tested, probed and sampled; the method is 'tactical' and the sphere of communication 'tactile'. Not to mention the ideology of 'contact', which in all of its forms, seeks to replace the idea of

social relations. A whole strategic configuration revolves around the test (the question/answer cell) as it does around a molecular command-code.

The entire political sphere loses its specificity as soon as it enters the media's polling game, that is to say, when it enters the integrated circuit of the question/answer. The electoral sphere is in any case the first large-scale institution where social exchange is reduced to getting a response. Thanks to these simplified signals, the electoral sphere is also the first institution to be universalised: universal suffrage is the first of the mass-media. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, political and economic practice merge increasingly into the same type of discourse; propaganda and publicity were fused, marketing and merchandising both objects and powerful ideas. This linguistic convergence between the economic and the political is moreover what marks a society such as ours, where 'political economy' has been fully realised. By the same token, it is also its end, since the two spheres are abolished in another reality or media hyperreality. Here again, each term is elevated to a higher power, that of third-order simulacra.

> While many regret the media's 'corruption of politics' and deplore the fact that the TV switch and the public opinion polls have cheerfully replaced opinion formation, this merely testifies that they have not understood polities at all. (*Le Monde*)

This phase of political hyperrealism is characterised by the necessary conjunction of the two-party system and the emergence of opinion polls as the mirror of this alternating equivalence of the political game.

Opinion polls are situated beyond all social *production* of opinion. They now refer only to a simulacrum of public opinion. This mirror of opinion is analogous in its way to that of the Gross National Product: the imaginary mirror of productive forces without regard for their social finality or counter-finality, the essential thing being merely that 'it' [*ça*] is reproduced. The same goes for public opinion, where what matters most is that it grows incessantly in its own image: this is the secret of mass representation. Nobody need *produce* an opinion any more, but everyone must *reproduce* public opinion, in the sense that all opinions are swallowed up in this kind of general equivalent and proceed from it thereafter (reproduce it, or what they take it to be, at the level of individual choice). For opinion as for material goods, production is dead: Long Live Reproduction!

If McLuhan's formula becomes significant anywhere, it is certainly here.[4] Public opinion is *par excellence* both the medium and the message. The polls informing this opinion are the unceasing imposition of the medium as the message. They thereby belong to the same order as TV and the electronic media, which, as we have seen, are also a perpetual question/answer game, an instrument of perpetual polling.

Polls manipulate the *undecidable*. Do they affect votes? True or false? Do they yield exact photographs of reality, or of mere tendencies, or a refraction of this reality in a hyperspace of simulation whose curvature we do not even know? True or false? Undecidable. However sophisticated their analyses,

they always leave room for the reversibility of hypotheses. Statistics is just casuistry. This undecidability is proper to every simulation process (see above for the undecidability of the crisis). The internal logic of these processes (statistics, probabilities, operational cybernetics) is certainly rigorous and 'scientific', yet it somehow doesn't get any purchase on anything, it is a fabulous fiction whose index of refraction in (true or false) reality is zero. This condition is all that gives these *models* any force, but the only truth it leaves them comes from paranoid projection tests of a caste or group, undecidability dreaming of a miraculous adequation between the real and their own models, and therefore an absolute manipulation.

What is true in the scenario of statistics is also true of the regulated partition of the political sphere: the alternation of the forces in power, minority/majority substitutions and so on. At the limit of pure representation, 'it' [*ça*] no longer represents anything. Politics dies from the over-regulated play of its distinct oppositions. The political sphere (more generally, the sphere of power) is emptied. In some ways this is the ransom for the fulfilment of the desire of the political class for a perfect manipulation of social representation. Smoothly and surreptitiously, all social substance vanishes from this machine at the very moment of its perfected reproduction.

The same goes for opinion polls: it is ultimately only members of the political classes who believe in them, just as it is only brokers and advertising executives who really believe in publicity and market analyses. This is not due to a particular stupidity (although we can't rule this out), but because the polls are homogeneous to the way contemporary politics operate. They therefore take on a 'real' tactical value, operating as a regulating factor of the political classes in accordance with their own game-rules. The political classes, then, have good reason to believe in polls, as in fact they do. Ultimately, though, who else does? It is the burlesque spectacle of the hyperrepresentative (that is, not representative at all) political sphere that people savour and sample through opinion polls and the media. There is a jubilation proper to this spectacular nullity, and the final form that it takes is that of *statistical contemplation*. Such contemplation, moreover, is always coupled, as we know, with a profound disappointment – the species of disillusion that the polls provoke by absorbing all public speaking, by short-circuiting every means of expression. They exert fascination in proportion to this neutralisation through emptiness, to the vertigo they create by anticipating every possible reality in the image.

The problem of opinion polls, then, is not their objective influence at all. As far as propaganda and advertising are concerned, such influence is, as we know, largely annulled by individual or collective resistance or inertia. Their problem is the operational simulation that they institute across the entire range of social practices, the leukaemia infecting all social substance, replacing blood with the white lymph of the media.

The question/answer circularity runs through every domain. We are slowly beginning to notice that the whole domain of surveys, polls and

statistics must be revised according to the radical suspicion brought to bear on their methods. The same suspicion bears, however, on ethnology. Unless you admit that the natives are totally 'natural' and incapable of simulation, then the problem is the same with the above as it is here: it is impossible to obtain a *non-simulated response* to a direct question, apart from merely reproducing the question. It is not even certain that we can test plants, animals or inert matter in the exact sciences with any hope of an 'objective' response. As to how those polled respond to the pollsters, how natives respond to ethnologists, the analysand to the analyst, you may be sure that there is total circularity in every case: those questioned always behave as the questioner imagines they will and solicits them to. Even the psychoanalytic transference and counter-transference collapses today under the shock of this stimulated, simulated and anticipated response, which is simply a modality of the self-fulfilling prophecy.[5] So we come up against the strange paradox where whatever those polled, analysands and natives say, it is irremediably short-circuited and lost. Indeed, it is on the basis of this foreclosure that these disciplines – sociology, psychoanalysis and ethnology – will be able to develop in leaps and bounds. Such amazing development is just hot air, however, since the circular response of those polled, the analysands and the natives is nevertheless a challenge and a victorious revenge: when they turn the question back on itself, isolating it by holding the expected mirror-image response up to it, then there is no hope that the question can ever get out of what is in fact the vicious circle of power. It is exactly the same in the electoral system, where 'representatives' no longer represent anything, by dint of controlling the electoral body's responses so well: somewhere, everything has escaped them. That is why the controlled responses of the dominated are nevertheless somehow a genuine response, a desperate vengeance which lets power bury power.

The systems of the 'advanced democracies' become stable through the formula of the two-party system. The *de facto* monopoly remains in the hands of a homogeneous political class, from the left to the right, but must not be exercised in this way. This is because single party rule, totalitarianism, is an unstable form which drains the political stage and can no longer ensure the feedback of public opinion, the minimal current in the integrated circuit that constitutes the transistorised political machine. The two-party system, by contrast, is the end of the end of representation since solicitation reaches its highest degree, in the name of a simple formal constraint, when you approach the greatest perfect competitive equation between the two parties. This is only logical: democracy attains the law of equivalence in the political order, and this law is fulfilled by the see-sawing of the two terms, which thus maintains their equivalence but by means of this minuscule divergence allows for public consensus and the closure of the cycle of representation: a theatre of operations where only the smoky reflections of political Reason continue to function. Democracy's credo of the individual's 'free choice' effectively turns into its exact opposite: voting has become absolutely *obligatory*. If this is not the case *de jure*, then it is

through the structural, statistical constraint of the two-party system, reinforced by the opinion polls.[6] Voting has become absolutely *aleatory:* when democracy reaches a formally advanced stage, it is distributed in equal quantities (50/50). Voting merges with the Brownian motion of particles or probability calculus, as if the whole world were voting according to chance, as if signs were voting.

At this point, it matters little what the parties in power express historically and socially – it is even *necessary* that they no longer represent anything: the fascination of the game and the polls, the formal and statistical compulsion, is so much greater.

'Classical' universal suffrage already implies a certain neutralisation of the political field, in the name of a consensus over the rules of the game. But we can still distinguish the representatives and the represented in this game, on the basis of a real social antagonism in opinions. The neutralisation of this contradictory referential, under the sign of a public opinion which from now on is equal to itself, mediatised and homogenised by means of anticipation (polls), will make possible an alternation, not of parties, but of their 'heads', creating a simulated opposition between the two parties, absorbing their respective objectives, and a reversibility of every discourse into any other. Beyond the representative and the represented, this is the pure form of representation; just as, beyond the signifier and the signified, simulation marks the pure form of the political economy of the sign; just as, beyond use-value and exchange-value, beyond every substance of production, the flotation of currencies and their accountable drift marks the pure form of value.

It may seem that the historical movement of capital carries it from open competition towards oligopoly and then towards monopoly, that democracy moves from a multi-party system to a two-party system and then towards single-party rule: oligopoly, or real duopoly, results from the *tactical division of the monopoly*. In every domain duopoly is the completed stage of monopoly. It is not that a political will (State intervention, anti-trust laws, etc.) shatters the market's monopoly: any unitary system, if it wants to survive, must find a *binary regulation*. This does not change anything as regards monopoly, on the contrary, power is only absolute if it is able to diffract into various equivalents, if it knows how to divide in order to become stronger. This goes for detergent brands as much as for a 'peaceful co-existence'. Two superpowers are necessary in order to keep the universe under control: a single empire would crumble by itself. The balance of terror merely allows regulated oppositions to be put in place, for strategy is structural, never atomic. Even if this regulated opposition can be ramified into a more complex scenario, the matrix remains binary. From now on, it will never again be a question of a duel or open competitive struggle, but one of couplets of simultaneous oppositions.

From the smallest disjunctive unit (the question/answer particle) up to the macroscopic level of the great 'two-party' systems that govern the economy, politics and global co-existence, the matrix never changes. It is always

the 0/1, the binary scansion that is affirmed as the metastable or homeostatic form of contemporary systems. It is the core of the processes of simulation that dominate us. It can be organised into a game of unstable variations, from polyvalence to tautology, without putting the strategic form of the duopoly into question. It is the divine form of simulation.[7]

Why has the World Trade Center in New York got *two* towers? All Manhattan's great buildings are always content to confront each other in a *competitive* verticality, from which there results an architectural panorama that is the image of the capitalist system: a pyramidal jungle, every building on the offensive against every other. The system itself can be spotted in the famous image we have of New York on arriving by sea. This image has changed completely in a few years. The effigy of the capitalist system has passed from the pyramid to the punch card. The buildings are no longer obelisks, but trustingly stand next to one another like the columns of a statistical graph. This new architecture no longer embodies a competitive system, but a countable one where competition has disappeared in favour of correlation. (New York is the only city in the world to have retraced, throughout the entire length and breadth of its history, the contemporary form of the capitalist system in this way, instantaneously changing according to this system. No European city has ever done this.) This architectural graphism belongs to the monopoly: the World Trade Center's two towers are perfect parallelepipeds, four hundred metres high on a square base; they are perfectly balanced and blind communicating vessels. The fact that there are two identical towers *signifies* the end of all competition, the end of every original reference. Paradoxically, if there were only one, the WTC would not embody the monopoly, since we have seen that it becomes stable in a dual form. For the sign to remain pure it must become its own double: this doubling of the sign really put an end to what it designated. Every Andy Warhol does this: the multiple replicas of Marilyn Monroe's face are of course at the same time the death of the original and the end of representation. The two towers of the WTC are the visible sign of the closure of a system in the vertigo of doubling, while the other skyscrapers are each the original moment of a system continually surpassing itself in the crisis and the challenge.

This doubling, this replication, inspires a particular fascination. However high they are and however much higher than all the others, the two towers nevertheless signify an arrested verticality. They ignore the other buildings, they are not of the same race, they no longer challenge them nor compare themselves to them; the two towers reflect one another and reach their highest point in the prestige of similitude. They echo the idea of the model they are for one another, and their semi-detached altitude no longer has a transcendent value, but only signifies that the commutative strategy of the model will now historically prevail over the heart of the system itself (as New York truly is), over the traditional strategy of competition. The buildings of the Rockefeller Center also mirror their glass and steel façades in one another, in the city's infinite specularity. The towers are themselves blind

and no longer have a façade. Every reference to habitat, to the façade as 'face', to the interior and exterior, that we still find even in the Chase Manhattan Bank or in the most daring mirror buildings from the sixties has been erased. At the same moment that the rhetoric of verticality is disappearing, so too is the rhetoric of the mirror. There now remains only a series based on the binary code, as if architecture, in the image of the system, proceeded only by means of an unchanging genetic code, a definitive model.

The Hyperrealism of Simulations

We have just defined a digital space, a magnetic field of the code with its modelled polarisations, diffractions and gravitations, with the insistent and perpetual flux of the smallest disjunctive units (the question/answer cell operates like the cybernetic atom of *signification*). We must now measure the disparity between this field of control and the traditional field of repression, the police-space which used to correspond to a violence of signification. This space was one of reactionary conditioning, inspired by the Pavlovian apparatus of programmed and repetitive aggression which we also saw scaled up in 'hard sell' advertising and the political propaganda of the thirties. A crafted but industrial violence that aimed to produce terrified behaviour and animal obedience. This no longer has any meaning. Totalitarian, bureaucratic concentration is a schema dating from the era of the market law of value. The schema of equivalences effectively imposes the form of a general equivalent, and hence the centralisation of a global process. This is an archaic rationality compared to simulation, in which it is no longer a single general equivalent but a diffraction of models that plays the regulative role: no longer the form of the general equivalent, but the form of distinct oppositions. We pass from injunction to disjunction through the code, from the ultimatum to solicitation, from obligatory passivity to models constructed from the outset on the basis of the subject's 'active response', and this subject's involvement and 'ludic' participation, towards a total environment model made up of incessant spontaneous responses, joyous feedback and irradiated contacts. According to Nicolas Schöffer, this is a 'concretisation of the general ambience': the great festival of Participation is made up of myriad stimuli, miniaturised tests, and infinitely divisible question/answers, all magnetised by several great models in the luminous field of the code.

Here comes the great Culture of tactile communication, under the sign of techno-lumino-kinetic space and total spatio-dynamic theatre!

A whole imaginary based on contact, a sensory mimicry and a tactile mysticism, basically ecology in its entirety, comes to be grafted on to this universe of operational simulation, multi-stimulation and multi-response. This incessant test of successful adaptation is naturalised by assimilating it to animal mimicry ('the phenomenon of animals' adaptation to the colours and forms of their habitat also holds for man' – Nicolas Schöffer), and even

to the Indians with their 'innate sense of ecology'! Tropisms, mimicry and empathy: the ecological evangelism of open systems, with positive or negative feedback, will be engulfed in this breach, with an ideology of regulation through information that is only the avatar, in accordance with a more flexible rationality, of the Pavlov reflex. Hence electro-shock is replaced by body attitude as the condition of mental health. When notions of need, perception, desire, etc., become operational, then the apparatuses of force and forcing yield to ambient apparatuses. A generalised, mystical ecology of the 'niche' and the context, a simulated environment eventually including the 'Centres for Cultural and Aesthetic Re-animation' planned for the Left Bank (why not?) and the Centre for Sexual Leisure, which, built in the form of a breast, will offer 'a superlative euphoria thanks to a pulsating ambience. … Workers from all classes will be able to enter these stimulating centres.' A spatio-dynamic fascination, just like 'total theatre', set up 'according to a hyperbolic, circular apparatus turning around a cylindrical spindle'. No more scenes, no more cuts, no more 'gaze', the end of the spectacle and the spectacular, towards the total, fusional, tactile and aesthesic (and no longer the aesthetic) etc., environment. We can only think of Artaud's total theatre, his Theatre of Cruelty, of which this spatio-dynamic simulation is the abject, black-humour caricature. Here cruelty is replaced by minimum and maximum 'stimulus thresholds', by the invention of 'perceptual codes calculated on the basis of saturation thresholds'. Even the good old 'catharsis' of the classical theatre of the passions has today become a homeopathy by means of simulation.

The end of the spectacle brings with it the collapse of reality into hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography. Through reproduction from one medium into another the real becomes volatile, it becomes the allegory of death, but it also draws strength from its own destruction, becoming the real for its own sake, a fetishism of the lost object which is no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denegation and its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal.

Realism had already inaugurated this tendency. The rhetoric of the real already signals that its status has been radically altered (the golden age of the innocence of language where what is said need not be doubled in an effect of reality). Surrealism was still in solidarity with the realism it contested, but which it doubled and ruptured in the imaginary. The hyperreal represents a much more advanced phase insofar as it effaces the contradiction of the real and the imaginary. Irreality no longer belongs to the dream or the phantasm, to a beyond or a hidden interiority, but to *the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself.* To gain exit from the crisis of representation, the real must be sealed off in a pure repetition. Before emerging in pop art and painterly neo-realism, this tendency can already be discerned in the *nouveau roman*. Here the project is to construct a void around the real, to eradicate all psychology and subjectivity from it in order to give it a pure objectivity. In fact, this is only the objectivity of the

pure gaze, an objectivity finally free of the object, but which merely remains a blind relay of the gaze that scans it. It is easy to detect the unconscious trying to remain hidden in this circular seduction.

This is indeed the impression made by the *nouveau roman*, a wild elision of meaning in a meticulous but blind reality. Syntax and semantics have disappeared: the object now only appears in court, where its scattered fragments are subjected to unremitting cross-examination. There is neither metaphor nor metonymy, only a successive immanence under the law enforcing authority of the gaze. This 'objective' microscopy incites reality to vertiginous motion, the vertiginous death of representation within the confines of representation. The old illusions of relief, perspective and depth (both spatial and psychological) bound up with the perception of the object are over with: optics in its entirety, scopics, has begun to operate on the surface of things – the gaze has become the object's molecular code.

There are several possible modalities of this vertigo of realistic simulation:

1. The detailed deconstruction of the real, the paradigmatic close 'reading' of the object: the flattening out, linearity and seriality of part-objects.
2. Abyssal vision: all the games of splitting the object in two and duplicating it in every detail. This reduction is taken to be a depth, indeed a critical metalanguage, and doubtless this was true of a reflective configuration of the sign in a dialectics of the mirror. From now on this infinite refraction is nothing more than another type of seriality in which the real is no longer reflected, but folds in on itself to the point of exhaustion.
3. The properly serial form (Andy Warhol): Here the paradigmatic dimension is abolished along with the syntagmatic dimension, since there is no longer a flexion of forms, nor even an internal reflexion, only a contiguity of the same: zero degree flexion and reflexion. Take this erotic photograph of twin sisters where the fleshy reality of their bodies is annihilated by their similarity. How do you invest when the beauty of the one is immediately duplicated in the other? The gaze can only go from one to the other, and these poles enclose all vision. This is a subtle means of murdering the original, but it is also a singular seduction, where the total extent of the object is intercepted by its infinite diffraction into itself (this scenario reverses the Platonic myth of the reunion of two halves separated by a symbol. In the series, signs subdivide like protozoa). Perhaps this is the seduction of death, in the sense that, for we sexually differentiated beings, death is perhaps not nothingness, but quite simply the mode of reproduction prior to sexual differentiation. The models that generate in infinite chains effectively bring us closer to the generation of protozoa; sex, which for us is confused with life, being the only remaining difference.
4. This pure machinality is doubtless only a paradoxical limit, however. Binarity and digitality constitute the true generative formula which encompasses all the others and is, in a way, the stabilised form of the code.

> This does not mean pure repetition, but minimal difference, the minimal inflexion between two terms, that is, the 'smallest common paradigm' that can sustain the fiction of meaning. A combinatory of differentiation internal to the painterly object as well as to the consumer object, this simulation contracts, in contemporary art, to the point of being nothing more than the infinitesimal difference that still separates hyperreality from hyperpainting. Hyperpainting claims to exhaust itself to the point of its sacrificial eclipse in the face of the real, but we know how all painting's prestige is revived in this infinitesimal difference: painting retreats into the border that separates the painted surface and the wall. It also hides in the signature, the metaphysical sign of painting and the metaphysics of representation at the limit, where it takes itself as its own model (the 'pure gaze') and turns around itself in the compulsive repetition of the code.

The very definition of the real is *that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction*. It is a contemporary of science, which postulates that a process can be reproduced exactly within given conditions, with an industrial rationality which postulates a universal system of equivalences (classical representation is not equivalence but transcription, interpretation and commentary). At the end of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only that which can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced:* the hyperreal.

So are we then at the end of the real and the end of art due to a total mutual reabsorption? No, since at the level of simulacra, hyperrealism is the apex of both art and the real, by means of a mutual exchange of the privileges and prejudices that found them. The hyperreal is beyond representation (cf. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Esquisse d'une économique de l'hyperrealisme', *L'Art vivant*, 36, 1973)[8] only because it is entirely within simulation, in which the barriers of representation rotate crazily, an implosive madness which, far from being ex-centric, keeps its gaze fixed on the centre, on its own abyssal repetition. Analogous to the effect of an internal distance from the dream, allowing us to say that we are dreaming, hyperrealism is only the play of censorship and the perpetuation of the dream, becoming an integral part of a coded reality that it perpetuates and leaves unaltered.

In fact, hyperrealism must be interpreted in inverse manner: *today reality itself is hyperrealist*. The secret of surrealism was that the most everyday reality could become surreal, but only at privileged instants which again arose out of art and the imaginary. Today everyday, political, social, historical, economic, etc., reality has already incorporated the hyperrealist dimension of simulation so that we are now living entirely within the 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality. The old slogan 'reality is stranger than fiction', which still corresponded to the surrealist stage in the aestheticisation of life, has been outrun, since there is no longer any fiction that life can possibly confront, even as its conqueror. Reality has

passed completely into the game of reality. Radical disaffection, the cool and cybernetic stage, replaces the hot, phantasmatic phase.

The consummate enjoyment [*jouissance*] of the signs of guilt, despair, violence and death are replacing guilt, anxiety and even death in the total euphoria of simulation. This euphoria aims to abolish cause and effect, origin and end, and replace them with reduplication. Every closed system protects itself in this way from the referential and the anxiety of the referential, as well as from all metalanguage that the system wards off by operating its own metalanguage, that is, by duplicating itself as its own critique. In simulation, the metalinguistic illusion reduplicates and completes the referential illusion (the pathetic hallucination of the sign and the pathetic hallucination of the real).

'It's a circus', 'it's a theatre', 'it's a movie'; all these old adages are ancient naturalist denunciations. This is no longer what is at issue. What is at issue this time is *turning the real into a satellite*, putting an undefinable reality with no common measure into orbit with the phantasma that once illustrated it. This satellisation has subsequently been materialised as the two-room-kitchen-shower which we really have sent into orbit, to the 'spatial power' you could say, with the latest lunar module. The most everyday aspect of the terrestrial environment raised to the rank of a cosmic value, an absolute decor, hypostatised in space. This is the end of metaphysics and the beginning of the era of hyperreality.[9] The spatial transcendence of the banality of the two-room apartment by a cool, machinic figuration in hyperrealism[10] tells us only one thing, however: this module, such as it is, participates in a hyperspace of representation where everyone is already in possession of the technical means for the instant reproduction of his or her own life. Thus the *Tupolev*'s pilots who crashed in Bourget were able, by means of their cameras, to see themselves dying at first hand. This is nothing other than the short-circuit of the response by the question in the test, a process of instant renewal whereby reality is immediately contaminated by its simulacrum.

A specific class of allegorical and somewhat diabolical objects used to exist, made up of mirrors, images, works of art (concepts?). Although simulacra, they were transparent and manifest (you could distinguish craftsmanship [*façon*] from the counterfeit [*contrefaçon*]) with their own characteristic style and *savoir-faire*. Pleasure, then, consisted in locating what was 'natural' within what was artificial and counterfeit. Today, where the real and the imaginary are intermixed in one and the same operational totality, aesthetic fascination reigns supreme: with subliminal perception (a sort of sixth sense) of special effects, editing and script, reality is overexposed to the glare of models. This is no longer a space of production, but a reading strip, a coding and decoding strip, magnetised by signs. Aesthetic reality is no longer achieved through art's premeditation and distancing, but by its elevation to the second degree, to the power of two, by the anticipation and immanence of the code. A kind of unintentional parody hovers over everything, a tactical simulation, a consummate aesthetic enjoyment

[*jouissance*], is attached to the indefinable play of reading and the rules of the game. Travelling signs, media, fashion and models, the blind but brilliant ambience of simulacra.

Art has for a long time prefigured this turn, by veering towards what today is a turn to everyday life. Very early on the work of art produced a double of itself as the manipulation of the signs of art, bringing about an oversignification of art, or, as Lévi-Strauss said, an 'academicisation of the signifier', irreversibly introducing art to the form of the sign. At this point art entered into infinite *reproduction*, with everything that doubles itself, even the banal reality of the everyday, falling by the same token under the sign of art and becoming aesthetic. The same goes for production, which we might say has today entered into aesthetic reduplication, the phase where, expelling all content and all finality, it becomes somehow abstract and non-figurative. In this way it expresses the pure form of production, taking upon itself, as art does, the value of the finality without end. Art and industry may then exchange their signs: art can become a reproductive machine (Andy Warhol) without ceasing to be art, since the machine is now nothing but a sign. Production can also lose all its social finality as its means of verification, and finally glorify in the prestigious, hyperbolic and aesthetic signs that the great industrial complexes are, 400-m-high towers or the numerical mysteries of the Gross National Product.

So art is everywhere, since artifice lies at the heart of reality. So art is dead, since not only is its critical transcendence dead, but reality itself, entirely impregnated by an aesthetic that holds onto its very structurality, has become inseparable from its own image. It no longer even has the time to take on the effect of reality. Reality is no longer stranger than fiction: it captures every dream before it can take on the dream effect. A schizophrenic vertigo of serial signs that have no counterfeit, no possible sublimation, and are immanent to their own repetition – who will say where the reality they simulate now lies? They no longer even repress anything (which, if you like, keeps simulation from entering the sphere of psychosis): even the primary processes have been annihilated. The cool universe of digitality absorbs the universe of metaphor and metonymy. The simulation principle dominates the reality principle as well as the pleasure principle.

Kool Killer, or The Insurrection of Signs

In the spring of 1972 in New York a spate of graffiti broke out which, starting with ghetto walls and fences, finally overcame subways and buses, lorries and elevators, corridors and monuments, completely covering them in graphics ranging from the rudimentary to the sophisticated, whose content was neither political nor pornographic. These graphics consisted solely of names, surnames drawn from underground comics such as DUKE SPIRIT SUPERKOOL KOOLKILLER ACE VIPERE SPIDER EDDIE KOLA and

so on, followed by their street number – EDDIE 135 WOODIE 110 SHADOW 137, etc. – or even by a number in Roman numerals, a dynastic or filiatory index – SNAKE I SNAKE II SNAKE III, etc. – up to L (50), depending on which name, which totemic designation is taken up by these new graffitists.

This was all done with Magic Markers or spray-paint, allowing the inscriptions to be a metre or more in height by the entire length of the subway car. At night, youths would work their way into bus depots or subways, even getting inside the cars, breaking out into an orgy of graphics. The following day all these subway trains cross Manhattan in both directions. The graphics are erased (but this is difficult), the graffitists are arrested and imprisoned, the sale of marker pens and spray cans is forbidden, but to no avail, since the youths manufacture them by hand and start again every night.

Today this movement has stopped, or at least is no longer so extraordinarily violent. It could only have been ephemeral, and, besides, in a single year of history it developed greatly. The graffitists became more expert, with incredible baroque graphics, and ramified into styles and schools connected to the different groups in operation. Young Blacks and Puerto Ricans originated the movement, and the graffitists were particular to New York. Several wall paintings are found in other cities with large ethnic minorities, improvised collective works with an ethno-political content, but very little graffiti.

One thing is certain: both the graffitists and the muralists sprang up after the repressions of the great urban riots of 1966–70. Like the riots, graffiti was a savage offensive, but of another kind, changing content and terrain. A new type of intervention in the city, no longer as a site of economic and political power, but as a space-time of the terrorist power of the media, signs and the dominant culture.

The urban city is also a neutralised, homogenised space, a space where indifference, the segregation of urban ghettos, and the downgrading of districts, races and certain age groups are on the increase. In short, it is the cut-up space of distinctive signs. Multiple codes assign a determinate space-time to every act and instant of everyday life. The racial ghettos on the outskirts or in the city centre are only the limit expression of this urban configuration: an immense centre for marshalling and enclosure where the system reproduces itself not only economically and spatially, but also in depth by the ramifications of signs and codes, by the symbolic destruction of social relations.

There is a horizontal and vertical expansion of the city in the image of the economic system itself. Political economy, however, has a third dimension where all sociality is invested, covered and dismantled by signs. Neither architecture nor urbanism can do anything about this, since they themselves result from this new turn taken by the general economy of the system: they are its operational semiology.

The city was first and foremost a site for the production and realisation of commodities, a site of industrial concentration and exploitation.

Today the city is first and foremost the site of the sign's execution, as in its life or death sentence.

In the city's 'red belt' of factories, and in the working-class outskirts, this is no longer the case for us. In this city, in the same space, the historical dimension of the class struggle, the negativity of labour power, were still inscribed, an irreducible social specificity. The factory, as the model of socialisation through capital, has not disappeared today but, in line with the general strategy, has been replaced by the entire city as the space of the code. The urban matrix no longer realises a *power* (labour power) but a *difference* (the operation of the sign): metallurgy has become semiurgy.

We see this urban scenario materialised in the new cities which directly result from the operational analysis of needs and sign-functions, and in which everything is conceived, projected and realised on the basis of an analytic definition: environment, transport, labour, leisure, play and culture become so many commutable terms on the chessboard of the city, a homogeneous space defined as a total environment. Hence the connection between the urban landscape and racism: there is no difference between the act of packing people into one homogeneous space (which we call a ghetto) on the basis of a racial definition, and the act of making people homogeneous in a new city on the basis of a functional definition of their needs. It follows one and the same logic.

The city is no longer the politico-industrial zone that it was in the nineteenth century, it is the zone of signs, the media and the code. By the same token, its truth no longer lies in its geographical situation, as it did for the factory or even the traditional ghetto. Its truth, enclosure in the sign-form, lies all around us. It is the ghetto of television and advertising, the ghetto of consumers and the consumed, of readers read in advance, encoded decoders of every message, those circulating in, and circulated by, the subway, leisure-time entertainers and the entertained, etc. Every space-time of urban life is a ghetto, each of which is connected to every other. Today a multiplicity of codes submit socialisation, or rather desocialisation, to this structural breakdown. The era of production, commodities and labour power merely amounts to the interdependence of all social processes, including exploitation, and it was on this socialisation, realised in part by capital itself, that Marx based his revolutionary perspective. But this historical solidarity (whether factory, local or class solidarity) has disappeared. From now on they are separate and indifferent under the sign of television and the automobile, under the sign of behaviour models inscribed everywhere in the media or in the layout of the city. Everyone falls into line in their delirious identification with leading models, orchestrated models of simulation. Everyone is commutable, like the models themselves. This is the era of geometrically variable individuals. As for the geometry of the code, it remains fixed and centralised. The monopoly of this code, circulating throughout the urban fabric, is the genuine form of social relations.

It is possible to conceive of the decentralisation of the sphere of material production, even that the historical relation between the city and commodity

production is coming to an end. The system can do without the industrial, productive city, the space-time of the commodity and market-based social relations. The signs of this development are evident. It cannot, however, do without the urban as the space-time of the code and reproduction, for the centrality of the code is the definition of power itself.

Whatever attacks contemporary semiocracy, this new form of value, is therefore politically essential: graffiti for example. According to this new form there is a total commutability of elements within a functional set, each taking on meaning only insofar as it is a term that is capable of structural variation in accordance with the code.

Under these conditions, radical revolt effectively consists in saying 'I exist, I am so and so, I live on such and such street, I am alive here and now.' This would still be an identitarian revolt however, combating anonymity by demanding a proper name and a reality. The graffitists went further in that they opposed pseudonyms rather than names to anonymity. They are seeking not to escape the combinatory in order to regain an identity (which is impossible in any case), but to turn indeterminacy against the system, to turn *indeterminacy* into *extermination*. Retaliation, reversion of the code according to its own logic, on its own terrain, gaining victory over it because it exceeds semiocracy's own non-referentiality.

SUPERBEE SPIX COLA 139 KOOL GUY CRAZY CROSS 136 means nothing, it is not even a proper name, but a symbolic matriculation number whose function it is to derail the common system of designations. Such terms are not at all original, they all come from comic strips where they were imprisoned in fiction. They blasted their way out however, so as to burst into reality like a scream, an interjection, an anti-discourse, as the waste of all syntactic, poetic and political development, as the smallest radical element that cannot be caught by any organised discourse. Invincible due to their own poverty, they resist every interpretation and every connotation, no longer denoting anyone or anything. In this way, with neither connotation nor denotation, they escape the principle of signification and, as *empty signifiers*, erupt into the sphere of the *full signs* of the city, dissolving it on contact.

Names without intimacy, just as the ghettos have no intimacy, no private life, but thrive on an intense collective exchange. These names make no claim to an identity or a personality, but claim the radical exclusivity of the clan, gang, age group, group or ethnicity which, as we know, passes through the devolution of the name, coupled with an absolute loyalty, to this totemic designation, even if it came directly from the pages of underground comics. This form of symbolic designation is annihilated by our social structure which imposes a *proper* name and a *private* individuality on everyone, shattering all solidarity in the name of an urban, abstract and universal sociality. These names or tribal appellations have, by contrast, a real symbolic charge: they are made to be given, exchanged, transmitted and relayed in a collective anonymity, where these names are exchanged as terms to introduce group members amongst each other, although they are no more private a property than language.

This is the real force of a symbolic ritual, and, in this sense, graffiti runs contrary to all media and advertising signs, although they might create the illusion, on our city walls, that they are the same incantation. Advertising has been spoken of as a 'festival', since, without it, the urban environment would be dismal. But in fact it is only a cold bustle, a simulacrum of appeal and warmth, it makes no contacts, it cannot be revived by an autonomous or collective reading, and it does not create a symbolic network. More so than the walls that support it, advertising is itself a wall of functional signs made to be decoded, and its effects are exhausted in this decoding.

All media signs issue from this space without qualities, from this surface of inscription set up between producers and consumers, transmitters and receivers of signs. The city is a 'body without organs', as Deleuze says,[11] an intersection of channelled flows. The graffitists themselves come from the territorial order. They territorialise decoded urban spaces – a particular street, wall or district comes to life through them, becoming a collective territory again. They do not confine themselves to the ghetto, they export the ghetto through all the arteries of the city, they invade the white city and reveal that it is the real ghetto of the Western world.

A linguistic ghetto erupts into the city with graffiti, a kind of riot of signs. In the becoming-sign of the sign, graffiti has until now always constituted the basest form (the sexual and pornographic base), the shameful, repressed inscriptions in pissoirs and waste grounds. Only political and propagandistic slogans have conquered the walls in a direct offensive, full signs for which the wall is still a support and language a traditional medium. They are not aiming at the wall itself, nor at the pure functionality of signs as such. Doubtless it was only in May '68 in France that the graffiti and posters swept through the city in a different manner, attacking the support itself, producing a savage mobility on the walls, an inscription so sudden that it amounted to annihilating them. The inscriptions and frescoes at Nanterre actually hijacked the wall as a signifier of terrorist, functional gridded space: an anti-media action. The proof is that the government has been careful enough neither to efface nor to repaint the walls: the mass political slogans and posters have taken responsibility for this. There is no need for repression since the media themselves, the far-left media, have given the walls back their blind function. Since then, we have met with the Stockholm 'protest wall' where one is at liberty to protest on a certain surface, but where it is forbidden to put graffiti on neighbouring surfaces.

There has also been the ephemeral onslaught of the advertising hijack, limited by its own support, but already utilising the avenues the media have themselves opened up: subways, stations and posters. Consider also the assault on television by Jerry Rubin and America's counter-culture. This is a political attempt to hijack a great mass-medium, but only at the level of content and without changing the media themselves.

New York graffiti utilised urban clearways and mobile supports for the first time in a free and wide-ranging offensive. Above all, however, the very form of the media themselves, that is, their mode of production and

distribution, was attacked for the first time. This was precisely because graffiti has no content and no message: this emptiness gives it its strength. So it was no accident that the total offensive was accompanied by a recession in terms of content. This comes from a sort of revolutionary intuition, namely that deep ideology no longer functions at the level of political signifieds, but at the level of the signifier, and that this is where the system is vulnerable and must be dismantled.

Thus the political significance of graffiti becomes clear. It grew out of the repression of the urban riots in the ghettos. Struck by this repression, the revolt underwent a split into a doctrinal *pur et dur* Marxist-Leninist political organisation on the one hand, and, on the other, a savage cultural process with neither goal, ideology, nor content, at the level of signs. The first group called for a genuinely revolutionary practice and accused the graffitists of folklore, but it's the other way round: the defeat of 1970 brought about a regression into traditional political activism, but it also necessitated the radicalisation of revolt on the real strategic terrain of the total manipulation of codes and significations. This is not at all a flight into signs, but on the contrary an extraordinary development in theory and practice (these two terms now no longer being kept distinct by the party).

Insurrection and eruption in the urban landscape as the site of the reproduction of the code. At this level, relations of forces no longer count, since signs don't operate on the basis of force, but on the basis of difference. We must therefore attack by means of difference, dismantling the network of codes, attacking coded differences by means of an uncodeable absolute difference, over which the system will stumble and disintegrate. There is no need for organised masses, nor for a political consciousness to do this – a thousand youths armed with marker pens and cans of spray-paint are enough to scramble the signals of urbania and dismantle the order of signs. Graffiti covers every subway map in New York, just as the Czechs changed the names of the streets in Prague to disconcert the Russians: guerrilla action.

Despite appearances, the City Walls Project, the painted walls, have nothing to do with graffiti. Moreover, they are prior to graffiti and will survive it. The initiative for these painted walls comes from the top as an innovatory attempt to enliven urbania set up with municipal subsidies. The 'City Walls Incorporated' organisation was founded in 1969 'to promote the program and technical aspects of wall-painting'. Its budget was covered by the New York Department of Cultural Affairs along with various other foundations such as that of David Rockefeller. His artistic ideology: 'The natural alliance between buildings and monumental painting.' His goal: 'To make a gift of art to the people of New York.' Consider also the 'Billboard Art Project' in Los Angeles:

> This project was set up to promote artistic representations that use the billboard as a medium in the urban environment. Thanks to the collaboration of Foster and Kleiser [two large advertising agencies], public billposting spaces have thus become an art showcase for the painters of Los Angeles. They create a dynamic medium and take art out of the restricted circle of the galleries and museums.

Of course, these operations are confined to professionals, artists brought together in a consortium from New York. No possible ambiguity here: this is a question of a politics of the environment, of large-scale urban planning, where both the city and art gain. They gain because the city does not explode with the eruption of art 'out in the open', in the streets, nor does art explode on contact with the city. The entire city becomes an art gallery, art finds a whole new parading ground in the city. Neither undergoes any structural alteration, they merely exchange their privileges.

'To make a gift of art to the people of New York'! We need only compare this to SUPERKOOL's formula: 'There are those who don't like it, man, but whether they like it or not, we've become the strongest art movement to hit the city of New York.'

This makes all the difference. Some of the painted walls may be beautiful, but that has nothing to do with it. They will find a place in the history of art for having been able to create space on the blind, bare walls, by means of line and colour alone: the *trompe-l'oeils* are always the most beautiful, those painted walls that create an illusion of space and depth, those that 'enhance architecture with imagination', according to one of the artists' formulas. But this is precisely where their limits lie. They *play at* architecture without breaking the rules of the game, they recycle architecture in the imaginary, but retain the sacrament of architecture (from the technical support to the monumental structure, including even its social, class aspect, since most of the City Walls of this kind are in the white, civilised areas of the cities).

So architecture and town planning, even if they are transfigured by the imagination, cannot change anything, since they are mass-media themselves and, even in their most daring conception, they reproduce mass social relations, which is to say that collectively they allow people no response. All they can do is enliven, and participate in urban recycling, design in the largest sense: the simulation of exchange and collective values, the simulation of play and non-functional spaces. Hence the adventure parks for the children, the green spaces, the houses of culture; hence the City Walls and the protest walls, the green spaces of language [*parole*].

The graffitists themselves care little for architecture; they defile it, forget about it and cross the street. The mural artist respects the wall as he used to respect the limitations of his easel. Graffiti runs from one house to the next, from one wall of a building to the next, from the wall onto the window or the door, or windows on subway trains, or the pavements. Graffiti overlaps, is thrown up, superimposes (superimposition amounting to the abolition of the support as a framework, just as it is abolished as frame when its limits are not respected). Its graphics resemble the child's polymorphous perversity, ignoring the boundaries between the sexes and the delimitation of erogenous zones. Curiously, moreover, graffiti turns the city's walls and corners, the subway's cars and the buses, into a *body*, a body without beginning or end, made erotogenic in its entirety by writing just as the body may be in the primitive inscription (tattooing). Tattooing takes

place on the body. In primitive societies, along with other ritual signs, it makes the body what it is – material for symbolic exchange: without tattooing, as without masks, the body is only what it is, naked and expressionless. By tattooing walls, SUPERSEX and SUPERKOOL free them from architecture and turn them once again into living, social matter, into the moving body of the city before it has been branded with functions and institutions. The end of the 'four walls' when they are tattooed like archaic effigies. End of the repressive space-time of urban transport systems where the subway cars fly past like missiles or living hydras tattooed up to the eyes. Something about the city has become tribal, parietal, before writing, with these powerful emblems stripped of meaning. An incision into the flesh of empty signs that do not signify personal identity, but group initiation and affiliation: 'A biocybernetic self-fulfilling prophecy world orgy I.'[12]

It is nevertheless astonishing to see this unfold in a Quaternary cybernetic city dominated by the two glass and aluminium towers of the World Trade Center, invulnerable metasigns of the system's omnipotence.

There are also frescoes and murals in the ghettos, the spontaneous artworks of ethnic groups who paint their own walls. Socially and politically, the impulse is the same as with graffiti. These are savagely painted walls, not financed by the urban administration. Moreover, they all focus on political themes, on a revolutionary message: the unity of the oppressed, world peace, the cultural promotion of ethnic communities, solidarity, and only rarely the violence of open struggle. In short, as opposed to graffiti, they have a meaning, a message. And, contrary to the City Walls project, which drew its inspiration from abstract, geometrical or surrealist art, they are always inspired by figurative and idealist forms. We can also see the difference between a scholarly and cultivated avant-garde art and the popular, realist forms with a strong ideological content but formally 'less advanced' (even though they have a variety of inspirations, from children's drawings to Mexican frescoes, from a scholarly art to Douannier Rousseau, or from Fernand Léger up to the simple images of Epinal, the sentimental illustrations of popular struggles). In any case, it is a matter of a counter-culture that, far from being underground, is reflexive and connected to the political and cultural consciousness of the oppressed group.

Here again, some of these walls are beautiful, others less so. That this aesthetic criterion can operate is in a certain way a sign of weakness. What I mean is that even though they are savages and anonymous collectives, they respect their support as well as the language of painting, even if this is in order to articulate a political act. In this sense, they can very easily be looked on as decorative works of art (some of them are even conceived as such), and have an eye turned towards their own value. Most of them are protected from this museum-culturalisation by the rapid destruction of the fences and the crumbling walls – here the municipal authorities do not patronise through art, and the negritude of the support is in the image of the ghetto. However, their mortality is not the same as the mortality of graffiti, which is systematically condemned to police repression (it is even

forbidden to take photographs of it). This is because graffiti is more offensive and more radical, bursting into the white city; above all it is trans-ideological, trans-artistic. This is almost a paradox: whereas the Black and Puerto Rican walls, even if they have not been signed, always carry a virtual signature (a political or cultural, if not an artistic, reference), graffiti, composed of nothing but names, effectively avoids every reference and every origin. It alone is savage, in that its message is zero.

We will come to what it signifies elsewhere, by analysing the two types of recuperation of which it is the object (apart from police repression):

1. It is recuperated as art. Jay Jacobs: 'A primitive, millenial, communitarian form, not an elitist one like Abstract Expressionism.' Or again: 'The subway cars rumble past one after the other throughout the station, like so many Jackson Pollocks hurtling by, roaring through the corridors of the history of art.' We speak of 'graffiti artists' and 'an eruption of popular art' created by youth, which 'will remain one of the important and characteristic manifestations of the art of the '70s', and so on. Always the aesthetic reduction, the very form of our dominant culture.
2. It is interpreted (and I am talking about the most admiring interpretations here) in terms of a reclamation of identity and personal freedom, as non-conformism: 'The indestructible survival of the individual in an inhuman environment' (Mitzi Cunliffe in *The New York Times*). A bourgeois humanist interpretation that comes from *our* feelings of frustration in the anonymity of large cities. Cunliffe again: 'It says [the graffiti says]: I AM, I am real, I have lived here. It says: KIKI, OR DUKE, OR MIKE, OR GINO is alive, he's doing well and he lives in New York.' OK, but 'it' does not speak like that, it is our bourgeois-existentialist romanticism that speaks like that, the unique and incomparable being that each of us is, but who gets ground down by the city. Black youths themselves have no personality to defend, from the outset they are defending the community. Their revolt challenges bourgeois identity and anonymity at the same time. COOL COKE SUPERSTRUT SNAKE SODA VIRGIN – this Sioux litany, this subversive litany of anonymity, the symbolic explosion of these war names in the heart of the white city, must be heard and understood.

Notes

1. Counterfeit and reproduction always imply an anxiety, a disquieting strangeness. There is unease in front of the photograph, which has been assimilated into a sorcerer's trickery, an unease, more generally, in front of any technical equipment. Benjamin relates this to the unease bound up with the appearance of a mirror-image. There is already a little sorcery at work in the mirror, but how much more there would be were the image to be detached from the mirror, transported, stockpiled and reproduced at whim (cf. *The Student of Prague*, where the Devil detaches the student's image from the mirror and then hunts him down through the intermediary of this image). In this way all reproduction implies maleficence, from the event of being seduced by one's own image in

the water, like Narcissus, to being haunted by the double, and, who knows, even to the mortal reversal of the vast array of technical equipment that today man disguises in his own image (the narcissistic mirage of technology, as McLuhan says), and that sends back endless halting and distorted reproductions of himself and his power, to the ends of the earth. Reproduction is diabolical in its essence, sending tremors down to our roots. This has hardly changed for us: simulation (which we describe here as the operation of the code) remains and will always remain the site of an immense project of control and death, just as the simulacrum-object (the primitive statue, the image or the photo) has from the outset always had black magic as its objective.

2. Furthermore, there is a flagrant contradiction in Monod's book, reflecting the ambiguity of all contemporary science: its discourse is directed at the code, that is, at third-order simulacra, but it still follows second-order 'scientific' schemata such as objectivity, the scientific 'ethic' of knowledge, the truth-principle and the transcendence of science, and so on. These things are all incompatible with third-order models of indeterminacy.
3. 'The weak "definition" of TV condemns its viewer to rearrange the few points he retains into a kind of abstract work of art. He thereby participates in the creation of a reality which is only pointilistically presented: the televiewer is in the situation of an individual who is asked to project his own phantasma onto inkblots which are not supposed to represent anything.' TV as a perpetual Rorschach test. Again: 'The TV image obliges us to always be filling in the blanks on the screen in a convulsive, kinetic and tactile sensory participation.'
4. 'The Medium is the Message' is even the formula of the political economy of the sign when it leads on to third-order simulation. A distinction of the medium from the message remains characteristic of second-order signification.
5. The whole contemporary 'psychological' situation is characterised by this short-circuit.

   The emancipation of children and adolescents, after a first phase of revolt and once the *principle of the right* to emancipation has been established, appears to be the real emancipation of parents. Youth (students, high school pupils and adolescents) seem to sense this in their increasingly relentless (although also always unreconciled) demands that parents or educators be present and speak. Alone at last, free and responsible, it suddenly occurs to them that in the process the others have pocketed the real freedom. Nor is there any question of simply leaving them in peace. Instead they will be plagued, not by affective or spontaneous material demands but by a demand revised and corrected by implicit Oedipal knowledge. A hyperdependency (far greater than the other) distorted by irony and rejection, a *parody of the original libidinal mechanisms*. A demand without content or reference, unfounded, but so much more ferocious for all that: a naked demand to which there is no possible response. The content of knowledge (education) or affective relations (family), the familial or pedagogic referential having been eliminated during the act of emancipation, remains nothing more than a demand bound up with the empty form of the institution, a perverse, but so much more obstinate, demand. A 'transferential' desire (that is non- or irreferential), a desire fuelled by lack, by the vacant place, a 'liberated' desire, desire caught in its own vertiginous image, a desire to desire thereby also abyssal [*en abyme*]: a hyperreal desire. Stripped of symbolic substance, desire flows ever more intensely into its double, drawing its energy from its own reflection and from its own disillusionment. That is literally what the 'demand' is today, and it is clear that as opposed to 'classical' object or transference relations, this demand is insoluble and interminable.

Simulated Oedipus.
François Richard writes:

> The students *demanded* to be seduced, bodily or verbally. But they are also aware of this and play their part ironically. 'Give your knowledge and your presence: you've got the floor, so speak, that's what you're there for.' While this is certainly a protest, that is not all it is: the more authority is contested, the more laughable it appears, the greater the demand for an authority in itself. They also play

> Oedipus, so as to be able to annihilate him absolutely. They say that 'the prof is Papa' for a laugh, they play at incest, discontented, untouchable, they play the tease, ultimately to be desexualised.

Does the analysand constantly demand Oedipus, recite 'Oedipal' tricks and have 'analytic' dreams in order to respond to the analyst's supposed demand or to resist him? What about the student doing his 'Oedipus' number, his seduction number, familiarly brushing up against the seductee, moving closer in order to dominate? This is not desire, however, but its simulation, a simulated Oedipal psychodrama (but no less real or dramatic for all that). It is quite different when there are real libidinal stakes such as knowledge and power, or even a real work of mourning over knowledge and power (as was able to take place in the universities after '68). Now is the stage of desperate reproduction, where the stakes are zero and the simulacrum at a maximum, a simulation at once aggravated and parodic, as interminable as psychoanalysis and for the same reasons.

Interminable psychoanalysis

There is a whole chapter to be added to the history of the transference and the countertransference concerning their elimination through simulation. This chapter would also deal with the insolubility of the transference and the impossibility of psychoanalysis, because it is now psychoanalysis that produces and reproduces the unconscious as its institutional substance. Psychoanalysis too dies from the exchange of unconscious signs, just as the revolution dies from the exchange of political-economic signs. This short-circuit was indeed glimpsed by Freud in the form of the gift of the analytic dream or, with a 'prepared' analysand, the gift of their analytic knowledge. This was still interpreted as resistance, however, as a detour, and did not fundamentally question the analytic process or the principle of the transference. It is quite different though when the unconscious itself, the discourse of the unconscious, becomes impossible to find in accordance with the same scenario of simulatory anticipation as we have seen at work at all levels in machines of the third order. Analysis then can no longer be resolved, it becomes logically and historically interminable, since it settles on a substance that is a puppet of reproduction, an unconscious programmed by the demand, an insurmountable instance from which the entire analysis is redistributed. Here again the unconscious's 'messages' have been short-circuited by the 'medium' of psychoanalysis. This is a libidinal hyperrealism. We must add the 'hyperreal' to the celebrated categories of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, since it captures and redirects, perverts, the play of the three others.

6. Athenian democracy, far more advanced than our own, logically came to pay for votes as a service, after having tried every other repressive solution to complete the quorum.
7. In this sense it is necessary to undertake a radical critique of Lévi-Strauss's extension of binary structures as 'anthropological' mental structures, and dualistic organisation as the basic structure of primitive societies. The dualistic form with which Lévi-Strauss would like to grace primitive societies is only ever *our* structural logic, our own code. Indeed, it is the very structure of our domination of 'archaic' societies. Lévi-Strauss is kind enough to slip this to them in the form of the mental structures common to the human race. So they will be all the better prepared to receive the baptism of the West.
8. [See also Jean-François Lyotard, *Des dispositifs pulsionels*, Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1979, pp. 99–108 – tr.]
9. The coefficient of reality is proportionate to the reserve of the imaginary that gives it its specific weight. This is true of terrestrial as well as space exploration: when there is no more virgin, and hence available to the imaginary, territory, when the map covers the whole territory, something like the reality principle disappears. In this sense, the conquest of space constitutes an irreversible threshold on the way to the loss of terrestrial references. Reality haemorrhages to the precise extent that the limits of an internally coherent universe are infinitely pushed back. The conquest of space comes after the conquest of the planet, as the last phantasmatic attempt to extend the jurisdiction of

the real (for example, when the flag, technology and two-room apartments are carried to the moon); it is even an attempt to substantiate concepts or territorialise the unconscious, which is equivalent to the derealisation of human space, or its reversal into a hyperreality of simulation.

10. What about the cool figuration of the metallic caravan and the supermarket so beloved of the hyperrealists, or the Campbell's soup cans dear to Andy Warhol, or even that of the Mona Lisa when it was satellited into planetary orbit as the absolute model of the earth's art. The Mona Lisa was not even sent as a work of art, but as a planetary simulacrum where a whole world bears testimony to its existence (testifying, in reality, to its own death) for the gaze of a future universe.
11. [See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia I*, tr. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane, London: Athlone, 1984, and *A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia II*, tr. Brian Massumi, London: Athlone, 1988, for the BWO – tr.]
12. [In English in the original – tr.]

3

Fashion, or the Enchanting Spectacle of the Code

The Frivolity of the *Déjà Vu*

The astonishing privilege accorded to fashion is due to a unanimous and definitive resolve. The acceleration of the simple play of signifiers in fashion becomes striking, to the point of enchanting us – the enchantment and vertigo of the loss of every system of reference. In this sense, it is the completed form of political economy, the cycle wherein the linearity of the commodity comes to be abolished.

There is no longer any determinacy internal to the signs of fashion, hence they become free to commute and permutate without limit. At the term of this unprecedented enfranchisement, they obey, as if logically, a mad and meticulous recurrence. This applies to fashion as regards clothes, the body and objects – the sphere of 'light' signs. In the sphere of 'heavy' signs – politics, morals, economics, science, culture, sexuality – the principle of commutation nowhere plays with the same abandon. We could classify these diverse domains according to a decreasing order of 'simulation', but it remains the case that every sphere tends, unequally but simultaneously, to merge with models of simulation, of differential and indifferent play, the structural play of value. In this sense, we could say that they are all haunted by fashion, since this can be understood as both the most superficial play and as the most profound social form – the inexorable investment of every domain by the code.

In fashion, as in the code, signifieds come unthreaded [*se défiler*], and the parades of the signifier [*les défilés du signifiant*] no longer lead anywhere. The signifier/signified distinction is erased, as in sexual difference (H.-P. Jeudy, 'Le signifiant est hermaphrodite' [in *La mort du sens: l'idéologie des mots*, Tours/Paris: Mame, 1973]), where gender becomes so many distinctive oppositions, and something like an immense fetishism, bound up with an intense pleasure [*jouissance*][1] and an exceptional desolation, takes hold – a pure and fascinating manipulation coupled with the despair of radical indeterminacy. Fundamentally, fashion imposes upon us the rupture of an imaginary order: that of referential Reason in all its guises, and if we are able to enjoy [*jouir*] the dismantling or stripping of reason [*démantélement de la raison*], enjoy the *liquidation* of meaning (particularly at the level of our body – hence the affinity of clothing and fashion), enjoy this endless finality of fashion, we also suffer profoundly from the

corruption of rationality it implies, as reason crumbles under the blow of the pure and simple alternation of signs.

There is vehement resistance in the face of the collapse of all sectors into the sphere of commodities, and a still more vehement resistance concerning their collapse into the sphere of fashion. This is because it is in this latter sphere that the liquidation of values is at its most radical. Under the sign of the commodity, all labour is exchanged and loses its specificity – under the sign of fashion, the signs of leisure and labour are exchanged. Under the sign of the commodity, culture is bought and sold – under the sign of fashion, all cultures play like simulacra in total promiscuity. Under the sign of the commodity, love becomes prostitution – under the sign of fashion it is the object-relation itself that disappears, blown to pieces by a cool and unconstrained sexuality. Under the sign of the commodity, time is accumulated like money – under the sign of fashion it is exhausted and discontinued in entangled cycles.

Today, every principle of identity is affected by fashion, precisely because of its potential to revert all forms to non-origin and recurrence. Fashion is always *rétro*, but always on the basis of the abolition of the *passé* (the past): the spectral death and resurrection of forms. Its proper *actuality* (its 'up-to-dateness', its 'relevance') is not a reference to the present, but an immediate and total recycling. Paradoxically, fashion is the *inactual* (the 'out-of-date', the 'irrelevant'). It always presupposes a dead time of forms, a kind of abstraction whereby they become, as if safe from time, effective signs which, as if by a twist of time, will return to haunt the present of their inactuality with all the charm of 'returning' as opposed to 'becoming' structures. The aesthetic of renewal: fashion draws triviality from the death and modernity of the *déjà vu*. This is the despair that nothing lasts, and the complementary enjoyment of knowing that, beyond this death, every form has always the chance of a second existence, which is never innocent since fashion consumes the world and the real in advance: *it is the weight of all the dead labour of signs bearing on living signification* – within a magnificent forgetting, a fantastic ignorance [*méconnaissance*]. But let's not forget that the fascination exerted by industrial machinery and technics is also due to its being dead labour watching over living labour, all the while devouring it. Our bedazzled misconstrual [*méconnaissance*] is proportionate to the progressive hold of the dead over the living. Dead labour alone is as strange and as perfect as the *déjà vu*. The enjoyment of fashion is therefore the enjoyment of a spectral and cyclical world of bygone forms endlessly revived as effective signs. As König says, it is as though fashion were eaten away by a suicidal desire which is fulfilled at the moment when fashion attains its apogee. This is true, but it is a question of a *contemplative* desire for death, bound to the spectacle of the incessant abolition of forms. What I mean is that the desire for death is itself recycled within fashion, emptying it of every subversive phantasm and involving it, along with everything else, in fashion's innocuous revolutions.

Having purged these phantasms which, in the depths of the imaginary, add the bewitchment and charm of a previous life to repetition, fashion dances vertiginously over the surface, on pure actuality. Does fashion recover the innocence that Nietzsche noted in the Greeks: 'They knew how to live ... to stop ... at the surface, the fold, the skin, to believe in forms, tones, words. … Those Greeks were superficial – out of *profundity*' (*The Gay Science*, Preface, 2nd edition, 1886 [tr. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Random House, 1974], p. 38)? Fashion is only a simulation of the innocence of becoming, the cycle of appearances is just its recycling. That the development of fashion is contemporary with that of the museum proves this. Paradoxically, the museum's demand for an eternal inscription of forms and for a pure actuality function simultaneously in our culture. This is because in modernity both are governed by the status of the sign.

Whereas styles mutually exclude each other, the museum is defined by the virtual co-existence of all styles, by their promiscuity within a single cultural super-institution, or, in other words, the commensurability of their values under the sign of the great gold-standard of culture. Fashion does the same thing in accordance with its cycle: it commutes all signs and causes an absolute play amongst them. The temporality of works in the museum is 'perfect', it is perfection and the past: it is the highly specific state of what has been and is never actual. But neither is fashion ever actual: it speculates on the recurrence of forms on the basis of their death and their stockpiling, like signs, in an a-temporal reserve. Fashion cobbles together, from one year to the next, what 'has been', exercising an enormous combinatory freedom. Hence its effect of 'instantaneous' perfection, just like the museum's perfection, but the forms of fashion are ephemeral. Conversely, there is a contemporary look to the museum, which causes the works to play amongst themselves like values in a set. Fashion and the museum are contemporary, complicitous. Together they are the opposite of all previous cultures, made of inequivalent signs and incompatible styles.

The 'Structure' of Fashion

Fashion exists only within the framework of modernity, that is to say, in a schema of rupture, progress and innovation. In any cultural context at all, the ancient and the 'modern' alternate in terms of their signification. For us however, since the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, there exists only an historical and polemical structure of change and crisis. It seems that modernity sets up a linear time of technical progress, production and history, and, simultaneously, a cyclical time of fashion. This only *seems* to be a contradiction, since in fact modernity is never a radical rupture. Tradition is no longer the pre-eminence of the old over the new: it is unaware of either – modernity itself invents them both at once, at a single stroke, it is always and at the same time 'neo-' and '*rétro-*', modern and anachronistic. The dialectic of rupture very quickly becomes the dynamics of the amalgam and recycling.

In politics, in technics, in art and in culture it is defined by the exchange rate that the system can tolerate without alteration to its fundamental order. Consequently fashion doesn't contradict any of this: it very clearly and simultaneously announces the *myth* of change, maintaining it as the supreme value in the most everyday aspects, and as the structural law of change: since it is produced through the play of models and distinctive oppositions, and is therefore an order which gives no precedence to the code of the tradition. For binary logic is the essence of modernity, and it impels infinite differentiation and the 'dialectical' effects of rupture. Modernity is not the transmutation but the commutation of all values, their combination and their ambiguity. Modernity is a code, and fashion is its emblem.

This perspective allows us to trace only the limits of fashion, in order to conquer the two simultaneous prejudices which consist:

1. in extending its field up to the limits of anthropology, indeed of animal behaviour;
2. in restricting, on the other hand, its actual sphere to dress and external signs.

Fashion has nothing to do with the ritual order (nor *a fortiori* with animal finery), for the good reason that it knows neither the equivalence/alternation of the old and the new, nor the systems of distinctive oppositions, nor the models with their serial and combinatory diffraction. On the other hand, fashion is at the core of modernity, extending even into science and revolution, because the entire order of modernity, from sex to the media, from art to politics, is infiltrated by this logic. The very appearance of fashion bears the closest resemblance to ritual – fashion as spectacle, as festival, as squandering – it doesn't even affirm their differences: since it is precisely the *aesthetic* perspective that allows us to assimilate fashion to the ceremonial (just as it is precisely the concept of festival that allows us to assimilate certain contemporary processes to primitive structures). The aesthetic perspective is itself a concern of modernity (of a play of distinctive oppositions – utility/gratuity, etc.), one which we project onto archaic structures so as to be better able to annex them under our analogies. Spectacle is our fashion, an intensified and reduplicated sociality enjoying itself *aesthetically*, the drama of change in place of change. In the primitive order, the ostentation of signs never has this 'aesthetic' effect. In the same way, our festival is an '*aesthetics*' *of transgression*, which is not the primitive exchange in which it pleases us to find the reflection or the model of our festivals – to rewrite the 'aesthetics' of potlach is an ethnocentric rewriting.

It is as necessary to distinguish fashion from the ritual order as it is to radicalise the analysis of fashion within our own system. The minimal, superficial definition of fashion restricts itself to saying: 'Within language, the element subject to fashion is not the signification of discourse, but its mimetic support, that is, its rhythm, its tonality, its articulation … in gesture … This is equally true of intellectual fashions: existentialism or structuralism – it is the vocabulary and not the inquiry that is taken on' (Edmond Radar, *Diogène*

[50, Summer, 1965]). Thus a deep structure, invulnerable to fashion, is preserved. Consequently it is in the very production of meaning [*sens*], in the most 'objective' structures, that it must be sought, in the sense that these latter also comply with the play of simulation and combinatory innovation. Even dress and the body grow deeper: now it is the body itself, its identity, its sex, its status, which has become the material of fashion – dress is only a particular case of this. Certainly scientific and cultural popularisations provide fertile soil for the 'effects' of fashion. However, along with the 'originality' of their procedures, science and culture themselves must be interrogated, to see if they are subject to the 'structure' of fashion. If indeed popularisation is possible – which is not the case in any other culture (the facsimile, the digest, the counterfeit, the simulation, the increased circulation of simplified material, is unthinkable at the level of ritual speech, of the sacred text or gesture) – it is because there is, at the very source of innovation in these matters, a manipulation of analytic models, of simple elements and stable oppositions which renders both levels, the 'original' and the 'popularisation', fundamentally homogeneous, and the distinction between the two purely tactical and moral. Hence Radar does not see that, beyond discourse's 'gestures', the very meaning [*sens*] of discourse falls beneath the blow of fashion as soon as in an entirely self-referential cultural field, concepts are engendered and made to correspond to each other through pure specularity. It may be the same for scientific hypotheses. Nor does psychoanalysis avoid the fate of fashion in the very core of its theoretical and clinical practice. It too goes through the stage of institutional reproduction, developing whatever simulation models it had in its basic concepts. If formerly there was a *work* of the unconscious, and therefore a determination of psychoanalysis by means of its object, today this has quietly become the determination of the *unconscious by means of psychoanalysis itself.* Henceforth psychoanalysis reproduces the unconscious, while simultaneously taking itself as its reference (signifying itself as *fashion*, as the *mode*). So the unconscious returns to its old habits, as it is generally required to do, and psychoanalysis takes on social force, just as the code does, and is followed by an extraordinary complexification of theories of the unconscious, all commutable and basically indifferent.

Fashion has its society: dreams, phantasms, fashionable psychoses, scientific theories, fashionable schools of linguistics, not to mention art and politics – but this is only small change. Fashion haunts the *model* disciplines more profoundly, indeed to the extent that they have successfully made their axioms autonomous for their greater glory, and have moved into an *aesthetic*, almost a play-acting stage where, as in certain mathematical formulae, only the perfect specularity of the analytic models counts for anything.

The Flotation of Signs

Contemporary with political economy and like the market, fashion is a universal form. In fashion, all signs are exchanged just as, on the market, all

products come into play as equivalents. It is the only universalisable sign system, which therefore takes possession of all the others, just as the market eliminates all other modes of exchange. So if in the sphere of fashion no general equivalent can be located, it is because from the outset fashion is situated in an even more formal abstraction than political economy, at a stage when there is not even any need for a perceptible general equivalent (gold or money) because there remains only the *form of general equivalence*, and that is fashion itself. Or even: a general equivalent is necessary for the *quantitative* exchange of value, whereas models are required for the exchange of differences. Models are this kind of general equivalent diffracted throughout the matrices which govern the differentiated fields of fashion. They are shifters, effectors, dispatchers, the media of fashion, and through them fashion is indefinitely reproduced. There is fashion from the moment that a form is no longer produced according to its own determinations, but *from the model itself* – that is to say, that it is never produced, but always and immediately *reproduced*. The model itself has become the only system of reference.

Fashion is not a *drifting* of signs – it is their *flotation*, in the sense in which monetary signs are floated today. This flotation in the economic order is recent: it requires that 'primitive accumulation' be everywhere finished, that an entire cycle of dead labour be completed (behind money, the whole economic order will enter into this general relativity). Now this process has been managed for a long time within the order of signs where primitive accumulation is indeed anterior, if not always already given, and fashion expresses the already achieved stage of an accelerated and limitless circulation of a fluid and recurrent combinatory of signs, which is equivalent to the instantaneous and mobile equilibrium of floating monies. All cultures, all sign systems, are exchanged and combined in fashion, they contaminate each other, bind ephemeral equilibria, where the machinery breaks down, where there is nowhere any meaning [*sens*]. Fashion is the pure speculative stage in the order of signs. There is no more constraint of either coherence or reference than there is permanent equality in the conversion of gold into floating monies – this indeterminacy implies the characteristic dimension of the cycle and recurrence in fashion (and no doubt soon in economy), whereas determinacy (of signs or of production) implies a linear and continuous order. Hence the fate of the economic begins to emerge in the form of fashion, which is further down the route of general commutations than money and the economy.

The 'Pulsion'[2] of Fashion

Were the attempt made to explain fashion by saying that it serves as a vehicle for the unconscious and desire, it would mean nothing if desire itself was 'in fashion'. In fact there is a 'pulsion' of fashion which hasn't got a great deal to do with the individual unconscious – something so violent that

no prohibition has ever exhausted it, a desire to have done with meaning [*sens*] and to be submerged in pure signs, moving towards a raw, immediate sociality. In relation to mediated, economic, etc., social processes, fashion retains something of a radical sociality, not at the level of the psychical exchange of contents, but at the immediate level of the distribution of signs. As La Bruyère has already said:

> Curiosity is not a taste for the good or the beautiful, but for the rare, for what one has and others have not. It is not an affection for the perfect, but for what is current, for the fashionable. It is not an amusement, but a passion, sometimes so violent that it only yields to love and ambition through the modesty of its object. ('De la Mode 2' [in J. Benda (ed.), *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1951], p. 386)

For La Bruyère, the passion for fashion connects the passion for collecting with the object-passion: tulips, birds, engravings by Callot. In fact fashion draws nearer to the collection (in those terms) by means of subtle detours, 'each of which', for Oscar Wilde, 'gives man a security which not even religion has given him'.

Paying tribute to it, he finds salvation in fashion [*faire son salut dans la mode*]. A passion for collecting, passion for signs, passion for the cycle (the collection is also a cycle); one line of fashion put into circulation and distributed at dizzying speeds across the entire social body, sealing its integration and taking in all identifications (as the line in collection unifies the subject in one and the same infinitely repeated cyclic process).

This force, this enjoyment, takes root in the sign of fashion itself. The semiurgy of fashion rebels against the functionalism of the economic sphere. Against the ethics of production[3] stands the aesthetics of manipulation, of the reduplication and convergence of the single mirror of the model: 'Without content, it [fashion] then becomes the spectacle human beings grant themselves of their power to make the insignificant signify' (Barthes, *The Fashion System* [tr. Mathew Ward and Richard Howard, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983], p. 288). The charm and fascination of fashion derives from this: the decree it proclaims with no other justification but itself. The arbitrary is enjoyed like an election, like class solidarity holding fast to the discrimination of the sign. It is in this way that it diverges radically from the economic while also being its crowning achievement. In relation to the pitiless finality of production and the market, which, however, it also stages, fashion is a festival. It epitomises everything that the regime of economic abstraction censures. It inverts every categorical imperative.

In this sense, it is spontaneously contagious, whereas economic calculation isolates people from one another. Disinvesting signs of all value, it becomes passion again – passion for the artificial. It is the utter absurdity, the formal futility of the sign of fashion, the perfection of a system where nothing is any longer exchanged against the real, it is the arbitrariness of this sign at the same time as its absolute coherence, constrained to a total relativity with other signs, that makes for its contagious virulence and, at the same time, its collective enjoyment. Beyond the rational and the irrational, beyond

the beautiful and the ugly, the useful and the useless, it is this immorality in relation to all criteria, the frivolity which at times gives fashion its subversive force (in totalitarian, puritan or archaic contexts), which always, in contradistinction to the economic, makes it a *total social fact* – for which reason we are obliged to revive, as Mauss did for exchange, a total approach.

Fashion, like language, is aimed from the outset at the social (the dandy, in his provocative solitude, is the *a contrario* proof of this). But, as opposed to language, which aims for meaning [*sens*] and effaces itself before it, fashion aims for a theatrical sociality, and delights in itself. At a stroke, it becomes an intense site from which no-one is excluded – the mirror of a certain desire for its own image. In contradistinction to language, which *aims* at communication, fashion *plays* at it, turning it into the goal-less stake of a signification without a message. Hence its aesthetic pleasure, which has nothing to do with beauty or ugliness. Is it then a sort of festival, an increasing excess of communication?

It is especially fashion in dress, playing over the signs of the body, that appears 'festive', through its aspect of 'wasteful consumption', of 'potlach'. Again this is especially true of *haute couture*. This is what allows *Vogue* to make this tasty profession of faith:

> What is more anachronistic, more dream-laden than a sailing ship? *Haute couture*. It discourages the economist, takes up a stance contrary to productivity techniques, it is an affront to democratisation. With superb languor, a maximum number of highly qualified people produce a minimum number of models of complex cut, which will be repeated, again with the same languor, twenty times in the best of cases, or not at all in the worst. ... Perhaps two million dresses. 'But why this debauchery of effort?' you say. 'Why not?' answer the creators, the craftsmen, the workers and the four thousand clients, all possessed by the same passion for seeking perfection. Couturiers are the last adventurers of the modern world. They cultivate the *acte gratuit*. ... 'Why *haute couture*?' a few detractors may think. 'Why champagne?' Again: 'Neither practice nor logic can justify the extravagant adventure of clothes. Superfluous and therefore necessary, the world is once more the province of religion.'

Potlach, religion, indeed the ritual enchantment of expression, like that of costume and animal dances: everything is good for exalting fashion against the economic, like a transgression into a play-act sociality.

We know, however, that advertising too wants a 'feast of consumption', the media a 'feast of information', the markets a 'feast of production', etc. The art market and horse races can also be taken for potlach – 'Why not?' asks *Vogue*. We would like to see a functional squandering everywhere so as to bring about symbolic destruction. Because of the extent to which the economic, shackled to the functional, has imposed its principle of utility, anything which exceeds it quickly takes on the air of play and futility. It is hard to acknowledge that the law of value extends well beyond the economic, and that its true task today is the jurisdiction of all models. Wherever there are models, there is an imposition of the law of value, repression by signs and the repression of signs by themselves. This is why there is a radical difference between the symbolic ritual and the signs of fashion. In primitive

cultures signs openly circulate over the entire range of 'things', there has not yet been any 'precipitation' of a signified, nor therefore of a reason or a truth of the sign. The real – the most beautiful of our connotations – does not exist. The sign has no 'underworld', it has no *unconscious* (which is both the last and the most subtle of connotations and rationalisations). Signs are exchanged without phantasms, with no hallucination of reality.

Hence they have nothing in common with the modern sign whose paradox Barthes has defined: 'The overwhelming tendency is to convert the perceptible into a signifier, towards ever more organised, closed systems. Simultaneously and in equal proportion, the sign and its systematic nature is disguised as such, it is rationalised, referred to a reason, to an agency in the world, to a substance, to a function' (cf. *The Fashion System*, p. 285). With simulation, signs merely disguise the real and the system of reference as a sartorial supersign. The real is dead, long live the realistic sign! This paradox of the modern sign induces a radical split between it and the magical or ritual sign, the same one as is exchanged in the mask, the tattoo or the feast.

Even if fashion is an enchantment, it remains the enchantment of the commodity, and, still further, the enchantment of simulation, the code and the law.

Sex Refashioned

There is nothing less certain than that sexuality invests dress, make-up, etc. – or rather it is a *modified* sexuality that comes into play at the level of fashion. If the condemnation of fashion takes on this puritan violence, it is not aimed at sex. The taboo bears on futility, on the passion for futility and the artificial which is perhaps more fundamental than the sexual drives. In our culture, tethered as it is to the principle of utility, futility plays the role of transgression and violence, and fashion is condemned for having within it the force of the pure sign which signifies nothing. Its sexual provocation is secondary with regard to this principle which denies the grounds of our culture.

Of course, the same taboo is also brought to bear on 'futile' and non-reproductive sexuality, but there is a danger in crystallising on sex, a danger that puritan tactics, which aim to change the stakes to sexuality, may be prolonged – whereas it is at the level of the *reality principle* itself, of the referential principle in which the unconscious and sexuality still participate, that fashion confrontationally sets up its pure play of differences. To place sexuality at the forefront of this history is once again to *neutralise the symbolic by means of sex and the unconscious*. It is according to this same logic that the analysis of fashion has traditionally been reduced to that of dress, since it allows the sexual metaphor the greatest play. Consequences of this diversion: the game is reduced to a perspective of sexual 'liberation', which is quite simply achieved in a 'liberation' of dress. And a new cycle of fashion begins again.

Fashion is certainly the most efficient neutraliser of sexuality (one never touches a woman in make-up – see 'The Body, or The Mass Grave of Signs' below) – precisely because it is a passion which is not complicitous, but in competition with sex (and, as La Bruyère has already noted, fashion is victorious over sex). Therefore the passion for fashion, in all its ambiguity, will come to play on the body confused with sex.

Fashion grows deeper as it 'stages' the body, as the body becomes the medium of fashion.[4] Formerly the repressed sanctuary, the repression rendering it undecodable, from now on it too is invested. The play of dress is effaced before the play of the body, which itself is effaced before the play of models.[5] All at once dress loses the ceremonial character (which it still had up until the eighteenth century) bound up with the usage of signs *qua* signs. Eaten away by the body's signifieds, by this 'transpearence' of the body as sexuality and nature, dress loses the fantastic exuberance it has had since the primitive societies. It loses its force as pure disguise, it is neutralised by the necessity that it must signify the body, it becomes a reason.

The body too is neutralised in this operation however. It too loses the power of disguise that it used to have in tattooing and costume. It no longer plays with anything save its proper truth, which is also its borderline: its nudity. In costumery, the signs of the body, mixed openly with the signs of the not-body, play. Thereafter, costume becomes dress, and the body becomes nature. Another game is set up – the opposition of dress and the body – designation and censure (the same fracture as between the signifier and the signified, the same play of displacement and allusion). Fashion strictly speaking begins with this partition of the body, repressed and signified in an allusive way – it also puts an end to all this in the simulation of nudity, in *nudity as the model of the simulation of the body*. For the Indian, the whole body is a face, that is, a promise and a symbolic act, as opposed to nudity, which is only sexual instrumentality.

This new reality of the body as hidden sex is from the outset merged with woman's body. The concealed body is feminine (not biologically of course; rather mythologically). The conjunction of fashion and woman, since the bourgeois, puritan era, reveals therefore a double indexation: that of fashion on a hidden body, that of woman on a repressed sex. This conjunction did not exist (or not so much) until the eighteenth century (and not at all, of course, in ceremonial societies) – and for us today it is beginning to disappear. As for us, when the destiny of a hidden sex and the forbidden truth of the body arises, when fashion itself neutralises the opposition between the body and dress, then the affinity of woman and fashion progressively diminishes[6] – fashion is generalised and becomes less and less the exclusive property of one sex or of one age. Be wary, for it is a matter neither of progress nor of liberation. The same logic still applies, and if fashion is generalised and leaves the privileged medium of woman so as to be open to all, the prohibition placed on the body is also generalised in a more subtle form than puritan repression: in the form of general desexualisation. For it was only under repression that the body had strong sexual

potential: it then appeared as a captivating demand. Abandoned to the signs of fashion, the body is sexually disenchanted, it becomes a *mannequin*, a term whose lack of sexual discrimination suits its meaning well.[7] The mannequin is sex in its entirety, but sex without qualities. Fashion is its sex. Or rather, it is in fashion that sex is lost as difference but is generalised as reference (as simulation). Nothing is sexed any longer, everything is sexualised. The masculine and the feminine themselves rediscover, having once lost their particularity, the chance of an unlimited second existence. Hence, in our culture alone, sexuality impregnates all signification, and this is because signs have, for their part, invested the entire sexual sphere.

In this way the current paradox becomes clear: we simultaneously witness the 'emancipation' of woman and a fresh upsurge of fashion. This is because fashion has only to do with the feminine, and not with women. Society in its entirety is becoming feminine to the extent that discrimination against women is coming to an end (as it is for madmen, children, etc., being the normal consequence of the logic of exclusion). Hence *prendre son pied*, at once 'to find one's feet', and a familiar French expression of the female orgasm [*jouissance*], has now become generalised, while simultaneously, of course, destabilising its signification. We must also note however, that woman can only be 'liberated' and 'emancipated' as 'force of pleasure' and 'force of fashion', exactly as the proletariat is only ever liberated as the 'labour force'. The above illusion is radical. The historical definition of the feminine is formed on the basis of the destiny of the body and sex bound up with fashion. The historical liberation of the feminine can only be the realisation of this destiny writ large (which immediately becomes the liberation of the whole world, without however losing its discriminatory character). At the same moment that woman accesses a universal labour modelled on the proletariat, the whole world also accesses the emancipation of sex and fashion, modelled on women. We can immediately, and clearly, see that fashion is a labour, to which it becomes necessary to accord equal historical importance to 'material' labour. It is also of capital importance (which by the same token becomes part of capital!) to produce commodities in accordance with the market, and to produce the body in accordance with the rules of sex and fashion. The division of labour won't settle where we think, or rather there is no division of labour at all: the production of the body, the production of death, the production of signs and the production of commodities – these are only modalities of one and the same system. Doubtless it is even worse in fashion: for if the worker is divided from himself under the signs of exploitation and of the reality principle, woman is divided from herself and her body under the signs of beauty and the pleasure principle!

The Insubvertible

History says, or so the story goes, that the critique of fashion (O. Burgelin) was a product of conservative thinking in the nineteenth century, but that

today, with the advent of socialism, this critique has been revived by the left. The one went with religion and the other with revolution. Fashion corrupts morals, fashion abolishes the class struggle. Although this critique of fashion may have passed over to the left, it does not necessarily signify an historical reversal: perhaps it signifies that with regard to morality and morals, the left has quite simply taken over from the right, and that, in the name of the revolution, it has adopted the moral order and its classic prejudices. Ever since the principle of revolution entered into morals, quite a categorical imperative, the whole political order, even the left, has become a moral order.

Fashion is immoral, this is what's in question, and all power (or all those who dream of it) necessarily hates it. There was a time when immorality was recognised, from Machiavelli to Stendhal, and when somebody like Mandeville could show, in the eighteenth century, that a society could only be revolutionized through its vices, that it is its immorality that gives it its dynamism. Fashion still holds to this immorality: it knows nothing of value-systems, nor of criteria of judgement: good and evil, beauty and ugliness, the rational/irrational – it plays within and beyond these, it acts therefore as the subversion of all order, including revolutionary rationality. It is power's hell, the hell of the relativity of all signs which all power is forced to crush in order to maintain its own signs. Thus fashion is taken on by contemporary youth, as a resistance to every imperative, a resistance without an ideology, without objectives.

On the other hand, there is no possible subversion of fashion since it has no system of reference to contradict (it is its own system of reference). We cannot escape fashion (since fashion itself makes the refusal of fashion into a fashion feature – blue-jeans are an historical example of this). While it is true that one can always escape the reality principle of the content, one can never escape the reality principle of the code. Even while rebelling against the content, one more and more closely obeys the logic of the code. Why so? It is the diktat of 'modernity'. Fashion leaves no room for revolution except to go back over the very genesis of the sign that constitutes it. Furthermore, the alternative to fashion does not lie in a 'liberty' or in some kind of step beyond towards a truth of the world and systems of reference. It lies in a deconstruction of both the form of the sign of fashion and the principle of signification itself, just as the alternative to political economy can only lie in the deconstruction of the commodity/form and the principle of production itself.

Notes

1. [I have translated the French noun *jouissance* and the verb *jouir*, whose admixture of libidinal and political economy is well known in contemporary French theory, variously according to context. In the main I have translated it as 'enjoyment'; sometimes as 'intense pleasure', with the French following in brackets. – tr.]
2. [*Pulsion* is the French translation of Freud's *Trieb*, which the *Standard Edition* translates as 'instinct', a move which for many reasons has been found inadequate. The current translation

is 'drive', which I have sometimes used for reasons of euphony. The French *pulsion*, however, seems preferable since it confers a less mechanistically dominated energetics than does 'drive'. These are the only options used throughout the present text. – tr.]

3. But we have seen that the economic today conforms with the same indeterminacy, ethics drops out in aid of a 'finality without end' of production whereby it rejoins the vertiginous futility of fashion. We may say then of production what Barthes says of fashion: 'The system then abandons the meaning yet does so without giving up any of the *spectacle of signification' [The Fashion System*, p. 288, J.B.'s emphasis].
4. The three modalities of the 'body of fashion' cited by Barthes (cf. *The Fashion System*, pp. 258–9):

    1. It is a pure form, with no attributes of its own, tautologically defined by dress.
    2. Or: every year we decree that a certain body (a certain type of body) is in fashion. This is another way of making the two coincide.
    3. We develop dress in such a way that it transforms the real body and makes it signify the ideal body of fashion.

    These modalities more or less correspond to the historical evolution of the status of the model: from the initial, but non-professional model (the high-society woman) to the professional mannequin whose body also plays the role of a sexual model up until the latest (current) phase where everybody has become a mannequin – each is called, summoned to invest their bodies with the rules of the game of fashion – the whole world is an 'agent' of fashion, just as the whole world becomes a productive agent. General effusion of fashion to all and sundry and at every level of signification.

    It is also possible to tie these phases of fashion in with the phases of the successive concentration of capital, with the structuration of the economic sphere of fashion (variation of fixed capital, of the organic composition of capital, the speed of the rotation of commodities, of finance capital and industrial capital – cf. *Utopie*, Oct. 1971, no. 4). However, the analytic principle of this interaction of the economic and signs is never clear. More than in the direct relation with the economic, it is in a sort of movement homologous to the extension of the market that the historical extension of the sphere of fashion can be seen:

    1. In the beginning fashion is concerned only with scattered details, minimal variations, supported by marginal categories, in a system which remains essentially homogeneous and traditional (just as in the first phase of political economy only the surplus of a yield is exchanged, which in other circumstances is largely exhausted in consumption within the group – a very weak section of the free labour force and the salariat). Fashion then is what is outside culture, outside the group, the foreigner, it is the city-dweller to the country-dweller, etc.

    2. Fashion progressively and virtually integrates all the signs of culture, and regulates the exchange of signs, just as in a second phase all material production is virtually integrated by political economy. Both systems anterior to production and exchange are effaced in the universal dimension of the market. All cultures come to play within fashion's universality. In this phase fashion's reference is the dominant cultural class, which administers the distinctive values of fashion.

    3. Fashion is diffused everywhere and quite simply becomes *the way of life* [*le mode de vie*]. It invests every sphere which had so far escaped it. The whole world supports and reproduces it. It recuperates its own negativity (the fact of not being in fashion), it becomes its own signified (like production at the stage of reproduction). In a certain way, however, it is also its end.

5. For it is not true that a dress or a supple body stocking which lets the body 'play' 'frees' something or other: in the order of signs, this is a supplementary adulteration. To denude structures is not to return to the zero degree of truth, it is to wrap them in a new signification which gets added to all the others. So it will be the beginning of a new cycle of forms. So much for the cycle of formal innovation, so much for the logic of fashion, and

no-one can do anything about it. To 'liberate' structures (of the body, the unconscious, the functional truth of the object in design, etc.) still amounts to clearing the way for the *universalisation of the system of fashion* (it is the only universalisable system, the only one that can control the circulation of every sign, including contradictory ones). A *bourgeois* revolution in the system of forms, with the appearance of a bourgeois political revolution; this too clears the way for the *universalisation of the system of the market*.

6. There are of course other, social and historical, reasons for this affinity: woman's (or youths') marginality or her social relegation. But this is no different: social repression and a malefic sexual aura are always brought together under the same categories.
7. [The French *mannequin* signifies a masculine, a feminine and a neuter; a man with no strength of character who is easily led, a woman employed by a large couturier to present models wearing its new collection, and an imitation human. Its gender is masculine (*le mannequin*). – tr.]

4

The Body, or the Mass Grave of Signs

A Sex is a mass grave of Signs

The Sign is a disembodied Sex

The Marked Body

The entire contemporary history of the body is the history of its demarcation, the network of marks and signs that have since covered it, divided it up, annihilated its difference and its radical ambivalence in order to organise it into a structural material for sign-exchange, equal to the sphere of objects, to resolve its playful virtuality and its symbolic exchange (not to be confused with sexuality) into sexuality taken as a determining agency, a *phallic* agency entirely organised around the fetishisation of the phallus as the general equivalent. In this sense, the body is, under the sign of sexuality as it is currently understood, that is, under the sign of its 'liberation', caught up in a process whose functioning and strategy themselves derive from political economics.

Fashion, advertising, nude-look, nude theatre, strip-tease: the play-script of erection and castration is everywhere. It has an absolute variety and an absolute monotony. Ankle boots and thigh boots, a short coat under a long coat, over the elbow gloves and stocking-tops on the thigh, hair over the eyes or the stripper's G-string, but also bracelets, necklaces, rings, belts, jewels and chains – the scenario is the same everywhere: a mark that takes on the force of a sign and thereby even a perverse erotic function, a boundary to figure castration which *parodies* castration as the symbolic articulation of *lack*, under the structural form of a bar articulating two *full* terms (which then on either side play the part of the signifier and the signified in the classical economy of the sign). The bar makes a zone of the body work as its corresponding terms here. This is not an erogenous zone at all, but an erotic, eroticised zone, a fragment erected into the phallic signifier of a sexuality that has become a pure and simple concept, a pure and simple signified.

In this fundamental schema, analogous to that of the linguistic sign, castration is *signified* (it passes into the state of a sign) and therefore subject to misrecognition [*méconnaissance*]. The nude and the not-nude play in a structural opposition and thus contribute to the *designation* of the fetish. The image of the stocking top on the thigh derives its erotic potential not from the proximity of the real genital and its *positive*

promise (from this naïve functionalist perspective, the naked thigh would have to play the same role), but from the apprehension surrounding the genitals (the panic of recognising castration) being *arrested in a staged castration*. The innocuous mark, the line of the stocking above which, instead of lack, ambivalence and the chasm, there is nothing more than a sexual plenitude. The naked thigh and, metonymically, the entire body has become a *phallic effigy* by means of this caesura, a fetishistic object to be contemplated and manipulated, deprived of all its menace.[1] As in fetishism, desire can then be fulfilled at the cost of warding off castration and the death drive.

Eroticisation always consists in the erectility of a fragment of the barred body, in a phallic phantasmatisation of everything beyond the bar in the position of the signifier and the simultaneous reduction of sexuality to the rank of the signified (*represented* value). A reassuring structural conjuring operation enables the subject to be recovered as phallus, to identify himself with and reappropriate this fragment of the body, or the entire positivised, fetishised body in the fulfilment of a desire that will for ever misconstrue his proper loss.

We can read this operation in the slightest detail. The tight-fitting bracelet round the arm or the ankle, the belt, the necklace and the ring establish the foot, the waist, the neck or the finger as *erectile parts*. Ultimately there is no further need for a mark or a visible sign: stripped of signs, it is nevertheless on the basis of a phantasmatic separation, thus tricking and eluding castration, that the body's eroticity functions exclusively in *nudity*. Even if the body is not structuralised by some mark (a jewel, some make-up or a wound can all work to this end), even if it is not fragmented, the bar is always there as the clothes come off, signalling the emergence of the body as phallus, even if, or, rather, especially if, it is a woman's body: this is the whole art of strip-tease, which we will come back to later.

We should reinterpret so-called Freudian 'symbolism' in this sense. It is not by virtue of their protuberant form that the foot, finger, nose or some other part of the body may act as metaphors for the penis (in accordance with a schema of analogy between these diverse signifiers and the real penis): rather, their phallic value rests solely on the basis of phantasmatic cut that erects them (the 'castrated' penis is a penis *because* it is castrated). Full, phallicised terms marked out by the bar that makes them autonomous. Everything beyond this bar is the phallus, everything is resolved into a phallic equivalent, even the female genitals, or any gaping organ or object traditionally listed as a symbol of the 'feminine'. The body is not arranged into masculine or feminine symbols: at a much deeper level, it is the site of the drama and the denial of castration, illustrated by the Chinese custom (cited by Freud in 'Fetishism' [in *Standard Edition*, ed. and tr. James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 21, 1961]) where, beginning by mutilating a woman's foot, they then venerate the mutilated foot as a fetish. The entire body is susceptible to innumerable forms of marking and mutilation,[2] followed by

phallic veneration (erotic exaltation). This, rather than the anamorphosis of the genital organs, is where the body's secret lies.

In this way, rouged lips are phallic (face paint and make-up are pre-eminent in the arsenal of the body's structural enhancement).

A made-up mouth no longer speaks, its beatified lips, half open, half closed, are no longer used for speaking, eating, vomiting or kissing. Beyond these always ambivalent exchange functions – introjection and rejection – and on the basis of their denegation, the perverse erotic and cultural function is established. This fascinating mouth, like an artificial sign, like cultural labour, the game and the rules of the game, neither speaks nor eats, and no-one kisses it. The painted mouth, objectified like a jewel, derives its intense erotic value not, as one might imagine, from accentuating its role as an erotogenic orifice, but conversely from its closure – paint being as it were the trace of the phallic, the mark that institutes its *phallic exchange-value:* an erectile mouth, a sexual tumescence whereby woman becomes erect and man's desire will be received in its own image.[3]

Mediated by this structural labour, desire, implacable as it is when it is based on loss, on the void between one and the other, becomes *negotiable* in terms of signs and exchanged phallic values, indexed on a general phallic equivalent where each party operates in accordance with a contract and converts its own enjoyment into cash in terms of a phallic accumulation: a perfect situation for a *political economy* of desire.

The same holds true for the gaze. The strand of hair falling over the eye (and every other ocular erotic artifact) implements the denegation of the gaze as the unending dimension of castration and, at the same time, as an amorous offering. When the eyes are metamorphosed by make-up, there is an ecstatic reduction of the threat and the gaze of the other where the subject may be reflected in his proper lack, but where he may also be vertiginously eliminated if these eyes open on him. These sophisticated eyes, these Medusa's[4] eyes, gaze at nobody, they don't open onto anything. Caught in the labour of the sign, they possess the sign's redundancy: they revel in their own fascination, and their seduction derives from this perverse onanism.

We could go on: what is true of these privileged sites of symbolic exchange (the mouth and the gaze) is also true of any part of the body whatever when it is caught in the process of erotic signification. But the most beautiful object, which always epitomises this *mise-en-scène* and seems to be the key to the vault of the political economy of the body, is the female body. The female body unveiled in the thousand variants of eroticism is obviously the emergence of the phallus, the fetish-object, an immense labour of phallic simulation at the same time as the endlessly repeated spectacle of castration. With the immense diffusion of images in the meticulous ritual of the striptease, the smooth and faultless potency [*puissance*] of the exhibited female body always functions as a phallic display, a potency medusified, paralysed, by a relentless phallic demand (hence the profound imaginary affinity between the escalation of the erotic and productivist growth).

The erotic privilege of the female body works for women just as much as for men. In fact, a single perverse structure works for everyone: centred on the denial of castration, it works with the female body as with the immanence of castration.[5] Thus the logical progression of the system (here once again homologous to political economy) leads to an erotic recrudescence of the female body because it best lends itself to phallic general equivalence, being deprived of a penis. The male body is not subject to the same erotic return (far from it) because it permits neither the fascinating reminder of castration, nor the spectacle of constantly overcoming it. It can never really become a smooth, closed and perfect object since it is stamped with the 'true' *mark* (the one the general system valorises) and in consequence is less susceptible to *demarcation*, to this long task of phallic formation. Of course, it is by no means certain that one day it too may be actualised as a phallic variation. We are approaching a new order where there is no erectile advertising nor any erectile nudity: it is at this cost that there can be a controlled transfer of erectility across the entire spectrum of objects, including the female body. At the limit, the erection itself is not incompatible with the system.[6]

We must see how, in woman's erotic 'privilege', historical and social subjection operate. Not by some mechanism of 'alienation' like a double of social alienation, but by trying to see *if the same process of misrecognition* [*méconnaissance*] works towards all political discrimination as towards sexual difference in fetishism, resulting in a fetishism of class or of the dominated group, along with a sexual overvaluation so as to better stave off the crucial examination that it conducts of the order of power. If such reflections are accurate then all signifying material of the erotic order is made up of nothing but the outfits of slaves (chains, collars, whips, etc.), savages (negritude, bronzed skin, nudity, tattooing) and all the signs of the dominated classes and races. This is how it is for the woman in her body, annexed to a phallic order which, when expressed in political terms, condemns her to a non-existence.[7]

Secondary Nudity

Any body or part of the body can operate functionally in the same way, provided that it is subject to the same erotic *discipline*: it is necessary and sufficient that it be as closed and as smooth as possible, faultless, without orifice and 'lacking' nothing, every erogenous difference being conjured up by the structural bar that will *design(ate)* this body (in the double sense of 'designate' and 'design'), visible in clothing, jewellery or make-up, invisible but always present in complete nudity, since it then envelops the body like a *second skin*.

The ubiquity of phrases such as 'almost naked', 'naked without being naked, as if you were naked' and the tights in which 'you are more naked than is natural' in the discourse of advertising is characteristic of this.

This is all in order to reconcile the naturalist ideal of living 'in touch with' your body with the commercial imperative of surplus-value. It is much more interesting, however, to note that in this discourse nudity is defined as secondary nudity, the nudity of tights X or Y, of the veil so transparent that 'their transparency even affects you'. Moreover, this nudity is very often relayed by the mirror – in any case, it is in this reduplication that the woman is united with 'the body of her dreams: her own'. And for once the advertising myth is absolutely right: there is no nudity other than that which is reduplicated in signs, which envelops itself in its signified truth and reconstructs, like a mirror, the fundamental rule of the body as erotic matter, the nudity of becoming, in order to be phallically celebrated, the diaphanous, smooth, depilated substance of a glorious and unsexed body.

The James Bond film *Goldfinger* provides a perfect example of this. In it, a woman is painted in gold, all her orifices are blocked up in a radical make-up, making her body a flawless phallus (that the make-up should be gold only emphasises the homology with political economy), which of course amounts to death. The nude gold-varnished playgirl will die by having incarnated to an absurd extent the phantasm of the erotic, but this is the case for every skin in functional aesthetics, in the mass culture of the body. 'Body hugging' tights, girdles, stockings, gloves, dresses and clothes, not to mention sun-tans: the *leitmotiv* of the 'second skin' and the transparent pellicle always come to vitrify the body.

The skin itself is defined not as 'nudity' but as an erogenous zone, a sensuous medium of contact and exchange, a metabolism of absorption and excretion. The body does not stop at this porous skin, full of holes and orifices; only metaphysics institutes it as the borderline of the body. This body is denied in the interests of a second, non-porous skin that neither exudes nor excretes,[8] that is, neither hot nor cold (it is 'cool' and 'warm': optimally air-conditioned), with no proper density (a clear or, in French, 'transparent' complexion), and above all without orifices (it is smooth). As functional as a cellophane wrapper. All these qualities (coolness, suppleness, transparency, one-piece) are qualities of *closure*, a zero degree resulting from the denegation of ambivalent extremes. The same goes for the 'youth' of the body, which will neutralise the old-young paradigm in an eternal youth of simulation.

The vitrification of nudity is related to the obsessional function of the protective wax or plastic coating of objects and the labour of scrubbing and cleaning intended to keep them in a constant state of propriety, of flawless abstraction. In both cases, vitrification and protection, it is a matter of blocking secretions (patina, oxidisation, dust), preventing them from collapsing and maintaining them in a sort of abstract immortality.

'Design(at)ed' nudity implies that there is nothing behind the lattice of signs that it weaves, especially not a body: neither a body of labour, nor a body of pleasure; neither an erogenous body nor a broken body. It formally exceeds all that in a simulacrum of the pacified body, just like Brigitte Bardot, who is 'beautiful because she fits her dress exactly' – a functional

equation without any unknown factors. As opposed to the rent skin and torn muscles of the anatomical body, the modern body comes much more under the heading of the inflatable, a theme illustrated by a cartoon strip in *Lui* where we see a stripper, her clothes scattered on the floor around her, making one final gesture: she 'uncorks' her navel and deflates immediately, leaving only a small heap of skin on the stage.

A utopia of nudity, of the body *present* in its truth: this is at most the ideology of the body that can be *represented*. The Indian (I no longer know which one) said: 'The naked body is an expressionless mask hiding each of our true natures.' By this he meant that the body only has meaning when it is marked, covered in inscriptions. Alphonse Allais' Rajah, a fanatic for denotation and truth, translated this contrariwise: not content to have made the dancing girl undress, he flays her alive.

The body is not at all the surface of being, a virginal beach without tracks, nature. It has only taken on this 'original' value through repression: and so, *to liberate the body as such in accordance with naturalist illusions is to liberate it as repressed*. Even in nudity, the body turns back on itself, shrouding itself with an ethereal and ineluctable censorship: the second skin. For the skin, like every sign that takes on the value of a sign, is doubled through signification: it is always already the second skin, not the final skin, but always the only one.

In the redundancy of the nudity-sign, which works towards a reconstruction of the body as a phantasm of totalisation, we again find the infinite speculation of the conscious subject through its mirror-image, capturing and bringing a formal resolution to the insurmountable division of the subject in this reduplication. The signs inscribed on the body, where the death drive is also tangentially inscribed, merely repeat the metaphysical operations of the conscious subject on corporeal material. 'By beating our skins we beat metaphysics back into our brains', as Artaud said.

Closure of the mirror, phallic reduplication of the mark: in both cases the subject is seduced by itself. It seduces its own desire and conjures it up in its own body, doubled in signs. Behind the exchange of signs, behind the labour of the code which functions as a fortification of the phallic, the subject can hide away and recover its strength: shying away from the desire of the other (from its own lack), and, as it were, to see (to see oneself) without being seen. The logic of the sign meets the logic of perversion.

It is important here to make a radical distinction between the labour of inscription and the mark at the level of the body in 'primitive' societies and that which takes place in our current system. They are too easily mixed up in the category of the 'symbolic expression' of the body. As if the body had always been what it is, as if archaic tattooing had the same meaning as make-up, as if, beyond all the revolutions of the mode of production, there existed an unexchanged mode of signification at the basis of every age extending even into the sphere of political economy. In archaic society, as opposed to our own, where *signs are exchanged under the regime of the general equivalent*, where they have an exchange-value in a system of phallic abstraction and of

the imaginary saturation of the subject, marking the body as a masking practice, all have the function of immediately actualising symbolic exchange, gift-exchange with the gods or within the group. Here, negotiation is not a *negotiation of identity by the subject* behind the mask, nor the manipulation of the sign: on the contrary, it *consumes the subject's identity* and, like the subject, enters the game of possession and dispossession, the entire body becoming, just like gods and women, material for symbolic exchange. Finally, within this standard schema of signification, our transcendental Signifier/Signified, our Phallus/ Subjectivity, which governs our entire political economy of the body, has not yet emerged. When the Indian (perhaps the same one) says 'everything is a face to me', in response to the white man's questions as to why he is naked, he is saying that his entire body (which, as we have seen is never nude) is given over to symbolic exchange, while for us, nudity has a tendency to be reduced to a single face and a single look. For the Indian, bodies gaze at each other and exchange all their signs. These signs are consumed in an incessant relaying and refer neither to a transcendental law of value, nor to a private appropriation of the subject. For us, the body is sealed in signs, increasing its value through a calculus of signs that it exchanges under the law of equivalence and the reproduction of the subject. The subject is no longer eliminated in the exchange, it speculates. The subject, not the savage, is enmeshed in fetishism: through the investment [*faire-valoir*] of its body, it is the subject that is fetishised by the law of value.

Strip-tease

Bernardin (manager of the Crazy Horse Saloon):

> You neither strip nor tease … you parody … I am a hoaxer: you give the impression of giving the naked truth, there could not be a greater hoax.
>
> This is the opposite of life, because when she is nude, she has many more adornments than when she is dressed. Bodies are made up with extremely beautiful special foundations, leaving the skin satin smooth … She has gloves that cut off on her arms, which is always so beautiful, green, red or black stockings on her legs, also cut off at the thigh. …
>
> Dream strip-tease: the space-woman. She was dancing in the void. Because the more slowly a woman dies, the more erotic it is. So I believe that this would reach its apex with a woman in a state of weightlessness.
>
> Beach nudity has nothing to do with stage nudity. On stage the women are goddesses, they are untouchable. … The wave of nudity sweeping through the theatre and elsewhere is superficial, it is limited to a mental act: I am going to take my clothes off, I am going to show nude actors and actresses. Precisely these limits make it uninteresting. Other people present reality: here, I am only suggesting the impossible.
>
> The reality of sex which is flaunted everywhere, diminishes the subjectivity of eroticism.
>
> Iridescent under intense lights, embellished by a voluminous orange wig, the whole thing set off with jewels, Usha Barock, an Austrian-Polish half-caste, will continue the tradition of the Crazy Horse: creating what you cannot hold in your arms.

The strip-tease is a dance, perhaps the only one, and definitely the most original in the contemporary Western world. Its secret is a woman's auto-erotic celebration of her own body, which becomes desirable in exact proportion to the intensity of this celebration. Without this narcissistic mirage that is the substance of every gesture, without this gestural repertoire of caresses that come to envelop the body, making it into an emblem as a phallic object, there would be no erotic effect. A sublime masturbation whose slow pace, as Bernardin said, is fundamental. This slow pace marks the fact that the gestures with which the girl covers herself (stripping, caressing, even as far as mimicking orgasm [*jouissance*]), come from 'the other'. Her gestures weave a phantom sexual partner around her. By the same token, however, the other is excluded, since she replaces it and appropriates its gestures for herself following a work of condensation which is not in fact far removed from dream-processes. The whole erotic secret (and labour) of the strip lies in this evocation and revocation of the other, through gestures so slow as to be poetic, as is slow motion film of explosions or falls, because something in this, before being completed, has *time to pass you by*, which, if such a thing exists, constitutes the perfection of desire.[9]

The only good strip is the one that reflects the body in the mirror of gestures and follows this rigorous narcissistic abstraction: the gestural repertoire being the mobile equivalent of the panoply of signs and marks at work in situations such as erectile stagings of the body at every level of fashion, make-up and advertising.[10] The bad strip is obviously a pure undressing, which simply restores a state of nudity, the alleged finality of the spectacle, lacking any hypnosis of the body, in order to give it directly over to the audience's lusts. It is not that the bad strip is unable to capture the audience's desire – on the contrary – but because the girl was unable to recreate her body as an object *for herself*, because she was unable to effect this transubstantiation of profane (realist, naturalist) nudity into sacred nudity, where a body describes its own contours, feels itself (but always across a kind of subtle void, a sensual distance, of a circumlocution which, once again, as in the dream, reflects the fact that gestures are like a mirror, that the body is turned back on itself by this mirror of gestures).

The bad strip is threatened by nudity or immobility (or the absence of 'rhythm', the awkward gesture): all that remains on the stage is a woman and an 'obscene' (in the strict sense of the term) body, rather than the closed sphere of a body which, by means of this aura of gestures, design(ate)s itself as a phallus and specifies itself as a *sign* of desire. To succeed is not at all to 'make love with the audience' as is generally thought, it is rather precisely the opposite. The stripper is a goddess according to Bernardin, and the prohibition cast over her, which she traces around herself, does not signify that you cannot *take* anything from her (cannot pass into sexual acting-out, this repressive situation belongs to the bad strip), but rather that you cannot *give* her anything, because she gives herself everything, hence the complete transcendence that makes her fascinating.

The slow pace of the gestures comes from the priesthood and from transubstantiation. Not bread and wine in this case, but the transubstantiation of the body into the phallus. Every piece of clothing that falls brings her no closer to nudity, to the naked 'truth' of sex (although the entire spectacle is also fuelled by the voyeuristic drive, haunted by a violent laying bare and the rape-drive, but these phantasms run counter to the spectacle). As her clothes fall, she design(ate)s what she strips down as a phallus – she unveils herself-as-other and the same game becomes profound, the body emerging more and more as a phallic effigy to the rhythm of the strip. This is not then a game of stripping signs away in order to reveal a sexual 'depth', but, on the contrary, an ascending play of the construction of signs – each mark deriving an erotic force by means of its labour as a sign, that is, by means of the reversal it effects of what has never been (loss and castration) into what it design(ate)s instead to take its place: the phallus.[11] This is why the striptease is slow: it ought to go as fast as possible if it is simply a matter of preparing for sex. It is slow because it is discourse, the construction of signs, the meticulous elaboration of deferred meaning. The gaze too testifies to this phallic transfiguration. A fixed gaze is an essential asset of the good stripper. This is commonly interpreted as a distantiation technique, a coolness intended to mark the limits of this erotic situation. Yes and no: the fixed gaze that merely marks a prohibition would once more turn the strip into a kind of repressive pornodrama. That is not a good strip, the mastery of the gaze has nothing to do with a willed 'cool': if it is cool, as with mannequins, it is on condition that cool is redefined as a very specific quality of the whole contemporary media and body culture, and no longer belongs to the order of the hot and the cold. This gaze is the neutralised gaze of autoerotic fascination, of the woman-object gazing at herself with her eyes wide open, then closing her eyes on herself. This is not the effect of desire undergoing censorship, it is the peak of perfection and perversion. It is the fulfilment of the entire sexual system that has it that a woman is never more completely herself, and therefore never so seductive, as when she accepts giving *herself* pleasure first of all, taking pleasure in herself, having no other desire or transcendence than that of her own image.

The ideal body, as outlined in this statute, is that of the mannequin. The mannequin offers the model of every phallic instrumentalisation of the body. The word itself states this: *manne-ken*, 'little man', the child or the penis. The woman wraps her own body in a sophisticated manipulation, a flawless and intense narcissistic discipline, which effectively makes it the paradigm of seduction. And doubtless it is here, in this perverse process that turns her and her sacralised body into a living phallus, that we find the *real castration of woman* (also of man, but according to a model which tends to crystallise around the woman). To be castrated is to be covered with phallic substitutes. The woman is covered in them, she is summoned to produce a phallus from her body, on pain of perhaps not being desirable. And if women are not fetishists it is because they perform this labour of continual fetishisation on themselves, they become *dolls*. We know that the doll is a

fetish produced in order to be continually dressed and undressed, dressed up and dressed down. It is this play of covering and uncovering that gives the doll its childhood symbolic value, it is in this play, conversely, that every object- and symbolic relation regresses when the woman *turns herself* into a doll, becomes her own fetish and the fetish of the other.[12] As Freud says: 'pieces of underclothing, which are so often chosen as a fetish, crystallise the last moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic ('Fetishism', in *Standard Edition*, Vol. 21, p. 155).

Thus the fascination of the strip-tease as a spectacle of castration derives from the immanence of discovering, or rather seeking and never managing to discover, or better still searching by all available means without ever discovering, that there is nothing there. 'An aversion, which is never absent in any fetishist, to the real female genitals remains a *stigma indelibile* of the repression that has taken place' (ibid., p. 154). The experience of this unthinkable absence, which subsequently remains constitutive of every 'revelation', every 'unveiling' (and in particular the sexual status of 'truth'), the obsession with the hole is changed into the converse fascination with the phallus. From this mystery of the denied, barred, gaping void, a whole population of fetishes surges forth (objects, phantasms, body-objects). The fetishised woman's body itself comes to bar the point of absence from which it arose, it comes to bar this vertigo in all its erotic presence, a 'token of a triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it' (ibid., p. 154).

There is nothing behind this succession of veils, there never has been, and the impulse which is always pressing forward in order to discover this is strictly speaking the process of castration; not the recognition of lack, but the fascinating vertigo of this nihilating substance. The entire march of the West, ending in a vertiginous compulsion for realism, is affected by this myopia of castration. Pretending to restore the 'ground of things', we unconsciously 'eye up' the void. Instead of a recognition of castration, we establish all kinds of phallic alibis; then, following a fascinated compulsion, we seek to dismiss these alibis one by one in order to uncover the 'truth', which is always castration, but which is in the last instance always revealed to be castration *denied*.

Planned Narcissism

All this leads us to repeat the question of narcissism in terms of social control. There is a passage in Freud that brings out everything we have been discussing up to this point:

> Women, especially if they grow up with good looks, develop a certain self-contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed on them in their choice of object. Strictly speaking, it is only themselves that such women love with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them. Nor does their need lie in the direction of loving, but of being loved; and the man who fulfils this condition is the one who finds

> favour with them. … Such women have the greatest fascination for men, not only for aesthetic reasons, since as a rule they are the most beautiful, but also because of a combination of interesting psychological factors. ('On narcissism: An introduction', in *Standard Edition*, Vol. 14, 1957, pp. 88–9)

There follows a question 'of children, cats, and certain animals' which 'we env[y] … for maintaining … an unassailable libidinal position', and for the 'narcissistic consistency … they manage' (ibid., p. 89). In the current system of erotics, however, it is not a question of primary narcissism bound to a sort of 'polymorphous perversity'. It is rather a matter of the displacement of '[the narcissism] enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego [onto] the ego-ideal', or, more precisely, the projection of the 'narcissistic perfection of … childhood' (ibid., p. 94) as the ideal ego which, as we know, is bound up with repression and sublimation. The gratification the woman takes from her body and the rhetoric of beauty reflect, in fact, a fierce discipline, an ethics which parallels the one that governs the economic order. Neither can one distinguish, in the framework of this functional aesthetics of the body, the process by which the subject submits to its narcissistic ideal ego from that by which society enjoins the subject to conform to this ideal, leaving it no other alternative but to love itself, to invent itself and invest itself in accordance with socially imposed rules. This narcissism is therefore radically distinct from that of the cat or the child *in that it is placed under the sign of value*. This is a planned narcissism, a managed and functional exaltation of beauty as the exploitation and exchange of signs. Self-seduction is only apparently gratuitous; in fact its every detail is finalised by the norm of the optimal management of the body on the market of signs. Modern erotics, whatever phantasms are in play in it, is organised around a rational economy of value, differentiating it absolutely from primary or infantile narcissism.

Thus fashion and advertising sketch the auto-erotic *Carte du Tendre*[13] and plan its exploration: you are responsible for your body and must invest in it and make it yield benefits – not in accordance with the order of enjoyment – but with the *signs* reflected and mediated by mass models, and in accordance with an organisation chart of prestige, etc. A strange strategy is operative here; there is a diversion and transfer of investments from the body and the erogenous zones towards *staging the body and erotogeneity*. From now on, narcissistic seduction becomes associated with the body or with parts of the body objectified by a technique, by objects, gestures and a play of marks and signs. This *neo-narcissism* is associated with the *manipulation* of the body as value. This is a planned economy of the body based on a schema of libidinal and symbolic destructuration, an administered dismantling and restructuration of investments, a 'reappropriation' of the body according to models of management and hence under the control of meaning, transferring the fulfilment of desire onto the code.[14] All this is established as a 'synthetic' narcissism which must be distinguished from the two classical forms of narcissism:

1. Primary, fusional narcissism.
2. Secondary narcissism: the investment of the body as distinct, the mirror of the ego. Integration of the ego by specular recognition and the gaze of the other.
3. Tertiary, 'synthetic', narcissism: rewriting the body, deconstructed as a 'personalised' Eros, that is, indexed on collective functional models. The homogenised body as the site of the industrial production of signs and differences, mobilised under the sign of programmatic seduction. The interception of ambivalence in the interests of a total positivisation of the body as the schema of seduction, satisfaction and prestige. The body as a *summation* of partial objects, the subject of which is the second person plural of consumption.[15] The interception of the subject's relation to its proper lack in its body, by the body which has itself become the medium of totalisation. This was made admirably apparent in the film *Le Mépris*, with Brigitte Bardot, examining her own body in a mirror, offering each part of it to the erotic approval of the other, the finished product being a formal addition as object: 'So, d'you love every bit of me?' The body becomes a total system of signs arranged by models under the general equivalent of the phallic cult, just as capital becomes the total system of exchange-value under the general equivalent of money.

Incestuous Manipulation

The current 'liberation' of the body necessarily undergoes this narcissism. The 'liberated' body is a body where law and prohibition, which once used to censor sex and the body from the outside, are somehow interiorised as a narcissistic variable. External constraints have changed into the constituency of the sign, a closed simulation. And if, in the Name-of-the-Father, the puritan law was initially and in a violent manner brought to bear on genital sexuality, the current phase corresponds to a mutation of all these characteristics:

1. It is no longer a violent repression, it has been pacified.
2. It is no longer fundamentally oriented towards genital sexuality, but is subsequently sanctioned by morality. This infinitely more subtle and radical stage of repression and control is oriented towards the *level of symbolic exchange itself*. That is to say, that repression, overcoming secondary sexuation (genitality and the social bisexual model) reaches primary sexuation (erogenous difference and ambivalence, the subject's relation to his own lack on which the virtuality of all symbolic exchange is based).[16]
3. It no longer takes place in the Name-of-the-Father, but in some way in the Name-of-the-Mother. Because symbolic exchange is based on incest prohibition, every abolition (censorship, repression, destructuration) at this level of symbolic exchange signifies a process of incestuous regression. We have seen that the eroticisation of the phallic manipulation of the body is characterised as fetishisation: now, fetishistic perversion is defined by the

> fact that it has never gotten over the desire for the mother, making the fetish the replacement for what the fetishist lacked. All the labour of the perverse subject consists in settling into the mirage of himself as the living phallus of the mother so as to find a fulfilment of desire there: this is in fact the *fulfilment of the desire for the mother* (whereas traditional genital repression signifies the *fulfilment of the word of the Father)*. We can see that this creates a strictly incestuous situation: the subject is no longer divided (he no longer abandons his phallic identity) and no longer divides (he no longer relinquishes any part of himself in a relation of symbolic exchange). This is fully defined by identification with the mother's phallus. Exactly the same process as in incest, where it never leaves the family.

Today, generally speaking, the same goes for the body: if the law of the Father or puritan morality has been (relatively speaking) avoided here, it is according to a libidinal economy characterised by the destructuration of the symbolic and the raising of the incest barrier. This general model of the fulfilment of desire, circulated by the mass-media, always comes with an obsessional and anxious quality that is utterly different from the basically hysterical puritan neurosis. It is no longer a matter of an anxiety bound up with Oedipal prohibition, but of an anxiety bound up with the fact, even *at the breast* of satisfaction and multiplied phallic enjoyment, in the 'heart'[17] of the gratifying, tolerant, soothing, permissive society, of being only the living marionette of the desire for the mother. A deeper anxiety than that of genital frustration, since it entails the abolition of the symbolic and of exchange, as well as the incestuous position where the subject comes to lack even his own lack. This anxiety is translated into and betrayed everywhere today as the phobic obsession with *manipulation*.

We are all, at every level, living with this subtle form of repression and alienation: its sources are elusive, its presence insidious and total, and the forms that a struggle might take remain undiscovered and perhaps cannot be found. This is because manipulation refers to the original manipulation of the subject by the mother as much as by his own phallus. We can no longer stand against this fusional and manipulatory plenitude, this dispossession, as we could against the transcendental law of the Father. Every future revolution must take account of this fundamental condition and, between the law of the Father and the desire for the mother, between the 'cycle' of repression and transgression and the cycle of regression and manipulation, rediscover the form of the articulation of the symbolic.[18]

Models of the Body

1. For medicine, the body of reference is the *corpse*. In other words, the corpse is the ideal limit of the body in its relation to the system of medicine. The accomplished practice of the corpse produces and reproduces medicine under the sign of the preservation of life.

2. For religion, the ideal reference of the body is the *animal* (instincts and appetites of the 'flesh'). The corpse as a mass grave, and its reincarnation beyond death as a carnal metaphor.
3. For the system of political economy, the ideal type of the body is the *robot*. The robot is the accomplished model of the functional 'liberation' of the body as labour power, it is the extrapolation of absolute, asexual, rational productivity (this may be a cerebral robot: the computer is always the extrapolation of the brain and labour power).
4. For the system of the political economy of the sign, the reference model of the body is the *mannequin* (along with all its variations). Contemporary with the robot (this is the ideal pair of science fiction: *Barbarella*), the mannequin also represents a totally functionalised body under the law of value, but this time as the site of the production of the value-*sign*. It is no longer labour power, but models of signification that are produced – not only sexual models of fulfilment, but *sexuality itself as a model*.

Behind the ideality of its ends (health, resurrection, rational productivity, liberated sexuality), every system thus alternately reveals the reductive phantasm on which it is articulated, and the delirious vision of the body that provides its strategy. Corpse, animal, machine and mannequin – these are the negative ideal types of the body, the fantastic reductions under which it is produced and written into successive systems.

The strange thing is that the body is nothing other than the models in which different systems have enclosed it, and at the same time every other thing: their radical alternative, the irreducible difference that denies them. We may still call the body this inverse virtuality. For this however – for the body as material of symbolic exchange – *there is no model*, no code, no ideal type, no controlling phantasm, *since there could not be a system* of the body as anti-object.

Phallus Exchange Standard

Since the Industrial Revolution, a single immense mutation has enveloped material goods, language and sexuality (the body), in accordance with a process that marks either the progressive generalisation of political economy, or the entrenchment of the law of value.

1. Products become commodities: use-value and exchange-value. Intended on the one hand for the abstract finality of the 'needs' that they 'satisfy', and on the other hand to the structural form that governs their production and exchange.
2. Language becomes a means of communication, a field of signification. It is arranged into signifiers and signifieds. Just like the separation of the commodity into a referential finality, language as a medium has the goal of expression, and is separated into the order of signifieds and a structural form that governs the exchange of signifiers: the code of *langue*.

In both cases, the passage to a functional finality, the rational assignation of an 'objective' content (use-value or signified-referent), seals the assignation of a structural form that is the form of political economy itself. In the 'neo-capitalist' (techno- and semiocratic) framework, this form is systematised at the expense of 'objective' reference: signifieds and use-values progressively disappear to the great advantage of the operation of the code and exchange-value.

At the term of this process, a term which today remains only an outline for us, the two 'sectors' of production and signification are merging. Products and commodities are produced as signs and messages and are regulated on the basis of the abstract configuration of language: transporting contents, values, finalities (their signifieds), they circulate according to an abstract general form organised by *models*. Commodities and messages both culminate in the same sign-status. Thereby, moreover, their reference is blurred in the face of the play of signifiers which can also in this way attain structural perfection. With the acceleration and proliferation of messages, information, signs and models, it is in *fashion* as a total cycle that the linear world of the commodity will reach completion.

The body and sexuality can be analysed in terms of everything that preceded it (use-value and exchange-value; signifier and signified).

1. We can show how sexuality is reduced, *in its current mode of 'liberation'*, to use-value (the satisfaction of 'sexual needs') and exchange-value (the play and calculation of the erotic signs governed by the circulation of models). We can also show that sexuality becomes separated as a *function:* from the collective function of the reproduction of the species, it passes to the individual functions of physiological equilibrium (part of a general hygiene), mental equilibrium, 'self-expression' or the expression of subjectivity, unconscious emanations, the ethics of sexual pleasure (what else?). In any case, sexuality becomes an *element of the economy of the subject*, an objective finality of the subject itself obedient to an order of finalities (whatever they might be).
2. The more it is functionalised (the more it submits to some transcendent reference that *speaks through it*, even if it were its own idealised principle, the libido, the signified's last subterfuge), the more sexuality takes on a structural form (like the products of industry or the language of communication). It reverts to the great oppositions (male/female) in whose disjunctions it is imprisoned, and crystallises around the exercise of a particular sexual *model*, attested to by a particular sexual organ, and closes the play of the body's signifiers.
3. The Male/Female *structure* becomes confused with the privilege granted to the *genital* function (whether reproductive or erotic). The privilege of genitality over all the body's erogenous virtualities reverberates in the structure of a male dominated social order, for structure hinges on biological difference. This is not merely in order to maintain a genuine difference, but, on the contrary, to establish a *general equivalence*, the

Phallus becoming the absolute signifier around which all erogenous possibilities come to be measured, arranged, abstracted, and become equivalent. The *Phallus exchange standard* governs contemporary sexuality in its entirety, including its 'revolution'.

4. The emergence of the phallus as the general equivalent of sexuality, combined with the emergence of sexuality itself as the general equivalent of the virtualities of symbolic exchange, delineates the emergence of a *political economy of the body* which is established on the ruins of the body's symbolic economy. In the context of a general liberalisation, revelling in the current sexual 'revolution' is only the expression of the accession of the body and sexuality to the stage of political economy, a sign of their integration with the law of value and general equivalence.
5. From both angles – the promotion of *sexuality as function* or the promotion of *sexuality as structural discourse* – the subject turns out to be back with the fundamental norm of political economy: it thinks itself and locates itself sexually in terms of *equilibrium* (an equilibrium of functions under the sign of the identity of the ego) and *coherence* (the structural coherence of a discourse under the sign of the infinite reproduction of the code).

Just as 'design(at)ed' objects – seized by the political economy of the sign – obey an imperative of deprivation that reflects an ascetic economy of calculated functions; just as the sign in general has a functional tendency to divest itself in order to translate, as closely as possible, the adequation (of the signifier and the signified) which is its law and its reality principle, so the body seized by political economy also tends towards a formal nudity as if towards its absolute imperative. This nudity embodies all the labour of inscription and marks, fashion and make-up at the same time as the whole idealist perspective of 'liberation' makes no 'discoveries' or 'rediscoveries' concerning the body: it translates the *logical* metamorphosis of the body in the historical process of our societies. It translates the modern status of the body in its relation to political economy. Just as the divestment of objects characterises their assignation to a function, that is to say, *their neutralisation by the function*, so the body's nudity defines its assignation to the *sex/function*, its assignment to sex as function, that is to say, the *reciprocal neutralisation of the body and sex*.

Demagogy of the Body

Under the sign of the sexual revolution, the transfiguration of the pulsion as revolutionary substance and the unconscious as the subject of history. Liberating the primary processes as the 'poetic' principle of social reality, *liberating the unconscious as use-value*, such is the imaginary that crystallises under the slogan of the body. Sex and the body are able to bear all these hopes because, repressed under whatever order used to cover our 'historic'

societies, they have become *metaphors of radical negativity*. They want to make these metaphors pass into the state of a revolutionary *fact*. Error: to take the side of the body is a trap. We cannot take the side of the primary processes, this remains a secondary illusion.[19]

At best, the body will remain, theoretically too, eternally ambivalent: object and anti-object – cutting across and annulling the disciplines that claim to unify it; site and non-site – the site of the unconscious as the non-site of the subject, and so on. Even after the partition of the body into the anatomical and the erogenous, contemporary psychoanalysis (Leclaire) continues to set down the movement of desire in its name, under the regime of the letter. Always the body, since there are no words to express the non-site: the best is doubtless still that which, throughout a long history, has designated what has no, or does not take, place: the repressed. We must, however, be aware of the risks this inherited word involves. The subversive privilege the body was given since it was always in a state of repression is now coming to an end in the process of its emancipation[20] (not entirely due to the actions of a repressive politics of desublimation; psychoanalysis too plays its part in the officialisation of sex and the body: here again we find an inextricable confusion between sex and the body as the crucial *event* of the subject, as process, labour, and also as an historical *advent* in the order of concepts and values). We must ask ourselves if this body we are 'liberating' does not forever denegate the symbolic potentialities of the old repressed body, if the body 'everybody's talking about' is not precisely the converse of the speaking body. In the current system, the body as the site of the primary processes is contrasted to the body as secondary process: erotic use- and exchange-value, a rationalisation under the sign of value. The pulsional body menaced by *desire* is contrasted to the semiurgic, structural body, theatricised in nudity, functionalised by *operational sexuality*.

The secondary body of sexual emancipation and 'repressive desublimation' is set *under the sign of Eros alone*. There is a confusion with sex and the mere principle of Eros, that is to say, a *neutralisation of one by the other with the ex-inscription of the death-drive*. The pleasure principle is thus established as the rationality of a 'liberated' subjectivity, a 'new political economy' of the subject. 'Eros redefines reason in his own terms. Reasonable is what sustains the order of gratification' (Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation* [London: Sphere, 1970], p. 180). From now on, 'liberated' subjectivity is exhausted in inscribing itself as positivity in the exercise of Eros, the pleasure principle, which is simply the reification of the libido as the model of fulfilment. There is a new *reason* here, opening the way to an unlimited finality of the subject, and so there is no longer any difference between sexual 'escalation' and the schema of indefinite societal growth, of the 'liberation' of the forces of production; both evolve according to the same movement, both equally destined for failure in accordance with the irrevocable reflux of a death drive they thought they could conjure away.

The body organised under the sign of Eros represents a more advanced phase of political economy. Here the reabsorption of symbolic exchange is

as radical as the alienation of human labour in the classical system of political economy. If Marx has described the historical phase where the alienation of labour power and the logic of the commodity necessarily resulted in a *reification of consciousness*, today we could say that the inscription of the body (and of all symbolic domains) into the logic of the sign is necessarily doubled by a *reification of the unconscious*.

Instead of being cut through by desire, nudity operates as the equivalent to and staging of desire. Instead of sex cutting through the body, it operates as the signifier and the equivalent of sex. Instead of ambivalence dividing sexuality, it operates throughout the structural combination of the 'male' and the 'female' as the equivalent of this ambivalence! The sexual duopoly operates as the scenario of difference. The libido is structurally divided into two terms and operates as the reductive equivalent of the death drive. In this way nudity, sex, the unconscious, etc., instead of opening up a more profound difference, are linked metonymically to one another as a constellation of representative equivalents in order to define, term by term, a discourse of sex as value. This is the same operation as in psycho-metaphysics, where the subject, as ideal referent, is nothing in fact but circulation, a metonymic exchange interrupted by terms of consciousness, will, representation, etc.

Apologue

– So ultimately, why are there two sexes?
– What are you complaining about? Do you want twelve of them or just one?

A modern novel

The margin could be wider: why not zero or an infinity of sexes? The question of the 'total' is absurd here (whereas we can *logically* ask 'why not six fingers on each hand?'). It is absurd because sexualisation is precisely the partition that cuts across every subject, making the 'one' or 'several' unthinkable. The 'two' also becomes unthinkable, however, since the 'two' is already a total (besides, the above dialogue operates on the figure of the 'two'). Now sex, understood radically, cannot accede to the stage of the sum total nor to a calculable status: it is a *difference*, and the two 'sides' of difference, which are not *terms*, cannot be added together nor become parts of a series. They cannot be calculated on the basis of *units*.

By contrast, the dialogue is logical in the context of the imposed bisexual model (Male/Female) since from the outset it sets sex up as two structurally opposed *terms*. The possibility of an absurd passage to the limit of serial numeration, to *sex as accumulation*, is implied by the bisexual structure from the moment male and female are set up as whole terms.

In this way the *ambivalence* of sex is reduced by *bivalence* (the two poles and their sexual roles). Today, when bivalence is undergoing the

metamorphoses of the 'sexual revolution', and where we see, as they say, a blurring of the differences between the male and the female, the ambivalence of sex is reduced by the *ambiguity* of the unisex.

Against the metaphor of the sex principle.

Today, our way lit by Freud, we know very well, too well, how to discern the sublimation and secondary rationalisation of the pulsional processes behind any given social practice, ethics or politics. It has become a cultural cliché to decode every discourse in terms of repression and phantasmatic *determination*.

This is only right, however: they are now only *terms*, and the unconscious is merely a language to which to refer. Sexual discourse too becomes entirely phantasmatic when sex itself, the critical reduction of moral and social mystification that it used to be, becomes the mode of *rationalisation* of a problem situated at the level of the *total symbolic destruction of social relations*, an examination the sexualist discourse contributes to locking away under a security code. It is easy today to read in the Sunday papers that frigidity in so many women is due to their overbearing fixation on the father, and that they punish themselves for this by prohibiting pleasure: this psychoanalytic 'truth' now becomes a part of culture and *social* rationalisation (hence the ever increasing impasse in the analytic cure).

The sexual or analytic interpretation has no privilege. It too can become the phantasm of the definitive truth, and immediately therefore can also become the revolutionary theme. This is what is happening today – the collusion between the revolution and psychoanalysis results from the same imaginary and the same distortion as the 'bourgeois' recuperation of psychoanalysis; both result from the *inscription of sex and the unconscious as the determining* agency, that is to say, their reduction to a rationalist causality.

There is mystification from the moment there is a rationalisation in the name of some agency or other, as soon as the sexual is sublimated and rationalised into the political, the social and the moral, but equally as soon as the symbolic is censored and sublimated into a dominant sexual *parole*.

Zhuang-Zi's Butcher

> 'Hey!' Prince When-Hui said to him, 'how can your art reach such a level?' The butcher put his knife down and said, 'I love the Tao and so I progress in my art. At the start of my career, I saw only the ox. After three years' experience, I no longer saw the ox. Now my mind works more than my eyes do. My senses no longer act, only my mind. I knew the natural conformation of the ox and only attacked it at the interstices. If I do not damage the arteries, veins, muscles and nerves, then I shouldn't damage the major bones! A good butcher uses one knife in a year since he cuts only flesh. An ordinary butcher uses one knife in a month since he shatters bones with it. I have used the same knife for nineteen years. It has carved up many thousands of oxen and its cutting edge seems as if it has been newly sharpened. Strictly speaking, the joints of the bones have gaps in them and the cutting edge of the knife has no width. Whoever knows how to drive the extremely fine blade into the gaps

> manages his knife with ease because it is working in empty spaces. That is why I have used my knife for nineteen years and its cutting edge always appears newly sharpened. Every time I have cut the joints of the bones, I notice particular difficulties to be solved and I hold my breath, fix my gaze and work slowly. I wield my knife very gently and the joints separate as easily as we disturb the earth on the ground. I am taking up my knife again and getting back to work.' (Zhuang-Zi, *The Principle of Hygiene* III)

A perfect example of analysis and its prodigious operationality when it exceeds the full, substantial and opaque vision of the object ('at the start … I saw only the ox'), the anatomical vision of the body as a full edifice of bone, flesh and organs, unified by external representations, that can be carved up at will. This is the body on which the ordinary butcher labours, cutting by brute force, getting as far as to be able to recognise the articulation of the void and the structure of the void where the body is articulated ('[I] only attacked it at the interstices'). Zhuang-Zi's butcherknife is not a mass passing though a mass, it is itself the void ('with ease because it is working in empty spaces'). The knife that works in line with the analytic mind does not therefore work in spaces filled by oxen to which the senses and the eyes attest, but in accordance with the internal logical organisation of the rhythm and the intervals. If it does not wear out, it is because it does not set out to conquer a substance of the density of flesh and bone – because it is pure difference operating on difference – in order to disassemble a body (a practical operation) which, as we can clearly see, rests on a symbolic economy which is neither 'objective' knowledge nor a relation of forces, but a structure of exchange: the knife and the body *are exchanged*, the knife *articulates* the body's lack and thereby deconstructs it in accordance with its own rhythm.

This knife is also Leclaire's letter. The latter comes to divide a particular site on the body erotogenically in accordance with the logic of desire. A receptive, hard wearing and 'useless' [*inusable*] symbolic inscription, when the letter, due to its extremely fine thread, disjoins the anatomical body and works in the void articulated by the body. This instead of the poor butcher's full discourse that merely cuts anatomically and according to material evidence.

The millenial brother of Lichtenberg's knife,[21] the logical paradox of which (the knife with no blade which is missing a handle) sets up the symbolic configuration of an *absent* phallus instead of the full phallus and its f(ph)antas(ma)tic evidence. This knife does not work on the body, it resolves it, circling it attentively and dreamily (free-floating attention: 'I hold my breath, fix my gaze and work slowly'), proceeding *anagrammatically*, that is to say, it does not advance from one term to another, from one organ, juxtaposed and connected to another like words by the thread of a functional syntax: this is how the bad butcher and the linguist of signification proceed. Here, the thread of meaning is quite different: it splits the manifest body and follows the body beneath the body, like the anagram which follows the model of the dispersal and resolution of a *first* term or corpus whose secret is another articulation than that which runs beneath

discourse and traces something (a name, a formula) whose absence haunts the text. It is this formula of the body which defies the anatomical body, that the knife describes and resolves. It is certain that the efficacy of the sign, its symbolic efficacy in primitive societies, far from being 'magical', is bound up with this extremely precise labour of *anagrammatical resolution*. Hence the architecture of the erogenous body, which is only ever the anagrammatic articulation of a formula 'lost without ever having been', a formula whose thread of desire reforms the disjunctive synthesis that it retraces without saying: desire itself is nothing other than the resolution of the signifier in the orphic dispersal of the body, in the anagrammatical dispersal of the poem, according to the musical rhythm of the knife of Zhuang-Zi's butcher.

Notes

1. The genitals themselves, the object-sex, are never fetishised, only the phallus as the general equivalent; just as in political economy, the product or the commodity in itself is never fetishised, but rather the form of exchange-value and its general equivalent.
2. There is an affinity between the ceremonial of signs surrounding the erotic body and the ceremonial of suffering that surrounds sado-masochistic perversion. The marks of 'fetishism' (necklaces, bracelets, chains) always mimic and evoke the marks of sado-masochism (mutilation, wounds, cuts). These two perversions electively crystallise around this system of marks.

   Certain marks (and only these are suggestive) render the body *more nude than if it were really nude*. Here the body's nudity is the perverse nudity associated with the ceremonial. These marks may be clothes or accessories, but also gestures, music or technique. All perversions need effects in the widest sense of the term. In sado-masochism suffering becomes the emblem of the body, just as jewels or rouge may in fetishist passion.

   All perversions revel in something: in the erotic system we are describing, the body revels in indulgence, self-seduction; in sado-masochism, it revels in suffering (painful auto-eroticism). There is, however, an affinity between the two, since whether the other suffers or indulges in himself, he is radically objectified. Every perversion acts out death.
3. The sexual act is often only possible at the cost of this perversion: the other's body is phantasised as a mannequin, a phallus-mannequin, a phallic fetish, cherished, caressed and possessed as the phantasiser's own penis.
4. Against the thesis of the phallic mother who terrifies because she is phallic, Freud said that the paralysis produced by the *Medusa*'s head worked because the snakes that replaced her hair came, as many times as there were snakes, to deny castration. Whoever wished to annul castration was repeatedly reminded of it through this reversal (A. Green). The same goes for the fascination with make-up and the strip-tease: each fragment of the body highlighted or phallically enhanced by the mark also happens to deny castration, which nevertheless re-emerges everywhere in the very separation of these part-objects so that, like the fetish-object, they only ever appear to 'testify to and veil the castrated genitals' (Lacan).
5. If the line of the stocking is more erotic than the shawl covering the eye or the line of the glove on the arm, it is not due to the promiscuity of the genitals: it is simply because castration is played out and denied here *at close range*, as near as possible and in the greatest possible immanence. Thus in Freud it is the last perceived object, the closest to the discovery of the absence of the penis in women that will become the fetish-object.
6. Only the annulment of phallus-value and the irruption of the radical play of difference remain unthinkable and inadmissible.

7. That said, the fact that one of the terms of sexual binomialism, the male, although it has become the marked term and although this in turn has become the general equivalent in the system, this structure which to us appears ineluctable is in fact without biological foundation: like every great structure, its goal is precisely to break with nature (Lévi-Strauss). We can imagine a culture where the terms are reversed: a male strip-tease in a matriarchal culture. All that is required is that the female become the marked term and operate as the general equivalent. We must see, however, that even if these terms are alternated (which largely encapsulates women's 'liberation'), the structure remains unchanged as does the refusal of castration and phallic abstraction. So we can see that the real problem is not whether the system carries within it any possibility for structural alteration, but rather lies in a radical alternative, which puts into question the very abstraction of this political economy of sex, based on making one of the terms a general equivalent and on the misrecognition [*méconnaissance*] of castration and the symbolic economy.
8. Except for the noble excretion of tears, but with incredible precautions! Cf this admirable text for a cosmetics firm called Longcil; 'when an emotion overwhelms you to the point that only looks can translate its depth, at this moment more than any other, you don't want your eye-shadow to betray you. At this moment more than any other, *Longcil* is irreplaceable … especially in moments like these, it takes care of your looks to protect and improve them … so that now you need only put on your make-up and not give it a second thought.'
9. The gestural narrative, or, technically speaking, the 'bump and grind', realises here what Bataille called the 'ruse of opposition' [*feinte du contraire*]: because it is continuously covered and concealed by the same gestures that denude it, the body here acquires its poetic meaning by force of ambivalence. On the other hand, we see how naïve nudists and others are, their 'superficial beach nudity' that Bernardin speaks of, who believe they are laying reality entirely bare and fall into the equivalence of the sign: reality is nothing more than the equivalent signifier to a natural signified. This naturalist unveiling is only ever a 'mental act', as Bernardin put it so well, it is an *ideology*. In this sense the *strip*, through its perverse play and its sophisticated ambivalence, is as opposed to 'liberation through nudity' as it is to a *liberal-rationalist ideology*. The 'escalation of the nude' is the escalation of rationalism, the rights of man, formal liberation, liberal demagogy, and petty-bourgeois free-thinking. This realistic aberration was put perfectly back into its place by a little girl's words when she was offered a doll that pisses: 'My little sister can do that too. Couldn't you give me a real one?'
10. A play of transparent veils can play the same role as this play of gestures. Advertising is of the same order when it frequently puts two or several women on stage. It is only in appearance that this is a homosexual thematic, since it is in fact a variant of the narcissistic model of self-seduction, a play of reduplications centred on the self by means of the detour of a sexual simulation (which may be homosexual besides: there are only ever men in advertising to act as a narcissistic warning, to help the woman to take pleasure in herself).
11. Even when the last piece of clothing falls away, the integral strip does not alter its logic. We know that gestures are enough to trace an enchanted line around the body, a much more subtle marker than panties. In any case, it is not a sexual organ that this structural marker (panties or gesture) bars, but the very sexualisation that crosses the body: the spectacle of the organ and, at the limit, of the orgasm do not therefore eliminate this at all.
12. The *perverse* desire is the *normal* desire imposed by the *social* model. If the woman avoids auto-erotic regression, she is no longer an object of desire, she becomes a subject of desire, and thereby resistant to the structure of the perverse desire. But she too could very well seek to fulfil her desire in the fetishistic neutralisation of the desire of the other, so that the perverse structure (that kind of division of the labour of desire between the subject and the object which is the secret of perversion and its erotic yield) remains unchanged. The only alternative is that everyone should break down this phallic fortress and open up the perverse structure which surrounds the sexual system; instead of fixing their eyes on

a phallic identity, on its absence in the place of the other, leave the white magic of phallic identification in order to recognise their own perilous ambivalence, so that the play of desire as symbolic exchange becomes possible once more.

13. [In the seventeenth century a certain Mlle de Scudéry imagined a map [*carte*] of the country or kingdom she conceived and called *Tendre*, following the contemporary usage of the word *tendre* to designate the 'tender emotions' and sentiments, as opposed to the 'military virtues' of strength, toughness, coldness and cruelty, etc. (*Le Petit Robert*). – tr.]
14. If we refer to the function of the letter in Leclaire's work, an erotic function of differential inscription and the annulment of difference, we can see that the current system is characterised by the abolition of the opening function of the letter and by augmenting its closure property. The literal function has broken with the alphabet of desire (symbolic inscription disappeared to the great advantage of structural inscription) in favour of the alphabet of the code. Even in analysis, the ambivalence of the letter has been replaced by an equivalence within the system of the code, its literal function as (linguistic) value. The letter is then reduplicated and reflects itself like a full sign, it is fetishistically invested as a single line instead and in place of erogenous difference. The letter is invested as a phallus in which all differences are eliminated. The scansion of the subject by the letter in enjoyment is eliminated in favour of the fulfilment of desire in the fetishised letter alone. Thus not only the anatomical body is opposed to Leclaire's erogenous body, but also and especially the semiurgic body, made up of a lexis of full, coded signifiers, signifying models of the fulfilment of desire.
15. The subject of consumption, in particular the consumption of the body, is neither the ego, nor the unconscious subject, it is the second person plural, the 'you' of advertising, i.e. the intercepted, fragmented subject reconstituted by the dominant models, 'personalised' and brought into play in the sign-exchange. Being no more than the simulation model of the second person of exchange, the 'you' is effectively *no-one*, only a fictive term maintained by the discourse of the model. This 'you' is no longer the one that speaks, but the effect of the division of the code, a phantom that appeared in the mirror of signs.
16. We really must appreciate that the 'liberation' and 'revolution' of the body works essentially at the level of secondary sexualisation, i.e. a bisexual rationalisation of sex. They are therefore operative in a late phase, where a puritan repression used to be, while at the same time they are caught at the level of contemporary, symbolic, repression. This revolution is 'one war too late' as regards the mode of repression. Put better (or worse), there is an insidious and widespread progression of primary repression which, by the mere fact of the 'sexual revolution', disturbingly merges with the 'gentle' repression under the sign of the management of narcissism discussed above.
17. [In this passage, Baudrillard is punning on the maternal function of the breast [*sein*] and being 'in the midst' or 'at the heart of [*au sein de*] the 'maternal' society he here claims has displaced that of the law of the Father. – tr.]
18. This presupposes a type of exchange that has remained outside the dominance of incest prohibition and the law of the Father (such as the type of economic and linguistic exchange that we are familiar with), *which is based on value* and culminates in the system of exchange-value. This type of exchange exists: it is symbolic exchange which, by contrast, is based *on the annulment of value*, and hence cancels the prohibition on which it is based and overcomes the law of the Father. Symbolic exchange is neither a regression within the law (towards incest), nor a pure and simple transgression (always dependent on the law), it is the *revolution* of this law.
19. Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure* [Paris: Klincksieck, 1971], p. 23.
20. After the history of the body's negativity comes the history of its positivity. The ambiguity of the current 'revolution' derives entirely from the fact that centuries of repression have based the body on *value*. Repressed, the body is charged with a transgressive virtuality of all values. Similarly however, we must understand that a long lasting and inextricable confusion between the body and a series of 'materialist' values (health, well-being, sexuality, liberty) has been at work in the shadows of repression. The concept of the body has grown

up in the shadow of a certain transcendental materialism which has slowly matured in the shadow of idealism as its revitalising solution, even bringing about its resurrection in accordance with determinate finalities, and operates as a dynamic element in the equilibrium of the new system of values. Nudity becomes the emblem of radical subjectivity. The body becomes the standard of the pulsions. But this liberation has something of the ambiguity of every liberation, in that it is here liberated as value. Just as labour is never 'liberated' as anything other than labour power in a system of forces of production and exchange-value, subjectivity is only ever liberated as a phantasm and sign-value in the framework of planned signification, a systematics of signification whose coincidence with the systematics of production is clear enough. In the final analysis, subjectivity is only ever 'liberated' in the sense that it is once again seized by political economy.

21. And the opposite of Ockham's razor, which castrates and traces the taut thread of abstraction and reason.

5

Political Economy and Death

The Extradition of the Dead

As soon as savages began to call 'men' only those who were members of their tribe, the definition of the 'Human' was considerably enlarged: it became a universal concept. This is precisely what we call culture. Today all men are men. Universality is in fact based exclusively on tautology and doubling, and this is where the 'Human' takes on the force of a moral law and a principle of exclusion. This is because the 'Human' is from the outset the institution of its structural double, the 'Inhuman'. This is all it is: the progress of Humanity and Culture are simply the chain of discriminations with which to brand 'Others' with inhumanity, and therefore with nullity. For the savages who call themselves 'men', the others are something else. For us, by contrast, under the sign of the Human as a universal concept, others are nothing. In other cases, to be 'man' is, like being a gentleman, a challenge, a distinction experienced as a great struggle, not merely giving rise to an exchange of *quality* or status amongst different beings (gods, ancestors, foreigners, animals, nature …), but *imposing* its stakes universally, being praised and prohibited. We are happy to be promoted to the universal, to an abstract and generic value indexed on the equivalence of the species, to the exclusion of all the others. In some sense, therefore, the definition of the Human inexorably contracts in accordance with cultural developments: each 'objective' progressive step towards the universal corresponded to an ever stricter discrimination, until eventually we can glimpse the time of man's definitive universality that will coincide with the excommunication of all men – the purity of the concept alone radiant in the void.

Racism is modern. Previous races or cultures were ignored or eliminated, but never under the sign of a universal Reason. There is no criterion of man, no split from the Inhuman, there are only differences with which to oppose death. But it is our undifferentiated concept of man that gives rise to discrimination. We must read the following narrative by Jean de Léry, from the sixteenth century: *Histoire d'un voyage en la terre de Brésil* ('The History of a Journey to the Land of Brazil') to see that racism did not exist in this period when the Idea of Man does not yet cast its shadow over all the metaphysical purity of Western culture. This Reformation puritan from Geneva, landing amongst Brazilian cannibals, is not racist. It is due to the extent of our progress that we have since become racists, and not only towards Indians and cannibals: the increasing hold of rationality on our culture has

meant the successive extradition of inanimate nature, animals and inferior races[1] into the Inhuman, while the cancer of the Human has invested the very society it claimed to contain within its absolute superiority. Michel Foucault has analysed the extradition of madmen at the dawn of Western modernity, but we also know of the extradition and progressive confinement of children, following the course of Reason itself, into the idealised state of infancy, the ghetto of the infantile universe and the abjection of innocence. But the old have also become inhuman, pushed to the fringes of normality. Like so many others, the mad, children and the old have only become 'categories' under the sign of the successive segregations that have marked the development of culture. The poor, the under-developed, those with subnormal IQs, perverts, transsexuals, intellectuals and women form a folklore of terror, a folklore of excommunication on the basis of an increasingly racist definition of the 'normal human'. Quintessence of normality: ultimately all these 'categories' will be excluded, segregated, exiled in a finally universal society, where the normal and the universal will at last fuse under the sign of the Human.[2]

Foucault's analysis, amongst the masterpieces of this genuine cultural history, takes the form of a genealogy of discrimination in which, at the start of the nineteenth century, labour and production occupy a decisive place. At the very core of the 'rationality' of our culture, however, is an exclusion that precedes every other, more radical than the exclusion of madmen, children or inferior races, an exclusion preceding all these and serving as their model: the exclusion of the dead and of death.

There is an irreversible evolution from savage societies to our own: little by little, *the dead cease to exist*. They are thrown out of the group's symbolic circulation. They are no longer beings with a full role to play, worthy partners in exchange, and we make this obvious by exiling them further and further away from the group of the living. In the domestic intimacy of the cemetery, the first grouping remains in the heart of the village or town, becoming the first ghetto, prefiguring every future ghetto, but are thrown further and further from the centre towards the periphery, finally having nowhere to go at all, as in the new town or the contemporary metropolis, where there are no longer any provisions for the dead, either in mental or in physical space. Even madmen, delinquents and misfits can find a welcome in the new towns, that is, in the rationality of a modern society. Only the death-function cannot be programmed and localised. Strictly speaking, we no longer know what to do with them, since, today, *it is not normal to be dead*, and this is new. To be dead is an unthinkable anomaly; nothing else is as offensive as this. Death is a delinquency, and an incurable deviancy. The dead are no longer inflicted on any place or space-time, they can find no resting place; they are thrown into a radical utopia. They are no longer even packed in and shut up, but obliterated.

But we know what these hidden places signify: the factory no longer exists because labour is everywhere; the prison no longer exists because arrests and confinements pervade social space-time; the asylum no longer

exists because psychological control and therapy have been generalised and become banal; the school no longer exists because every strand of social progress is shot through with discipline and pedagogical training; capital no longer exists (nor does its Marxist critique) because the law of value has collapsed into self-managed survival in all its forms, etc., etc. The cemetery no longer exists because modern cities have entirely taken over their function: they are ghost towns, cities of death. If the great operational metropolis is the final form of an entire culture, then, quite simply, ours is a culture of death.[3]

Survival, or the Equivalent to Death

It is correct to say that the dead, hounded and separated from the living, condemn us to an *equivalent death*: for the fundamental law of symbolic obligation is at play in any case, for better or worse. Madness, then, is only ever the *dividing* line between the mad and the normal, a line which normality *shares* with madness and which is even defined by it. Every society that internalises its mad is a society invested in its depths by madness, which alone and everywhere ends up being symbolically exchanged under the legal signs of normality. Madness has for several centuries worked hard on the society which confines it, and today the asylum walls have been removed, not because of some miraculous tolerance, but because madness has *completed* its normalising labour on society: madness has become pervasive, while at the same time it is forbidden a resting place. The asylum has been reabsorbed into the core of the social field, because normality has reached the point of perfection and assumed the characteristics of the asylum, because the virus of confinement has worked its way into every fibre of 'normal' existence.

So it is with death. Death is ultimately nothing more than the social line of demarcation separating the 'dead' from the 'living': therefore, it affects both equally. Against the senseless illusion of the living of willing the living to the exclusion of the dead, against the illusion that reduces life to *an absolute surplus-value* by subtracting death from it, the indestructible logic of symbolic exchange re-establishes the equivalence of life and death in the indifferent fatality of survival. In survival, death is repressed; life itself, in accordance with that well known ebbing away, would be nothing more than a survival determined by death.

The Ghetto Beyond the Grave

The concept of immortality grew alongside the segregation of the dead. For the flip-side of death, this eminent status which is the mark of the 'soul' and 'superior' spiritualities, is only a story that conceals the real extradition of the dead and the rupturing of a symbolic exchange with them. When the dead are there, lifelike [*vivants*] but different from the living [*vivants*] whom they partner in multiple exchanges, they have no need to, and neither is it necessary that they should, be immortal, since this fantastic quality shatters all reciprocity. It is only to the extent that they are excluded by the

living that they quietly become immortal, and this idealised survival is only the mark of their social exile.

We must get rid of the idea of *progress* in religions, leading from animism to polytheism and then to monotheism, in the course of which an immortal soul progressively emerges. It is to the precise extent that the dead are confined that they are conferred an immortality, just as, in a similar way, we see life expectancy grow simultaneously with the segregation of pensioners, deemed asocial, in our societies.

Immortality is progressive, and this is one of the strangest things. It progresses in time, passing from limited to eternal survival; in social space, immortality becomes democratic and passes from being the privilege of a few to being everyone's virtual right. This is relatively recent, however. In Egypt, certain members of the group (Pharoahs, then priests, chiefs, the wealthy, the initiates of the dominant class), according to the degree of their power, slowly broke away as immortals, others having only the right to death and the double. Towards the year 2000 BC, everyone accedes to immortality in a sort of social conquest, perhaps the outcome of a great struggle. Without attempting a social history or constructing a fiction, we can well imagine, in Egypt and the Great Dynasties, revolts and social movements demanding the right to immortality for all.

In the beginning, then, immortality was a matter of an emblem of power and social transcendence. Where, in primitive groups, there were no structures of political power, there was no personal immortality either. Consequently, in the least segmented societies, a 'relative' soul and a 'restricted' immortality correspond to a similarly relative transcendence of power structures. Then, with the Grand Empires, despotic societies of total transcendence of power, immortality is generalised and becomes eternal. The King or the Pharoah is the first to benefit from this advancement, but then, at a more advanced stage, issuing from God Himself who is immortality *par excellence*, immortality is democratically redistributed. But the phase of the immortal God, which coincides with the great universalist religions (and Christianity in particular), is already a phase of a huge abstraction of social power in the Roman Imperium. If the Greek gods were mortals, it is because they were bound to a specific culture and were not yet universal.

In its initial stages, Christianity was not in accord over immortality, which was a late acquisition. The Church Fathers still admitted the provisional elimination of the soul awaiting resurrection. Even when St Paul preached the idea of resurrection, the pagans mocked him for it and even the Church Fathers had a deep resistance to it. In the Old Testament (Daniel), resurrection is promised only to those who have not received retribution during their lifetime for *good or evil*. The beyond of life, *survival*, is only the settling of all accounts, existing only according to what remained unexchanged in life. Resurrection, or immortality, is a fine example of the last resort as regards the symbolic possibility of the archaic group's *immediate* regulation of all its accounts, annulling all its symbolic debt without reference to an afterlife.

Originally the distinctive emblem of power, the immortality of the soul acts, throughout Christianity, as an egalitarian myth, as a democratic beyond as opposed to worldly inequality before death. It is only a myth. Even in its most universalist Christian version, immortality only belongs to every human being *by right*: in fact, it is sparingly granted, remaining the privilege of *a* culture, and within this culture, the privilege of a specific social and political caste. Have the missionaries ever believed in the immortal soul of the natives? Has woman ever really had a soul in 'classical' Christianity? What about madmen, children and criminals? In fact it always comes down to this: only the rich and powerful have a soul. Social, political and economic inequality (life expectancy, prestigious funerals, glory and living on in men's memories) before death is only ever the effect of this fundamental discrimination: some, the only real 'human beings', have the right to immortality; others have only the right to death. Nothing has changed greatly since Egypt and the Great Dynasties.

'What does immortality matter?' the naïve materialist will say, 'It's all imaginary.' Yes, and it is exciting to see that this is where the basis of the *real* social discrimination lies, and that nowhere else are power and social transcendence so clearly marked than in the imaginary. The economic power of capital is based in the imaginary just as much as is the power of the Church: capital is only its fantastic secularisation.

We can also see that democracy changes nothing here. We used to be able to fight in order to gain immortality for the souls of all, just as generations of proletarians fought in order to gain equality in terms of goods and culture. It is the same fight, the former for survival in the beyond, and the latter for survival here. It is the same trap: the personal immortality of a few resulting, as we have seen, in the break-up of the group – so what's the point of demanding immortality for all? It is simply to generalise the imaginary. The revolution can only consist in the abolition of the separation of death, and not in equality of survival.

Immortality is only a kind of general equivalent bound to the abstraction of linear time (taking form as soon as time becomes this abstract dimension bound to the process of political-economic accumulation and, in short, to the abstraction of life).

Death Power

The emergence of survival can therefore be analysed as the fundamental operation in the birth of power. Not only because this set-up will permit the necessity of the sacrifice of this life and the threat of recompense in the next (this is exactly the priest-caste's strategy), but more profoundly by instituting *the prohibition of death* and, at the same time, the agency that oversees this prohibition of death: power. Shattering the union of the living and the dead, and slapping a prohibition on death and the dead: the primary source of social control. Power is possible only if death is no longer free, only if the dead are put under surveillance, in anticipation of the

future confinement of life in its entirety. This is the fundamental Law, and power is the guardian at the gates of this Law. It is not the repression of unconscious pulsions, libido, or whatever other energy that is fundamental, and it is not anthropological; it is the repression of death, the *social* repression of death in the sense that this is what facilitates the shift towards the repressive socialisation of life.

Historically, we know that sacerdotal power is based on a monopoly over death and exclusive control over relations with the dead.[4] The dead are the first restricted area, the exchange of whom is restored by an obligatory mediation by the priests. Power is established on death's borders. It will subsequently be sustained by further separations (the soul and the body, the male and the female, good and evil, etc.) that have infinite ramifications, but the principal separation is between life and death.[5] When the French say that power 'holds the bar',[6] it is no metaphor: it is the bar between life and death, the decree that suspends exchange between life and death, the tollgate and border control between the two banks.

This is precisely the way in which power will later be instituted between the subject separated from its body, between the individual separated from its social body, between man separated from his labour: the agency of mediation and representation flourishes in this rupture. We must take note, however, that the archetype of this operation is the separation between a group and its dead, or between each of us today and our own deaths. Every form of power will have something of this smell about it, because it is on the manipulation and administration of death that power, in the final analysis, is based.

All the agencies of repression and control are installed in this divided space, in the suspense between a life and its proper end, that is, in the production of a literally fantastic and artificial temporality (since at every instant every life has its proper death there already, that is to say, in this same instant lies the finality it attains). The first abstract social time is installed in this rupture of the indivisible unity of life and death (well before abstract social labour time!). All the future forms of alienation that Marx denounces, the separations and abstractions of political economy, take root in this separation of death.

The economic operation consists in life taking death hostage. This is a *residual* life which can from now on be read in the operational terms of calculation and value. For example, in Chamisso's *The Man who Lost his Shadow*, Peter Schlemil becomes a rich and powerful capitalist once his shadow has been lost (once death is taken hostage: the pact with the Devil is only ever a political-economic pact).

Life given over to death: the very operation of the symbolic.

The Exchange of Death in the Primitive Order

Savages have no biological concept of death. Or rather, the biological fact, that is, death, birth or disease, everything that comes from nature and that

we accord the privilege of necessity and objectivity, quite simply has no meaning for them. This is absolute disorder, since it cannot be symbolically exchanged, and what cannot be symbolically exchanged constitutes a mortal danger for the group.[7] They are unreconciled, unexpiated, sorcerous and hostile forces that prowl around the soul and the body, that stalk the living and the dead; defunct, cosmic energies that the group was unable to bring under control through exchange.

We have de-socialised death by overturning bio-anthropological laws, by according it the immunity of science and by making it autonomous, as individual fatality. But the physical materiality of death, which paralyses us through the 'objective' credence we give it, does not stop the primitives. They have never 'naturalised' death, they know that death (like the body, like the natural event) is a *social relation*, that its definition is social. In this they are much more 'materialist' than we are, since for them the real materiality of death, like that of the commodity for Marx, lies in its *form*, which is always the form of a social relation. Instead, all our idealism converges on the illusion of a biological materiality of death: our discourse of '*reality*', which is in fact the discourse of the *imaginary*, surpasses the primitives in the intervention of the *symbolic*.

Initiation is the accented beat of the operation of the symbolic. It aims neither to conjure death away, nor to 'overcome' it, but to articulate it socially. As R. Jaulin describes in *La Mort Sara* [Paris: Plon, 1967], the ancestral group 'swallows the *koys*' (young initiation candidates), who die '*symbolically*' in order to be reborn. Above all, we must avoid understanding this according to the degraded meaning we attach to it, but in the sense that their death becomes the stakes of a reciprocal-antagonistic exchange between the ancestors and the living. Further, instead of a break, a social relation between the partners is established, a circulation of gifts and counter-gifts as intense as the circulation of precious goods and women: an incessant play of responses where death can no longer establish itself as end or agency. By offering her a piece of flesh, the brother gives his wife to a dead member of the family, in order to bring him back to life. By nourishing her, this dead man is included in the life of the group. But the exchange is reciprocal. The dead man gives his wife, the clan's land, to a living member of the family in order to come back to life by assimilating himself to her and to bring her back to life by assimilating her to himself. The important moment is when the *moh* (the grand priests) put the *koy* (the initiates) to death, so that the latter are then consumed by their ancestors, then the earth gives birth to them as their mother had given birth to them. After having been 'killed', the initiates are left in the hands of their initiatory, 'cultural' parents, who instruct them, care for them and train them (initiatory birth).

It is clear that the initiation consists in an exchange being established where there had been only a brute fact: they pass from natural, aleatory and irreversible death to a death that is *given* and *received*, and that is therefore reversible in the social exchange, 'soluble' in exchange. At the same time

the opposition between birth and death disappears: they can also be *exchanged* under the form of symbolic reversibility. Initiation is the crucial moment, the social nexus, the darkroom where birth and death stop being the terms of life and twist into one another again; not towards some mystical fusion, but in this instance to turn the initiate into a real social being. The uninitiated child has only been born biologically, he has only one 'real' father and one 'real' mother; in order to become a social being he must pass through the *symbolic* event of the initiatory birth/death, he must have gone through the circuit of life and death in order to enter into the symbolic reality of exchange.

It is not, in this initiatory test, a matter of staging a second birth to eclipse death. Jaulin himself leans towards this interpretation: society 'conjured' death away, or even opposed it 'dialectically', in the initiation, to a term of his invention which it uses and 'overcomes': 'To the life and death they are given, men have added initiation, by means of which they transcend the disorder of death.' This formula is very beautiful and very ambiguous at the same time, since initiation is not 'added' to the other terms, and it doesn't play life off *against* death towards a rebirth (we are extremely suspicious of those who triumph over death!). It is the *splitting* of life and death that initiation conjures away, and with it the concomitant fatality which weighs down on life as soon as it is split in this way. For life then becomes this biological irreversibility, this absurd physical destiny, life has then been lost in advance, since it is condemned to decline with the body. Hence the idealisation of one of these terms, birth (and its doubling in resurrection) at the expense of the other, death. This, however, is simply one of our ingrained prejudices concerning the 'sense' or 'meaning of life'. For birth, as an irreversible individual event, is as traumatising as death. Psychoanalysis puts this differently: birth is a sort of death. And with baptism, Christianity has done nothing more than, through a collective ritual, to define the *mortal* event of birth. The advent of life is a *crime* of sorts, if it is not repeated and expiated by a collective simulacrum of death. Life is only a benefit in itself within the calculable order of value. In the symbolic order, life, like everything else, is a crime if it survives unilaterally, if it is not seized and destroyed, given and returned, 'returned' to death. Initiation effaces this crime by resolving the *separate* event of life and death in one and the same social act of exchange.

Symbolic / Real / Imaginary

The symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a 'structure', but an act of exchange and *a social relation which puts an end to the real*, which resolves the real, and, at the same time, puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary.

The initiatory act is the reverse of our reality principle. It shows that the *reality* of birth derives solely from the separation of life and death. Even the *reality* of life itself derives solely from the disjunction of life and death.

The *effect of the real* is only ever therefore the structural effect of the disjunction between two terms, and our famous reality principle, with its normative and repressive implications, is only a generalisation of this disjunctive code to all levels. The reality of nature, its 'objectivity' and its 'materiality', derives solely from the separation of man and nature, of a body and a non-body, as Octavio Paz put it. Even the reality of the body, its material status, derives from the disjunction of a spiritual principle, from discriminating a soul from a body.

The symbolic is what puts an end to this disjunctive code and to separated terms. *It is the u-topia that puts an end to the topologies of the soul and the body, man and nature, the real and the non-real, birth and death*. In the symbolic operation, the two terms lose their reality.[8]

The reality principle is never anything other than the *imaginary* of the other term. In the man/nature partition, nature (objective, material) is only the imaginary of man thus conceptualised. In the sexual bipartition masculine/feminine, an arbitrary and structural distinction on which the sexual reality (and repression) principle is based, 'woman' thus defined is only ever man's imaginary. Each term of the disjunction excludes the other, which eventually becomes its imaginary.

So it is with life and death in our current system: the price we pay for the 'reality' of this life, to live it as a positive value, is the ever-present phantasm of death. For us, defined as living beings, death is our imaginary.[9] So, all the disjunctions on which the different structures of the real are based (this is not in the least abstract: it is also what separates the teacher from the taught, and on which the reality principle of their relation is based; the same goes for all the social relations we know) have their archetype in the fundamental disjunction of life and death. This is why, in whatever field of 'reality', every separate term for which the other is its imaginary is haunted by the latter as *its own death*.

Thus the symbolic everywhere puts an end to the fascination with the real and the imaginary, to the closure of the phantasm drawn up by psychoanalysis, but where, at the same time, psychoanalysis locks itself up by establishing, through a considerable quantity of disjunctions (primary and secondary processes, unconscious and conscious, etc.), a psychical reality principle of the unconscious inseparable from psychoanalysis's own reality principle (the unconscious as psychoanalysis's reality principle!) and thus in which the symbolic cannot but put an end to psychoanalysis too.[10]

The Inevitable Exchange

The real event of death is imaginary. Where the imaginary creates a symbolic disorder, initiation restores symbolic order. Incest prohibition does the same thing in the domain of filiation: the group responds to the real, natural, 'asocial' event of biological filiation by a system of alliance and the exchange of women. It is essential that everything (women in this case, but otherwise birth and death) becomes available for exchange, that is, comes

under the jurisdiction of the group. Incest prohibition, in this sense, is interdependent with and complementary to initiation, in that in the one case young initiates circulate amongst the living adults and the dead ancestors: they are given and returned, whereby they accede to symbolic recognition. In the other case, it is women who circulate: they too only attain real social status once given and returned, instead of being retained by the father or brothers for their own use. 'Whosoever gives nothing, whether his daughter or his sister, is dead.'[11]

Incest prohibition lies at the basis of alliances amongst the living. Initiation lies at the basis of alliances amongst the living and the dead. This is the fundamental fact that separates us from the primitives: exchange does not stop when life comes to an end. Symbolic exchange is halted neither by the living nor by the dead (nor by stones or beasts). This is an absolute law: obligation and reciprocity are insurmountable. None can withdraw from it, for whom- or whatever's sake, on pain of death. Death is nothing other than this: taken hostage by the cycle of symbolic exchanges (cf. Marcel Mauss, 'L'effet physique chez l'individu de l'idée de mort suggérée par la collectivité', in *Sociologie et Anthropologie* [4th edn, Paris: PUF, 1968]).[12]

But we could also say that this does not separate us from the primitives, and that *it is exactly the same for us*. Throughout the entire system of political economy, the law of symbolic exchange has not changed one iota: we continue to exchange with the dead, even those denied rest, those for whom rest is prohibited. We simply pay with our own death and our anxiety about death for the rupture of symbolic exchanges with them. It is profoundly similar with inanimate nature and beasts. Only an absurd theory of liberty could claim that we are quits with the dead, since the debt is universal and unceasing: we never manage to 'return' what we have taken for all this 'liberty'. This huge litigation, involving all the obligations and reciprocities that we have denounced, is properly the unconscious. No need for a libido, for desire, for an energetics or for the pulsions and their destinations to give an account of this. The unconscious is social in the sense that it is made up of all that could not be exchanged socially or symbolically. And so it is with death: it is exchanged in any case, and, at best, it *will be exchanged* in accordance with a social ritual, as with the primitives; at worst, it will be *'redeemed' by an individual labour of mourning*. The unconscious is subject in its entirety to the distortion of the death of a symbolic process (exchange, ritual) into an economic process (redemption, labour, debt, individual). This entails a considerable difference in enjoyment: we trade with our dead in a kind of melancholy, while the primitives live with their dead under the auspices of the ritual and the feast.

The Unconscious and the Primitive Order

The reciprocity of life and death, which entails their exchange in a social *cycle* instead of being cut up according to biological *linearity* or the *repetition* of the phantasm, the reabsorption of the prohibition separating the living

from the dead that rebounds so violently on the living; all this puts the very hypothesis of the unconscious into question again.

In his *Oedipe africain* [Paris: Plon, 1969], Edmond Ortigues asks what it means 'to marry one's mother' and 'to kill one's father':

> The verb 'to marry' has a different meaning in different contexts, it has not got the same social and psychological content. As for the verb 'to kill', apparently so clear-cut, are we quite certain that it holds no surprises? What then is a 'dead father' in a country where the ancestors are so close to the living? … Everything changes, requiring us to re-examine the meaning of each term.
>
> In a society under the sway of ancestral law, it is impossible for the individual to kill the father, since, according to the customs of the Ancients, the father is always already dead and always still living. … To take the father's death upon oneself or to individualise the moral consciousness by reducing paternal authority to that of a mortal, a substitutable person separable from the ancestral altar and from 'custom', *would be to leave the group*, to remove oneself from the basis of tribal society.
>
> When we talk of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, we think of an individually experienced drama. But what might this be in a tribal society where the religion of 'fertility' and the 'ancestors' proposes as the explicit basis of the collective tradition what, for us, the young Oedipus is condemned to live out in his personal phantasms?

Therefore, the 'symbolic function' in primitive societies is articulated not through the law of the Father and the individual psychical reality principle, but from the outset through a collective principle, through the collective movement of exchanges. In the initiation, we have seen how, by means of a social process, the biological figures of filiation break up in order to make way for the initiatory parents. These parents are symbolic figures who refer to the socius, that is, to all the fathers and mothers of the clan, and ultimately to the dead fathers, the ancestors, and to the clan's earth mother. The instance of the Father does not appear, it is broken down into the collectivity of rival brothers (initiates). 'Aggressivity will be displaced along a horizontal line, into fraternal rivalry, overcompensated by an extremely powerful solidarity' (Ortigues, ibid.). (Why 'will be *displaced*'? As if it were normally directed onto the Father?) Opposed to the Oedipus principle, which corresponds to the *negative* aspect of incest prohibition (prohibited with the mother and imposed by the father) is, in the *positive* sense, a principle of the exchange of sisters by brothers. It is the sister, and not the mother, who is at the centre of this apparatus, and it is at the level of brothers that the whole social act of exchange is organised. Therefore, no desocialised Oedipal triangle, no closed familial structure sanctioned by prohibition and the dominant Word of the Father, but a principle of exchange between *peers*, on the basis of the challenge and reciprocity: an autonomous principle of social organisation.

> The appearence of the concept of the gift was implemented at the core of one and the same age group in an atmosphere of equality. The sacrifice to which the child consents in the nursery to benefit another child is not of the same order as separation from the mother. (Ortigues, ibid.)

All this tells of a social principle of exchange opposed to a psychical principle of prohibition. All this tells of a symbolic process opposed to an unconscious process. Nowhere in the primitive order, since it is well ventilated and resolutely social, does there emerge the *psychically* over-determined *biological* triad of the family, with the psychical apparatus and the intertwined phantasms, as its double, the whole thing crowned by the fourth purely 'symbolic' term, the phallus. The phallus is 'strictly necessary in order to introduce a relation to the level of speech, and to make it into a reciprocal law of recognition amongst subjects'. It is here, in fact (at least in psychoanalytic theory), that the Name of the Father, the signifier of the Law, is inscribed for us, and alone introduces us into exchange. The famous ploy of the Word of the Father protects us against mortal fusion with, and absorption by, the desire for the mother. Without the phallus, there is no salvation. The necessity of this Law and of a symbolic agency barring the subject, thanks to which the primary repression at the basis of the formation of the unconsious is implemented, by the same token gives the subject access to his own desire. Without this agency to arrange exchanges, without the mediation of the phallus, the subject, incapable of repression, no longer even gains access to the symbolic and sinks into psychosis.

Because they were effectively ignorant of this Law, and the structure of repression and the unconscious which it entails, we were able to say that primitive societies were 'psychotic' societies. Of course, this is simply our fierce way of abandoning them to their gentle madness (if not to see, as begins to happen in the psychoanalytic West itself, whether psychosis might not conceal a more radical meaning, a more radical symbolicity than we have ever glimpsed under the sign of psychoanalysis). Yes, these societies have access to the symbolic.[13] No, they do not gain access to the symbolic by means of the intercession of an immutable Law, the image of which is sketched in the social order itself: the Father, the Chief, the Signifier and Power. The symbolic is not an *agency* here, so that access to it would be regulated by the mediation of a Phallus, an uppercase figure to embody all the metonymic figures of the Law. The symbolic is precisely this cycle of exchanges, the cycle of giving and returning, an order born of the very reversibility which escapes the double jurisdiction, the repressed psychical agency, and the transcendent social instance.[14]

When fathers are exchanged, given, received and transmitted from one generation of initiates to the other in the form of already dead and always living ancestors (the biological father is himself inexchangeable, no-one can stand in for him, and his symbolic figure, his word, is immutable; it too remains unexchanged, a word with no response); when the mother (the ancestral grounds put at stake with each successive initiation), is *given*, received and transmitted (this is also the tribal language, the secret language to which the initiate gains access) by the fathers, then everything – the father, the mother and the word – loses its character as a fatal and indecipherable agency, even its position in a structure controlled by prohibition (just as birth and death lose their status as fatal events, as necessity and as law, in the symbolic hyperevent of initiation).

If we can speak of a society with neither repression nor unconscious, it is not in order to rediscover some miraculous innocence where the flows of 'desire' roam freely and the primary processes are realised without prohibition. This is *an order of the dispressed* [*défoulé*], an idealism of desire and the libido such as haunts Freudo-Reichian, Freudo-Marxist and even schizo-nomadic imaginations: the phantasm of a desire or a (machined) unconscious naturalised in order to be 'liberated'. The phantasm of 'liberty' has today been transferred from the spheres of rational thought to those of the irrational, the brute, the 'primary' and the unconscious while, however, remaining a *bourgeois* problematic (namely the Cartesian and Kantian problematic of freedom and necessity).

To put the theory of the unconscious into question is also to put the theory of Desire into question, in that here, at the level of an entire civilisation, it is always simply a matter of a negative phantasm of the rational order. Hence Desire becomes an integral part of our reigning prohibition, its dreamt materiality becomes part of our imaginary. Whether it is dialectically related to the prohibition, as with Oedipus and psychoanalysis, or whether it is exalted in its brute productivity, as in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, it remains the promise of a savage naturality, the phantasm of an *objective*, liberatory pulsional energy to be liberated – a force of desire inherited from the mobile field of revolutions: good old labour force. As we know, the effect of force is always the effect of repression, as the effect of reality is always the effect of the imaginary. We must write the 'Mirror of Desire' as we have written *The Mirror of Production*.

An example: primitive cannibalism. Apart from the question of sustenance, this is a problem of the 'oral drive' of devouring, on which there weighs a fundamental (perhaps even the most fundamental) prohibition for us, whereas certain primitives would naïvely transgress and fulfil their 'desire' through this very process. A postulate: every man would like to devour his fellow man, and when, due to necessity, a Catholic rugby team did just this after their plane crashed in the Cordillère des Andes, the whole world was astonished at this divine resurgence of a nature they thought dead and buried. Even the Pope blessed and exculpated them, so as not to make them into an example; nevertheless, this is no longer *absolutely* a crime. And why not, if only by reference to a *nature* whose consecration (unconscious and psychoanalytic), whose *libidinal* consecration is today in competition with the sanctity of the divine and the religious? Cannibals themselves do not claim to live in a state of nature, nor in accordance with their desire at all; they quite simply claim, through their cannibalism, to *live in a society*, the most interesting case being a society that eats its own dead. This is neither due to a vital necessity nor because the dead no longer count for anything, quite the contrary: it is in order to pay homage to them and thus to prevent those left to rot in accordance with the natural order, escaping from the social order, turning against the group and persecuting it. This devouring is a social act, a *symbolic* act, that aims to maintain a tissue of bonds with the dead man or the

enemy they devour. In any case they don't just eat anybody, as we know; whoever is eaten is always somebody worthy, it is always a mark of respect to devour somebody since, through this, the devoured even becomes sacred. *We* scorn what we eat, we can only eat what we despise, that is, death, the inanimate, the animal or the vegetable condemned to biological assimilation. We think of anthropophagia as despicable in view of the fact that we despise what we eat, the act of eating and ultimately even our own bodies. Primitive devouring is ignorant of the abstract separation of the eater and the eaten into the active and the passive. Between the two there is a duel mode, combining honour and reciprocity, perhaps even a challenge and a duel *tout court*, which the eaten can eventually win (cf. the whole ritual of propitiation as regards nourishment). In any event, it is not a mechanical act of absorption.[15] It is not even an absorption of the 'vital forces', as ethnologists, following the natives, communally claim, merely passing from an alimentary to a magical functionalism (the psychoanalysts adhere to a psychical functionalism of the pulsion). Devouring, no longer just an act of subsistence, nor a transubstantiation of manna benefiting the eater, is a *social* act, a sacrificial process where the metabolism of the whole group is at stake. Neither the fulfilment of desire nor the assimilation of something or other, it is on the contrary an act of expenditure, consumption or consummation, and of the transmutation of the flesh into a symbolic relation, the transformation of the body in social exchange. We find the same thing in the Eucharist, but in the abstract form of the sacrament, using the general equivalence of bread and wine. The accursed share consumed here is already considerably sublimated and evangelised.

Killing no longer has the same meaning for us. The ritual murder of the king has nothing to do with the 'psychoanalytic' murder of the father. Behind the obligation to expiate the privilege the king retains through death, his murder aims to keep what threatened to accumulate and become fixed on the king's person (status, wealth, women and power) within the flow of exchanges, within the group's reciprocal movements. His death prevents this accident. This is the essence and function of sacrifice: to extinguish what threatens to fall out of the group's symbolic control and to bury it under all the weight of the dead. The king must be killed from time to time, along with the phallus which began to rule over social life. The king's murder does not therefore come from the depths of the unconscious or from the figure of the father, on the contrary, it is our unconscious and its peripeteia that result in the loss of sacrificial mechanisms. We now only conceive of murder within a closed economy, as the phantasmatic murder of the father, that is, as the balance of repression and the law, as the fulfilment of desire and as the regulation of the accounts. The stake is phallic, and it is certain that it is on the basis of repression that, with the death of the father, the phallic peripeteia of the seizure of power enters the game. This is an extremely simplified rewriting of death and murder as repressed aggression, as a violence equivalent to the violence of repression. In the primitive order, murder is neither violence nor

an acting-out of the unconscious. So for those who kill the king, there is no seizure of power nor any increase in guilt, as there is in the Freudian myth. Neither does the king simply endure this. Instead, he *gives* his death, returns it in exchange, and marks it with the feast, whereas the phantasmatic murder of the father is lived as the experience of guilt and anxiety.

Thus, neither killing nor eating have the same meaning for us: they do not result in a 'murder-pulsion', in an oral sadism, nor in a structure of repression, which alone gives them the meaning they have for us today. They are social acts that rigorously follow the apparatus of symbolic obligation. Amongst other things, they never have the unilateral meaning in which all the aggression at the basis of our culture is expressed: killing–eating – I kill I eat – you are killed, you are eaten. The unconscious and all its phantasms (and their psychoanalytic theory) presuppose the acknowledgement of this disjunction, the repression of ambivalence, the restitution of which, under whatever form it may be, in the symbolic process, puts an end to the jurisdiction of the unconscious.

KILLING POSSESSING DEVOURING – the entirety of our individual unconscious is organised around these terms and the phantasmas that surround them, under the sign of repression.

GIVING RETURNING EXCHANGING – with the primitives, everything operates in the manifest collective exchange around these three terms, in the myths that underlie them.

Each of these 'verbs' of the unconscious presupposes a break, a rupture, the bar we find everywhere in psychoanalysis, along with the guilt it gives rise to, the play and the repetition of the prohibition. The 'verbs' of the symbolic assume on the contrary a reversibility, an indefinite cyclical transition.

Above all, however, the radical difference lies in the autonomisation of a psychical sphere: something operates collectively in primitive societies, the repression of which works for us solely on the agency of the psychical apparatus and the unconscious. The ritual is utterly different to the phantasm, as is the myth from the unconscious. All the analogies on which anthropology and psychoanalysis play are profound mystifications.

The distortion that psychoanalysis submits primitive societies to is of the same order, but in the opposite sense than what they have to endure under Marxist analysis.

1. For the anthropo-Marxists, the economic instance is also present and determinant in the type of society, it is merely hidden, latent, whereas for us it is manifest. This difference is judged to be secondary, however; the analysis does not stop and passes without meeting any opposition onto its materialist discourse.
2. For the anthropo-psychoanalysts, the agency of the unconscious is also present and determinant in this type of society; it is simply manifested, externalised, whereas for us it is latent, repressed. This difference remains inessential, however, and the analysis continues without disguising its discourse in terms of the unconscious.

On both sides there is the same misrecognition [*méconnaissance*] of this apparently miniscule difference: for one and the same structure, the economy or the unconscious, we pass from primitive formations to our own, now from the manifest to the hidden, now the reverse. Only our own metaphysics could neglect this detail, in the illusion that the content remains the same. But this is radically false: when the economic 'is hidden behind' other structures, it quite simply ceases to exist; it provides no account of anything, it is nothing. On the other hand, when the unconscious is 'manifest', when it becomes a manifest and articulated structure, it is no longer unconscious at all. A psychical structure and a process based on repression have no meaning in the other, ritual and non-psychical configuration of an overt resolution of signs. Everything changes when we pass from the latent to the manifest, and from the manifest to the latent.[16] This is why, against Marxist and psychoanalytic misrecognition, we must start over again *beginning from* this displacement.

We will come to see that the impossibility of locating and specifying the economic is due precisely to the symbolic. And that the possibility of overtly manifesting something unconscious, but which by this very fact ceases to be so, is also due to the symbolic.

The Double and the Split

The figure of the double, intimately bound up with figures of death and magic, poses in itself all the problems of psychological and psychoanalytic interpretation.

Shadow, spectre, reflection, image; a material spirit almost remains visible, the primitive double generally passes for the crude prefiguration of the soul and consciousness in accordance with an increasing sublimation and a spiritual 'hominisation', as in Teilhard de Chardin: towards the apogee of a single God and a universal morality. But this single God has everything to do with the form of a unified political power, and nothing to do with the primitive gods. In the same way, soul and consciousness have everything to do with a principle of the subject's unification, and nothing to do with the primitive double. On the contrary, the historical advent of the 'soul' puts an end to a proliferating exchange with spirits and doubles which, as an indirect consequence, gives rise to another figure of the double, wending its diabolical way just beneath the surface of Western reason. Once again, this figure has everything to do with the Western figure of alienation, and nothing to do with the primitive double. The telescoping of the two under the sign of psychology (conscious or unconscious) is only a misleading rewriting.

Between the primitive and its double, there is neither a mirror relation nor one of abstraction, as there is between the subject and its spiritual principle, the soul, or between the subject and its moral and psychological principle, consciousness. There is no sign of such a reason common to both the primitive and its double, no relation of ideal equivalence that structures

the subject for us to the point of splitting it. The double is no longer a fantastic ectoplasm, an archaic resurgence issuing from guilt and the depths of the unconscious (we will come back to this). The double, like the dead man (the dead man is the double of the living, the double is the familiar living figure of the dead), is a *partner* with whom the primitive has a personal and concrete relationship, sometimes happy, sometimes not, a certain type of visible exchange (word, gesture and ritual) with an invisible part of himself. *We cannot speak of alienation here*, for the subject is only alienated (like we are) when he internalises an abstract agency, issuing from the 'other world', as Nietzsche said – whether psychological (the ego and the ego-ideal), religious (God and the soul) or moral (conscience and the law) – an irreconcilable agency to which everything else is subordinated. Historically then, alienation begins with the internalisation of the Master by the *emancipated* slave: there is no alienation as long as the *duel*-relation of the master and the slave lasts.

The primitive has a non-alienated duel-relation with his double. He really can trade, as we are forever forbidden to do, *with his shadow* (the real shadow, not a metaphor), as with some original, living thing, in order to converse, protect and conciliate this tutelary or hostile shadow. The shadow is precisely not the reflection of an 'original' body, it has a full part to play, and is consequently not an 'alienated' part of the subject, but one of the figures of exchange. In another context, this is precisely what poets find when they question their own body, or interpellate words in language. To speak to one's body and to speak to language in a duel mode beyond the active and the passive (my body speaks (to) me, language speaks (to) me) – to make each fragment of the body and each fragment of language autonomous, like a living being, capable of responding and exchanging – is to bring about the end of separation and the split, which is only the submissive equivalence of each part of the body to the principle of the subject, and the submissive equivalence of each fragment of language to the code of language.

The status of the double (as well as that of spirits and gods, which are also real, living and different beings, not idealised essences) in primitive society is therefore the inverse of our alienation: one being multiplies into innumerable others just as alive as the first, whereas the unified, individual subject can only confront itself in alienation and death.

With the internalisation of the soul and consciousness (the principle of identity and equivalence), the subject undergoes a real confinement, similar to the confinement of the mad in the seventeenth century as described by Foucault. It is at this point that the primitive thought of the double as continuity and exchange is lost, and the haunting double comes to the fore as the subject's discontinuity in death and madness. 'Whoever sees his double, sees his death.' A vengeful and vampiric double, an unquiet soul, the double begins to prefigure the subject's death, haunting him in the very midst of his life. This is Dostoevsky's double, or Peter Schlemihl's, the man who lost

his shadow. We have always interpreted this double as a metaphor of the soul, consciousness, native soil, and so on. Without this incurable idealism and without being taken as a metaphor, the narrative is so much more extraordinary. We have all lost our *real* shadows, we no longer speak to them, and our bodies have left with them. To lose one's shadow is already to forget one's body. Conversely, when the shadow grows and becomes an autonomous power (as with the mirror-image in *The Student of Prague*, which has the effect of the Devil and dementia), it is so as to devour the subject who has lost it, it is a murderous shadow, the image of all the rejected and forgotten dead who, as is quite normal, never accept being nothing in the eyes of the living.

Our entire culture is full of this haunting of the separated double, even in its most subtle form, as Freud gave it in 'Das Unheimliche' ('The Uncanny': 'Disturbing Strangeness' or 'Disturbing Familiarity'): the anxiety that wells up around the most familiar things. Here the *vertigo of separation* builds up to its greatest intensity, since this is its simplest form. There comes a moment, in fact, when the things closest to us, such as our own bodies, the body itself, our voice and our appearance, are separated from us to the precise extent that we internalise the soul (or any other equivalent agency or abstraction) as the ideal principle of subjectivity. This is what kills off the proliferation of doubles and spirits, consigning them once again to the spectral, embryonic corridors of unconscious folklore, like the ancient gods that Christianity *verteufelt*, that is, transformed into demons.

By a final ruse of spirituality, this internalisation also *psychologises* doubles. In fact it is interpretation in terms of an archaic *psychical apparatus* that is the very last form of the *Verteufelung*, the demonic corruption and elimination of the primitive double: projection of the guilt attached to the phantasmatic murder of the other (the close relative) in accordance with the magic of the omnipotence of ideas (*Allmacht der Gedanken*), the return of the repressed, etc. In 'The Uncanny', Freud writes:

> Our analysis of instances of the uncanny has led us back to the old, animistic conception of the universe. This was characterised by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings; by the subject's narcissistic overvaluation of his own mental processes; by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic based on that belief; by the attribution to various outside persons and things of carefully graded magical powers, or '*mana*'; as well as by all the other creations with the help of which man, in the unrestricted narcissism of that stage of development, strove to fend off the manifest prohibitions of reality. It seems as if each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to the animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has passed through it without preserving certain residues and traces of it which are still capable of manifesting themselves, and that everything which now strikes us as 'uncanny' fulfils the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them back to expression. (*Standard Edition*, Vol. 17, 1955, pp. 240–41)

This is how psychology, our authority in the depths, our own 'next world', this omnipotence, magical narcissism, fear of the dead,[17] this animism or primitive psychical apparatus, is quietly palmed off on the savages in order then to recuperate them for ourselves as 'archaic traces'. Freud does not think this is what he said in speaking of 'narcissistic overvaluation of … mental processes'. If there is such an overvaluation of one's own mental processes (to the point of exporting this theory, as we have done with our morality and techniques, to the core of every culture), then it is Freud's overvaluation, along with our whole psychologistic culture. The jurisdiction of the psychological discourse over all symbolic practices (such as the dazzling practices of the savages, death, the double and magic; but also over our current symbolic practices) is even more dangerous than that of the economistic discourse: it is of the same order as the repressive jurisdiction of the soul and consciousness over the body's entire symbolic potential. Psychoanalysis's reinterpretation of the symbolic is a reductive operation. Since we live under the unconscious (but is this the case? Isn't it our own myth, marking out and even participating in repression: a repressed thought of repression?), we believe that we are justified in extending the jurisdiction of psychical history as we used to do with history itself, to every possible configuration. The unconscious, and the psychical order in general, becomes the insurmountable agency, giving the feudal right of trespass over every previous individual and social formation. This imaginary also spreads into the future, however: if the unconscious is our modern myth, and psychoanalysis its prophet, the liberation of the unconscious (Desiring-Revolution) is its millenial heresy.

The idea of the unconscious, *like the idea of consciousness*, remains an idea of discontinuity and rupture. Put simply, it substitutes the irreversibility of a lost object and a subject forever 'missing' itself, for the positivity of the object and the conscious subject. However decentred, the subject remains within the orbit of Western thought, with its successive 'topologies' (hell/heaven – subject/nature – conscious/unconscious), where the fragmented subject can only dream of a lost continuity.[18] It will never get back to, or catch up with [*rejoindre*] *utopia*, which is not at all the phantasm of a lost order but, contrary to all the topologies of discontinuity and repression, the idea of a duelling order, of reversibility, of a symbolic order (in the strong etymological sense of the term) where, for example, death is not a separate space; where neither the subject's own body nor its own shadow are separate spaces; where there is no death putting an end to the history of the body; where there is no bar putting an end to the ambivalence of the subject and the object; where there is neither a beyond (survival and death) nor an 'on this side' (the unconscious and the lost object); only an immediate, non-phantasmatic actualisation of symbolic reciprocity. This utopian idea is not fusional: only nostalgia engenders fusional utopias. There is no nostalgia here, nor is anything lost, separated or unconscious. Everything is already there, reversible and sacrificed.

Political Economy and Death

> We do not die because we must, we die because it is a habit,
> to which one day, not so long ago, our thoughts became bound.
>
> Raoul Vaneigem

> *Den Göttern ist der Tod immer nur ein Vorurteil*
> [To the Gods, death is only ever a prejudice.]
>
> F.W. Nietzsche

As a universal of the human condition, death exists only when *society* discriminates against the dead. The *institution* of death, like that of the afterlife and immortality, is a recent victory for the *political* rationalism of castes, priests and the Church: their power is based on the management of the imaginary sphere of death. As regards the disappearance of the religious afterlife, it is the even more recent victory for the *State's* political rationality. When the afterlife fades in the face of the advances made by 'materialist' reason, it is quite simply because it has crossed over into life itself. The power of the State is based on the management *of life as the objective afterlife.* In this, it is more powerful than the Church, since the abstract power of the State is increased not by an imaginary beyond, but by the imaginary of life itself. It relies on secularised death, the transcendence of the social, and its force derives from the mortal abstraction it embodies. Just as medicine is the management of the corpse, so the State is the management of the dead body of the socius.

From the start, the Church was established on the bipartition of survival, or the afterlife, from life, the earthly world and the Kingdom of Heaven. It kept a jealous watch over this partition, for if the distance disappeared, its power would be at an end. The Church lives in the *deferred eternity* (as the State lives in deferred society, as revolutionaries live in the deferred revolution: all are living in death) that it had so much trouble imposing. All primitive Christianity, and later popular, messianic and heretical Christianity, lived in the hope of parousia, in the necessity of the immediate realisation of the Kingdom of God (cf. W.E. Mühlmann, *Les Messianismes révolutionnaires* [tr. J.B., 1968]). The mad Christians did not at first believe in a heaven and hell in the beyond: their vision implied the pure and simple resolution of death in the collective will for *immediate eternity.* The great Manichean heresies that threatened the foundations of the Church hold the same principle since they interpret this world as an antagonistic duality, a *here* and a *there*, of the principles of good and evil; impiously, they bring heaven and hell down to earth. For having effaced the glaze of the beyond they were ferociously suppressed, as were the spiritualist heretics of the St Francis of Assisi or the Joachim of Fiore type, whose radical charity amounted to establishing a total community on this earth and thus sparing the Last Judgement. The Cathars also set their sights a little too much on *achieved* perfection in the inseparability of body and soul, the immanence of salvation in collective faith, which made a joke of the Church's power of death. Throughout its

history, the Church has had to dismantle the primitive community which had a tendency to seek salvation in the intense reciprocity with which it was shot through and on which it drew for its own energy. Against the abstract universality of God and the Church, sects and communities practised the 'self-management' of salvation, which then consisted in the group's symbolic exaltation, finally turning into a deadly vertigo. The Church's sole condition of possibility is the incessant elimination of this symbolic demand. This is also the State's sole condition of possibility. At this point political economy enters the arena.

To counter the dazzling sight of earthly communities, the Church imposes a *political economy of individual salvation*. First through faith (which became the soul's *personal* relation to God instead of the effervescent community), then through the accumulation of works and merits, that is, an economy in the strict sense of the term, with its final account and its equivalences. It is then, as always since the appearance of processes of accumulation,[19] that death really arose at the horizon of life. It is then that the Kingdom really passes to the other side of death, before which everyone finds themselves *alone* once again. Wherever it goes, Christianity trails with it the fascination with suffering, solitude and death involved in the destruction of archaic communities. In the completed form of the religious universal, as in the economic (capital), everyone finds themselves alone again.

With the sixteenth century, the modern figure of death was generalised. The Counter-Reformation, the funereal and obsessional games of the Baroque, and especially Protestantism, by individualising conscience before God and disinvesting collective ceremonials, brought about the progress of the individual's anguish of death. It also gave rise to the immense modern enterprise of staving off death: the ethics of accumulation and material production, sacralisation through investment, the labour and profit collectively called the 'spirit of capitalism' (Max Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic* [tr. T. Parsons, London: Routledge, 1992]) constructed a salvation-machine from which intra-worldly ascesis is little by little withdrawn in the interests of worldly and productive accumulation, without changing the aim of protecting itself against death.

With the turn of the sixteenth century, the vision and iconography of death in the Middle Ages was still folkloric and joyous. There is a *collective theatre* of death, which was not yet buried in individual consciousness (nor, as later, in the unconscious). In the fifteenth century, death also inspired the great messianic and egalitarian festival of the Dance of Death: kings, bishops, princes, townsfolk and villagers are all equal in the face of death, by way of a challenge to the unequal order of birth, wealth and power. This was the last great movement that Death was able to appear as an offensive myth, and as collective speech, since, as we know, death has become an individual, tragic[20] thought 'of the law [*de droite*]', a 'reactionary' thought as regards revolt and social revolutionary movements.

Our death was really born in the sixteenth century. It has lost its scythe and its clock, it has lost the Apocalyptic Horsemen and the grotesque and

macabre plays of the Middle Ages. Again, all this came from folklore and festival, in which death was still exchanged, not of course with the primitives' 'symbolic efficacy', but at least as the *collective* phantasm on cathedral pediments and in the divided operations of hell. We could even say that pleasure is possible insofar as there is a hell. Its disappearence from the imaginary is only the sign of its psychological interiorisation; death ceases to be the Grim Reaper, and becomes an anguish concerning death. More subtle and more scientific generations of priests and sorcerers will flourish on this psychological hell.

With the disintegration of traditional Christian and feudal communities through bourgeois Reason and the nascent system of political economy, death is no longer divided. It is cast in the image of the material goods which, as in previous exchanges, begin to circulate less between inseparable partners (it is always more or less a community or a clan who exchange), and increasingly under the sign of a general equivalent. In the capitalist mode, everyone is alone before the general equivalent. It is no coincidence that, in the same way, everyone finds themselves alone before death, since *death is general equivalence.*

From this point on the obsession with death and the will to abolish death through accumulation become the fundamental motor of the rationality of political economy. Value, in particular time as value, is accumulated in the phantasm of death deferred, pending the term of a linear infinity of value. Even those who no longer believe in a personal eternity believe in the infinity of time as they do in a species-capital of double-compound interests. The infinity of capital passes into the infinity of time, the eternity of a productive system no longer familiar with the reversibility of gift-exchange, but instead with the irreversibility of quantitative growth. The accumulation of time imposes the idea of progress, as the accumulation of science imposes the idea of truth: in each case, what is accumulated is no longer symbolically exchanged, but becomes an *objective* dimension. Ultimately, the total objectivity of time, like total accumulation, is the total impossibility of symbolic exchange, that is, death. Hence the absolute impasse of political economy, which intends to eliminate death through accumulation: the time of accumulation is the time of death itself. We cannot hope for a dialectical revolution at the end of this process of spiralling hoarding.

We already know that the economic rationalisation of exchange (the market) is the social form which *produces* scarcity (Marshall Sahlins, 'The original affluent society', in *Stone Age Economics* [Chicago: Aldine and Atherton, 1972]). Similarly, the infinite accumulation of time as value under the sign of general equivalence entails the *absolute scarcity of time that is death*.

A contradiction in capitalism? No, communism in this instance is in solidarity with political economy, since, in accordance with the same fantastic schema of an eternal accumulation of productive forces, communism too aims for the abolition of death. Only its total ignorance of death (save perhaps as a hostile horizon to be conquered by science and technics) has

protected it up to now from the worst contradictions. For nothing can will the abolition of the law of value if you want to abolish death, that is, to preserve life as absolute value, at the same time. Life itself must leave the law of value and achieve a successful exchange against death. The materialists, with their idealistic life expurgated of death, a life 'free' at last of all ambivalence, hardly trouble themselves with this.[21]

Our whole culture is just one huge effort to dissociate life and death, to ward off the ambivalence of death in the interests of life as value, and time as the general equivalent. The elimination of death is our phantasm, and ramifies in every direction: for religion, the afterlife and immortality; for science, truth; and for economics, productivity and accumulation.

No other culture had this distinctive opposition of life and death in the interests of life as positivity: life as accumulation, death as due payment.

No other culture had this impasse: as soon as the *ambivalence* of life and death and the symbolic reversibility of death comes to an end, we enter into a process of accumulation of life as *value*; but by the same token, we also enter the field of the *equivalent* production of death. So life-become-value is constantly *perverted* by the equivalent death. Death, at the same instant, becomes the object of a perverse desire. Desire invests the very separation of life and death.

This is the only way that we can speak of a death-drive. This is the only way we can speak of the unconscious, for *the unconscious is only the accumulation of equivalent death*, the death that is no longer exchanged and can only be cashed out in the phantasm. The symbolic is the inverse dream of an end of accumulation and a possible reversibility of death in exchange. *Symbolic* death, which has not undergone the *imaginary* disjunction of life and death which is at the origin of the *reality* of death, is exchanged in a social ritual of feasting. Imaginary-real death (our own) can only be redeemed through the individual work of mourning, which the subject carries out over the death of others and over himself from the start of his own life. This work of mourning has fuelled Western metaphysics of death since Christianity, even in the metaphysical concept of the death drive.

The Death Drive

With Freud we pass from philosophical death and the drama of consciousness to death as a pulsional process inscribed in the unconscious order; from a metaphysics of anguish to a metaphysics of the pulsion. It's just as if death, *liberated from the subject*, at last gained its status as an *objective* finality: the pulsional energy of death or the principle of psychical functioning.

Death, by becoming a pulsion, does not cease to be a finality (it is even the only end from this standpoint: the proposition of the death drive signifies an extraordinary simplification of finalities, since even Eros is subordinate to it), but this finality sinks, and is inscribed in the unconscious. Now this sinking of death into the unconscious coincides with the sinking of the dominant

system: death becomes simultaneously a 'principle of psychical functioning' and the 'reality principle' of our social formations, through the immense repressive mobilisation of labour and production. In other words, with the death drive, Freud installs the process of *repetition* at the core of objective determinations, at the very moment when the general system of production passes into pure and simple *reproduction*. This coincidence is extraordinary, since we are much more interested in a *genealogy* of the concept of the death drive than in its metaphysical status. Is the death drive an anthropological 'discovery' which supplants all the others (and which can from now on provide a universal explanatory principle: we can imagine political economy entirely governed and engendered by the death drive), or is it *produced* at a given moment in relation to a particular configuration of the system? In this case, its radical nature is simply the radical nature of the system itself, and the concept merely sanctions a culture of death by giving it the label of a trans-historical pulsion. This operation is characteristic of all idealist thought, but we refuse to admit this with Freud. With Freud (as with Marx), Western reason will stop rationalising and idealising its own principles, it will even stop idealising reality through its critical effect of 'objectivity'. Ultimately, reality will designate unsurpassable pulsional or economic structures: thus the death drive as the *eternal* process of desire. But how is it that this proposition is itself not a matter of a secondary elaboration?

It is true that, at first, the death drive breaks with Western thought. From Christianity to Marxism and existentialism: either death is openly denied and sublimated, or it is dialecticised. In Marxist theory and practice, death is already conquered in the being of the class, or it is integrated as historical negativity. In more general terms, the whole Western practice of the domination of nature and the sublimation of aggression in production and accumulation is characterised as constructive Eros: Eros makes use of sublimated aggression for its own ends and, in the movement of becoming (this applies just as much to political economy), death is distilled as negativity into homeopathic doses. Not even the modern philosophies of 'being-towards-death' reverse this tendency: here death serves as a tragic haunting of the subject, sealing its absurd liberty.[22]

In Freud it is quite another matter. A dialectic with the death drive is no longer possible; there is no longer any sublimation, even if it is tragic. For the first time, death appeared as an indestructible *principle*, in opposition to Eros. The subject, class and history are irrelevant in this regard: the irreducible duality of the two pulsions, Eros and Thanatos, rewakens the ancient Manichean version of the world, the endless antagonism of the twin principles of good and evil. This very powerful vision comes from the ancient cults where the basic intuition of a specificity of evil and death was still strong. This was unbearable to the Church, who will take centuries to exterminate it and impose the pre-eminent principle of the Good (God), reducing evil and death to a negative principle, dialectically subordinate to the other (the Devil). But there is always the nightmare of Lucifer's autonomy, the Archangel of Evil (in all their forms, as popular heresies and superstitions

that always have a tendency to take the existence of a principle of evil literally and hence to form cults around it, even including black magic and Jansenist theory, not to mention the Cathars), which will haunt the Church day and night. It opposes the dialectic as an institutional theory and as a deterrent to a radical, dualistic and Manichean concept of death. History will bring victory to the Church and the dialectic (including the 'materialist' dialectic). In this sense, Freud breaks quite profoundly with Christian and Western metaphysics.

The duality of the life and death instincts corresponds more precisely to Freud's position in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, the duality completes itself in a cycle dominated solely by the death drive. Eros is nothing but an immense detour taken by culture towards death, which subordinates everything to its own ends. But this last version does not, however, revert to an inverted dialectic between the two terms of the duality, since dialectics can only be the constructive becoming of Eros, whose goal is 'to establish ever larger unities and to bind and regulate energies'. Two principal characteristics oppose the death drive to this:

1. It dissolves assemblages, unbinds energy and undoes Eros's organic discourse by returning things to an inorganic, *ungebunden*, state, in a certain sense, to utopia as opposed to the articulate and constructive topics of Eros. Entropy of death, negentropy of Eros.
2. This power of disintegration, disarticulation and *defection* implies a radical counter-finality in the form of an involution towards the prior, inorganic state. The compulsion to repeat (*Wiederholungszwang*), or the 'tendency to reproduce and revive even those past events that involve no satisfaction whatsoever', is primarily, for every living being, the tendency to reproduce the non-event of a prior inorganic state of things, that is to say, death. It is thus always as a repetitive cycle that death comes to dismantle the constructive, linear or dialectical finalities of Eros. The viscosity of the death drive and the elasticity of the inorganic is everywhere victorious in its resistance to the structuration of life.

In the proposed death drive therefore, whether in its duel form or in the incessant and destructive counter-finality of repetition, there is something irreducible to all the intellectual apparatuses of Western thought. Freud's thought acts fundamentally as the death drive in the Western theoretical universe. But then, of course, it is absurd to give it the constructive status of 'truth': the 'reality' of the death instinct is indefensible; to remain faithful to the intuition of the death drive, it must remain a deconstructive hypothesis, that is, it must be adopted solely within the limits of the deconstruction that it carries out on all prior thought. As a concept, however, it too must be immediately deconstructed. We cannot think (other than as the ultimate subterfuge of reason) that the principle of deconstruction is all that escapes it.

The death drive must be defended against every attempt to redialecticise it into a new constructive edifice. Marcuse is a good example of this. Concerning repression through death, he writes: 'Theology and philosophy

today compete with each other in celebrating death as an existential category. Perverting[!] a biological fact into an ontological essence, they bestow transcendental blessing on the guilt of mankind which they help to perpetuate' (*Eros and Civilisation*[London: Sphere, 1970], p. 188). Thus it is for 'surplus-repression'. As for fundamental repression:

> The brute fact of death denies once and for all the reality of a non-repressive existence. For death is the final negativity of time, but 'joy wants eternity'. … Time has no power over the Id, the original domain of the pleasure principle. But the Ego, through which alone pleasure becomes real, is in its entirety subject to time. The mere anticipation of the inevitable end, present in every instant, introduces a repressive element into all libidinal relations. (ibid., p. 185)

We will overlook the 'brute fact of death': it is never a brute fact, only a social relation is repressive. What is most curious is the way in which death's primal repression exchanges signs with the 'liberation' of Eros:

> The death instinct operates under the Nirvana principle: it tends towards … a state without want. This trend of this instinct implies that its *destructive* manifestations would be minimised as it approached such a state. If the instinct's basic objective is not the termination of life but of pain – the absence of tension –then paradoxically, in terms of the instinct, the conflict between life and death is the more reduced, the closer life approximates the state of gratification. … Eros, freed from surplus-repression, would be strengthened, and the strengthened Eros would, as it were, absorb the objective of the death instinct. *The instinctual value of death would have changed*. (ibid., p. 187, J.B.'s emphasis)

Thus we will be able to change the instinct and triumph over the brute fact, in accordance with good old idealist philosophy of freedom and necessity:

> Death can become a token of freedom. The necessity of death does not refute the possibility of final liberation. Like the other necessities, it can be made rational – painless. (ibid., p. 188)

The Marcusean dialectic therefore implies the total restoration of the death drive (in *Eros and Civilisation*, however, this passage is immediately followed by the 'Critique of Neo-Freudian Revisionism'!), thus limiting the resistances this concept provokes in pious souls. Here again, it is not too much for dialectics – the 'liberation' of Eros in this instance; in others the 'liberation' of the forces of production – to bring about the end of death.

The death drive is irritating, because it does not allow of any dialectical recovery. This is where its radicalism lies. But the panic it provokes does not confer the status of truth on it: we must wonder if, in the final instance, it is not itself a rationalisation of death.

This is first of all the conviction that we hear in Freud (elsewhere he will talk of a speculative hypothesis):

> The dominating tendency of mental life … is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli (the 'Nirvana principle', to borrow a term from Barbara Low) … [which] is one of our strongest reasons for believing in the existence of death instincts. ('Beyond the pleasure principle', in *Standard Edition*, Vol. 18, 1955, pp. 55–6)

Why, then, all Freud's efforts to ground the death instinct in biological rationality (Weissmann's analysis, etc.)? This positivist effort is generally deplored, a little like Engels' attempt to dialecticise Nature that we agree to ignore out of affection for him. However:

> If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that *'the aim of all life is death'* and, looking backwards, that *'inanimate things existed before living ones'*. … Thus these guardians of life [instincts], too, were originally the myrmidons of death. (ibid., p. 38)

It is difficult to rid the death drive of positivism here in order to turn it into a 'speculative hypothesis' or 'purely and simply a principle of psychical functioning' (J.B. Pontalis, *L'Arc*, 34, 1968). Moreover, at this level there is no longer any real pulsional duality: death alone is finality. But it is this finality that in turn poses a crucial problem, since it inscribes death as anterior, as psychical and organic destiny, almost like programming or genetic code, in short, as a *positivity* that, unless we believe in the scientific reality of this pulsion, we can only take it as a myth. We can only set Freud against what he himself says:

> The theory of the drives is so to say our mythology. Drives are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness. ('New introductory lectures', in *Standard Edition*, Vol. 22, 1964, p. 95)

If the death drive is a myth, then this is how we will interpret it. We will interpret the death drive, and the concept of the unconscious itself, as myths, and no longer take account of their effects or their efforts at 'truth'. A myth *recounts* something: not so much in the content as in the form of its discourse. Let's make a bet that, under the metaphoric species of sexuality and death, psychoanalysis tells us something concerning the fundamental organisation of our culture, that when the myth is no longer told, when it establishes its fables as axioms, it loses the 'magnificent indefiniteness' that Freud spoke of. 'The concept is only the residue of a metaphor', as Nietzsche said. Let's bet then on the *metaphor* of the unconscious, on the *metaphor* of the death drive.

Eros in the service of death, all cultural sublimation as a long detour to death, the death drive nourishing repressive violence and presiding over culture like a ferocious super-ego, the forces of life inscribed in the compulsion to repeat; all this is true, but true of *our* culture. Death undertakes to abolish death and, for this very purpose, erects death above death and is haunted by it as its own end. The term 'pulsion' or 'drive' is stated metaphorically, designating the contemporary phase of the political-economic system (does it then remain political economy?) where the law of value, in its most terroristic structural form, reaches completion in the pure and simple compulsive reproduction of the code, where the law of value appears to be a finality as irreversible as a pulsion, so that it takes on the figure of a destiny for our culture. Stage of the immanent repetition of one and the same law, insisting on its own end, caught, totally invested by death

as objective finality, and total subversion by the death drive as a deconstructive process – the metaphor of the death drive says all of this simultaneously, for the death drive is at the same time the system and the system's *double*, its doubling into a radical counter-finality (see the Double, and its 'worrying strangeness', *das Unheimliche)*.

This is what the myth recounts. But let's see what happens when it sets itself up as the objective discourse of the 'pulsion'. With the term 'pulsion', which has both a biological and a psychical definition, psychoanalysis settles down into categories that come straight from the imaginary of a certain Western reason: far from radically contradicting this latter, it must then interpret itself as a moment of Western thought. As for the biological, it is clear that scientific rationality produces the distinction of the living and the non-living on which biology is based. Science, producing itself as a code, on the one hand literally produces the dead, the non-living, as a conceptual object, and, on the other, produces the separation of the dead as an axiom from which science can be legitimated. The only good (scientific) object, just like the only good Indian, is a dead one. Now it is this inorganic state to which the death drive is oriented, to the non-living status that only comes about through the arbitrary decrees of science and, when all's said and done, through its own phantasm of repression and death. Ultimately, being nothing but the cyclical repetition of the non-living, the death drive contributes to biology's arbitrariness, doubling it through a psychoanalytic route. But not every culture produces a separate concept of the non-living; only our culture produces it, under the sign of biology. Thus, suspending the discrimination would be enough to invalidate the concept of the death drive, which is ultimately only a theoretical agreement between the living and the dead, with the sole result that science loses its footing amongst all the attempts at articulation. The non-living is always permanently sweeping science along into the axiomatics of a system of death (see J. Monod, *Chance and Necessity* [tr. Austyn Wainhouse, London: Collins, 1970]).

The problem is the same as regards the psychical, putting the whole of psychoanalysis into question. We must ask ourselves when and why our system began to produce the 'psychical'. The psychical has only recently become autonomous, doubling biology's autonomy at a higher level. This time the line passes between the organic, the somatic and 'something else'. There is nothing psychical save on the basis of this distinction. Hence the ensuing insoluble difficulty of linking the two parts together again; the precise result of this is the concept of the pulsion, which is intended to form a bridge between the two, but which merely contributes to the arbitrariness of each. Here the metapsychology of the pulsion reverts to mind–body metaphysics, rewriting it at a more advanced stage.

The separated order of the psychical results from our precipitate desire, in our (conscious or unconscious) 'heart of hearts', for everything that the system prohibits from collective and symbolic exchange: it is an order of the repressed. It is hardly astonishing that this order is governed by the death drive, since it is nothing but the precipitate individual of an order of death.

Psychoanalysis, like every other discipline, theorises the death drive as such within its own order, and so merely sanctions this mortal discrimination.

Conscious, unconscious, super-ego, guilt, repression, primary and secondary processes, phantasm, neurosis and psychosis: yes, all this works very well *if we consent to* the circumscription of the psychical as such, which circumscription produces our system (not just any system) as the immediate and fundamental form of intelligibility, that is to say, as *code*. The omnipotence of the code is precisely the inscription of separate spheres, which then justifies a specialised investigation and a sovereign science; but it is undoubtedly the psychical that has the best future. All the savage, errant, transversal and symbolic processes will be inscribed and domesticated within it, *in the name of the unconscious itself*, which, like an unexpected joke, is generally considered today as the leitmotiv of radical 'liberation'! Death itself will be domesticated under the sign of the death drive!

In fact the death drive must be interpreted against Freud and psychoanalysis if we wish to retain its radicality. The death drive must be understood as acting against the scientific positivity of the psychoanalytic apparatus as developed by Freud. The death drive is not just the limit of psychoanalysis's formulations nor its most radical conclusion, it is its reversal, and those who have rejected the concept of the death drive have, in a certain sense, a more accurate view than those who take it, as even Freud himself did, in their psychoanalytic stride without, perhaps, understanding what he had said. The death drive effectively goes far beyond all previous points of view and renders all previous apparatuses, whether economic, energetic, topological or even the psychical apparatus itself, useless. All the more reason, of course, for the pulsional logic it draws on, inherited from the scientific mythology of the nineteenth century. Perhaps Lacan guessed this when he spoke of the 'irony' of the concept of the death drive, of the unheard of and insoluble paradox that it poses. Historically, psychoanalysis has taken the view that this is its strangest offspring, but death does not allow itself to be caught in the mirror of psychoanalysis. It acts as a total, radical, functional principle, and has no need of the mirror, repression, nor even a libidinal economy. It merely meanders through successive topologies and energetic calculi, ultimately forming the economics of the unconscious itself, denouncing all that *as well* as Eros's positive machinery, as the positive interpreting machine that it disrupts and dismantles like any other. A principle of counter-finality, a radical speculative hypothesis, meta-economic, metapsychical, meta-energetic, metapsychoanalytic, the death (drive) is beyond the unconscious: it must be wrested from psychoanalysis and turned against it.

Death in Bataille

Despite its radicality, the psychoanalytic vision of death remains an *insufficient vision*: the pulsions are *constrained* by repetition, its perspective bears on a final equilibrium within the inorganic continuum, eliminating differences

and intensities following an involution towards the lowest point; an entropy of death, pulsional conservatism, equilibrium in the absence of Nirvana. This theory manifests certain affinities with Malthusian political economy, the objective of which is to protect oneself against death. For political economy only exists by default: death is its blind spot, the absence haunting all its calculations. And the absence of death alone permits the exchange of values and the play of equivalences. *An infinitesimal injection of death would immediately create such excess and ambivalence that the play of value would completely collapse.* Political economy is an economy of death, because it economises on death and buries it under its discourse. The death drive falls into the opposite category: it is the discourse of death as *the* insurmountable finality. This discourse is oppositional but complementary, for if political economy is indeed Nirvana (the infinite accumulation and reproduction of dead value), then the death drive denounces its truth, at the same time as subjecting it to absolute derision. It does this, however, in the terms of the system itself, by idealising death as a drive (as an objective finality). As such, the death drive is the current system's most radical negative, but even it simply holds up a mirror to the funereal imaginary of political economy.

Instead of establishing death as the regulator of tensions and an equilibrium function, as the *economy* of the pulsion, Bataille introduces it in the opposite sense, as the paroxysm of exchanges, superabundance and excess. Death as excess, always already there, proves that life is only defective when death has taken it hostage, that life only exists in bursts and in exchanges with death, if it is not condemned to the discontinuity of value and therefore to absolute deficit. 'To will that there be life only is to make sure that there is only death.' The idea that death is not at all a breakdown of life, that it is willed by life itself, and that the delirial (economic) phantasm of eliminating it is equivalent to implanting it in the heart of life itself – this time as an endless mournful nothingness. Biologically, '[t]he idea of a world where human life might be artificially prolonged has a nightmare quality about it' (G. Bataille, *Eroticism* [2nd edn, tr. M. Dalwood, London: Marion Boyars, 1987], p. 101), but symbolically above all; and here the nightmare is no longer a simple possibility, but the reality we live at every instant: death (excess, ambivalence, gift, sacrifice, expenditure and the paroxysm), and so real life is absent from it. We renounce dying and accumulate instead of losing ourselves:

> Not only do we renounce death, but also we let our desire, which is really the desire to die, lay hold of its object and we keep it while we live on. We enrich our life instead of losing it. (*Eroticism*, p. 142)

Here, luxury and prodigality predominate over functional calculation, just as death predominates over life as the unilateral finality of production and accumulation:

> On a comprehensive view, human life strives towards prodigality to the point of anguish, to the point where the anguish becomes unbearable. The rest is mere moralising chatter. … A febrile unrest within us asks death to wreak its havoc at our expense. (ibid., p. 60)

Death and sexuality, instead of confronting each other as antagonistic principles (Freud), are exchanged in the same cycle, in the same cyclical *revolution* of continuity. Death is not the 'price' of sexuality – the sort of equivalence one finds in every theory of complex living beings (the infusorium is itself immortal and asexual) – nor is sexuality a simple detour on the way to death, as in *Civilisation and its Discontents*: they exchange their energies and excite each other. Neither has its own specific economy: life and death only fall under the sway of a single economy if they are separated; once they are mixed, they pass beyond economics altogether, into festivity and loss (eroticism according to Bataille):

> [W]e can no longer differentiate between sexuality and death[, which] are simply the culminating points of the festival nature celebrates, with the inexhaustible multitude of living beings, both of them signifying the boundless wastage of nature's resources as opposed to the urge to live on characteristic of every living creature. (*Eroticism*, p. 61)

This festivity takes place because it reinstates the *cycle* where penury imposes the *linear* economy of duration, because it reinstates a cyclical revolution of life and death where Freud augurs no other issue than the repetitive involution of death.

In Bataille, then, there is a vision of death as a principle of excess and an anti-economy. Hence the metaphor of luxury and the luxurious character of death. Only sumptuous and useless expenditure has meaning; the economy has no meaning, it is only a residue that has been made into the law of life, whereas wealth lies in the luxurious exchange of death: sacrifice, the 'accursed share', escaping investment and equivalence, can only be annihilated. If life is only a need to survive *at any cost*, then annihilation is a *priceless* luxury. In a system where life is ruled by value and utility, death becomes a useless luxury, and the only alternative.

In Bataille, this luxurious conjunction of sex and death figures under the sign of *continuity*, in opposition to the discontinuous economy of individual existences. Finality belongs in the discontinuous order, where discontinuous beings secrete finality, all sorts of finalities, which amount to only one: their *own* death.

> We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. (*Eroticism*, p. 15)

Death itself is without finalities; in eroticism, the finality of the individual being is put back into question:

> What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners …? The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participants as they are in their normal lives. (ibid., p. 17)

Erotic nakedness is equal to death insofar as it inaugurates a state of communication, loss of identity and fusion. The fascination of the dissolution of

constituted forms: such is Eros (*pace* Freud, for whom Eros binds energies, federates them into ever larger unities). In death, as in Eros, it is a matter of introducing all possible continuity into discontinuity, a game of complete continuity. It is in this sense that 'death, the rupture of the discontinuous individualities to which we cleave in terror, stands there before us more real than life itself' (ibid., p. 19). Freud says exactly the same thing, but by default. It is no longer a question of the same death.

What Freud missed was not seeing the curvature of life in death, he missed its vertigo and its excess, its reversal of the entire economy of life, making it, in the form of a final pulsion, into a belated equation of life. Freud stated life's final economy under the sign of repetition and missed its paroxysm. Death is neither resolution nor involution, but a reversal and a symbolic challenge.

> For once they travel down their allotted paths
> With open eyes, self-oblivious, too ready to
> Comply with what the gods have wished them,
> Only too gladly will mortal beings
> Speed back into the All by the shortest way;
> So rivers plunge – not movement, but rest they seek,
> Drawn on, pulled down against their will from
> Boulder to boulder – abandoned, helmless –
> By that mysterious yearning toward the chasm;
> Chaotic deeps attract, and whole peoples too
> May come to long for death
> [By Xanthos once, in Grecian times, there stood The town]
> The kindness of Brutus provoked them. For
> When fire broke out, most nobly he offered them
> His help, although he led those troops which
> Stood at their gates to besiege the township
> Yet from the walls they threw all the servants down
> Whom he had sent. Much livelier then at once
> The fire flared up, and they rejoiced, and
> Brutus extended his arms towards them,
> All were beside themselves. And great crying there,
> Great jubilation sounded. Then into flames
> Leapt man and woman; boys came hurtling
> Down from the roofs or their fathers stabbed them.
> It is not wise to fight against heroes. But
> Events long prepared it. Their ancestors
> When they were quite encircled once and
> Strongly the Persian forces pressed them,
> Took rushes from the rivers and, that their foes
> Might find a desert there, set ablaze the town;
> And house and temple – breathed to holy
> Aether – and men did the flame carry off there.
> So their descendants heard … (Hölderlin, 'Voice of the people'
> [2nd version, in *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, tr. and ed. Michael Hamburger, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, pp. 178–83])

The proposition according to which life and death are exchanged, and exchanged at the highest price with death, no longer belongs to the order of scientific truth, since it is a 'truth' that science is forever forbidden.

> If the union of two lovers comes about through love, it involves the idea of death, murder or suicide … [a] continuous violation of discontinuous individuality … the orifices, gulfs and abysses whereby beings are absorbed into continuity, somehow assimilates it to death. (Bataille, *Eroticism*, pp. 21ff)

When Bataille says this, concerning eroticism, there is no objective relation, no law, and no natural necessity in any of this. Luxury and excess are not functions, they are inscribed neither in the body nor in the world. Nor on the other hand is death – sumptuous, symbolic death, which belongs to the order of the challenge – inscribed in a body or a nature any longer. The symbolic can never be confused with the real or with science.

But even Bataille commits the following error:

> The desire to produce at cut prices is niggardly and human. Nature, for its part, is boundlessly prodigious, and 'sacrifices' in good spirits. (ibid., p. 60)

Why seek the security of an ideally prodigious nature, as opposed to the economists' ideally circulating nature? Luxury is no more 'natural' than economics. Sacrifice and sacrificial expenditure are not of the order of things. This error leads Bataille to confuse reproductive sexuality with erotic expenditure:

> The excess from which reproduction springs can only be understood with the aid of the excess of death, and vice-versa. (ibid., p. 101)

But reproduction as such has no excess – even if it implies the individual's death, it is still a matter of a positive economy and a functional death – from which the species might benefit. Sacrificial death, however, is anti-productive and anti-reproductive. It is true that it aims at continuity, as Bataille says, but not that of the species, which is only the continuity of an order of life, whereas the radical continuity in which the subject is ruined by sex and death always signifies the fabulous loss of an order. It is no more supported by the reproductive act than desire is supported by need, no more than sumptuary expenditure prolongs the satisfaction of needs: this biological functionalism is annihilated in eroticism. To look for the secret of sacrifice, sacrificial destruction, play and expenditure in the law of the species, is to reduce it all to a functionalism. There is not even a contiguity between sacrifice and the law of the species. Erotic excess and the reproductive sexual function have nothing in common. The symbolic excess of death has nothing in common with the body's biological losses.[23]

Bataille, here, labours the influence of the temptation of naturalism, if not biologism, leading him, conversely, to naturalise a tendency to discontinuity: 'The urge to live on characteristic of every living creature' (ibid., p. 61). The 'living creature' protects itself against the living energies of a debauched nature, an orgy of annihilation by means of prohibitions, resisting the excess of the death drive that comes from nature by every available means (its resistance, however, is only ever provisional: 'Men have never definitively said *no* to violence and death' – ibid., p. 62).

Thus, on the basis of a *natural* definition of expenditure (nature as the model of prodigality) and a substantial and ontological definition of economics (the subject wishes to live on in his being – but where does this basic desire come from?), Bataille sets up a kind of *subjective dialectic* of prohibition and transgression, where the initially high-spirited character of sacrifice and death is lost in the delights of Christianity and perversion;[24] a kind of *objective dialectic* between continuity and discontinuity where the challenge posed by death to economic organisation is effaced in the face of a great metaphysical alternation.

Nevertheless, something remains in Bataille's excessive and luxuriant vision of death that removes it from psychoanalysis and its individual and psychical domain. This something provides the opportunity to disturb every economy, shattering not only the objective mirror of political economy, but also the inverse psychical mirror of repression, the unconscious and libidinal economy. Beyond all mirrors, or in their fragments, shattered like those of the mirror where *The Student of Prague* rediscovered his real image at the moment of death, something appears for us today: a fantastic dispersal of the body, of being and wealth. Bataille's figure of death is the closest premonition of this.

My Death is Everywhere, my Death Dreams

Punctual Death, Biological Death

The irreversibility of biological death, its objective and punctual character, is a modern fact of science. It is specific to our culture. Every other culture says that death begins before death, that life goes on after life, and that it is impossible to distinguish life from death. Against the representation which sees in one the *term* of the other, we must try to see the radical *indeterminacy* of life and death, and the impossibility of their autonomy in the symbolic order. Death is not a due payment [*échéance*], it is a nuance of life; or, life is a nuance of death. But our modern idea of death is controlled by a very different system of representations: that of the machine and the function. A machine either works or it does not. Thus the biological machine is either dead or alive. The symbolic order is ignorant of this digital abstraction. And even biology acknowledges that we start dying at birth, but this remains with the category of a functional definition.[25] It is quite another thing to say that death articulates life, is exchanged with life and is the apogee of life: for then it becomes absurd to make life a process which expires with death, and more absurd still to make death equivalent to a deficit and an accelerated repayment. Neither life nor death can any longer be assigned a given *end*: there is therefore no punctuality nor any possible *definition* of death.

We are living entirely within evolutionist thought, which states that we go from life to death: this is the illusion of the subject that sustains both biology and metaphysics (biology wishes to reverse metaphysics, but

merely prolongs it). But there is no longer even a subject who dies at a given moment. It is more real to say that whole parts of 'ourselves' (of our bodies, our language) fall from life to death, while the living are subjected to the work of mourning. In this way, a few of the living manage to forget them gradually, as God managed to forget the drowned girl who was carried away by the stream of water in Brecht's song:

> *Und es geschah, dass Gott sie allmählich vergass,*
>
> *zuerst das Gesicht, dann die Hände, und zuletzt das Haar …*
>
> [It happened (very slowly) that it gently slid from God's thoughts:
>
> First her face, then her hands, and right at the end her hair.]
>
> ['The Drowned Girl' in *Bertolt Brecht: Poems and Songs*, ed. and tr. John Willett, London: Methuen, 1990, p. 14]

The subject's identity is continually falling apart, falling into God's forgetting. But this death is not at all biological. At one pole, biochemistry, asexual protozoa are not affected by death, they divide and branch out (nor is the genetic code, for its part, ever affected by death: it is transmitted unchanged beyond individual fates). At the other, symbolic, pole, death and nothingness no longer exist, since in the symbolic, life and death are reversible.

Only in the infinitesimal space of the individual conscious subject does death take on an irreversible meaning. Even here, death is not an event, but a myth experienced as anticipation. The subject needs a myth of its end, as of its origin, to form its identity. In reality, the subject is never there: like the face, the hands and the hair, and even before no doubt, it is always already somewhere else, trapped in a senseless distribution, an endless cycle impelled by death. This death, everywhere in life, must be conjured up and localised in a precise point of time and a precise place: the body.

In biological death, death and the body neutralise instead of stimulating each other. The mind–body duality is biology's *fundamental* presupposition. In a certain sense, this duality is death itself, since it objectifies the body as residual, as a bad object which takes its revenge by dying. It is according to the mind that the body becomes the brute, objective fact, fated for sex, anguish and death. It is according to the mind, this imaginary schizz, that the body becomes the 'reality' that exists only in being condemned to death.

Therefore the mortal body is no more 'real' than the immortal soul: both result simultaneously from the same abstraction, and with them the two great complementary metaphysics: the idealism of the soul (with all its moral metamorphoses) and the 'materialist' idealism of the body, prolonged in biology. Biology lives on as much by the separation of mind and body as from any other Christian or Cartesian metaphysics, but it no longer declares this. The mind or soul is not mentioned any more: as an ideal principle, it has entirely passed into the moral discipline of science; into the legitimating principle of technical operations on the real and on the world; into the principles of an 'objective' materialism. In the Middle Ages, those who

practised the discourse of the mind or soul were closer to the 'bodily signs' (Octavio Paz, *Conjunctions and Disjunctions* [tr. Helen Lane, New York: Arcade, 1990]) than biological science, which, techniques and axioms, has passed entirely over to the side of the 'non-body'.

The Accident and the Catastrophe

There is a paradox of modern bourgeois rationality concerning death. To conceive of it as natural, profane and irreversible constitutes the sign of the 'Enlightenment' and Reason, but enters into sharp contradiction with the principles of bourgeois rationality, with its individual values, the unlimited progress of science, and its mastery of nature in all things. Death, neutralised as a 'natural fact', gradually becomes a *scandal*. Octavio Paz has analysed this brilliantly in his theory of the Accident:

> Modern science has eliminated epidemics and has given us plausible explanations of other natural catastrophes: nature has ceased to be the depository of our guilt feelings; at the same time, technology has extended and widened the notion of accident and, what is more, it has given it an absolutely different character. … Accidents are part of our daily life and their shadow peoples our dreams. … The uncertainty principle in contemporary physics and Gödel's proof in logic are the equivalent of the Accident in the historical world. … Axiomatic and deterministic systems have lost their consistency and revealed an inherent defect. But it is not really a defect: it is a property of the system, something that belongs to it as a system. The Accident is not an exception or a sickness of our political regimes; nor is it a correctable defect of our civilisation: it is the natural consequence of our science, our politics and our morality. The Accident is part of our idea of progress. … The Accident has become a paradox of necessity: it possesses the fatality of necessity and at the same time the uncertainty of freedom. The *non-body*, transformed into a materialist science, is a synonym for terror: the Accident is one of the attributes of reason that we adore. … Christian morality has given its powers of repression over to it, but at the same time this superhuman power has lost any pretension to morality. It is the return of the anguish of the Aztecs, without any celestial signs or presages. Catastrophe has become banal and laughable because in the final analysis the Accident is only an accident. (*Conjunctions and Disjunctions*, pp. 111–13)

Just as society gives rise to madmen and anomalies at its peripheries in the process of normalisation so reason and the technical mastery of nature, as they become more entrenched, become surrounded by the catastrophic breakdown of the 'inorganic body of nature' they give rise to as unreason. This unreason is intolerable, since reason wants to be sovereign and can no longer even think of what escapes it; it is unresolvable since for us there are no longer any propitiating or reconciling rituals: the accident, like death, is absurd, that's all there is to it. It is a piece of *sabotage*. An evil demon is there to make this beautiful machine always break down. Hence this rationalist culture suffers, like no other, from a collective paranoia. Something or someone must have been responsible for the least accident, the slightest irregularity, the least catastrophe, an earth tremor, a house in ruins, bad weather; everything is an *assassination attempt*. Thus the new wave of sabotage, terrorism

and banditism is less interesting than the fact that what happens is *interpreted* this way. Accident or not? Undecidable. Nor is it important, since the category of the Accident analysed by Octavio Paz has fallen under that of the assassination attempt. And this is normal in a rational system: since chance can only be left to a *human* will, every breakdown is interpreted as a curse, an *evil spell*, or, politically, as a breach of the social order.[26] And it is true that a natural catastrophe is a danger to the established order, not only because of the real disorder it provokes, but by the blow it strikes to every sovereign 'rationality', politics included. Hence the state of siege for the earth tremor (Nicaragua), hence the police presence at the scenes of catastrophes (which, at the time of the Ermenonville DC–10 catastrophe, is more important than at a demonstration). For no-one knows to what extent the 'death drive', primed by the accident or the catastrophe, may be unleashed on this occasion and turn against the political order.

It is remarkable that we have returned, in the heyday of the rational system and as a full logical consequence of this system, to the 'primitive' vision where we impute a hostile will to every event, and particularly to death. But it is ourselves and ourselves alone who are full primitives (which nickname we attach to the primitives in order to exorcise it). For the 'primitives' themselves, this conception corresponded to the logic of their reciprocal and ambivalent exchanges involving everything around them; even natural catastrophes and death were easily intelligible through the categories of their social structures, whereas for us it is plainly paralogical. This is arational paranoia, the axioms of which give rise to an increasingly ubiquitous and absolute unintelligibility: death as unacceptable and insoluble, the Accident as persecution, as the absurd and spiteful resistance of a matter or a nature that *will not* abide by the 'objective' laws with which we have pursued it. Hence the ever increasing fascination with the catastrophe, the accident and the assassination attempt: reason itself is pursued by the hope of a universal revolt against its own norms and privileges.

'Natural' Death

An ideal or standard form of death, 'natural' death, corresponds to the biological definition of death and the rational logical will. This death is 'normal' since it comes 'at life's proper term'. Its very concept issues from the possibility of pushing back the limits of life: living becomes a process of accumulation, and science and technology start to play a role in this quantitative strategy. Science and technology do not manage to fulfil an original desire to live as long as possible; through the symbolic disintrication of death, life passes into life-capital (into a quantitative evaluation), which alone gives rise to a biomedical science and technology of prolonging life.

Natural death therefore signifies not the acceptance of death within 'the order of things', but a systematic denegation of death. Natural death is subject to science, and death's call is to be exterminated by science. This clearly signifies that death is inhuman, irrational and senseless, like untamed

nature (the Western concept of 'nature' is always the concept of a repressed or domesticated nature). The only good death is a death that has been defeated and subjected to the law: this is the ideal of natural death.

It should be possible for everyone to reach the term of their biological 'capital', to enjoy life 'to the end' without violence or premature death. As if everyone had their own little print-out of a life-plan, their 'normal expectation' of life, basically a 'contract of life'; hence the *social* demand for a quality of life that makes up part of a natural death. The new social contract: society as a whole, with its science and technology, becomes collectively responsible for the death of each individual.[27] This demand could moreover involve calling the existing order into question, as do quantitative (wage) demands: to demand a *just* lifespan just as one demands just rewards for one's labour power. Essentially, this right, like every other, conceals a repressive jurisdiction. Everyone has a right, but also a *duty*, to a natural death, for this death is characteristic of the system of political economy, its typical *obligation* to die:

1. As a system of maximalisation of the forces of production (in an 'extensive' system of manpower, slaves have no natural death, they are made to work themselves to death);
2. More importantly, that everyone should have a *right* to their life (habeas corpus – habeas vitam) extends social jurisdiction over death. Death is socialised like everything else, and can no longer be anything but natural, since every other death is a *social* scandal: we have not done what is necessary. Is this social progress? No, it is rather the progress *of* the social, which even annexes death to itself. Everyone is dispossessed of their death, and will no longer be able to die as it is now understood. One will no longer be free to live as long as possible. Amongst other things, this signifies the ban on consuming one's life without taking limits into account. In short, the principle of natural death is equivalent to the neutralisation of life.[28] The same goes for the question of equality in death: life must be reduced to quantity (and death therefore to nothing) in order to adjust it to democracy and the law of equivalences.

Old Age and Retirement: the 'Third Age'

Here too, science's conquest of death enters into contradiction with the system's rationality: retirement becomes a dead weight on social self-management. An entire portion of social wealth (money and moral values) is sunk into it without being able to give it a meaning. A third of society is thus segregated and placed in a situation of economic parasitism. The lands conquered on this death march are socially barren. Recently colonised, old age in modern times burdens society with the same weight as colonised native populations used to. Retirement, or the 'Third Age', says precisely what it means: it is a sort of Third World.

Old age has merely become a marginal and ultimately asocial slice of life – a ghetto, a reprieve and the slide into death. Old age is literally being

eliminated. In proportion as the living live longer, as they 'win' over death, they cease to be symbolically acknowledged. Condemned to a forever receding death, this age group loses its status and its prerogatives. In other social formations, old age actually exists as the symbolic pivot of the group. In such societies, the status of the elderly, the perfected form of the ancestor, is the most prestigious. 'Years' constitute real wealth which is exchanged for authority or power, instead of the situation today, where years 'gained' are only calculable accumulated years that have no capacity to be exchanged. Prolonged life expectancy has therefore simply ended up discriminating against old age, which follows logically from discriminating against death itself. Here again, the 'social' has worked well, making old age into a 'social' territory (which in journals appears under this rubric alongside immigrants and abortions), and socialising this part of life into an enclosure over itself. Under the 'beneficent' sign of *natural death*, it has been made into an early *social death*.

> Because the individual life of civilised man, placed into an infinite 'progress' according to its own immanent meaning should never come to an end; for there is a further step ahead of one who stands in the march of progress. And no man who comes to die stands upon the peak which lies in infinity. Abraham, or some peasants of the past, died 'old and satiated with life' because he stood in the organic cycle of life; because his life, in terms of its meaning and on the eve of his days, had given to him what life had to offer; because for him there remained no puzzles he might wish to solve; and therefore he could have had 'enough' of life. Whereas civilised man, placed in the midst of the continuous enrichment of culture by ideas, knowledge and problems, may become 'tired of life' but not 'satiated by life' … And because death is meaningless, civilised life as such is meaningless. (Max Weber, 'Science as a Vocation' [in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, tr. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970], pp. 139–40)

Natural Death and Sacrificial Death

Why is it that today there are no expected and foreseen deaths from old age, a death in the family, the only death that had full meaning for the traditional collectivity, from Abraham to our grandfathers? It is no longer even touching, it is almost ridiculous, and socially insignificant in any case. Why on the other hand is it that violent, accidental, and chance death, which previous communities could not make any sense of (it was dreaded and cursed as vehemently as we curse suicide), has so much meaning for us: it is the only one that is generally talked about; it is fascinating and touches the imagination. Once again, ours is the culture of the Accident, as Octavio Paz says.

Death is not abjectly exploited by the Media since they are happy to gamble on the fact that the only events of immediate, unmanipulated and straightforward significance for all are those which in one way or another bring death onto the scene. In this sense the most despicable media are also the most objective. And again, to interpret this in terms of repressed individual pulsions or unconscious sadism is trivial and uninteresting, since it is

a matter of a *collective* passion. Violent or catastrophic death does not satisfy the little individual unconscious, manipulated by the vile mass-media (this is a secondary revision, and is already *morally* weighted); this death moves us so profoundly only because it works on the group itself, and because in one way or another it transfigures and redeems in its own eyes.

'Natural' death is devoid of meaning because the group has no longer any role to play in it. It is banal because it is bound to the policed and commonplace [*banalisé*] individual subject, to the policed and commonplace nuclear family, and because it is no longer a collective mourning and joy. Each buries his own dead. With the primitives, there is no 'natural' death: every death is social, public and collective, and it is always the effect of an adversarial *will* that the group must absorb (no biology). This absorption takes place in feasting and rites. Feasting is the exchange of wills (we don't see how feasting would reabsorb a *biological* event). Evil wills and expiation rites are exchanged over the death's head. Death deceives and symbolically gains esteem; here death gains status, and the group is enriched by a partner.

To us, the dead have just passed away and no longer have anything to exchange. The dead are residual even before dying. At the end of a lifetime of accumulation, the dead are subtracted from the total in an economic operation. They do not become effigies: they serve entirely as alibis for the living and to their obvious superiority over the dead. This is a flat, one-dimensional death, the end of the biological journey, settling a credit: 'giving in one's soul', like a tyre, a container emptied of its contents. What banality!

All passion then takes refuge in violent death, which is the sole manifestation of something like the sacrifice, that is to say, like a real transmutation *through the will of the group*. And in this sense, it matters little whether death is accidental, criminal or catastrophic: from the moment it escapes 'natural' reason, and becomes a challenge to nature, it once again becomes the business of the group, demanding a collective and symbolic response; in a word, it arouses the *passion for the artificial*, which is at the same time sacrificial passion. Nature is uninteresting and meaningless, but we need only 'return' one death to 'nature', we need only exchange it in accordance with strict conventional rites, for its energy (both the dead person's energy and that of death itself) to affect the group, to be reabsorbed and expended by the group, instead of simply leaving it as a natural 'residue'. We, for our part, no longer have an effective rite for reabsorbing death and its rupturing energies; there remains the phantasm of sacrifice, the violent artifice of death. Hence the intense and profoundly *collective* satisfaction of the automobile death. In the fatal accident, the artificiality of death fascinates us. Technical, non-natural and therefore *willed* (ultimately by the victim him- or herself), death becomes interesting once again since *willed* death has a meaning. This artificiality of death facilitates, on a par with the sacrifice, its *aesthetic* doubling in the imagination, and the enjoyment that follows from it. Obviously 'aesthetics' only

has a value for us since we are condemned to contemplation. The sacrifice is not 'aesthetic' for the primitives, but it always marks a refusal of natural and biological succession, an intervention of an initiatory order, a controlled and socially governed violence. These days, we can only rediscover this anti-natural violence in the chance accident or catastrophe, which we therefore experience as *socially* symbolic events of the highest importance, as sacrifices. Finally, the Accident is only accidental, that is to say, absurd, for official reason; for the symbolic demand, which we have never been without, the accident has always been something else altogether.

Hostage-taking is always a matter of the same scenario. Unanimously condemned, it inspires profound terror and joy. It is also on the verge of becoming a political ritual of the first order at a time when politics is collapsing into indifference. The hostage has a symbolic yield a hundred times superior to that of the automobile death, which is itself a hundred times superior to natural death. This is because we rediscover here a *time* of the sacrifice, of the ritual of execution, in the immanence of the collectively expected death. This death, totally undeserved, therefore totally artificial, is therefore perfect from the sacrificial point of view, for which the officiating priest or 'criminal' is expected to die in return, according to the rules of a symbolic exchange to which we adhere so much more profoundly than we do to the economic order.

The workplace accident is the concern of the economic order and has no symbolic yield whatsoever. Since it is a machinic breakdown rather than a sacrifice, it is as indifferent to the collective imagination as it is to the capitalist entrepreneur. It is the object of a mechanical refusal, of a mechanical revolt, based on the right to life and to security, and is neither the object nor the cause of a *ludic* terror.[29] Only the worker, as is well known, *plays* too freely with his security, at the whim of the unions and bosses who understand nothing of this challenge.

We are all hostages, and that's the secret of hostage-taking, and we are all dreaming, instead of dying stupidly working oneself to the ground, of *receiving* death and of *giving* death. Giving and receiving constitute one symbolic act (the symbolic act *par excellence*), which rids death of all the indifferent negativity it holds for us in the 'natural' order of capital. In the same way, our relations to objects are no longer living and mortal, but instrumental (we no longer know how to destroy them, and we no longer expect our own death), which is why they are really dead objects that end up killing us, in the same fashion as the workplace accident, however, just as one object crushes another. Only the automobile accident re-establishes some kind of sacrificial equilibrium. For death is something that is shared out, and we must know how to share it out amongst objects just as much as amongst other men. Death has only given and received meaning, that is to say, it is socialised through exchange. In the primitive order, everything is done so that death is that way. In our culture, on the contrary, everything is done so that death is never done to anybody by *someone* else, but only by 'nature', as an impersonal expiry of the body. We experience our death as

the 'real' fatality inscribed in our bodies only because we no longer know how to inscribe it into a ritual of symbolic exchange. The order of the 'real', of the 'objectivity' of the body as elsewhere the order of political economy, are always the results of the rupture of this exchange. It is from this point that even our bodies came into existence as the place in which our inexchangeable death is confined, and we end up believing in the biological essence of the body, watched over by death which in turn is watched over by science. Biology is pregnant with death, and the body taking shape within it is itself pregnant with death, and there are no more myths to come and free it. The myth and the ritual that used to free the body from science's supremacy has been lost, or has not yet been found.

We try to circumscribe the others, our objects and our own body within a destiny of instrumentality so as no longer to receive death from them but there is nothing we can do about this – the same goes for death as for everything else: no longer willing to give or receive it, death encircles us in the biological simulacrum of our own body.

The Death Penalty

> Until the eighteenth century, we hanged guilty animals, after a formal condemnation, for causing a man's death. We even hanged horses.
>
> Author unknown

There had to be a very specific reason for the revulsion inspired in us by punishing these animals, since it ought to have been more serious to judge a man than an animal, and more odious to make him suffer. But, in one way or another, hanging a horse or a pig, like hanging a madman or a child, seems more odious to us, since they are 'not responsible'. This secret equality of consciousness in law, so that the condemned always retain the privilege of denying the right of the other to judge, this possible challenge which is quite different from the right to a defence and which re-establishes a minimum of symbolic opposition, no longer exists at all in the case of the animal or the madman. It is precisely the application of a symbolic ritual to a situation which prohibits the possibility of a symbolic response and gives this type of punishment its particularly odious character.

As opposed to physical elimination, justice is a social, moral and ritual act. The odious character of punishing a child or a madman comes from the *moral* aspect of justice: if the 'other' must be convinced of their guilt and condemned as such, punishment looses all meaning, since neither consciousness of the wrong nor even humiliation are possible with these 'criminals'. It is therefore as stupid as crucifying lions. But there is something else in the punishment of an animal, which this time derives from the *ritual* character of justice. It is the application of a *human* ceremonial to a beast, rather than just the *infliction* of death, that gives the scene its extraordinary atrocity. Every attempt to dress an animal, every disguise and attempt to tame an animal to the human comedy is sinister and unhealthy. By dying, it would become frankly unbearable.

But why this revulsion at seeing an animal treated like a human being? Because then man changes into a beast. In the hanged animal there is, by way of the sign and the ritual, a hanged man, but a man changed into a beast as if by black magic. A 'reflex' signification results from the ubiquitous action of the deep reciprocity, whatever we are dealing with, between man and animal or the executioner and his victim, mingled with the visual representation in a terrible confusion, and this malific ambiguity (as in Kafka's '*Metamorphosis*') gives rise to disgust. The end of culture, of the social, the end of the rules of the game. Killing a beast in this fundamentally human manner unleashes an equivalent monstrosity in the man, who thus becomes the victim of his own ritual. The institution of justice, by which man claims to draw a line between himself and 'brutality', turns against him. Of course, such brutality is a myth – a caesura that implies the absolute privilege of the human, the expulsion of the animal into the 'brutal'. This discrimination is justified, however, when at the same time as the privilege, it implies all the risks and responsibilities of the human, in particular that of justice and *social* death, which by contrast, according to the same logic, does not concern the animal at all. For man to impose this form on the animal is to erase the limit between the two, and at the same time to eliminate the human. Man is then only the squalid caricature of the myth of animality that he himself has instituted.

We do not need psychoanalysis, the 'Father-Figure', sadistic eroticism and guilt to explain the nausea attendant upon the torture of animals. Everything here is social, everything relates to the *social* line of demarcation that man traces around himself in accordance with a mythical code of differences, and to the contortions that shatter this line, in accordance with the law that states that *reciprocity never ends*: every discrimination is only ever imaginary and is forever cut across by symbolic reciprocity, for better or worse.

Of course, this nausea, bound up with the loss of the privilege of the human, is also therefore proper to a social order, where the break with the animal, and therefore the abstraction of the human, is definitive. This revulsion distinguishes us: it signifies that human Reason has made progress, allowing us to consign all this 'medieval' torture of humans and animals to 'barbarism'. 'As late as 1906 in Switzerland, a dog was tried and executed for participating in theft and murder.' We are so reassured when we read that 'we are no longer like that', the subtext of which is 'today we are "humane" to animals, we respect them'. But the opposite is the case: disgust is inspired in us by the execution of an animal *in exact proportion to the contempt in which we hold it*. It is insofar, as is proper to our culture, as we relegate the animal to a non-human state of irresponsibility that the animal becomes unworthy of the human ritual. All we need then do is apply this ritual to the animal to make us nauseous, not because of some moral progress, but because of the deepening of human racism.

Those who, in times past, used to ritually sacrifice animals did not take them to be beasts. Even medieval society, which condemned and punished

animals in accordance with its own norms, was far closer than we are to those who are horrified by this practice. By holding animals culpable, these societies paid them tribute. The innocence to which we consign animals (along with madmen, the sick and children) is significant of the radical distance separating us from them, and of the racial exclusion by which we rigorously maintain the definition of the Human. In a context where every living being is a partner in exchange, the animal has the 'right' to sacrifice and to ritual expiation. The primitive sacrifice of the animal is bound up with its exceptional and sacred status as a divinity, as a totem.[30] We no longer sacrifice them, we no longer even punish them, and we take pride in this; but this is simply because we have domesticated them and because we have turned them into a racially inferior world, no longer even worthy of our justice; they are barely even exterminable as butcher meat. Or perhaps rational liberal thought takes those it excommunicates into their charge, such as animals, madmen and children who 'know not what they do', and who therefore do not deserve punishment and death as much as they do public charity: protectionism of every kind, the RSPCA, 'open' psychiatry, modern pedagogy; all the definitive but gentle forms of inferiorisation in which Liberal Reason takes refuge. A racial compensation whereby humanism increases its privilege over 'inferior beings'.[31]

In the light of all this, the question of the death penalty is posed, which is also the question of the naïvety or hypocrisy of every liberal humanism on this question.

With the primitives, the 'criminal' is not an inferior, abnormal or irresponsible being. On him, like the 'mad' or the 'sick', a great number of the symbolic cycles are articulated. Some of this can still be detected in Marx's formulation of the criminal as an essential function of the bourgeois order. It is onto the king that responsibility for *the* crime *par excellence* devolves: breaking the incest taboo (which is why he is king, and why he will be put to death). His expiation confers on him the highest status, since it is also what relaunches the cycle of exchanges. There is a whole philosophy of cruelty (in Artaud's sense) here, which we are no longer familiar with, and which excludes social infamy as it does the death penalty: the death of the criminal-king is not a sanction, it neither separates nor removes something rotten on the social body; on the contrary, it is a festival and an elevation in which solidarity is renewed and separations undone. The madman, the fool, the bandit, the hero and many other characters from traditional societies have all played, relatively speaking, the same role as agents of symbolic ferment. Society was articulated on their *difference*. The dead were the first to play this role. Still untouched by social Reason, traditional societies coped with the criminal extremely well, even if it was by collective ritual death,[32] just like peasant societies with their village idiots, even if it was as objects of ritual derision.

The end of the culture of cruelty where difference is glorified and expiated in one and the same sacrificial act. We no longer know any other way of dealing with deviants but extermination or therapy. We now only know

how to cut, expurgate and repel them into society's dark regions. And this only to the extent of our 'tolerance', our sovereign conception of freedom.

> If contemporary societies have progressed to the moral level, this does not rule out their regression to mood shifts. (*Encyclopaedia Universalis*)

By being normalised, that is to say, by extending the logic of equivalences to everyone, society, socialised at last, excludes every antibody. It then creates, in the same movement, specific institutions to receive them, and so, throughout successive centuries, prisons, asylums, hospitals and schools have flourished, not to forget the factories, which also began to flourish with the Rights of Man (this is how labour must be understood). *Socialisation* is nothing but the immense passage from the symbolic exchange of difference to the social logic of equivalence. Every 'social' or socialist 'ideal' merely doubles the process of socialisation. Even liberal thought, which wants to abolish the death penalty, simply perpetuates it. As regards the death penalty, the thought of the right (hysterical reaction) and the thought of the left (rational humanism) are both equally removed from the symbolic configuration where crime, madness and death are modalities of exchange, the 'accursed share' around which all exchange gravitates. Why do we reintegrate the criminal into society? To make him into the equivalent of a normal man? But exactly the opposite is true. As Gentis says: 'It is not a question of returning the madman to the truth of society, but of returning society to the truth of madness' (*Les Murs de l'asile*). All humanist thought grows faint in the face of this demand, which was openly realised in previous societies, and is always present, but hidden and violently repressed, in our own (crime and death always provoke the same secret jubilation; it is however debased and obscene).

If the bourgeois order first got rid of crime and madness by elimination or confinement, then secondly it neutralised all this on a therapeutic basis. This is the phase of the progressive absolution of the criminal and his reform into a social being, by every devious means of medicine and psychology. We must see, however, that this liberal change of policy takes place on the basis of a wholly repressive social space whose *normal* mechanisms have absorbed the repressive function that hitherto devolved onto special institutions.[33]

Liberal thinking believes this cannot be put better than its claim that 'penal law is called upon to develop in the direction of a preventative social medicine and a curative social service' (*Encyclopaedia Universalis*). Does this imply the disappearance of the *penal* aspect of the law? Not at all: the penalty is called upon to be realised in its purest form in great therapeutic, psychological and psychiatric reform programmes. Penal violence finds its most subtle equivalent in re-socialisation and re-education (also in the form of self-criticism or repentance, according to the dominant social system), and from this point we are all summoned to it in normal life itself: we are all madmen and criminals.[34]

It is not just that penal violence and the death penalty *might* disappear in this society, but that they *must*, and the abolitionists, totally contradicting

themselves, merely follow the tendency of the system. They want to abolish the death penalty without abolishing responsibility (since without responsibility, there would be no human conscience or dignity, and therefore no liberal thought!). This is illogical, and above all futile, since responsibility has been dead for a long time. As a vestigial individual trait from the Enlightenment, it has been eliminated by the system itself as the latter becomes *more rational*. When capitalism rested on merit, initiative, individual enterprise and competition, it needed an ideal of responsibility, and therefore its repressive equivalent: for better or worse, everyone, whether entrepreneur or criminal, received his penalty or his credit. In a system that rests on bureaucratic programming and the execution of a plan, *irresponsible* executants are required, and so the entire system of values based on responsibility collapses into itself, since it is no longer viable. It is a matter of indifference whether you struggle for abolition or not: the death penalty is useless. Justice also collapses: generally irresponsible, the individual becomes, whatever happens to him, a pretext for bureaucratic structures, and will no longer accept being tried by just anyone, nor even by society as a whole. Even the problem of collective responsibility is a red herring: responsibility has quite simply disappeared.

Hence the secondary benefit of the elimination of humanist values and the dismantling of the repressive apparatus, based on the possibility of being able to distinguish 'in one's conscience', between good and evil, and on this criterion to be able to try and to condemn. But this order has had every opportunity to renounce the death penalty. It is still making gains in this respect, and hence open prisons become possible. For death and the prison were the truth of the social jurisdiction of a society that remained heterogeneous and divided. Therapy and reform are the truth of the social jurisdiction of a homogeneous and normalised society. The thought of the right still refers to the first, while the thought of the left refers to the second; both, however, obey the same system of values.

In other contexts, both speak the same medical language: remove a diseased member, says the right; cure a sick organ, says the left. On either side death acts at the level of equivalences. The primitive procedure is only aware of reciprocities: clan *contra* clan, death *contra* death (gift *contra* gift). We know only a system of equivalences (a death *for* a death) between two terms as abstract as in economic exchange: society and the individual under the jurisdiction of a 'universal' and legal morality.

A death for a death, says the right, fair's fair, you have killed so you must die, that's the law of the contract. Intolerable, says the left, the criminal must be spared: *he is not really responsible*. The principle of equivalence is intact: basically one of the terms (responsibility) tends towards zero, while the other (penalty) also tends in this direction. The environment, childhood, the unconscious,[35] social conditions, outline a new equation of responsibility, but still in terms of causality and the contract. In the terms of this new contract, the criminal merits no more than (Christian) pity or social security. Here again, the thought of the left merely invents more

subtle neo-capitalist formations, where repression becomes diffuse, as surplus-value did in another context. In the psychiatric and ergonomic cures, however, it is very much a matter of an *equivalent* to death. Here the individual is treated as a functional survivor, as an object to be retrained: we surround him with care and solicitude, so many traits of his anomaly, and we *invest* in him. The tolerance he enjoys is of the same order as that we have seen being exercised over the beasts: it is an operation by means of which the social order exorcises and controls its own hauntings. Does the system make us all irresponsible? We can only accept this if we delimit a category of *notorious* examples of irresponsibility, that we will care for as such. By the effect of contrast, it will return the illusion of responsibility to us. Delinquents, criminals, children and madmen will suffer the effects of this clinical operation.

A simple examination of the evolution of the death penalty in 'materialist' terms (of profit and class) should leave those who wish to abolish it in perplexity. It is always through the discovery of more profitable economic substitutes, subsequently rationalised as 'more humane', that the death penalty is curbed: hence prisoners of war are spared in order to be made slaves; hence, in Rome, criminals were sent to the salt mines; hence the prohibition of duels in the seventeenth century, the institution of forced labour as a corrective solution, the variable extortion of the labour force and the ergo-therapeutic retraining of the Nazi camps. There are no miracles anywhere: death disappears or subsides when the system, for one reason or another, has an interest in it (1830: the first extenuating circumstances in a trial involving a bourgeois). Neither social conquest nor the progress of Reason: just the logic of profit or privilege.[36]

But this analysis remains totally insufficient, since it merely substitutes an economic for a moral rationality. Something else is in operation here, a 'heavy' hypothesis with respect to which the materialist interpretation appears to be a 'light' hypothesis. Profit may be an effect of capital, but it is never the fundamental law of the social order. It's fundamental law is the progressive control of life and death. Its objective is equally therefore to snatch death away from radical difference in order to submit it to the law of equivalence. And the naïvety of humanist thought (liberal or revolutionary) consists in not seeing that its rejection of death is necessarily the same as that of the system, that is, the rejection of something that escapes the law of value. It is only in this sense that death is an evil. But humanist thought turns it into an *absolute* evil, and it is from this point that it becomes enmeshed in the worst contradictions.[37] Claude Glayman (discussing the execution of Buffet and Bontemps):

> The irremediably human feeling that no man has the right to deal out death at will ('irremediably' is a kind of *lapsus:* the humanist does not appear to be totally convinced of this evidence). Life is sacred. But even without religious faith we are completely persuaded. … In a consumer society that tends to banish scarcity, death, we might say, is still more intolerable (life as a consumer good, death as scarcity: what an incredible platitude! But communism,

> and even Marx himself, are in agreement over this equation.) … Here too, the impression of a sort of permanence of the Middle Ages remains. … What society do we live in? What shores are we drifting towards? For we must not turn our backs on life, whatever it may be. (*Le Monde*)

This is precisely the 'rear' entry to life, the basic principle of pious souls, who are also those who enter the revolution backwards and turn their backs on life. These unbelievable acrobatics are, however, typical of thought bending over backwards to satisfy its rejection of death.

We can clearly see that the humanist debate starts from the individualist system of values of which it is the crown: 'The social and individual instinct of conservation', says Camus, 'requires the postulate of individual responsibility.' But precisely these postulates define the platitude of life and death in our equivalence-dominated systems. Beyond this point, man need only cultivate the instinct of conservation or responsibility (two complementary prejudices in the abstract and rationalist view of the subject). Death resumes its meaning as a sacrificial exchange, a collective moment and an intense deliverance of the subject. 'There is no passion … so weak but it mates and masters the fear of death', said Bacon (*Essays* [London: Dent, 1906], Vol. II, p. 6). But this is too little: *death is itself a passion*. And at this level the difference between self and others is effaced: 'The desire to kill often coincides with the desire to die oneself or to eliminate oneself'; 'Man desires to live, but he also desires to be nothing, he wants what cannot be undone, he wants death for its own sake. In this case, not only will the possibility of being put to death not stop the criminal, it is rather probable that it will add to the vertigo in which he is lost.' We know that suicide and murder can often be substitutes for one another, with a strong predilection for suicide.

This passionate, sacrificial death overtly accepts the *spectacle of death*, which, as with all organic functions, we have made into a *moral* and therefore clandestine and shameful function. The good souls heavily insist on the shameful character of *public* executions, but they do not see that odiousness of this type of execution stems from its *contemplative* attitude in which the death of the other is savoured as a spectacle at a distance. This is not sacrificial violence, which not only demands the presence of the whole community, but *is* one of the forms of its self-presence [*présence à ellemème*]. We rediscover something of this contagious festivity in an episode in England in 1807, when the 40,000 people who came to attend an execution were seized by delirium upon seeing a hundred dead bodies lying on the ground. This collective act has nothing in common with the spectacle of extermination. By confusing the two in the same abstract reprobation of violence and death, one merges with the thought of the State, that is, the pacification of life. Now, if the right prefers to use repressive blackmail, the left, for its part, is distinguished by imagining and setting up future models of pacified socialisation.

A civilisation's progress is thus measured only by its respect for life as absolute value. What a difference from public, celebrated death by torture

(the Black from the Upper Volta laughing in the face of the guns that hit him, cannibalism in the Tupinamba), and even murder and vengeance, passion for death and suicide! When society kills in a totally premeditated fashion, we do it a great honour when we accuse it of a barbaric vengeance worthy of the Dark Ages, because vengeance is still a *fatal* reciprocity. It is neither 'primitive' nor 'purely the way of nature'; nothing could be more false. It has nothing to do with our calculable and statistical abstract death, which is the by-product of an agency both moral and bureaucratic (our capital punishment and concentration camps), and thus has everything to do with the system of political economy. This system is similarly abstract, but never in the way that a revenge, a murder or a sacrificial spectacle is abstract. We have produced a judicial, ethnocidal and concentration camp death, to which our society has adjusted. Today, everything and nothing has changed: under the sign of the values of life and tolerance, the same system of extermination, only gentler, governs everyday life, and it has no need of death to accomplish its objectives.

The same objective that is inscribed in the monopoly of institutional violence is accomplished as easily by forced survival as it is by death: a forced 'life for life's sake' (kidney machines, malformed children on life-support machines, agony prolonged at all costs, organ transplants, etc.). All these procedures are equivalent to disposing of death and imposing life, but according to what ends? Those of science and medicine? Surely this is just scientific paranoia, unrelated to any human objective. Is profit the aim? No: society swallows huge amounts of profit. This 'therapeutic heroism' is characterised by soaring costs and 'decreasing benefits': they manufacture unproductive survivors. Even if social security can still be analysed as 'compensation for the labour force in the interests of capital', this argument has no purchase here. Nevertheless, the system is facing the same contradiction here as with the death penalty: it overspends on the prolongation of life because this system of values is essential to the strategic equilibrium of the whole; economically, however, this overspending unbalances the whole. What is to be done? An economic choice becomes necessary, where we can see the outline of euthanasia as a semiofficial doctrine or practice. We choose to keep 30 per cent of the uraemics in France alive (36 per cent in the USA!). Euthanasia is already everywhere, and the ambiguity of making a humanist demand for it (as with the 'freedom' to abortion) is striking: it is inscribed in the middle to long term logic of the system. All this tends in the direction of an increase in social control. For there is a clear objective behind all these apparent contradictions: to ensure control over the entire range of life and death. From birth control to death control, whether we execute people or compel their survival (the prohibition of dying is the caricature, but also the logical form of progressive tolerance), the essential thing is that the decision is withdrawn from them, that their life and their death are never freely theirs, but that they live or die according to a social visa. It is even intolerable that their life and death remain open to biological chance, since this is still a type of freedom. Just as morality commanded: 'You shall

not kill', today it commands: 'You shall not die', not in any old way, anyhow, and only if the law and medicine permit. And if your death is conceded you, it will still be by order. In short, death proper has been abolished to make room for death control and euthanasia: strictly speaking, it is no longer even death, but something completely neutralised that comes to be inscribed in the rules and calculations of equivalence: rewriting-planning-programming-system. It must be possible to *operate* death as a social service, integrate it like health and disease under the sign of the Plan and Social Security. This is the story of 'motel-suicides' in the USA, where, for a comfortable sum, one can purchase one's death under the most agreeable conditions (like any other consumer good); perfect service, everything has been foreseen, even trainers who give you back your appetite for life, after which they kindly and conscientiously send the gas into your room, without torment and without meeting any opposition. A *service* operates these motel-suicides, quite rightly paid (eventually reimbursed?). Why did death not become a social service when, like everything else, it is functionalised as individual and computable consumption in social input and output?

In order that the system consents to such economic sacrifices in the artificial resurrection of its living losses, it must have a fundamental interest in withdrawing even the biological chance of death from people. 'You die, we'll do the rest' is already just an old advertising slogan used for funeral homes. Today, *dying is already part of the rest*, and the Thanatos centres charge for death just as the Eros centres charge for sex. The witch hunt continues.

A transcendent, 'objective' agency requires a delegation of justice, death and vengeance. Death and expiation must be wrested from the circuit, monopolised at the summit and redistributed. A bureaucracy of death and punishment is necessary, in the same way as there must be an abstraction of economic, political and sexual exchanges: if not, the entire structure of social control collapses.

This is why every death and all violence that escapes the State monopoly is subversive; it is a prefiguration of the abolition of power. Hence the fascination wielded by great murderers, bandits or outlaws, which is in fact closely akin to that associated with works of art: a piece of death and violence is snatched from the State monopoly in order to be put back into the savage, direct and symbolic reciprocity of death, just as something in feasting and expenditure is retrieved from the economic in order to be put back into useless and sacrificial exchange, and just as something in the poem or the artwork is retrieved from the terrorist economy of signification in order to be put back into the consumption of signs. This alone is what is fascinating in our system. Only what is not exchanged as values, that is, sex, death, madness and violence, is fascinating, and for this reason is universally repressed. Millions of war dead are exchanged as values in accordance with a general equivalence: 'dying for the fatherland'; we might say they can be converted into gold, the world has not lost them altogether. Murder, death and violation are legalised everywhere, if not

legal, provided that they can be reconverted into value in accordance with the same process that mediatises labour. Only certain deaths, certain practices, escape this convertibility; they alone are subversive, but do not often make the headlines.

Amongst these is suicide, which in our societies has taken on a different extension and definition, to the point of becoming, in the context of the offensive reversibility of death, the form of subversion itself. While there are fewer and fewer executions, more and more commit suicide in prison, an act of *subverting* [*détournement*] institutional death and turning it against the system that imposes it: through suicide, the individual tries and condemns society in accordance with its own norms, by inverting the authorities and reinstating reversibility where it had completely disappeared, while at the same time regaining the advantage. Even suicides outside prison become political in this sense (*hari-kiri* by fire is only the most spectacular form of this): they make an infinitesimal but inexpiable breach, since it is total defeat for a system not to be able to attain total perfection. All that is needed is that the slightest thing escapes its rationality.

The prohibition of suicide coincides with the advent of the law of value. Whether religious, moral or economic, the same law states 'no-one has the right to remove any capital or value'. Yet each individual is a parcel of capital (just as every Christian is a soul to be saved), and therefore has no right to destroy himself. It is against this orthodoxy of value that the suicide revolts by destroying the parcel of capital he has at his disposal. This is unpardonable: we will go so far as to hang the suicide for having succeeded. It is therefore symptomatic that suicide increases in a society saturated by the law of value, as a challenge to its fundamental rule. But we must also take another look at its definition: if every suicide becomes subversive in a highly integrated system, all subversion of and resistance to this system is reciprocally, by its very nature, suicidal. Those actions at least that strike at its vitals. For the majority of so-called 'political' or 'revolutionary' practices are content to exchange their survival with the system, that is, to convert their death into cash. There are rarely suicides that stand against the controlled production and exchange of death, against the *exchange-value of death;* not its use-value (for death is perhaps the only thing that has no use-value, which can never be referred back to need, and so can unquestionably be turned into a weapon) but its value as rupture, contagious dissolution and negation.

The Palestinians or the rebellious Blacks setting fire to their own district become suicidal, as is resistance to the security forces in all its forms, as are the neurotic behaviour and multiple breakdowns by which we challenge the system's capacity to ever fully integrate us. Also suicidal are all political practices (demos, disorder, provocation, etc.) whose objective is to arouse repression, the 'repressive nature of the system', not as a secondary consequence, but as the immediacy of death: the game of death unmasks the system's own function of death. The order has possession of death, but it cannot *play* it out – only those who set death *playing* against itself win.

The property system is so absurd that it leads people to demand their death as their own good – the private appropriation of death. The mental devastation of this appropriation is so great that it leads to investment in the 'immovable' [*immobilier*] property of death, not only as a preoccupation with the 'third home', such as the tomb or the burial ground have become (many people buy a concession in the village cemetery at the same time as they buy their country house), but as the demand for a 'quality of death'. A comfortable, personalised, 'designer' death, a 'natural' death: this is the inalienable right constituting the perfected form of bourgeois individual law. Besides, immortality is only ever the projection of this natural and personal right into infinity – the subject's appropriation of the afterlife and eternity, her body and her death are equally inalienable. What despair is hidden by this absurd demand, analogous to that which fuels our delirious accumulation of the objects and signs from which we manically assemble our own private universe: death must once again become the final object in this collection and, instead of going through this inertia as the only possible event, it must itself re-enter the game of accumulating and administering things.

Contrary to the twists the subject stamps on his own demise, dispossession occurs only in violent, unexpected death, which reinstates the possibility of escaping the neurotic control of the subject.[38]

Everywhere, a stubborn and fierce resistance springs up to the principle of the accumulation, production and conservation of the subject in which he can read his own programmed death. Everywhere death is played off against death. In a system which adds up living and capitalises life, the death drive is the only alternative. In a meticulously regulated universe, the only temptation is to normalise everything by destruction.

Security as Blackmail

Security is another form of social control, in the form of life blackmailed with the afterlife. It is universally present for us today, and 'security forces' range from life assurance and social security to the car seatbelt by way of the state security police force.[39] 'Belt up' says an advertising slogan for seatbelts. Of course, security, like ecology, is an industrial business extending its cover up to the level of the species: a convertibility of accident, disease and pollution into capitalist surplus profit is operative everywhere. But this is above all a question of the worst repression, which consists in dispossessing you of your own death, which everybody dreams of, as the darkness beneath their instinct of conservation. It is necessary to rob everyone of the last possibility of *giving* themselves their own death as the last 'great escape' from a life laid down by the system. Again, in this symbolic short-circuit, the *gift-exchange* is the challenge to oneself and one's own life, and is carried out through death. Not because it expresses the individual's asocial rebellion (the defection of one or millions of individuals does not infringe the law of the system at all), but because it carries in it a

principle of sociality that is radically antagonistic to our own social repressive principle. To bury death beneath the contrary myth of security, it is necessary to exhaust the gift-exchange.

Is it so that men might live that the demand for death must be exhausted? No, but in order that they die the only death the system authorises: the living are separated from their dead, who no longer exchange anything but the form of their afterlife, under the sign of comprehensive insurance. Thus car safety: mummified in his helmet, his seatbelt, all the paraphernalia of security, wrapped up in the security myth, the driver is nothing but a corpse, closed up in another, non-mythic, death, as neutral and objective as technology, noiseless and expertly crafted. Riveted to his machine, glued to the spot in it, he no longer runs the risk of dying, since he is *already* dead. This is the secret of security, like a steak under cellophane: *to surround you with a sarcophagus in order to prevent you from dying.*[40]

Our whole technical culture creates an artificial milieu of death. It is not only armaments that remain the general archetype of material production, but the simplest machine around us constitutes a horizon of death, a death that will never be resolved because it has crystallised beyond reach: fixed capital of death, where the living labour of death has frozen over, as the labour force is frozen in fixed capital and dead labour. In other words, all material production is merely a gigantic 'character armour' by means of which the species means to keep death at a respectful distance. Of course, death itself overshadows the species and seals it into the armour the species thought to protect itself with. Here again, commensurate with an entire civilisation, we find the image of the automobile-sarcophagus: the protective armour is just death miniaturised and become a technical extension of your own body. The biologisation of the body and the technicisation of the environment go hand in hand in the same obsessional neurosis. The technical environment is our over-production of pollutant, fragile and obsolescent objects. For production lives, its entire logic and strategy are articulated on fragility and obsolescence. An economy of stable products and good objects is indispensable: the economy develops only by exuding danger, pollution, usury, deception and haunting. The economy lives only on the suspension of death that it maintains *throughout material production*, and through renewing the *available death stocks*, even if it means conjuring it up by a security build up: blackmail and repression. Death is definitively secularised in material production, where it is reproduced on a large scale as capital. Even our bodies, which have become biological machinery, are modelled on this inorganic body, and therefore become, at the same time, a *bad object*, condemned to disease, accident and death.

Living by the production of death, capital has an easy time producing security: it's the same thing. *Security is the industrial prolongation of death*, just as ecology is the industrial prolongation of pollution. A few more bandages on the sarcophagus. This is also true of the great institutions that are the glory of our democracy: Social Security is the social prosthesis of

a dead society ('Social Security is death!' – May '68), that is to say, a society already exterminated in all its symbolic wheels, in its deep system of reciprocities and obligations, which means that *neither the concept of security nor that of the 'social' ever had any meaning*. The 'social' begins by taking charge of death. It's the same story as regards cultures that have been destroyed then revived and protected as folklore (cf. M. de Certeau, 'La beauté du mort' [in *La culture au pluriel*, Paris: UGE, 1974]). The same goes for life assurance, which is the domestic variant of a system which everywhere presupposes death as an axiom. The social translation of the death of the group – each materialising for the other only as social capital indexed on death.

Death is dissuaded at the price of a continual mortification: such is the paradoxical logic of security. In a Christian context, ascesis played the same role. The accumulation of suffering and penitence was able to play the same role as character armour, as a protective sarcophagus against hell. And our obsessional compulsion for security can be interpreted as a gigantic collective ascesis, an anticipation of death in life itself: from protection into protection, from defence to defence, crossing all jurisdictions, institutions and modern material apparatuses, life is no longer anything but a doleful, defensive book-keeping, locking every risk into its sarcophagus. Keeping the accounts on survival, instead of the radical compatibility of life and death.

Our system lives off the production of death and pretends to manufacture security. An about-face? Not at all, just a simple twist in the cycle whose two ends meet. That an automobile firm remodels itself on the basis of security (like industry on anti-pollution measures) without altering its range, objectives or products shows that security is only a question of exchanging terms. Security is only an internal condition of the reproduction of the system when it reaches a certain level of expansion, just as feedback is only an internal regulating procedure for systems that have reached a certain point of complexity.

After having exalted production, today we must therefore make security heroic. 'At a time when anybody at all can be killed driving any car whatsoever, at whatever speed, the true hero is he who refuses to die' (a Porsche hoarding: 'Let's put an end to a certain glorification of death'). But this is difficult, *since people are indifferent to security:* they did not want it when Ford and General Motors proposed it between 1955 and 1960. *It had to be imposed in every instance.* Irresponsible and blind? No, this resistance must be added to that which traditional groups throughout have opposed to 'rational' social progress: vaccination, medicine, job security, a school education, hygiene, birth control and many other things: Always these resistances have been broken, and today we can produce a 'natural', 'eternal' and 'spontaneous' state based on the need for security and all the good things that our civilisation has produced. We have successfully infected people with the virus of conservation and security, even though they will have to fight to the death to get it. In fact, it is more complicated, since they are fighting for the *right* to security, which is of a profoundly

different order. As regards security itself, no-one gives a damn. They had to be infected over generations for them to end up believing that they 'needed' it, and this success is an essential aspect of 'social' domestication and colonisation. That entire groups would have preferred to die out rather than see their own structures annihilated by the terrorist intervention of medicine, reason, science and centralised power – this has been forgotten, swept away under the universal moral law of the 'instinct' of conservation. However, this resistance always reappears, even if only in the form of the workers' refusal to apply safety standards in the factories; what do they want out of this, if not to salvage a little bit of control over their lives, even if they put themselves at risk, or if its price is increasing exploitation (since they produce at ever greater speed)? These are not 'rational' proletarians. But they struggle in their own way, and they know that economic exploitation is not as serious as the 'accursed share', the accursed fragment that above all they must not allow to be taken from them, the share of symbolic challenge, which is at the same time a challenge to security and to their own lives. The boss can exploit them to death, but he will only really dominate them if he manages to make each identify with their own individual interests and become the accountant and the capitalist of their own lives. He would then genuinely be the Master, and the worker the slave. As long as the exploited retain the choice of life and death through this small resistance to security and the moral order, they win on their own, symbolic, ground.

The car driver's resistance to security is of the same order and must be eliminated as immoral: thus suicide has been prohibited or condemned everywhere because primarily it signifies a challenge that society cannot reply to, and which therefore ensures the pre-eminence of a single suicide over the whole social order. Always the accursed share (the fragment that everyone takes from their own lives so as to challenge the social order; the fragment that everyone takes from their own body so as to give it; this may even be their own death, on condition that everyone *gives* it away), the fragment which is the whole secret of symbolic exchange, because it is given, received and returned, and cannot therefore *be breached* by the dominant exchange, remaining irreducible to its law and fatal to it: its only real adversary, the only one it must exterminate.

Funeral Homes and Catacombs

> By dint of washing, soaping, furbishing, brushing, painting, sponging, polishing, cleaning and scouring, the grime from the things washed rubs off onto living things.
>
> Victor Hugo

The same goes for death: by dint of being washed and sponged, cleaned and scoured, denied and warded off, death rubs off onto every aspect of life. Our whole culture is hygienic, and aims to expurgate life from death. The detergents in the weakest washing powder are intended for death. To sterilise death at all costs, to varnish it, cryogenically freeze it, air-condition

it, put make-up on it, 'design' it, to pursue it with the same relentlessness as grime, sex, bacteriological or radioactive waste. The make-up of death: Hugo's formula makes us think of those American funeral homes where death is immediately shielded from mourning and the promiscuity of the living in order to be 'designed' according to the purest laws of standing, smiling and international marketing.

It is not so worrying that the dead man is made beautiful and given the appearance of a representation. Every society has always done this. They have always staved off the abjection of natural death, the *social* abjection of decomposition which voids the corpse of its signs and its social force of signification, leaving it as nothing more than a substance, and by the same token, precipitating the group into the terror of its own symbolic decomposition. It is necessary to ward off death, to smother it in artificiality in order to evade the unbearable moment when flesh becomes nothing but flesh, and ceases to be a sign. The skeleton, with its stripped bones, already seals the possible reconciliation of the group, for it regains the force of the mask and the sign. But between the two, there is the abject passage through nature and the biological that must be warded off at all costs by sarcophagic practices (the devouring of flesh), which are in fact semiurguic practices. Therefore, every thanatopraxis, even in contemporary societies, is analysed as the will to ward off this sudden loss of signs that befalls the dead, to prevent there remaining, in the *asocial* flesh of the dead, something which signifies nothing.[41]

In short, every society has its sarcophagic rituals; embalming, the artificial preservation of the flesh, is one of its variants. The practices of the funeral homes, which appear so ridiculous and misplaced to us, idealists of natural death that we are, therefore remain faithful to the most remote traditions. The point at which they become absurd is their connotation of *naturalness*. When the primitive showers the dead with signs, it is in order to make the transition towards the state of death as quick as possible, beyond the ambiguity between the living and the dead which is precisely what the disintegrating flesh testifies to. It is not a question of making the dead play the role of the living: the primitive concedes the dead their difference, for it is at this cost that they will be able to become partners and exchange their signs. The funeral home scenario goes the other way. Here, it becomes a question of the dead retaining the appearance of life, the *naturalness* of life: he still smiles at you, the same colours, the same skin, he seems himself even after death, he is even a little fresher than when he was alive, and lacks only speech (but we can still hear this in stereo). A faked death, idealised in the colours of life: the secret idea is that life is natural and death is against nature. Death must therefore be *naturalised* in a stuffed simulacrum of life. In all of this there is on the one hand a refusal to let death signify, take on the force of a sign, and, behind this sentimental nature-fetishism on the other, a great ferocity as regards the dead himself: rotting and change are forbidden, and instead of being carried over to death and thus the symbolic recognition of the living, he is maintained as a puppet within the orbit of the living in order to serve as an alibi and a simulacrum of their own lives.

Consigned to the natural, he loses his right to difference along with every chance of a *social* status.

This is what separates those societies that are afraid neither of the sign nor of death, since they make it signify overtly, from our 'ideological' societies where everything is buried under the natural, where signs have become nothing but designs, entertaining the illusion of a natural reason. Death is the first victim of this ideologisation: rigidly set in the banal simulacrum of life, it becomes shameful and obscene.

There is an enormous difference between these sanctuaries and drugstores of smiling, sterilised death and the corridors of the Capuchin convent in Palermo, where three centuries of disinterred corpses, meticulously fossilised in the clay of the cemetery, with skin, hair and nails, lie flat or suspended by the shoulders in close ranks, along the length of reserved corridors (the corridor of the religious, the corridor of the intellectuals, the corridors of women, children, etc.), still dressed either in a crude wrap or, on the contrary, in costume with gloves and powdered muslin. In the pale half light from the barred windows, 8,000 corpses in an incredible multiplicity of attitudes – sardonic, languid, heads bent, fierce or timid: a dance of death which was for a long time, before becoming the Grevin Museum for the tourists, a place for dominical walks for the relatives and friends who used to come to see their dead, to acknowledge them, show them to their children with the familiarity of the living, a 'dominicality' of death similar to those of the Mass or the theatre. A Baroque of death (the first unburied corpses date from the sixteenth century and the Counter-Reformation). The solidity of a society capable of exhuming its dead, of opening a route to them, half-way between intimacy and the spectacle, of bearing without fright or obscene curiosity, that is, without the effects of sublimation and seriousness to which we are accustomed, the theatre of death, where cruelty is still a sign, even if this is no longer in the bloody rites of the Tarahumaras. What a contrast with the fragility of *our* societies, which are incapable of confronting death without wan humour or perverse fascination. What a contrast with the anxious warding off in the funeral homes.

The Dereliction of Death

The cult of the dead is on the wane. An order has been placed over the tombs, no longer a perpetual concession. The dead become socially mobile. The devotion to death remains, particularly in the working or middle classes, but today this is much more as a variable of status (a second home) than as tribal piety. We speak less and less of the dead, we cut ourselves short and fall silent: death is discredited. End of a solemn and detailed 'death in the family': we die in hospital, death has become extraterritorial. The dying lose their rights, including the right to know when they are going to die. Death, like mourning, has become obscene and awkward, and it is good taste to hide it, since it can offend the well-being of others. Etiquette forbids any reference to the dead. Cremation is the limit point of this discrete elimination,

since it minimalises the remains. No more vertigo of death, only dereliction [*désaffecté*]. And the immense funeral cortège is no longer of a pious order, it is the sign of dereliction itself, of the consumption of death. In consequence, it grows in proportion to the disinvestment of death.

We no longer have the experience that others had of death. Spectacular and televised experience has nothing to do with this. The majority no longer have the opportunity to see somebody die. In any other type of society, this is something unthinkable. The hospital and medicine take charge of you; the technical Extreme Unction has replaced every other sacrament. Man disappears from his nearest and dearest before being dead. He dies somewhere else.

Roos, a Swiss woman, had the idea of going to speak to the dying about their own death, of making them speak. This is an obscene idea, a general denegation: no-one dies in the service of any hospital (it is the staff that have a problem). She was taken to be a madwoman, a provocatrice, and so she discharged herself from hospital. When she found a dying man to speak to, she went to find her students, but on her return she found him dead (here, she perceived that the problem was hers and her students'). She has subsequently succeeded: soon there will be a staff of psychologists to watch over the dying and give speech back to them. The neo-spiritualism of the human and psycho-social sciences.

The priest and the extreme unction still bore a trace of the community where death was discussed. Today, blackout. In any case, if the priest was nothing but a vulture, today this function is largely fulfilled by the doctor, who shuts speech off by overwhelming the dying with care and technical concern. An *infantile* death that no longer speaks, an inarticulate death, kept out of sight. Serums, laboratories and healing are only the alibi of the prohibition of speech.

The Exchange of Disease

In any case, we no longer die at home, we die in hospital – for many good 'material' reasons (medical, urbane, etc.), but especially because the sick or dying or man, as *biological* body, no longer has any place but within a *technical* milieu. On the pretext of being cared for, he is then deported to a functional space-time which is charged with neutralising the symbolic difference of death and disease.

Precisely where the goal is the elimination of death, the hospital (and medicine in general) takes charge of the sick as the virtually dead. Therapeutic scientificity and efficiency presuppose the radical objectification of the body, the social discrimination of the sick, and hence a process of mortification. The logical conclusion to the medical genealogy of the body:

> Medicine becomes modern with the corpse. … It will no doubt remain a decisive fact about our culture that its first scientific discourse concerning the individual had to pass through this stage of death. (Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* [tr. A.M.S. Smith, London: Routledge, 1990], p. 197)

Mortified, the patient is also deadly, taking his revenge as he can: by means of its functions, its specialisations and its hierarchies, the clinical institution as a whole seeks to preserve itself from contamination from the already-dead. The patient is dangerous because he is expected to die the death to which he has been condemned, and because of the neutrality in which he is enclosed at the term of his cure. From now on, the dead body can only act its incidental nature and its cure, it radiates the total difference between itself and the sick man, and, as dead, all its potential malificence. Neither the technical manipulation, the 'humane environment', nor even the occasion of his death in reality will be too much to ensure his silence.

The most serious danger the sick man represents, and by reason of which he is genuinely asocial and like a dangerous madman, is his profound demand to be recognised as such and to *exchange his disease*. It is an aberrant and inadmissible demand from the sick (and the dying) to base an exchange on this difference, not in order to be cared for and recover, but to *give* his disease so that it might be *received*, and therefore symbolically recognised and exchanged, instead of being neutralised in the techniques of clinical death and the strictly functional survival called health and curing.

The human or therapeutic relation to the hospital cannot be perfected; the general practice of medicine cannot change anything as concerns the blackout or the symbolic lock-out. Summoned to cure the sick, devoted to healing, the doctor and his helpers, exclusively equipped to cure the entire institution, including its walls, its surgical machinery and its psychological apparatuses (alternating between coldness and solicitude, and today the 'humanisation' of the hospital): none of this breaks the fundamental prohibition of a different status for disease and death. At best, the sick will be left the possibility of 'self-expression', of speaking about his disease, and recontextualising his life, in short the possibility of not experiencing this temporary anomaly so negatively. As regards recognising the madness of disease as difference, as meaning, a wealth of meaning, as material *from which to restructure* an exchange, without trying in any way to 'return the sick to their normal lives', this presupposes the total elimination of medicine and the hospital, the entire system of enclosing the body in its 'functional' truth; ultimately even the social order in its entirety, for which the mere demand that disease be treated as a *structure of exchange* is an absolute danger.[42]

Sexualised Death and Deadly Sex

Speaking of death makes us laugh in a strained and obscene manner. Speaking of sex no longer provokes the same reaction: sex is legal, only death is pornographic. Society, having 'liberated' sexuality, progressively replaces it with death which functions as a secret rite and fundamental prohibition. In a previous, religious phase, death was revealed, recognised, while sexuality was prohibited. Today the opposite is true. But all 'historical' societies are arranged so as to dissociate sex and death in

every possible way, and play the liberation of one off against the other – which is a way of neutralising them both.

Is everything evenly balanced in this strategy, or is there a priority of one term over the other? For the phase which concerns us, everything happens as if the indexation of death were the principal objective, bound up with the exaltation of sexuality: the 'sexual revolution' was entirely oriented in this direction, under the sign of the one-dimensional Eros and the *function* of pleasure. In other places, this is precisely what gave it its naïvety, its pathos, its sentimentality, and, at the same time, its 'political' terrorism (the categorical imperative of desire). The slogan of sexuality is in solidarity with political economy, in that it too aims at abolishing death. We will only have exchanged prohibitions. Perhaps, by means of this 'revolution', we will even have set up the fundamental prohibition against death. In so doing, the sexual revolution devours itself, since death is the real sexualisation of life.

My Death is Everywhere, my Death Dreams

Pursued and censured everywhere, death springs up everywhere again. No longer as apocalyptic folklore, such as might have haunted the *living* imagination in certain epochs; but voided precisely of any imaginary substance, it passes into the most banal reality, and for us takes on the mask *of the very principle of rationality* that dominates our lives. Death is when everything functions and serves something else, it is the absolute, signing, cybernetic functionality of the urban environment as in Jacques Tati's film *Play-Time*. Man is absolutely indexed on his function, as in Kafka: the age of the civil servant is the age of a culture of death. This is the phantasm of total programming, increased predictability and accuracy, finality not only in material things, but in fulfilling desires. In a word, *death is confused with the law of value* – and strangely with the structural law of value by which everything is arrested as a coded difference in a universal nexus of relations. This is the true face of ultra-modern death, made up of the faultless, objective, ultra-rapid connection of all the terms in a system. Our true necropolises are no longer the cemeteries, hospitals, wars, hecatombs; death is no longer where we think it is, it is no longer biological, psychological, metaphysical, it is no longer even murder: our societies' true necropolises are the computer banks or the foyers, blank spaces from which all human noise has been expunged, glass coffins where the world's sterilised memories are frozen. Only the dead remember *everything* in something like an immediate eternity of knowledge, a quintessence of the world that today we dream of burying in the form of microfilm and archives, making the entire world into an archive in order that it be discovered by some future civilisation. The cryogenic freezing of all knowledge so that it can be resurrected; knowledge passes into immortality as sign-value. Against our dream of losing and forgetting everything, we set up an opposing great wall of relations, connections and information, a dense and inextricable artificial memory, and we bury ourselves alive in the fossilised hope of one day being rediscovered.

Computers are the transistorised death to which we submit in the hope of survival. Museums are already there to survive all civilisations, in order to bear testimony. But to what? It is of little importance. The mere fact that they exist testifies that we are in a culture which no longer possesses any meaning for itself and which can now only dream of having meaning for someone else from a later time. Thus everything becomes an environment of death as soon as it is no longer a sign that can be transistorised in a gigantic whole, just as money reaches the point of no return when it is nothing more than a system of writing.

Basically, political economy is only constructed (at the cost of untold sacrifices) or designed so as to be recognised as immortal by a future civilisation, or as an instance of truth. As for religion, this is unimaginable other than in the Last Judgement, where God recognises his own. But the Last Judgement is there already, realised: it is the definitive spectacle of our crystallised death. The spectacle is, it must be said, grandiose. From the hieroglyphic schemes of the Defense Department or the World Trade Center to the great informational schemes of the media, from siderurgical complexes to grand political apparatuses, from the megapolises with their senseless control of the slightest and most everyday acts: humanity, as Benjamin says, has everywhere become an object of contemplation to itself.

> Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. ('The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* [tr. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt, London: Jonathan Cape, 1970], p. 244).

For Benjamin, this was the very form of fascism, that is to say, a certain exacerbated form of ideology, an aesthetic perversion of politics, pushing the acceptance of a culture of death to the point of jubilation. And it is true that today the whole system of political economy has become the finality without end and the aesthetic vertigo of productivity to us, and this is only the contrasting vertigo of death. This is exactly why art is dead: at the point of saturation and sophistication, all this jubilation has passed into the spectacle of complexity itself, and all aesthetic fascination has been monopolised by the system as it grows into its own double (what else would it do with its gigantic towers, its satellites, its giant computers, if not double itself as signs?). We are all victims of production become spectacle, of the aesthetic enjoyment [*jouissance*], of delirious production and reproduction, and we are not about to turn our backs on it, for in every spectacle there is the immanence of the catastrophe. Today, we have made the vertigo of politics that Benjamin denounces in fascism, its perverse aesthetic enjoyment, into the experience of production at the level of the general system. We produce the experience of a de-politicised, deideologised vertigo of the rational administration of things, of endlessly exploding finalities. Death is immanent to political economy, which is why the latter sees itself as immortal. The revolution too fixes its sights on an immortal objective, in the name of which it demands the suspension of death, in the interests of accumulation. But immortality is

always the monotonous immortality of a social paradise. The revolution will never rediscover death unless it demands it immediately. Its impasse is to be hooked on the end of political economy as a *progressive* expiry, whereas the demand for the end of political economy is posed right now, in the demand for immediate life and death. In any case, death and *enjoyment*, highly prized and priced, will have to be paid for throughout political economy, and will emerge as insoluble problems on the 'day after' the revolution. The revolution only opens the way to the problem of death, without the least chance of resolving it. In fact, there is no 'day after', only days for the administration of things. Death itself demands to be experienced immediately, in total blindness and total ambivalence. But is it revolutionary? If political economy is the most rigorous attempt to put an end to death, it is clear that only death can put an end to political economy.

Notes

1. Racism *was founded*, and from the universal point of view we claim to have overcome it in accordance with the egalitarian morality of humanism. Neither the soul, in times past, nor today the biological characteristics of the species, on which this egalitarian morality is based, offer a more objective or less arbitrary argument than, for example, the colour of one's skin, since they too are *distinctive* criteria. On the basis of such criteria (soul or sex), we effectively obtain a Black = White equivalence. This equivalence, however, excludes everything that has not a 'human' soul or sex even more radically. Even the savages, who hypostatise neither the soul nor the species, recognise the earth, the animal and the dead as the socius. On the basis of our universal principles, we have rejected them from our egalitarian metahumanism. By integrating Blacks on the basis of white criteria, this metahumanism merely extends the boundaries of abstract sociability, *de jure* sociality. The same white magic of racism continues to function, merely whitening the Black under the sign of the universal.
2. The more we stress the human character of the divine essence, and the more we see the distance that separates God from man increase, the more we see reflection on religion or theology nullify the identity and unity of the divine essence and the human essence, the more we see the debasement of all that is human, in the sense that human consciousness becomes its object. The reason for this is that if everything positive in the conception we have of the divine being is reduced to the human, then man, the object of consciousness, could only become a negative and inhuman conception. To enrich God, man must become poor (Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* [I.H.G. translation; available tr. George Eliot, New York: Harper and Row, 1957]).

   This text clearly describes an 'abduction' into the universal. The universalisation of God is always bound up with an exclusion and reduction of the human in its originality. When God starts to resemble man, man no longer resembles anything. What Feuerbach does not say, because he is still too wrapped up in religion, is that the universalisation of man also takes place at the cost of the exclusion of all others (madmen, children, etc.) in their difference. When Man starts to resemble Man, others no longer resemble anything. Defined as universality and as an ideal reference, the Human, just like God, is properly inhuman and extravagant. Feuerbach has equally nothing to say concerning the act of abduction, by which God captures the human for his own ends, in such a way that man is nothing more than the anaemic negative of God, which, backfiring, killed God himself. Even Man is dying from the various 'inhumanities' (madness, infancy, savagery) he has instituted.
3. At a time when public sector housing is taking on the appearance of a cemetery, cemeteries normally adopt the form of real estate (as in Nice, etc.). On the other hand,

it is remarkable that in the American metropolis, and often in the French, traditional cemeteries constitute the only green, or empty, spaces in the urban ghetto. That the space of the dead became the only district in the city where living is tolerable says a great deal about the inversion of values in the modern necropolis. In Chicago children play in cemeteries, cyclists ride there and lovers kiss. What architect would dare to draw inspiration from the truth of the contemporary urban set-up and form a conception of a city on the basis of cemeteries, waste ground and 'accursed' spaces? This would truly be the death of architecture.

4. Heresies always put this 'Kingdom of the Beyond' in question to establish the Kingdom of God *hic et nunc*. To deny the doubling of life and survival, to deny the next world, is also to deny the rupture with the dead and therefore the necessity of crossing over via an intermediary agency to establish trade with them. This is the end of the Church and its power.
5. God keeps the signifier and the signified, good and evil, apart, He also separates man and woman, the living and the dead, the body and the mind, the Other and the Same, etc. More generally, it is He who maintains the split between the poles of every distinct opposition, and therefore between the inferior and the superior, Black and White. As soon as reason becomes political, that is to say, as soon as the distinct opposition is resolved as power and leans in the interests of one of these terms, God is already on this side.
6. [*tient la barre*: 'at the helm' – tr.]
7. For us, by contrast, everything which is symbolically exchanged constitutes a mortal danger for the dominant order.
8. There is therefore no distinction on the symbolic plane between the living and the dead. The dead have a different status, that is all, which requires certain ritual precautions. But visible and invisible do not exclude each other since they are two possible states of a person. Death is an aspect of life. The Canaque arriving in Sydney for the first time, stupefied by the crowds, soon explains the thing by the fact that in this country the dead walk amongst the living, which is nothing strange. 'Do Kamo', for the Canaques (Maurice Leenhardt, *Do Kamo: Person and Myth in the Melanesian World* [tr. Basia Miller Gulati, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979]), is that 'which lives', and everyone may belong to this category. There again the living/non-living is a distinctive opposition that we alone make, and we base all our 'science' and our operational violence on it. Science, technics and production assume this rupture of the living and the non-living, privileging the living on which alone science in all its rigour is based (cf. J. Monod, *Chance and Necessity*). Even the 'reality' of science and technics is also the separation of the living and the dead. The very finality of science as a pulsion, as the death drive (the desire to know), is inscribed in this disjunction, so that an object is only real insofar as it is dead, that is, relegated to inert and indifferent objectivity, as were initially, above everything else, the dead and the living.

   By contrast, the primitives were not plunged, as we like to say so much, into 'animism', that is, into the idealism of the living, into the irrational magic of forces: they privilege *neither one term nor the other*, for the simple reason that they do not make this distinction.
9. This rule also applies in the political sphere. Thus the peoples of the Third World (Arabs, Blacks and Indians) act as Western culture's imaginary (as much an object or support of racism as the support of revolutionary aspirations). On the other hand, we, the technological and industrial West, are their imaginary, what they dream of in their separation. This is the basis of the *reality* of global domination.
10. Of course, the psychoanalytic (Lacanian) real is no longer given as substance, nor as a positive reference: it is the always lost object that cannot be located, and of which there is nothing ultimately to say. A delimited absence in the network of the 'symbolic order', this real retains however the charm of a game of hide-and-seek with the signifier which traces after it. From the representation to the trace, the real is effaced – not entirely, however. There is all the difference between an unconscious topology and utopia. Utopia *puts an end to the real*, even as absence or lack.

At least in Lacan there is something other than the idealist misinterpretation of Lévi-Strauss, for whom, in his *Structural Anthropology* [2 vols, tr. M. Layton, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977–9], 'the function of the symbolic universe is to resolve on the ideal plane what is experienced as contradictory on the real plane'. Here (not too far from its most degraded sense), the symbolic appears as a sort of ideal compensation function, mediating between the *separation* of the real and ideal. In fact, the symbolic is quite simply reduced to the imaginary.

11. On the other hand, whoever cannot be *given* also dies, or falls to the necessity of *selling* themselves. This is where prostitution takes hold, as the residue of gift-exchange and the first form of economic exchange. Even though the prostitute's wages were initially, in the ancient context, a 'sacrificial wage', it inaugurates the possibility of another type of exchange.
12. Cf. also M. Leenhardt: There is no idea of nothingness in death. The Canaque does not mistake the idea of death for that of nothingness. Perhaps we may find in their term *sèri* an idea similar to our 'nothingness'. *Sèri* indicates the situation of the bewitched or cursed man who has been abandoned by his ancestors, the *baos*, a man in perdition, out of society. He feels himself non-existent and suffers a veritable ruin. For him 'nothingness' is, at most, a social negation and is not a part of the idea he has of death. (Do *Kamo*, p. 35)
13. Such societies are consequently less psychotic than our modern societies (for which we politely reserve the qualification 'neurotic', but which are in fact in the process of becoming 'psychotic' according to our own definition, that is, they are in the process of a total loss of access to the symbolic).
14. Because the 'social' itself does not exist in 'primitive societies'. The term 'primitive' has been eliminated today, but we must also eliminate the equally ethnocentric term 'society'.
15. Cf. the cannibalism scene in Jean de Lhéry's *Les Indiens de la Renaissance*.
16. On this point see René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* [tr. Patrick Gregory, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1979].
17. Just like Jaulin (*La Mart Sara*) on the primitive fear of the dead: 'By lending anti-social intentions to the forces of death, the Sara have merely logically extended some very broad observations and, at the same time, several unconscious givens.' It is not at all certain that these unconscious 'givens' have much to do with this. The haunting and the negativity of the forces of death might well be explained as the menacing agency and the immanence of these wandering forces as soon as they escape from the group, where they can no longer be exchanged. 'The dead man', in fact, 'avenges himself.' But the hostile double, the hostile dead man, is repeatedly incarnated in the group's failure to preserve his material in symbolic exchange, to repatriate, through an appropriate ritual, this 'nature' that escapes with the dead man and which then cyrstallises into a malefic instance. This nevertheless leaves his relation with the group intact: he exercises it in the form of persecution (the dead labour frozen within capital plays the same role for us). This has nothing to do with a superegoic projection or an unconscious apparatus issuing from the depths of the species …
18. The neo-millennialism of the liberation of the unconscious should not be analysed as a distortion of psychoanalysis: it follows logically from the imaginary resurrection of the lost object (*objet petit 'a'*) that psychoanalysis buried at the core of its theory: the always unlocatable real which allows it to guard the gates to the symbolic. The *objet petit 'a'* is in fact the true mirror of Desire, and, at the same time, the mirror of psychoanalysis.
19. Science itself is cumulative only because it is half bound up with death, because it heaps death upon death.
20. In times past, however, there had already existed another individual and pessimistic thought of death: the Stoics' aristocratic, pre-Christian thought was also bound up with the conception of a personal solitude in death in a culture where collective myths were collapsing. The same emphases are also found in Montaigne and Pascal, in the feudal lord or the Jansenist of *noblesse de robe* (the ennobled bourgeoisie), in humanist resignation or desperate Christianity. This, however, marks the beginning of the modern anguish of death.

21. In this respect, there is no difference between atheist materialism and Christian idealism, for they part company only on the question of the afterlife (but whether or not there is anything after death has no importance: 'that is not the question' [in English in the original – tr.]), they agree on the basic principle: life is life, and death is always death; that is, they share the will to keep them scrupulously at a distance from each other.
22. The Christian dialectic of death epitomises and puts an end to Pascal's formula: 'It is important for all life to know whether the soul is mortal or immortal', is succeeded by humanist thinking, a rationalist mastery over death. In the West, this has been drawn on from the Stoics and the Epicureans (Montaigne – the denegation of death – benign or cold serenity), up to the eighteenth century and Feuerbach: 'Death is a phantom, a chimera, since it exists only when it does not exist.' The staging of reason never results in an excess of life, nor in an enthusiastic sense of death: humanism seeks a *natural* reason for death, a wisdom backed up by science and the Enlightenment thinkers.

    Dialectical reason – death as negativity and the movement of becoming – succeeds this formal and rationalist overcoming of death. The beautiful dialectic follows the upward mobility of political economy.

    The dialectic then breaks down to make room for the irreducibility of death and its insurmountable immanence (Kierkegaard). With Heidegger, dialectical reason falls into ruin, taking a subjective and irrational turn towards a metaphysics of despair and the absurd which, however, does not prevent it from continuing to be the dialectic of a conscious subject finding a paradoxical freedom in it: 'Everything is permitted, since death is insurmountable' (quia absurdum: Pascal was not so far from the modern pathos of death). Camus: 'The absurd man fixes death with an impassioned stare; this fascination liberates him.'

    The anguish of death as a test of truth. Human life as being-towards-death. Heidegger: 'Authentic being-towards-death – that is to say, the finitude of temporality – is the hidden basis of Dasein's historicality' *(Being and Time* [tr. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1978], §74, p. 438). Death as 'authenticity': there is in this, in relation to a system that is itself mortifying, a vertiginous escalation, a challenge which is in fact a profound obedience.

    The terrorism of authenticity through death remains a secondary process in that, by means of dialectical acrobatics, consciousness recuperates its 'finitude' as destiny. Anxiety as the reality principle and as 'freedom' remains the imaginary which, in its contemporary phase, has substituted the mirror of death for that of immortality. But all this remains extremely Christian and is moreover constantly mixed up with 'existential' Christianity.

    Revolutionary thought, for its part, oscillates between the *dialecticisation* of death as negativity, and the *rationalist* objective of the abolition of death: to put an end to it as a 'reactionary' obstacle in solidarity with capital, with the help of science and technics, *en route* to the immortality of generic man, beyond history, in communism. Death, like so many other things, is only a superstructure, whose exit will be governed by the revolution of the infrastructure.
23. There is a great risk of confusion here, for if we acknowledge that death and sexuality are biologically intertwined in the organic destiny of complex beings, this has *nothing to do* with the *symbolic* relation of death and sex. The first is inscribed in the positivity of the genetic code, the second in the destruction of social codes. Or rather, the second has no biological equivalent *inscribed* anywhere, whether in a code or in language. It is play, challenge and intense pleasure [*jouissance*] as it mockingly thwarts the former. Between the two, between the *real* relation of death and sexuality and their symbolic relation, there passes the caesura of exchange, a social destiny where everything plays.

    Weissman: soma is mortal, plasma germinative and immortal. Protozoa are virtually immortal, death arising only with differentiated metazoa for whom death becomes possible and even *rational* (the unlimited duration of an individual life becomes a useless luxury. For Bataille, death on the contrary becomes an 'irrational' luxury). *Death is only a late acquisition of living beings.* In the history of the species of living creatures, it appears along with sexuality.

So also Tournier in *Friday or the Other Island* ([tr. Norman Denny, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984], pp. 106–7):

> Sex and death. Their close association … he insisted that this was a sacrifice of the individual to the species, since in the act of procreation the individual loses something of his substance. Thus sexuality is the living presence, ominous and mortal, of the species in the essence of the individual. To procreate is to bring forth a new generation which innocently and inexorably will thrust its predecessor towards extinction. … The instinct which brings the sexes together is then an instinct of death. But Nature has thought it prudent to disguise her stratagem, transparent though it is, and what appears to be the self-indulgence of lovers is in reality a course of mad self-abnegation.

This fable is accurate, but demonstrates only the correlation between *biological* sex and death: in fact, death's decree appears along with sexuality, since the latter is already the inscription of a *functional* distribution, and therefore is immediately of a repressive order. But this functional distribution is not of the order of the pulsion; it is *social*. It appeared in a certain type of social relation. Savages do not make sexuality autonomous like we do; they are closer to what Bataille describes: 'Through the activity of organs in a flow of coalescence and renewal, like the ebb and flow of waves …, the self is dispossessed' (*Eroticism* [2nd edn, tr. M. Dalwood, London: Marion Boyars, 1987], p. 18).

24. In fact, Bataille's vision 'of excess' often falls into the trap of transgression, a fundamentally Christian dialectics or mysticism (but shared by contemporary psychoanalysis and by every 'libertarian' ideology of the festival and release [*défoulement*]) of the prohibition and transgression. We have made the festival into an aesthetics of *transgression*, because our entire culture is one of prohibition. Repression still marks the idea of the festival, which by the same token may be accused of reactivating the prohibition and reinforcing the social order. We treat the primitive feast to the same analysis since we are basically incapable of imagining anything other than the bar, its on-this-side and its beyond, which again issues from our fundamental schema of an uninterrupted linear order (the 'good form' which culture excludes is always that of the end, of a final fulfilment). Like the sacrifice, the primitive feast is not a transgression but a reversal, a cyclical revolution. This is the only form that puts an end to the bar and its prohibitions. The inverse order of the transgression or 'liberation' of repressed energies simply ends up in a compulsion to repeat the prohibition. Thus only reversibility and the cycle are in excess; transgression remains by default. 'In the economic order, all production is reproduction; in the symbolic order, all reproduction is production.'
25. It is, moreover, curious to see how, technically, death becomes increasingly undecidable for science itself: heart failure, then a level encephalogram; but then what? There is no longer any objective progress here: something of the indeterminacy and undecidability of death in the heart of science itself is reflected on the symbolic plane.
26. To the point that it is sufficient that certain political groups *demand* some accident or assassination attempt of unknown origin: this is their only 'practice', transforming chance into subversion.
27. Since today this contractual demand is addressed to social authorities, whereas before one signed pacts with the Devil to prolong, enrich and enjoy one's life. The same contract, and the same trap: the Devil always wins.
28. This is more important than the maximal exploitation of the labour force. This can clearly be seen in the case of the elderly: they are no longer exploited (if they are allowed to live on the fruits of society) if they are forced to live, since they are the living example of the accumulation of life (as opposed to its consumption). Society supports them as models of the use-value of life, *accumulation* and saving. This is precisely why they no longer have any symbolic presence in our society.
29. It only becomes the object of a passion again if it can be imputed to a person (a particular capitalist or a particular business personified), and is therefore experienced once again as crime and sacrifice.

30. Contrary to what is generally thought, human sacrifices *succeeded* animal sacrifice to the extent that the animal lost its magical pre-eminence, and the man-king succeeded the animal-totem as worthy of the sacrificial function. The more recent substitutive sacrifice of the animal has a very different meaning.
31. Hence in the past prisoners of war were spared in order to be used as slaves. No longer worthy of potlach and sacrifice, they were condemned to the lowliest role and to a slow death from labour.
32. But when and why did this death cease to be a sacrifice and become a torture? When did it cease to be a form of torture to become an execution, as it is for us? There is no history of death and the death penalty: there is only a genealogy of the social configurations to provide death with meaning.
33. The same liberal policy change took place, at another level, in England in 1830, where they wanted to replace the executioner with a preventative regular police force. The English prefer the executioner to the regular police force. And in fact the police, established in order to reduce the violence being wrought on the citizens, quite simply took over from crime in wreaking this violence against the citizen. In time, it revealed itself to be much more repressive and dangerous for the citizen than crime itself. Here again, overt and selective repression metamorphoses into generalised preventative repression.
34. Hence the meaning of the famous formula, 'We are all German Jews' (but also, 'we are all Indians, Blacks, Palestinians, women or homosexuals'). From the moment that the repression of difference was no longer carried out by extermination, but by absorption into the repressive equivalence and universality of the social, we are all different and repressed. There are no more detainees in a society that has invented 'open' prisons, just as there are no more survivors in a society that claims to abolish death. In this retaliatory contamination, the omnipotence of the symbolic order can be read: the unreal basis of the separations and the lines traced by power. Hence the power of this particular formula – We are all German Jews – in that rather than expressing an abstract solidarity (of the type 'all *together* for … we are all *united behind* this or that… forward *with* the proletariat', etc.), it expresses the inexorable fact of the symbolic reciprocity between a society and those it excludes. In a single movement it falls into line with them as radical difference. This is how it captured something fundamental in May '68, whereas other slogans were mere political cant.
35. For in this will to abolish death, which is the project of political economy, the unconscious, by a curious reversal ('that which knows no death' is the death drive), starts to play an important role. It becomes the referential discourse of the thesis of the criminal's irresponsibility (crime as acting out). It is well versed in the defence dossier as an explanatory system. *The unconscious plays a decisive role today in rationalist progressivist and humanist thought*: it has indeed fallen on hard times. And in this way, psychoanalysis also enters (without willing it?) ideology. The unconscious, however, would have had many other things to say about death if it had not learnt to speak the system's language: quite simply, it used to say that death did not exist, or, rather, that to abolish death was a phantasm that itself originates from the depths and repression of death. Instead of this, today it serves only as evidence, to our social idealists, of irresponsibility and justifies their *moral* discourse: life is a good, and death is an evil.

    In its violent classical phase, which even today coincides with conservative thought, capital plays on the discourse of conscious psychology and responsibility, and therefore repression: this is the terrorist discourse of capitalism. In its more advanced phase, which coincides with progressive, even revolutionary thought, neo-capitalism plays on the discourse of psychoanalysis: unconscious, irresponsibility, tolerance and reform. Consciousness and responsibility are the normative discourse of capital. The unconscious is the liberal discourse of neo-capitalism.
36. In 1819, under pressure from even the entrepreneurs and proprietors, and because the penal machine was jammed by the courts being too severe with the death penalty (jurors had the stark choice between the death penalty and acquittal), the death penalty was

abolished in a hundred or so cases (England). Its abolition therefore corresponds to a rational adaptation, to an increasing efficiency of the penal system. Koestler:

> Our capital punishment is not the inheritance of the butchery of the Dark Ages. It has its own history. It is the residue of a jurisdiction which is contemporary with the development of political economy, and whose fiercest period – the Bloody Code in nineteenth century England – coincides with the industrial revolution. Medieval custom reserved death for a few particularly serious offences. Bound to the increasingly imperious defence of the right to private property, the curve began to rise through the height of the nineteenth and up to the twentieth centuries. ('The "bloody code" ', in *Reflections on Hanging* [London: Gollancz, 1956], pp. 13ff. [Baudrillard has paraphrased and summarised rather than cited Koestler here. – tr.])

This curve, then, also charts the ascendancy of the capitalist bourgeois class. And its recession after 1850 is the effect not of absolute human progress, but that of the capitalist system.

37. Of the type: 'The state is led to multiply very real murders in order to avoid an unknown murder. It will never know if whether this murder has any chance of being perpetrated' (Camus, *Sur la peine capitale*). This play on logic, seeking to place the system in contradiction with itself, leads liberal humanism directly to abject compromise: 'The abolition of the death penalty must be demanded both for reasons of logic and realism(!)' (ibid.). 'In the last resort, the death penalty is bad because, by its very nature, it rules out any possibility of making punishment and responsibility proportionate' (Koestler, The "bloody code"'); this was already the reason that the English capitalists had demanded its abolition in 1820! The liberal argument is: terror goes against its own ends; a scale of well administered penalties, of 'minimal punishment', is both 'more humane and more effective(!)' The equivalence of the human and the effective has a long history in humanist thought.
38. It's not so simple however, since the subject can still invoke violent death, death 'from the outside' – an accident, suicide or a bomb – to avoid putting his 'natural' immortality into question. The ultimate subterfuge, the ultimate ruse of the ego that may lead the subject to the opposite extreme, to seek an 'absurd' death in order to better safeguard his immortal principle.
39. [CRS – Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité: the French riot police – tr.]
40. Cryogenic freezing, or being sealed in a gel so as to be resurrected, is the limit-form of this practice.
41. Just as much by simply devouring the body: in this sense, cannibalising the dead is itself a semiurgic activity (the idea that is always put forward is that through cannibalism 'one assimilates the forces of the dead': this is a secondary magical discourse for both the primitive and the ethnologist. It is not a question of force, that is to say, of a *natural* surplus or potential; on the contrary, it is a question of signs, that is to say, of preserving the sign's potential *against* every natural process, against the devastations of nature).
42. For the Dangaleat (Jean Pouillon, *Nouvelle Revue de Psychoanalyse*, no. 1, 1967), disease had an initiatory value. One must have been sick in order to become part of the group. One only becomes a doctor if one has been sick, and by the very fact of having been so. Disease comes from the *margaï*, each has their own *margaï* or *margaïs*, which they inherit from father to son. Every social position is acquired thanks to disease, which is a sign of election. Disease is a mark, a meaning – the normal man goes his own way, he islinsignificant. Disease is culture, the source of value and the principle of social organisation. Even where disease does not have this determinant social function, it is always a social matter, a social crisis, socially and publically resolved, by reactivating the whole social metabolism through the extraordinary relation between the doctor and the sick man, and setting it to work. This is radically different from contemporary medical practice, where the illness is individually borne and therapy individually applied.

The reciprocity and exchange of the illness is preponderant in primitive societies. Illness is a social relation, like labour, etc. Organic causality can be recognised and treated by all sorts of means; the illness itself is never conceived as an organic lesion, but in the last instance as the rupture and breakdown of social exchange. The organic is a metaphor: it will therefore be treated 'metaphorically' by the symbolic operation of social exchange through the two protagonists in the cure. The two are always three in other contexts: the group is immanent to the cure, at once the operator and the stakes of 'symbolic efficacy'. In short, the doctor and the sick are redistributed around the illness as social relation, instead, as is the case for us, of making the illness autonomous as an organic relation with its objective causality, doctor and patient each becoming objectified as passive and active, patient or specialist.

6

The Extermination of the Name of God

The Anagram

The model of a symbolic exchange also exists within the field of language, something like the core of a political anti-economy, a site of the extermination of value and the law: poetic language. In the field of an anti-discourse, a beyond of the political economy of language, Saussure's *Anagrams* constitute the fundamental discovery. The same discovery that will later lend its conceptual arms to linguistic science had previously, in his *Cahiers d'anagrammes*, brought out the antagonistic character of a non-expressive language, beyond the laws, axioms and finalities assigned it by linguistics, in the form of a *symbolic* operation of language, that is to say, not a structural operation of representation by signs, but exactly the opposite, the deconstruction of the sign and representation.

The principle of poetic functioning proclaimed by Saussure does not claim to be revolutionary. Only the passion he puts into establishing this principle as the recognised and conscious structure of remote, Vedic, Germanic and saturnine texts, and establishing its *proof*, is proportionate to the incredible scope of his hypothesis. He himself draws no radical or critical consequences from it, he does not care for one moment to generalise it on a speculative level, and when he failed to find this proof, he abandoned this revolutionary intuition and went on to the edification of linguistic science. It is perhaps only today, at the term of half a century of uninterrupted development in this science, that we can draw out the consequences of the hypothesis Saussure abandoned,[1] and investigate to what extent it lays the advance foundations for a decentring of all linguistics.

The rules of the poetic proclaimed by Saussure are the following.[2]

The Law of the Coupling

1. 'A vowel has no right to figure within the Saturnine unless it has its *counter-vowel* in some other place in the verse (to ascertain the identical vowel, without attention to quantity). The result of this is that if the verse has an even number of syllables, the vowels couple up exactly, and must always have a remainder of zero, with an even total for each type of vowel.'
2. The law of consonants is identical, and no less strict: there is always an even number of any consonant whatever.

3. He goes so far as to say that if there is an irreducible remainder either of vowels (unpaired verse) or consonants, then, contrary to what we might think, this does not escape condemnation even if it is a matter of a simple 'e': we will then see it reappear in the following verse, as a new remainder corresponding to the overspill from the preceding one.

The Law of the Theme-word In the composition of the verse, the poet sets the phonemic material provided by the theme-word to work. One (or several) verse(s) contain(s) anagrams of a single word (in general a proper name, of a god or a hero) by being constrained to reproduce itself, especially in a vocal rendition, 'on hearing one or two Latin Saturnine verses, F. de Saussure heard the principal phonemes of a proper name become clearer and clearer' (Starobinski, *Les mots*, p. 28). Saussure writes:

> In the hypogram, it is a matter of emphasising a name or a word, striving to repeat its syllables and thus giving it a second, artificial way of being, added, so to speak, to the original being of the word.

TAURA*S*IA C*I*SAUNA SAMN*I*0 C*EPI*T (*SCIPIO*)

*A*ASE*N* ARG*A*LEON *ANEMON AMEGARTOS* AUTM*E* (*AGAMEMNON*)

These simple rules are repeated untiringly in multiple variants. As regards alliteration, the rule to which it used to be thought we were able to submit all ancient poetry, Saussure says that it is only one aspect 'of an otherwise vast and important phenomenon', given that *'all* syllables alliterate, or assonate, or are combined in some other phonemic harmony'. Phonemic groups 'become echoes',

> entire verses to be anagrams of other preceding verses, however far off, in the text. … [P]olyphonies visually reproduce, when the occasion arises, the syllables of an important word or name, whether they figure in the text or present themselves naturally to the mind through the context. … [P]oetry analyses the phonemic substances of words, whether to turn them into accoustic series or signifying [*significative*] series when one alludes to a certain name [the anagrammatised word – J.B.]. [In short,] everything is answered, in one way or another, within the verse …

whether the signifiers or the phonemes answer one another throughout the verse, or the hidden signified, the theme-word, is echoed from one polyphony to the other, 'beneath' the 'manifest' text. Moreover, both rules can co-exist:

> Sometimes conjointly with anaphony, sometimes beyond every word we imitate, there is a correspondence of all the elements, translating into an exact 'coupling', that is to say, a repetition as a pair of even numbers.

Saussure will hesitate between the terms of 'anagram', 'antigram', 'hypogram', 'paragram' and 'paratext' to designate 'the elaborate variation that allows the perspicacious reader to perceive the evident but dispersed presence of

conducting phonemes' (Starobinski, *Les mots*, p. 33). We could, as an extension of Saussure's work, propose the term 'ANATHEMA', which is originally the equivalent of an ex-voto, of a votive offering: the divine name running beneath the text, and to whom the text is consecrated, the name of he who consecrates and to whom it is consecrated.[3]

These two laws appear to say extremely little as regards what we could say about the 'essence' of the poetic. Furthermore, they take no account of the poetic 'effect', of the enjoyment [*jouissance*] proper to texts, or of their aesthetic 'value' Saussure has only considered the poet's 'inspiration', not the reader's ecstasy. Perhaps he would never even have claimed that there was any relation whatsoever between the rules he clarifies (he thought he observed them, and that's all there is to it) and the exceptional intensity it has always been agreed that we find in poetry. By limiting his perspective to a formal logic of the signifier, he seems to leave the concern with looking for poetic enjoyment of the wealth of the *signified* and the profundity of *expression* to others who, with one accord, have always done so (psychologists, linguists and the poets themselves). Saussure, however, and Saussure alone, tells us that the enjoyment derived from the poetic is enjoyment in that it shatters 'the fundamental laws of the human word'.

Linguists become refugees in the face of this subversion of their discipline, in an untenable paradox. They acknowledge, with Roman Jakobson, that

> the poetic anagram cuts across the two laws of the human word as proclaimed by Saussure, that of the codified bond between the signifier and its signified, and that of the linearity of signifiers. … (The means employed by poetic language are such that they make us take leave of the linear order …) ['F. de Saussure sur les anagrammes', in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 7, Berlin: Mouton, 1985, p. 247]

(or, as Starobinski summarizes it, 'we leave the consecutive temporality proper to common language' [*Les mots*, p. 47]), and simultaneously affirm that 'Saussure's researches open up unprecedented perspectives in the *linguistic* study of poetry' [Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 7, p. 246].

An elegant manner to recuperate the poetic as a particular field of discourse, on which linguistics retains the monopoly. What does it matter if the poetic denies the laws of signification, since we will neutralise it by giving it the keys to the city of linguistics, and by requiring it to obey the same reality principle? But what is a signified or a signifier if it is no longer governed by the code of equivalence? What is a signifier if it is no longer governed by the law of linearity? And what is linguistics without all this? Nothing (but we will see the contortions it goes through in order to make amends for this violence).

Linguistics gets out of Saussure's first law (the coupling) by putting forward the redundancy of the signifier, or indeed the frequency with which a particular phoneme or polyphony occurs, which is greater than the average in ordinary language, etc.; it gets out of the second (properly anagrammatic) law by invoking the 'latent' name (Agamemnon) as the secondary signified of a text that inevitably 'expresses' or 'represents' it, conjointly with the

'manifest' signified ('one and the same signifier splits into two signifieds', says Jakobson [*Selected Writings*, Vol. 7, p. 247]) – a desperate attempt to save, even if it was through a more complex operation, the law of linguistic value and the essential categories of the mode of signification (signifier, signified, expression, representation, equivalence). The linguistic imaginary seeks to annex the poetic to itself and even claims to enrich poetics' economy of the *term* and *value*. But against it, and giving full scope to Saussure's discovery, it must be said that, on the contrary, the poetic is a process of *the extermination of value*.

The law of the poem is in fact to make sure, following a rigorous proceedure, that *nothing remains of it*. This is why it contrasts sharply with the discourse of linguistics, which, for its part, is a process of the accumulation, production and distribution of language as value. The poetic is irreducible to the mode of signification, which is nothing other than the mode of production of the values of language. This is why it is irreducible to the linguistic, which is the science of this mode of production.

The poetic is the insurrection of language against its own laws. Saussure himself never formulated this subversive consequence. Others, however, have accurately assessed the danger inherent in the simple formulation of another possible formulation of language. This is why they have all made to conceal this in accordance with their code (calculating the signifier as a term, and the signified as value).

The Poetic as the Extermination of Value

1. Saussure's first law, that of the coupling, is in no way, as he himself insists, that of the unlimited expressive alliteration or redundancy of some phoneme or other.

> Pour qui sont ces serpents qui sifflent sur nos têtes?
>
> [For whom are these snakes whistling over our heads?]

These *serpents* are the rattlesnakes of a linguistics of the recurrence and accumulation of the signified: s-s-s-s- '*ÇA*' [*ID*] also whistles in the signifier, and the more 's's there are, the more *ça* whistles, the more menacing it is and the better it 'expresses'. Thus again:

> … the faint fresh flame of the young year flushes
>
> from leaf to flower and flower to fruit …

'In Swinburne's lines', says Ivan Fonagy, 'we feel the breeze passing, without the poem expressly mentioning it' ('Form and Function in Poetic Language', *Diogène*, 51, 1965, p. 90). Saussure's coupling is a calculated, conscious and rigorous duplication which refers to another *status of repetition*, not as the accumulation of terms, as the accumulative or alliterative (com)pulsion, but as the *cyclical cancellation of terms, two by two, the extermination of doubling by the cycle*.

> Vowels always couple up exactly, AND MUST ALWAYS GIVE A REMAINDER OF ZERO. (Saussure cited in Starobinski, *Les mots*, p. 21)

And in the emblematic citation that he gives this law – NUMERO DEUS PARI GAUDET ('God rejoices in even numbers') – it is said that in one way or another, enjoyment is inseparable not from amassing the Same, reinforcing meaning by the addition of the Same, but quite the contrary, from its cancellation by the *double*, by the cycle of the anti-vowel or the anti-gram where the phonematic character comes to be cancelled as if in a mirror.

2. Saussure's second law, which concerns the theme-word or the 'anathema' that runs through the text, must be analysed in the same way. It must be seen that it is not at all a matter of repeating the original signifier or reproducing its phonematic components throughout a text.

'Aasen argaleôn anemôn amegartos autmè' does not 'reproduce' Agamemnon even though Saussure is ambiguous on this point. He says:

> In the hypogram, it is a question of emphasising a name, a word, striving to repeat its syllables and thus giving it a second, artificial way of being added, so to speak, to the original being of the word.

In fact, the theme-word is *diffracted* throughout the text. In a way, it is 'analysed' by the verse or the poem, reduced to its simple elements, decomposed like the light spectrum, whose diffracted rays then sweep across the text. In other words then, the original corpus is dispersed into 'partial objects'. It is therefore a matter not of another manner of being the Same, of reiteration or paraphrase, of a clandestine avatar of the original name of God, but rather of an explosion, a dispersion, a dismembering where this name is annihilated. Not an 'artificial double' (what use is this unless it is in order to be reduced to the same thing?), but a dismembered double, a body torn limb from limb like Osiris and Orpheus. Far from reinforcing the signifier in its being, repeating it positively, this metamorphosis of its scattered members is equivalent to its death as such, to its annihilation. To sum it up, this is, *on the level of the signifier, of the name it incarnates, the equivalent of putting God or a hero to death in the sacrifice.* Following this, the animal totem, the god or the hero circulate, disarticulated, disintegrated by its death in the sacrifice (eventually torn limb from limb and eaten), as the symbolic material of the group's integration. The name of God, torn limb from limb, dispersed into its phonemic elements as the signifier, is put to death, haunts the poem and rearticulates it in the rhythm of its fragments, without ever being reconstituted in it as such.

The symbolic act never consists in the reconstitution of the name of God after a detour and analytic breakdown within the poem; the symbolic act never consists of the resurrection of the signifier. Starobinski is wrong when he says:

> It will be a matter of reassembling the principal syllables, as Isis reunited Orpheus' dismembered body.

Lacan gets his theory of symbolism wrong when he says:

> If man finds himself open to desiring as many others within himself as his members have names other than his, if he is to recognise as many disjointed members, lost without ever having been a unity, as there are beings that are metaphors of these members, we can also see that the question of ascertaining the epistemological value of these symbols has been resolved, since these are the very members that return to him after wandering through the world in an alienated fashion. (*La psychanalyse*, Vol. V, 1960, p. 15)

The symbolic act is never in this 'return', in this retotalisation that follows alienation, in this resurrection of an identity; on the contrary, it is always in the volatilisation of the name, the signifier, in the *extermination of the term*, disappearance with no return. This is what makes possible the intense circulation on the interior of the poem (also in the primitive group on the occasion of feasting and sacrifice), this is what gives enjoyment a language, and, again, one from which *nothing results nor remains*. The entire pack of linguistic categories cannot do too much to efface the scandal of the loss and death of the signifer in this feverish agitation of language which, as Bataille says concerning life, 'demands that death exert its ravages at its expense'.

Here, of course, the limits Saussure imposes on himself explode. This poetic principle is not only applicable to Vedic, Germanic or Latin poetry, and it is pointless to seek, as he did, for a hypothetical generalisation of the *proof* of this. It is obvious that modern poets have never made use of the generative theme-word, if ever the ancient poets did. But this is not an objection since it is clear that, for all languages and all epochs, the *form* Saussure distinguished is sovereign. It is clear to all – enjoyment bears witness to this – that *a good poem is one where nothing is left over*, where all the phonemic material in use is consumed; and that, on the other hand, a bad poem (or 'not-poetry-at-all') is one where there is a remainder, where not every significant phoneme, diphoneme, syllable or term has been seized by its double, where not every term has been volatilised and consumed in a rigorous reciprocity (or antagonism), as in primitive gift-exchange, where we feel the weight of the remainder that has not found its corresponding term, nor therefore its death and absolution, which has not *been* successfully *exchanged* in the very operation of the text: it is in proportion to this residue that we know that a poem is bad, that it is the slag of discourse, something which has not exploded, which has been neither lost nor consumed in the festival of reversible speech.

Value is residue. It is the discourse of signification, our language governed by linguistics. The *economy* of signification and communication, where we produce and exchange terms and meaning-values, under the law of the code, rests on everything that has not been seized by the symbolic operation of language, by symbolic extermination.

The economic process is inaugurated in the same way: what re-enters the circuits of accumulation and value is what *remains* from sacrificial consumption, what has not been exhausted in the incessant cycle of the gift

and the counter-gift. It is this remainder that we accumulate, we speculate on the rest, and here the birth of the economic begins.

We can distinguish a third dimension of our mode of signification from the notion of the remainder. We know that the poetic operation 'shatters the fundamental laws of language':

1. The signifier–signified equivalence.
2. The linearity of the signifier (Saussure: 'In linguistics, we should not, due to its being obvious, lightly disregard the truth that the elements of a word *follow each other*, since, on the contrary, it provides in advance the central principle of all useful reflection on words.')
3. The third dimension, never really taken into account, and strictly interdependent with the two others, is that of *the boundlessness, the limitless production of signifying material*. Just as equivalence defines a dimension of the economic (that of unlimited productivity, the infinite reproduction of value), so the signifier–signified equivalence defines an unlimited field of *discursivity*.

We no longer even see this proliferation of our discursive customs, it becomes so 'natural' to us, but it is what distinguishes us from all other cultures. We use and abuse words, phonemes and signifiers with no ritual, religious or poetic restriction of any kind, in total 'freedom', with no responsibility as regards the immense 'material' that we produce as we please. Everyone is free to endlessly use and endlessly draw on phonemic material in the name of what they want to 'express' and with the sole consideration of what they have to say. This 'freedom' of discourse, the possibility of *taking* it and using it without ever *returning* it, answering to it, nor sacrificing even a share of one's goods to it, as the primitives used to in order to ensure its symbolic reproduction; *the idea of language as an all purpose medium* of an inexhaustible nature, like a place where the utopia of political economy would be realised: 'to each according to his needs'; this phantasm of an unprecedented stock, a raw material that would be magically reproduced in exact proportion to its use (no need even for primitive accumulation), and therefore the freedom of a fantastic wastage, is the exact status of our discursive communication, a staggering availability of signifying material. All this is thinkable only in a general configuration where the same principles govern the reproduction of both material goods and the species itself. A mutation runs simultaneously through social formations where material goods, the number of individuals and the proliferation of words are, in a more or less rigorous fashion, distributed, limited and controlled inside a symbolic cycle, and our 'modern' social formations, which are distinguished by an infinite productivity, as economic as it is linguistic and demographic. These societies are caught in an endless escalation at every level: material accumulation, linguistic expression, and the proliferation of the species.[4]

This model of productivity (exponential growth, galloping demographics, unlimited discursivity) must be simultaneously analysed everywhere. On the plane of language, which is alone in question here, it is clear that

the unrestrained freedom to use phonemes in unlimited number for purposes of expression, without the reverse processes of cancellation, expiation, reabsorption or destruction (it does not matter which term), is radically opposed by the simple law announced by Saussure, that in poetry a vowel, a consonant or a syllable cannot be uttered without being doubled, that is to say, somehow exorcised, without fulfilling itself in the repetition that cancels it.

From that point on, there is no question of unlimited use. The poetic, like symbolic exchange, brings into play a strictly limited and distributed corpus, but it undertakes *to reach the end of it*, whereas our economy of discourse implements an unlimited corpus that cares nothing for resolution.

What becomes of words and phonemes in our discursive system? We should not think that they graciously disappear as soon as they have served their purpose, nor that they return somewhere, like the characters on a Linotype matrix, and wait until the next time they are used. Again, this is part of our idealist conception of language. Every term or phoneme not taken back, not *returned*, not volatilised by poetic doubling, not exterminated as a term and as a value (in its equivalence to what it 'meant' or 'wanted to say'), *remains*. It is a residue. It will return to a fantastic sedimentation of waste, of opaque discursive material. (We begin to perceive that the essential problem of a productive civilisation may be that of its waste, *which is nothing other than the problem of its own death*: giving way under its own remains. Industrial leftovers are nothing, however, in relation to the remains of language.) Such as it is, our culture is haunted and jammed by this gigantic, petrified, residual instance: by means of an escalation of language it attempts to reduce a tendential decline in the rate of 'communication'. Nothing happens. Just as every commodity, that is to say, everything produced under the sign of the law of value and equivalence, is an *irreducible residue* that comes to bar social relations, so every word, every term and every phoneme produced and not symbolically destroyed accumulates like the repressed, weighs down on us with all the abstraction of dead language.

An economy of profusion and wastage rules over our language: the affluent utopia. But although 'affluence' and wastage are recent characteristics of the material economy, an *historical* trait, they appear to be a natural dimension, always already given, of spoken or written language. There is and will always be, at every instant, a utopia, insofar as we will want it for the whole world – the utopia of an unlimited *capital* of language as use- and exchange-value. In order to signify, everyone proceeds by the accumulation and cumulative exchange of signifiers whose truth lies elsewhere, in the equivalence to what they want to say (one can say it in fewer words: concision is a *moral* virtue, but this is only ever an economy of *means*). This discursive 'consumption', over which the spectre of penury never hangs, this wasteful manipulation, sustained by the imaginary of profusion, results in a prodigious inflation that leaves, in the image of our societies of uncontrolled growth, an equally prodigious residue, a non-degradable waste of

consummated, but never entirely consumed, signifiers. For used words are not volatilised, they accumulate like waste – a sign pollution as fantastic as, and contemporary with, industrial pollution.

Linguistics seized the stage of the *waste product* [*déchet*], the stage of a functional language that it universalises as the natural state of all language. It imagines no other:

> Just as the Romans and the Etruscans divided the sky by rigid mathematical lines, and in this way delimited space as a *templum* and conjured up a God, so every people has above them such a sky divided up by mathematical concepts and, under the demand for truth, it intends that from now on every conceptual God should be sought nowhere other than within this sphere. (Nietzsche, *The Philosopher's Book*)

This is what linguistics does: it *forces* language into an autonomous sphere in its own image, and feigns to have found it there 'objectively', when, from start to finish, it invented and rationalised it. It is incapable of imagining a state of language other than that of the combinatory abstraction of the code [*langue*] accompanied with an infinite manipulation of speech [*parole*]; in other words, speculation (in the double sense of the term) on the basis of general equivalence and free circulation; everyone using words as they please and exchanging them in accordance with the law of the code.

But *let's suppose* a stage where the signs of language were deliberately distributed (like money is for the Are-Are): restricted distribution, no formal 'freedom' of production, circulation or use. Or rather a double circuit:

- the circuit of 'liberated' words, gratuitously useable, circulating as exchange-value; a zone of meaning 'commerce', analogous to the sphere of the gimwali in economic exchange;
- the controlled circuit of a non-'liberated' zone, of a material restricted to symbolic use where words have neither use- nor exchange-value, and where they cannot be gratuitously multiplied nor uttered, analogous to the sphere of the kula for 'precious' goods.

The general principle of equivalence does not operate in this sphere, nor therefore does the logical and rational articulation of the sign with which semio-linguistic 'science' is preoccupied.

The poetic recreates the situation of primitive societies in linguistic material: a restricted corpus of objects whose uninterrupted circulation in the gift-exchange creates an inexhaustible wealth, a feast of exchange. Assessed by their volume or their value, primitive goods end up in an almost absolute penury. Tirelessly consumed in feasting and exchange, they recount, through their 'minimal volume and number', the 'maximal energy of signs' of which Nietzsche spoke, or the first and only genuine affluent society of which Marshall Sahlins spoke (*Les temps modernes*, Oct. 1968).

Words here have the same status as objects or goods: they are not freely available to everybody, language has no 'affluence'. In these magical and ritual formulations there reigns a restriction which alone preserves the symbolic efficacity of signs. The shaman and the prophet (*Vates*) act on considered,

coded and limited phonemes or formulae, exhausting them in a maximal configuration of meaning. So the formula is pronounced, in its literal and rhythmic exactitude, so it binds the future, but not because it signifies.[5]

The same goes for the poetic, which is defined by the fact of operating on a *restricted* corpus of the signifier, and by aiming to resolve it completely. And it is precisely because the poetic (or the primitive ritual of language) aims not at the production of signifieds, but at the exact consumption and cyclical resolution of a signifying material, that it takes on a limited corpus. *Limitation* is neither restrictive nor penurious in this context: *it is the fundamental rule of the symbolic*. Conversely, the inexhaustible character of our discourse is bound to the rule of equivalence and linearity, just as the infinite character of our material production is inseparable from the change to equivalence in exchange-value (it is this linear infinity which simultaneously breeds, at every moment of capital, the fact of poverty and the phantasm of a final wealth).

The signifier, doubling up and returning to cancel itself out, follows the same movement as the gift and the counter-gift, giving and returning; it is a reciprocity where the use-value and the exchange-value of an object cancel each other out, and the same complete cycle results in the nothingness of value, on which the intensity of the social relation or the enjoyment of the poem acts.

This is a question of *revolution*. What the poetic accomplishes with the phoneme-value at a microscopic level, every social revolution accomplishes over the entire flanks of the code of value – use-value, exchange-value, rules of equivalence, axioms, value-systems, coded discourses, rational finalities, etc. – when the death drive is linked to it in order to volatilise them. This same process of completion does not stop short of the analytic operation: in contrast to science as a process of accumulation, the real *analytic* operation *eliminates its object*, which comes to an end in it. The term of the analysis – not its 'constructive' finality, but its real *end* – is this volatilisation of the object and its own concepts; or again, these are the processes of the subject who, far from attempting to master its object, accepts being analysed by it in turn, in which movement the respective positions of each are irremediably dismantled. It is only from this point that the subject and the object *are exchanged*, whereas in their respective positivity (in science for example) they merely draw themselves erect and face each other off for an indefinite period. Science is bound to the construction of its object and to its repetition as a phantasm (as much as to the phantasmatic reproduction of the subject of knowledge). A perverse pleasure is attached to this phantasm, the pleasure of continually reconstructing a faltering object, whereas it is proper to analysis, and to enjoyment, *to bring its object to an end*.[6]

The poetic is the restitution of symbolic exchange in the very heart of words. Where words, in the discourse of signification, finalised by meaning, do not respond to each other, do not speak to each other (and neither, within words themselves, do consonants, vowels and syllables), in the

poetic, on the contrary, once the authority of meaning has been broken, all the constitutive elements enter into exchange with, and start to respond to, each other. They are not 'liberated', nor is any deep or 'unconscious' content 'set free' through them: they are simply returned to exchange, and this very process is enjoyment. It is futile to look for the secret in an energetics, a libidinal economy or a fluid dynamics: enjoyment is not bound up with the effectuation of a force, but with the actualisation of an exchange – an exchange without traces, where no force casts a shadow, since every force, and the law behind it, has been resolved. For it is the operation of the symbolic to be its own definitive end.

The mere possibility of this is a revolution in relation to an order where nothing and no-one, neither words, men, their bodies nor their gazes, are given access to direct communication, but instead pass in transit as values through the models that engender or reproduce them in total 'estrangement' to each other … The revolution is everywhere where an exchange crops up – be it the infinitesimal exchange of phonemes or syllables in a poetic text, or of millions of men speaking to each other in an insurgent city – that shatters the finality of the models, the mediation of the code and the consecutive cycle of value. For the secret of a social *parole*, of a revolution, is also the anagrammatic dispersal of the instance of power, the rigorous volatilisation of every transcendent social instance. The fragmented body of power is then exchanged as social *parole* in the poetry of rebellion. Nothing remains of this *parole*, nor is any of it accumulated anywhere. Power is reborn from what is not consumed in it, for power is the residue of *parole*. In social rebellion the same anagrammatical dispersal is at work as that of the body in eroticism, as that of knowledge and its object in the analytic operation: the revolution is symbolic or it is not a revolution at all.

The End of the Anathema

The whole science of linguistics can be analysed as resistance to the operation of dissemination and literal resolution. Everywhere there is the same attempt to reduce the poetic to a meaning, a 'wanting-to-say' [*vouloir-dire*], to bring it back under the shadow of a meaning, to shatter the *utopia* of language and to bring it back to the topic of discourse. Linguistics opposes the discursive order (*equivalence and accumulation*) to the literal order (*reversibility and dissemination*). We can see this counter-offensive unfolding in the interpretations of the poetic given here and there (Jakobson, Fonagy, Umberto Eco – see 'The Linguistic Imaginary', below). Psychoanalytic interpretation, to which we will return, also arises from this resistance. For the radicality of the symbolic is such that all the sciences or disciplines that labour to neutralise it come to be analysed by it in their turn, and returned to their ignorance [*méconnaissance*].

These, then, are the principles of linguistics and psychoanalysis that will be at stake as regards Saussure's anagrammatic hypothesis. Although he made this hypothesis in connection with a precise point and subject to

assessment, there is nothing to prevent us developing it and drawing out its ultimate consequences. In any case, *the radicalisation of hypotheses is the only possible method* – theoretical violence being the equivalent, in the analytic order, of the 'poetic violence which replaces the order of all the atoms of a phrase' of which Nietzsche speaks.

We will begin with Starobinski's commentary on Saussure [*Les mots*, pp. 33ff.]. Two aspects of his commentary are especially in question here: the theme-word (whether or not it exists); and the specificity of the poetic (and thus Saussure's discovery).

Saussure's whole argument seems to draw its support from the *real* existence of the key-word, the latent signifier, the 'matrix' and the 'corpus princeps':

> This versification seems to be dominated by a *phonemic* preoccupation, sometimes internal and free (the mutual correspondence of elements by couplets or rhymes), sometimes external, that is to say, drawing inspiration for phonemic composition from a name like Scipio, Jovei, etc.

And we know that after having had this intuition, all his efforts were brought to bear on establishing its proof. Here, it is true, Saussure falls into the trap of scientific validation, into the superstition of the fact. Fortunately, he fails to establish this proof (of knowing whether the practices of the ancient poets were governed scientifically by the anagram of the theme-word), and this failure preserves the scope of his hypothesis, which would in fact, once delimited by a proof, be restricted to a certain type of ancient poetry and, more seriously, it would have restrained the poetic act to the formal gymnastics of the cryptogram, a game of hide-and-seek with the key-word, playing for the reconstitution of a term that had been voluntarily buried and dislocated. This is how Starobinski interprets it:

> Poetic discourse will therefore only ever be the second manner of being of a name: an elaborate variation that would allow the perspicacious reader to see the obvious but dispersed presence of the principal phonemes … The hypogram slides from a simple name into the complex spread of the syllables in a line; it will be a question of recognising and reassembling of the principal syllables, as Isis reunites the dismembered body of Osiris.

From the outset, Starobinski eliminates both the emanationist or mystical theory (the germinal diffusion of the theme-word through the line) and the productive theory (the theme-word used by the poet as a framework for the labour of composition). The theme-word is neither an original cell, nor a model: Saussure never tries to establish a relation of semantic privilege between the two levels (nominal and anagrammatised) of the word. Mannequin, sketch, miniature scene, theme or anathema: what status can we give it? This is important, since the whole schema of signification, of 'making a sign', is at stake: it is certain at least that we cannot turn the theme-word into the signified of the poem as signifier; and no less certain that there exists, if not a *reference*, then at least a *coherence* between the two. Starobinski seems to be sticking as close as possible to Saussure when he proposes:

> The latent theme-word differs only from the manifest line by its compression. It is *a* word like the *many* words deployed in the line: they differ only therefore in the way that the one differs from the multiple. Developed before the total text, hidden behind the text, or rather in it, the theme-word shows no qualitative difference: it is neither of a superior essence, nor of a more humble nature. It offers its substance to an inventive interpretation, causing it to survive in an extended echo.

But, if it is a word *like* other words, why is it necessary that it is hidden or latent? On the other hand, the 'manifest' text is something other than the 'development, multiplication, prolongation' and 'echo' of the theme-word (in itself, the echo is not poetic): this something else is dissemination, dismemberment and deconstruction. Starobinski overlooks this aspect of the operation until his most nuanced interpretation:

> The diction of the theme-word seemed to be dislocated, subjected to a rhythm other than that of the vocables through which the manifest discourse unfolds; the theme-word becomes looser, in the manner in which the subject of a fugue is stated, when it is treated as imitation by augmentation. There can be no question of recognising it, the theme-word never having been the object of an exposition; it must be divined in a reading attentive to the possible links between disparate phonemes. This reading is developed according to another tempo (and in another tense): ultimately, we leave the time of the 'continuity' proper to customary language.

This interpretation, more subtle in that it is allied to the analytic process (floating attention to a free discourse), also seems however to fall into the trap of presupposing a generative formula, whose scattered presence in the poem would in some sense be merely a secondary state, whose identity it would nevertheless always be possible (it is even the necessary condition of reading) to locate. Simultaneous double presence at two levels: Osiris dismembered is the same in another form, his finality is to become Osiris again following the phase of dispersion. The identity remains latent, and the process of reading is a process of identification.

This is the trap, this is the linguistic *defence*: as complex as they are, these interpretations only ever turn the poetic into a *supplementary* operation, a detour in a process of recognition (of a word, a term, a subject). It is always the same that is given to read. But then why this laborious reduction; and what makes all this 'poetic'? If it is in order to repeat the same term, if the line is only the phonemic dissimulation of the key-word, then all this is futile complication and subtlety. And enjoyment remains unexplained. Poetic intensity never consists in the repetition of an identity, but in the *destruction* of an identity. It is ignorance [*méconnaissance*] of this that produces the linguistic reduction, this is where it subtly distorts the poetic in the direction of its own axioms: identity, equivalence, refraction of the same, 'imitation by augmentation', etc. It especially never recognises the mad distortion, the perdition of the signifier and death in the anagram, as the symbolic form of language, remaining within the linguistic game, where poetry is only a code, a 'key', in the way we speak of a key to dreams.

This is what societies' games do, and this is all they do. This is what bad poetry, allegory and figurative music do, when they refer in too facile a fashion to what they 'signify', or endlessly metaphorise into other terms. These are charades, riddles and spoonerisms, in which, with the discovery of the key-word, everything is complete. And of course there is pleasure in this detour, as there is removing the mask from what is hidden, and whose secret presence attracts you. But this pleasure has nothing to do with poetic enjoyment, which is radical in another way, *and not perverse*: nothing is discovered in it, nothing expressed in it, and nothing shows through it. No riddles or 'divinations', no secret terms, no abutment of meaning. The poetic destroys every cleared path towards a final term, every key, it resolves the *anathema*, the law weighing down upon language.

We could offer the hypothesis that enjoyment is a direct function of the resolution of every positive reference. It is at its minimum where the signified is immediately produced as value: in 'normal' communicative discourse – linear and steady speech, exhausted in decoding. Beyond this discourse – the zero degree of enjoyment – all sorts of combinations are possible where a game of hide-and-seek is set up with the signified, a deciphering, and no longer a pure and simple decoding. This latter is the traditional anagram or the text with keys, the 'Yamamoto Kakpoté' or the texts from the *Fliegende Blätter* (interpreted by Freud and analysed by Lyotard in 'The Dreamwork Does Not Think', *Oxford Literary Review*, 6 (1) 1983), where, behind a coherent or incoherent manifest text, there lies a latent text to be found. In both cases, there is a disengagement, a distantiation of the signified, of the last word of history, a detour by way of the signifier, *différance* as Derrida says. But in any case, it is possible, by whatever developments, to seize hold of the last word, the formula that controls the text. This formula may be subconscious (in the joke, the *mot d'esprit*, to which we shall return) or unconscious (in the dream), but it is always coherent and discursive. With the dawning of this formula, the cycle of meaning is exhausted. And enjoyment, in every case, is proportionate to the detour, the delay, the loss of the statement, to the *time lost* in rediscovering it. It is therefore extremely restrained in society's games, more intense in the *mot d'esprit*, where the decoding is suspended and where we laugh in proportion to the destruction of meaning. *In the poetic text, it is infinite*, because no code whatsoever can be found there, no deciphering is possible, and because there is never a signified to put an end to the cycle. Here, the formula is not even unconscious (this is the limit of all psychoanalytic interpretations), *it does not exist*. The key is definitively lost. This is the difference between simple cryptogrammatic pleasure (the entire category of the brainwave, where the operation always ends up with a positive residue) and the symbolic radiation of the poem. In other words, if the poem refers to something, it is always to NOTHING, to the term of nothingness, to the signified zero. Poetic intensity consists in the vertigo of this perfect resolution, which leaves the place of the signified or the referent perfectly empty.[7]

'Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore': a perfect line where the anagrammatic form is taken up again. 'ABOLI' is the generative theme-word running

throughout the line, and referring to nothing. The anagrammatic form and its content seal an extraordinary union here.

Several other things can be advanced concerning the theme-word, even within the limits of Saussure's hypothesis. The hypogram, being a god's or a hero's name, is not just any 'signified', and not even a signified at all. We know that the literal invocation of God is dangerous because of the forces it unleashes. For this reason, the anagram is necessary to veil the incantation by rigorously, but obliquely, spelling out the name of God. This allusive mode differs radically from the mode of signification, for the signifier stands for the absence, dispersal and putting to death of the signified. The name of God appeared in the eclipse of its own destruction, in the sacrificial mode, exterminated in the literal sense of the term.

From this point, it is clear that the make or break question Saussure puts to himself, and on which Starobinski's objection entirely rests, concerning the *positive* existence of the theme-word, is beside the point, since the name of God exists only in order to be annihilated.

We endlessly create the identity of the name of God, with which no kind of enjoyment is associated, since enjoyment proceeds from the death of God and his name, and more generally from the fact that where something used to be – a name, a signifier, an agency – *nothing remains*. In this there is an agonising overhaul of our anthropological conceptions. It is said that poetry was always the exaltation, the positive celebration of a god or a hero (or a great many other things since), but we must see, on the contrary, that it is only beautiful and intense because it returns the god to death, because poetry is the site of its volatilisation and his sacrifice, because in it all the 'cruelty' (in Artaud's sense) and ambivalence of the relation to the gods is played out in a precise manner. You must be as naïve as a Westerner to think that the 'savages' prostrated themselves before their gods as we do before ours. On the contrary, in their rites they have always been able to actualise their ambivalence towards the gods, *perhaps they only ever roused them in order to put them to death*. This is still alive in the poetic. In the poetic, God is not invoked in any other form, the poem does not keep trotting out His name 'in extension' (once again, what interest would there be in this? A prayer wheel is quite enough to repeat his name), he is resolved, dismembered and sacrificed *in His name*. We could say, following Bataille, that the discontinuity (discursivity) of the name is abolished in the radical continuity of the poem. The ecstasy of death.

In the poem, God is not even the hidden subject of the utterance, nor is the poet the subject of enunciation. Language itself adopts speech so as to disappear in it. And the name of God is equally the name of the Father: the law (of repression, of the signifier, of castration) that it brings to bear on the subject and, at the same time, language is exterminated in the anagram. The poetic text is the example, realised at last, of reabsorption without residue, without trace, without the merest atom of a signifier (the name of God) and, through this, of the agency of language itself and, through this reabsorption, the *resolution of the law*.

The poem is the fatal declension of the name of God. For us, who no longer have a god, but for whom language has become God (the full and phallic value of the name of God is diffused for us throughout the extent of discourse), the poetic is the site of our ambivalence as regards language, of our death drive as regards language, of the force proper to the extermination of the code.

The Nine Billion Names of God

In a science-fiction story (Arthur C. Clarke, 'The nine billion names of God' [in *Of Time and Stars*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981, pp. 15–32]), a brotherhood of lamas, lost in the foothills of Tibet, devote their whole lives to the recitation of the names of God. There are a great many of these names – nine billion. When they have all been stated and declined, the world will come to an end, an entire cycle of the world. Bringing the world to an end, step by step, word by word, by exhausting the total corpus of the signifiers of God: this is their religious delirium – or the truth of their death drive.

But the lamas read slowly, their difficult task lasting many centuries. They then hear talk of mysterious Western machines that can record and decode at an incredible speed. One of them sets about ordering a powerful computer from IBM to hasten their task. The American technicians arrive in the Tibetan mountains to set up and programme the machine. According to them it will take only three months to get to the last of the nine billion names.[8] They themselves do not believe a word of the prophesied consequences of this enumeration, and, shortly before the expiry of the operation, afraid that the monks might turn against them when faced with the failure of their prophecy, they flee the monastery. Then, climbing down into the civilised world, they see the stars go out one by one …

The poem, too, is the total resolution of the world, as soon as the scattered phonemes of the name of God are consumed in it. When the anagram has been completely declined, nothing remains, the world has turned once again, and the intense enjoyment running through it has nowhere else to come from.

The second point on which Starobinski's commentary bears is the specificity of the poetic. Basically, he says, the rules Saussure evokes and imputes to a deliberate and calculated act may be reduced to the basic givens of all language. On the first rule (of the coupling):

> The total phonemic opportunities language offers at every instant to whoever wants to make use of them … are sufficiently numerous not to demand a laborious combination, requiring instead an *attentive* combination.

Ultimately no more chance: pure probability is sufficient. Again:

> The facts of phonemic symmetry [the term 'symmetry' is already a reductive term, that sees a specular redundancy in the doubling of phonemes – J.B.] noted here are striking: but are they the effect of an observed rule (of which no testimony has survived)? Could we not invoke, to justify the multiplicity of internal correspondences, an only barely conscious and half instinctive *taste for the echo*?

'An instinctive taste for the echo': the poet would be basically nothing other than a linguistic particle accelerator who merely increases the rate of the redundancy of customary language. That's what 'inspiration' is, and there is no need to calculate for it: a little 'attention' and 'instinct' is all we need:

> Must the Ancients' poetic practices resemble the obsessional ritual more than the surge of inspired speech?

Of course we can acknowledge formal constraints:

> It is true that traditional scansion subjects the *vates'* diction to a regularity that we must indeed qualify as *obsessional*. Nothing prevents us from imagining, since the facts go along with this, an increasing formal requirement that would oblige the poet to use every phonetic element twice in the same line.

But whether the poet is an inspired resonator or a calculating obsessional, it is always the same type of interpretation: the coupling and the anagram are the effects of a resonance, a redundancy, an 'imitation by augmentation', etc. – in short, the poetic is a play of combinations, and since all language is combinatory, the poetic becomes once more a particular case of language:

> Why do we not turn our attention to an aspect of the *process* of speech in the anagram, a process which is neither fortuitous, nor fully conscious? Why should there not exist an iteration, a generative and involuntary repetition that would double and project the materials of a primary speech within discourse, unpronounced and at the same time non-evanescent? Due to the lack of a conscious *rule*, the anagram can nevertheless be considered as a *regularity* (or a law) where the arbitrary theme-word submits to the necessity of a process.

The hypothesis of the theme-word, and its rigorous dispersal

> uncovers the extremely simple truth that language is an unending resource, and that dissimulated behind every phrase is the increasing clamour of the multitude from which it was taken in order to be isolated in front of us in its originality.

But what then did Saussure uncover? Nothing. Was this a 'staggering error'? Worse: a platitude: Generalised in this way, his hypothesis is annihilated. This is how, in all linguistic 'good faith', the radical difference of the poetic is denied. Saussure was at least seized by the intoxication of the poetic – the intoxication of the rigour with which he saw language turn back on itself, operating on its own material, instead of unfolding in a linear manner, idiotically following on from itself, as in customary discourse. This is no longer the case with Starobinski: rigour has become an 'obsession', a psychopathological category; total dispersion has become a probabilistic occurrence/recurrence; anagrammatic dispersion has become the 'clamouring multitude of language', a harmonic contextuality where a particular meaning is specified in turn:

> Every discourse is a set that facilitates the subtraction of a subset … moreover, every text is itself the subset of another text … every text incorporates and is incorporated. Every text is a productive product.

Onwards to the Russian dolls, to the 'abyssal' [*en abyme*] textuality dear to *Tel Quel*.

Starobinski's whole argument amounts to saying either the poet is just an obsessive formalist (if we follow Saussure's hypothesis), or his operation is exactly the same as that of all language, and so it is Saussure who is the obsessive: everything he believed he had discovered is nothing but the researcher's retrospective illusion, since:

> Every complex structure provides the observer with sufficient elements for him to select a subset apparently endowed with meaning, which nothing prevents us according an a priori logical or chronological antecedence.

Poor Saussure, who saw the anagram everywhere, and attributed his phantoms to the poets!

Starobinski and the linguists do not dream: by verifying Saussure's hypothesis *ad infinitum*, they reduce it to zero. To do this it was enough to stick to its *content* (the inference of the theme-word, its positive role, its metamorphoses) instead of judging it on its *form*. The stakes of the poetic are not the production of, nor even the combinatory variations on, a theme, nor an identifiable 'subset'. In this case, in fact, it is clearly part of a universal mode of discourse (except we cannot then see the *necessity* of the poetic, its different status, nor the enjoyment proper to this mode as opposed to that of discourse). Its stake is, precisely through the labour of the anagram, *the point of no return* in whatever term or theme. At this point, whether the theme-word's existence is recognised or not is a false problem. This is not because, according to Starobinski, every language is, at bottom, articulated on a sort of code or formula – but because, in any case, it is the *annihilation* of this code that is the form of the poetic. As Saussure describes it, this form holds for all poetry, the most modern and the most ancient. The principle of the annihilation of the code retains all its intelligibility even if the existence of this formula cannot be verified.[9] The only thing is that this code, which in ancient poetry could have taken the form of a word-theme, might, in modern poetry, be no more than signifying constellation that can no longer be located as such, even a letter or a formula of the Leclairian type, lost forever, or unconscious, or even the 'differential signifier' that *Tel Quel* talks about. What is essential, whatever the formula is, is to consider the poetic not as the mode of the formula's appearance, but as its *mode of disappearance*. In this sense, so much the better that Saussure failed to find proof of the formula: by verifying the content, he would have taken away the radicality of the form. Saussure's failure and intoxication, since they at least maintain the urgency of the poetic, are better than all the banalities that accept the poetic as a fact of universal language.

The Linguistic Imaginary

We must now leave Saussure and look at how the linguists dealt with the poetic and the questions it brought to bear on their 'science'. All things considered, the defence they put up in the face of this danger is the same as that mounted by the adherents of political economy (and its Marxist critics)

in the face of the symbolic alternative in previous societies and in our own. All of them chose to differentiate and modulate their categories while not changing their principle of rationality in any way, that is, without changing the arbitrariness and the imaginary that made them hypostatise the order of discourse and the order of production as universals. As scientists, they have good reason to believe in this order, since they are agents of order.

Thus the linguists concede that the arbitrary character of the sign is a bit shaken by the poetic; but certainly not the signifier/signified distinction, nor therefore the law of equivalence and the function of representation. Indeed, in a certain way, the signifier in this instance represents the signified far better, since it 'expresses' it directly following a *necessary* correlation between each element of the substance of the signifier and what it is supposed to express, instead of referring to it arbitrarily, as in discourse. The signifier's autonomy is conceded:

> The conceptual messages transmitted through the intermediary of sound necessarily differ from the pre-conceptual contents in the sound sequences and rhythms themselves. They either happen to converge or diverge. (I. Fonagy, *Diogène*, 51)

However, this is basically so that the signifier better embodies, not merely by convention, but in its materiality and its flesh, what it has to say: 'In Swinburne's lines, we feel the breeze passing …'. Instead of it being, as in conceptual language, the unit of primary articulation, *the phoneme, the unit of secondary articulation*, *becomes representative*, while, however, the form of the representation has not itself changed. It is always a question of *referring*, no longer to the concept by means of the terms of the *langue* nor syntax, but by means of vowels and syllables, the atoms of language, and their combination in rhythm, to an elementary presence, to an original instance of things (the 'breeze' as primary process!). Between the substance of language and the substance of the world (wind, water, feelings, passions, the unconscious; everything 'pre-conceptual', which is in fact already conceptualised, without appearing to be, by a whole code of perception), there is always a positive correlation at play, a play of equivalence amongst *values*.

In this way, muted vowels would stand for the dark and obscure, etc., and there would no longer be an *arbitrary* conceptual equivalence in this case, but a *necessary* phonemic equivalence. Thus Rimbaud's vowel-sonnet, and Fonagy's entire exposition of the 'symbolism' of linguistic sounds *(Diogène*, 51, p. 78): everyone would agree to recognise that *'i'* is lighter, faster and thinner than *'u'*; that *'k'* and *'r'* are harder than *'l'*, etc.

> The feeling of thinness associated with the vowel *'i'* may be the result of a subconscious kinaesthetic perception of the position of the tongue in the emission of this sound. The *'r'* appears masculine [!] by reason of the greater muscular effort required to emit it in comparison with the alveolar *'l'* or the labial *'m'*.

A real metaphysics of an original *langue*, a desperate attempt to rediscover a *natural deposit* of the poetic, an expressive genius of language, that would only have to be captured and transcribed.

In fact, all this is coded, and it is just as arbitrary to correlate the repetition of the phoneme *'f'* with the passing breeze as it is to correlate the word 'table' with the concept of table. There is nothing more in common between them than there is between a piece of music and what it 'evokes' (landscape or passion), other than cultural convention, or a *code*. That this code claims to be anthropological ('naturally' soft vowels) takes nothing away from its arbitrary character. Conversely moreover, we can clearly maintain, with Benveniste, that the very strong cultural convention that binds the word 'table' to the concept of 'table' imposes genuine *necessity*, and that at bottom the sign is never arbitrary. This is correct: the fundamental arbitrariness lies not in the internal organisation of the sign, but in the imposition of the sign as *value*, that is to say, in the presupposition of two instances and their equivalence in accordance with the law: the sign acting as a stand-in, as emanating from a reality that makes signs to you. Such is linguistics' metaphysics, and such is its imaginary. Its interpretation of the poetic is still haunted by this presupposition.

By contrast, when Harpo Marx waves a real sturgeon instead of pronouncing the password 'sturgeon', then indeed, by substituting the referent of the term and by abolishing their separation, he really explodes the arbitrariness at the same time as the system of representation, in a poetic act *par excellence:* putting the signifier 'sturgeon' to death by its own referent.

Whether conceptual or pre-conceptual, it is always the 'message' and the 'aim of the message as such', by which Jakobson defines the poetic function, which by autonomising the operation of the signifying material merely refers it to a *supplementary* effect of signification. Something other than the concept comes through, but it is still some *thing*; another value is realised through the very play of the signifier, but it remains a *value*; the signifying material functions at another level, its own, but it continues to *function*: moreover, Jakobson makes the poetic function supplementary rather than alternative, just one linguistic function out of many – a surplus-value of signification due to which the signifier itself is taken into account as an autonomous value. The poetic gives you more!

The 'self-presence' [*présence à lui-même*] of the signifier is analysed in terms of redundancy, as an internal echo, as resonance, phonetic recurrence, etc. (Hopkins: 'The verse is a discourse that repeats, either wholly or partially, the same phonemic figure'). Or again:

> It is acknowledged that poets worthy of the name possess a delicate and penetrating sensibility as regards the impressive *value* of the words and sounds with which they compose; to communicate this value to their readers, they are often moved to *represent*, around the principal word, the phonemes that characterise it, in such a way that, in short, this word becomes the generator of the entire line in which it appears. (M. Grammont, *Traité de phonétique* [Paris: Delagrave], 1933)

In all this, the 'labour' of the signifier always appears as a positive assemblage, concurrent with that of the signified, which sometimes coincide, and

sometimes diverge, to cite Fonagy again, but in any case the outcome is merely '*a subjacent current of signification*' – no question of escaping the being of discourse. And it could not be otherwise from a perspective that conceives the poetic as the autonomisation of one of the functional categories of the order of discourse.

The other Jakobsonian formula maintains this illusion: the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the rank of the constitutive process of the sequence.

> In poetry, one syllable is equalized with any other syllable of the same sequence; word stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress, long is matched with long, short is matched with short … [Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics' in *Language in Literature*, ed. K. Pomorska and S. Rudy, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 1987, p. 71]

Of course, articulation is no longer that of customary syntax, it is always rather a question of a *constructive* architecture; that anything other than a scansion of equivalence could start to play a role in prosody is never envisaged. Jakobson is content to substitute the *ambiguity* of the signified for the *ambivalence* of the signifier.

Ambiguity is what characterises the poetic and distinguishes it from the discursive: 'Ambiguity is an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focussed message briefly, a corollary feature of poetry' (Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', p. 85). 'The machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry' (Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* [London: Chatto & Windus, 1963]). Jakobson again:

> The supremacy of the poetic function over the referential function does not obliterate the reference but makes it ambiguous. The double-sensed message finds correspondence in a split addresser, a split addressee, as well as in a split reference. ['Linguistics and Poetics', p. 85]

In this way, all the categories of discursive communication 'work loose' in the poetic (all, curiously, except the code, of which Jakobson does not speak: what does the code become? Does it too become ambiguous? But it would then be the end of *langue* and linguistics). Ambiguity is not dangerous in itself. It does not change the *principles* of identity and equivalence in the slightest, nor does it change the principle of meaning as value; it merely produces floating values, renders identities diffuse, and makes the rules of the referential game more complex, without abolishing anything. Thus, for Jakobson, the ambiguous sender and addressee merely signifies the uncoupling of the I/YOU relation, internal to the message, from the author/reader relation: the positions of the respective subjects have not been lost, in some sense they expand indefinitely – subjects become unsettled *in their subject-positions*. Thus the message becomes unsettled, ambiguous, in its definition; all categories (sender, addressee, message, referent) move, work loose in their respective positions, but the structural grid of discourse remains the same.

'The machinations of ambiguity' do not therefore make a great deal of difference to the form of discourse. Jakobson has this bold formula:

> Poetry does not consist in adding rhetorical ornament to discourse: it involves a total revaluation of discourse and all its components, whatever they may be.

Bold and ambiguous, since the components (sender/addressee, message/code, etc.) maintain their separate existences, they are simply 'revalued'. The general economy remains the same – the political economy of discourse. At no point does this thought advance to the point of the *abolition* of separate functions: the abolition of the subject of communication (and therefore the sender/addressee distinction); the abolition of the message as such (and therefore of all the code's structural autonomy). All this work, in which the radical character of the poetic act consists, is swamped by 'ambiguity' and by a certain hesitation as regards linguistic categories. A 'discourse within a discourse', a 'message centred on itself': all this merely defines a *rhetoric of ambiguity*. But the ambiguous discourse, squinting at itself (a strabismus of signs), remains the discourse of positivity, *the discourse of the sign as value*.

In the poetic, by contrast, language turns back on itself to be abolished. It is not 'centred' on itself, it *decentres* itself. It undoes the entire process of the constructive logic of the sign, resolving all the internal specularity that makes a sign a sign: something full, reflected, centred on itself, and, as such, effectively ambiguous. The poetic is the loss of the spectacular closure of the sign and the message.

At bottom, this is the same metaphysics that has governed the theory of artistic form since romanticism: the bourgeois metaphysics of totality. Art should properly evoke 'this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live' (John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, pp. 194–5; quoted in Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* [tr. Anna Cancogni, London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989], p. 26). Eco appropriates this cosmology for himself, and retranscribes it in linguistic terms. The totalisation of meaning takes place by means of a 'chain reaction' and the infinite subdivision of signifieds:

> All this is attained by means of an identification between signifier and signified … the aesthetic sign … is not confined to a given denotatum, but rather expands every time the structure within which it is inevitably *embodied*, is duly appreciated – a sign whose signified, resounding relentlessly against its signifier, keeps acquiring new echoes, (ibid., p. 36)

This, then, is a schema of a first (denotative) phase of reference, followed by a second phase of 'harmonic' reference, where a 'theoretically unlimited' chain reaction is operative – hence the evocation of the cosmic.

This theory serves as the basic ideology of everything we have been able to say about the poetic (nor does psychoanalysis escape this) – ambiguity, polysemia, polyvalence, polyphony of meaning: it is always a matter of the *radiation of the signified*, of a simultaneity of significations.

> The linear character of discourse hides an harmonious concert of different messages. (Fonagy, *Diogène*, 51, p. 104)

The semantic density of language, the wealth of information, etc.: the poet 'liberates' all sorts of virtualities (with, as a corollary, a differential hermeneutics of the role played by the reader: every interpretation 'enriches' the text with that reader's personal harmonies). This whole myth plays on a 'savage' pre-conceptual anteriority and a 'virginity' of meaning:

> The poet rejects the usual and appropriate term for the concept, which is a skeletal reduction of all previous experiences, when he finds himself in front of an untamed, virginal, reality … The word must be recreated each time from an intense personal experience; the skeleton of the thing in itself must be attired in living flesh so as to give it the concrete reality the thing has for me. (ibid., p. 97)

We are no longer sure whether to undress the concept or dress it up in order to rediscover the virginity of the poetic! In any case, it is a question of uncovering 'the secret correspondences that might exist between things'.

This romantic theory, with its conception of 'genius', paradoxically turns out to be rewritten today in terms of information theory. This polyphonic 'wealth' can be put in terms of 'additional information'. At the level of the signified: Petrarch's poetry constitutes a 'large capital of information' on love (Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 54). At the level of the signifier a certain type of disorder, rupture and negation of the customary and predictable linguistic order increases the rate of information of the message. There would be a 'dialectical tension' between the elements of order and disorder that can serve as a base-rate within the poetic. Whereas the most probable use of the linguistic system would yield nothing, the unexpectedness of the poetic, its relative improbability, determines a minimum rate of information. Here again, the poetic gives you more.

Thus the semiological imaginary easily reconciles romantic polyphony and quantitative description:

> The structure of poetry can most rigorously be described and interpreted in terms of a chain of possibilities. … A superior accumulation at mid-range frequencies of a certain class of phonemes, or the contrasting assemblage of two opposed classes in the phonemic texture of a line, a strophe, or a poem, plays the role of a *'subjacent current of signification'*. (Fonagy, *Diogène*, 51)

'In language, form has a manifestly granular structure, which is open to a quantitative description' (Jakobson). With this we can confront Kristeva:

> Words are not non-decomposable entities held together by their meaning, but assemblages of signifying, phonemic and scriptural atoms leaping from word to word, thus creating unsuspected and unconscious relations between the elements of the discourse: this putting into relation of signifying elements constitutes a *signifying infrastructure of the langue.* (Julia Kristeva, 'Poésie et négativité', in *Séméiotikè* [Paris: Seuil, 1969], p. 185)

All these formulas converge on the idea of a 'Brownian' stage of language, an emulsional stage of the signifier, homologous to the molecular stage of physical matter, that liberates 'harmonies' of meaning just as fission or fusion liberate new molecular affinities. The whole conceived as an 'infrastructure', a 'subjacent current', that is to say, as a logically prior, or

structurally more elementary, stage of discourse, just like matter. This is a scientistic, 'materialist' view of discourse, where the atom and the molecule are properly assimilated to the secondary articulation of language, as the molecular stage – an original stage, prior to the differentiating organisation of meaning – is to the poetic, Besides, Kristeva is not afraid of her own metaphor: she says that modern science has broken the body down into simple elements in the same way as (poetic) linguistics has disarticulated signification into signifying atoms.

There, concurrently with the metaphysics of primary articulation (the metaphysics of signifieds, bound to the play of signifying units), what we might call the *metaphysics of secondary articulation* takes shape, in which the effect of infrastructural signification is bound up with the play of distinct units, the minimal entities of discourse, where they are once again taken as positive valencies (just as atoms and molecules have an elementary valency), as phonemic materiality whose assemblage takes place in terms of linkages and probabilities.

But the poetic is no more based on the autonomous articulation of the phonemic levy than on that of words or syntax. *It does not play secondary articulation off against the primary.*[10] It is the abolition of the analytic distinction of the articulations on which language's capacity for discourse and its operational autonomy rests, as the means of expression (and as the object of linguistics). In any case, why should the phonemic level be more 'materialist' than that of the lexical concept or the sentence? As soon as we turn the phonemic into minimal substances, the phoneme, like the atom, becomes an idealist reference. With the physics of the atom, science relentlessly entrenches its positivist rationality. It has not brought the phonemic any closer to another mode, which would presuppose the respective extermination of the object and subject of science. Perhaps today it is reaching its borders, at the same time as materialism is in total theoretical crisis, without meanwhile being able to step beyond its shadow: there is no 'dialectical' transition between science, even at the apogee of its crisis, and something perhaps beyond it and irremediably separated from it, since science is founded on the basis of the denegation (not dialectical negation, but *de*negation) of dialectics. The most rigorous materialism will never lead beyond the principle of the rationality of value.

Tel Quel have taken the deconstruction of the sign furthest, up to the total 'liberation' of the signifier. End of the mortgage of the signified and the message, there is no 'polysemia', it is the signifier that is plural. No more 'ambiguity' of the message, just the intertextuality of the signifier, which is linked with and is produced by its pure 'material' logic. The endless text of the paragram, *significance* is the real level of the productivity of language, a productivity beyond value, opposed to the signification of the sign-product.

Julia Kristeva, in 'Poésie et négativité' (pp. 185ff.) comes closest to acknowledging a poetic form, even if the superstition of a 'materialist production' of meaning leads her nevertheless, by returning the poetic to the semiotic order, to censoriously describe it as a radical alternative.

She posits the *ambivalence* of the poetic signified (and not its mere ambiguity): it is concrete and general at the same time, it includes both (logical) affirmation and negation, it announces the simultaneity of the possible and the impossible; far from postulating the 'concrete versus the general', it explodes this conceptual break: bivalent logic (0/1) is abolished by ambivalent logic. Hence the very particular negativity of the poetic. The bivalent logic of discourse rests on the negation internal to the judgement, it founds the concept and its self-equivalence (the signified is what it is). The negativity of the poetic is a radical negativity *bearing on the logic of judgement itself*. Something 'is' and is not what it is: a utopia (in the literal sense) of the signified. The thing's self-equivalence (and, of course, the subject's) is volatilised. Thus the poetic signified is the space where 'Non-Being intertwines with Being in a thoroughly disconcerting manner'. But there is a danger (which can be seen in outline in Kristeva's work) of taking this 'space' as a *topic* again, and taking the 'intertwining' as, once again, the dialectic. There is a danger of *filling* this space up with every figure of substitution: 'Metaphor, metonymy, and all the tropes are inscribed in space surrounded by this double semantic structure.' The danger of the metaphor, of an economy of metaphor that remains positive. In Kristeva's chosen example, Baudelaire's *meubles voluptueux* ('voluptuous furniture'), the poetic effect does not stem from an added erotic value, a play of additional phantasms nor from a metaphorical or metonymic 'value'. It stems from the short-circuit of the two, the furniture being no longer furniture and the voluptuous pleasure no longer being voluptuous pleasure – the furniture *(meubles)* becomes voluptuous, and the voluptuous pleasure becomes mobile – nothing remains of the two separated fields of value. Neither of the two terms is poetic in itself, no more than their synthesis is: they are poetic in that the one is volatilised in the other. There is no relation between (poetic) enjoyment and the voluptuous pleasure as such. In love, there is only voluptuous pleasure – but it becomes enjoyment when it is volatilised into furniture. And the furniture is cancelled by the voluptuous pleasure in the same way: the same reversal sweeps away the proper position of each term. It is in this sense that Rimbaud's formula stands: 'It is true literally, in every sense.'

Metaphor is simply the *transfer of value from one field to the other*, to the point of the 'absorption of a multiplicity of texts (meanings) in the message' (Kristeva, 'Poésie et négativité', p. 194). The poetic implies the *reversibility of one field onto the other*, and thus the annulment of their respective values. Whereas values are combined, implicated and intertextualised in the metaphor according to a play of 'harmonies' (the 'secret accord of language'), in poetic enjoyment they are annulled: radical ambivalence is non-valence.

Kristeva, then, reduces the radical theory of ambivalence to a theory of intertextuality and the 'plurality of codes'. The poetic can no longer be distinguished from discourse save by 'the infinite nature of its code'; it is a plural discourse, the other only being the limit case of a monological

discourse, a discourse with only one code. There is therefore a place for both types of discourse in a *general semiotics:* 'The semiotic practice of speech [discourse] is only one possible semiotic practice' (ibid., p. 215). Semanalysis has a duty to take them all into account, without exclusion, that is to say, without neglecting the irreducibility of the poetic, but equally without reducing it to the logic of the sign. Semanalysis has a duty to constitute a 'non-reductive typology of the plurality of semiotic practices'. There is an increasing intricacy of the different logics of meaning:

> The functioning of speech [*la parole*] is impregnated with paragrammatism, just as the functioning of poetic language is circumscribed by the laws of speech. (ibid., p. 214)

Once again Starobinski's doubts about Saussure come to the surface: the latter's tolerance of both the poetic and the discursive in the name of universal rules of language (here in the name of a 'genuinely materialist' science called semiotics). In fact, this is a reductive and repressive position. For from the poetic to the discursive there is no difference in their respective articulation of meaning, there is a radical antagonism. Neither of them is an 'infrastructure of signification' (would the logical discourse on it be its 'superstructure'?). Further, discourse, logos, is not a particular case in the infinity of codes: it is *the* code that puts an end to infinity, it is the discourse of closure that puts an end to the poetic, to the para- and the ana-grammatic. Conversely, it is on the basis of its dismantling, its destruction, that language revives the possibility of 'infinity'. In fact, 'infinity of codes' is a bad term, since it permits the amalgam of the one and the 'infinite' in the 'mathematics' of the text, and their distribution along a single chain. It must be said, in terms of radical incompatabilty and antagonism, that it is on the basis of the destruction of the discourse of *value* that language revives the possibility of *ambivalence:* this is the poetic revolution in relation to discourse, where the one can only be the death of the other.

The semiotic project is only a more subtle way of neutralising the radicality of the poetic and saving the hegemony of linguistics (re-baptised 'semiotics'), no longer by pure and simple annexation, but under cover of the ideology of 'plurality'.

The subversion of linguistics by the poetic does not stop here: it leads one to wonder whether the rules of language even hold good for the field of language over which they prevail, that is to say, in the dominant sphere of communication (similarly, the failure of political economy to give an account of anterior societies leads one, as an after-effect, to wonder if these principles have any value for us). Now it is true that the immediate practice of language is somewhat resistant to the rational abstraction of linguistics. O. Mannoni puts this well in 'The ellipsis and the bar':

> Linguistics originates from the bar it has installed between the signifier and the signified, and their reunion spells its death – which brings us back *to conversation in everyday life.* ('L'ellipse et la barre', in *Clefs pour l'imaginaire*, p. 35)

The Saussurian bar has facilitated the renewal of linguistic theory from top to bottom. In the same way, Marxism, by means of the concept of a material infrastructure opposed to the 'superstructure', has established something like an 'objective' and revolutionary analysis of society. Science is based on rupture. In exactly the same way, a 'science', a rationalist practice (organisation), originates from the distinction between theory and practice. Every science and every rationality lasts as long as this rupture lasts. Dialectics makes endless formal adjustments to this rupture, it never resolves it. To dialecticise the infra- and the superstructure, theory and practice, or even signifier and signified, *langue* and *parole*, is merely a vain effort at totalisation. Science lives and dies with the rupture.

This is indeed why current non-scientific practice, both linguistic and social, is revolutionary in some way, *because it does not make these kinds of distinctions*. Just as it has *never made a distinction between mind and body*, whereas every dominant religion and philosophy survives only on the basis of this distinction, so our, everybody's, immediate and 'savage' social practices do not make a distinction between theory and practice, infra- and superstructure: of itself and without debating the issue, it is transversal, beyond rationality, whether bourgeois or Marxist. Theory, 'good' Marxist theory, never analyses *real* social practice, it analyses the object that it produces for itself through separating this practice into an infra- and a superstructure, or, in other words, it analyses the social field that it produces for itself through the dissociation between theory and practice. Theory will never lead back to 'practice' since it only exists through having vivisected it: fortunately this practice is beginning to return to and even overcome it. But this brings with it the end of dialectical and historical materialism.

In the same way, the immediate, everyday linguistic practice of speech and the 'speaking subject' pays no attention to the distinction between the sign and the world (nor that between signifier and signified, the arbitrary character of the sign, etc.). Benveniste says and acknowledges this, but only as regards memory, since this is precisely the stage that science overcomes it and leaves it far behind: it interests only the linguistic subject, the subject of the *langue*, which is at the same time the subject of knowledge: Benveniste himself. Somewhere, however, the other is right, speaking in advance [*en deçà*] of the distinction between sign and world, in total 'superstition' – the other (along with ourselves and even Benveniste) knows more, it is true, about the essentials than Benveniste the linguist. For the methodology of the separation of signifier and signified holds no better than the methodology of the separation of the mind and the body. The same imaginary in both cases. In the one case, psychoanalysis[11] came to say what this was, as, in the other, did poetics. But there has basically never been any need for psychoanalysis nor for poetics: no-one has ever believed in them apart from the scholars and linguists themselves (just as, in the final analysis, no-one has ever believed in economic determinism other than economic scientists and their Marxist critics).

Virtually, and literally, speaking, *there has never been a linguistic subject*; it is not even true of we who speak that we purely and simply reflect the code of linguistics. Likewise, there has never been an *economic subject*, a *homo oeconomicus* – this fiction has never been inscribed anywhere other than in a code – there has never been *a subject of consciousness*, and there has never been *a subject of the unconscious*. In the simplest practice, there is always something that cuts across these simulation models, which are all rational models; there has always been a radicality absent from every code, every 'objective' rationalisation, that has basically only ever given rise to a single great subject: *the subject of knowledge*, whose form is shattered from today, from now, by undivided speech.[12] Basically we have all known this for much longer than Descartes, Saussure, Marx and Freud.

The *Witz*, or The Phantasm of the Economic in Freud

Is there an affinity between the poetic and the psychoanalytic? If it is clear that poetic form (dissemination, reversibility, strict delimitation of the corpus) cannot be reconciled with linguistic form (the signifier–signified equivalence, linearity of the signifier, undefined corpus), it seems, on the contrary, that it intersects with psychoanalytic form (primary processes: displacement, condensation, etc.). In the dream, the lapsus, the symptom, and the joke, or *mot d'esprit*, everywhere the unconscious works, we can, with Freud, read the distortions of the signifier–signified relation, the linearity of the signifier, the discrete sign. *This distortion of discourse, excess and transgression of language, where the phantasm operates, marks enjoyment*. But what of desire and the unconscious in the poetic; and up to what point does libidinal economy account for it?

The poetic and the psychoanalytic do not mix. *The symbolic mode is not that of the labour of the unconscious*. To question the poetic as Freud does is therefore to question psychoanalysis from the standpoint of the symbolic: the analysis in reverse is always the only one that, by means of this very reversal, allows us to escape theory, which is purely and simply the exercise of power.

Freud's analysis of the joke, the *mot d'esprit*, can serve as our guiding thread, for otherwise there is no *theorised* difference in Freud between the properly symptomatic field and that of the work of art and 'artistic creation' (the concept of 'sublimation', as we know, suffers from a lack of rigour and an hereditary idealism). This is a point of considerable importance: if the poem is neither a *lapsus* nor a *mot d'esprit*, there is nothing to account for it in the theory of the unconscious.

Contrary to Saussure, who is not concerned with poetic pleasure nor even with any cause or finality whatever of what he describes, Freud's analysis is *functional*, it is a theory of enjoyment [*jouissance*] in which work on the signifier is always related to the fulfilment of a desire. Moreover, this is an *economic* theory of enjoyment. The *Witz*, the *mot d'esprit* or joke

moves more rapidly, by way of short-cuts and short-circuits, towards what it means to say, and it says things, it 'liberates' significations that would never have existed without it, other than at the cost of considerable conscious intellectual effort. It is this ellipsis of psychical distance that is the source of enjoyment. In other words, the joke lifts the censorship, and the subversion this brings about 'liberates' the energies bound to the super ego and the process of repression. The 'liberation' of effects: the disinvestment of unconscious or preconscious representations; the disinvestment of the repressing psychical agency. In any case, enjoyment emerges from a residue, an excess or a differential quantum of energy made available by the operation of the *Witz*.

In this sense, concision, or the multiple use of the same material in different modalities, is a fundamental characteristic of the *mot d'esprit*. Always economising on effort: a single signifier may signify at multiple levels; we draw a maximum of (sometimes contradictory) significations from a minimum of signifiers. It is futile to insist on analogies with the poetic mode: the multiple use of the same material evokes Saussure's anagram, coupling the necessary delimitation of the corpus and the 'maximal energy in signs' of which Nietzsche speaks. Freud too says of the poet that 'polyphonic orchestration allows him to emit messages on the threefold levels of clear consciousness, the subconscious and the unconscious'. In every instance so much energy is 'economised' in relation to the ordinary system of distributing investments. In the polygon of forces that is the psychical apparatus, enjoyment is like the result of a sort of short-cut, or rather of the transversality of the *Witz*, which, cutting a diagonal across the diverse layers of the psychical apparatus catches up with its objective with less expenditure, even effortlessly attaining unforeseen objectives, yielding a kind of energetic surplus value, the enjoyment 'premium', the 'yield of pleasure'.

This energetic calculus has something of the whiff of capital about it, the capital of a saving of energy (Freud continually employs this term) where enjoyment never comes about save by the subtraction, by default, of a residue or a *surplus* from an investment (but never an excess) – or even from nothing at all: from an inverse process of expenditure, the abolition of energies and finalities. We are not speaking primarily about 'labour', or even the 'signifier', because this level is never primary for Freud. His libidinal economy is based on the existence of unconscious *contents* (affects and representations), of a repression and a production of the repressed, a calculated investment that steers this production towards an equilibrium (the resolution of tension) of bound and unbound energies. Freudian enjoyment takes place and is spoken of in terms of forces and quanta of energy. In the *Witz* or the dream, the play of signifiers is never in itself the articulation of enjoyment: it only opens roads to phantasmatic or repressed contents. The unconscious is a 'medium' which is never a 'message' in itself, since something like desire – strictly understood in terms of the topological or the economic theory – is necessary in order that it, the 'Id' that speaks, speaks in its own voice. The play of the signifier is

only ever the tracery of desire. Here, around the unconscious 'mode of production' (and its mode of representation), is where the entire problem of libidinal economy and the critique of libidinal economy is posed, in the perspective of an *enjoyment that never had anything to do with the economic.*

In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud says of the slip of the tongue, the *lapsus*:

> The reader's preparedness alters the text and reads into it something which he is expecting or with which he is occupied. The only contribution towards a misreading which the text itself need make is that of affording some resemblance in the verbal image, which the reader can alter in the sense he requires. (*Standard Edition*, Vol. 6, 1960, pp. 112–13)

It is of course a matter of a latent, repressed content, waiting to leap up and 'profit' from the fantasies, the interstices and the weak points of logical discourse in order to cause an explosion. This, at the level of discourse, is what happens to the body in the concept of anaclisis, desire 'profits' from the satisfaction of a physiological need in order to invest libidinally in a particular zone of the body, diverting the pure and simple function (organic logic) towards the fulfilment of desire. While this is true, it is not entirely true, since the articulation of the need and the desire has never been clarified. Between the two terms, so thoughtlessly formulated, on the one hand as the determinate completion of a function, and on the other as the indeterminate fulfilment of a desire, the concept of anaclisis is only a bridging concept that articulates nothing at all. Here libidinal economy suffers from the same 'layering' of the concept of need as does the economy in general: between the subject and the object, there is 'need'; between the need and the desire, there is 'anaclisis' (the same as in linguistic economy: between the signifier and the signified, or between the sign and the world, there is, or is not, a 'motivation'). All these layerings have the discrete charm of an insoluble science: if the articulation is impossible, it is because the terms have been badly formulated, because their very position is untenable. Somewhere, doubtless, the autonomisation of desire in the face of need, of the signifier in the face of the signified, and of the subject in the face of the object, is only an effect of science. But the economies that follow from all this have a hard time, since they do not want to renounce the regular oppositions by which they live: desire–need, unconscious-conscious, primary–secondary process, and so on. Is the pleasure principle itself anything other than the psychoanalytic reality principle?

It is certain, however, that psychoanalysis has given the signifier–signified relation an almost poetic slant. The signifier, instead of manifesting the signified in its presence, is in an inverse relation with it: it signifies the signified in its absence and its repression, in accordance with a negativity that never used to appear in linguistic economy. The signifier is in a necessary (not an arbitrary) relation with the signified, but only as the presence of something is with its absence. It signifies the lost object and takes the place of this loss.

> The concept of representation could hardly, in psychoanalysis, be situated between an objective reality on the one hand and its signifying figuration on the other, but rather between an hallucinated reality, a mnemic image of a lost object of satisfaction, on the one hand, and a substitute-object on the other, whether it is a formula-object like that constituted by the phantasm, or an instrumental contraption such as the fetish may be. (S. Leclaire, *Psychanalyser* [Paris: Seuil, 1968], p. 65)

Linguistic equivalence is lost, since the signifier is instead of and in the place of something else which no longer is, nor has it ever been. It is always therefore what it no longer is. The fetish-object, in its vacillating identity, is the endless metaphoric series of what is permanently denied: the absence of the phallus in the mother, sexual difference.

The removal of identifying marks from psychoanalytic signification in relation to linguistics is well formulated by Mannoni:

> By introducting the signifier, we make meaning lose its balance. This is not because the signifier brings with it a collection of signifieds of the sort that a semantics of the traditional type might locate them, but because we interpret Saussure's ellipsis *as if it kept the place of the signified empty*, a place which can only become full again in the different discourses in which a single signifier is then the common element ... If we also uncouple the signifier from the weight of the signified, it is not in order to give it over to the laws which linguistics discovers in every manifest discourse, but in order that it may be said to obey the law of the *primary process*, by means of which it escapes, if only for a hesitant moment, the apparent constraints of a discourse that always tends towards the univocal, even though it exploits the equivocal. ('L'ellipse et la barre', p. 46)

A remarkable passage. But what is this 'blank' signified that successive discourses will fill? What is a signifier 'liberated' so as to be given over to another order? Can we take this 'play' from the linguistic categories of the signifier and the signified without shattering the bar which separates them?

The bar is the strategic element which establishes both the principle of non-contradiction in the sign, and its components, as values. This is a coherent structure, so we cannot inject just anything into it (such as ambivalence, contradiction, or the primary process). Benveniste puts things clearly into focus in his critique of Freud's *Gegensinn der Urworte* ('On the antithetical meaning of primal words', 1910, *Standard Edition*, Vol. 11, 1957, pp. 155ff):

> It is thus improbable a priori that … languages, however archaic they are assumed to be, escape the 'principle of contradiction'. Let us suppose that a language exists in which 'large' and 'small' are expressed identically, then the distinction between 'large' and 'small' literally has no meaning. For it is indeed contradictoriness to impute to a language both a knowledge of two notions as opposite while, at the same time, the expression of these notions as identical. (E. Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics* [tr. Mary Elizabeth Meek, Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971], p. 71)

And this is correct: ambivalence is never part of linguistic signification. 'It being proper for language to express only what it is possible to express', it is as absurd to imagine a meaning that would not be conveyed by some

distinction, as it is on the other hand, to imagine a signifier that would mean everything:

> To imagine a state of language ... in which a certain object would be *denominated* as being itself and, at the same time, something else, and in which the relation *expressed* would be a relation of permanent contradiction, in which everything would be itself and something else, and hence neither self nor the other, is to imagine a pure chimera. (ibid., pp. 71–2)

Benveniste knows what he is talking about, since all linguistic rationalisation is there in order to prevent precisely this. There is no risk of the ambivalence of the repressed rising to the surface of linguistic science, since the latter is in its entirety a part of the repressing agency. But within its own order, linguistic science is right: nothing will ever participate in language that does not obey the principles of non-contradiction, identity and equivalence.

It is not a matter of saving linguistics, it is a matter of seeing that Benveniste is clear-sighted concerning the choice to be made here (moreover, he is only clear-sighted here because it is a matter of protecting his field from incursions from other fields – he tolerates the existence of a 'symbolic area' somewhere else, but this area 'is discourse, not language' – stay at home and language will be well protected!): *we cannot be content to 'interpret' the Saussurian ellipsis and bar in order to return the sign to the primary process*, to bring it under analysis. The entire architecture of the sign must be demolished, even its equation must be broken, and it is not enough merely to multiply the unknown factors. Alternatively, then, we must assume that psychoanalysis still makes room somewhere for a certain mode of signification and representation, a certain mode of value and expression: this is in fact precisely what Mannoni's 'empty' signified stands for – the place of the signified remains marked as that of the mobile contents of the unconscious.

If therefore we are, with the psychoanalytic signifier, beyond all logical equivalence, we are not, for all that, outside nor beyond value. For in its 'hesitation' [*trébuchement*], it always designates what it represents as *value* in absentia, under the sign of repression. Value is no longer logically conveyed by the signifier, it haunts it phantasmatically. The bar separating them has changed its meaning, but it remains nevertheless: there indeed remains a potential signified (a repressed signifier with an unresolved value content) on the one hand, and a signifier, itself an instance established as such by repression, on the other.

In fact, there is no longer any equivalence, but equally, there is no more ambivalence, that is, dissolution of value. Here lies the difference with the poetic, where the loss of value is radical. There is no more value in the poetic, not even absent or repressed, to nourish a residual signifier in the form of a symptom, a phantasm, or a fetish. The fetish-object *is not poetic*, precisely because it is opaque, more saturated with value than any other, because the signifier is not disintegrated in it but, on the contrary, is fixed, crystallised by a value that is for ever buried and for ever hallucinated as a lost reality. There is no longer a means of unblocking

the system, forever *caught fast in the obsession with meaning*, in the fulfilment of a perverse desire that comes to fill the empty form of the object with meaning. In the poetic (the symbolic) the signifier *disintegrates* absolutely, whereas in psychoanalysis it endlessly *shifts* under the effect of the primary processes and is distorted following the folds of repressed values. Whether distorted, transversal or in '*points de capiton*' (as Lacan says), the psychoanalytic signifier remains a surface indexed on the turbulent reality of the unconscious, whereas in the poetic it diffracts and radiates in the anagrammatic process; it no longer falls under the blows of the law that erects it, nor under the blows of the repressed which binds it, it no longer has anything to designate, not even the ambivalence of a repressed signified. It is nothing more than the dissemination and the absolution of value, experienced, however, without the shadow of anxiety, in total enjoyment. The illumination of the work of art or the symbolic act comes from the point of the non-repressed, the point of no return, where the repression and the incessant repetition of meaning in the phantasm or the fetish, the incessant repetition of the prohibition and value, are lifted, where death and the dissolution of meaning play without hindrance.

'Grasp in what has been written a symptom of what has been silenced' (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [tr. R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990]). A psychoanalytic proposition *par excellence*: everything that 'means' something (particularly scientific discourse in its 'transparency') has the function of *silencing*. And what it silences comes back to haunt it in an easy-going but irreversible subversion of its discourse. This is the place of the psychoanalytic, in the non-place relative to every logical discourse.

The poetic, however, silences nothing, and does not come back to haunt it. For it is always death that is repressed and silenced. It is actualised here in the sacrifice of meaning. The nothing, death, absence, is overtly stated and resolved: death is manifest at last, and is at last *symbolised*, whereas it is only *symptomatic* in all other formations of discourse. This, of course, signals the decline of all linguistics, which thrives on the bar of equivalence between what is said and what is meant, but it is also the end of psychoanalysis which, for its part, lives off the bar of repression between what is said and what is silenced, repressed, denied, phantasmatic and infinitely repeated in the mode of denial or de-negation: death. When, in a social formation or a formation of discourse, death speaks, is spoken and exchanged in a symbolic apparatus, psychonalysis no longer has anything more to say. When Rimbaud says, of his *Saison en enfer*, 'it is true literally, and in every sense', this also means that there is no *hidden*, latent, meaning, that nothing is repressed, that there is nothing behind it, that there is nothing for psychoanalysis. It is at this price that every meaning is possible.

> Linguistics originates from the bar it has installed between the signifier and the signified, and their reunion spells its death. (Mannoni, 'L'ellipse et la barre', p. 35)

Psychoanalysis too, originates from the bar it has installed, under the law of castration and repression, between what is said and what is silenced (or 'between an hallucinated reality … and a substitute-object' – Leclaire, *Psychanalyser*, p. 65), and for it, too, their reunion spells death.

That there is no residue signifies that there is no longer a signifier and a signified, no signified *behind* the signifier, no structural bar distributing them on either side; it also signifies that there is no longer a repressed agency *beneath* a repressing agency (as there is in psychoanalysis), no longer a latent beneath a manifest, nor the primary processes playing hide-and-seek with the secondary processes. There is no signified, of whatever sort, produced by the poem, no more there is a 'dream thought' behind the poetic text, nor a signifying formula (Leclaire), nor any kind of libido or potential energy which somehow threads its way through the primary processes and would still testify to a *productive* economy of the unconscious. *There is no more a libidinal than there is a political economy*, nor of course than there is a linguistic economy, that is to say, a political economy of language. Because the economic, wherever it is, is *based on the remainder* (only the remainder permits production and reproduction),[13] whether this remainder is that which is symbolically non-distributed and which re-enters commercial exchange and the circuit of commodity equivalence; whether this remainder is what is not exhausted in the anagrammatic circulation of the poem and enters the circuit of signification; or whether this remainder is quite simply the phantasm, that is to say, that which could not be resolved in the ambivalent exchange and death, and which, for this reason, is resolved as the precipitate of unconscious individual *value*, the repressed stock of scenes or representations which is produced and reproduced in accordance with the incessant compulsion to repeat.

Market value, signified value and unconscious/repressed value are all produced from what remains, from the residual precipitate of the symbolic operation. It is always this remainder that is accumulated and that fuels the diverse economies that govern our lives. To pass beyond economics (and if 'to change life' has any meaning, it can only be this) is to exterminate this remainder in all domains. The poetic is the model of this, since it operates without equivalence, accumulation, or residue.

To come back to the *Witz*: can we not assume that enjoyment is the effect of 'economising', of gaining potential due to the 'ellipsis of psychical distance', or the irruption of the primary process into the order of discourse, the irruption of a meaning *beneath a meaning*, or the deeper reality imposed by the presumed duality of the psychical agencies? Can we not assume that the finality of the 'other scene' to come is produced by twisting this latter around, the finality of the return of the repressed as the psychical value of the very separation of the agencies (topographical hypothesis), and the corollary of a binding and an unbinding of energies from which, at a given moment, there would result the libidinal surplus value called enjoyment (economic hypothesis)?

Can we not assume that enjoyment happens on the contrary at the end of the separation of the separate fields, that it arises out of the very discrimination of the agencies, and therefore from the differential play of investments, and therefore from within the logical order of psychoanalysis?

Is this the effect of the conflagration, the short-circuit (*Kurzschluss*) telescoping between separate fields (phonemes, words, roles, institutions) that until then had meaning *only due to their separation*, and that *lose* their meaning in this brutal reconciliation that causes them to be exchanged? Is this not the *Witz*, the effect of enjoyment where the separated subject is also lost, not only in the reflexive distance of consciousness, but also as regards the agency of the unconscious? The abolition of the super-ego at this moment, of the effort to maintain the discipline of the reality principle and the rationality of meaning, does not merely signify the effacement of the repressing agency to the advantage of the repressed agency, it signifies the simultaneous effacement of both. This is where we find something of the poetic in the *Witz* and the comical, something beyond the compulsive resurrection of the phantasm and the fulfilment of desire.

Freud cites Kant saying 'Das Komische ist eine in nichts zergangene Erwartung' ('[The comic is] a tense expectation that suddenly vanished, [transformed] into nothing').[14] In other words: *where there used to be something, now there is nothing* – not even the unconscious. Where there used to be some kind of finality (albeit unconscious), or even a value (albeit repressed), now there is nothing. *Enjoyment is the haemorrhage of value*, the disintegration of the code, the repressive *logos*. In the comic, the moral imperative of institutional codes (situations, roles, social characters) is lifted; in the *Witz*, the moral imperative of the identity principle of words themselves, and even the subject, is eliminated – for nothing, and certainly not in order to 'express' the 'unconscious'. Lichtenberg's definition of the knife (or the non-knife: an inspired and radically poetic witticism) retraces this explosion of meaning with no ulterior motive. A knife exists insofar as a blade and a handle exist and can be named separately. If the separation between the two is removed (and the blade and handle can only be reunited in their disappearance, as in Lichtenberg's joke), then, strictly speaking, there is no longer anything but enjoyment. The 'expectation' of the knife, Kant said, the practical expectation, as well as the phantasmatic expectation (we know what the knife can 'mean-to-say' [*vouloir-dire*]) is resolved into nothing. And this is not a primary process (displacement, condensation); there is no irruption of something from behind the blade and the handle, there is nothing behind this nothing. End of separation, end of the unconscious. Total resolution, total enjoyment.

The example of Lichtenberg is not an exceptional case. If we take a good look at them, all the examples of absurd logic (which is the limit of the *Witz*, and the point at which enjoyment is at its most acute) chosen by Freud – the cauldron, the cake, the salmon mayonnaise, cats that have two holes cut in their skin precisely at the place where their eyes are, the child that, as soon as it comes into the world, is fortunate to find a mother to take

care of it – all these examples can be analysed in the same way, as the reduplication of an identity or a rationality that turns back on itself in order to disintegrate and be eliminated, as the reabsorption of a signifier into itself without a trace of meaning.

'Eifersucht ist eine Leidenschaft, die mit Eifer sucht, was Leiden schafft' (an untranslatable *Witz*: 'jealousy is a passion that with eagerness seeks what causes pain'). Multiple use of the same material, thus pleasure from the deduction of energy? But Freud himself admits that the multiple use of the same material is also the most difficult to accomplish – the simplest still being saying two different things with the aid of different signifiers. What changes is that the two things are said *simultaneously*. But the essential thing then is the abolition of the time the signifier takes to unfold, its successivity: pleasure derives not from the addition of signifieds under the same signifier (economistic interpretation), but from the elimination of the logical time of enunciation, which amounts to the cancellation of the signifier itself (anti-economistic interpretation). Moreover, the 'Eifersucht' *Witz* constitutes a proper Saussurian coupling: it realises, at the level of a phrase and its 'anti-phrase', what Saussure said of every vowel and its countervowel in a line. Here the rule operates at the level of an entire syntagma, whereas in Saussure it operates only on non-signifying elements (phonemes or diphones), but the spark of pleasure, the *Witz* or the poem, always derives from the same rule of the signifier's revolution around itself. Meaning, the 'wealth' of meaning or of multiple meanings does not matter. Quite the opposite: the signified often makes the pleasure of the *Witz* relatively slight, and signifieds come to end the game to safeguard meaning. Whereas, in the infinitesimal lapse of time as the signifier turns back on itself, in the time of this cancellation, there is an infinity of meaning, a virtuality of infinite substitution, a crazy and ultra-fast expenditure, an instantaneous short-circuit of all messages, but always non-signified. Meaning has not 'taken': it remains in a state of centrifugal circulation, 'revolution'; incessantly given and returned like goods in symbolic exchange, they never fall under the authority of value.

Freud often speaks of 'joke-technique', which he distinguishes from the basic process in this way:

> [The joke-technique consists in] the use of the same name twice, once as a whole and again divided up into separate syllables ... in the manner of a riddle. (*Standard Edition*, Vol. 8, 1960, p. 31)

But this is nothing but 'technique'. The same goes for the multiple use of the same material: all these techniques can be summarised under a single category, that is, condensation:

> The multiple use of the same material is ... a special case of condensation; play upon words is nothing other than a condensation *without* substitute-formation; condensation remains the wider category. All these techniques are dominated by a tendency to compression, or rather to saving. It all seems to be a question of economy. In Hamlet's words: 'Thrift, thrift, Horatio!' (ibid., p. 42)

What Freud neglects here is that the 'techniques' of the *Witz* are *by themselves* sources of pleasure. He affirms this, but only, however, in order to add, as quickly as possible:

> We now see that what we have described as the techniques of jokes ... are rather the sources from which jokes provide pleasure … The technique which is characteristic of jokes and peculiar to them, however, consists in their procedure for safeguarding the use of these methods for providing pleasure against the objections raised by criticism, which would put an end to the pleasure … Their function consists from the first in lifting internal inhibitions and in making sources of pleasure fertile which have been rendered inaccessible by those inhibitions, (ibid., p. 130).

Thus everything that might have arisen from the procedure of the *Witz* itself is referred back to an original 'source' for which the *Witz* is no longer anything other than a technical medium.

The same schema applies to the pleasure of recognising and remembering:

> This rediscovery of what is familiar is pleasurable, and once more it is not difficult for us to recognise this pleasure as a pleasure in economy and to relate it to economy in psychical expenditure … recognition is pleasurable in itself – i.e., through relieving psychical expenditure … Rhymes, alliterations, refrains, and other forms of repeating similar verbal sounds which occur in verse, make use of the same source of pleasure – the rediscovery of something familiar, (ibid., pp. 121–2).

Again, these techniques, 'which show so much similarity to that of "multiple use" in the case of jokes' (ibid., p. 122), have no meaning in themselves: they are subordinated to the resurgence of a mnemic content (conscious or unconscious: amongst other things, it may be an originary or childhood phantasm), of which these techniques are only the means of expression.[15]

Like the poetic, every interpretation of the *Witz* in terms of the 'liberation' of phantasms or psychical energy is false. When the signified begins to erupt and circulate in every sense (the simultaneity of signifieds from different levels of the psychical apparatus, the transversality of the signifier under the pressure of the primary processes), we do not laugh and we do not enjoy: there is only anguish, hallucination and madness. Ambiguity and polysemia produce anguish, because the obsession with meaning (the moral law of signification) remains in its entirety, whereas a single, clear meaning no longer responds. Enjoyment, on the contrary, comes from what every imperative, every reference to meaning (manifest or latent) has swept aside, and this is only possible in an exact reversibility of all meaning – not in the proliferation, but in the meticulous reversal of all meaning. The same goes for energy: neither its 'explosive' liberation, its unbinding, its solitary drift, nor its intensity is enjoyment. Reversibility is the only source of enjoyment.[16]

When we laugh or enjoy, it is because, in one way or another, a twisting or distortion of the signifier or energy has managed to create a void. Thus the story of someone who loses his key in a dark alley and is looking for it under the street light, because this is the only chance he has of finding it.

The lost key can be given every hidden meaning (mother, death, phallus castration, etc.), all undecidable for that matter, but this is unimportant: the void of logical reason is reduplicated exactly in order to be destroyed, and it is in the void thus created that the laugh and enjoyment burst out (not, however, in order that this void 'emerges from its subsoil and establishes itself' – Lyotard). Freud puts this extremely well: *Entfesselung des Unsinns* – the unleashing of nonsense. But nonsense is not the hidden hell of meaning [*sens*], nor the emulsion of all the repressed and contradictory meanings. It is the meticulous reversibility of every term – *subversion* through *reversal*.

It is by means of the internal logic of the *Witz* that one of its 'external' characteristics must be interpreted: it shares itself out, it does not consume itself alone, it is meaningful only in exchange. The flash of wit or the funny story are like symbolic goods, like champagne, presents, rare goods, or women in primitive societies. The *Witz* provokes laughter, or the reciprocity of another funny story, or even a veritable potlach of stories in succession. We know the symbolic network of complicity that bind certain stories or jokes, that go from one to the other as poetry used to. Here, everything answers to the symbolic *obligation*. To keep a funny story to oneself is absurd, not to laugh is offensive, but to laugh first at one's own story also shatters the subtle laws of exchange in its own way.[17]

The *Witz* is necessarily inscribed in a symbolic exchange because it is bound to a symbolic (rather than an economic) mode of enjoyment. If this was a matter of 'psychical saving', we fail to see why everyone does not laugh alone, or is not the first to laugh with all this 'liberated' psychical energy. There must, therefore, have been something other than unconscious economic mechanisms to compel reciprocity. This something else is precisely the symbolic cancellation of value. It is because terms are symbolically exchanged, that is to say become reversible and are cancelled in their own operations, that the poetic and the *Witz* institute a social relation of the same type. Only subjects dispossessed of their identity, like words, are devoted to social reciprocity in laughter and enjoyment.

An Anti-Materialist Theory of Language

We see the outline, in the psychoanalytic interpretation of the dream, of the *Witz*, of neuroses and, by extension, of poetry, of a 'materialist' theory of language. The work of the primary process is possible because the unconscious treats *words as things*. The signifier, escaping the horizon and the finality of the signified, becomes pure material once more, available for another labour, an 'elementary' material available for the foldings, transports and telescopings of the primary process. The phonemic substance of language takes on the immanence of the material thing, lapsing back into (if these formulae have any meaning at all) primary articulation (signifying units), perhaps even into secondary articulation (distinct units). Sounds (or even letters) are then conceived as the atoms of a substance no different from that of the body.

It may seem that there was an unsurpassable radicality of language here. To treat words 'as things' would be in principle the fundamental operation of language, since it seems that we have the last word when we finally draw out a 'materialist' base. But the same goes for materialism as it does for everything else. The philosophical destiny of this theory is to operate a simple overturning of idealism, without surpassing endless speculation, by simply alternating between the two. Hence the concepts of 'thing' and of 'matter', negatively forged by idealism as its own hell, its negative phantasm, have passed silently into a positively real phase, indeed into a revolutionary explanatory principle, while losing none of the abstraction that they inherit from their origins. Idealism has created, in *repression*, the phantasm of a certain 'matter' which, laden with all the stigmata of idealist repression, re-emerges as materialism. Let's undertake a thorough examination of the concept of the 'thing' by means of which we would like to delimit a beyond of representation. Having evacuated all transcendence, there remains a crude, opaque and 'objective' matter, a substantial entity, a molar or molecular base of rocks or of language. But do we not see that idealism's last and most subtle resort is to have locked what it denied into this irreducible substantiality, to legitimate it as an adverse referent, as an alibi, and thus to disarm it as an 'effect' of reality which becomes the best support for idealist thought. The 'thing', 'substance', 'infrastructure' and 'matter' have never had any other meaning. Even the 'materialist' theory of language falls into the same trap of idealist interdependence. It is not true that words, when they cease to be representations and lose the sign's rationale, become 'things', thus incarnating a more fundamental status of objectivity, a surplus reality, a rediscovered stage of final appeal. There is no worse miscomprehension.

To treat words 'as things' ... in order to express THE thing – the Unconscious – in order to materialise a latent energy. Expression always falls into the trap, unless it is the repressed, the unsaid (perhaps the unsayable that here becomes a positive reference), of assuming the force of an authority, an agency, rather than a substance. Western thought cannot bear, and has at bottom never been able to bear, a void of signification, a *nonplace* and a non-value. *It requires a topography and an economics.* The radical reabsorption of the sign inaugurated in the poetic (and doubtless in the *Witz* as well) has to become the decipherable sign of an unsaid, of something that perhaps will never give up its code, but that thereby merely augments its value. Of course, I understand that psychoanalysis is not a 'vulgar' hermeneutics: it is a more subtle hermeneutics in that something else – another world, another scene – is always going on behind the operation of the material signifier, whose twists and turns can always be captured by a specialist discourse. Enjoyment is never purely and simply consumption or consummation. The libido always becomes metabolic in this operation, it always speaks from the depths of phantasm it always releases affects. In short, linguistic material is already finalised by a positive transformation (here a transcription), it always warrants an interpretation, which

envelops it as its analytic reason.[18] The 'Thing' hides itself and hides something else. To look for the force is to look for the signifier.

A profound motivation of the sign-symptom, a consubstantiality of word and thing, of the fate of language and the fate of the pulsion, the figure and the force. A libidinal economy whose principle is always to metaphorise (or metonymise) the unconscious, the body, the libido and the phantasm in a linguistic *disorder.* In linguistic motivation, it is always the arbitrary character of the sign that yields to the *positive* analogy of the signifier and the thing signified. In psychoanalytic motivation, it is a *reverse* necessity that binds the deconstructed signifier to a primary energetic potential. Here motivation appears as the *transgression* of a form by an insurrectional content. The blind surreality of the libido punctures language's reality principle and its transparency. This is how, in the best cases, the poetic is interpreted: Luciano Berio's organic sound, Artaud's theatre of cruelty, groans, screams and gasps, the incantation and irruption of the body into the repressive interiorised space of language. The irruption of the partial pulsions constitutes a partial surface *under the seal of repression,* simultaneously transgressive and regressive, for this is precisely only the revolution of a repressed content, marked as such by the hegemony of form.

This is better than Swinburne's breeze, but it still has to do with motivation and metaphor: a vitalist, energetic, corporealist metaphor of the theatre of cruelty. Therefore, in the final analysis, it is a finalist metaphor, even if it is a matter of a savage finality. The magic of a 'liberation' of an original force (we know Artaud's often shocking affinity with magic and exorcism, and even, in *Héliogabale*, with orgiastic mysticism). Metaphysics is always at the crossroads, as it is at the crossroads of the economic-energetic view of the unconscious processes (put simply, that is, the concept of the unconscious): the metaphysical temptation to make the unconscious as substantial as a *body*, and thus the finality of its liberation. The contemporary illusion of the repression that forms the unconscious as a content, as a force. Form triumphs by circumscribing what it denies as content, and delimiting it within a finality of the expression of content or the resurrection of forces.

On this point, there is not so much difference between linguistics and psychoanalysis, since in both there is always the same attempt to base the poetic in the connaturality of the discourse and its object:

> The distance from words to things is altered by the use made of the 'thing' in the word, by the mediation of its flesh and the echoes its flesh might make, in the caverns of sensibility, of the rumbling created by the thing. (J.-F. Lyotard, *Discours, figure* [Paris: Klincksieck, 1971], p. 77)

Thus the linguists try – at best – to preserve the 'symbolic' value of sound against the thesis of the arbitrary. Further on, Lyotard writes:

> The thing is not 'introduced into' language, but its linguistic arrangement spreads it out over words, and between them, the rhythms consonant with those that the thing discussed in the discourse sets up in our body, (ibid., pp. 77–8)

What miracle makes the 'thing' consonant with the word through the medium of the body? Not rhythm, but metaphor. In effect, this is a matter of a *positive economy of the metaphor*: the idea of a reconciliation between the 'thing' and the word given back its materiality. But this is false. If it is true that logical discourse denies the materiality of the word (the *Wortkörper*), the poetic is not, by means of a simple inversion, the resurrection of the word as thing. Far from making the thing appear, it aims to destroy language itself as a thing. The poetic is precisely the *mutual* volatilisation of the status of thing and discourse. That is to say that it aims at the extermination of language as discourse, but also as materiality; not by repressing it as discourse does, but by taking it to task to the point of annihilating it.

This is how even Kristeva, following Heraclitus and Lucretius, states a materialist theory of the signifier: words do not *express* the (movement of the) real, they *are* it. Not by means of the mediation of ideas, but through the consubstantiality (which is more than a 'correspondence') between the material thing and the phonemic substance of language. Homologous to psychoanalysis: if language makes the unconscious visible, it is not because it expresses it, but because it is of the same structure, and because it is articulated and speaks in the same way. The same cut, the same scene, the same 'way', and the same work. Where the Ancients used to say 'fire', we say 'language, the unconscious, the body'.

But to say that language makes fire, air, water and earth (or the work of the unconscious) visible because it is itself an element, an elementary substance in direct affinity with all the others, is at once more radical than all the psycho-naturalists' 'motivation', and also very far from the truth. The whole thing needs to be reversed: it is on condition that we see that fire, water, earth and air are neither values nor *positive* elements, that they are metaphors of the continual dissolution of value, of the symbolic exchange of the world – on condition that we see that they are not substances but *anti-substances*, anti-matter – this is the sense in which language may be said to reunite them, as soon as it has been torn from the logic of the sign and value. This is what the ancient myths (and the Heraclitean and Nietzschean myth of becoming) used to say about the elements, and it is in this sense that they are poetic, and even superior to every analytic interpretation that transposes this dissolution into the hidden instance of the unsaid, 'transpearing' in a no-saying or a saying-other.

There is no materialist reference in the symbolic operation, not even an 'unconscious' one; rather there is the operation of an 'anti-matter'. We are wary of science-fiction, but it is true that there is some analogy between a particle and an anti-particle, whose encounter would result in their mutual annihilation (along with, moreover, a fabulous energy), and the principle of the vowel and its counter-vowel in Saussure, or, in more general terms, between any given signifier and the anagrammatic double that eliminates it: here again, nothing remains but a fabulous enjoyment. Kristeva writes:

> In this *other* space, where logical laws of speech have been weakened, the subject dissolves and, in place of the sign, the clash of signifiers eliminating each other is instituted. An operation of generalised negativity, which has nothing to do with the constitutive negativity of the judgement (*Aufhebung*), nor with the negativity internal to the judgement (binary logic: 0–1), an annihilating negativity (Sunyavada Buddhism). A zerological subject, a non-subject who comes to assume the thought that cancels itself. ('Poésie et négativité', p. 212)

Beyond the Unconscious

The question is this: is there room to offer an hypothesis of the unconscious – this energy and affective potential which, in its repression and in its labour, lies at the basis of the 'expressive' disturbance and dislocation of the order of discourse, and opposes its primary to its secondary processes – an hypothesis in terms of the poetic process? Evidently everything hangs together: if the unconscious is this irreversible agency, then the duality of the primary and the secondary processes is also irreducible, and the work of meaning can only consist in the return of the repressed, in its transpearance in the repressing agency of discourse. In this regard, there is no difference between the poetic and the neurotic, between the poem and the *lapsus*. We take note of psychoanalysis's radicalism: if the primary processes 'exist', they are at work everywhere, and are determinant everywhere. Conversely, however, the mere hypothesis of a different order, a symbolic order that provided the economy of the unconscious, prohibition and repression and which basically resolved the distinction between the primary and the secondary processes, is enough to relativise the whole psychoanalytic perspective, and not only on those marginal territories over which it imperialistically encroaches (anthropology, poetics, politics, etc.), but on its own terrain, in the analysis of the psyche, neurosis and the cure. To turn to Mannoni again, it cannot be ruled out that psychoanalysis, which originates from the distinction between the primary and the secondary processes, will one day die when this distinction is abolished. The symbolic is already *beyond the psychoanalytic unconscious*, beyond libidinal economy, just as it is beyond value and political economy.

We must see that the symbolic processes (reversibility, anagrammatic dispersal, reabsorption without residue) are not at all mixed up with the primary processes (displacement, condensation, repression). They are mutually opposed, even if together they are opposed to the logical discourse of meaning. This singular difference (also as regards enjoyment) means that a dream, a *lapsus*, or a joke is not a work of art or a poem. The difference between the symbolic and the libidinal unconscious, today largely effaced by the privilege of psychoanalysis, must be re-established to prohibit psychoanalysis from encroaching where it has nothing to say. Concerning the poetic (the work of art), the symbolic and (primitive) anthropology neither Marx nor Freud has been able to say anything unless either has reduced it to the mode of production on the one hand, and to repression and castration on the other. Where psychoanalysis and Marxism come to grief, we must not

want to have them fall like angels (or like beasts), they must be pitilessly analysed according to their failures and omissions. Today, the limits of each are the strategic points of every revolutionary analysis.

Marx believed that *in* economics and its dialectical procedure he rediscovered the fundamental agency. In fact, he discovered, *throughout* many economic convulsions, what systematically haunted it: *the very separation of economics as an agency*. Running through the economic, breeding conflict and making it the site of contradictions is the fantastic autonomisation of the economy raised to the level of the reality principle, which these contradictions, however violent, rationalise in their own way.

But this is also true of psychoanalysis: here too, in the term of the unconscious and the labour of the unconscious, Freud gained possession of what, in the form of the individual psychical apparatus, resulted from the fracture of the symbolic as a fundamental agency. The conflictual relation of the conscious to the unconscious relentlessly translates the haunting of this very separation of the psychical as such. Freudian topography (unconscious, preconscious, conscious) merely formalises, and theorises as an original given, what results from a destructuration.

This analysis of Marx and Freud is critical. But neither are critical in relation to the respective separation of their domains. They are not conscious of the rupture that founds them. They are critical symptomatologies that subtly turn their respective symptomatological fields into the determining field. Primary processes, modes of production: 'radical' words, irreducible schemata of determination. It is as such that they imperialistically export their concepts.

Today, Marxism and psychoanalysis try to mix and exchange their concepts. Logically, in fact, if both fell within the province of 'radical' critique, they ought to be able to do this. This is not the case, as the failure of the Freudo-Marxian phantasm in all its forms testifies. But the basic reason for the incessant failure of this conceptual transfer, and why both remain desperate metaphors, is precisely due to the fact that Marxism and psychoanalysis retain their coherence only within their partial definitions (in their ignorance), and cannot therefore be generalised as analytic schemata.

A radical theory can be based neither on their 'synthesis' nor on their contamination, but only on their respective ex-termination. Marxism and psychoanalysis are in crisis. Rather than supporting one another, their respective crises must be telescoped and speeded up. They may yet do each other great collateral damage. We must not be deprived of this spectacle: they are only critical fields.

Notes

1. But 'forgotten' and covered over by all linguistics with especial care: it was only at this cost that it could be established as a 'science' and ensure its structural monopoly in all directions.
2. For what follows concerning the anagrammatic material we refer to Jean Starobinski, *Les mots sous les mots* [Paris: Gallimard, 1971]. For the basic rules, see 'Le souci de la répétition', pp. 12ff.

3. The term 'anathema' which can just as easily be an immolated victim as it can a consecrated object, having drifted in the direction of an accursed object or person, should retain all its importance for the rest of this analysis.
4. The same goes for our perception of space and time, which are unthinkable for us in any other way than infinity – a proliferation that corresponds both to their objectification as value and, here too, to the phantasm of an inexhaustible extension or succession.
5. There is a critique to be made here of what Lévi-Strauss, in his *Structural Anthropology* [2 vols, tr. M. Layton, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977–9], calls 'symbolic efficacity' since for him it remains bound (as is the vulgar representation of magic) to the operation of a myth on the body (or on nature) by means of a 'symbolic' exchange or correspondence of signifieds. For example, the difficult birth: mythic speech remobilises the blocked body along its signified, its content. Instead, the efficacity of the sign must be understood as the resolution of a formula. It is by making the elements of a formula exchange and resolve themselves within this exchange that you induce the same resolution in the sick person's body: the elements of the body (or of nature) enter once again into exchanges with each other. The impact of signs on the body (or on nature, as in the legend of Orpheus), their operating force, derives precisely from not being 'value'. There is no rationalisation of the sign in primitive societies, that is to say, there is no separation between its *actual* operation and a referential signified, no 'reservoir of meaning' where analogies would be conveyed. The symbolic operation is not analogical, it resolves, it is revolutionary, and it concerns the materiality of the sign, which it exterminates as value. There being no more value, the sign actualises the ambivalence, therefore the total exchange and total reversibility of meaning. Hence its efficacity, since conflicts, including disease, are only ever resolved in the exchange.

   > Actualising ambivalence, the primitive sign, the 'effective' sign, *has no unconscious*. It is clear, and equal to its manifest operation. It does not operate indirectly, or by analogy, on the repressed or unconscious representation (Lévi-Strauss very clearly leans in this direction, in his comparison with psychoanalysis – 'The sorcerer and his magic' – as indeed does all psychoanalytic anthropology). It is its own operation, with no residue, and this is how it operates on the world, this is why it is the direct operation of the world.

6. There again the *residue* of the analysis fuels the field of 'knowledge', the constructive Eros of 'science', in exactly the same way as the residues of the poetic become enmeshed in the field of communication. Science and discourse speculate on this residue in their imaginary, where they produce their 'surplus-value' and establish their power. What is not analysed and radically resolved in the symbolic operation is what is frozen under the death-mask of value – the beginning of the culture of death and accumulation.
7. But the disappearance of every coherent signified is not sufficient to produce the poetic. If this were the case, then a lexical madness would be sufficient, or an aleatory automatic writing. It is also necessary that the signifier is eliminated in a rigorous, entirely non-aleatory, operation, without which it remains 'residual', and its mere absurdity will not save it. In automatic writing, for example, the signified is indeed eliminated ('it means nothing' – *ça ne veut rien dire*) – even though it lives entirely on the nostalgia for the signified, and its pleasure consists in leaving every possible signified to chance – in any case, the signifier is produced here without any control, unresolved, instantaneous waste: the third rule of customary discourse (see above), that of the signifier's absolute availability, has been neither shattered nor overcome. But the poetic mode involves both *the liquidation of the signified, and the anagrammatic resolution of the signifier.*
8. The humour in this story is so successful because, if there is one thing on which the inscription of death has not taken, where the death drive is barred, it is cybernetic systems.
9. The same goes, in a certain way, for Freud's hypothesis of the death drive – its process and its content remain, in accordance with his avowed wishes, ultimately unverifiable

on the clinical level, but its form, as the principle of mental functioning and the anti-*logos*, is revolutionary.

10. This is the illusion of being able to separate the two articulations, and eventually extract the one from the other. It is the illusion of being able to rediscover, by splitting the primary, 'significative' articulation, the equivalent of non-linguistic signs in language (gestures, sounds, colours). This illusion leads J.-F. Lyotard, in *Discours, figure* [Paris: Klincksieck, 1971] to grant the level of the visual or the cry an absolute privilege as spontaneous transgression, always already beyond the discursive and closer to the figural. This illusion remains trapped by the very concept of double articulation, whereby the linguistic order again finds a means to establish itself in the interpretation of what escapes it.
11. Careful here: this all holds for psychoanalysis itself, which also thrives on the rupture between primary and secondary processes, and will die at the end of this separation. And it is true that psychoanalysis is 'revolutionary' and 'scientific' when it explores the entire field of channels from the standpoint of this rupture (in the unconscious). But perhaps we will one day see that real, total and immediate practice does not obey this postulate, or that analytic simulation model; that *symbolic* practice is from the very first beyond the distinction between primary and secondary processes. To this day, the unconscious and the subject of the unconscious, psychoanalysis and the subject of (psychoanalytic) knowledge, has lived – the analytic field will have disappeared as such into the separation that it instituted itself – for the benefit of the symbolic field. We can already see many signs that this has already taken place.
12. This speech has nothing to do with linguistic sense of the word '*parole*', since the latter is trapped with the *langue-parole* opposition and is subject to the *langue*. Undivided (symbolic) speech itself denies the *langue–parole* distinction, just as undivided social practice denies the theory-practice distinction. Only 'linguistic' *parole* says only what it says. But such speech has never existed, unless in the dialogue of the dead. Concrete, actual speech says what it says, *along with everything else at the same time.* It does not observe the law of the discrete sign and the separation of agencies, it speaks at every level at the same time, or better, it undoes the level of the *langue*, and thus linguistics itself. The latter, by contrast, seeks to impose a *parole* which would be nothing but the execution of the *langue*, that is to say, the discourse of power.
13. Cf. Charles Malamoud, 'Sur la notion de reste dans le brahmanisme', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens*, Vol. XVI, 1972.
14. [In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud cites Kant in the following manner: the comic is "an expectation that has turned to nothing"' (*Standard Edition*. ed. and tr. James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 8, 1960, p. 199), which he takes from Kant's C*ritique of Judgement*, tr. Werner Pluhar, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987, p. 204, from which I have taken the quotation – tr.]
15. It is on the reduction to and the primacy of the *economy* of the unconscious that the impossiblity of ever really theorising the difference between the phantasm and the work of art rests for Freud. He was able to say that the poets had had the intuition of everything he analysed before him, or even (in *Gradiva*), that psychiatry has no privilege over the poet and that the latter can very well express, 'without taking anything away from beauty and its works' (!) an unconscious problem in all its profundity. The poetic act remains supplementary, sublime but supplementary. J.-F. Lyotard attempts to take Freud up on this point, granting all importance to his distinction between the phantasm and the work of art, while seeking to articulate them rigorously. He first denounces every interpretation in terms of the 'liberation' of the phantasm. To liberate the phantasm is absurd, since the latter is a prohibition of desire, and is of the order of repetition (this is in fact what is currently being produced with the 'liberation' of the unconscious: they liberate it insofar as it is repressed and forbidden, a liberation, that is to say, under the sign of value, of an inverted surplus-value – but perhaps this is the 'Revolution'?). Lyotard writes: 'The artist … struggles to free *from* the phantasm, *from* the matrix of figures whose heir and whose locus he is, what really belongs to primary process, and is not a repetition' ('Notes on the critical function of the work of art', in

Driftworks [New York: Semiotext(e), 1984], p. 74 [translation modified – tr.]). 'For Freud, art must be situated by reference to the phantasm … only the artist *does not hide* his phantasms, he gives them the form of effectively real objects, and furthermore [!] the presentation he makes of them is a source of aesthetic pleasure' (*Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* [Paris: UGE, 1973], p. 56). In Lyotard, this theory takes on 'inverted' ways: *the artist's phantasm* is not produced in reality as the play, the reconciliation, or the fulfilment of desire, *it is produced in reality as a counter-reality*, it intervenes only in the lack of reality, hollowing out this lack. 'The function of art is not to offer a real simulacrum of the fulfilment of desire, it is to show, by way of the play of its figures, what deconstruction of the linguistic and perceptual order must be engaged in, in order that a figure of the unconscious order allows itself to be discerned through its very evasiveness (presentation of the primary process)' (ibid., pp. 57–8).

Being the prohibition of desire, however, how can the phantasm suddenly play this subversive role? The same goes for the primary processes: 'The work of art differs from the dream and the symptom in that in it, the same operations of condensation, displacement and figuration that, in the dream and the symptom, have the goal of *disguising* desire because it is intolerable, are, in expression, used to push back the *bonne forme* of secondary process and exhibit the "unform", the unconscious disorder' (ibid., p. 58). How are we to understand that the primary processes can be reversed in this way? Are they not themselves bound to *repressed* desire, or are they then the mode of existence of a '*pur et dur*' unconscious, an unsurpassable, infrastructural unconscious? So Lyotard, who correctly says that 'one cannot write on the side of the primary processes. Taking the side of the primary process is still an effect of the secondary processes', would condemn himself.

But this is exactly what the artist does: 'The [artist's] labour may be assimilated to that of the dream and to the operations of the primary process in general, but the artist repeats them and, in so doing, reverses them, because he applies them to the work of this process itself, that is to say, to the figures that arise from the phantasm' (ibid., p. 65).

And, more radically still: 'The artist is someone who, in the desire to see death, even at the price of his own death, lends it the upper hand over the desire to produce.' 'Disease is not the irruption of the unconscious, it is this irruption *and* the furious struggle against it. The genius advances as far as the same figure of depth as the sick, but rather than defending himself against it, he desires it' (ibid., p. 60–61). But where does this acquiesence to the 'cruelty' of the unconscious come from, if not a reversal of the 'will' from an elusive 'actual grace'? And where does the enjoyment that emanates from this act come from, which must somehow, of course, stem from the *form*, and not from the content. Form, for Lyotard, is not far removed from the mystics' void. The artist will contrive 'a deconstructed space', a void, a structure receptive to phantasmatic irruption: 'meaning comes about through the violation of discourse, it is a force or a gesture in the field of significations, it remains *silent*. And in this hole the repressed word merges from its subsoil and establishes itself. This void, this silence – the calming before the irruption – constitutes a dangerous analogy with mystical processes. But where, above all, do they proceed from? What is the process of 'deconstruction'? We soon see that it has nothing to do with the primary process – on which we here impose an incomprehensible double role: *it is both sides of the reversal*. Would we not do better here, frankly, to leave repression and repetition to one side, and to clear the poetic act of all psychoanalytic counter-dependence?

16. Pleasure, satisfaction and the fulfilment of desire belong to the economic order: enjoyment belongs to the symbolic order. We must make a radical distinction between the two. No doubt saving, recognition, psychical ellipsis and compulsive repetition are sources of a certain (somehow entropic, involutive) pleasure, simultaneously *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, familiar and disturbing, an endless source of anguish, since it is bound to the repetition of the phantasm. The economic is always accumulative and repetitive. The symbolic is the reversal, the resolution of accumulation and repetition; the resolution of the phantasm.

17. Freud thinks, remaining within the logic of economic interpretation, that if one is not the first to laugh, it is because the initiative for the *Witz* requires a certain psychical expenditure, and is therefore, moreover, unavailable for pleasure. He himself admits that this is not very satisfactory.
18. All matter is *raw* material. That is to say, that its concept only appears dependent on the appearance of the order of *production*. All those who would like to be 'materialists' (scientific, semiotic, historical, dialectical, etc.) ought to remember this. Even the sensationalist materialism of the eighteenth century is the first step towards a 'liberation' of the body in accordance with the *pleasure-function*, as *raw material in the production of pleasure*.

> Matter is only ever a force of production. But production itself is hardly 'materialist' at all – nor, moreover, is it idealist. It is an order and a code, and that's all there is to it. The same goes for science: it is an order and a code, no more or less 'materialist' than magic or anything else.

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FORGET FOUCAULT

Jean Baudrillard

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SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS SERIES

Originally published in 1977 as *Oublier Foucault*, Édition Galilée, Paris. This translation first appeared as "Forgetting Foucault" in *Humanities in Society*, Volume 3, Number 1 and is reprinted by permission of the publisher.

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Published by Semiotext(e)
2007 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 427, Los Angeles, CA 90057
www.semiotexte.com

"Forget Baudrillard" is translated by Phil Beitchman, Lee Hildreth, and Mark Polizzotti.

Special thanks to Andrew Berardini, Christoph Cox, Jared Elms, Ronald Gottesman, Rahul Govind, Lewanne Jones, Christopher Mays, Nicholas Zurko and Joe Weiss.

Cover Art by: Josephine Meckseper
Untitled (Vitrine), 2005, Mixed media in display window, 116.8 x 116.8 x 47 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York

Back Cover Photography: Marine Baudrillard
Design: Hedi El Kholti

ISBN-10: 1-58435-041-5
ISBN-13: 978-1-58435-041-5
Distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England
Printed in the United States of America

FORGET FOUCAULT

Jean Baudrillard

Introduction and Interview by Sylvère Lotringer

Translated by Nicole Dufresne

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Sylvère Lotringer

Exterminating Angel

Introduction to *Forget Foucault*

IN DECEMBER 1976 Jean Baudrillard sent a long review-essay of Michel Foucault's *The Will to Knowledge*, recently published in Paris,[1] to the prestigious French journal *Critique* founded by Georges Bataille. (Foucault was on the editorial board.) Its title, "Forget Foucault," left little doubt about the author's intentions. It wasn't just a critique of the book, but a pamphlet challenging his entire oeuvre. The essay was never published in *Critique*. It came out instead, separately, as a book a few months later.

Forget Foucault,[2] to my mind, is by far the best introduction to Baudrillard's work. I intended to publish it among the first three books of the new "Foreign Agents" series, which started in 1983, but the attack on Foucault made it a bit problematic. Taking on a fellow philosopher publicly, let alone a philosopher of Foucault's stature, was something rare, and not only in France. Instead I published Baudrillard's *Simulations*, which became a best-seller of sorts, especially in the art world. Foucault's death one year later further delayed the publication of the pamphlet. It was finally

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1. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, 1: The Will to Knowledge* [HS], tr. Robert Hurley, New York, Pantheon, (French, 1976) 1980.

2. Jean Baudrillard, *Oublier Foucault*, Paris, Galilée, 1977.

released in English in 1987 with a double title: *Forget Foucault/ Forget Baudrillard* and a reversible cover, as if one cover could cancel the other out, making it less sacrilegious. "Forget Baudrillard" was a long dialogue I had with Baudrillard in 1984, four years after we first met in Los Angeles and discussed the project. This series of mishaps and postponements both in France and in the United States, has a lot to do with the peculiar strategy Baudrillard inaugurated with this pamphlet.

Baudrillard wrote it shortly after publishing *Symbolic Exchange and Death*,[3] the most sweeping exposition of his main thesis until then. Few people realized how closely the two books were connected. Interestingly, *Symbolic Exchange* was released by Editions Gallimard in the same renowned series, Bibliotheque des Sciences humaines [Library of the Human Sciences] as was Foucault's *The Order of Things*.[4] The two books, however, didn't elicit a comparable reaction, or fire the same intense controversies. Actually *Symbolic Exchange and Death* attracted little attention in France and wouldn't be published in English until 20 years later. By then Baudrillard had become famous in America for his deadpan, seemingly nihilistic views of consumer society. Not everyone recognized him as a powerful and idiosyncratic thinker. And while he is still known today for his paradoxical positions, or extravagant formulations, not everyone realizes that these formulations derive from an impeccable philosophical core, and that their glittering effects are based on solid scholarship.

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3. Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* [SE], tr. Iain Hamilton Grant, London, Sage, (1976) 1993.

4. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, tr. anon., New York, Pantheon, (1966) 1970.

Symbolic Exchange and Death wasn't as easy to "place" intellectually as any of Foucault's works. Although it addressed a number of issues current at the time, it didn't look like anything else that was being published in France during that period. It didn't seem to belong there, or anywhere for that matter. It was as if it had fallen from outer space. Even Baudrillard's use of the word "symbolic" was confusing. It didn't quite fit with the way Claude Lévi-Strauss or Jacques Lacan were using it at the time. It didn't help either that his dualistic (confrontational) approach to culture seemed to reinstate the kind of binarism post-Structuralist philosophers had been trying to eliminate.

Until then Baudrillard was mostly known as a self-taught sociologist drawn to Situationist ideas, the author of several essays unraveling both the logic of consumer society (it exchanges signs, not goods) and the Marxist analysis that claimed to account for it (its use value was just a fiction of exchange value). In *Consumer Society*,[5] he demonstrated as well that ideological critique, any counter-discourse really, remained immanent to what it meant to oppose. In the last resort even the Situationists were complicit to the spectacle. (Their concrete attempts to offset its "alienating effect" through experiential drifts and *detournements* were certainly more imaginative, but hardly conclusive.) Baudrillard wanted to achieve something more radical, on a much larger scale: not suspend momentarily the semiotic code—the principle of equivalence that regulated the flows of capital—but destroy it. Destroy, he said. "Only total revolution, theoretical and practical, can restore the symbolic in the demise of the sign and of value.

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5. Jean Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, tr. George Rizer , London, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1998.

Even signs must burn," he proclaimed in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.[6] This was easier said than done. It was becoming doubtful at the time whether any class (let alone the famous working class) could ever achieve that feat. Forgetting revolution and "radical critique," Baudrillard finally took the task into his own hands, challenging capitalism to provoke its own demise. It is still working on it.

Sleeping with the Enemy

This was a major shift in political theory. Actually, and contrary to all appearances, it wasn't unlike what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari advocated in *Anti-Oedipus*,[7] or Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*,[8] in the wake of May '68. It wasn't just coincidental that Guattari and Baudrillard at one point belonged to the same Maoist group; or that, in 1968, Baudrillard happened to be teaching with Henri Lefebvre at the University of Nanterre, vortex of the uprising. All of them came from the same place politically: the far-left. Most French intellectuals at the time belonged there. There weren't many other options available. Marxist rhetoric in politics had bottomed out. The student rebellion had proved at least one thing: the French Communist Party, trade-unions and the working class—the entire institutional left—had ceased to be revolutionary. The communist

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6. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, tr. Charles Levin, St. Louis, Mo, Telos Press, (1972) 1981.

7. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, tr. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen Lane, New York, Viking (1972) 1977.

8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, tr. Alan Sheridan. New York, Pantheon (1975) 1977.

bureaucracy hadn't thrown its might on the side of the student revolt. Instead it pressed the besieged government for salary increases. When the Italian Communists later crucified the Autonomia Movement, falsely associating them with the terrorist red brigade, that was the end of creative leftism in Europe.

No wonder French post-'68 thinkers, Baudrillard included, looked somewhere else for revolutionary alternatives. Failing to enlist their allies, they resolved to sleep with the enemy. It was a bold theoretical move, outdoing Marx in his analysis of capital. All of the "children of May," revolutionaries bereft of a revolution, turned to capitalism, eager to extract its subversive energy they no longer found in traditional class struggles. Updating the theory of power and the fluctuations of subjectivity to the erratic shifts of the semiotic code, they assumed that they could redirect its flows and release in their wake new "deterritorialized" figures—psychotic creativity, desire, nomadism, becoming revolutionary—in spite of the abrupt "reterritorializations" that the system was bound to impose in order to insure its own survival. (Deterritorializations result from the absolute decodification of capital).

Baudrillard didn't disagree with them on the nature of the beast, only on the extent of the damage. Contrary to them, he maintained that their willful distinctions between various "regimes of madness," or between thresholds and gradients of intensity (necessary to identify the direction and consistency of the flows) could not hold anymore. Libidinal distinctions would prove powerless to stem the flow. He saw them as doomed attempts to reintroduce a modicum of human agency in a process that had become both irreversible (linear, cumulative) and inhuman. Energetic and intense, capital was gradually gnawing away at every singularity. Simulating its fluidity, they had been engulfed by it. Revolution had come and

gone; they arrived too late, one day after the orgy, like Kafka's Messiah. Boldly going beyond Marx, they had simply lost their moorings. "Theoretical production, like material production," Baudrillard wrote, "loses its determinacy and begins to turn around itself, slipping *en abyme* towards a reality that cannot be found. This is where we are today: indeterminacy, the era of *floating theories*, as much as floating money…" (*SE*, p. 44). All the efforts to enlist capitalism on their side were bound to fail. The only way out of the morass was a radical leap of faith, a flight into the unknown. Only an absolute deterritorialization *of theory itself* could meet the absolute challenge of capital.

This is what Baudrillard meant by a *total* revolution: a strategy geared to escalate the system and push it to its breaking point. Then, giving up on every pretence of rationality, it would start *revolving* and achieve in the process a circularity of its own: "We know the potential of tautology when it reinforces the system's claim to perfect sphericity (Ubu Roi's belly)" (*SE*, p. 4). Coming back full circle to his early pataphysical roots, Baudrillard was taunting capital to emulate Jarry's absurdism—and share in Ubu's grotesque fate. After all, wasn't capitalism itself a pataphysical proposition? It was endlessly cutting the branch on which it sits, devastating the planet and endangering the human species while claiming to improve its lot. Capital didn't care a fig for the fate of humanity. The real wasn't its business. It had cancelled the *principle* of reality and substituted a codification of a higher order, a hyper-reality that made the real obsolete. Its dirge-like flows were self-referential, leaving everything else in a state of self-induced simulation. The flows of capital were posthumous, post-human. In their nihilistic energy, they carried the seeds of their own destruction. Only Ubu, Jarry's truculent

hero, the coward king cannibalizing his own entourage, and himself in the process, could account for such a bullish cynicism. The society of the spectacle was turning into a soft version of the theater of cruelty, a burlesque of death with the globe as its stage. Life was being exchanged for nothing, for a handful of glittering toys, work absorbed time like a sponge and left no traces. Baudrillard wasn't the exterminator, *but the system itself*. Yet no one was paying attention.

In his Bastille days, De Sade challenged French regicides to draw revolution out to its most extreme moral conclusions: "Fellow compatriots, a last-ditch effort is required if you really want to earn the name of Republican!" Already spinning himself silly with the system like an autistic child, Baudrillard was ready to make the extra mile. He would be the fool of capital and wave its Good News all around like a lantern: "Every system that approaches perfect operativity simultaneously approaches its downfall… it approaches absolute power and total absurdity; that is, immediate and probable subversion. A gentle push in the right place is enough to bring it crashing down" (*SE*, p. 4). Beware of gentle pataphysicians with a big hammer.

Excluding death

By the time Baudrillard conceived this collapse, the general outlook of society had changed drastically. By the early 60s, workers were already becoming eager consumers. Surplus value no longer arose from hard labor; it was created through the commodity. Semiotic equivalence became more real than reality. As "communication" replaced production, workers were being "alienated" not

at work, but at home in their daily lives. Class struggle no longer applied. It was the beginning of the assembly-*life*, social life colonized by the commodity.

Baudrillard's thought enjoys a special status in French theory, providing a bridge between the high modernist thinkers of the 30s and 40s and post-structuralist thought, which sought to revise Marxian analysis in light of the increased abstraction of capitalism.

While the Situationists sought to reclaim life through their *detournements*, Baudrillard turned to death as an ally. Re-reading Hegel through Nietzsche, he realized that debts always preceded exchange. A spared slave could never be free of the master's *gift* of his life. Foucault said the same thing in conclusion to his *Will to Knowledge*, the book Baudrillard was ostensibly challenging. Foucault reminded his readers that, in ancient cultures, the right to kill was a dissymmetrical one. In reality, it was "the right to *take* life or *let* live." And Baudrillard says: "Contrary to what we might imagine, power is never the power of putting someone to death, but exactly the opposite." Power consists of "unilateral giving (of life in particular)" (*SE*, pp. 40, 42). Foucault was talking about death's absolute form during periods when the sovereign could exercise the right to kill in order to ensure his own survival. In modern times, this *symbolic* right subsisted but, Foucault estimated, only in a "relative and limited" form. The mechanisms of power had dramatically changed. Instead of destroying life, the mechanisms of power managed it in all sorts of ways. As a result, to "*let* live" was substituted a power to "*foster* life," thereby disqualifying death and the rituals that accompanied it.

"Now it is over life, through its unfolding," Foucault wrote, "that power establishes its dominion; death is power's limit, the

moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most "private."[9] While Foucault went onto explore what "to seize hold of life" really meant in terms of the administration of bodies and lives, this point became pivotal in Baudrillard's thinking. But could these disciplined bodies, these lives newly modulated by a creative bio-power, still be called lives? Foucault briefly envisaged the possibility of a "resistance," but never elaborated on its possible nature or the conditions in which it could be exerted. One could argue that Foucault vindicated Baudrillard's thesis *by default*. Only life pushed to the limit, to moments that escaped the system of equivalence, could render power powerless. *Giving one's life away*—a counter-gift—was the only present that couldn't be reciprocated.

Restoring the Potlatch

French sociologist Marcel Mauss had rediscovered traces of this agonistic reciprocity in a radical custom—"potlatch"—practiced among tribes of the American Northwest.[10] Potlatch was the sumptuary sacrifice of accumulated wealth. Whoever was ready to sacrifice everything, *even life itself*, carried the day. This organizing principle of primitive economies was "symbolic exchange" and, Baudrillard assumed, its ghost still was secretly haunting contemporary society. Exchange was a rationalized version of this *symbolic* violence. "Giving back" could be a challenge to the capitalist system.

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9. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, op. cit, p. 138.

10. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: the Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, tr. W.D. Halls, New York, Norton, (1925), 1990.

Could potlatch be reactivated against capitalistic forms of equivalence and death (hence life) be returned to the system? "Things must be pushed to the limit, where quite naturally they collapse and are inverted" (*SE*, p. 4). But was the saturation of the semiotic code enough by itself to trigger *symbolic* exchange again? And where would this push come from? It would have to come from the system itself. Maybe symbolic exchange could offer the system something it couldn't absorb without self-destructing. "An infinitesimal injection of death would immediately create such excess and ambivalence that the circulation of value and the principle of equivalence would completely collapse." Death would act simultaneously in both directions. "Death must be played against death: a radical tautology that makes the system's own logic the ultimate weapon" (*SE*, p. 4). Baudrillard's concept of symbolic exchange was *reversibility*—a challenge to the death by means of death. But death as a *form*, a specific ritual and protocol, not a content. Only this form, perhaps, alone, could belong to a higher order than the code.

Baudrillard was recasting symbolic exchange in light of Freud's death drive, which involves both the system *and* its counter-finality. Freud conceived it as a myth that told something about the organization of our culture. But the same, of course, would apply to Baudrillard's system itself. Baudrillard's concept of symbolic exchange could be seen as his own cultural myth, no truer a myth than Foucault's discourse about truth. Symbolic exchange may be a hallucination of theory, the kind of elusive anthropological construct that is needed in order to upset the discourse of generalized equivalence. This does not make it any less 'true.' Even though Antonin Artaud mythologized the Land of the Tarahumaras, his descriptions were anthropologically accurate. Ironically, Baudrillard's

hallucination of theory like Artaud's myth of origin- occurs in a desert ... For Baudrillard, it's an *american* desert—a desert in the midst of a land without origin or original. Baudrillard didn't ground his theory anywhere, except *on the very process of deterritorialization*. On the principle of death itself. It is the form that his theory had to take in order to *reverse* signs and values, leaving nothing behind. "Strictly speaking, nothing remains for us to base anything on. All that remains for us to do is theoretical violence—speculation to the death, whose only method is the radicalization of hypotheses" (*SE*, p. 5).

Speculating on Foucault

But why speculate to death on the work of *Foucault*? In *Symbolic Exchange*, Baudrillard was fiercely critical of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's thesis on "desire"—he suspected its "savage naturality," a substitute for "good old labor force."—but he didn't seem to see anything wrong with Foucault's analyses. In fact, Baudrillard begins *Forget Foucault* by praising him. He describes Foucault's work as "perfect in that the very movement of the text gives an admirable account of what it proposes: on the one hand, a powerful generating spiral... on the other hand, an interstitial flowing of power..." But he immediately qualifies, this perfection is "disturbing... too beautiful to be true." In short, "Foucault's discourse is *a mirror of the powers it describes*" (*FF*, p.10).

Baudrillard's judgment is sharp and final: "floating theories" —and he included Deleuze and Guattari's among them—now merely "serve as signs for one another... It merely signifies that any theory can from now on be exchanged against any other

according to variable exchange rates, but without any longer being invested anywhere..." (*SE*, 44). Foucault's thesis on sex was just a sign for Deleuze's theory of "desire." At one point Baudrillard envisaged writing a book on "The Mirror of Desire" along the line of his *The Mirror of Production*, but never got around to actually writing. In *Forget Foucault*, this "mirror of desire" in Deleuze was assimilated to the interstitial flowing of power identified by Foucault. All that Baudrillard had to do was to negotiate the exchange rate between these two theories within his own pamphlet.

As Foucault saw it, sex was a habit to which consciousness has not long been accustomed. It was essentially different from *sexuality*, which had long been a fluid configuration meant to adapt readily to various social pressures and historical situations. The sublimation of sexuality through courtly love served to shore up the medieval system of personal allegiance. By extracting from sexuality a series of regulated oppositions (sexual differences), Freud finally shaped 'sex' as we conceive it today.

In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault wondered to what extent the diffuse assemblage of sexuality had been taken over by sex. This question led him to dispel Freud and Wilhelm Reich's "repressive hypothesis." Instead of focusing on repression, Foucault observed the insistent injunction to *express* sex that was surfacing everywhere, demanding everyone to disclose it in its most minute details. Thus, while a social diffraction of power replaced transcendent power, sexual incitation was replacing old interdictions. For Baudrillard, the newly ambiguous status of sex placed it on the same "floating" basis as capital. Consequently, in his eyes, "liberating" sex could only mean exterminating it.

Power and Desire

Foucault's *The Will to Power* suffered a tepid reception in France and Gilles Deleuze wrote his friend a 10 page memo in support of his book. Yet he couldn't help wondering in it whether Foucault wasn't simply miniaturizing the state in his micro-political arrangements. "Is the notion of power still applicable at this level?" he asked. "Is it not also a miniaturization of a global concept?" And he added: "I am not sure that micro-arrangements can be described in terms of power."[11]

And this is exactly the question Baudrillard raises in *Forget Foucault*—with a vengeance : "But what if Foucault spoke so well to us of power… only because power is dead? Not merely impossible to locate because of dissemination, but dissolved purely and simply in a manner that still escapes us…" (*FF*, p.12). Foucault's new version of power hadn't changed anything; the power principle had remained the same. A masterful but obsolete theory, Baudrillard concluded.

Suspicious of the word "desire" because of its Lacanian implications (desire, a state dependent on lack), Foucault substituted the word "pleasure," which he found less tainted, "a virgin territory, almost devoid of meaning."[12] Baudrillard saw no real difference between the two, anymore than he saw a difference between "repression" of sex and the "induced mode of speaking" that Foucault claimed had replaced it. "Foucault doesn't want to talk about repression: but what else is that slow, brutal infection of the mind

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11. Gilles Deleuze, "Desire and Pleasure," *More & Less 2*, Pasadena, CA, Art Center College of Design 1998, p. 250.

12. In "Le Gai Savoir II," *Mec Magazine* 6/7, July–August 1988, p. 32. Quoted by David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1993, p. 365.

through sex, whose only equivalent in the past was the infection through the soul" (*FF*, p. 31). Here, Baudrillard seems to be giving Foucault lessons in Nietzscheism…

Baudrillard was eventually ostracized for daring to take on Foucault, yet oddly, no one ever reproached Deleuze for raising many of the same questions. Worse still, Deleuze, otherwise known for his generosity, made it known around Paris that he saw Baudrillard as "the shame of the profession." In my opinion, it was Baudrillard's challenge to Foucault (and to himself) that Deleuze most objected to. Contrary to Baudrillard, Deleuze had criticized Foucault's hypotheses in a friendly dialogue. But hadn't Deleuze himself said that dialogues were useless, because either both people agreed, and in that case there was no point of dialoguing, or else they disagreed, and there was nothing to expect of an exchange of ideas? In an interview one year later, Foucault still defended pleasure as "an event 'outside the subject' or on the edge of the subject," opposing Deleuze's idea that pleasure would have to be ascribed to a subject.[13]

In his pamphlet, Baudrillard bridges this disagreement swiftly: "For us, the sexual has become strictly the actualization of a desire in a moment of pleasure—all the rest is 'literature.' What an extraordinary crystallization of the orgasmic function, which is itself the materialization of an energetic substance" (*FF*, pp. 24–25). As far as Baudrillard was concerned, the exchange rate between desire and pleasure remained pretty low.

He didn't leave it at that. Drawing a parallel between Foucault's immanent conception of power and Deleuze's notion of desire, Baudrillard raised the stakes further: "Such a coincidence is not

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13. In "Le Gai Savoir II," *op. cit.*, p. 365.

accidental: *it's simply that in Foucault power takes the place of desire...* That is why there is no desire in Foucault: its place is already taken... When power blends into desire and desire blends into power, let's forget them both" (*FF*, pp.17–19). The exchange rate between the two theories now was approaching zero. Both thinkers found this unforgivable.

But why did Baudrillard challenge Foucault instead of Deleuze? Until then, no one had dared to confront Foucault head-on. He was a formidable adversary. Like everyone else, Baudrillard had been fascinated by the power of Foucault's writing. His initial eulogy wasn't merely contrived. He in fact had embraced Foucault's theories, beginning with his own genealogical approach to culture. The "genesis" of simulacra, the "three orders of value" that Baudrillard took pains to differentiate historically: the *natural* law of counterfeit, the *market* law of the industrial simulacrum and the *structural* law of simulation (the genetic code) eloquently registered this impact.[14] This was a "gift" that he received from Foucault, *and why he had to return it to him with a vengeance*. This may sound illogical, or ungrateful, but such is the nature of the symbolic principle at work here. The logic of Mauss' potlatch. Baudrillard's gesture wasn't a Freudian patricide. He had to purge himself of Foucault's crippling influence. Baudrillard becoming another Foucauldian? Impossible. He valued Foucault's work too much to become just another disciple. "To forget Foucault was to do him a service," Baudrillard later explained. "To adulate him was to do him a disservice."[15] David

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14. Jean Baudrillard, "The Orders of Simulacra," in *Simulations*, tr. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philippe Beitchman, New York, Semiotext(e), pp. 83–159. Also *Symbolic Exchange*, pp. 81–159.

15. David Macey, *op. cit*, p. 360. Quoted from *Cool Memories*, Paris, Galilée, 1987, p. 198.

Macey, Foucault's biographer, described this comment as displaying "a certain insight with extraordinary arrogance." But Macey had missed the point. Baudrillard hadn't "forgotten Foucault" to do him a service but to do *himself* a service. Although Baudrillard boldly challenged Foucault, he never persecuted him as his disciples were doing. Beware of disciples, Nietzsche warned. Once again, Baudrillard out-Nietzsched Foucault, even at *Foucault's expense*. What was at stake for Baudrillard was the integrity of his own argument. "For a time," he admitted to me later, "I believed in Foucault's genealogy, but the order of simulation is antinomical to genealogy… If you take this logic to the extreme, what you get is the reabsorption of all genealogy. That's why I believe Foucault was unable to make the leap."[16] *Simulation* was the extermination of Foucault's genealogy, the way Baudrillard *absorbed* all its traces, like the sons' repast in *Totem and Tabou*.

Reversing Foucault

In *Symbolic Exchange*, Baudrillard was still in sync with Foucault. In Foucault's work on madness, he saw a prefiguration of confinements to come: the confinement of children in "the idolized state of infancy," of the old pushed to the fringes of normality, of the poor and under-developed reduced to a subnormal state, of perverts ostracized, of women hystericized, etc., all forming "a folklore of terror… on the basis of an increasingly racist definition of the 'normal human.'" In the new culture of capital, *to die was no longer normal*. Going further, Baudrillard pointed out that "the cemetery

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16. *Infra*, "Forget Baudrillard," pp. 73–74.

no longer exists because modern cities have entirely taken over their function: they are ghost towns, cities of death. If the great operational metropolis is the final form of an entire culture, then, quite simply, ours is a culture of death" (*SE*, 126–27). Baudrillard turned the metropolis itself into a necropolis, into an "accursed" space. But he didn't challenge him for that, only returned Foucault's analysis to Georges Bataille.

Forget Foucault went one step further, actually completely reversed his theses. Baudrillard was fully aware of the impact his pamphlet would have on Foucault, and did not shy away from it. In order to dislodge his system from his own, all Baudrillard needed to do was to follow the spiral of Foucault's thought, as he had done before, but dare him to go to this mysterious space Foucault was reluctant to be occupy. "What interests me," Baudrillard said, "is the mysterious point where he stops and finds nothing more to say."[17]

Paradoxically, Foucault himself had already showed him the way by praising Deleuze's own reversal of Platonism. Deleuze was practicing philosophy, he said, "not as thought, but as theater …" this kind of dramatization, Foucault continued, meant to "displace onself insidiously within it, to descend a notch, to descend to its smallest gestures."[18] Baudrillard did the same thing, but in reverse. He *escalated* Foucault's discourse *up* a notch, and to its *biggest* gestures—"into a wider spiral… the only true spiral, that of its own power" (*FF*, p. 38). Displacing himself *within it*, approving his adversary's hypotheses without reservation, was a far more formidable challenge than simply criticizing him.

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17. *Infra*, "Forget Baudrillard," p. 74.

18. Michel Foucault, "Theatrum philosophicum," in *Aesthetics, Methods, and Epistemology*, Trans. Robert Hurley, New York, The New Press, 1998, p. 367.

Baudrillard is always at his best when challenging an adversary.[19] *Forget Foucault* is a case in point. The essence of his method is *polemical* (from "polemos," war). His goal was not to engage his adversary in a dialogue, but to create a non-dialectical space in which adversaries are locked in a close fight that requires an immediate response—or death. "Challenge alone is without an end since it is indefinitely reversible. It is this reversibility which gives it its prodigious force" (*FF*, p. 56).

Following Marx, the Situationists often played the game of inverting words to bring out the ideology of any discourse. In this "insurrectional style," Guy Debord wrote, "the philosophy of poverty became the poverty of philosophy." Baudrillard's style is far more "reversional" than insurrectional. he strives to bring a speech act to its absolute energy. There is no difference between discourse and the essence of war. Their aim is to destroy, not denounce, the adversary. The art of war consists of an ability to extract what is most important and decisive from a multitude of objects and circumstances. In order to do this, the enemy's center of gravity must be identified right away, the inner spring of its movement, and then pushed to the limit. At this culminating point, the system reverses.

Reading *Symbolic Exchange* makes it easier to grasp what *Forget Foucault* was really trying to achieve. In his pamphlet, Baudrillard demonstrates how it is possible to fuse two disparate intellectual machines—Foucault's strategic inversion of power and sexuality, and Baudrillard's own symbolic reversion of the principle of equivalence. Radicalizing Foucault's twin hypotheses

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19. Otherwise, he may lose some of his sharpness, as could be seen in "Radical Thought." Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, Trans. Ames Hodges, New York, Semiotext(e), 2005, pp.162–177.

was a way of disconnecting them both from their own ends so they would be instantly disintegrated. Vindicating *all* Foucault's hypotheses beyond his wildest dreams, Baudrillard made him more Foucaldian that he himself would have believed possible; a truly *radical* Foucault.

Baudrillard dared Foucault to look back at himself from the perspective of death, as Baudrillard himself was doing. "Ex-termination," for Baudrillard, never was a *term*, any more than the extermination of history was the "end" of history. There was a reason for that: the term wasn't where Baudrillard was going, but the place he was coming from, and had occupied all along. *It was the place of death*.[20] No wonder that, challenged to join Baudrillard there, Foucault remained silent.

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20. In French, "la place du mort" (playing with a Dummy Hand).

Part 1

FORGET FOUCAULT

Forget Foucault

FOUCAULT'S WRITING is perfect in that the very movement of the text gives an admirable account of what it proposes: on one hand, a powerful generating spiral that is no longer a despotic architecture but a filiation *en abyme*, coil and strophe without origin (without catastrophe, either), unfolding ever more widely and rigorously; but on the other hand, an interstitial flowing of power that seeps through the whole porous network of the social, the mental, and of bodies, infinitesimally modulating the technologies of power (where the relations of power and seduction are inextricably entangled). All this reads *directly* in Foucault's discourse (which is *also* a discourse of power). It flows, it invests and saturates the entire space it opens. The smallest qualifiers find their way into the slightest interstices of meaning; clauses and chapters wind into spirals; a magistral art of decentering allows the opening of new spaces (spaces of power and of discourse) which are immediately covered up by the meticulous outpouring of Foucault's writing. There's no vacuum here, no phantasm, no backfiring, but a fluid objectivity, a nonlinear, orbital, and flawless writing. The meaning never exceeds what one says of it; no dizziness, yet it never floats in a text too big for it: no rhetoric either.

In short, Foucault's discourse is a mirror of the powers it describes. It is there that its strength and its seduction lie, and not at all in its "truth index," which is only its leitmotiv: these procedures of truth are of no importance, for Foucault's discourse is no truer than any other. No, its strength and its seduction are in the analysis which unwinds the subtle meanderings of its object, describing it with a tactile and tactical exactness, where seduction feeds analytical force and where language itself gives birth to the operation of new powers. Such also is the operation of myth, right down to the symbolic effectiveness described by Lévi-Strauss. Foucault's is not therefore a discourse of truth but a mythic discourse in the strong sense of the word, and I secretly believe that it has no illusions about the effect of truth it produces. That, by the way, is what is missing in those who follow in Foucault's footsteps and pass right by this mythic arrangement to end up with the truth, nothing but the truth.

THE VERY PERFECTION of this analytical chronicle of power is disturbing. Something tells us—but implicitly, as if seen in a reverse shot of this writing too beautiful to be true—that if it is possible at last to talk with such definitive understanding about power, sexuality, the body, and discipline, even down to their most delicate metamorphoses, it is because at some point *all this is here and now over with*. And because Foucault can only draw such an admirable picture since he works at the confines of an area (maybe a "classical age," of which he would be the last great dinosaur) now in the process of collapsing entirely. Such a configuration lends itself to the most dazzling display of analysis just before its terms have been recalled. "When I speak of time, that's because it's already no

longer there," said Apollinaire. But if Foucault spoke so well of power to us—and let us not forget it, in real objective terms which cover manifold diffractions but nonetheless do not question the objective point of view one has about them, and of power which is pulverized but whose *reality principle* is nonetheless not questioned—only because power is dead? Not merely impossible to locate because of dissemination, but dissolved purely and simply in a manner that still escapes us, dissolved by reversal, cancellation, or made hyperreal through simulation (who knows?). Nonetheless, something happened to power which Foucault cannot retrieve once again from deep within his genealogy: for him the political has no end, but only metamorphoses from the "despotic" to the "disciplinary," and at this level to the "microcellular" according to the same process belonging to the physical and biological sciences. This may constitute enormous progress over the imaginary order of power which dominates us—but nothing has changed concerning the *axiom* of power: it doesn't exceed its shadow, i.e., the smallest definition of its *real* function. Power, then, is still turned toward a reality principle and a very strong truth principle; it is still oriented toward a possible coherence of politics and discourse (power no longer pertains to the despotic order of what is forbidden and of the law, but it still belongs to the objective order of the real). Foucault can thus describe to us the successive spirals of power, the last of which enables him to mark its most minute terminations, although power never ceases being the term, and the question of its extermination can never arise.

And what if Foucault spoke to us so well of sexuality (at last an analytical discourse on sex—or a discourse freed from the pathos of sex—that has the textual clarity of discourses which

precede the discovery of the unconscious and which do not need the "blackmail of the deep" to say what they have to say), what if he spoke so well of sexuality only because its form, this great *production* (that too) of our culture, was, like that of power, in the process of disappearing? Sex, like man, or like the category of the social, may only last for a while. And what if sex's reality effect, which is at the horizon of the discourse on sexuality, also started to fade away radically, giving way to other simulacra and dragging down with it the great referents of desire, the body, and the unconscious—that whole recitative which is so powerful today? Foucault's hypothesis itself suggests how mortal sex is sooner or later. While psychoanalysis seemingly inaugurates the millennium of sex and desire, it is perhaps what orchestrates it in full view before it disappears altogether. In a certain way, psychoanalysis puts an end to the unconscious and desire, just as Marxism put an end to the class struggle, because it hypostatizes them and buries them in their theoretical project. We have at this point reached the *metalanguage* of desire in a discourse on sex that has outreached itself by redoubling the signs of sex so as to mask an indeterminacy and a profound disinvestment—the dominant catchword *sexual* is now equivalent to an inert sexual milieu. It is the same with sex as with politics: "Remember in '68 how many strikes, barricades, speeches and cobblestones it took for people to begin to accept that everything is political. Pornography, as it proliferates and is censured only to come back stronger, will let them see that *everything is sexuality*" (*Art Press*, issue on pornography [1]). There is a double absurdity here (everything is political, everything is sexuality), a parallel absurdity in these two catchwords at the very moment when politics collapses and when sex itself becomes involuted and disappears as a strong referent in the hyperreality of "liberated" sexuality.

If, as Foucault states, the bourgeoisie used sex and sexuality to give itself a glorious body and a prestigious truth in order to pass this on then to the rest of society under the guise of truth and banal destiny, it could just be that this simulacrum slips out of its skin and departs with it. Because he remains within the classic formula of sex, Foucault cannot trace this new spiral of sexual simulation in which sex finds a second existence and takes on the fascination of a lost frame of reference* (and this is nothing but the coherence lent by a given configuration to the *myth* of the unconscious). Even if he fashions sex into a discursive configuration, this has its own internal coherence and, just like power, it has a positive index of refraction. Discourse is discourse, but the operations, strategies, and schemes played out there are real: the hysterical woman, the perverse adult, the masturbating child, the oedipal family. These real, historical devices, machines that have never been tampered with—no more so than the "desiring machines" in their order of libidinal energy—all exist, and the truth is: *they have been true*. But Foucault cannot tell us anything about the simulating machines that double each one of these "original" machines, about the great simulating mechanism which winds all these devices into a wider spiral, because Foucault's gaze is fixed upon the classic "semiurgy" of power and sex. He does not see the frenzied semiurgy that has taken hold of the simulacrum. Maybe this spiral that erases all others is only a new aspect of desire or power, but this is very unlikely because it breaks down all discourse into these terms. Barthes said of Japan: "There, sexuality is

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* It may well be that pornography is there only to reactivate this lost referent in order to prove *a contrario*, by its grotesque hyperrealism, that there is however some *real* sex somewhere.

in sex and nowhere else. In the United States, sexuality is every where except in sex."[2] And what if sex itself is no longer in sex? We are no doubt witnessing, with sexual liberation, pornography, etc., the agony of sexual reason. And Foucault will only have given us the key to it when it no longer means anything. The same goes for *Discipline and Punish*, with its theory of discipline, of the "panoptic" and of "transparence." A magistral but obsolete theory. Such a theory of control by means of a gaze that objectifies, even when it is pulverized into micro-devices, is passé. With the simulation device we are no doubt as far from the strategy of transparence as the latter is from the immediate, symbolic operation of punishment which Foucault himself describes. Once again a spiral is missing here, the spiral in front of which Foucault, oddly enough, comes to a halt right at the threshold of a current revolution of the system which he has never wanted to cross.

ONE COULD SAY a lot about the central thesis of the book: there has never been a repression of sex but on the contrary an injunction against talking about it or voicing it and a compulsion to confess, to express, and to *produce* sex. Repression is only a trap and an alibi to hide assigning an entire culture to the sexual imperative. Supposing we agree with Foucault (note, however, that this assignation need in no way envy good old repression—and what difference does it make whether we say repression or an "induced" mode of speaking? It's only a question of terminology), what would remain of the book's essential idea? Basically this: it substitutes a negative, reactive, and transcendental conception of power which is founded on interdiction and law for a positive, active, and immanent conception, and this is in fact essential. One can

only be struck by the coincidence between this new version of power and the new version of desire proposed by Deleuze and Lyotard: but there, instead of a lack or interdiction, one finds the deployment and the positive dissemination of flows and intensities. Such a coincidence is not accidental: *it's simply that in Foucault power rakes the place of desire.* It is there in the same way as desire in Deleuze and Lyotard: always already there, purged of all negativity, a network, a rhizome, a contiguity diffracted ad infinitum. That is why there is no desire in Foucault: its place is already taken (looking at it the other way round, one way wonder if, in the schizoid and libidinal theories, desire or anything along that line is not the anamorphosis of a certain kind of power remaining under the sign of the same immanence, the same positivity, and the same machinery going every which way. Better yet, one can even wonder if, from one theory to the other, desire and power don't exchange their figure in ceaseless speculation—in mirror games that are for us games of truth).

These are certainly twin theories to their core; they are synchronous and isochronous in their "device" (*dispositif*: a term dear to them), and their facilitation (*frayage: Bahnung*) is the same—this is why they can be interchanged so well (see Deleuze's article on Foucault in *Critique* [3]) and can generate as of today all the by-products ("enjoyment of power," "the desire for capital," etc.) which are exact replicas of the previous generation's by-products "the desire of revolution," "enjoyment of non-power," etc.). For in those days Reichians & Freudo-Marxists and desire & power were under opposite signs; today micro-desire (that of power) and micro-politics (that of desire) literally merge at the libido's mechanical confines: all one has to do is miniaturize. Such is the spiral Foucault suggests: power/ knowledge/pleasure

(he dare not say *desire,* although it is desire, the whole theory of desire, which comes directly into question). Foucault is part of this molecular intertwining which sketches out all of the future's visible hysteria: he has helped establish a systematic notion of power along the same operational lines as desire, just as Deleuze established a notion of desire along the lines of future forms of power. This collusion is too beautiful not to arouse suspicion, but it has in its behalf the quaint innocence of a betrothal. When power blends into desire and desire blends into power, let's forget them both.[4]

As for the hypothesis concerning repression, it's fine to object to it radically, but not on the basis of a simplistic definition. Yet what Foucault rejects is just such a repression of sex intended to channel all forms of energy toward material production. On this basis, it is too easy to say that the proletariat should have been the first class affected by repression, while history shows that the privileged classes first experienced it. In conclusion, the hypothesis concerning repression doesn't hold up. But it is the other hypothesis which is interesting: the hypothesis concerning a repression that originates from much farther away than the horizon of manufacturing and that simultaneously includes the whole horizon of sexuality. Whether we discuss the liberation of productive forces, of energies, or of speaking about sex, it is the same struggle and the same advancement toward an ever more powerful and differentiated socialization. One might as well say that repression in the maximal hypothesis, is never repression OF sex for the benefits of who knows what, but repression THROUGH sex (a grid of discourses, bodies, energies, and institutions imposed through sex, in the name of "the talking sex"). And sex which has been repressed only hides that repression by means of sex.

The production channel leads from work to sex, but only by switching tracks; as we move from political to "libidinal" economy (the last acquisition of '68), we change from a violent and archaic model of socialization (work) to a more subtle and fluid model which is at once more "psychic" and more in touch with the body (the sexual and the libidinal). There is a metamorphosis and a veering away from labor power to drive (*pulsion*), a veering away from a model founded on a system of representations (the famous "ideology") to a model operating on a system of affect (sex being only a kind of anamorphosis of the categorical social imperative). From one discourse to the other—since it really is a question of discourse—there runs the same ultimatum of *pro-duction* in the literal sense of the word. The original sense of "production" is not in fact that of material manufacture; rather, it means to render visible, to cause to appear and be made to appear: *pro-ducere.* Sex is produced as one produces a document, or as an actor is said to appear (*se produire*) on stage. To produce is to force what belongs to another order (that of secrecy and seduction) to materialize. *Seduction* is that which is everywhere and always opposed to *pro-duction*; seduction withdraws something from the visible order and so runs counter to production, whose project is to set everything up in clear view, whether it be an object, a number, or a concept. Let everything be produced, be read, become real, visible, and marked with the sign of effectiveness; let everything be transcribed into force relations, into conceptual systems or into calculable energy; let everything be said, gathered, indexed and registered: this is how sex appears in pornography, but this is more generally the project of our whole culture, whose natural condition is "obscenity." Ours is a culture of "monstration" and demonstration, of "productive" monstrosity (the "confession" so

well analyzed by Foucault is one of its forms). We never find any seduction there—nor in pornography with its immediate production of sexual acts in a frenzied activation of pleasure; we find no seduction in those bodies penetrated by a gaze literally absorbed by the suction of the transparent void. Not a shadow of seduction can be detected in the universe of production, ruled by the transparency principle governing all forces in the order of visible and calculable phenomena: objects, machines, sexual acts, or gross national product.[5]

Pornography is only the paradoxical limit of the sexual, a realistic exacerbation and a mad obsession with the real—this is the "obscene," etymologically speaking and in all senses. But isn't the sexual itself a forced materialization, and isn't the coming of sexuality already part of the Western notion of what is real—the obsession peculiar to our culture with "instancing" and instrumentalizing all things? Just as it is absurd to separate in other cultures the religious, the economic, the political, the juridical, and even the social and other phantasmagorical categories, for the reason that they do not occur there, and because these concepts are like so many venereal diseases with which we infect them in order to "understand" them better, so it is also absurd to give autonomy to the sexual as "instance" and as an irreducible given to which all other "givens" can be reduced. We need to do a critique of sexual Reason, or rather a genealogy of sexual Reason, as Nietzsche has done a genealogy of Morals—because this is our new moral system. One could say of sexuality as of death: "It is a habit to which consciousness has not long been accustomed."

We do not understand, or we vaguely sympathize with, those cultures for which the sexual act has no finality in itself and for which sexuality does not have the deadly seriousness of an energy

to be freed, a forced ejaculation, a production at all cost, or of a hygienic reckoning of the body. These are cultures which maintain long processes of seduction and sensuousness in which sexuality is one service among others, a long procedure of gifts and counter-gifts; lovemaking is only the eventual outcome of this reciprocity measured to the rhythm of an ineluctable ritual. For us, this no longer has any meaning: for us, *the sexual has become strictly the actualization of a desire in a moment of pleasure*—all the rest is "literature." What an extraordinary crystallization of the orgastic function, which is itself the materialization of an energetic substance.

Ours is a culture of premature ejaculation. More and more, all seduction, all manner of seduction (which is itself a highly *ritualized* process), disappears behind the *naturalized* sexual imperative calling for the immediate realization of a desire. Our center of gravity has in fact shifted toward an unconscious and libidinal economy which only leaves room for the total naturalization of a desire bound either to fateful drives or to pure and simple mechanical operation, but above all to the imaginary order of repression and liberation.

Nowadays, one no longer says: "You've got a soul and you must save it," but: "You've got a sexual nature, and you must find out how to use it well."

"You've got an unconscious, and you must learn how to liberate it."

"You've got a body, and you must know how to enjoy it."

"You've got a libido, and you must know how to spend it," etc., etc. This compulsion toward liquidity, flow, and an accelerated circulation of what is psychic, sexual, or pertaining to the body is the exact replica of the force which rules market value: capital must

circulate; gravity and any fixed point must disappear; the chain of investments and reinvestments must never stop; value must radiate endlessly and in every direction. This is the form itself which the current realization of value takes. It is the form of capital, and sexuality as a catchword and a *model* is the way it appears at the level of bodies.

Besides, the body to which we constantly refer has no other reality than that of the sexual and productive model. It is capital which gives birth in the same movement to the energetic of labor power and to the body we dream of today as the locus of desire and the unconscious. This is the body which serves as a sanctuary for psychic energy and drives and which, dominated by these drives and haunted by primary processes, has itself become primary process—and thus an anti-body, the ultimate revolutionary referent. Both are simultaneously conceived in repression, and their apparent antagonism is yet another effect of repression. Thus, to rediscover in the secret of bodies an unbound "libidinal" energy which would be opposed to the bound energy of productive bodies, and to rediscover a phantasmal and instinctual truth of the body in desire, is still only to unearth the psychic metaphor of capital.

This is the nature of desire and of the unconscious: the trash heap of political economy and the psychic metaphor of capital. And sexual jurisdiction is the ideal means, in a fantastic extension of the jurisdiction governing private property, for assigning to each individual the management of a certain capital: psychic capital, libidinal capital, sexual capital, unconscious capital. And each individual will be accountable to himself for his capital, under the sign of his own liberation.

This is what Foucault tells us (in spite of himself): nothing functions with repression (*répression*), everything functions with

production; nothing functions with repression (*refoulement*), everything functions with liberation. But it is the *same thing*. Any form of liberation is fomented by repression: the liberation of productive forces is like that of desire; the liberation of bodies is like that of women's liberation, etc. There is no exception to the logic of liberation: any force or any liberated form of speech constitutes one more turn in the spiral of power. This is how "sexual liberation" accomplishes a miracle by uniting in the same revolutionary ideal the two major effects of repression, liberation and sexuality.

Historically, this process has been building up for at least two centuries, but today it is in full bloom with the blessing of psychoanalysis—just as political economy and production have only made great strides with Marx's sanction and blessing. It is this conjecture which dominates us completely today, even through the "radical" contestation of Marx and psychoanalysis.*

It is in this way that the purified axioms of Marxism and psychoanalysis converge in today's only "revolutionary" catchword—that of the "productivity" of "desire." The "desiring machine" only fulfills, in one single movement, the positive destiny

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* Because it is a partial critique, the *political* critique of Marx against the bureaucratic perversion of the revolution by revolutionary parties and against the economistic infrastructural perversion of the class struggle, etc., amounts to generalizing the axiomatic of production (productivity regarded as a discourse of total reference). This is Marxism's assumption in its purest form.

Likewise, because it is only partial, the *oedipal* critique of psychoanalysis (Deleuze, etc.) against the perversion of desire by the signifier, the law, castration, and the oedipal model only glorifies the axiomatic of desire and of the unconscious in its purest form.

of Marxism and psychoanalysis. They at last come together under less naïve auspices than Reich's, still too strongly marked by the Oedipus complex, the proletariat, repression, and class struggle. Reich had aimed too soon at the synthesis of two disciplines that were both historical and psychological and that were still cluttered with cumbersome elements: his mixture is archaic and his interpretation does not hold up; the times were not yet ready. But today, on the basis of a productivity cleansed of its contradictions, its historical objectives and its *determinations* and of a libido cleansed in its own way (of the Oedipus complex, repression, and of its too-genital, too familial, *determinations*) the collusion and synthesis may finally be accomplished to each other's benefit: the mirror of production and that of desire will be able to refract each other endlessly. The category of the sexual and sexual discourse were born in the same way that the category of the clinical and the clinical gaze came into being—*where there was nothing before* except uncontrolled, senseless, unstable, or highly ritualized forms. And where there was therefore *no repression either*, that leitmotiv by which we evaluate all earlier societies much more so than ours; we condemn them for being primitive from the technological point of view; these were repressed, non-"liberated" societies which did not even know of the unconscious. Psychoanalysis came to clear the way for sex by telling what was hidden—how incredible is the racism of truth, the evangelical racism of psychoanalysis; everything changes with the coming of the Word. If the question remains unsettled for our culture (repression or not), it is nonetheless without ambiguity for the others: they know neither repression nor the unconscious because they do not know the category of the sexual. *We* act as if the sexual were "repressed" wherever it does not appear in its own right: this is our way of saving sex through the

"sex principle." It is our moral system (psychic and psychoanalytic) which remains hidden behind the hypothesis of repression and which governs our blindness. To talk about sexuality, "repressed" or not, "sublimated" or not, in feudal, rural, and primitive societies is a sign of utter foolishness (like reinterpreting religion, *ne varietur*, as ideology and mystification). And on that basis, then, it becomes possible again to say with Foucault: *there is not and there has never been any repression in our culture either*—not, however, according to his meaning, but in the sense that there has never truly been any sexuality. Sexuality, like political economy, is only *montage* (all of whose twists and turns Foucault analyzes); sexuality as we hear about it and as it "is spoken," even as the "id speaks," is only a simulacrum which experience has forever crossed up, baffled, and surpassed, as in any system. The coherence and transparence of *homo sexualis* has never had more reality than that of *homo oeconomicus*.

A long process simultaneously establishes the psychic, the sexual, and also the "other scene" of fantasy and the unconscious, as well as the energy to be produced there. Such psychic energy is but a direct effect of the "scenic" hallucination of repression through which energy is hallucinated as sexual substance; it will then become metaphorized and metonymized according to the various topical, economical, etc., instances and according to modalities of secondary, tertiary, etc., repression: what a marvelous edifice on the part of psychoanalysis, the loveliest hallucination of the world unseen, as Nietzsche would say. What an extraordinary effectiveness this model of energetic and scenic simulation possesses; what an extraordinary theoretical psychodrama is presented in this *mise-en-scène* of the psyche, this scenario of sex as an instance, as an eternal reality (as elsewhere others have hypostatized production

into a generic dimension or driving energy). What does it matter whether the economic, the biological, or the psychic bears the cost of this *mise-en-scène*—or whether we refer to the "scene" or to the "other scene"—it is the scenario that counts, it is psychoanalysis in its entirety as a model of simulation which must be questioned.

In this production-at-all-costs that is the modern sacrament of sex, there is such terrorism in the project of liquidation that one does not see why, unless it's for the beauty of the paradox, anyone would refuse to see repression there. Or could it be because this is too weak? Foucault doesn't want to talk about repression: but what else is that slow, brutal infection of the mind through sex, whose only equivalent in the past was infection through the soul (see Nietzsche—the infection through sex is nothing anyway but the historical and mental reversal of the infection through the soul under the sign of materialist parousia!)

But it is really useless to argue about the terms. One can say either way: speaking is the primary injunction and repression only a detour (in this sense, labor and exploitation are also only a detour and the alibi for something else more fundamental: no argument here), or repression comes first and speech is only a more modern variant of it ("repressive desublimation"). Basically, both hypotheses don't change much of anything. What is disturbing in the first hypothesis (Foucault's) is that if there has been repression somewhere, or at least the effect of repression (and this can hardly be denied), then there is no way to explain it. Why is the imaginary of repression necessary for the balance of powers, if these live on the induction, production, and extortion of speech? On the other hand, one sees better why speech (a metastable system) would come after repression, which is only an unstable power system.

If sex exists solely when it is spoken and discoursed about and when it is confessed, what was there before we spoke about it? What break establishes this discourse on sex, and in relationship to what? We see what new powers are organized around it, but what peripeteia of power instigates it? What does it neutralize, or settle, or put to an end* (otherwise who can ever pretend to end it, as Foucault states on p. 157, "to break away from the agency of sex"[6])? Wherever we turn, it is not an innocent undertaking to "give meaning to sex"; power starts off from something (otherwise there would not even be those resistances noted on p. 96), something like an exclusion, a division, or a denial, and on that basis power can "produce something real" or produce *the* real. It is only from this point on that we can conceive of a new peripeteia of power—a catastrophic one this time—where power no longer succeeds in producing the real, in reproducing itself as real, or in opening new spaces to the reality principle, and where it falls into the hyperreal and vanishes: *this is the end of power*, the end of the strategy of the real.

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*According to Foucault, this break puts an end to "the body and its pleasure," the innocence of libertinage, and the *ars erotica* (of which we still retain a few terms, such as seduction, charm, sensuality, *jouissance*, "pleasure" itself—we no longer dare talk about voluptuousness—terms which sex and psychoanalysis have succeeded neither in annexing nor in discrediting with their discourse). I think it puts an end to something more radical, a configuration where not only sex and desire but even the body and pleasure are not specified as such, just as the discourse of production puts an end to a regime where not only exchange value but also use value do not exist. Use value is the ultimate alibi, in sex as well as in production. And I'm afraid that in Foucault "pleasures" are still opposed to the "exchange value of the sexual" only insofar as they constitute the use value of the body.

For Foucault, the crisis or peripeteia of power does not even exist; there is only modulation, capillarity, a "micro-physical" segmentation of power as Deleuze says. And this is true: for Foucault, power operates right away like Monod's genetic code, according to a diagram of dispersion and command (DNA), and according to a *teleonomical* order. Down with theological power, long live teleonomical power! Teleonomy is the end of all final determination and of all dialectic: it is the kind of generative inscription of the code that one expects—an immanent, ineluctable, and always positive inscription that yields only to infinitesimal mutations. If we look closely, power according to Foucault strangely resembles "this conception of social space which is as new as the recent conception of physical and mathematical spaces," as Deleuze says now that he has suddenly been blinded by the benefits of science. It is precisely this collusion that we must denounce, or laugh about. Everyone today wallows in the molecular as they do in the revolutionary. However, until further notice—and this could be the only one—the *true* molecule is not that of the revolutionaries; it is Monod's molecule of the genetic code and the "complex spirals of DNA." We should not, however, rediscover as an apparatus (*dispositif*) of desire what the cyberneticists have described as a matrix of code and of control.[7]

We see what benefit there is over the old finalist, dialectical, or repressive theories in supposing a total positivity, a teleonomy and a microphysics of power, but we must also see what we are getting into: a strange complicity with cybernetics which challenge precisely the same earlier schemas (Foucault does not, for that matter, hide his affinity with Jacob, Monod, and recently Jacques Ruffié, *De la Biologie à la Culture* [Paris: Flammarion, 1976]). The same can be said of Deleuze's molecular topology of desire, whose flows

and connections will soon converge if they have not already done so with genetic simulations, microcellular drifts, and the random facilitations (*frayages*) of code manipulators. In the *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986) of Deleuze-Guattari, the transcendental Law such as it is found in *The Castle* is opposed to the immanence of desire in the adjacent offices. How can we fail to see that the Law of the Castle has its "rhizomes" in the corridors and the offices—the "bar" or the break constituted by the law has simply been geared down ad infinitum in cellular and molecular succession. Desire is therefore only the molecular version of the Law. And what a strange coincidence to find schemas of desire and schemas of control everywhere. It is a spiral of power, of desire, and of the molecule which is now bringing us openly toward the final peripeteia of absolute control. Beware of the molecular!

This "veering away" in Foucault's writing occurs progressively since *Discipline and Punish*, going against *Madness and Civilization* and the whole original ordering of his genealogy. Why wouldn't sex, like madness, have gone through a confinement phase in which the terms of certain forms of reason and a dominant moral system were fomented before sex and madness, according to the logic of exclusion, once more became discourses of reference? Sex once more becomes the catchword of a new moral system; madness becomes the paradoxical form of reason for a society too long haunted by its absence and dedicated this time to its (normalized) cult under the sign of its own liberation. Such is also the trajectory of sex in the curved space of discrimination and repression where a *mise-en-scène* is installed as a long-term strategy to produce sex later as a new rule of the game. Repression or the *secret* is the locus of an imaginary inscription on whose basis

madness or sex will subsequently become exchangeable as value.* Everywhere, as Foucault himself has so well demonstrated, discrimination is the violent founding act of Reason—why wouldn't the same hold true of sexual reason?

This time we are in a full universe, a space radiating with power but also cracked, like a shattered windshield still holding together. However, this "power" remains a mystery—starting from despotic centrality, it becomes by the halfway point a "multiplicity of force relations" (but what is a force relation without a force resultant? It's a bit like Pere Ubu's polyhedra that set off in all directions like crabs) and it culminates, at the extreme pole, with *resistances* (what a divine surprise on pp. 95–96!) so small and so tenuous that, literally speaking, atoms of power and atoms of resistance merge at this microscopic level. The same fragment of gesture, body, gaze, and discourse encloses both the positive electricity of power and the negative electricity of resistance (and we wonder what the origin of that resistance might turn out to be; nothing in the book prepares us for it except the allusion to some inextricable "force relations." But since we may ask ourselves exactly the same question concerning power, a balance is achieved in a discourse which in essence staunchly describes the only true spiral, that of its own power).

This is not an objection. It is a good thing that terms lose their meaning at the limits of the text (they don't do it enough).** Foucault makes the term *sex* and its true principle ("the fictive

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* Sexual discourse is invented through repression, for repression speaks about sex better than any other form of discourse. Through repression (and only through repression), sex takes on reality and intensity because only confinement gives it the stature of myth. Its liberation is the beginning of its end.

point of sex") lose their meaning; the analytics of power is not pushed to its conclusion at the point where power cancels itself out or where it has never been.

As economic reference loses its strength, either the reference of desire or that of power becomes preponderant. The reference of desire, born in psychoanalysis, comes to maturity in Deleuzian anti-psychoanalysis under the form of a shattered molecular desire. The reference of power, which has a long history, is discussed again today by Foucault at the level of dispersed, interstitial power as a grid of bodies and of the ramiform pattern of controls. Foucault at least economizes desire, as well as history (but being very prudent, he does not deny them), yet everything still comes back to *some kind* of power—without having that notion reduced and expurgated—just as with Deleuze everything comes back to *some kind* of desire, or with Lyorard to *some kind* of intensity: these are shattered notions, yet they remain miraculously intact in their current acceptance. Desire and intensity remain *force*/notions; with Foucault power remains, despite being pulverized, a *structural* and a polar notion with a perfect genealogy and an inexplicable presence, a notion which cannot be surpassed in spite of a sort of latent denunciation, a notion which is whole in each of its points or microscopic dots. It is hard to see how it could be reversed (we find the same aporia in Deleuze, where desire's reversion into its own repression is inexplicable). Power no longer has a *coup de*

** This is what a theory should be at best, rather than a statement of some truth, or above all a "breaking away from the agency of sex" this is wishful thinking; and besides, if there is no repression, what does this emancipation mean? But we can bet that a new militant generation will rise over this horizon, brandishing "new procedures of truth."

force—there is simply nothing else either on this side of it or beyond it (the passage from the "molar" or the "molecular" is for Deleuze still a *revolution* of desire, but for Foucault it is an anamorphosis of power). Only now Foucault does not see that power is dying (even infinitesimal power), that it is not just pulverized by pulverulent, that it is undermined by a reversal and tormented by a reversibility and a death which cannot appear in the genealogical process alone.

With Foucault, we always brush against political determination in its last instance. One form dominates and is diffracted into the models characteristic of the prison, the military, the asylum, and disciplinary action. This form is no longer rooted in ordinary relations of production (these, on the contrary are modeled after it); this form seems to find its procedural system within itself—and this represents enormous progress over the illusion of *establishing* power in a substance of production or of desire. Foucault unmasks all the final or causal illusions concerning power, but he does not tell us anything *concerning the simulacrum of power itself*. Power is an irreversible principle of organization because it fabricates the real (always more and more of the real), effecting a quadrature, nomenclature, and dictature without appeal; nowhere does it cancel itself out, become entangled in itself, or mingle with death. In this sense, even if it has no finality and no last judgment, power returns to its own identity again as a *final principle*: it is the last term, the irreducible web, the last tale that can be told; it is what structures the indeterminate equation of the word.

According to Foucault, this is the *come-on that power offers*, and it is not simply a discursive trap. What Foucault does not see is that power is never there and that its institution, like the institution

of spatial perspective versus "real" space in the Renaissance, is only a simulation of perspective—it is no more reality than economic accumulation—and what a tremendous trap that is. Whether of time, value, the subject, etc., the axiom and the myth of a real or possible accumulation govern us everywhere, although we *know* that nothing is ever amassed and that stockpiles are self-consuming, like modern megalopolis, or like overloaded memories. Any attempt at accumulation is ruined in advance by the void.* Something in us disaccumulates unto death, undoes, destroys, liquidates, and disconnects so that we can resist the pressure of the real, and live. Something at the bottom of the whole system of production *resists the infinite expansion of production*—otherwise, we would all be already buried. There is something in power that resists as well, and we see no difference here between those who enforce it and those who submit to it: this distinction has become meaningless, not because the roles are interchangeable but because power is *in its form reversible*, because on one side and the other something holds out against the unilateral exercise and the infinite expansion of power, just as elsewhere against the infinite expansion of production. This resistance is not a "desire" it is what causes power to come undone in exact proportion to its logical and irreversible extension. And it's taking place everywhere today.

In fact, the whole analysis of power needs to be reconsidered. To have power or not, to take it or lose it, to incarnate it or to challenge it: if this were power, it would not even exist. Foucault

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*It is this impossible accumulation which entails the equal impossibility of repression, for repression is only the inverse figure of accumulation—from the other side of the "bar."

tells us something else; power is something that functions; "…power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (*The History of Sexuality*, p. 93). Neither central, nor unilateral, nor dominant, power is distributional; like a vector, it operates through relays and transmissions. Because it is an immanent, unlimited field of forces, we still do not understand what power runs into and against what it stumbles since it is expansion, pure magnetization. However, if power were this magnetic infiltration ad infinitum of the social field, it would long ago have ceased meeting with any resistance. Inversely, if it were the one-sidedness of an act of submission, as in the traditional "optic," it would long ago have been overthrown everywhere. It would have collapsed under the pressure of antagonistic forces. Yet this has never happened, apart from a few "historical" exceptions. For "materialist" thinking, this can only appear to be an internally insoluble problem: why don't "dominated" masses immediately overthrow power? Why fascism? Against this unilateral theory (but we understand why it survives, particularly among "revolutionaries"—they would really like power for themselves), against this native vision, but also against Foucault's functional vision in terms of relays and transmissions, we must say that *power is something that is exchanged*. Not in the economical sense, but in the sense that power is executed according to a reversible cycle of seduction, challenge, and ruse (neither axis nor indefinite relay, but a cycle). And if power cannot be exchanged in this sense, it simply disappears. We must say that power *seduces*, but not in the vulgar sense of a complicit form of desire on the part of those who are dominated—this comes down to basing it in the desire of others,

which is really going overboard in taking people for idiots—no, power seduces by that reversibility which haunts it, and upon which a minimal symbolic cycle is set up. Dominators and dominated exist no more than victims and executioners. (While exploiters and exploited do in fact exist, they are on different sides because there is no reversibility in production, which is precisely the point: nothing essential happens at that level.) With power there are no antagonistic positions: it is carried out according to a cycle of seduction.

The one-sidedness of a force relation never exists, a one-sidedness upon which a power "structure" might be established, or a form of "reality" for power and its perpetual movement, which is linear and final in the traditional vision but radiating and spiraling in Foucault. Unilateral or segmentary: this is the dream of power imposed on us by reason. But nothing yearns to be that way; everything seeks its own death, including power. Or rather—but this is the same thing—everything wants to be exchanged, reversed, or abolished in a cycle (this is in fact why neither repression nor the unconscious exists: reversibility is always already there). *That alone is what seduces deep down*, and that alone constitutes pure *jouissance*, while power only satisfies a particular form of hegemonic logic belonging to reason. Seduction is elsewhere.

Seduction is stronger than power because it is a reversible and mortal process, while power wants to be irreversible like value, as well as cumulative and immortal like value. Power shares all the illusions of the real and of production; it wants to belong to the order of the real and so falls over into the imaginary and into self superstition (helped by theories which analyze it even if only to challenge it). Seduction, however, does not partake of the real order. It never belongs to the order of force or to force relations.

It is precisely for this reason that seduction envelops the whole *real* process of power, as well as the whole *real* order of production, with this never-ending reversibility and disaccumulation—without which *neither power nor production would even exist.*

Behind power, or at the very heart of power and of production, there is a void which gives them today a last glimmer of reality. Without that which reverses them, cancels them, and seduces them, they would never have attained reality.

Besides, the real has never interested anyone. It is the locus of disenchantment par excellence, the locus of simulacrum of accumulation against death. Nothing could be worse. It is the imaginary catastrophe standing behind them that sometimes makes reality and the truth fascinating. Do you think that power, economy, sex—all the *real's* big numbers—would have stood up one single instant without a fascination to support them which originates precisely in the inversed mirror where they are reflected and continually reversed, and where their imaginary catastrophe generates a tangible and immanent gratification?

Today especially, the real is no more than a stockpile of dead matter, dead bodies, and dead language. It still makes us feel secure today to evaluate this *stock of what is real* (let's not talk about energy: the ecological complaint hides the fact that it is not material energy which is disappearing on the species' horizon but the *energy of the real*, the reality of the real and of every serious possibility, capitalistic or revolutionary, of managing the real). If the horizon of production has vanished, then the horizon of speech, sexuality, or desire can still carry on; there will always be something to liberate, to enjoy, and to exchange with others through words: now that's real, that's substantial, that's prospective stock. That's power.

Not so, unfortunately. Not for long, that is. This sort of thing consumes itself as it goes along. We have made, and have wanted to make, an irreversible agency (*instance*) out of both sex and power; and out of desire we have made a force or irreversible energy (a *stock* of energy, needless to say, since desire is never far from capital). For we give meaning, following our use of the imaginary, only to what is irreversible; accumulation, progress, growth, production, value, power, and desire itself are all irreversible processes—inject the slightest dose of reversibility into our economical, political, institutional, or sexual machinery (*dispositif*) and everything collapses at once. This is what endows sexuality today with this mythic authority over bodies and hearts. But it is also what makes it fragile, like the whole structure of production.

Seduction is stronger than production. It is stronger than sexuality and must never be confused with it. It is not an internal process of sexuality, although it is generally reduced to that. It is a circular and reversible process of challenge, one-upmanship, and death. The sexual, on the contrary, is the form of seduction that has been reduced and restricted to the energetic terms of desire.

What we need to analyze is the intrication of the process of seduction with the process of production and power and the irruption of a minimum of reversibility in every irreversible process, secretly ruining and dismantling it while simultaneously insuring that minimal continuum of pleasure moving across it and without which it would be nothing. And we must keep in mind that production everywhere and always seeks to exterminate seduction in order to establish itself over the single economy governing force relations; we must also keep in mind that sex or its production seeks everywhere to exterminate seduction in order to establish itself over the single economy governing relations of desire.

When Jesus arose from the dead, he became a Zombie.

— Graffito, Watts, Los Angeles

The Messiah will only come when he will no longer be necessary. He will come one day after his advent. He will not come on the day of the Last Judgment, but on the day after.

— Kafka

THUS WILL THEY AWAIT THE MESSIAH, not only on the day after, but on all the following days, even though he was already there. Or in other words: God was already dead long before they knew it, just as light-years separate the same event from one star to the next, thereby separating advent from event.

Thus will they always be one Revolution late. Or rather: they will await the Revolution to the very day, even though it has already been accomplished. And when it happens, it will be because it is no longer necessary; it will be nothing more than the sign of what has already occurred.

Are the Messiah and the Revolution so insignificant that they must always arrive late, like a projected shadow or a reality effect

after the fact, whereas things have never needed the Messiah or a Revolution in order to take place?

But in the end the Revolution signifies only this: that it has already taken place and that it had a meaning just before, one day before, but not anymore now. When it comes, it is to hide the fact that it is no longer meaningful.

In fact, the revolution has already taken place. Neither the bourgeois revolution nor the communist revolution: just the revolution. This means that an entire cycle is ending, and they have not noticed it. And they will play the game of linear revolution, whereas it has already curved upon itself to produce its simulacrum, like stucco angels whose extremities join in a curved mirror.

All things come to an end in their redoubled simulation—a sign that a cycle is completed. When the reality effect, like the useless day-after Messiah, starts uselessly duplicating the course of things, it is the sign that a cycle is ending in an interplay of simulacra where everything is replayed before death, at which point everything falls over far behind the horizon of truth.

It is useless therefore to run after power or to discourse about it *ad infinitum* since from now on it also partakes of the sacred horizon of appearances and is also there only to hide the fact that it no longer exists, or rather to indicate that since the apogee of the political has been crossed, the other side of the cycle is now starting in which power reverts into its own simulacrum.

Power is no more held than a secret is extracted, for the secrecy of power is the same as that of the secret: it does not exist. On the other side of the cycle—the side of the decline of the real—only the *mise-en-scène* of the secret, or of power, is operational. But this is the sign that the substance of power, after a

ceaseless expansion of several centuries, is brutally exploding and that the sphere of power is in the process of contracting from a star of first magnitude to a red dwarf, and then to a black hole absorbing all the substance of the real and all the surrounding energies, now transmuted at once into a single pure sign—the sign of the social whose density crushes us.

NEITHER AN AGENCY (*instance*), a structure, a substance, nor in fact a force relation, power is a challenge. From the power puppet of primitive societies which talks but has nothing to say to the current form of power which is there only to exorcise the absence of power, a whole cycle has been covered which is one of a double challenge, the challenge of power against all of society and the challenge against those who hold power. This is the secret history both of power and its catastrophe.

Let us consider the *real* history of capital. All materialist critical thought is only the attempt to *stop* capital, to freeze it in the moment of its economic and political rationality. Capital's "mirror phase," lulled by the sirens of dialectics. Of course at this point materialist thinking also freezes everything that resists it at this one phase. Fortunately, capital does not remain trapped in this model but goes beyond it in its irrational movement to leave standing there an example of materialist thought curled back upon its nostalgic dialectics and its already lost idea of the revolution. Such thought was in essence only a rather superficial moment of theory, but above all it operated like a brake in attempting to neutralize, with a well-tempered *socialité* and an ideal social transparence, the deep rooted opposition and *deadly challenge to the social itself.*

Today the extremes finally come face to face, once the conservative obstacle of critical thought has been removed. Not only do social *forces* clash (however dominated by one single great model of socialization), but *forms* come into opposition as well—the forms of capital and of sacrifice, of value and of challenge—*with the death of the social at stake*. The social itself must be considered a model of simulation and a form to be overthrown since it is a strategic form of value brutally positioned by capital and then idealized by critical thought. And we still do not know what it is that forever has fought against it and that irresistibly destroys it today.

All forms of power have endeavored to camouflage this fundamental challenge in the form of force relations such as dominator/dominated and exploiter/exploited, thereby channeling all resistance into a frontal relation (even reduced to microstrategies, this conception still dominates in Foucault: the puzzle of guerilla warfare has simply been substituted for the chessboard of classical battle). For in terms of force relations, power always wins, even if it changes hands as revolutions come and go.

But it is doubtful if anyone has ever thought it possible to exorcise power by force. Rather, each person knows deep down that any form of power is a personal challenge, a challenge to the death, and one that can only be answered by a counterchallenge to break the logic of power or, even better, to enclose it in a circular logic. Such is the nature of this counterchallenge—nonpolitical, nondialectical, and nonstrategic—but whose strength throughout history has nonetheless been incalculable: this is the challenge which dares those who hold power to exercise it to the limit and which can only spell death for those who are dominated. A challenge to power to be power, power of the sort that is total, irreversible, without scruple, and with no limit to its violence. No

form of power dares go that far (to the point where in any case it too would be destroyed). And so it is in facing this unanswerable challenge that power starts to break up.

There was a time when power allowed itself to be sacrificed according to the rules of this symbolic game from which it cannot escape. A time when power possessed the ephemeral and mortal quality of what had to be sacrificed. Ever since it has sought to escape that rule, or has ceased being a *symbolic* power in order to become a *political* power and a strategy of social domination, the symbolic challenge has not stopped haunting power in the political sense, nor has it stopped undoing the truth of the political. Now that it has been struck by that challenge, the entire substance of the political is crumbling. We are at the point where no one exercises power or wants it anymore, not because of some historical or temperamental weakness but because its secret has been lost, and no one wants to take up the challenge any longer. How true it is, then, that power need only be enclosed within power for it to burst.

Against that "strategy" which is not a strategy, power has defended itself in every possible way (this is exactly what constitutes its practice): by being democratized, liberalized, vulgarized, and, more recently, decentralized and deterritorialized, etc. But whereas force relations become easily trapped and de-energized by these tricks of the political, the reverse challenge, with its ineluctable simplicity, comes to an end only with power.

PEOPLE ALWAYS REASON in terms of strategies and force relations; they don't see the desperate effort of the oppressed to escape oppression or uproot power. They never measure the extraordinary

force of the challenge because this challenge is unremitting and invisible (although that force can manifest itself in large-scale acts, but acts "without objective, without duration, and without future"). The challenge is hopeless—but then hope is a weak value, and history itself is a value degraded through time and distorted between its end and its means. All the stakes of history are eluctable, negotiable, and *dialectic*. Challenge is the opposite of *dialogue*: it creates a nondialectic, ineluctable space. It is neither a means nor an end: it opposes its own space to political space. It knows neither middle-range nor long-term; its only term is the immediacy of a response or of death. Everything linear, including history, has an end; challenge alone is without end since it is indefinitely reversible. And it is this reversibility which gives it its prodigious force.*

No one has ever seriously considered this other, nonpolitical side of power, the side of its symbolic reversal. However, because it lacks definition by the void, this oppositional challenge has always been at stake and has overcome in the end power's political definition as central, legislative, or police power. It is also involved at the current stage, where power only appears as a sort of curvature

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* This is no doubt the same reversibility which the category of the feminine has exerted on the masculine throughout the entire course of our culture's sexual history: thus the challenge which the feminine offers the masculine of taking its pleasure (*jouissance*) alone, and of alone exercising the right to pleasure and sex. Women's right to reserve sex and to deny pleasure, their constant reversals, and their continuous refraction of sexual power into the void have always exerted an incalculable pressure, with no possibility of response from the "strong" masculine side except through a headlong flight into phallocracy. Today phallocracy is crumbling under this very challenge, taking with it all forms of traditional sexuality—and not at all due to social pressure from any sort of feminine liberation.

of social space, or the summation of scattered particles, or the branching out of random elements "in cluster" (any term from microphysics or computer theory can be transferred today into power, as well as into desire). This is a stage of power, *á la Foucault*, the conductor, inductor, and strategist of speech. But the turnaround Foucault manages from power's repressive centrality to its shifting positivity is only a peripeteia. We stay effectively within political discourse—"we never get out of it," says Foucault—although we need precisely to grasp the radical lack of definition in the notion of the political, its lack of existence, its simulation, and what from that point on sends the mirror of the void back to power. In effect, we need a symbolic violence more powerful than any political violence.

Let us consider now the *real* history of class struggle whose only moments were those when the dominated class fought on the basis of its self-denial "as such," on the basis of the sole fact that it amounted to nothing. Marx had told it that it should be abolished one day, but this was still a political perspective. When the class itself, or a fraction of it, prefers to act as a radical non-class, or as the lack of existence of a class, i.e., to act out its own death right away within the explosive structure of capital, when it chooses to implode suddenly instead of seeking political expansion and class hegemony, then the result is June '48, the Commune, or May '68. The secret of the void lies here, in the incalculable force of the implosion (contrary to our imaginary concept of revolutionary explosion)—think of the Latin Quarter on the afternoon of May 3.

Power did not always consider itself as power, and the secret of the great politicians was to know that power *does not exist*. To know that it is only a perspectival space of simulation, as was the pictorial Renaissance, and that if power seduces, it is precisely—

what the naive realists of politics will never understand—because it is simulacrum and because it undergoes a metamorphosis into signs and is invented on the basis of signs. (This is why *parody*, the reversal of signs or their hyperextension, can touch power more deeply than any force relation.) This secret of power's lack of existence that the great politicians shared also belongs to the great bankers, who know that money is nothing, that money does not exist; and it also belonged to the great theologians and inquisitors who knew that God does not exist, that God is dead. This gives them incredible superiority. Power is truly sovereign when it grasps this secret and confronts itself with that very challenge. When it ceases to do so and pretends to find a truth, a substance, or a representation (in the will of the people, etc.), then it loses its sovereignty, allowing others to hurl back the challenge of its own life or death, until it dies in at the hands of that infatuation with itself, that imaginary concept of itself, and that superstitious belief in itself as a substance; it dies as well when it fails to recognize (*méconnaissance*) itself as a void, or as something reversible in death. At one time leaders were killed when they lost that secret.

WHEN ONE TALKS SO MUCH about power, it's because it can no longer be found anywhere. The same goes for God: the stage in which he was everywhere came just before the one in which he was dead. Even the death of God no doubt came before the stage in which he was everywhere. The same goes for power, and if one speaks about it so much and so well, that's because it is deceased, a ghost, a puppet; such is also the meaning of Kafka's words: the Messiah of the day after is only a God resuscitated from among the dead, a zombie. The finesse and the microscopic nature of the analysis

are themselves a "nostalgia effect." And so everywhere we see power coupled with seduction (it's almost obligatory these days) in order to give it a second existence. Power gets its fresh blood from desire. And it's no longer anything more than a sort of "desire effect" at the confines of the social, or a sort of "strategy effect" at the confines of history. It is here also that "the" powers of Foucault come into play: grafted upon the privacy of bodies, the tracing of discourses, the facilitation of gestures, in a more insinuating, more subtle, and more discursive strategy which there too takes away power from history and brings it nearer to seduction.

This universal fascination with power in its exercise and its theory is so intense because it is a fascination with a *dead* power characterized by a simultaneous "resurrection effect," in an obscene and parodic mode, of all the forms of power already seen—exactly like sex in pornography. The imminence of the death of all the great referents (religious, sexual, political, etc.) is expressed by exacerbating the forms of violence and representation that characterized them. There is no doubt that fascism, for example, is the first obscene and pornographic form of a desperate "revival" of political power. As the violent reactivation of a form of power that despairs of its rational foundations (the form of representation that was emptied of its meaning during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), as the violent reactivation of the social in a society that despairs of its own rational and contractual foundation, fascism is nevertheless the only fascinating modern form of power: it is the only one since Machiavelli to assert itself as such, as a challenge, by trifling with all forms of political "truth" and it is the only one to have taken up the challenge to assume power unto death (whether its own or that of others). Besides, it is because it has taken up the challenge that

fascism has benefited from this strange consent, this absence of resistance to power. Why have all the *symbolic* resistances failed in the face of fascism—a unique fact in history? No ideological mystification and no sexual repression *à la Reich* can explain it. Only challenge can arouse such a passion for responding to it, such a frenzied assent to play the game in return, and thus raise every resistance. This, moreover, remains a mystery: why does one respond to a challenge? For what reason does one accept to play better, and feel passionately compelled to answer such an arbitrary injunction?

Fascist power is then the only form which was able to reenact the ritual prestige of death, but (and most importantly here) in an already posthumous and phony mode, a mode of one-upmanship and *mise-en-scène*, and in an *aesthetic* mode—as Benjamin clearly saw—that was no longer truly sacrificial. Fascism's politics is an aesthetics of death, one that already has the look of a nostalgia fad; and everything that has had this look since then must be inspired by fascism, understood as an *already nostalgic* obscenity and violence, as an already reactionary scenario of power and death which is already obsolete the very moment it appears in history. Again, an eternal shift in the advent of the Messiah, as Kafka says. An eternal inner simulation of power, which is never already (*jamais déjà*) anything but the sign of what it was.

We find the same nostalgia and the same simulation characteristic of nostalgia fads when we look today at "micro" fascisms and "micro" powers. The "micro" operator can only downshift from what fascism may have been without resolving it and transform an extremely complex scenario of simulation and death into a simplified "floating signifier," "whose essential function is denunciation" (Foucault). Its function is also invocation because the memory of fascism (like the memory of power), even in the

micro form, is still the nostalgic invocation of the political, or *of a form of truth for the political*; and its invocation simultaneously allows us to save the hypothesis of desire, whose mere paranoiac accident power and fascism can always appear to be.

IN ANY CASE, power lures us on and truth lures us on. Everything is in the lightning-quick contraction in which an entire cycle of accumulation, of power, or of truth comes to a close. There is never any inversion or any subversion: the cycle must be accomplished. But it can happen instantaneously. It is death that is at stake in this contraction.

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1. *Art Press* 22 (January–February, 1976): 3, [Translator's note]

2. Roland Barthes, *The Empire of Signs*, tr. Richard Howard, New York, Hill & Wang,(1970) 1982.

3. Gilles Deleuze, "Ecrivain Non: Un Nouveau Cartographe," *Critique* 31(1975): 1207–27. [Translator's note]

4. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, and H. Lane (New York, 1977) and Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, tr. I.LH. Grant, London, Athlone Press, (1993) 1992.

5. For a more complete account of Baudrillard's critique of production, see his *Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis, 1975); for a fuller discussion of production/seduction, see his recent *Seduction,* tr. Brian Singer, New York, St. Martiin's Press, (1979) 1990. [Translator's note]

6. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, 1: The Will to Knowledge (vol 1),* tr. Robert Hurley, New York, Pantheon, (1976) 1980.

7. See Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Biology*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York, 1971). [Translator's note]

Part 2

FORGET BAUDRILLARD

An Interview with Sylvère Lotringer

"As in judo, the best answer to an adversary maneuver is not to retreat, but to go along with it, turning it to one's own advantage, as a resting point for the next phase."

— Michel Foucault

1

The Ends of History □ Hyperreality □ Nihilism and Disenchantment □ Neutralizing Desire □ Appearance and Disappearance □ Sexuality and Obscenity □ Foucault: Genealogy and Simulation □ Desire and Seduction □ Metaphor and Metamorphosis □ The Disappearance of of the Subject □ The Giddiness of Chance □ Panic and Information

Sylvère Lotringer: *Let's begin at the end or, rather, at the ends: the end of production, the end of history, the end of the political. Your reflections begin with a series of liquidations. Has the time come to put Western civilization in the wax museum? Is everything now for sale?*

Jean Baudrillard: I don't know if it's a question of an "end." The word is probably meaningless in any case, because we're no longer so sure that there is such a thing as linearity. I would prefer to begin, even if it sounds a little like science fiction, with a quotation from *Die Provinz des Menschen* (The Human Province), a recent book by Elias Canetti.[1] It is possible, he says—and he finds the idea rather painful—that starting from a precise moment in time the human race has dropped out of history. Without even being conscious

of the change, we suddenly left reality behind. What we have to do now, continues Canetti, would be to find that critical point, that blind spot in time. Otherwise, we just continue on with our self-destructive ways. This hypothesis appeals to me because Canetti doesn't envisage an end, but rather what I would hall an "ecstasy," in the primal sense of that word—a passage at the same time into the dissolution and the transcendence of a form.

History survives its disappearance, but somewhere its spirit got snatched away…

History isn't over, it is in a state of simulation, like a body that's kept in a state of hibernation. In this irreversible coma everything continues to function all the same, and eventually can even seem to amount to history. And then, surreptitiously (as Canetti has it), it's possible that everything is no longer real or true. In any case we would no longer be in a position to decide on that.

The "end" you're talking about would be the end of all finalities—together with an exacerbated, empty parody of their resurgence.

There is no end in the sense that God is dead, or history is dead. I would prefer not to play the role of the lugubrious, thoroughly use-less prophet. It is not a tragic event, something highly charged with emotion, something that you could mourn—for there would still be something to be done about it. Suddenly, there is a curve in the road, a turning point. Somewhere, the real scene has been lost, the scene where you had rules for the game and some solid stakes that everybody could rely on.

How did that happen? Has this really happened?

That's fiction. History has stopped meaning, referring to anything — whether you call it social space or the real. We have passed into a kind of hyper-real where things are being replayed *ad infinitum*.

Traditional societies had no history but they had a mythology; we're discovering now that history may have been our own mythology. If we can cease believing in history, then maybe history had more to do with faith than fact.

But then, what does it mean "to believe?" That would mean maintaining some kind of subjectivity as a criterion of the validity of things. Now if credibility alone is what gives things meaning, then we're bound to remain trapped in the imaginary.

What interests me instead (but can you still call this history?) is the possibility of a pure event, an event that can no longer be manipulated, interpreted, or deciphered by any historical subjectivity.

Can individual subjectivity be totally short-circuited by the event?

The problematic of the subject implies that reality can still be represented, that things give off signs guaranteeing their existence and significance—in short, that there is a reality principle. All of that is now collapsing with the dissolution of the subject. This is the well-known "crisis of representation." But just because this system of values is coming apart—the system which also supported the political and theatrical scenes—that doesn't mean we are being left in a complete void. On the contrary, we are confronted with a more radical situation.

The tabula rasa brings out tendencies latent in the culture. It clears the ground. But there is a high price to pay in terms of emptiness and disenchantment. There you hate all the seduction, and the sadness, of nihilism.

It is true that logic only leads to disenchantment. We can't avoid going a long way with negativity, with nihilism and all. But then don't you think a more exciting world opens up? Not a more reassuring world, but certainly more thrilling, a world where the name of the game remains secret. A world ruled by reversibility and indetermination…

That's certainly radical; it leaves no roots.

Radicality is not a more sublime virtue of theory. It means isolating in things whatever allows for interpretation, whatever overburdens them with meaning. I don't derive any malicious pleasure from this analysis; still, it gives me a curious sense of giddiness…

But who's there to feel giddy? To exult in one's own disappearance is still another, more paradoxical, paroxysmal form of subjectivity. What's left once you've liquidated that overload of meaning?

What remains is a good deal less than one would like to admit. Every system of value—in terms of energy, for example—seems to be crumbling down.

You settled your score with Marx in The Mirror of Production[2]. *Why haven't you written a* Mirror of Desire *to have done with the judgment of Freud?*

I can't bring myself to write something on psychoanalysis. It would be useless to attack frontally its ideology or proclaim its demise. You have to allow desire to catch itself in its own trap.

Desire was caught from the start. That's the reactive side of any theory. You can only reveal a phenomenon if it is already disappearing. Where is hysteria now? Nowhere and everywhere. Often the pyramid of concepts is piled up sky high on top of an empty tomb.

It is always the same sign that controls appearance and disappearance. It presides over both. In the meantime, you're left to your own devices. There may be events, there may be a history...

The history of sexuality, for example.

Sexuality has gone weightless. It is now reaching the state of "obscenity." But everyone conspires to mask its disappearance by setting up trompe l'oeil stage decors.[3]

Psychoanalysis pretends to cure sexual neurosis, while it keeps on injecting it with a semblance of reality. Although far removed from the Freudian point of view, Foucault still participates in that nostalgic effect of theory. After all, paying so much attention to the genealogy of sexuality accredits the idea that it is still a space to be occupied. But it is more like Grand Central Station...

I don't see the point of retracing the genealogy of sexuality. It's so true, so undeniable that there is nothing to say about it.

American sexuality is more Foucauldian than Foucault. In sex clinics here, masturbation has become a categorical imperative if you want to reach a synthetic genitality. Your position with respect to Foucault is of the same order. Foucault wrote the archeology of things; you take them to the point of their cryogenicization. In The Order of the simulacra, *though your approach was pretty close to his…*

You're talking about the three orders? I could have made a book out of it, others rushed in to find examples. As for myself, without denying it, I don't believe it holds up. For a time I believed in Foucauldian genealogy, but the order of simulation is antinomical to genealogy.

An anti-genealogy then?

No. If you take this logic to the extreme, what you get is the reabsorption of all genealogy. That's why I believe Foucault was unable to make the leap. What interests me is the mysterious point where he stops and finds nothing more to say.

You keep criss-crossing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's path, breaking away from representation, rejecting dialectics, dismissing meaning and metaphor.[4] *You part company with them on the terrain of subjectivity: they put the subject in flux, you abolish it. They make desire the basis of becoming; you see becoming as annihilating desire.*

I couldn't care less about desire. I neither want to abolish it nor to take it into consideration. I wouldn't know where to put it anymore.

That's no surprise. You derive your own energy from the collapse of values. To make desire itself the basis of the system becomes redundant.

What bothers me about desire is the idea of an energy at the source of all these fluxes. Is desire really involved? In my opinion, it has nothing to do with it.

Well then, what does?

Earlier on you mentioned disenchantment. The other, enchanting aspect, for me, is no longer desire, that is clear. It is seduction. Things make events all by themselves, without any mediation, by a sort of instant commutation. There is no longer any metaphor, rather metamorphosis. Metamorphosis abolishes metaphor, which is the mode of language, the possibility of communicating meaning. Metamorphosis is at the radical point of the system, the point where there is no longer any law or symbolic order. It is a process without any subject, without death, beyond any desire, in which only the rules of the game of forms are involved. Among other things, what psychoanalysis has to say about mythology is an abuse of metaphorical language.

And what would correspond to that mythology in the order of metamorphosis?

The possibility of transmutation: becoming-animal, becoming-woman. What Gilles Deleuze says about it seemed to me to fit perfectly.[5]

Love is no longer considered as a dependence of desire upon a lack, but in the unconscious form of the transformation into the

other. In that metamorphic unconscious nothing is repressed. The metaphor is by-passed. Conversely, in metastasis—the proliferation of bodies, obesity, cancer—there again, unfortunately, the subject no longer exists. There is no more language. Metaphor is no longer possible.

And what do you see taking shape with the disappearance of subjectivity?

Something rather paradoxical. There are three modes of disappearance. Either the subject disappears in the cloning system, eliminating death. That has no charm. It is too much like an extermination which is the proliferating metastatic form of the disappearance of the other. Or, you could have disappearance as death, which is the metaphorical form of the subject. Or else, disappearance as a game, the art of disappearance.

Alongside these modes of disappearance, the mechanical (cloning), organic (death), and ritual (game) forms, why not conceive of a more lively way of disappearing? The possibility of assuming roles without identifying with them. One agrees to disappear, but in order to reappear somewhere else, where one is not expected.

I conceive of that disappearance abstractly, with Deleuze, as a flux, but also as an absolute transparency. It is the loss of the real, the absolute distance of the real. One can no longer touch things.

The only form of the real that remains, as I see it, is a shifting between things. Otherwise you are paralyzed—or vaporized. Paralysis is the panicky plea for identity. It's neurosis: wearing yourself out trying to pour into concrete what is slipping away in all directions. Evaporation

is chloroform, or ether. Disappearing without a trace. It chills you to the bone; it puts you to sleep, too.

It's possible that in places like New York people can remain in a kind of positive, happy fluidity, a state of trans-pearing. But most people experience it as a kind of liquid terror.

Is it worth abdicating all subjectivity in order to protect ourselves from terror?

We're no longer in systems of real accomplishment; today they are necessarily potential, with the added bonus of risk, panic. The de-subjectification of things.

What's there to risk if all subjectivity is being extinguished?

We're condemned to effects of giddiness—in all the electronic games as well. There's no more pleasure, no more interest, but a kind of dizziness induced by the connections, the switching operations in which the subject gets lost. You manipulate all you want, without any objective, with the effect of aleatory giddiness of the potential systems where anything can happen.

You prefer panic to terror.

Panic doesn't have to be unhappy. I see it as ecstasy. It's just a mode of propagation by contiguity, like contagion, only faster—the ancient principle of metamorphosis, going from one form to another without passing through a system of meaning. This process of effects in the absence of causes is a form of extraordinary

expansion. The "speed" that Virilio talks about is an effect of panic with respect to movement.[6]

A giddiness effect. Panic can also be the inflation of the event by the news media. All the communication theories have to be revised, including my own, which is still too meaningful. People no longer seek to appropriate things, or even destroy them. Bataille's "devil's share" was still part of the ultimate romanticism of political economy. Now it's something else.[7]

2

Death and Metastasis □ The Giddiness of Theory □ Desire and Culture □ "Objective" Necessity □ Sociology and Metaphysics □ The End of the Social □ Symbolic Exchange and Destiny □ The Fatal Between Chance and Necessity □ Movement and Speed □ The Ecstasy of Capital □ Gambling as Extermination of Value □ Statistics and Fate □ Objective Chance without the Unconscious □ The Chain of Appearances

Sylvère Lotringer: *What do you make of death? Of the three modes of disappearance, it's clearly the one you are least interested in. It doesn't disappear for all that...*

Jean Baudrillard: Death has passed into either the history of metamorphoses or into metastatic history. I found an article by Franz Bader, a German writer from the early 19th century, entitled "On Ecstasy as Metastasis." For him ecstasy is the anticipation of death, a passage into the metastatic state of the living subject. Death is replaced by the passage of this point of inertia.

Every time I meet William Burroughs, I feel I'm in the presence of a fiesty corpse. As a living person he seems rather bored. I asked him if he would go to the moon. "Of course," he replied. "I'd go anywhere; I'd leave the solar system if they came to get me in a flying saucer." "Even if there is no coming back?" I asked. He looked at me. "Why come back?"

I experienced the same feeling of no return during a trip to the United States a few years ago. It was a real shock. I had the revelation that I was entering the period of the rest of my life from another point of view, in a state of complete irony with respect to what had gone before. When there is no fundamental passion, when life or love disappears, there is no longer any possibility of a multiplicity of modalities, with respect to love or existence. It's an extra helping, a little bit ecstatic, a little bit residual, but also profoundly melancholic. Death is an event that has always already taken place.

I've often wondered how one could live theories like yours.

I got into it fairly late. For a long time, I was very "cool" about producing theories. Of course there had to be an obsession behind it, but I didn't think it had very much to do with anything. It was a kind of game. I could write about death without it having any influence whatsoever on my life. When someone asked me, "What can we do with this? What are you really analyzing?" I took it very lightly, with great calm.

You felt it had more to do with culture?

I'd always kept my distance from culture—as well as from theory. I maintained a position of distrust and rejection. That's the only "radicalness" I can claim. It might have something to do with my old pataphysical training: I don't want culture; I spit on it. If a theory really becomes part of it, for me it's unspeakable. Several years ago, all that changed. Somewhere along the line I stopped living, in Canetti's sense.

Something came unstuck.

The giddiness I'm talking about ended up taking hold of me.

A logical giddiness.

Yes. I stopped working on simulation. I felt I was going totally nuts. Finally, by various paths, all this came to have extremely direct consequences on my life. It seemed logical that something would happen, an event of this kind—but I began to wonder what theory had to do with all this. There is in theories something that does away with the feeling of being "unstuck" But what theory brings back on the other hand, to reaccentuate it, pervert it—in the full sense of the word—I'd rather not know about.

You spoke a bit earlier about the art of disappearance.

Disappearance is something completely different from death. Dying doesn't do any good, you still have to disappear. It is a mode assimilated to that of seduction. The death of meaning is not interesting in itself.

Behaviorism puts an end to meaning. It does it more radically than we do.

There meaning is truly erased, but it doesn't disappear. Pragmatism is the same as simulation pushed to the limit. Simulation puts an end to meaning absolutely, in its neutralizing, undifferentiated form. But it does it without prestige, without charm, without pleasure, without any of the effects of disappearance which are the best we can afford today.

You rediscover desire in charm. Something of desire would have to remain, otherwise…

I only resented desire in the cultural acceptance it gained. Actually desire is a term that managed to get out of the test of reality—if you'll pardon the expression—while still retaining a certain poetic density. It wasn't killed, it remains—on condition that it stays out of the libidinal.

It's desire as seduction.

In seduction, all the energy that you gathered for yourself is turned over to the object. Objective necessity occurs—an absolute surprise which takes away the effectiveness of the subject.

Exchange exerts a similar effect, but the subject's disappearance is of a statistical order. It melts into "the masses," which are conceived as an infinite commutation of individual clones—the mass as circulation, not immobility or assembly, of course.[8]

Neutralization is a statistical fiction, a sociologist's point of view reporting the existence of a flat encephalogram on the level of culture.

Well, let's be frank here. If I ever dabbled in anything in my theoretical infancy, it was philosophy more than sociology. I don't think at all in those terms. My point of view is completely metaphysical. If anything, I'm a metaphysician, perhaps a moralist, but certainly not a sociologist. The only "sociological" work I can claim is my effort to put an end to the social, to the concept of the social.[9]

You proclaimed the end of the social, I guess, by contrast with another more archaic form, which Marcel Mauss defined as the "total social fact." What does that symbolic, or agonistic exchange of traditional societies mean to you now? Do you still believe it has a bearing on post-industrial societies?[10]

Actually in traditional societies exchange is absent. Symbolic exchange is the opposite of exchange. The term is rather deceptive. There is an order of exchange and an order of fate. The only means of exorcising fate is through exchange; in other words, through a contractual agreement. Where exchange is not possible, fate takes over. In the case of the hostage, whenever exchange becomes impossible, you move into the order of the fatal, of the catastrophe. There is a dual reversibility, an agonistic challenge.

Negotiation is no longer possible. From there on, anything can happen.

I call symbolic exchange fatal: I am led to it by chance. Fate is in the dividing line separating chance and necessity, to use Jacques Monod's terms.[11]

Neither one wipes out the order of events. One—necessity—is based on an order of causes, of finality, a system of values which is that of metaphysics. The other—chance—is based on an objective

by an undetermined and erratic order. What I wanted to define with the "fatal" order is an objective order, but of the highest necessity. The question of finality no longer applies. An event—or a being, or a word—resolves all efforts at explanation; it imposes itself with a force which is no longer of the final or causal order. It is more final than final: it is fatal.

The way speed is more mobile than movement—its pure form, independent of any destination.

Yes, speed is the ecstatic form of movement. In ecstasy, there is no longer any stage—no more scene, no more theatre. But there is no more passion either. It is intense, but dispassionate. It can carry a charge of seductiveness, for seduction is an ecstatic form. The fatal is ecstasy in the form of an event, in the same way that free-floating capital is an ecstatic form of the circulation of money. They no longer bear any relationship to production.

It is the extreme form of the logic of capital.

The ecstatic form of capital is totally generalized exchange. An orbital form. In merchandise, money is already in process of de-referentialization. It is the transpoliticized form of merchandise. Look at what happens in the movement of money—money no longer bears any relationship to value, even in the sense in which Bataille uses the term (in order for there to be something "spent," one must still believe in value). That is what gives rise to intense miraculous effects of multiplication. The secret of gambling is that money does not exist as a value.

But value returns after the fact: it's what you have to pay if you lose.

Afterward, you commit suicide. But in the heat of the moment, the idea of winning or losing is relatively unimportant compared to the seductive sequence of events.

Gambling is the ecstatic form of money.

Gambling isn't exactly a passion: the pleasure one derives from it is too crystalline. It is a cold ecstasy which deals with money not as meaning, value, depth or substance, but in the pure form of appearance or disappearance.

It's a form of imminence.

Yes, but there's nothing behind it. It's the imminence of itself. Gambling is an organized catastrophic, apparitional form—a total metamorphosis.

It's a game with a subject. This would explain the fascination it holds: to gamble is to forget yourself. The extreme form of neurosis—and its annulment.

Gambling is a game, a challenge. There is no gambling subject: the transubstantiation is complete. It's pure seduction. It comes from elsewhere. In theory gambling is without consequence. This is why it's so easy to condemn the "immorality" of gambling. Gambling is immoral. It bears no relation to the reality of money.

It feeds on itself.

It's the passion of arriving at a given object: money, in this case and managing to completely disconnect it, to discover its means of appearing. I didn't say its means of production; we know that only too well, and it's no fun. Wherever you can find the possibility of pure appearances, you are once again in the game. It's in this sense that I no longer situate myself in the irreversible order of annihilation. The possibility of returning to a level of metamorphosis or seduction cannot be lost. There's only fate.

But first this has to pass through a rage to destroy, to exterminate everything.

There has to be extermination. In the final account, it's extremely rare that something can get out of the chain of cause and effect to fully appear. It is the ephemeral moment in which things take the time to appear before taking on meaning or value. What is fascinating then—what makes that moment an event—is that a mode of sociality can be created which is not the mode of exchange but occurrence of pure events. The statistical occurrence, on the contrary, is flat, numerical, without sequence. It is nothing but contiguity and measurement. We live in a world that is very loose, quite lax, in which things are more or less arbitrary, disconnected and therefore sporadic, erratic. The order of the fatal, on the other hand, is the site of symbolic exchange. There is no more liberty, everything is locked in a sequential chain.

That was already the case with the primitive ceremonial.

I don't exclude rituals and ceremonies. Whatever reaches the level of pure appearance—a person, an event, an act—enters the realm

of the fatal. It cannot be deciphered or interpreted. The subject has nothing to say about it. Events emerge from any and every place, but from an absolute beyond, with that true strangeness which alone is fascinating. It belongs neither to the order of the normal nor to the accidental. It is a necessity greater than the law, something like objective chance without any effect of the unconscious, whose fate would be repressed.

A successful event leaves nothing behind it.

In the finalities that one can assign oneself, values are always relative. They must be invested. They are necessary, but subjectively. For example, the fetishistic object topples the subject's need to place itself in the transcendental center of the world. On the contrary, at any given moment the universe has the possibility of incarnating itself in a detail which is unjustifiable in its own right. The universal no longer exists, there is nothing left but a singularity which can take on the aspect of totality.

Singularities, in the Hegelian sense, have a particularity and a universal aspect. They are moments.

Yes, whereas now singularities very likely no longer have any universal becoming. The universal is a game preserve, it is the site of that indifferent strategy. It cannot be assigned an end, a reason, a meaning. It is total crystallization around an event.

Deleuze dealt with this problematic in Logic of Sense.[12] *But for him, the logic of appearances, the play of surfaces does not abolish subjectivity.*

For me events are no longer those of the subject; they reach a point where they function all by themselves. It is a pure connection of events in a logic of appearances, if you like, which meets seduction. The order of seductive connections stands in opposition to rational connections, whatever they may be, and also to delirious connections, and possibly to molecular ones. It is not an order of the accidental; an accident does not fascinate me in that sense. The catastrophe does not fascinate me as an accident, it fascinates me as a necessity. That appearances function all by themselves is based on a necessity much more implacable than the chain of causes which is for its part relatively arbitrary, as is the connection of the signifier and the signified. The connection, the chain of appearances are signs that do not, in fact, make sense. There is a rule to the game.

3

Law and Rules □ Crisis, Catastrophe □ Poetry □ A Sign is as Good as the Thing Itself □ Femininity, Childhood □ "Strategy" of the Fatal □ The Principle of Evil □ Model and Truth □ Beyond Esthetic Judgement □ Fashion, Politics □ The Ecstacy of Forms □ The Media Doesn't Mystify □ Beau Brummel □ Power/Knowledge/ Will □ Revolution, Devolution □ May '68, an Inconsequential Event.

Sylvère Lotringer: *Is the fatal the fulfillment of an empty rule?*

Jean Baudrillard: A rule can be perfectly arbitrary in its enunciation, but it is much more unbreakable than the "law," which can be transgressed. You can do anything with the law. With the rule, on the other hand, either you play or you don't play. If you play, the rule is implacable. You can't get around it. It would be idiotic to transgress it. The rule of the game—the seductive sequence—is played in an extremely ceremonialized fashion. Situations can be replayed indefinitely, the "rule" does not change. But it is secret, never known, never spoken. If it were known, things would become visible and reversible again. With causal or rational sequences, you have crisis. With seductive sequences, on the contrary, you are—literally—in a catastrophic order.

That's the logic of the avalanche.

Forms that are beyond judgment have a much greater power of fascination, but they are for that same reason terribly dangerous for any order whatsoever. They can no longer be controlled. At any given moment a category or a form stops representing itself, it no longer enters the stage of representation, it no longer functions according to its end. It doubles back upon itself, taking a curve so rapid that it reaches a kind of potentialization. All the rest goes into a state of weightlessness. In the language of poetry we are familiar with those sequences in which things seem to take place without continuity, without consequence, without mediation. Language is always an order of seduction to the extent that it is a mutant order. If you suppose continuous, progressive, linear order then it is still based on a mutational "superstructure." Words in a poem are of that order. They do not go through meaning. One word calls forth another in a catastrophe of charm. One leads to another in a thoughtless, unintelligible way. I am not seeking the irrational. On the contrary, we know that there is a necessity without its being transcendental or providential. The same thing can take place in the order of facts, of actions, of existential situations.

It is ritual without the sacred, the tragic without the tragedy.

It is not a sacred universe, even though there is indeed a tragic aspect in seduction. If you accept the rule of the game, you can never know in advance to what degree of concatenation of appearances a strategy may lead. Take, for example, the story of the woman to whom a man sends an ardent love letter. She asks him what part of her seduced him the most. What else can he answer?

Her eyes, of course. And he receives in the mail, wrapped in brown paper, the woman's eye. The man is shattered, destroyed. The woman sets herself as the destiny of the other. Literalizing the metaphor, she abolishes the symbolic order. The sign becomes the thing. The subject is caught in the trap of his own desire. She loses an eye, he loses face.

In On Seduction *you took another metaphor literally, that of the woman object.*[13] *It meant (in appearance at least) taking feminism against the grain, with, I believe, unexpected potentializations.*

I consider woman the absence of desire. It is of little import whether or not that corresponds to real women. It is my conception of "femininity."

Isn't it surprising that in the midst of metamorphoses, the feminine figure for you remains fixed. That's very nostalgic, that polarity of roles.

But I don't believe in it. For me, femininity is non-polar. Contrary to masculinity, woman has no anxious focalization on sex, she can transform herself into herself.

That means becoming-woman is something that can occur in women or in men.

Of course. Femininity appears in certain individuals, men or women. But woman is the object which plays out all the liquidities of desire. The drama of love is entirely in men, that of charm completely in women.

Speaking of love, you replace intersubjectivity with a reciprocal transformation. A passage into the other, but an other which is no longer there.

That is the problem of otherness. As in the world, or on the terrain of sex, no one is the other of the other sex any longer. It is not narcissism, which is a concretion accomplished in solitude; not otherness either. Each one functions within his/her own nebula, accomplishing his/her own virtuality.

If I understand, the process of becoming-woman common to both sexes is the accomplishment of each one as a separate object. Their reciprocal challenge is to become more woman than woman, in a word, to attain that femininity which each one can attain only in relationship to himself/herself.

I think here of the strategic position of the process of becoming-object. What interests me now is no longer the subject but the object and its destiny. You become the destiny of the other. It is clearer when you think of childhood. The child always has a double strategy. He has the possibility of offering himself as object, protected, recognized, geared as a child to the pedagogical function; and at the same time he is fighting on equal terms. At some level the child knows that he is not a child, but the adult does not know that. That is the secret.

That's what is fueling the hysterical campaign against "child abuse." Adults panic in the face of the extermination of childhood, which on the other hand, they are encouraging. Childhood constitutes the last anchor of our culture. If childhood were lost, what

would morality be based on? The social repression of "child molesters" is all the more ferocious. [14]

The problem is that everything has been unleashed on childhood. There has been quite a "palingenesis" on childhood, no psychoanalytic joke intended; now there it has been taken seriously. The category of childhood is defined historically, and there psychology begins: child psychology, therapy, pedagogy, it all follows. If, going against every assumption, you maintain the little utopian fact that childhood does not exist and that the child is perhaps the only one to know it, then everything blows up in your face. That is what I was trying to say about women. Women, children, animals—we must not be afraid of assimilations—do not just have a subject-consciousness, they have a kind of objective ironic presentiment that the category into which they have been placed does not exist. Which allows them at any given moment to make use of a double strategy. It isn't psychology, it's strategy.

When you speak of the strategy of the fatal, what interests me most is the strategy. What is to be done?

No, it's completely antinomical. It's not really strategy. That's a play on words to dramatize the total passage from the subject to the object. Whether you call it the revenge of the object, or the Evil Genius of matter, it is not representable. But it is a power all the same. In fact, I would go along with calling it the principle of Evil, of irreconciliation, the way the Good is the principle of reconciliation. That exists, it is inextricable, it cannot be destroyed.

Can you still invoke a strategy to account for situations in which the subject has no place?

Only an "objective" strategy that no one could recognize. What I foresee is a transposition of all forms and the impossibility of any politics. There is something like a threshold of inertia. Beyond that, forms snowball, terror is unleashed as an empty form.

Panic.

Right. It's the other form of the ecstatic, its catastrophic form, in the almost neutral sense of the term, in its mathematical extension. It is a completely alien response of the object world to the subject world, of a completely external destiny which occurs with an absolute surprise and whose symbolic wave strikes the human world.

You see several sides to ecstasy?

I see two. Take a model. Its ecstatic side is to be truer than the truth; it creates a kind of giddiness, a kind of inflation of truth. A model is a rather pathetic thing. But take fashion for example. Fashion participates in this phenomenon absolutely. It doesn't depend on any sort of esthetic judgment. It's not the beautiful opposed to the ugly, it's what's more beautiful than the beautiful. The obese—that famous fat American—is not opposed to the skinny one. He is fatter than fat, and that is fascinating. Fashion is the absolute formalization of the beautiful. It functions by means of the unconditional transmutation of forms. Ecstatic forms can be static and cold; sometimes they can be more enchanting, warmer.

There is a splendor of fashion, and, behind it, an uncontrollable rule of the game. A rule which conveys the objective irony of fashion. Everything that can be invented deliberately falls flat on its face, and it's something else that catches on instead.

Can fashion serve as a model for politics?

Fashion has always been at odds with politics and scorned by politics. But you cannot politically oppose fashion to politics. Fashion is a splendid form of metamorphosis. It is both a ritual and a ceremony. It can't be programmed.

Could happy, ecstatic political forms be conceived of?

It's rather difficult to sort out happy and unhappy forms. Seduction, like fashion, is a happy form, beyond the beauty of desire: "I am not beautiful, I am worse." Seduction uses signs which are already simulators to make them into the falser than false. It displaces them, turns them into traps and produces a splendid effect snatched from the imperative of veracity of signs, and even of desire, which is no longer at stake.

Must all political rituals necessarily be programmed?

Politics functioned in terms of distinctive oppositions: the left or the right. As in other areas you have the true or the false, the beautiful or the ugly, etc. Now, at a given point the energy of a situation stopped depending on this kind of dissociation. It is no longer the dialectic of the two terms that organizes things, but the fact that the forms each go their separate ways, meaninglessly, senselessly. It

is the truer than true, or the falser than false. A form shoots off in a kind of relentless logic, uncalculated, without any history, without any memory, the way cancer cells go off in an organic direction. That logic seems to me more interesting because it does after all correspond more to the way things are evolving nowadays.

Where do you see that logic at work in the political field right now? In the media?

The media are supposed to be a fabulous distortion. But behind that analysis still lurks a symbolic demand for truth. Where does that distortion come from? Placing the media in the system of will—choice—liberty is really hopeless. All you can do is invoke a total alienation of the political subject, accuse the power structure of manipulating, etc. The power structure doesn't manipulate TV, it functions exactly the way it does. It relies on representations, it also secretes them with the scant political relief of a TV image, without accuracy or energy, to the point of merging with the civil society in the indistinction of the political scene. Meaning manages to disappear in the horizon of communication. The media are simply the locus of this disappearance, which is always a challenge to the powers that be. It's becoming urgent to reformulate a theory of the media as "agents provocateurs" of information overload, turning political debate into a gigantic abyss. Let's get rid of the notion that the media mystify and alienate. We've had enough of that.

The theory of alienation has become the echo necessary to the media for their existence. It amounts indirectly to giving them the benefit of an intention. They don't deserve that.

You're right. In the transpolitical, there is no more who. Then if it isn't the power structure, which seems pretty clear, if there is no longer a subject, is there a strategy of the object, objective irony?

The media industry never does anything but reproduce its own necessity. As William Burroughs says it plainly enough: all things considered, the public could get along very well without the news.

There you have it. All that is done now is to display a range of choices which are all equally potential or fulfilled. Have you heard this story about Beau Brummel? He traveled a great deal, always in the company of his manservant. One day he was in Scotland, in a region where there are many lakes, each one more beautiful than the other. Brummel turned to his servant and asked him, "Which lake do I prefer?" Having to choose is really a bore. That's what servants are for. In any case, that's not what counts. Power—Knowledge—Will—let the inventors of those ideas take responsibility for them. It makes perfect sense to me that the great masses, very snobbishly, delegate to the class of intellectuals, of politicians, this business of managing, of choosing, of knowing what one wants. They are joyously dumping all those burdensome categories that no one, deep down inside, really wants any part of. That people want to be told what they want is certainly not true; it is not clear either that they really want to know what they want, or that they desire to want at all. The whole edifice of socialism is based on that assumption. They start from the fact that this is what people ought to want, that they are social in the sense that they are supposed to know themselves, know what they want. I think we have pressed beyond that point, beyond truth, beyond reality.

Objective irony, that would be the masses' offhand way of getting rid of their responsibilities, turning power back to its fantasies, knowledge to its obsessions, will to its illusions. The silent majority, as you see it then, is not the accomplice of law and order, but rather its silence is a dead silence. The masses are playing dead. And this stubborn silence, this insolent reserve, would sanction the disappearance of the social.

Exactly. Large systems of information relieve the masses of the responsibility of having to know, to understand, to be informed, to be up on things. Advertising relieves people of the responsibility of having to choose, which is perfectly human and perfectly horrible. As for power, it has always seemed ironic to me to delegate it to people. That's like catching them in a trap, and that trap closes on the political class itself. I see all of this as a profound reversal of strategy on the part of the masses. They are no longer involved in a process of subversion or revolution, but in some gigantic devolution from an unwanted liberty—with some evil genius lurking behind it all. I think we are beginning to realize how much terror lies at the heart of the paradise of communication. Beyond that, events are inconsequential, and that is even more true for theories.

But there is power in the fact of being inconsequential.

That was what interested me about May '68. Behind the political, revolutionary, and historical scene, and also behind the failure, there was the power of an event which managed to absorb its own continuity. It makes it implode, succeeds in swallowing its own energy and disappearing.

May '68 swept down on France like an avalanche, and no sooner had it appeared than it disappeared, mysteriously, practically without a trace.

Then where has all that energy gone? Nowhere—certainly not into socialism in any case. It must have been reabsorbed somewhere—without necessarily remaining underground so as to emerge later. For me May '68 was the first event that corresponded to this inertial point of the political scene. Continuity disappears. Only such things are fascinating.

4

Going to Extremes □ The Scenario of Deterrence □ Terrorism and Hyperreality □ The Impossible War □ Fascism and Transpolitics □ May '68 □ Two Forms of Secret □ The Ecstasy of Socialism □ The Story of Sophie Calle □ Ends, Means □ Power Doesn't Exist □ God's Strategy □ Italy in Political Simulation □ The Challenge to the Social

Sylvère Lotringer: *Comprehension is no longer involved there.*

Jean Baudrillard: No. But more comprehension is going to be resecreted. It is intolerable for everybody that events should be inconsequential, or that their own desires. should be inconsequential. And, in the last analysis, that theory should be inconsequential. No exceptions allowed.

All of that is part of what Paul Virilio calls "the aesthetic of disappearance."[15]

From time to time theory allows itself beautiful effects of disappearance. What more can one do? In terms of results there is no difference between what came to an end with May '68 and whatever

Giscard d'Estaing or Mitterand accomplished. Acceleration permits another kind of disappearance effect, another order that can't be reached in any other way. Therefore, I agree with Paul Virilio on the idea of theory going to extremes. You will ask me, why are people going to those extremes, if you don't suppose that at some point the world, and the universe, too, is in the grips of a movement to extremes. There you are, apparently, forced to make an almost objective, rational hypothesis. It is impossible to think that theory can be nothing more than fiction. Otherwise no one would bother producing theory any more. You have to believe that going somewhere is not just a metaphor. And then, if it is a challenge, in any case there is a partner. It is no longer a dialectic, but there is a rule of the game. Somewhere there must be a limit that constitutes the real in order for there to be theory. A point where things can stick, or from which they can take off.

For Virilio there is definitely a trend toward extremes at work in the world today: the military class is swallowing up civilian society before disappearing itself in a suicidal race.[16]

Virilio's calculation is to push the military to a kind of extreme absolute of power, which can only ultimately cause its own downfall, place it before the judgment of God and absorb it into the society it destroys. Virilio carries out this calculation with such an identification or obsession that I can only credit him at times with a powerful sense of irony: the system devours its own principle of reality, inflates its own empty forms until it reaches an absolute and its own ironic destiny of reversal. I myself am not so interested in military hardware, but in software. It's the form of his idea that strikes me as valid.

The state of emergency, the risk of nuclear extermination—you can dismiss all that?

Why, of course I think about it, but for me there is no fatal term. The nuclear threat is part of a "soft" mode of extermination, bit by bit, by deterrence, not at all an apocalyptic term. It is the scenario of deterrence that Paul Virilio shares with me, apparently, because he moves back and forth between the real term and the mythical term, which is mine. For me, it's in the realm of the intellectual wager. If there were an absolute term of the nuclear apocalypse in the realm of the real, then at that point I would stop, I wouldn't write anymore! God knows, if the metaphor really collapses into reality, I won't have any more to do. That would not even be a question of resignation—it's no longer possible to think at that point.

The implosive side of the nuclear threat paralyzes everything. It's more than deterrence, it's political tetanus.

Virilio is very interested in strategic vicissitudes; I don't have the patience. Does the nuclear threat have a political term? Or does it make it disappear when the bomb hits the ground? It's the same as for the media, I no longer attach any importance to it. Can there be a political management of a material that is "transpolitical?" I don't see where it could come from.

Let's go back to your analysis of terrorism, which led you to discard the concept of the social. For a number of years we witnessed a trend toward extremes in the confrontation between the Red Army Faction and the German government. Now what was the final outcome? A

challenge; implosive forms of confrontation? Not at all. Once the extremes were eliminated (the Baader-Meinhof "suicides" at Stammheim), the possibility was established of bargaining, of striking a compromise. Politics regained the upper hand, and history with it.

Terrorism can have a visible, a spectacular form. It is still part of the dramatic, practically, in the historical realm. So it can be succeeded by a kind of negotiable terror. The term "hostage," as I have used it, would then qualify not only the visible dramas of the taking of hostages, but rather the hyperreality of everyday life which is situated well beyond negotiable terror. It's the same as for deterrence. It's not the actual terror of the orbiting bombs' power of destruction; Virilio says that very clearly. War having also become an impossible exchange, the hostage would only qualify a situation in which all exchange has become impossible.

War is perhaps impossible: it continues nonetheless everywhere you look.

People get killed, people die in war, of course. But it would still involve a kind of conspiracy to setup a *trompe l'oeil* decor, the way city planners make provisions for parks and greenery. The history of Europe is perhaps of that order—an effort to circumscribe Europe as a space of freedom, a political space, etc., to escape that panic of the insolubility, the impossibility of a declared war, of a war which can really signify itself. It is set up as a war space in an attempt to somehow alter, however minimally, the situation of generalized dissuasion, which is intolerable. The consequences are felt at some point with this blockage, this leukemia of political life which is unbearable for everybody, for the ruling classes as well as for those who are ruled. But at this point war certainly no longer

has the same meaning, nor does art, or politics, or the hostage. Everything takes on another existence, with different stakes.

You once tried, along with Virilio, to theorize the concept of the "trans-political?" Is the transpolitical situated on the other side of the political logic of consequences? Can that be a way of saving the political?

The efforts to save it, that is what we are witnessing all around us. Those efforts are occupying the scene. The present, or recent, form of socialism in France—I call it "ecstatic"—in that sense it is trans-political. It proceeds from a model. Socialism realizes, hyperrealizes a model which no longer has any veracity or original passion.

The transpolitical would be a negative notion then. It's the same scene, but emptied out from within.

In that sense, yes. That is part of the exterminating analysis. I'm not crazy about the term itself. It's almost too "figurative." It signifies that there could still be a beyond, and that we ought to go and take a look at what's going on there. I prefer the formulation in terms of that point Canetti describes. We don't know what happened after that. The traditional points of reference are no longer usable, but we don't know what we are in. To demand a degree of truth is always problematical. Fascism was already something like that. It was a kind of potentialization. That is why it remains relatively inexplicable in political terms, such as capitalism or class struggle.

There is a secret to fascism.

Yes. It derives its overwhelming necessity precisely from its being isolated and disconnected, as in the case of the catastrophe, but this necessity is far beyond any rational finality. The secret lies in that total autonomy of a narrative, of a form, a myth that can no longer be described in a logical, coherent and acceptable manner, but runs amok. Past a certain threshold of inertia, forms start snowballing, stampeding, and terror is unleashed as an empty form. There comes about a swept away effect, an effect that feeds on itself and can become the source of immense energies, as fascism did, unfortunately. When effects go faster than causes, they devour them. I could easily see the "speed-up" analyzed by Virilio from this angle, as an attempt to accelerate faster than linearity can. Movement goes somewhere, speed goes nowhere. May '68 was an illogical event, irreducible to simulation, one which had no status other than that of coming from someplace else—a kind of pure object or event. Its strangeness derives from a logic of our own system, but not from its history. It is a prodigious effect, and it is situated or. the other side of that crucial point Canetti describes and that I mentioned earlier.

The cause of an event is always imagined after the fact. After that jolly May, we were treated to the curious spectacle of causes racing after effects.

May '68 is an event which it has been impossible to rationalize or exploit, from which nothing has been concluded. It remains indecipherable. It was the forerunner of nothing.

There are no children of May.

Perhaps a kind of "secret" is involved here too.

Tell me about secrets.

There are fundamentally two kinds of secrets. The obscene form of the secret involves a saturation of the event with explanations. The other kind involves something which is not hidden and therefore cannot be expressed directly in words. It is this second kind of secret which makes the event somehow innocent. Now what can you do with that? Ordinarily, when things happen, you pick them up as best you can as a subject. In the case of May '68, we have been forced to give all our subjective energy to the object.

The event becomes a kind of slippery object that refers each subject back to his/her own fantasies without ever allowing itself to be touched.

That event disappeared without leaving a trace other than this secondary and parodic effect, this second or third-hand product manufactured to occupy a political scene that has been utterly absorbed and destroyed: French socialism.

The socialists' error is to have occupied the vacuum and to have allowed themselves to be sucked into the black hole of politics.

There are two ways of seeing this. You can say there used to be a political sphere and there isn't anymore, following a Foucauldian genealogy. That was how Foucault talked about man. There is no longer a scene of politics the way it was organized around the history of power relations, production, classes. Power is no longer an

objective, locatable process. This is what I say is lost, if we can speak of an end of something. We are elsewhere. If, on the contrary, the political sphere consists in knowing how to play on an event or a thing on the basis of its objective or conscious end—but in order to ward it off—then power, in political terms, becomes a kind of challenge.

A challenge from the powers that be not to exercise power?

I wonder, in fact, if true power, the power that deepens the meaning of politics, is not the one that pulls back from itself, that plays out its own death, without even willing it consciously. The secret of power is that it can no longer be occupied, no longer be taken. When "power" is confused with the "power structure," you know it is no longer power. It becomes extremely vulnerable.

Could we not conceive this phenomenon in a more active fashion? The political as the art of not occupying a position yourself, but creating a void for others to rush into it.

The political sphere must keep secret the rule of the game that, in reality, power doesn't exist. Its strategy is, in fact, always creating a space of optical illusion, maintaining itself in total ambiguity, total duplicity in order to throw the others into this space. This is Machiavelli's strategy.

It is also the story of Sophie Calle.[17]

Right. For no particular reason, as you know, she followed a stranger in the street; she became his shadow and thus, in a certain

sense, erased his traces, acted as his destiny. Creating a void, she asked the other to fill it. She herself is nothing. She has no desire of her own in all this. She doesn't want to go anywhere, even though she follows him all the way to Venice. She doesn't want to find out what he is or to know his life. She is the proof that, although he thought he was going somewhere, in fact he is going nowhere. Where he supposedly is, there's no one. We could envision this story in terms of Balthazar Gracian. Is God's strategy really to lead man to his own ends, in other words to move man closer to the image of God according to a progressive-evolutionary process? God isn't so dumb, Gracian says. Nowhere does it say that man wants to arrive at his own end, which would be the idea of God in its canonical form. God's strategy is much more subtle, which no doubt corresponds to man's desire not to give a shit about his own end. God's strategy—that of all the Jesuit manuals that were incredibly widespread in the seventeenth century—is to keep man in an eternal suspense. And that is in the order of politics, which reveals God as being fairly malicious, perverse, given man's faculty to erect almost anything as a finality. Any possible illusion to avoid the Last Judgment, which is truly Hell. In fact, politics is always in a contrary, twisted, or simply "seductive" relation to its own ends. God is much more interested in the game, in the possibility of playing with ends, even using means. Furthermore, this proposition—the end and the means—has always favored the ends at the expense of the means. Since the means are immoral, the ends must be moral. But we could very well turn the proposition around, and this is precisely what the Jesuits do: play with the means, whatever, for the ends cannot be found anymore. For the Jesuits, and this is their basic proposition, it is impossible to establish a proof of God's existence. So all right, God exists, the grace of

God exists, but it has nothing to do with us because what we're dealing with is a strategic worldliness. And with this you can play. There are only means.

In Simulations, *what especially interested me, in fact, was the possibility of effecting this kind of diversion. I was struck by the fact that the Italians—in particular certain figures of the Autonomia movement* [18]*—when confronted with an emergency situation, found in certain of your propositions, even if they were disenchanted ones, instruments that they immediately tried to use politically. Instead of respecting your own ends (or their absence as ends...), they took certain of your concepts as floating theoretical tools capable of being reinvested in particular situations. In short, they diverted your own diversion. I admit that I like this practical perversion of your own theoretical perversion.*

That indeed seems to me to be the situation in Italy. Everyone seems to be party to prolonging a situation that isn't exactly political—in any case, no one can pull the strings anymore. The situation is seductive because of that kind of indecisiveness with which everyone plays without necessarily being aware of it. I like that Italian ability to turn around, turn away an objective state that would otherwise be catastrophic: the State could have disappeared a long time ago, along with politics.

In fact, the State has never existed there...

I think that every other country is in the same situation, despite appearances to the contrary. They are all in a situation of political simulation, but on the sly. Italy, on the other hand, seems to be exercising the simulacrum as such, seduction as such.

The simulacrum supports politics, instead of wiping it out.

The Italians have a long tradition of all this with the Jesuits and the Church—in the way Nietzsche meant. For them, the end is always imminent, but at the same time there is a possibility of almost joyful resurrection with each event, and that is phenomenal. We certainly couldn't say the same of Poland… Who are ideologically active cannot help fantasizing about a world that would make more sense, or that would return to sense. And so you get to terrorism, which invokes an enormous fantasy of a political order, of the State, the better to murder it, to massacre it. But what game is terrorism playing? Terrorism makes no more sense than the State does. They are accomplices in a circular set up.

In Germany as in Italy (neither country has ever been unified or centralized), terrorism helps the State appear.

It's the role of a partner more than of an adversary. It's always like that: events are played out on a conscious level of adversity, of war, of irreconcilable, incompatible ideologies, but in reality what's happening underneath it all? Who would dream that the situation can become so totally terroristic that in fact it joins its other extreme? I don't see how all this can end. It is not objectively representable.

You see in the terrorist act, as in nuclear confrontation between the Great Powers (which is, in fact, State terrorism), not an explosive phenomenon, but the point at which the social implodes. But what is "the social?" You hypostatize a complex reality in an abstraction, only to immediately send the abstraction back to the domain of unreality and proclaim its end. Isn't that a bit too easy?

But I take the social as already hypostatized. From hypostasis to ecstasy!

If the social doesn't exist, if it has never existed outside of the theoretical imagination, then it can't implode.

All right, that's entirely plausible. And yet you could also state the hypothesis that at a given moment the social did exist, but not at all as a representation of society, nor in a positive sense, but rather as a challenge to the reality of things, as a virulent myth. This is how Georges Bataille saw sociology: as a challenge to the very nature of the social and to society. History also existed in that sense. But then, that's not really existence, because when history begins to exist, very quickly there's nothing left but to treat it as an instance of jurisdiction and meaning. I have never resolved that ambiguity between being and existence; I believe it's insoluble.

5

The Challenge to the Real □ A Geoseismic View of Things □ Theory as Event □ The Art of Disappearance □ The Vortex of Implosion □ Seduction □ The Malice of the Social □ The Slipperiness of Forms □ The Evil Genius of Theory □ Extermination □ Metaphysics and Metatheory □ "Forgetting" Theory □ Myth and Serials □ The Media's Anti-Destiny

Sylvère Lotringer: *For Nietzsche, the philosopher must decipher action. He must actively evaluate the forces confronting each other in society. You conceive of the social as the depletion of an empty form. What role, then, do you attribute to theory? Must it be a virulent myth, as it is for Bataille? But if the social has become weightless, what does myth attack? And for what cause?*

Jean Baudrillard: I admit, that question of theory troubles me. Where is theory situated today? Is it completely satellized? Is it wandering in realms which no longer have anything to do with real facts? What is analysis? As long as you consider that there is a real world, then by the same token there is a possible position for theory. Let us say a dialectical position, for the sake of argument. Theory

and reality can still be exchanged at some point and that is ideality. There is after all a point of contact between the two. And then you can transform the world, and theory does transform the world. That is not at all my position anymore. Moreover, it never was. But I have never succeeded in formulating it. In my opinion, theory is simply a challenge to the real. A challenge to the world to exist. Very often a challenge to God to exist. But there is more than theory. In the beginning, religion, in its former heretical phase, was always a negation—at times a violent one—of the real world, and this is what gave it strength. After that, religion became a process of reconciliation rather than a pleasure or reality principle. This can hold true for theory as well: a theory can attempt to reconcile the real with theory itself. And then there is a principle of antagonism—an absolutely irreconcilable, almost Manichaean antagonism. You maintain a position of challenge, which is different from unreality.

Still, isn't that exactly what you do: make stakes unreal by pushing them to the limit?

But I hold no position on reality. Reality remains an unshakeable postulate toward which you can maintain a relation either of adversity or of reconciliation. The real—all things considered, perhaps it exists—no, it doesn't exist—is the insurmountable limit of theory. The real is not an objective status of things, it is the point at which theory can do nothing. That does not necessarily make of theory a failure. The real is actually a challenge to the theoretical edifice. But in my opinion theory can have no status other than that of challenging the real. At that point, theory is no longer theory, it is the event itself. There is no "reality" with respect to which theory could

become dissident or heretical, pursuing its fate other than in the objectivity of things. Rather, it's the objectivity of things we must question. What is this objectivity? In the so-called "real world," don't things always happen that way? By a divergence, a trajectory, a curve which is not at all the linear curve of evolution? We could perhaps develop a model of drifting plates, to speak in seismic terms, in the theory of catastrophes. The seismic is our form of the slipping and sliding of the referential. The end of the infrastructure. Nothing remains but shifting movements that provoke very powerful raw events. We no longer take events as revolutions or effects of the superstructure, but as underground effects of skidding, fractal zones in which things happen. Between the plates, continents do not quite fit together, they slip under and over each other. There is no more system of reference to tell us what happened to the geography of things. We can only take a geoseismic view. Perhaps this is also true in the construction of a society, a mentality, a value-system. Things no longer meet head-on; they slip past one another. Everyone claims to "be in reality." But the test of reality is not decisive. Nothing happens in the real.

Is anything happening in the theory then?

Theory dismantles the reality principle; it's not at all a means of objectivizing things in order to transform them. No, I don't believe that. At a certain point I felt—if we suppose that the real, and social practices, are indeed there—that I was launched on a trajectory that was increasingly diverging, becoming asymptotic. It would be an error to constantly try to catch hold of that zig-zagging line of reality. The only thing you can do is let it run all the way to the end. At that point, they can raise any objection they like about the relation

to reality: we are in a totally arbitrary situation, but there is an undeniable internal necessity. From that point on, theory maintains absolutely no relation with anything at all; it becomes an event in and of itself. We can no longer fix the way things are going.

I wonder if there isn't a kind of "skidding" endemic to theory. When theory manages to complete itself, following its internal logic, that's when it disappears. Its accomplishment is its abolition.

Yes, I really believe that's true. Can theory (I'm speaking here about what I've done) produce, not a model, but a utopian, metaphorical representation of an event, even as its entire cyclical trajectory is being accomplished, completed? I think there is a destiny of theory. There is a curve we can't escape. You know that my way is to make ideas appear, but as soon as they appear I immediately try to make them disappear. That's what the game has always consisted of. Strictly speaking, nothing remains but a sense of dizziness, with which you can't do anything.

Isn't that a little bit suicidal?

It's suicidal, but in a good way. If this game didn't exist, there would be no pleasure in writing, or in theorizing.

Theory, or the pleasure of disappearing...

There is an art of disappearing, a way of modulating it and making it into a state of grace. This is what I'm trying to master in theory.

It's the end of theory, at least in Canetti's sense.

Yes, in that sense.

Theory implodes.

It's possible that theory will implode, that it will absorb its own meaning, that it will end up at best mastering its disappearance. But it doesn't happen like that. We must manage to choke back the meanings we produce—which always tend to be produced. If a theory—or a poem, or any other kind of writing (it's not endemic to theory)—indeed manages to implode, to constitute a concentric vortex of implosion, then there are no other effects of meaning. Theory has an immediate effect—a very material one as well—of being a void. It's not so easy to create a void. And besides, there's catastrophe all around it. I don't see how theory and reality can go together. Can we implode in the real with charm? Without going all the way to suicide, we continually play on the process of disappearance in our relations to others. Not by making ourselves scarce, but by challenging the other to make us reappear. That's what seduction is, in the good sense. Not a process of expansion and conquest, but the implosive process of the game.

You theorize the way others go to a casino. It's your gambling side; you swoop down on a theoretical object—Foucault, for example—with a cold passion and you totally disconnect it from its own thrust...

There has to be some pleasure at stake, of course, which is neither the pleasure of prophecy nor, I think, of annihilation (destruction for destruction's sake). A perverse pleasure, in short. Theory must be played the way we said gambling was before.

The secret of gambling is that money doesn't exist. Does theory have a secret too?

The secret of theory is that truth doesn't exist. You can't confront it in any way. The only thing you can do is play with some kind of provocative logic. Truth constitutes a space that can no longer be occupied. The whole strategy is, indeed, not to occupy it, but to work around it so that others come to occupy it. It means creating a void so that others will fall into it.

If theory can no longer occupy anything, can it at least constitute a challenge to the system to bring about its own annihilation?

I have my doubts about its capacities in that respect. Those in power manage it much better than we could. The French socialists were wiped out because they couldn't see the malice of the social, which the Jesuits know so well. They should have had a more sporting idea of struggle: the slipperiness of forms. By trying to establish stability the socialists lost every time. They were always completely out of step with their system of cultural projection. The ground they fell on was quicksand. So what else could they do? What position can theory hold when it comes to thinking up events of that order? In concrete terms, I can't see any. Except perhaps in the twisting in which systems, in the simulated references they latch onto (the masses, the media), end up turning on themselves without intending to, and skidding. To me this seems pure genius, in the evil sense. It's a hypothesis, but a rather effective one.

Theory can anticipate or hasten the catastrophic aspect of things.

We could say that theory is ahead of the state of things, that it moves too fast and thus is in a position of destiny with respect to what could happen. In reality, things happen in such a way that they are always absolutely ahead of us, as Rilke said. We're always late, and therefore they are always unpredictable. No matter how, things are always much further along than theory simply by virtue of the fact that the use of discourse is in the domain of metaphor. We can't escape it. In language we are condemned to using ambiguous extrapolations. If we claim a truth, we push effects of meaning to the extreme within a model. All that theory can do is be rigorous enough to cut itself off from any system of reference, so that it will at least be current, on the scale of what it wishes to describe.

You've cut yourself off from every system of reference, but not from referentiality. What I see you describing is not a challenge to the real, but a challenge internal to theory. You don't criticize the genealogical attitude or the libidinal position, you send them spinning away like tops. You wholly embrace the movement that animates them, you amplify their concepts to the maximum, pulling them into the vortex of your own dizziness. You draw them into an endless spiral which, like the treatment of myths by Lévi-Strauss, leads them bit by bit to their own exhaustion.

That's right. Thus theory is exterminated. It no longer has any term, literally. You can't find an end for it anymore. That's one mode of disappearance.

By pushing theory to its limit the way you do, you are hyper-realizing it. You take away from theory its substance, to exhaust it, to extenuate

it in its form, and then you "forget it" as a body in suspension might be left behind. You don't even simulate the real, you play God's advocate, the evil genius of theory. More Foucauldian than Foucault, you evaporate his microphysics; more schizo than Deleuze and Guattari, you straddle their fluxes, denying them any resting point. You are not the metaphysician you would like people to take you for; you are a metatheoretician. A simulator of theory. No wonder theoreticians accuse you of being an agent provocateur. You aren't theoretical, you are "worse." You put theory into a state of grace into which you dare the world to follow you.

Theory is simulation. At least that is the usage of it I have. Both simulation and challenge. It isn't deliberate. It started that way, that's all. I don't want to give it a general form.

You catch concepts in their own trap—that is, in yours—abolishing every certainty by dint of fidelity. That is the position of humor, which can be sad, as well as tongue-in-cheek. You adopt the imperceptible insolence of the servant challenging his master (his intellectual masters) to take him seriously. Calling your bluff would mean getting entangled in your game. But to evade your challenge still amounts to lending you a hand. You "forget" those whom you vampirize, but you never allow yourself to be forgotten. You are like the media, about which one can say nothing without oneself becoming implicated in it. What allows you to understand it so well, is that you are included in it. You are both playing the same game. You both use the same strategy. You don't speak about the media, the media speaks through you. As soon as you turn on your theoretical screen, the great myths of history are turned into a soap opera, or into "serials. You make them share the fate of that TV program, "Holocaust," which you analyzed so well. [19]

I don't deny history. It's an immense toy.

Yes, if you remain glued to the screen, or fascinated by the giddiness of commutations.

Our anti-destiny is the media universe. And I don't see how to make this mental leap which would make it possible to reach the fractal or fatal zones where things would really be happening. Collectively we are behind the radio-active screen of information. It is no more possible to go behind that curtain than it is to leap over your own shadow.

You are one of the few thinkers to confront the Gorgon of the media from within, to extract from it a vision—at the risk of being paralyzed. Yet you, too, need an adversary to succumb to your own fascination. And that partner can't be the media since you are yourself behind the screen; nor can it be reality, which you have left far behind. That partner is theory. Cultivating paradox in order to revulse theory, to upset its vision, to bring it to a crisis by playing and displaying the card of its own seriousness. That, I believe, is what your pleasure is, the only one maybe, or the only socializable one, at any rate a pleasure that is as strong as fascination.

I admit that I greatly enjoy provoking that revulsion. But right away people ask, "What can you do with that?" It relies after all on an extraordinary deception—in the literal sense of the term. There is nothing to be had from it.

Paris — Rome, 1984–85

Notes

1. Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, tr. Joachim Neugroschel. New York, Seabury Press, (1972) 1978.

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3. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, tr. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman. New York: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1983.

4. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, tr. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen Lane, New York, Viking (1972) 1977.

5. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, tr. Brian Masummi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press (1980) 1987.

6. Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, tr. Mark Polizzotti, New York, Semiotext(e), (1977), 1986.

7. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, tr. Robert Hurley. New York, Zone Books, (1967) 1991.

8. Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*. New York: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1983).

9. *Ibid.* "The End of the Social" comprises the second part.

10. Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death,* London, Sage, 1993.

11. Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, New York: Vintage, 1972.

12. Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, tr. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, New York, Columbia University Press, (1969), 1990.

13. Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, tr. Brian Singer, New York, St. Martin's Press, (1979) 1990.

14. *Loving Boys*, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1980).

15. Paul Virillio, *Aesthetics of Disappearance*, tr. Philip Beitchman, New York, Semiotexte, (1980) 1991.

16. Paul Virilio/Sylvere Lotringer, *Pure War*, (New York: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 1983).

17. Sophie Calle, Follow Me, tr. Dany Barash and Danny Hatfield , Seattle, Bay Press, (1983) 1988.

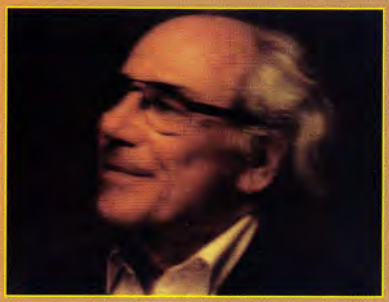
18. *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, (New York: Semiotext(e) 1980).

19. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, tr. Sheila Faria Galser, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, (1981) 1994.

FORGET FOUCAULT

Jean Baudrillard

Introduction by Sylvère Lotringer



Foucault's discourse is a mirror of the powers he describes. Its strength and its seduction lie there, and not in its 'truth' index. But what if Foucault spoke to us so well of sexuality only because its form, like that of power, is disappearing? In fact the entire analysis of power needs to be reconsidered. We are at the point where no one exercises power or wants to challenge it any longer. And there has never truly been a sexuality.

In 1976, Jean Baudrillard sent this essay to the French magazine *Critique*, where Michel Foucault was an editor. Though invited to reply, Foucault remained silent. *Oublier Foucault* (1977) made Baudrillard instantly infamous in France. Using the recently published *History of Sexuality* as the occasion, Baudrillard questions the foundations of Foucault's entire oeuvre. First published in 1987 in America, this devastating confrontation is complemented by a long dialogue with Sylvère Lotringer, "Forget Baudrillard," which clarifies some of the issues raised by Baudrillard's pamphlet and retraces the trajectory of his ideas. There is no better introduction to Baudrillard's polemical approach to culture than *Forget Foucault*, where Baudrillard dares his formidable adversary to meet the challenge of his own thought.

Internationally renowned as a 21st-century philosopher, reporter and provocateur, Jean Baudrillard has upset all existing theories of contemporary society with scathing humor and clinical precision. His major books in English are *Simulations*, *Fatal Strategies*, *Impossible Exchange* and *The Intelligence of Evil*.

SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS
distributed by The MIT Press
ISBN-10: 1-58435-041-5
ISBN-13: 978-1-58435-041-5

IN
THE SHADOW OF THE SILENT MAJORITIES
. . .OR
THE END OF THE SOCIAL

AND OTHER ESSAYS

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JEAN BAUDRILLARD

IN THE SHADOW OF THE SILENT MAJORITIES ...OR THE END OF THE SOCIAL

AND OTHER ESSAYS

Translated by Paul Foss,
Paul Patton and John Johnston

Semiotext(e), Inc.
522 Philosophy Hall
Columbia University
New York City, New York 10027

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We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the New York State Council on the Arts.

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The whole chaotic constellation of the social revolves around that spongy referent, that opaque but equally translucent reality, that nothingness: the masses. A statistical crystal ball, the masses are "swirling with currents and flows," in the image of matter and the natural elements. So at least they are represented to us. They can be "mesmerized," the social envelops them, like static electricity; but most of the time, precisely, they form an earth*, that is, they absorb all the

*Translator's Note: Throughout the text *"la masse," "faire masse"* imply a condensation of terms which allows Baudrillard to make a number of central puns and allusions. For not only does *la masse* directly refer to the physical and philosophical sense of "substance" or "matter," it can just as easily mean "the majority" (as in "the mass of workers") or even the electrical usage of an "earth"; hence *faire masse* can simultaneously mean *to form a mass, to form an earth* or *to form a majority.*

electricity of the social and political and neutralise it forever. They are neither good conductors of the political, nor good conductors of the social, nor good conductors of meaning in general. Everything flows through them, everything magnetises them, but diffuses throughout them without leaving a trace. And, ultimately, the appeal to the masses has always gone unanswered. They do not radiate; on the contrary, they absorb all radiation from the outlying constellations of State, History, Culture, Meaning. They are inertia, the strength of inertia, the strength of the neutral.

In this sense, the mass is characteristic of our modernity, as a highly implosive phenomenon, irreducible for any traditional theory and practice, even perhaps for any theory and practice at all.

According to their imaginary representation, the masses drift somewhere between passivity and wild spontaneity, but always as a potential energy, a reservoir of the social and of social energy; today a mute referent, tomorrow, when they speak up and cease to be the "silent majority," a protagonist of history — now, in fact, the masses have no history to write, neither

past nor future, they have no virtual energies to release, nor any desire to fulfill: their strength is *actual*, in the present, and sufficient unto itself. It consists in their silence, in their capacity to absorb and neutralise, already superior to any power acting upon them. It is a specific inertial strength, whose effectivity differs from that of all those schemas of production, radiation and expansion according to which our imaginary functions, even in its wish to destroy those same schemas. An unacceptable and unintelligible figure of implosion (is this still a "process"?) — stumbling block to all our systems of meaning, against which they summon all their resistance, and screening, with a renewed outbreak of signification, with a blaze of signifiers, the central collapse of meaning.

The social void is scattered with interstitial objects and crystalline clusters which spin around and coalesce in a cerebral chiaroscuro. So is the mass, an *in vacuo* aggregation of individual particles, refuse of the social and of media impulses: an opaque nebula whose

growing density absorbs all the surrounding energy and light rays, to collapse finally under its own weight. Á black hole which engulfs the social.

This is, therefore, exactly the reverse of a "sociological" understanding. Sociology can only depict the expansion of the social and its vicissitudes. It survives only on the positive and definitive hypothesis of the social. The reabsorption, the implosion of the social escapes it. The hypothesis of the death of the social is also that of its own death.

The term "mass" is not a concept. It is a leitmotif of political demagogy, a soft, sticky, lumpenanalytical notion. A good sociology would attempt to surpass it with "more subtle" categories: socio-professional ones, categories of class, cultural status, etc. Wrong: it is by prowling around these soft and acritical notions (like "mana" once was) that one can go further than intelligent critical sociology. Besides, it will be noticed retrospectively that the concepts "class," "social relations," "power," "status," "institution" — and "social" itself — all those too explicit concepts which are the glory of the legitimate sciences, have also

only ever been muddled notions themselves, but notions upon which agreement has nevertheless been reached for mysterious ends: those of preserving a certain code of analysis.

To want to specify the term "mass" is a mistake — it is to provide meaning for that which has none. One says: "the mass of workers." But the mass is never that of the workers, nor of any other social subject or object. The "peasant masses" of old were not in fact masses: only those form a mass who are freed from their symbolic bondage, "released" (only to be caught in infinite "networks") and destined to be no more than the innumerable end points of precisely those same theoretical models which do not succeed in integrating them and which finally only produce them as statistical refuse. The mass is without attribute, predicate, quality, reference. This is its difinition, or its radical lack of definition. It has no sociological "reality." It has nothing to do with any *real* population, body or specific social aggregate. Any attempt to qualify it only seeks to transfer it back to sociology and rescue it from

this indistinctness which is not even that of equivalence (the unlimited sum of equivalent individuals: 1+1+1 — such is the sociological definition), but that of the *neutral*, that is to say *neither one nor the other* (ne-uter).

There is no longer any polarity between the one and the other in the mass. This is what causes that vacuum and inwardly collapsing effect in all those systems which survive on the separation and distinction of poles (two, or many in more complex systems). This is what makes the circulation of meaning within the mass impossible: it is instantaneously dispersed, like atoms in a void. This is also what makes it impossible for the mass to be *alienated*, since neither the one nor *the other* exist there any longer.

A speechless mass for every hollow spokesman without a past. Admirable conjunction, between those who have nothing to say, and the masses, who do not speak. Ominous emptiness of all discourse. No hysteria or potential fascism, but simulation by precipitation of every lost referential. Black box of every referential, of every uncaptured meaning, of impossible history, of untraceable systems of representation, the mass is what remains when the social has been

completely removed.

Regarding the impossibility of making meaning circulate among the masses, the best example is God. The masses have hardly retained anything but the image of him, never the Idea. They have never been affected by the Idea of God, which has remained a matter for the clergy, nor by anguish over sin and personal salvation. What they have retained is the enchantment of saints and martyrs; the last judgment; the Dance of Death; sorcery; the ceremony and spectacle of the Church; the immanence of ritual — the contrast to the transcendence of the Idea. They were and have remained pagans, in their way, never haunted by the Supreme Authority, but surviving on the small change of images, superstition and the devil. Degraded practices with regard to the spiritual wager of faith? Indeed. It is their particular way, through the banality of rituals and profane simulacra, of refusing the categorical imperative of morality and faith, the sublime imperative of *meaning*, which they have always re-

jected. It isn't that they have not been able to attain the higher enlightenment of religion: they have ignored it. They don't refuse to die for a faith, for a cause, for an idol. What they refuse is transçendence; the uncertainty, the difference, the waiting, the asceticism which constitute the sublime exaction of religion. For the masses, the Kingdom of God has always been already here on earth, in the pagan immanence of images, in the spectacle of it presented by the Church. Fantastic distortion of the religious principle. The masses have absorbed religion by their sorcerous and spectacular manner of practising it.

All the great schemas of reason have suffered the same fate. They have only traced their trajectory, they have only followed the thread of their history along the thin edge of the social stratum bearing meaning (and in particular of the stratum bearing social meaning), and on the whole they have only penetrated into the masses at the cost of their misappropriation, of their radical distortion. So it was with Historical Reason, Political Reason, Cultural Reason, Revolutionary Reason — so even with the very Reason of the Social, the most interesting since this seems inherent to the masses, and appears to

have produced them throughout its evolution. Are the masses the "mirror of the social"? No, they don't reflect the social, nor are they reflected in the social — it is the mirror of the social which shatters to pieces on them.

Even this image is not right, since it still evokes the idea of a hard substance, of an opaque resistance. Rather, the masses function as a gigantic black hole which inexorably inflects, bends and distorts all energy and light radiation approaching it: an implosive sphere, in which the curvature of spaces accelerates, in which all dimensions curve back on themselves and "involve" to the point of annihilation, leaving in their stead only a sphere of potential engulfment.

The Abyss of Meaning

So it is with information.

Whatever its political, pedagogical, cultural content, the plan is always to get some meaning across, to keep the masses *within reason;* an imperative to produce meaning that takes the form of the constantly repeated imperative to moralise

information: to better inform, to better socialise, to raise the cultural level of the masses, etc. Nonsense: the masses scandalously resist this imperative of rational communication. They are given meaning: they want spectacle. No effort has been able to convert them to the seriousness of the content, nor even to the seriousness of the code. Messages are given to them, they only want some sign, they idolise the play of signs and stereotypes, they idolise any content so long as it resolves itself into a spectacular sequence. What they reject is the "dialectic" of meaning. Nor is anything served by alleging that they are mystified. This is always a hypocritical hypothesis which protects the intellectual complaisance of the producers of meaning: the masses spontaneously aspire to the natural light of reason. This in order to evade the reverse hypothesis, namely that it is in complete "freedom" that the masses oppose their refusal of meaning and their will to spectacle to the ultimatum of meaning. They distrust, as with death, this transparency and this *political* will. They scent the simplifying terror which is behind the ideal hegemony of meaning, and they react in their own way, by reducing all articulate discourse to a single irra-

tional and baseless dimension, where signs lose their meaning and peter out in fascination: the spectacular.

Once again, it is not a question of mystification: it is a question of their own exigencies, of an explicit and positive counter-strategy — the task of absorbing and annihilating culture, knowledge, power, the social. An immemorial task, but one which assumes its full scope today. A deep antagonism which forces the inversion of received scenarios: it is no longer meaning which would be the ideal line of force in our societies, that which eludes it being only waste intended for reabsorption some time or other — on the contrary, it is meaning which is only an ambiguous and inconsequential accident, an effect due to ideal convergence of a perspective space at any given moment (History, Power, etc.) and which, moreover, has only ever really concerned a tiny fraction and superficial layer of our "societies." And this is true of individuals also: we are only episodic conductors of meaning, for in the main, and profoundly, we *form a mass,* living most of the time in panic or haphazardly, above and beyond any meaning.

Now, with this inverse hypothesis, every-

thing changes.

Take one example from a thousand concerning this contempt for meaning, the folklore of silent passivities.

On the night of Klaus Croissant's extradition, the TV transmitted a football match in which France played to qualify for the world cup. Some hundreds of people demonstrated outside la Sante, a few barristers ran to and fro in the night; twenty million people spent their evening glued to the screen. An explosion of popular joy when France won. Consternation and indignation of the illuminati over this scandalous indifference. *La Monde:* "9 pm. At that time the German barrister had already been taken out of la Sante. A few minutes later, Rocheteau scored the first goal." Melodrama of indignation.[1] Not a single query about the mystery of this indifference. One same reason is always invoked: the manipulation of the masses by power, their mystification by football. In any case, this indifference *ought* not to be, hence it has nothing to

tell us. In other words, the "silent majority" is even stripped of its indifference, it has no right even that this be recognised and imputed to it, even this apathy must have been imposed on it by power.

What contempt behind this interpretation! Mystified, the masses are not allowed their own behavior. Occasionally, they are conceded a revolutionary spontaneity by which they glimpse the "rationality of their own desire," that yes, but God protect us from their silence and their inertia. It is exactly this indifference, however, that demands to be analysed in its *positive* brutality, instead of being dismissed as white magic, or as a magic alienation which always turns the multitudes away from their revolutionary vocation.

Moreover, how does it succeed in turning them away? Can one ask questions about the strange fact that, after several revolutions and a century or two of political apprenticeship, in spite of the newspapers, the trade unions, the parties, the intellectuals and all the energy put into educating and mobilising the people, there are still (and it will be exactly the same in ten or twenty years) a thousand persons who stand up and twenty million who remain "passive" — and not

only passive, but who, in all good faith and with glee and without even asking themselves why, frankly prefer a football match to a human and political drama? It is curious that this proven fact has never succeeded in making political analysis shift ground, but on the contrary reinforces it in its vision of an omnipotent, manipulatory power, and a mass prostrate in an unintelligible coma. Now none of this is true, and both the above are a deception: power manipulates nothing, the masses are neither mislead nor mystified. Power is only too happy to make football bear a facile responsibility, even to take upon itself the diabolical responsibility for stupefying the masses. This comforts it in its illusion of being power, and leads away from the much more dangerous fact that this indifference of the masses is their true, their only practice, that there is no other ideal of them to imagine, nothing in this to deplore, but everything to analyse as the brute fact of a collective retaliation and of a refusal to participate in the recommended ideals, however enlightened.

What is at stake in the masses lies elsewhere. We might as well take note and recognise that any hope of revolution, the whole promise of the social and of social change has only been able to function up till now thanks to this dodging of the issue, this fantastic denial. We might as well begin again, as Freud did in the psychic order,[2] from this remainder, from this blind sediment, from this waste or refuse of meaning, from this unanalysed and perhaps unanalysable fact (there is a good reason why such a Copernican Revolution has never been undertaken in the political universe: it is the whole political order that is in danger of paying the price).

Rise and Fall of the Political

The political and the social seem inseparable to us, twin constellations, since at least the French Revolution, under the sign (determinant or not) of the economic. But for us today, this undoubtedly is only true of their simultaneous decline.

When the political emerged during the Renaissance from the religious and ecclesiastic spheres, to win reknown with Machiavelli, it was at first only a pure game of signs, a pure strategy which was not burdened with any social or historical "truth," but, on the contrary, played on the absence of truth (as did later the worldly strategy of the Jesuits on the absence of God). To begin with, the political space belonged to the same order as that of Renaissance mechanical theatre, or of perspective space in painting, which were invented at the same time. Its form was that of a game, not of a system of representation — semiurgy and strategy, not ideology — its function was one of virtuosity, not of truth (hence the game, subtle and a corollary to this, of Balthazar Gracian in *Homme de Cour*). The cynicism and immorality of Machiavellian politics lay there: not as the vulgar understanding has it in the unscrupulous usage of means, but in the offhand disregard for ends. Now, as Nietzsche well knew, it is in this disregard for a social, psychological, historical truth, in this exercise of simulacra as such, that the maximum of political energy is found, where the political is a game and is not yet given a reason.

It is since the eighteenth century, and particularly since the Revolution, that the political has taken a decisive turn. It took upon itself a social reference, the social invested it. At the same time, it entered into representation, its performance became dominated by representative mechanisms (theatre pursued a parallel fate: it became a representative theatre — likewise for perspective space: machinery at the start, it became the place where a truth of space and of representation was inscribed). The political scene became that of the evocation of a fundamental signified: the people, the will of the people, etc. It no longer worked on signs alone, but on meaning; henceforth summoned to best signify the real it expressed, summoned to become transparent, to moralise itself and to respond to the social ideal of good representation. For a long time, nevertheless, a balance came into play between the proper sphere of the political and the forces reflected in it: the social, the historical, the economic. Undoubtedly this balance corresponds to the golden age of bourgeois represen-

tative systems (constitutionality: eighteenth-century England, the United States of America, the France of bourgeois revolutions, the Europe of 1848).

It is with marxist thought, in its successive developments, that the end of the political and of its particular energy was inaugurated. Here began the absolute hegemony of the social and the economic, and the compulsion, on the part of the political, to become the legislative, institutional, executive mirror of the social. The autonomy of the political was inversely proportional to the growing hegemony of the social.

Liberal thought always thrives on a kind of nostalgic dialectic between the two, but socialist thought, revolutionary thought openly postulates a dissolution of the political at some point in history, in the final transparency of the social.

The social won. But, at this point of generalisation, of saturation, where it is no more than the zero degree of the political, at this point of absolute reference, of omnipresence and diffraction in all the interstices of physical and mental space, what becomes of the social itself? It is the sign of its end: the energy of the social is reversed, its

specificity is lost, its historical quality and its ideality vanish in favour of a configuration where not only the political becomes volatilised, but where the social itself no longer has any name. Anonymous. THE MASS. THE MASSES.

The Silent Majority

The dwindling of the political from a pure strategic arrangement to a system of representation, then to the present scenario of neo-figuration, where the system continues under the same manifold signs but where these no longer represent anything and no longer have their "equivalent" in a "reality" or a real social substance: there is no longer any political investiture because there is no longer even any social referent of the classical kind (a people, a class, a proletariat, objective conditions) to lend force to effective political signs. Quite simply, there is no longer any social signified to give force to a political signifier.

The only referent which still functions is that of the silent majority. All contemporary

systems function on this nebulous entity, on this floating substance whose existence is no longer social, but statistical, and whose only mode of appearance is that of the survey. A simulation on the horizon of the social, or rather on whose horizon the social has already disappeared.

That the silent majority (or the masses) is an imaginary referent does not mean they don't exist. It means that *their representation is no longer possible.* The masses are no longer a referent because they no longer belong to the order of representation. They don't express themselves, they are surveyed. They don't reflect upon themselves, they are tested. The referendum (and the media are a constant referendum of directed questions and answers) has been substituted for the political referent. Now polls, tests, the referendum, media are devices which no longer belong to a dimension of representations, but to one of simulation. They no longer have a referent in view, but a model. Here, revolution in relation to the devices of classical sociality (of which elections, institutions, the instances of representation, and even of repression, still form a part) is complete: in all this, social meaning still flows

between one pole and another, in a dialectical structure which allows for a political stake and contradictions.

Everything changes with the device of simulation. In the couple "silent majority/survey" for example, there is no longer any pole nor any differential term, hence no electricity of the social either: it is short-circuited by the confusing of poles, in a total circularity of signalling (exactly as is the case with molecular communication and with the substance it informs in DNA and the genetic code). This is the ideal form of simulation: collapse of poles, orbital circulation of models (this is also the matrix of every implosive process).

Bombarded with stimuli, messages and tests, the masses are simply an opaque, blind stratum, like those clusters of stellar gas known only through analysis of their light spectrum — radiation spectrum equivalent to statistics and surveys — but precisely: it can no longer be a question of expression or representation, but only of the simulation of an ever inexpressible and unexpressed social. This is the meaning of

their silence. But this silence is paradoxical — it isn't a silence which does not speak, it is a silence which *refuses to be spoken for in its name.* And in this sense, far from being a form of alienation, it is an absolute weapon.

No one can be said to represent the silent majority, and that is its revenge. The masses are no longer an authority to which one might refer as one formerly referred to class or to the people. Withdrawn into their silence, they are no longer (a) *subject* (especially not to — or of — history), hence they can no longer be spoken for, articulated, represented, nor pass through the political "mirror stage" and the cycle of imaginary identifications. One sees what strength results from this: no longer being (a) subject, *they can no longer be alienated* — neither in their own language (they have none), nor in any other which would pretend to speak for them. The end of revolutionary convictions. For these have always speculated on the possibility of the masses, or the proletariat, denying themselves as such. But the mass is not a place of negativity or explosion, it is a place of absorption and implosion.

Inaccessible to schemas of liberation, revolution and historicity; this is its mode of defense, its

particular mode of retaliation. Model of simulation and imaginary referent for use by a phantom political class which now no longer knows what kind of "power" it wields over it, the mass is at the same time the death, the end of this political process thought to rule over it. And into it is engulfed the political as will and representation.

The strategy of power has long seemed founded on the apathy of the masses. The more passive they were, the more secure it was. But this logic is only characteristic of the bureaucratic and centralist phase of power. And it is this which today turns against it: the inertia it has fostered becomes the sign of its own death. That is why it seeks to reverse its strategies: from passivity to participation, from silence to speech. But it is too late. The threshold of the "critical mass," that of the involution of the social through inertia, is exceeded.[3]

Everywhere the masses are encouraged to speak, they are urged to live socially, electorally, organisationally, sexually, in participation, in festival, in free speech, etc. The spectre must be exorcised, it must pronounce its name. Nothing shows more dramatically that the only genuine problem today is the silence of the mass, the

silence of the silent majority.

All reserves are exhausted in maintaining this mass in controlled emulsion and in preventing it from falling back into its panic-inducing inertia and its silence. No longer being under the reign of will or representation, it falls under the province of diagnosis, or divination pure and simple — whence the universal reign of information and statistics: we must ausculate it, sound it out, unearth some oracle from within it. Whence the mania for seduction, solicitude and all the solicitation surrounding it. Whence prediction by resonance, the effects of forecasting and of an illusory mass outlook: "The French people think . . . The majority of Germans disapprove . . . All England thrilled to the birth of the Prince . . . etc." — a mirror held out for an ever blind, ever absent recognition.

Whence that bombardment of signs which the mass is thought to re-echo. It is interrogated by converging waves, by light or linguistic stimuli, exactly like distant stars or nuclei bombarded with particles in a cyclotron. Information is exactly this. Not a mode of communication or

of meaning, but a mode of constant emulsion, of input-output and of controlled chain reactions, exactly as in atomic simulation chambers. We must free the "energy" of the mass in order to fabricate the "social."

But it is a contradictory process, for information and security, in all their forms, instead of intensifying or creating the "social relation," are on the contrary entropic processes, modalities of the end of the social.

It is thought that the masses may be structured by injecting them with information, their captive social energy is believed to be released by means of information and messages (today it is no longer the institutional grid as such, rather it is the quantity of information and the degree of media exposure which measures socialisation). Quite the contrary. Instead of transforming the mass into energy, information produces even more mass. Instead of informing as it claims, instead of giving form and structure, information neutralises even further the "social field"; more and more it creates an inert mass impermeable to the classical institutions of the social, and to the very contents of information. Today, replacing the fission of symbolic structures by the social

and its rational violence, is the fission of the social itself by the "irrational" violence of media and information — the final result being precisely an atomised, nuclearised, molecularised mass, the result of two centuries of accelerated socialisation and which brings it irremediably to an end.

The mass is only mass because its social energy has already frozen. It is a cold reservoir, capable of absorbing and neutralising any hot energy. It resembles those half-dead systems into which more energy is injected than is withdrawn, those paid-out deposits exorbitantly maintained in a state of artificial exploitation.

Immense energy is expended in mitigating the tendentially declining rate of political investment and the absolute fragility of the social principle of reality, in maintaining this simulation of the social and in preventing it from totally imploding. And the system risks being swallowed up by it.

Basically, what goes for commodities also goes for meaning. For a long time capital only

had to produce goods; consumption ran by itself. Today it is necessary to produce consumers, to produce demand, and this production is infinitely more costly than that of goods (for the most part, and above all since 1929, the social arose out of this crisis of demand: the production of demand largely overlaps the production of the social itself).[4] For a long time it was enough for power to produce meaning (political, ideological, cultural, sexual), and the demand followed; it absorbed supply and still surpassed it. Meaning was in short supply, and all the revolutionaries offered themselves to produce still more. Today, everything has changed: no longer is meaning in short supply, it is produced everywhere, in ever increasing quantities — it is demand which is weakening. And it is the *production of this demand for meaning* which has become crucial for the system. Without this demand for, without this susceptibility to, without this minimal participation in meaning, power is nothing but an empty simulacrum and an isolated effect of perspective. Here, too, the production of demand is infinitely more costly than the production of meaning itself. Beyond a certain point, it is impossible, all the energy mustered by the system

will no longer be enough. The demand for objects and for services can always be artificially produced, at a high, but accessible cost; the system has proved this. The desire for meaning, when it is in short supply, and the desire for reality, when it is weakening everywhere, cannot be made good and together threaten total ruin.

The mass absorbs all the social energy, but no longer refracts it. It absorbs every sign and every meaning, but no longer reflects them. It absorbs all messages and digests them. For every question put to it, it sends back a tautological and circular response.[5] It never participates. Inundated by flows and tests, it *forms a mass or earth;* it is happy to be a good conductor of flows, but of any flow, a good conductor of information, but of any information, a good conductor of norms, but of any norm, and thereby to reflect the social in its absolute transparency, to give place only to the effects of power and of the social, the latter like constellations fluctuating around this imperceptible nucleus.

The mass is dumb like beasts, and its silence is equal to the silence of beasts. Despite having been surveyed to death (and the constant solicitation, the information, to which it is submitted is

equivalent to experimental torture on laboratory animals), it says neither whether the truth is to the left or to the right, nor whether it prefers revolution or repression. It is without truth and without reason. It has been attributed with every arbitrary remark. It is without conscience and without unconscious.

This silence is unbearable. It is the unknown of the political equation, the unknown which annuls every political equation. Everybody questions it, but never as silence, always to make it speak. But the inertial strength of the masses is unfathomable: literally, no "sounding" or survey will cause it to become evident, since their effect is to blanket it out. A silence which topples the political and the social into the hyperreality with which we associate it. For if the political seeks to "pick up" the masses in a social echo or simulation chamber (the media, information), it is the masses who in return become a huge echo or simulation chamber of the social. Manipulation has never existed. The game is played on both sides, with the same weapons, and who can say which is winning today: the simulation power

performs on the masses, or the inverse simulation held out by the masses for power to be swallowed up in.

Neither Subject Nor Object

The mass realises that paradox of being both an object of simulation (it only exists at the point of convergence of all the media waves which depict it) and a subject of simulation, capable of refracting all the models and of emulating them by hypersimulation (its hyperconformity, an immanent form of humour).

The mass realises that paradox of not being a subject, a group-subject, but of not being an object either. Every effort to make a subject of it (real or mythical) runs head on into the glaring impossibility of an autonomous change in consciousness. Every effort to make an object of it, to treat and analyse it as brute matter, according to objective laws, runs head on into the contrary fact that it is impossible to manipulate the masses in any determinate way, or to understand them in terms of elements, relations, structures and wholes. All manipulation plunges, gets sucked into the mass, absorbed, distorted, reversibilised.

It is impossible to know where it goes; most likely it goes round and round in an endless cycle, foiling every intention on the part of the manipulators. No analysis would know how to contain this diffuse, decentered, Brownian, molecular reality: the notion of object vanishes just as "matter," in the ultimate analysis, vanishes on the horizon of microphysics — it is impossible to comprehend the latter as object once that infinitesimal point is reached where the subject of observation is himself annulled. No more object of knowledge, no more subject of knowledge.

The mass brings about the same insoluble boundary situation in the field of the "social". No longer is it objectifiable (in political terms: no longer is it representable), and it annuls any subject who would claim to comprehend it (in political terms: it annuls anybody who would claim to represent it). Only surveys and statistics (like the law of large numbers and the calculus of probabilities in mathematical physics) can account for it, but one knows that this incantation, this meteoric ritual of statistics and surveys has

no real object, especially not the masses whom it is thought to express. It simply simulates an elusive object, but whose absence is nevertheless intolerable. It "produces" it in the form of anticipated responses, of circular signals which seem to circumscribe its existence and to bear witness to its will. Floating signs — such are surveys — instantaneous signs, intended for manipulation, and whose conclusions can be interchanged. Everybody knows the profound indeterminateness which rules over statistics (the calculus of probabilities or large numbers also correspond to an indeterminateness themselves, to a "Plimsoll line" of the concept of matter, to which again hardly any notion of "objective law" corresponds).

Besides, it is not certain that the procedures of scientific experimentation in the so-called exact sciences have much more truthfulness than surveys and statistics. In any discipline whatsoever, the coded, controlled, "objective" form of inquiry only allows for this circular type of truth, from which the very object aimed at is excluded. In any case, it is possible to think that the uncertainty surrounding this enterprise of the objective determination of the world remains total and that

even matter and the inanimate, when summoned to respond, in the various sciences of nature, in the same terms and according to the same procedures as the masses and "social" beings in statistics and surveys, also send back the same conforming signals, the same coded responses, with the same exasperating, endless conformity, only to better escape, in the last instance, exactly like the masses, any definition as object.

There would thus be a fantastic irony about "matter," and every object of science, just as there is a fantastic irony about the masses in their muteness, or in their statistical discourse so conforming to the questions put to them, akin to the eternal irony of feminity of which Hegel speaks — the irony of a false fidelity, of an excessive fidelity to the law, an ultimately impenetrable simulation of passivity and obedience, and which annuls in return the law governing them, in accordance with the immortal example of Soldier Schweik.

From this would follow, in the literal sense, a *pataphysics* or science of imaginary solutions, a science of the simulation or hypersimulation of

an exact, true, objective world, with its universal laws, including the delirium of those who interpret it according to these laws. The masses and their involuntary humor would introduce us to a pataphysics of the social which ultimately would relieve us of all that cumbersome metaphysics of the social.

This contradicts all received views of the process of truth, but perhaps the latter is only an illusion of judgment. The scientist cannot believe that matter, or living beings, do not respond "objectively" to the questions he puts, or that they respond to them *too* objectively for his questions to be sound. This hypothesis alone seems absurd and unthinkable to him. He will never accept it. He will never leave the enchanted and simulated circle of his enquiry.

The same hypothesis applies everywhere, the same *axiom of credibility*. The adman cannot but believe that people believe in it — however, slightly, that is, that a minimal probability exists of the message reaching its goal and being decoded according to its meaning. Any principle of uncertainty is excluded. If it turned out that the refractive index of this message in the recipient were nil, advertising would instantly collapse. It

only surveys on that belief which it accords itself (this is the same wager as that of science about the objectivity of the world) and which it doesn't try too hard to verify, in terror that the contrary hypothesis might also be true, namely that the great majority of advertising messages never reach their destination, that the viewing public no longer differentiates between the contents, which are refracted in the void. The medium alone functions as an atmospheric effect and acts as spectacle and fascination. THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE, McLuhan prophesied: a formula characteristic of the present phase, the "cool" phase of the whole mass media culture, that of a freezing, neutralisation of every message in a vacuous ether. That of a glaciation of meaning. Critical thought judges and chooses, it produces differences, it is by selection that it presides over meaning. The masses, on the other hand, do not choose, they do not produce differences but a lack of differentiation — they retain a fascination for the medium which they prefer to the critical exigencies of the message. For fascination is not dependent on meaning, it is proportional to the disaffection of meaning. It is obtained by neutralising the message in favour of the medium, by

neutralising the idea of favour of the idol, by neutralising the truth in favour of the simulacrum. It is at this level that the media function. Fascination is their law, and their specific violence, a massive violence denying communication by meaning in favour of another mode of communication. Which one?

For us an untenable hypothesis: that it may be possible to communicate *outside the medium of meaning*, that the very intensity of communication may be proportional to the reabsorption of meaning and to its collapse. For it is not meaning or the increase of meaning which gives tremendous pleasure, but its neutralisation which fascinates (cf. *Witz*, the operation of wit, in *L'Echange Symbolique et la Mort*). And not by some death drive, which implies that life is still on the side of meaning, but quite simply by defiance, by an allergy to reference, to the message, to the code and to every category of the linguistic enterprise, by a repudiation of all this in favor of imploding the sign in fascination (no longer any signifier or signified: absorption of the poles of signification). None of the guardians of meaning

can understand this: the whole morality of meaning rises up against fascination.

The political sphere also only survives by a credibility hypothesis, namely that the masses are permeable to action and to discourse, that they hold an opinion, that they are present behind the surveys and statistics. It is at this price alone that the political class can still believe that it speaks and that it is politically heard. Even though the political has long been the agent of nothing but spectacle on the screen of private life. Digested as a form of entertainment, half-sports, half-games (see the winning ticket in American elections, or election evenings on radio or TV); like those old comedies of manners, at once both fascinating and ludicrous. For some time now, the electoral game has been akin to TV game shows in the consciousness of the people. The latter, who have always served as alibi and as supernumerary on the political stage, avenge themselves by treating as a *theatrical* performance the political scene and its actors. The people have become a *public*. It is the football match or film or cartoon which serve as models for their perception of the political sphere. The people even enjoy day to day, like a home movie, the fluctuations of

their own opinions in the daily opinion polls. Nothing in all this engages any responsibility. At no time are the masses politically or historically engaged in a conscious manner. They have only ever done so out of perversity, in complete irresponsibility. Nor is this a flight from politics, but rather the effect of an implacable antagonism between the class (caste?) which bears the social the political, culture—master of time and history, and the un(in)formed, residual, senseless mass. The former continually seeks to perfect the reign of meaning, to invest, to saturate the field of the social, the other continually distorts every effect of meaning, neutralises or diminishes them. In this confrontation, the winner is not at all the one you might think.

This can be seen in the shift in value from history to the humdrum, from the public sphere to the private sphere. Up till the 60's, history leads on the downbeat: the private, the ordinary is only the dark side of the political sphere. At best a dialectic plays between the two, and it is to be hoped that one day the ordinary, like the individual, will shine over history, in the universal. But

in the meantime, the withdrawal of the masses into their domestic sphere, their refuge from history, politics and the universal, and their absorption into an idiotic humdrum existence of consumption is only to be lamented (happily they work, which preserves for them an "objective" historical status, while awaiting a change in consciousness). Today, there is a reversal of the downbeat and the upbeat: one begins to forsee that ordinary life, men in their banality, could well not be the insignificant side of history — better: that withdrawing into the private could well be *a direct defiance of the political*, a form of actively resisting political manipulation. The roles are reversed: it is the banality of life, everyday life, everything formerly branded as petit-bourgeois, abject and apolitical (including sex) which becomes the downbeat, with history and the political unfolding their abstract eventuality elsewhere.

A staggering hypothesis. The depoliticised masses would not be this side of the political, but beyond it. The private, the unnamable, the ordinary, the insignificant, petty wiles, petty perversions etc., would not be this side of representation, but beyond it. In their "naive" practice

(and without having waited for analysis of the "end of the political"), the masses would sentence the political to annihilation, they would be spontaneously transpolitical like they are translinguistic in their language.

But take care! Out of this private and asocial universe, which does not enter into a dialectic of representation and of transcendence towards the universal, out of this involutive sphere which is opposed to all revolution from the top and refuses to play the game, some would like to make a new source of revolutionary energy (in particular in its sexual and desire version). They would like to give it meaning and to reinstate it in its very banality, as historical negativity. Exaltation of micro-desires, small differences, unconscious practices, anonymous marginalities. Final somersault of the intellectuals to exalt insignficance, to promote non-sense into the order of sense. And to transfer it back to political reason. Banality, inertia, apoliticism used to be fascist; they are in the process of becoming revolutionary — without changing meaning, without ceasing to have meaning. Micro-revolution of banality, transpolitics of desire — one more trick of the "liberationists". The denial

of meaning has no meaning.

From Resistance to Hyperconformity

The emergence of silent majorities must be located within the entire cycle of historical resistance to the social. Resistance to work of course, but also resistance to medicine, resistance to schooling, resistance to security, resistance to information. Official history only records the uninterrupted progress of the social, relegating to the obscurity reserved for former cultures, as barbarous relics, everything not coinciding with this glorious advent. In fact, contrary to what one might believe (that the social has definitely won, that its movement is irreversible, that consensus *upon* the social is total), resistance to the social in all its forms has progressed *even more rapidly than the social.* It has merely taken other forms than the primitive and violent ones which were subsequently absorbed (the social is alive and well, thank you, only idiots run away from writing and vaccination and the benefits of security). Those frontal resistances still corres-

ponded to an equally frontal and violent period of socialisation, and came from traditional groups seeking to preserve their own culture, their original cultures. It was not the mass in them which resisted, but, on the contrary, differentiated structures, in opposition to the homogeneous and abstract model of the social.

This type of resistance can still be discovered in the "two-step flow of communication" which American sociology has analysed: the mass does not at all constitute a passive receiving structure for media messages, whether they be political, cultural or advertising. Microgroups and individuals, far from taking their cue from a uniform and imposed decoding, decode messages in their own way. They intercept them (through leaders) and transpose them (second level), contrasting the dominant code with their own particular sub-codes, finally recycling everything passing into their own cycle, exactly like primitive natives recycle western money in their symbolic circulation (the Siane of New Guinea) or like the Corsicans recycle universal suffrage and elections in their clan rivalry strategies. This *ruse* is universal: it is a way of redirecting, of absorbing, of victoriously salvaging the material dif-

fused by the dominant culture. It is this which also governs the "magic" usage of the doctor and medicine among the "underdeveloped" masses. Commonly reduced to an antiquated and irrational mentality, we should read in this, on the contrary, an offensive practice, a rediversion by excess, an unanalysed but conscious rejection "without knowing it" of the profound devastation wreaked by rational medicine.

But this is still the feat of groups traditionally structured by identity and significance. Quite different is the refusal of socialisation which comes *from the mass*; from an innumerable, unnamable and anonymous group, whose strength comes from its very destructuration and inertia. Thus, in the case of the media, traditional resistance consists of reinterpreting messages according to the group's own code and for its own ends. The masses, on the contrary, accept everything and redirect everything *en bloc* into the spectacular, without requiring any other code, without requiring any meaning, ultimately without resistance, but making everything slide into an

indeterminate sphere which is not even that of non-sense, but that of overall manipulation/fascination.

It has always been thought — this is the very ideology of the mass media — that it is the media which envelop the masses. The secret of manipulation has been sought in a frantic semiology of the mass media. But it has been overlooked, in this naive logic of communication, that *the masses are a stronger medium than all the media,* that it is the former who envelop and absorb the latter — or at least there is no priority of one over the other. The mass and the media are one single process. Mass(age) is the message.

So it is with movies, whose inventors initially dreamed of a rational, documentary, *social* medium, but which very quickly and permanently swung towards the imaginary.

So it is with technology, science, and knowledge. Condemned to a "magical" practice and to a "spectacular" consumption. So it is with consumption itself. To their amazement, economists have never been able to rationalise consumption, the seriousness of their "theory of need" and the general consensus upon the discourse of utility

being taken for granted. But this is because the practice of the masses very quickly had nothing (or perhaps never had anything) to do with needs. They have turned consumption into a dimension of status and prestige, of useless keeping up with the Joneses or simulation, of potlatch which surpassed use value in every way. A desperate attempt has been made from all sides (official propaganda, consumer societies, ecologues and sociologues) to instil into them sensible spending and functional calculation in matters of consumption, but it is hopeless. For it is by sign/value and the frantic stake in sign/value (which economists, even when they try to integrate it as a variable, have always seen as upsetting economic reason), that *the masses block the economy*, resist the "objective" imperative of needs and the rational balancing of behaviors and ends. Sign/value against use value, this is already a distortion of political economy. And let it not be said that all this ultimately profits exchange value, that is to say the system. For if the system does well out of this game, and even encourages it (the masses "alienated" in gadgets, etc.), this isn't the main thing, and what this slipping, this skidding initiates in the long term — already initiates — is

the end of the economic, cut off from all its rational definitions by the excessive, magic, spectacular, fraudulent and nearly parodic use the masses put it to. An asocial use, resistant to all pedagogies, to all socialist education — an aberrant use whereby the masses (us, you, everybody) have already crossed over to the other side of political economy. They haven't waited for future revolutions nor theories which claim to "liberate" them by a "dialectical" movement. They know that there is no liberation, and that a system is abolished only by pushing it into hyperlogic, by forcing it into an excessive practice which is equivalent to a brutal amortization. "You want us to consume — O.K., let's consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose."

So it is with medicine: frontal resistance (which hasn't disappeared everywhere) has been replaced by a more subtle form of subversion; an excessive, uncontrollable consumption of medicine, a panicked conformity to health injunctions. A fantastic escalation in medical consumption which completely corrupts the social objectives and finalities of medicine. What better way to abolish it? At present, doctors, manipu-

lated much more than they manipulate, no longer know what they are doing, what they are. "Give us more treatment, doctors, medication, security, health — more, ever further, keep it coming . . . !" The masses alienated in medicine? Not at all: they are in the process of ruining its institution, of making Social Security explode, of putting the social itself in danger by craving always more of it, as with commodities. What greater mockery can there be than this craving for the *social* as an item of *individual* consumption, submitted to an ever-escalating supply and demand? A parody and a paradox: it is by their very inertia in the ways of the social laid out for them that the masses go beyond its logic and its limits, and destroy its whole edifice. A destructive hypersimulation, a destructive hyperconformity (as in the case of Beaubourg, analysed elsewhere[6]) that has all the appearance of a victorious challenge — no one can measure the strength of this challenge, of the reversion exerted on the whole system. There lies the genuine stake today, in this underhand, inescapable confrontation between the silent majority and the social imposed on them, in this hypersimulation reduplicating simulation and exterminating it according to its

own logic — not in any class struggle nor in the molecular hodge-podge of desire-breaching minorities.

Mass and Terrorism

We are therefore at the paradoxical point where the masses refuse the baptism of the social, which is also that of meaning and liberty. Let us not make them into a new and glorious reference. For one thing, they don't exist. But note that all power silently flounders on this silent majority, which is neither an entity nor a sociological reality, but the shadow cast by power, its sinking vortex, its form of absorption. A nebulous fluid, shifting, conforming, far too conforming to every solicitation and with a hyperreal conformity which is the extreme form of non-participation: such is the present calamity of power. Such is also the calamity of revolution. For this implosive mass, by definition, will never explode and every revolutionary promise will implode into it as well. In consequence, what is to be done with these masses? They are the leitmotif of every discourse; they are the obsession of every social

project; but all run aground on them, for all remain rooted in the classical definition of the masses, which is that of an eschatological faith in the social and its fulfillment. Now, the masses *aren't* the social, they are the reversion of any social and of any socialism. Enough theorists have criticised meaning, denounced the traps of liberty and the mystifications of the political, radically censured rationality and every form of representation; however, when the masses wander through meaning, the political, representation, history, ideology, with a somnambulent strength of denial, when they realise here and now everything which the most radical critics have been able to envisage, then the latter know not what to make of it, and persist in dreaming of a future revolution — a critical revolution, a revolution of prestige, that of the social, that of desire. This revolution by involution is not theirs: it is not critical-explosive, it is implosive and blind. It proceeds by inertia, and not from a new and joyous negativity. It is silent and involutive — exactly the reverse of all speech making and consciousness raising. It has no meaning. It has nothing to say to us.

Indeed the only phenomenon which may be in a relation of affinity with it, with these masses such that the final vicissitude of the social and its death is at stake, is terrorism. Nothing is more "cut off from the masses" than terrorism. Power may well try to set the one against the other, but nothing is more strange, more familiar either, than their convergence in denying the social and in refusing meaning. For terrorism claims to really aim at capital (global imperialism, etc.) but it mistakes its enemy, and in doing so it aims at its true enemy, which is the social. Present-day terrorism aims at the social in response to the terrorism of the social. It aims at the social such as it is produced today — the orbital, interstitial, nuclear, tissual network of control and security, which invests us on all sides and produces us, all of us, as a silent majority. A hyperreal, imperceptible sociality, no longer operating by law and repression, but by the infiltration of models, no longer by violence, but by deterrence/persuasion — to that terrorism responds by an *equally hyperreal* act, caught up from the outset in concentric waves of media and of fascination,

dedicated from the outset not to any representation or consciousness, but to a mental downgrading by contiguity, fascination and panic, not to reflection or to the logic of cause and effect, but to a chain reaction by contagion — senseless and indeterminate like the system it combats, into which it insinuates itself rather like a point of maximum and infinitesimal implosion — a non-explosive, non-historical, non-political terrorism: implosive, crystallising, earth-shattering — and for that matter a homologue deep down, of the silence and inertia of the masses.

Terrorism does not aim at making anything speak, at resuscitating or mobilising anything; it has no revolutionary consequences (in this regard, it is rather a complete counter-performance, for which it is violently reproached, but that isn't its game); it aims at the masses in their silence, a silence mesmerised by information; it aims at that white magic of the social encircling us, that of information, of simulation, of deterrence, of anonymous and random control, in order to precipitate its death by accentuating it. It aims at that white magic of social abstraction by the black magic of a still greater, more anonymous, arbitrary and hazardous abstraction: that of the terrorist act.

It is the only non-representative act. In this regard it has an affinity with the masses, who are the only non-representable reality. This is definitely not to say that terrorism would *represent* the silence and the not-said of the masses, that it would violently express their passive resistance. It is simply to say: there is no equivalent to the blind, non-representative, senseless character of the terrorist act, but the blind, senseless and unrepresentational behavior of the masses. What they do have in common is that they are the most radical, most intense contemporary form of the denial of the whole representative system. That is all. No one really knows what relation can be established between two elements that are outside representation, this is a problem of which our epistemology of knowledge permits no resolution, since it always postulates the medium of a subject and of a language, the medium of a representation. We are really only acquainted with representative series, we know little about analogical, affinitive, im-mediatised, non-reference series and other systems. Undoubtedly something very substantial passes between them (the masses and terrorism) which we would seek in vain in the

historical precedents of representative systems (assembly/people, party/proletariat, minorities-marginals/groupuscules...). And just as a positive social energy passes between the two poles of any representative system, it could be said that between the masses and terrorism, between these two non-poles of a non-representative system, also passes an energy, but a *reverse energy*, an energy not of social accumulation and transformation, but of social dispersal, of dispersion of the social, of absorption and annulment of the political.

It cannot be said that it is the "age of the silent majority" which "produces" terrorism. It is the simultaneity of the two which is staggering, and noteworthy. Whether or not one accepts its brutality, it alone truly marks the end of the political and of the social. It alone betrays this reality of a violent implosion of all our systems of representation.

Terrorism does not at all aim at unmasking the repressive character of the State (that is the provocative negativity of groupuscules, who find in this a last chance to be representative in the eyes of the masses). It propagates, by its own non-representativity, and by chain reaction (not by

remonstration and consciousness raising) the apparent non-representativity of all power. Here is its subversion: it precipitates non-representation by injecting it in infinitesimal but very concentrated doses.

Its fundamental violence is to deny all the institutions of representation (unions, organised movements, conscious "political" struggle, etc.), including those who play at solidarity with it, for solidarity is still a way of constituting it as model, as emblem, and hence of assigning it to representation. ("They died for us, their action was not wasted . . .") Any means will do to impose meaning, to disregard how far terrorism is without legitimacy, without political consequences, without any historical continuity. Its only "ripples" are precisely not an historical flow but its story, its shock wave in the media. This story no more belongs to an objective and informative order than terrorism does to the political order. Both are elsewhere, in an order which is neither of meaning nor of representation — mythical perhaps, simulacrum undoubtedly.

The other aspect of terrorist violence is its

disclaiming of any determination and of any quality. In this sense, we must distinguish terrorism from "banditry" and commando action. The latter is an act of war aimed at a determinate enemy (blowing up a train, hurling a bomb into the opposing party's headquarters, etc.). The other is dependent on traditional criminal violence (a bank hold-up, sequestration in exchange for ransom, etc.) All these actions have an economic or martial "objective". Present-day terrorism, initiated by the taking of hostages and the game of postponed death, no longer has any objectives (if it claims to have any, they are ridiculous, or unachievable, and in any case, this is quite the most ineffective method of attaining them), nor any determinate enemy. Do the Palestinians strike at Israel by means of intermediary hostages? No, it is through Israel as intermediary that they strike at a mythical, or not even mythical, anonymous, undifferentiated enemy; a kind of omnipresent global social order, whenever, whoever, down to the last of the "innocents." Terrorism is this: it is novel, and insoluble, only because it strikes wherever, whenever, whoever; otherwise it would only be ransom or a military commando act. *Its blindness is the exact*

replica of the system's absolute lack of differentiation. For some time the system has no longer separated ends from means, tormentors from victims. In its deadly and indiscriminate taking of hostages, terrorism strikes at precisely the most characteristic product of the whole system: the anonymous and perfectly undifferentiated individual, the term substitutable for any other. Paradoxically, it seems that the innocent pay the crime of being nothing, of being lotless, of having been dispossessed of their name by an equally anonymous system whose purest incarnation they then become. They are the end products of the social, of a now globalised abstract sociality. It is in this sense, in the sense in which they are precisely *anybody*, that they are the predestined victims of terrorism.

It is in this sense, or rather in this defiance of sense, that the terrorist act is akin to the natural catastrophe. There is no difference between an earthquake in Guatemala and the hijacking of a Lufthansa Boeing with three hundred passengers on board, between the "natural" intervention and

the "human" terrorist intervention. Nature is terrorist, as is the abrupt failure of the whole technological system: the great New York blackouts ('65 and '77) create more wonderful terrorist situations than the true ones, dream situations. Better: these great technological accidents, like great natural accidents, illustrate the possibility of a radical *subjectless* subversion. The power failure of '77 in New York could have been instigated by a very organised terrorist group; that would have changed nothing in its objective outcome. The same acts of violence, of pillage, the same undermining, the same suspension of the "social" order would have ensued from it. This signifies that terrorism is not a step of violence, but is everywhere in the normality of the social, such that from one moment to the next it can be transfigured into an inverse, absurd, uncontrollable reality. The natural catastrophe acts in this sense and so, paradoxically, it becomes the *mythical expression* of the catastrophe of the social. Or rather the natural catastrophe being a meaningless, non-representative vicissitude par excellence (unless representative of God, which is why the person in charge of Continental Edison was able to speak of God and his intervention during the last New

York blackout), it becomes a kind of symptom or violent incarnation of the state of the social, namely of its catastrophe and of the collapse of every representation supporting it.
it.

Implosive Systems, Explosive Systems

In their triangular affinity, the masses, the media and terrorism describe the presently prevailing process of implosion. The whole process is affected by a violence which is only just beginning, an orbital and nuclear violence of intake and fascination, a violence of the void (fascination is the extreme intensity of the *neutral*). For us today, implosion can only be violent and catastrophic because it comes from the *failure* of the system of explosion and of organised expansion which has predominated in the West now for a few centuries.

Implosion is not necessarily a catastrophic process. In a subdued and controlled form, it has even been the main secret of primitive and tradi-

tional societies. Not expansive or centrifugal configurations, but centripetal ones: singular pluralities never directed towards the universal, but centered about a cyclic process — ritual — and tending to "involve" in a non-representative, unauthoritarian process; without any disjunctive polarity, yet without caving in on themselves either (save undoubtedly for certain implosive processes which are inexplicable to us, like the collapse of the Toltec, Olmec, Mayan cultures, nothing of which is known any more, and whose pyramidal empires disappeared without a trace, without any visible catastrophe, as though suddenly abandoned, without any apparent cause, without any external violence). Thus primitive societies have survived by a *controlled implosion* — they died as soon as they ceased to control this process, and switched over to one of explosion (demography, or uncontrollable surplus production, a process of uncontrollable expansion, or quite simply when colonisation violently initiated them into the expansive and centrifugal norm of Western systems).

Conversely, our "modern" civilisations have existed on a base of expansion and explosion at all levels, under the sign of universalised

commerce, of economic and philosophical investments, under the sign of universal law and conquest. Undoubtedly even they have known how to survive, for a time at least, on a *controlled explosion*, on a liberation of subdued and progressive energy, and this was the golden age of their culture. But, according to a process of boom and acceleration, this explosive process has become uncontrollable, it has acquired a fatal speed or amplitude, or rather it has reached the limits of the universal, it has saturated the field of possible expansion and, just as primitive societies were ravaged by explosion for not knowing how to curb the implosive process any longer, so our culture begins to be ravaged by implosion for not having known how to curb and equilibrate the explosive process.

Implosion is inevitable, and every effort to save the principles of reality, of accumulation, of universality, the principles of evolution which extol expanding systems, is archaic, regressive or nostalgic. Including all those who want to free libidinal energies, plural energies, fragmentary intensities, etc. The "molecular revolution" only represents the final stage of "liberation of energy" (or of proliferation of segments, etc.) up to the in-

finitesimal boundaries of the field of expansion which has been that of our culture. The infinitesimal attempt of desire succeeding the infinite attempt of capital. The molecular solution succeeding the molar investment of spaces and the social. The final sparks of the explosive system, the final attempt to still control an energy of confines, or to shrink the confines of energy (our fundamental leitmotif) so as to save the principle of expansion and of liberation.

But nothing will halt the implosive process, and the only remaining alternative is between a violent or catastrophic implosion, and a smooth implosion, an implosion in slow motion. There are traces of the latter, of various attempts to control new impulses which are anti-universalist, anti-representative, tribal, centripetal, etc.: communes, ecology, ZPG, drugs — all of these undoubtedly belong to this order. But we must not delude ourselves about a smooth transition. It is doomed to be short lived and to fail. There has been no balanced transition from implosive systems to explosive systems: this has always happened violently, and there is every chance that our passage towards implosion may also be violent and catastrophic.

. . . *Or the End of the Social*

The social is not a clear and unequivocal process. Do modern societies correspond to a process of socialisation or to one of progressive desocialisation? Everything depends on one's understanding of the term and none of these is fixed; all are reversible. Thus the institutions which have sign-posted the "advance of the social" (urbanisation, concentration, production, work, medicine, education, social security, insurance, etc.) including capital, which was undoubtedly the most effective socialisation medium of all, could be said to produce and destroy the social in one and the same movement.

If the social is formed out of abstract instances which are laid down one after the other on the ruins of the symbolic and ceremonial edifice of former societies, then these institutions produce more and more of them. But at

the same time they consecrate that ravenous, all-consuming abstraction which perhaps devours precisely the "essential marrow" of the social. From that point of view, it could be said that the social regresses to the same degree as its institutions develop.

The process accelerates and reaches its maximal extent with mass media and information. Media, *all* media, information, *all* information, act in two directions: outwardly they produce more of the social, inwardly they neutralise social relations and the social itself.

But then, if the social is both destroyed by what produces it (the media, information) and reabsorbed by what it produces (the masses), it follows that its definition is empty, and that this term which serves as universal alibi for every discourse, no longer analyses anything, no longer designates anything. Not only is it superfluous and useless — wherever it appears it conceals something else: defiance, death, seduction, ritual, repetition — it conceals that it is only abstraction and residue, or even simply an *effect* of the social, a simulation and an illusion.

Even the term "social relation" is enigmatic? What is a "social relation," what is the "produc-

tion of social relations?" Here everything is spurious. Is the social instantaneously, and as if by definition, a "relation," which already presupposes a serious abstraction and a rational algebra of the social — or else is it something different from what the term "relation" neatly rationalises? Does the "social relation" perhaps exist *for something different*, namely for what it destroys? Does it perhaps ratify, perhaps inaugurate the end of the social?

The "social sciences" came to consecrate this obviousness and agelessness of the social. But we must change our tune. There were *societies without the social*, just as there were societies without history. Networks of symbolic ties were precisely neither "relational" nor "social." At the other extreme, our "society" is perhaps in the process of putting an end to the social, of burying the social beneath a simulation of the social. There are many ways for it to die — as many as there are definitions. Perhaps the social will have had only an ephemeral existence, in the narrow gap between the symbolic formations and our "society" where it is dying. Before, there is not yet

any social; after, there is no longer any. Only "sociology" can seem to testify to its agelessness, and the supreme gibberish of the "social sciences" will still echo it long after its disappearance.

For two centuries now, the uninterrupted energy of the social has come from deterritorialisation and from concentration in ever more unified agencies. A centralised perspective space which orientates everything inserted into it by simple convergence along the "line of flight" towards infinity (in effect, the social, like space and time, opens up a perspective towards infinity). The social can only be defined from this panoptic point of view.

But let us not forget that this perspective space (in painting and architecture as in politics or the economy) is only one simulation model among others, and that it is characterised only by the fact that it gives rise to effects of truth, of objectivity, unknown and unheard of in the other models. Perhaps, even this is only a *delusion*? In which case everything that has been contrived and staged in this "comedy of errors" of the social has never had any deep significance. Ultimately, things have never functioned socially, but symbolically, magically, irrationally, etc. Which im-

plies the formula: capital is a *defiance* of society. That is to say that this perspective, this panoptic machine, this machine of truth, of rationality, of productivity which is capital, is without objective finality, without reason: it is above all a violence, and this violence is perpetrated by the social on the social, but basically it is not a social machine, it doesn't care a damn about capital or likewise about the social in their equally interdependent and antagonistic definition. This is to say, once more, that there is no contract, no contract is ever exchanged between distinct agencies according to the law — that is all sound and fury — there are only ever stakes, defiances, that is to say something which does not proceed via a "social relation."

(Defiance is not a dialectic, nor a confrontation between respective poles, or terms, in an extended structure. It is a process of *extermination* of the structural position of each *term*, of the subject position of each of the antagonists, and in particular of the one who hurls the challenge: because of this it even abandons any contractual

position which might give rise to a "relation." Exchange of value is no longer its logic. Its logic abandons positions of value and positions of meaning. The protagonist of defiance is always in a suicidal position, but it is a triumphant suicide: it is by the destruction of value, the destruction of meaning (one's own, their own) that the other is forced into a never equivalent, ever escalating response. Defiance always comes from that which has no meaning, no name, no identity — it is a defiance of meaning, of power, of truth, of their existing as such, of their pretending to exist as such. Only this *reversion* can put an end to power, to meaning, to value, and never any *relation* of force, however favorable it is, since the letter re-enters into a polar, binary, structural relation, which re-creates by definition a new space of meaning and of power.[7])

Here several hypotheses are possible:

1.— *The social has basically never existed.* There never has been any "social relation." Nothing has ever functioned socially. On this inescapable basis of challenge, seduction and

death, there has never been anything but *simulation* of the social and the social relation. In which case, there is no point dreaming about a "real" sociality, a hidden sociality, an ideal socialist: this just hypostatises a simulacrum. If the social is a simulation, the only likely turn of events is that of a brutal *de-simulation* — the social ceasing to take itself as a space of reference and to play the game, and putting an end at last to power, to the effect of power and to the mirror of the social which perpetuates it. A de-simulation which itself captures the style of a challenge (the reverse of capital's challenge of the social and society): a challenge to the belief that capital and power exist according to their own logic — *they have none*, they vanish as apparatuses as soon as the simulation of social space is undone.[8] This is really what we are seeing today: the disintegration of the whole idea of the social, the consumption and involution of the social, the breakdown of the social simulacrum, a genuine defiance of the constructive and productive approach to the social which dominates us. All quite suddenly, as if the social had never existed. A breakdown which has all the features of a catastrophe, not an evolution or revolution. No longer a "crisis" of the social,

but the reabsorption of its system. Without having anything to do with those marginal defections (of the mad, women, druggies, delinquents), which, on the contrary, supply new energy to the failing social. This reabsorption process can no longer be resocialised. Like a ghost at dawn, its principle of reality and of social rationality simply fades away.

2.— *The social has really existed, it exists even more and more,* it invests everything, it alone exists. Far from being volatilised, it is the social which triumphs; the reality of the social is imposed everywhere. But, contrary to the antiquated idea which makes the social into an objective progress of mankind, everything which escapes it being only residue, it is possible to envisage that *the social itself is only residue,* and that, if it has triumphed in the real, it is precisely as such. Litter piling up from the symbolic order as it blows around, it is the social as remainder which has assumed real force and which is soon to be universal.[9] Here is a more subtle form of death.

In this event, we are really even deeper in the social, even deeper in pure excrement, in the fan-

tastic congestion of dead labor, of dead and institutionalised relations within terrorist bureaucracies, of dead languages and grammars (the very term "relation" already has something dead about it, something about death to it).

Then of course it can no longer be said that the social is dying, *since it is already the accumulation of death*. In effect we are in a civilisation of the supersocial, and simultaneously in a civilisation of non-degradable, indestructible residue, piling up as the social spreads.

Waste and recycling: such would be the social in the image of a production whose cycle has long escaped the "social" finalities to become a completely described spiral nebula, rotating and expanding with every "revolution" it makes. Thus one sees the social expanding throughout history as a "rational" control of residues, and a rational *production* of residues.

1544 saw the opening of the first great poorhouse in Paris: vagrants, lunatics, the sick, everyone not integrated by the group and discarded as remainders were taken in charge under the emerging sign of the social. This was extended

to the dimensions of National Assistance in the nineteenth century, then Social Security in the twentieth century. Proportional to the reinforcement of social reason, it is the whole community which soon becomes residual and hence, by one more spiral, the social which piles up. When the remainders reach the dimensions of the whole of society, one has a perfect socialisation.[10] Everybody is completely excluded and taken in charge, completely disintegrated and socialised.

Symbolic integration is replaced by a functional integration, functional institutions take charge of the residue from symbolic disintegration — a social agency appears where there was none, nor even any name for it. "Social relations" fester, proliferate, grow proportionately richer with this disintegration. And the social sciences cap it off. Whence the piquancy of an expression like: "the responsibility of society vis-a-vis its underprivileged members," when we know the "social" is precisely the agency which arises from this dereliction.

Whence the interest of *Le Monde*'s "Society" column where paradoxically only immigrants,

delinquents, women, etc. appear: precisely those who have not been socialised; the social "case" being analogous to the pathological case. Pockets to be absorbed, segments which the social isolates the more it spreads. Designated as *refuse* on the horizon of the social, they thus fall under its jurisdiction and are fated to find their place in a widening sociality. It is on these *remainders* that the social machine starts up again and finds support for a new extension. But what happens when everybody is socialised? Then the machine stops, the dynamic is reversed, and it is *the whole social system which becomes residue*. As the social progressively gets rid of all of its residue, it becomes residual itself. By placing residual categories under the rubric "Society," the social *designates itself as remainder*.

Now what becomes of the rationality of the social, of the contract and of the social relation if the social, instead of appearing as original structure, appears as refuse, and refuses processing? If the social is only remains, it is no longer the scene of a positive process or history, it is simply the scene of a piling up and exorbitant processing of

death. It no longer makes any sense, since it is there for something else, in despair of anything else: it is excremental. Without any ideal perspective. For remains are the transcendence of nothingness, they are what is irreconcilable in death, and on them can only be founded a politics of death. Reclusion or preclusion. Under the sign of productive reason, the social has been above all the space of a great Reclusion — under the sign of simulation and deterrence it has become the space of a great Preclusion. But perhaps that is already no longer a "social" space.

It is from the point of view of this administration of refuse that the social can appear today for what it really is: a right, a need, a service, a use value pure and simple. No longer a conflictual, political structure: but a welcoming structure. The limit of the economist value of the social as use value is in effect its ecologist value as *niche*. The proper use of the social as one of the ways of balancing the exchanges between the individual and his environment, the social as functional ecosystem, homeostasis and superbiology of the species — no longer even a structure, but a substance: the cordial and high protein anonymity of a nutritious substance. A kind of foetal

security space helping everywhere to relieve the difficulties of living, providing everywhere for the quality of life, like comprehensive insurance, the equivalent of a wasted life; a degraded form of lubricating, insuring, passifying and permissive sociality; the lowest form of social energy: that of an environmental, behavioral utility. Such is the face of the social for us — its entropic form — the other face of its death.

[*EXCURSUS: The Social, or The Functional Ventilation of Remainders*]

[The social exists to look after the soaking up of excess wealth which, redistributed to all and sundry, would ruin the social order, would create an intolerably utopian situation.

This reversion of wealth, of all wealth, which formerly was effected by sacrifice which left no room for any accumulation of remainders, is intolerable to our societies. It is by this very fact that they are "societies" — in the sense that they always produce a surplus, remainders — whether it be demographic, economic, or linguistic — and that these remainders must be cleared up (never sacrificed, that is too dangerous: but purely and

simply got rid of).

The social exists on the double basis of the production of remainders and their eradication.

If all wealth were sacrificed, people would lose a sense of the real. If all wealth became disposable, people would lose a sense of the useful and the useless. *The social exists to take care of the useless consumption of remainders so that individuals can be assigned to the useful management of their lives.*

Use and use value constitute a fundamental ethics. But it exists only in a simulation of shortage and calculation. If all wealth was redistributed, of itself this would abolish use value (the same goes for death: if death was redistributed, *brought forward*, of itself this would abolish life as use value). It would suddenly and brutally become clear that use value is only a cruel and disillusioning moral convention, which presupposes a functional calculation in all things. But it dominates us all and, intoxicated as we are by the phantasm of use value, we could not bear this *catastrophe* of reversing wealth and of reversing death. It is not that everything should be reversed; just that the remainder should be. And the social is what takes

care of remainders.

Up till now the car and the house, and various "commodities" have somehow or other succeeded in soaking up the disposable physical and mental capacities of individuals. What would happen if all disposable wealth was redistributed amongst them? Quite simply, the bottom would drop out of their lives — they would lose the fabric and even tempo of a well-tempered economy, lose a sense of self-interest and of purpose. A brutal disequilibrium of the value system would result (a sudden influx of cash is the most rapid and the most radical way to ruin a currency). Or else, as in the affluent society, they would be reduced to a pathological multiplication of use value (3,4,*n* cars) where in any case this dissipates into a hyper-real functionalism.

All surplus is capable of ruining the system of equivalences, if it is disproportionately poured back into it, and of driving our *mental* system of equivalences to despair at the same time.[11] Hence there is a kind of wisdom in the institution of the social as a matrix preventing the growth and reversion of wealth, as a medium for its controlled squandering.

In a society incapable of total reversion and

committed to use value, there is a kind of intelligence and wisdom in the institution of the social and of its "objective" wastefulness: prestige operations, Concorde, the moon, missiles, satellites, even public works and Social Security in their absurd one-upmanship. An implicit understanding of the stupidity and the limits of use value. The true artlessness is that of socialists and humanists of every shade who want all wealth to be redistributed and that there should be no useless expenditure, etc. Socialism, the champion of use value, the champion of the use value of the social, reveals a total misunderstanding of the social. It believes that the social can become the optimal collective management of the use value of men and things.

But the social is never that. Despite any socialist longing, it is insane, uncontrollable, a monstrous protuberance, which expends, which destroys, without any thought to optimal management. And it is precisely *in this way* that it is functional, that it fulfils its role (despite what idealists may cry). This is, to maintain *a contrario* the principle of use value, to save the reality principle by the roundabout but objective route of wastefulness. The social manufactures this priva-

tion necessary to the distinction between good and evil, and to the whole moral order in general — a privation absent from the "first affluent societies" described by Marshall Sahlins. This is what socialism does not see and why, by wanting to abolish this privation and insisting on a generalised access to wealth, it puts an end to the social while believing that it is heightening it.

From this point of view the problem of the death of the social is simple: the social dies from an extension of use value which is equivalent to its extermination. When everything, including the social, becomes use value, it is a world become inert, where the reverse of what Marx dreamed occurs. He dreamed of the economic being reabsorbed into a (transfigured) social; what is happening to us is the social being reabsorbed into a (banalised) political economy: administration pure and simple.

It is the *wrong use of wealth* which saves a society. Nothing has changed since Mandeville and his *Fable of the Bees*. And socialism can do nothing to prevent it. The whole of political economy has been invented to dissolve this paradox, this maleficent ambiguity of the social functioning. But it has always come to grief, by a

sort of secondary functionality. Or else, it is in the process of succeeding and, after having seen the abolition of the political and its dilution in the social, we are in the process of seeing the reabsorption of the social back into the economic — an economy even more political, and lacking in "hubris," an economy of extravagance and excess which would still characterise the capitalist age.]

3.— *The social has well and truly existed, but does not exist any more.* It has existed as coherent space, as reality principle: the social relation, the production of social relations, the social as dynamic abstraction, scene of conflicts and historical contradictions, the social as structure and as stake, as strategy and as ideal — all this has had an end in view, all this has meant something. The social has not always been a delusion, as in the first hypothesis, nor remainder, as in the second. But precisely, it has only had an end in view, a meaning as power, as work, as capital, from the perspective space of a rational distribution, from the finalised space of an ideal convergence, which is also that of production — in short, in the narrow gap of second-

order simulacra, and, absorbed into third-order simulacra, it is dying.

End of the perspective space of the social. The rational sociality of the contract, dialectical sociality (that of the State and of civil society, of public and private, of the social and the individual) gives way to the sociality of contact, of the circuit and transistorised network of millions of molecules and particles maintained in a random gravitational field, magnetised by the constant circulation and the thousands of tactical combinations which electrify them. But is it still a question of the *socius*? Where is sociality in Los Angeles? And where will it be later on, in a future generation (for Los Angeles is still that of TV, movies, the telephone and the automobile), that of a total dissemination, of a ventilation of individuals as terminals of information, in an even more measurable — not convergent, but connected — space: a space of connection? The social only exists in a perspective space, it dies in the space of simulation, which is also a space of deterrence.

The space of simulation confuses the real

with the model. There is no longer any critical and speculative distance between the real and the rational. There is no longer really even any projection of models in the real (which is still equivalent to the substitution of the map for the territory in Borges), but an in-the-field, here-and-now transfiguration of the real into model. A fantastic short-circuit: the real is hyperrealised. Neither realised, nor idealised: but hyperrealised. The hyperreal is the abolition of the real not by violent destruction, but by its assumption, elevation to the strength of the model. Anticipation, deterrence, preventive transfiguration, etc.: the model acts as a sphere of absorption of the real.

That is clear in some of its subtle, tenuous, imperceptible features, by which the real appears as more true than the true, as too real to be true. The task of all media and information today is to produce this real, this extra real (interviews, live coverage, movies, TV-truth, etc.). There is too much of it, we fall into obscenity and porn. As in porn, a kind of zoom takes us too near the real, which never existed and only ever came into view at *a certain distance*. Deterrence of all real poten-

tiality, deterrence by meticulous reduplication, by macroscopic hyperfidelity, by accelerated recycling, by saturation and obscenity, by abolition of the distance between the real and its representation, by implosion of the differentiated poles between which flowed the energy of the real: this hyperreality puts an end to the system of the real, it puts an end to the real as referential by exalting it as model.

It also puts an end to the social in the same way. The social, if it existed with second-order simulacra, no longer even has the opportunity to be produced with third-order ones: from the beginning it is trapped in its own "blown up" and desperate staging, in its own obscenity. Signs of this hyperrealisation of the social, signs of its reduplication and its anticipated fulfillment are everywhere. The transparency of the social relation is flaunted, signified, consumed everywhere. The history of the social will never have had time to lead to revolution: it will have been outstripped by signs of the social and of revolution. The social will never have had time to lead to socialism, it will have been short-circuited by the hypersocial, by the hyperreality of the social (but perhaps socialism is no more than this?). Thus the

proletariat will not have even had time to deny itself as such: the concept of class will have dissolved well before, into some parodic, extended double, like "the mass of workers" or simply into a retrospective simulation of the proletariat. Thus, even before political economy leads to its dialectical overthrow, to the resolution of all needs and to the optimal organisation of things, before it would have been able to see whether there was any basis to all that, it will have been captivated by hyperreality of the economy (the stepping up of production, the precession of the production of demand before that of goods, the indefinite scenario of crisis).

Nothing has come to the end of its history, or will henceforth any more, for nothing escapes this precession of simulacra. And the social itself has died before having given up its secret.[12]

Nevertheless let us tenderly recall the unbelievable naivety of social and socialist thinking, for thus having been able to reify as universal and to elevate as ideal of transparency such a totally ambiguous and contradictory — worse, such a residual or imaginary — worse, such an already abolished in its very simulation — "reality": the social.

NOTES

1. This is akin to the bitterness of the extreme-left, and its "intelligent" cynicism towards the silent majority. *Charlie-Hebdo* for instance: "The silent majority doesn't give a damn about anything, provided that it snoozes through the evening in its slippers. . . Mind you, if the silent majority keeps its trap shut, it is because when all is said and done, it makes the law. It lives well, it eats well, it works just as much as is necessary. What it asks of its leaders is to be fathered and secured just enough, with a little daily dose of imaginary danger."

2. There the analogy with Freud ends, for his radical act results in a hypothesis, that of repression and the unconscious, which again opens up the possibility, widely exploited since then, of producing meaning, of reintegrating desire and the unconscious in the partition of meaning. A symphony concertante, in which the relentless reversion of meaning enters the well-tempered scenario of desire, in the shadow of a repression which opens up the reverse possibility of liberation. Whence comes the fact that the liberation of desire could so easily take over from the political revolution, making good the failure of meaning instead of deepening it. Now it is not at

all a question of discovering a new interpretation of the masses in terms of libidinal economy (the conformity or "fascism" of the masses reduced to a latent structure, to an obscure desire for power and for repression which would possibly feed off a primary repression or death drive). Such is the only alternative today to the failing marxist analysis. But it is the same, with one more twist. Formerly the destiny of revolution held back by sexual bondage was palmed off on the masses (Reich); today it is a desire for alienation and for bondage, or else a kind of ordinary microfascism as incomprehensible as their virtual drive for liberation. There is no desire for fascism and for power any more than there is for revolution. Last hope: that the masses have an unconscious or a desire, which would allow their recathexis as bearer, or instrument of meaning. Desire, reinvented everywhere, is only the referential of political despair. And the strategy of desire, after having been tried out in the marketing industry, is today polished up further in its revolutionary promotion in the masses.

3. The notion of "critical mass," usually associated with the process of nuclear *explosion*, is reapplied here with reference to nuclear *implosion*. What we are witnessing in the domain of the social and of the political, with the *involuntary* phenomenon of the masses and the silent majority, is a kind of inverse explosion by the force of inertia — this also has its point of no return.

4. It is no longer even a question of the production of the social, for then socialism, indeed capitalism itself

would be equal to the task. In fact, everything changes with the precession of the production of demand before that of goods. Their logical relationship (between production and consumption) is broken, and we move into a totally different order, which is no longer that of either production, or consumption, but that of the simulation of both, thanks to the inversion of the process. At present, it is no longer a question of a "real" crisis of capital, a crisis Attali thinks can be treated by a little extra social or socialism, but of quite a different mechanism, the hyperreal, which no longer has anything to do with either capital or the social.

5. Same configuration as for black holes. Veritable stellar tombs, their field of gravity is so huge that even light is trapped, satellised, then absorbed in them. They are, therefore, regions in space from which *no information* can come. Their discovery and their being taken into consideration therefore imply a kind of overturning of every traditional science and knowledge procedure. While the latter is always based on information, the message, the positive signal (some "meaning"), conveyed by a medium (waves or light), here something different appears whose meaning or mystery revolves around *the absence of information*. That no longer transmits, that no longer responds. A revolution of the same order comes into play with the taking into consideration of the masses.

6. *L'effet Beaubourg*, Paris, 1977 (Ed. Galilee).

7. The same goes for seduction. If sex and sexuality, such as the sexual revolution turns them into, are really a mode of exchange and production of sexual relations, seduction on the other hand is contrary to exchange, and close to challenge. Sexuality has precisely become a "sexual relation," it can be talked about in these already rationalised terms of value and exchange, only by ignoring any form of seduction — just as the social only becomes a "social relation" when it has lost any symbolic dimension.

8. But defying the social can take the reverse form of a renewed outbreak of the social simulacrum, of social demand, of demand *for* the social. An exacerbated, compulsive hyperconformity, a much more pressing demand for the social as norm and as discourse.

9. See, in *L'Echange symbolique et la mort*, the three levels of residue: value in the economic order, phantasm in the psychic order, signification in the linguistic order. So one should also add here the residual status of the social in the . . . social order.

10. See the case of the Guayaki or the Tupi-Guarani: whenever such residue appears, it is drained off by messianic leaders into the Atlantic, in the form of eschatological movements, which purge the group of its "social" residue. Not only political power (Clastres) but even the social is averted as disintegrated/disintegrating agency.

11. This system of equivalences is not necessarily

linked to the political economy of capital. The equilibrium between work and its remuneration, between merit and enjoyment, is perhaps, beyond any bourgeois ethic, a measure of oneself, and a form of resistance. Should something come your way without equivalent, the blessing may be mixed. Holderlin's madness came to him from this prodigality of the Gods, from this grace of the Gods which overwhelms you and becomes fatal if it can't be redeemed or counterbalanced by some human equivalence, from the earth, from toil. Here there is a sort of law which has nothing to do with bourgeois ethics. More familiar to us, witness the fatal disorder in people overexposed to wealth and to good fortune — thus those customers in a large store who were offered to help themselves to anything they wanted: pandemonium broke out. Or again those wine growers to whom the State offered more money to pull out their vines than they could get by working them. They were much more destructured by this unexpected subsidy than by any traditional exploitation of their labor power.

12. Fourth hypothesis: *The implosion of the social into the masses.* This hypothesis is akin to hypothesis 3 (simulation/deterrence/implosion) in another form. It is developed in the main text.

THE IMPLOSION OF MEANING IN THE MEDIA

We are in a universe where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning. Consider three hypotheses:

1.— Either information produces meaning (a negentropic factor), but doesn't succeed in compensating for the brutal loss of signification in every domain. The reinjection of message and content by means of the media is vain, since meaning is devoured and lost more rapidly than it is reinjected. In this case, appeal has to be made to a productivity at the base in order to relieve the failing media. This is the whole ideology of free speech, of the media subdivided into innumerable individual cells of transmission, indeed "anti-media" (CB radios, etc.).

2.— Or information has nothing to do with signification. It is something else, an operational model of another order, outside of meaning and

the circulation of meaning properly speaking. This is the hypothesis of Shannon: a sphere of information that is purely instrumental, a technical medium implying no end purpose of meaning, and thus which must not itself be implicated in a value judgement. A kind of code, perhaps like the genetic code: it is what it is, it functions as it does; meaning is something else, coming afterwards in some way, as in Jacques Monod's *Chance and Necessity*. In this case, there would simply be no significant relation between the inflation of information and the deflation of meaning.

3.— Or rather the contrary: there is a rigorous and necessary correlation between the two, to the extent that information is directly destructive of meaning and signification, or neutralizes it. The loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving and dissuasive action of information, the media, and the mass media.

The third hypothesis is the most interesting, although it goes against the grain of all accepted opinion. Everywhere socialization is measured according to exposure through media messages. Those who are under-exposed to the media are virtually asocial or desocialized. Everywhere in-

formation is reputed to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus-value of meaning homologous to the economic plus-value which results from the accelerated rotation of capital. Information is given as creative of communication, and even if the wastage is enormous a general consensus would have it that there is in the total nonetheless a surplus of meaning, which is redistributed in all the interstices of the social fabric — just as a consensus would have it that material production, despite its dysfunctions and irrationalities, nevertheless leads to an excess of wealth and social finality. We are all accomplices in this myth. It is the alpha and omega of our modernity, without which the credibility of our social organization would collapse. Yet *the fact is that it is collapsing,* and for this very reason. Just where we think that information is producing meaning, it is doing the exact opposite.

Information devours its own contents; it devours communication and the social, and for two reasons:

1. Instead of causing communication, *it ex-*

hausts itself in the act of staging the communication; instead of producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning. It is a gigantic process of simulation with which we are very familiar. The non-directed interview, speech, listeners who telephone in, participation at all levels, blackmail through speech — all say: "It's your concern, you are the event, etc." More and more information is invaded by this sort of phantom content, this homeopathic graft, this awakened dream of communication. It is a circular set-up in which the desire of the audience is put on stage, an anti-theater of communication, which, as we know, is never anything but the recycling "in the negative" of traditional institutions, the integrated circuit of the negative. Immense energies are deployed in order to keep this simulacre standing upright, and to avoid the brutal de-simulation which would confront us with the obvious reality of a radical loss of meaning.

It is useless to wonder if it is the loss of communication which causes this escalation in the simulacre, or if it is the simulacre which is there first, with its dissuasive finality, since it short-circuits in advance all possibility of communication (precession of the model which puts an end to

the real). It is useless to wonder which is the first term. There is none, it is a cicular process — that of simulation, that of the hyperreal: a hyperreality of communication and of meaning, more real than the real. Hence the real is abolished.

Thus communication as well as *the social* functions as a closed circuit, as a lure — to which is attached the force of a myth. The belief and the faith in information attached to this tautological proof give the system itself, by doubling its signs, an unlocatable reality.

But this belief may be thought to be as ambiguous as the one attached to myths in archaic societies. One both believes and doesn't believe. The question is simply not posed. "I know very well, but all the same. . . ." A sort of inverted simulation corresponds in the masses, in each one of us, to this simulation of meaning and of communication in which this system encloses us. To the tautology of the system the masses have responded with ambivalence; to dissuasion they have responded with disaffection, and an always enigmatic belief. The myth exists, but one must guard against thinking that people believe in it. That is the trap of critical thought, which can

only be exercized given the naivete and the stupidity of the masses as a presupposition.

2. Behind this exacerbated staging of communication, the mass media, with its pressure of information, carries out an irresistable destructuration of the social.

Thus information dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy.[1]

Thus the media do not bring about socialization, but just the opposite: the implosion of the social in the masses. And this is only the macroscopic extension of the *implosion of meaning* at the microscopic level of the sign. The latter is to be analyzed starting from McLuhan's formula *the medium is the message*, the consequences of which are far from being exhausted.

Its meaning is that all the contents of meaning are absorbed in the dominant form of the medium. The medium alone makes the event — and does this whatever the contents, whether conformist or subversive. A serious problem for

all counter-information, pirate radios, anti-media, etc. But there is something even more serious, which McLuhan himself did not make clear. For beyond this neutralization of all content, one could still hope to manipulate the medium in its form, and to transform the real by utilizing the impact of the medium as form. With all content nullified, perhaps there is still a revolutionary and subversive use-value of the *medium as such*. Yet — and this is where McLuhan's formula at its extreme limit leads — there is not only the implosion of the message in the medium; in the same movement there is the implosion of the medium itself in the real, *the implosion of the medium and the real* in a sort of nebulous hyperreality where even the definition and the distinct action of the medium are no longer distinguishable.

Even the "traditional status" of the media themselves, characteristic of our modernity, is put into question. McLuhan's formula, *the medium is the message*, which is the key formula of the era of simulation (the medium is the message — the sender is the receiver — the circularity of all poles — the end of panoptic and perspectival space — such is the alpha and omega of *our* modernity),

this very formula must be envisaged at its limit, where, after all contents and messages have been volatilized in the medium, it is the medium itself which is volatilized as such. At bottom, it is still the message which lends credibility to the medium, and which gives to the medium its distinct and determined status as intermediary of communication. Without a message, the medium also falls into that indefinite state characteristic of all our great systems of judgement and value. A single *model*, whose efficacy is *immediacy*, simultaneously generates the message, the medium, and the "real."

In short, *the medium is the message* signifies not only the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. There are no longer media in the literal sense of the term (I am talking above all about the electronic mass media) — that is to say, a power mediating between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another — neither in content nor in form. Strictly speaking, this is what implosion signifies: the absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuit between poles of every differential system of meaning, the effacement of terms and of

distinct oppositions, and thus that of the medium and the real. Hence the impossibility of any mediation, of any dialectical intervention between the two or from one to the other, circularity of all media effects. Hence the impossibility of a sense (meaning), in the literal sense of a unilateral vector which leads from one pole to another. This critical — but original — situation must be thought through to the very end; it is the only one we are left with. It is useless to dream of a revolution through content or through form, since the medium and the real are now in a single nebulous state whose truth is undecipherable.

The fact of this implosion of contents, of absorption of meaning, of the evanescence of the medium itself, of the re-absorption of the whole dialectic of communication in a total circularity of the model, of the implosion of the social in the masses, can appear catastrophic and hopeless. But it is only so in regard to the idealism that dominates our whole vision of information. We all live by a fanatical idealism of meaning and communication, by an idealism of communication through meaning, and, in this perspective, it is very much *a catastrophe of meaning* which lies in wait for us.

But it must be seen that the term "catastrophe" has this "catastrophic" meaning of the end and annihilation only in a linear vision of accumulation and productive finality that the system imposes on us. Etymologically, the term only signifies the curvature, the winding down to the bottom of a cycle leading to what can be called the "horizon of the event," to the horizon of meaning, beyond which we cannot go. Beyond it, nothing takes place *that has meaning for us* — but it suffices to exceed this ultimatum of meaning in order that catastrophe itself no longer appear as the last, nihilistic day of reckoning, such as it functions in our current collective fantasy.

Beyond meaning, there is fascination, which results from the neutralization and implosion of meaning. Beyond the horizon of the social, there are the masses, which result from the neutralization and implosion of the social.

The essential thing today is to evaluate this double challenge — the defiance of meaning by the masses and their silence (which is not at all a passive resistance) — and the defiance of meaning which comes from the media and its fascination. In regard to this challenge all the marginal and alternative attempts to resuscitate meaning

are secondary.

Evidently there is a paradox in this inextricable conjunction of the masses and the media: is it the media that neutralizes meaning and that produces the "unformed" (or informed) mass, or is it the mass that victoriously resists the media by diverting or absorbing all the messages which it produces without responding to them? Some time ago, in "Requiem for the Media," I analyzed (and condemned) the media as the institution of an irreversible model of communication *without response*. But today? This absence of response can be understood as a counter-strategy of the masses themselves in their encounter with power, and no longer at all as a strategy of power. What then?

Are the mass media on the side of power in the manipulation of the masses, or are they on the side of the masses in the liquidation of meaning, in the violence done to meaning and in the fascination that results? Is it the media which induce fascination in the masses, or is it the masses which divert the media into spectacle? Mogadishu Stammheim: the media are made the

vehicle of the moral condemnation of terrorism and of the exploitation of fear for political ends, but, simultaneously, in the most total ambiguity, they propagate the brutal fascination of the terrorist act. They are themselves terrorists, to the extent to which they work through fascination (cf. Umberto Eco on this eternal moral dilemma: how not to speak of terrorism, how to find a *good use* for the media? *There is none*). The media carry meaning and non-sense; they manipulate in every sense simultaneously. The process cannot be controlled, for the media convey the simulation internal to the system and the simulation destructive of the system according to a logic that is aboslutely Moebian and circular — and this is exactly what it is like. There is no alternative to it, no logical resolution. Only a logical *exacerbation* and a catastrophic resolution.

With one qualification. We are face to face with this system, in a double situation, an insoluble "double bind" exactly like children face to face with the adult universe. They are simultaneously summoned to behave like autonomous subjects,

responsible, free, and conscious, and as submissive objects, inert, obedient, and conforming. The child resists on all levels, and to a contradictory demand he also responds with a double strategy. To the demand to be an object, he opposes all the practices of disobedience, revolt, emancipation; in short, a total claim to subjecthood. To the demand to be a subject, he opposes just as stubbornly and efficaciously with an object's resistance, that is to say, in exactly the opposite manner: infantilism, hyperconformism, a total dependence, passivity, idiocy. Neither of the two strategies has more objective value than the other. The resistance-as-subject is today unilaterally valorized and held as positive — just as in the political sphere only the practices of liberation, emancipation, expression, and constitution as a political subject are taken to be valuable and subversive. But this is to ignore the equal or perhaps even superior impact, of all the practices-as-object — the renunciation of the position of subject and of meaning — exactly the practices of the masses — which we bury and forget under the contemptuous terms of alienation and passivity. The liberating practices respond to *one* of the aspects of the system, to the

constant ultimatum to make of ourselves pure objects, but they don't respond at all to the other demand, which is to constitute ourselves as subjects, to liberate ourselves, to express ourselves at any price, to vote, produce, decide, speak, participate, play the game — a form of blackmail and ultimatum just as serious as the other, probably even more serious today. To a system whose argument is oppression and repression, the strategic resistance is the liberating claim of subjecthood. But this reflects rather the system's previous phase, and even if we are still confronted with it, it is no longer the strategic terrain: the system's current argument is the maximization of the word and the maximal production of meaning. Thus the strategic resistance is that of a refusal of meaning and a refusal of the word — or of the hyperconformist simulation of the very mechanisms of the system, which is a form of refusal and of non-reception.

This is the resistance of the masses: it is equivalent to sending back to the system its own logic by doubling it, to reflecting, like a mirror, meaning without absorbing it. This strategy (if one can still speak of strategy) prevails today,

because it was ushered in by that phase of the system.

A mistake concerning strategy is a serious matter. All the movements which only bet on liberation, emancipation, the resurrection of the subject of history, of the group, of speech as a raising of consciousness, indeed of a "seizure of the unconscious" of subjects and of the masses, do not see that they are acting in accordance with the system, whose imperative today is the overproduction and regeneration of meaning and speech.

NOTES

1. Here we have discussed information only in the social register of communication. But it would be fascinating to consider the hypothesis within the framework of the *cybernetic* theory of communication. There also, the fundamental thesis would have it that information would be synonymous with negentropy, the resistance to entropy, and an excess of meaning and of organization. But it would be fitting to pose the opposite hypothesis: INFORMATION = ENTROPY. For example: the information or knowledge about a system or an event that can be obtained is already a form of neutraliza-

tion and of entropy of this system. (This applies to the sciences in general and to the human and social sciences in particular.) The information in which an event is reflected or through which it is diffused is already a degraded form of the event. One would not hesitate to analyze the intervention of the media in May 1968 in this sense. The extension given to the student action permitted the general strike, but the latter was precisely a black box which neutralized the original virulence of the movement. The very amplification was a mortal trap and not a positive extension. Distrust the universalization of struggles through information. Distrust campaigns of solidarity at every level, this solidarity that is both electronic and worldwide. Every strategy of the universalization of differences is an entropic strategy of the system.

OUR THEATER OF CRUELTY

I. Mogadishu

In the terrorist act there is a simultaneous power of death and simulation which it is intolerable to see confused with the "morbid taste of death," and with the frenzy of the "morbid" and the "spectacular." Dead or living, it is elsewhere that terrorism wins out. At least by this single fact: it alone makes the event, and thus returns the whole "political" order to its nullity. And the media, all while orchestrating the victory of order, only cause the evidence for the opposite to reverberate: to wit, that terrorism is burying the political order.

The media are terrorists in their own fashion, working continually to produce (good) sense, but, at the same time, violently

defeating it by arousing everywhere a fascination without scruples, that is to say, a paralysis of meaning, to the profit of a single scenario.

Terrorism is not violent in itself; only the spectacle it unleashes is truly violent. It is our Theater of Cruelty, the only one that remains to us, perhaps equal in every respect to that of Artaud or to that of the Renaissance, and extraordinary in that it brings together *the spectacular and the challenge at their highest points.* It is at the same time a model of simulation, a micromodel flashing with a minimally real event and a maximal echo chamber, like a crystal thrown into an unstable solution or an experimental matrix, an insoluble equation which makes all the variables appear suddenly. Not a real event, but a condensed narrative, a flash, a scenario — that is to say, that which opposes to every event said to be real the purest form of the spectacular — and a ritual, or that which, of all possible events, opposes to the political and historical model or order the purest symbolic form of challenge.

A strange mixture of the symbolic and the spectacular, of challenge and simulation. This

paradoxical configuration is the only original form of our time, and subversive because insoluble. There is neither victory nor defeat: no sense can be made of an event which is irremediably spectacular, or irremediably symbolic. Everything in terrorism is ambivalent and reversible: death, the media, violence, victory. Who plays into the other's hands? Death itself is undefinable: the death of the terrorists is equivalent to that of the hostages; they are substitutable. In spite of all the efforts to set them into radical opposition, fascination allows no distinction to be made, and rightly so, for power finally does not make any either, but settles its accounts with everyone, and buries Baader and Schleyer together at Stuttgart in its incapacity to unravel the deaths and rediscover the fine dividing line, the distinctive and valid oppositions which are the secret of law and order. Nor is it possible to reclaim a positive use for the media, or a transparence of repression: the repressive act traverses the same unforeseeable spiral as the terrorist act; no one knows where it will stop, nor all the setbacks and reversals that will ensue. There is no distinction possible between the spectacular and the symbolic, no distinction possible between the "crime"

and the "repression." *It is this uncontrollable eruption of reversibility that is the true victory of terrorism.*

This victory lies not at all in the fact of imposing a negotiation and forcing a government to capitulate. Besides, the objective — most of the time to liberate imprisoned comrades — is typically a zero sum equation. The stakes are elsewhere. And if power wins out at the level of the objective, it loses at the level of the real stakes. It loses its political definition, and is forced to accept, all the while trying to thwart, this reversibility of all the actors in the same process. Terrorists, killers, hostages, leaders, spectators, public opinion — there is no more innocence in a system which has no meaning. No tragedy either (in spite of the ideology of the Baader group itself, and the pedagogy of the terrorist model on a world-wide scale). The force of the terrorists comes to them precisely from the fact that they have no logic. The others do: it is quick, effective, flawless, without scruples; it is why they "win." If the terrorists had one, they would not make the errors that they do, but they would no longer be terrorists. To demand that they be at the same time illogical, which gives them their power, and

logical tacticians, which would make them successful, is absurd — again a fantasy of synthesis, and of defense on our part, which allows us to recuperate ourselves in the fury of defeat.

Hence the stupidity and the obscenity of all that is reported about the terrorists: everywhere the wish to palm off meaning on them, to exterminate them with meaning, which is more effective than the bullets of specialized commandoes (and all the while subjecting them elsewhere, in the prisons, to sensory deprivation). It is still this rage for meaning which makes us, with the best will in the world, treat them like idiots incapable of going all the way and blowing up the airplane and the passengers, which makes us want them not to have "won."

Not only have they not won, but they have encouraged inordinately the sacred union of all the world forces of repression; they have reinforced the political order, etc. — let's go all the way — they have killed their Stammheim* comrades, since if they had not launched and then botched up this operation, the others would still be living. But all this participates in the same conspiracy of meaning, which amounts to setting an

action in contradiction with itself (here to ends that were not desired, or according to a logic which was not its own). Strangulation.

II. Stammheim

The insoluble polemic on the manner in which Baader and his comrades died is itself obscene, and for the same reason: there is an equal obscenity in wanting to forcibly impose meaning on the highjackers' act and in wanting to restore Baader's death to the order of factual reality. Principle of meaning as principle of truth: there you have the real life blood of State terrorism.

It is to believe that the German government's strategy attains perfection in a single blow: not only does it link together in an almost improvised manner the bungled taking of hostages with the immediately subsequent liquidation of the prisoners who disturbed it, but does so in such a way (coarse, equivocal, incoherent) that it traps everyone in the hysterical search for truth, which is the best way to abolish the symbolic futility of this death.

The highjackers made so many errors at Mogadishu that one can only think that they

were done "on purpose." They have finally attained their objective obliquely, which was the challenge of their own death, the latter summing up the virtual one of all the hostages, and more radically still, that of the power which kills them. For it absolutely must be repeated that the stakes are not to beat power on its own ground, but to oppose another political order of force. One knows nothing about terrorism if one does not see that it is not a question of real violence, nor of opposing one violence to another (which, owing to their disproportion, is absurd, and besides, all *real* violence, like real order in general, is always on the side of power), but to oppose to the *full* violence and to the *full* order a clearly superior model of extermination and virulence operating through emptiness.

The secret is to oppose to the order of the real an absolutely imaginary realm, absolutely ineffectual at the level of reality, but whose implosive energy absorbs everything real and all the violence of real power which founders there. Such a model is no longer of the order of transgression: repression and transgression are of the

old order of the law, that is to say, of the order of a real *system* in expansion. In such a system, all that comes into contradiction with it, including the violence of its opposite, only makes the expansion accelerate. Here, the virulence comes from the implosion — and the death of the terrorists (or of the hostages) is of this implosive order: the abolition of value, of meaning, of the real, at a determined point. This point can be infinitesimal, and yet provokes a suction, an absorption, a gigantic convection, as could be seen at Mogadishu. Around this tiny point, the whole system of the real condenses, is tetanized, and launches all its anti-bodies. It becomes so dense that it goes beyond its own laws of equilibrium and involutes in its own over-effectiveness. At bottom, the profound tactic of simulation (for it's very much a matter of simulation in the terrorist model, and not of real death) is to provoke an excess of reality, and *to make the system collapse under an excess of reality.*

If it is possible then to think that the highjackers have acted purposefully in order to meet their death, this kind of paradoxical death which

shines intensely for a moment before falling back into the real, it is posssible to think inversely that the German government itself did not commit so many errors in the Baader affair except towards a well defined end (even without desiring it). It was able to stage Baader's death neatly — he did not do it. Far from seeing there a secondary episode, it must be seen as the *key* to the situation. By sowing this doubt, this deliberate ambiguity concerning the facts, it insured that the truth about this death, and not the death itself, became fascinating. Everyone exhausted himself in argument and in attempts at clarification — clarifications reinforced by the theatricality of the event which acts as a gigantic dissuasion of the terrorists' execution — everyone, and above all the revolutionaries who wanted strongly to have it that Baader had been "assassinated." They too were vultures of the truth. What's the bloody difference, anyway — suicides or victims of liquidation? The difference, of course, is that if they were liquidated and it can be proven, then the masses, guided by the truth of the facts, would know that the German State is fascist, and would mobilize in order to wreak revenge. What a load of rubbish. A death is romantic or it is not. And

in the latter case, there is no need for revenge; it is of the imaginary order. What non-sense to fall back into the reality of a contract of revenge and equivalence! The avengers are worth the moralists: always evaluate the price, and have the just price paid. It matters little that the "reality" of this death (the truth about. . .) is stolen from you, since it is not of the order of the real, and therein lies its force. You are the one who depreciates it by wanting to institute it as a fact, as capital with the value of death, and to exhaust it in death, whereas this death at full price, not liquidated in the equivalence of meaning and vengeance, opens a cycle of vertigo in which the system itself can only come to be implicated in the end, or brutally, through its own death. Against this vertiginous death the system defends itself by setting in place an inverse cycle — a recycling of the truth against the insoluble cycle of death. Such is the inspired manoeuvre of the German government, which consists in delivering through its "calculated" errors an unfinished product, an unrecoverable truth. Thus everyone will exhaust himself finishing the work, and going to the end of the truth. A subtle incitement to self-management. It is content to produce an event in-

volving death; others will put the finishing touches on the job. The truth. Even among the very ones who revolt at Baader's death, no one sees through this trap, and all function with the same automatism on the fringe of open complicity which all intelligent power contrives to spread around its decisions.

Far from harming him, the flaws of Stammheim stem from a strategy of simulation by the German State which alone would merit analysis and denunciation. A strategy of sacred union, and not at all moral, against the terrorist violence, but, much more profoundly, *a sacred union in the production of truth,* of the facts, of the real. Even if this truth explodes (if in fifteen years it is finally established that Baader was coldly liquidated), it will hardly be a scandal. No power will be frightened by it; if necessary, the crew of leaders will be changed. The price of the truth for power is superficial. On the other hand, the benefits of general mobilization, dissuasion, pacification and mental socialization obtained through this crystalization of the truth are immense. A smart operation, under which Baader's death threatens to be buried definitively. □

Seduction

AN BAUDRILLARD

SEDUCTION

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SEDUCTION

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

translated by Brian Singer

MACMILLAN

© Editions Galilée 1979
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First published 1979 by Editions Galilée, 9 rue Linné, Paris 5e.

English translation first published 1990.

Published by
MACMILLAN EDUCATION LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

Printed in Canada

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Baudrillard, Jean
Seduction. - (Culture texts).
1. Femininity
I. Title II. Series III. De la seduction, *English*
155.333

ISBN 0-333-51076-3
ISBN 0-333-51077-1

KING ALFRED'S COLLEGE
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INTRODUCTION

A fixed destiny weighs on seduction. For religion seduction was a strategy of the devil, whether in the guise of witchcraft or love. It is always the seduction of evil – or of the world. It is the very artifice of the world. Its malediction has been unchanged in ethics and philosophy, and today it is maintained in psychoanalysis and the 'liberation of desire.' Given the present-day promotion of sex, evil and perversion, along with the celebration of the ofttimes programmatic resurrection of all that was once accursed, it might seem paradoxical that seduction has remained in the shadows – and even returned thereto permanently.

The eighteenth century still spoke of seduction. It was, with valour and honour, a central preoccupation of the aristocratic spheres. The bourgeois Revolution put an end to this preoccupation (and the others, the later revolutions ended it irrevocably – every revolution, in its beginnings, seeks to end the seduction of appearances). The bourgeois era dedicated itself to nature and production, things quite foreign and even expressly fatal to seduction. And since sexuality arises, as Foucault notes, from a process of production (of discourse, speech or desire), it is not at all surprising that seduction has been all the more covered over. We live today the promotion of nature, be it the good nature of the soul of yesteryear, or the good material nature of things, or even the psychic nature of desire. Nature pursues its realization through all the metamorphosis of the repressed, and through the liberation of all energies, be they

psychic, social or material.

Seduction, however, never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice – never to the order of energy, but that of signs and rituals. This is why all the great systems of production and interpretation have not ceased to exclude seduction – to its good fortune – from their conceptual field. For seduction continues to haunt them from without, and from deep within its forsaken state, threatening them with collapse. It awaits the destruction of every godly order, including those of production and desire. Seduction continues to appear to all orthodoxies as malefice and artifice, a black magic for the deviation of all truths, an exaltation of the malicious use of signs, a conspiracy of signs. Every discourse is threatened with this sudden reversibility, absorbed into its own signs without a trace of meaning. This is why all disciplines, which have as an axiom the coherence and finality of their discourse, must try to exorcize it. This is where seduction and femininity are confounded, indeed, confused . Masculinity has always been haunted by this sudden reversibility within the feminine. Seduction and femininity are ineluctable as the reverse side of sex, meaning and power.

Today the exorcism is more violent and systematic. We are entering the era of final solutions; for example, that of the sexual revolution, of the production and management of all liminal and subliminal pleasures, the micro-processing of desire, with the woman who produces herself as woman, and as sex, being the last avatar. Ending seduction.

Or else the triumph of a soft seduction, a white, diffuse feminization and eroticization of all relations in an enervated social universe.

Or else none of the above. For nothing can be greater than seduction itself, not even the order that destroys it.

I

THE ECLIPTIC OF SEX

Nothing is less certain today than sex, behind the liberation of its discourse. And nothing today is less certain than desire, behind the proliferation of its images.

In matters of sex, the proliferation is approaching total loss. Here lies the secret of the ever increasing production of sex and its signs, and the hyperrealism of sexual pleasure, particularly feminine pleasure. The principle of uncertainty has extended to sexual reason, as well as political and economic reason.

The state of sex's liberation is also that of its indetermination. No more want, no more prohibitions, and no more limits: it is the loss of every referential principle. Economic reason is sustained only by penury; it is put into question with the realization of its objective, the abolition of the spectre of penury. Desire too is sustained only by want. When desire is entirely on the side of demand, when it is operationalized without restrictions, it loses its imaginary and, therefore, its reality; it appears everywhere, but in generalized simulation. It is the ghost of desire that haunts the defunct reality of sex. Sex is everywhere, except in sexuality (Barthes).

In sexual mythology, the transition towards the feminine is contemporaneous with the passage from determination to general indetermination. The feminine is not substituted for the

masculine as one sex for another, according to some structural inversion. It is substituted as the end of the determinate representation of sex, as the flotation of the law that regulates the difference between the sexes. The ascent of the feminine corresponds to both the apogee of sexual pleasure and a catastrophe relative to sex's reality principle.

And so it is femininity that is gripping, in the present and fatal situation of sex's hyperreality – as it was yesterday, but in direct contrast, in irony and seduction.

★ ★ ★

Freud was right: there is but one sexuality, one libido – and it is masculine. Sexuality has a strong, discriminative structure centered on the phallus, castration, the Name-of-the Father, and repression. There is none other. There is no use dreaming of some non-phallic, unlocked, unmarked sexuality. There is no use seeking, from within this structure, to have the feminine pass through to the other side, or to cross terms. Either the structure remains the same, with the female being entirely absorbed by the male, or else it collapses, and there is no longer either female or male – the degree zero of the structure. This is very much what is happening today: erotic polyvalence, the infinite potentiality of desire, different connections, diffractions, libidinal intensities – all multiple variants of a liberatory alternative coming from the frontiers of a psychoanalysis free of Freud, or from the frontiers of desire free of psychoanalysis. Behind the effervescence of the paradigm of sex, everything is converging towards the non-differentiation of the structure and its potential neutralization.

The danger of the sexual revolution for the female is that she will be enclosed within a structure that condemns her to either discrimination when the structure is strong, or a derisory triumph within a weakened structure.

The feminine, however, is, and has always been, somewhere else. That is the secret of its strength. Just as it is said that something lasts because its existence is not adequate to its essence, it must be said that the feminine seduces because it is never where it thinks it is, or where it thinks itself. The feminine is not found in the history of suffering and oppression imputed

to it – women's historical tribulations (though by guile it conceals itself therein). It suffers such servitude only when assigned to and repressed within this structure – to which the sexual revolution assigns and represses it all the more dramatically. But by what aberrant complicity (complicit with what? if not, precisely, the male) would one have us believe that this is the female's history? Repression is already here in full force, in the narrative of women's sexual and political misery, to the exclusion of every other type of strength and sovereignty.

There is an alternative to sex and to power, one that psychoanalysis cannot know because its axiomatics are sexual. And yes, this alternative is undoubtedly of the order of the feminine, understood outside the opposition masculine/feminine, that opposition being essentially masculine, sexual in intention, and incapable of being overturned without ceasing to exist.

This strength of the feminine is that of seduction.

★ ★ ★

One may catch a glimpse of another, parallel universe (the two never meet) with the decline of psychoanalysis and sexuality as strong structures, and their cleansing within a *psy* and molecular universe (that of their final liberation). A universe that can no longer be interpreted in terms of psychic or psychological relations, nor those of repression and the unconscious, but must be interpreted in the terms of play, challenges, duels, the strategy of appearances – that is, the terms of seduction. A universe that can no longer be interpreted in terms of structures and diacritical oppositions, but implies a seductive reversibility – a universe where the feminine is not what opposes the masculine, but what seduces the masculine.

In seduction the feminine is neither a marked nor an unmarked term. It does not mask the "autonomy" of desire, pleasure or the body, or of a speech or writing that it has supposedly lost(?). Nor does it lay claim to some truth of its own. It seduces.

To be sure, one calls the sovereignty of seduction feminine by convention, the same convention that claims sexuality to be fundamentally masculine. But the important point is that this form of sovereignty has always existed – delineating, from a distance, the feminine as something that is nothing, that is never

"produced," is never where it is produced (and certainly cannot, therefore, be found in any "feminist" demand). And this not from the perspective of a psychic or biological bi-sexuality, but that of the trans-sexuality of seduction which the entire organization of sex tends to reject – as does psychoanalysis in accordance with the axiom that there is no other structure than that of sexuality (which renders it incapable, by definition, of speaking about anything else).

★ ★ ★

What does the women's movement oppose to the phallocratic structure? Autonomy, difference, a specificity of desire and pleasure, a different relation to the female body, a speech, a writing – *but never seduction*. They are ashamed of seduction, as implying an artificial presentation of the body, or a life of vassalage and prostitution. They do not understand *that seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe.* The sovereignty of seduction is incommensurable with the possession of political or sexual power.

There is a strange, fierce complicity between the feminist movement and the order of truth. For seduction is resisted and rejected as a misappropriation of women's true being, a truth that in the last instance is to be found inscribed in their bodies and desires. In one stroke the immense privilege of the feminine is effaced: the privilege of having never acceded to truth or meaning, and of having remained absolute master of the realm of appearances. The capacity immanent to seduction to deny things their truth and turn it into a game, the pure play of appearances, and thereby foil all systems of power and meaning with a mere turn of the hand. The ability to turn appearances in on themselves, to play on the body's appearances, rather than with the depths of desire. Now all appearances are reversible . . . only at the level of appearances are systems fragile and vulnerable . . . meaning is vulnerable only to enchantment. One must be incredibly blind to deny the sole force that is equal and superior to all others, since with a simple play of the *strategy of appearances*, it turns them upside down.

★ ★ ★

Anatomy is destiny, Freud said. One might be surprised that the feminist movement's rejection of this definition, phallic by definition, and sealed with the stamp of anatomy, opens onto an alternative that remains fundamentally biological and anatomical:

> Indeed, woman's pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity, for example. The pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They each contribute, irreplaceably, to woman's pleasure. Among other caresses . . .Fondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading the lips, stroking the posterior wall of the vagina, brushing against the mouth of the uterus, and so on. To evoke only a few of the most specifically female pleasures.
>
> Luce Irigaray

Parole de femme? But it is always an anatomical speech, always that of the body. What is specific to women lies in the diffraction of the erogenous zones, in a decentered eroticism, the diffuse polyvalence of sexual pleasure and the transfiguration of the entire body by desire: this is the theme song that runs through the entire female, sexual revolution, but also through our entire culture of the body, from the Anagrammes of Bellmer to Deleuze's mechanized connections. It is always a question of the body, if not the anatomical, then the organic, erogenous body, the functional body that, even in fragmented and metaphorical form, would have pleasure as its object and desire as its natural manifestation. But then either the body is here only a metaphor (and if this is the case, what is the sexual revolution, and our entire culture, having become a body culture, talking about?), or else, with this body speech, this woman speech, we have, very definitely, entered into an anatomical destiny, into anatomy as destiny. There is nothing here radically opposed to Freud's maxim.

Nowhere is it a question of seduction, the body worked by artifice (and not by desire), the body seduced, the body to be

seduced, the body in its passion separated from its truth, from that ethical truth of desire which obsesses us – that serious, profoundly religious truth that the body today incarnates, and for which seduction is just as evil and deceitful as it once was for religion. Nowhere is it a question of the body delivered to appearances. Now, *seduction alone is radically opposed to anatomy as destiny.* Seduction alone breaks the distinctive sexualization of bodies and the inevitable phallic economy that results.

Any movement that believes it can subvert a system by its infra-structure is naive. Seduction is more intelligent, and seemingly spontaneously so. Immediately obvious – seduction need not be demonstrated, nor justified – it is there all at once, in the reversal of all the alleged depth of the real, of all psychology, anatomy, truth, or power. It knows (this is its secret) that *there is no anatomy*, nor psychology, that all signs are reversible. Nothing belongs to it, except appearances – all powers elude it, but it "reversibilizes" all their signs. How can one oppose seduction? The only thing truly at stake is mastery of the strategy of appearances, against the force of being and reality. There is no need to play being against being, or truth against truth; why become stuck undermining foundations, when a *light* manipulation of appearances will do.

Now woman is but appearance. And it is the feminine as appearance that thwarts masculine depth. Instead of rising up against such "insulting" counsel, women would do well to let themselves be seduced by its truth, for here lies the secret of their strength, which they are in the process of losing by erecting a contrary, feminine depth.

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It is not quite the feminine as surface that is opposed to the masculine as depth, but the feminine as indistinctness of surface and depth. Or as indifference to the authentic and the artificial. Joan Rivière, in "Feminité sans mascarade" *(La Psychoanalyse* no. 7), makes a fundamental claim – one that contains within it all seduction: "Whether femininity be authentic or superficial, it is fundamentally the same thing."

This can be said only of the feminine. The masculine, by contrast, possesses unfailing powers of discrimination and abso-

lute criteria for pronouncing the truth. The masculine is certain, the feminine is insoluble.

Now, surprisingly, this proposition, that in the feminine the very distinction between authenticity and artifice is without foundation, also defines the space of simulation. Here too one cannot distinguish between reality and its models, there being no other reality than that secreted by the simulative models, just as there is no other femininity than that of appearances. Simulation too is insoluble.

This strange coincidence points to the ambiguity of the feminine: it simultaneously provides radical evidence of simulation, and the only possibility of its overcoming – in seduction, precisely.

THE ETERNAL IRONY OF THE COMMUNITY

This femininity, the eternal irony of the community.

Hegel

Femininity as a principle of uncertainty.

It causes the sexual poles to waver. It is not the pole opposed to masculinity, but what abolishes the differential opposition, and thus sexuality itself, as incarnated historically in the masculine phallocracy, as it might be incarnated in the future in a female phallocracy.

If femininity is a principle of uncertainty, it is where it is itself uncertain that this uncertainty will be greatest: in the play of femininity.

Transvestism. Neither homosexuals nor transexuals, transvestites like to play with the indistinctness of the sexes. The spell they cast, over themselves as well as others, is born of sexual vacillation and not, as is customary, the attraction of one sex for the other. They do not really like male men or female women, nor those who define themselves, redundantly, as distinct sexual beings. In order for sex to exist, signs must reduplicate biological being. Here the signs are separated from biology, and consequently the sexes no longer exist properly speaking. What

transvestites love is this game of signs, what excites them is *to seduce the signs themselves*. With them everything is makeup, theater, and seduction. They appear obsessed with games of sex, but they are obsessed, first of all, with play itself; and if their lives appear more sexually endowed than our own, it is because they make sex into a total, gestural, sensual, and ritual game, an exalted but ironic invocation.

Nico seemed so beautiful only because her femininity appeared so completely put on. She emanated something more than beauty, something more sublime, a different seduction. And there was deception: she was a false drag queen, a real woman, in fact, playing the queen. It is easier for a non-female/female than for a real woman, already legitimated by her sex, to move amongst the signs and take seduction to the limit. Only the non-female/female can exercise an untainted fascination, because s/he is more seductive than sexual. The fascination is lost when the real sex shows through; to be sure, some other desire may find something here, but precisely no longer in that perfection that belongs to artifice alone.

Seduction is always more singular and sublime than sex, and it commands the higher price.

One must not seek to ground transvestism in bisexuality. For the sexes and sexual dispositions, whether mixed or ambivalent, indefinite or inverted, are still real, and still bear witness to the psychic reality of sex. Here, however, it is this very definition of the sexual that is eclipsed. Not that this game is perverse. What is perverse is what perverts the order of the terms; but here there are no longer any terms to pervert, only signs to seduce.

Nor should one seek to ground transvestism in the unconscious or in "latent homosexuality." The old casuistry of latency is itself a product of the *sexual* imaginary of surfaces and depths, and always implies a diagnosis of symptoms and prognosis for their correction. *But here nothing is latent*, everything calls into question the very idea of a secret, determinate instance of sex, the idea that the deep play of phantasies controls the superficial play of signs. On the contrary, everything is played out in the vertigo of this inversion, this *transsubstantiation of sex into signs that is the secret of all seduction.*

Perhaps the transvestite's ability to seduce comes straight from parody – a parody of sex by its over-signification. The prostitution of transvestites would then have a different meaning from the more common prostitution of women. It would be closer to the sacred prostitution practiced by the Ancients (or the sacred status of the hermaphrodite). It would be contiguous with the theater, or with makeup, the ritual and burlesque ostentation of a sex whose own pleasure is absent.

The seduction itself is coupled with a parody in which an implacable hostility to the feminine shows through, and which might be interpreted as a male appropriation of the panoply of female allurements. The transvestite would then reproduce the situation of the first warrior – he alone was seductive – the woman being nul (consider fascism, and its affinity for transvestites). But rather than the addition of the sexes is not this their invalidation? And doesn't the masculine, in this mockery of femininity, rescind its status and prerogatives in order to become a contrapuntal element in a ritual game?

In any case, this parody of femininity is not quite as acerbic as one might think, since it is the parody of femininity *as men imagine* and stage it, as well as phantasize it. A femininity exaggerated, degraded, parodied (drag queens in Barcelona keep their moustaches and expose their hairy chests), the claim is that in this society femininity is naught but the signs with which men rig it up. To over-simulate femininity is to suggest that woman is but a masculine model of simulation. Here is a challenge to the female *model* by way of a female *game*, a challenge to the female/woman by way of the female/sign. And it is possible that this living, feigned denunciation, which plays on the furthermost bounds of artifice, and simultaneously plays with the mechanisms of femininity to the point of perfection, is more lucid and radical than all the ideo-political claims of a femininity "alienated in its being." Here femininity is said to have no being (no nature, writing, singular pleasures or, as Freud said, particularized libido). Contrary to every search for an authentic femininity, for a woman's speech, etc., the claim here is that the female is nothing, and that this is her strength.

Here is a more subtle response than feminism's outright denial of the law of castration. For the latter encounters symbolic, not

anatomical fate, one that weighs on all possible sexuality. The overturning of this law, therefore, can only result from its *parodic resolution*, from the ex-centricity of the signs of femininity, the reduplication of signs that puts an end to every insoluble biology or metaphysics of the sexes. Makeup is nothing else: a triumphant parody, a solution by excess, the surface hypersimulation of this in-depth simulation that is itself the symbolic law of castration – a transsexual game of seduction.

The irony of artificial practices: the peculiar ability of the painted woman or prostitute to exaggerate her features, to turn them into more than a sign, and by this usage of, not the false as opposed to the true, but the more false than false, to incarnate the peaks of sexuality while simultaneously being absorbed in their simulation. The irony proper to the constitution of woman as idol or sex object: in her closed perfection, she puts an end to sex play and refers man, the lord and master of sexual *reality*, to his transparency as an *imaginary* subject. The ironic power of the object, then, which she loses when promoted to the status of a subject.

All masculine power is a power to produce. All that is produced, be it the production of woman as female, falls within the register of masculine power. The only, and irresistible, power of femininity is the inverse power of seduction. In itself it is nul, seduction has no power of its own, only that of annuling the power of production. But it always annuls the latter.

Has there, moreover, ever been a phallic power? This entire history of patriarchal domination, of phallocracy, the immemorial male privilege, is perhaps only a story. Beginning with the exchange of women in primitive societies, stupidly interpreted as the first stage of woman-as-object. All that we have been asked to believe – the universal discourse on the inequality of the sexes, the theme song of an egalitarian and revolutionary modernity (reinforced, these days, with all the energies of a *failed* revolution) – is perhaps one gigantic misunderstanding. The opposite hypothesis is just as plausible and, from a certain perspective, more interesting – that is, that the feminine has never been dominated, but has always been dominant. The feminine considered not as a sex, but as the form transversal to every sex, as well as to every power, as the secret, virulent form

of in-sexuality. The feminine as a challenge whose devastation can be experienced today throughout the entire expanse of sexuality. And hasn't this challenge, which is also that of seduction, always been triumphant?

In this sense, the masculine has always been but a residual, secondary and fragile formation, one that must be defended by retrenchments, institutions, and artifices. The phallic fortress offers all the signs of a fortress, that is to say, of weakness. It can defend itself only from the ramparts of a manifest sexuality, of a finality of sex that exhausts itself in reproduction, or in the orgasm.

One can hypothesize that the feminine is the only sex, and that the masculine only exists by a superhuman effort to leave it. A moment's distraction, and one falls back into the feminine. The feminine would have a decisive advantage, the masculine a definite handicap. One sees how ridiculous it is to want to "liberate" the one in order that it accede to the fragility of the other's "power," to the eccentric, paradoxical, paranoid and tiresome masculine state.

The phallic fable reversed: where woman is created from man by subtraction, here it is man created from woman by exception. A fable easily strengthened by Bettleheim's analysis in *Symbolic Wounds*, where men are said to have erected their powers and institutions in order to thwart the originally far superior powers of women. The driving force is not penis envy, but on the contrary, man's jealousy of woman's power of fertilization. This female advantage could not be atoned; a different order had to be built at all costs, a masculine social, political and economic order, wherein this advantage could be reduced. Thus the ritual practices whereby the signs of the opposite sex are appropriated are largely masculine: scarifications, mutilations, artificial vaginizations, couvades, etc.

All this is as convincing as a paradoxical hypothesis can be (and it is always more interesting than the received wisdom), but in the end it only reverses the terms, and so turns the feminine into an original substance, a sort of anthropological infrastructure. It reverses the anatomical determination, but lets it subsist as destiny – and once again the "irony of femininity" is lost.

The irony is lost when the feminine is instituted as a sex, even and above all when it is in order to denounce its oppression. It is the eternal illusion of enlightenment humanism, which aspires to liberate the servile sex, race or class in the very terms of its servitude. That the feminine becomes a sex in its own right! An absurdity, if posed in neither the terms of sex nor power.

The feminine knows neither equivalence nor value: it is, therefore, not soluble in power. It is not even subversive, it is reversible. Power, on the other hand, is soluble in the reversibility of the feminine. If the "facts" cannot decide whether it was the masculine or feminine that was dominant throughout the ages (once again, the thesis of women's oppression is based on a caricatural phallocratic myth), by contrast, it remains clear that in matters of sexuality, the reversible form prevails over the linear form. The excluded form prevails, secretly, over the dominant form. The seductive form prevails over the productive form.

Femininity in this sense is on the same side as madness. It is because madness secretly prevails that it must be normalized (thanks to, amongst other things, the hypothesis of the unconscious). It is because femininity secretly prevails that it must be recycled and normalized (in sexual liberation in particular).

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And in the orgasm.

The despoilment of the orgasm, the absence of sexual pleasure, is often advanced as characteristic of women's oppression. A flagrant injustice whose immediate rectification everyone must pursue in accord with the injunctions of a sort of long-distance race or sex rally. Sexual pleasure has become a requisite and a fundamental right. The most recent of the rights of man, it has acceded to the dignity of a categorical imperative. It is immoral to act otherwise. But this imperative does not even have the Kantian charm of endless finalities. As the management and self-management of desire, its imposition does not, no more than that of the law, allow ignorance as a defense.

But this is to remain unaware that sexual pleasure too is rever-

sible, that is to say that, in the absence or denial of the orgasm, superior intensity is possible. It is here, where the end of sex becomes aleatory again, that something arises that can be called seduction or delight. Or again, sexual pleasure can be just a pretext for another, more exciting, more passionate game. This is what occurred in *The Empire of the Senses*, where the aim was to push sexual pleasure to its limit and beyond – a challenge that prevails over the workings of desire, because it is much more dizzying, because it involves the passions while the other implies only a drive.

But this vertigo can be equally present in the *rejection* of sexual pleasure. Who knows if women, far from being "despoiled," have not, from time immemorial, been playing a game of their own by triumphantly asserting a right to sexual reticence? If they have not, from the depths of their sexual impassibility, been throwing down a challenge, challenging men's pleasure to be but the pleasure of men alone? No one knows to what destructive depths such provocation can go, nor what omnipotence it implies. Men, reduced to solitary pleasures, and enmeshed within the directives of delight and conquest, never did find a way out.

Who won this game with its different strategies? Men, apparently, all down the line. But it is by no means certain that they did not lose themselves in this terrain and become bogged down (as in that of the seizure of power) consequent to a sort of forward flight that could neither assure them of safety, nor relieve them of their secret despair at what had escaped them – whatever their gains or calculations. This had to end: it was imperative that women have orgasms. Measures had to be taken to liberate them and make them climax – thereby ending this unbearable challenge that ultimately nullifies sexual pleasure in a possible strategy of non-pleasure. For sexual pleasure knows no strategy: it is only energy seeking an outlet. It is therefore quite inferior to any strategy that uses it as its material, and uses desire itself as a tactical element. This is the central theme of the libertine sexuality of the eighteenth century, from Laclos to Casanova and Sade (including Kierkegaard in *Diary of the Seducer*), for whom sexuality still retains its ceremonial, ritual and strategic character, before sinking, with the Rights of Man and psychology, into the revealed truth of sex.

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Here then is the era of the pill when sexual pleasure is decreed. The end of the right to sexual reticence. Women must realize that they are being dispossessed of something essential for them to put up so much resistance (all those ghosts of "missed" acts) to the "rational" adoption of the pill. The same resistance as that of entire generations to school, medicine, security and work. The same profound intuition about the ravages of an unfettered liberty, speech or pleasure. Defiance, the other's defiance, is no longer possible: all symbolic logic has been eliminated to the advantage of a permanent erection and its blackmail (without counting the tendencious lowering of the rate of sexual pleasure itself).

The "traditional" woman's sexuality was neither repressed nor forbidden. Within her role she was entirely herself; she was in no way defeated, nor passive, nor did she dream of her future "liberation." It is the beautiful souls who, retrospectively, see women as alienated from time immemorial, and then liberated. And there is a profound disdain in this vision, the same disdain as that shown towards the "alienated" masses supposedly incapable of being anything but mystified sheep.

It is easy to paint a picture of woman alienated through the ages, and then open the doors of desire for her under the auspices of the revolution and psychoanalysis. It is all so simple, so obscene in its simplicity – worse, it implies the very essence of sexism and racism: commiseration.

Fortunately, the female has never fit this image. She has always had her own strategy, the unremitting, winning strategy of challenge (one of whose major forms is seduction). There is no need to lament the wrongs she suffered, nor to want to rectify them. No need to play the lover of justice for the weaker sex. No need to mortgage everything for some liberation or desire whose secret had to wait till the twentieth century to be revealed. At each moment of the story the game was played with a full deck, with all the cards, including the trumps. And men did not win, not at all. On the contrary, it is women who are now about to lose, precisely under the sign of sexual pleas-

ure – but this is another story.

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It is the story of the feminine in the present tense, in a culture that produces everything, makes everything speak, everything babble, everything climax. The promotion of the female as a sex in its own right (equal rights, equal pleasures), of the female as value – at the expense of the female as a principle of uncertainty. All sexual liberation lies in this strategy: the imposition of the rights, status and pleasure of women. The overexposing and staging of the female as sex, and of the orgasm as the repeated proof of sex.

Pornography states this clearly. A trilogy of spread, sensualism and signification, pornography promotes female sexual pleasure in so exaggerated a manner, only in order to better bury the uncertainty that hovers over the "black continent." No more of that "eternal irony of the community" of which Hegel spoke. Henceforth women will climax, and will know why. All femininity will be made visible – woman as emblematic of orgasm, and orgasm as emblematic of sexuality. No more uncertainty, no more secrets. This is the radical obscenity that is beginning.

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Pasolini's *Salo, or a 120 Days* – a veritable twilight of seduction. All reversibility has been abolished in accordance with an implacable logic. Everything is irreversibly masculine and dead. Even the complicity, the promiscuity between executioners and victims has disappeared: inanimate torture, perpetrated without emotion, a cold machination. (Here one perceives that sexual gratification is truly the industrial usufruct of the body, and the opposite of all seduction: it is a product of extraction, a technological product of a machinery of bodies, a logistics of pleasure which goes straight to its objective, only to find its object dead).

The film illustrates the truth that in a dominant masculine system, and in every dominant system (which thereby becomes

masculine), it is femininity that incarnates reversibility, the possibility of play and symbolic involvement. *Salo* is a universe completely sanitized of that minimum of seduction that provides the stakes not just of sex, but of every relation, including death and the exchange of death (this is expressed in *Salo*, as in Sade, by the predominance of sodomy). It is here that it becomes apparent that the feminine is not a sex (opposed to the other), but what counters the sex that alone has full rights and the full exercise of these rights, the sex that holds a monopoly on sex: the masculine, itself haunted by the fear of something other, *of which sex is but the disenchanted form*: seduction. The latter is a game, sex is a function. Seduction supposes a ritual order, sex and desire a natural order. It is these two fundamental forms that confront each other in the male and female, and not some biological difference or some naive rivalry of power.

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The feminine is not just seduction; it also suggests a challenge to the male to be the sex, to monopolize sex and sexual pleasure, a challenge to go to the limits of its hegemony and exercise it unto death. Today phallocracy is collapsing under the pressure of this challenge (present throughout our culture's sexual history), and its inability to meet it. Our entire conception of sexuality may be collapsing because constructed around the phallic function and the positive definition of sex. Every *positive* form can accommodate itself to its negative form, but understands the challenge of the *reversible* form as mortal. Every structure can adapt to its subversion or inversion, but not to the reversion of its terms. Seduction is this reversible form.

Not the seduction to which women have been historically consigned: the culture of the gynaeceum, of rouge and lace, a seduction reworked by the mirror stage and the female imaginary, the terrain of sex games and ruses (though here lies the only bodily ritual of western culture left, all the others having disappeared, including politeness). But seduction as an ironic, alternative form, one that breaks the referentiality of sex and provides a space, not of desire, but of play and defiance.

This is what occurs in the most banal games of seduction: I shy away; it is not you who will give me pleasure, it is I who will make you play, and thereby rob you of your pleasure. A game in continuous movement – one cannot assume that sexual strategies alone are involved. There is, above all, a strategy of displacement (*se-ducere*: to take aside, to divert from one's path) that implies a distortion of sex's truth. To play is not to take pleasure. Seduction, as a passion and as a game at the level of the sign, acquires a certain sovereignty; it is seduction that prevails in the long term because it implies a reversible, indeterminate order.

The glamour of seduction is quite superior to the Christian consolation of the pleasures of the flesh. One wants us to consider the latter a natural finality – and many are driven mad for failing to attain it. But love has nothing to do with sex drives, if not in the libidinal look of our contemporary culture. Love is a challenge and a prize: a challenge to the other to return the love. And to be seduced is to challenge the other to be seduced in turn (there is no finer argument than to accuse a woman of being incapable of being seduced). Perversion, from this perspective takes on a somewhat different meaning: it is *to pretend to be seduced* without being seduced, without being capable of being seduced.

The law of seduction takes the form of an uninterrupted ritual exchange where seducer and seduced constantly raise the stakes in a game that never ends. And cannot end since the dividing line that defines the victory of the one and the defeat of the other, is illegible. And because there is no limit to the challenge to love more than one is loved, or to be always more seduced – if not death. Sex, on the other hand, has a quick, banal end: the orgasm, the immediate form of desire's realization.

> In analysis, one can see the extreme danger that may be incurred by a man who begins to listen to a woman's demand for sexual pleasure. If, through her desire, a woman alters the unalterability within which a man cannot help but enclose her, if she herself becomes an immediate and limitless demand, if she no longer remains within

> this enclosure and is no longer held by it, the man finds himself cast into a subsuicidal state. A demand that tolerates no delay, no excuse, that is limitless with regard to intensity and duration, shatters the absolute represented by woman, by feminine sexuality, and even by feminine pleasure. ...Feminine sexual pleasure can always be rendered divine again, and thus controlled, reduced to the coolness of marble breasts, whereas the demand for enjoyment made by a woman to the man who is bound to her without being able to flee, causes him to lose his bearings and the feeling of pure contingency.... When all desire is channelled into the demand for enjoyment, the world turns upside down and bursts asunder. This is doubtless why our culture has taught women to demand nothing in order to induce them to desire nothing...[1]

And this "desire, all of which is channelled into the demand for enjoyment"? Does it still concern woman's "desire"? Isn't this a form of madness, which has but little to do with "liberation"? What is this new, feminine figure of unlimited sexual demand, an unlimited claim to sexual gratification? This, in effect, is the end point to which our culture is rushing – and Roustang is right, it conceals a form of subsuicidal collective violence. And not just for men, but for women too, and for sexuality in general.

> We say no to those who love only women; those who love only men; those who love only children (there are also the elderly, sados, machos, dogs, cats)... The new militant, with his refined egocentricism, claims a right to his sexual racism. But we say no to all sectarianism. If one must become a misogynist to be a pederast, an androphobe to be

1. François Roustang, *Dire Mastery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1982), pp. 104-5.

> a lesbian, ...if one must reject the pleasures of the night, chance encounters, and pick-ups in order to defend oneself against rape, then in the name of a struggle against certain prohibitions, one has returned to other taboos, moralisms, norms, blinkers...
>
> Within our body we experience not one sex, not two, but a multitude of sexes. We do not see a man, or woman, but a human being, anthropomorphic(!)... Our bodies are tired of all the stereotyped cultural barriers, all the physiological segregation... We are male and female, adults and children, fairies, dykes, and gays, fuckers and fucked, buggers and buggered. We do not accept the reduction of all our sexual richness to a single sex. Our sapphism is only one facet of our sexuality. We refuse to limit ourselves to what society demands of us, that is, that we be either hetero, lesbian, gay the whole gamut of promotional products. We are unreasonable in all our desires.
>
> Judith Belladonna Barbara Penton
> *Libé*, July 1978

The frenzy of unlimited sex, an exacerbated ventilation of desire onto demand and gratification – doesn't this constitute a reversal of what Roustang described: if until now women were taught to demand nothing in order that they desired nothing, are they not now being taught to demand everything in order to desire nothing? The entire black continent decoded by sexual gratification?

Masculinity would be closer to the Law, femininity closer to sexual pleasure. But is not such pleasure the axiomatics of a decoded sexual universe – the feminine and liberating reference produced by the gradual enfeeblement of the Law, the Law becoming an injunction to pleasure after having been its interdiction. An effect of simulation inverted: it is when pleasure seeks openly to be autonomous, that it is truly a product of the Law. Or else the Law collapses, and where the Law disappears, pleasure is inaugurated as a new contract. What does it

matter: nothing has changed, and the inversion of signs is but a consequence of strategy. This is the significance of the present turnaround, and of the twin privileging of the feminine and pleasure over the masculine and prohibition that once dominated sexual reason. The exaltation of the feminine is a perfect instrument for the unprecedented generalization and controlled extension of sexual Reason.

An unexpected fate, one that cuts short all the illusions of desire and all the rationalizations of liberation. Marcuse:

> What within a patriarchal system appears as the feminine antithesis of masculine values would then truly constitute a repressed social and historical alternative – the socialist alternative... To do away with patriarchal society is to deny all the particular qualities attributed to women as women, and thus to extend these qualities to all sectors of social life, to work and leisure alike. Women's liberation would then be, simultaneously, the liberation of men...
>
> *Actuels*, Galilée, p. 33.

Suppose the feminine liberated and placed at the service of a new collective Eros (the same *modus operandi* as for the death drive – the same dialectic aligned with the new social Eros). But what happens if the feminine, far from being a set of specific qualities (which it may have been when repressed, but only then), proves, once "liberated," to be the expression of an *erotic indetermination*, and of the loss of any specific qualities, as much in the social as the sexual sphere?

The situation of the feminine was quite ironic in seduction, and is just as ironic today in its indetermination and equivocation; for its promotion as subject is accompanied by its return as object, that is to say, as generalized pornography. A strange coincidence. Women's liberation would very much like to cast the deciding vote against this objectification. But the cause is hopeless, for the significance of the liberation of the feminine lies in its radical ambiguity. Even Roustang's text, which tends to support the flood of female demands, cannot but have a

presentiment of the catastrophe that the channelling of all desire into the demand for gratification constitutes. Unless one considers the subsuicidal state of men provoked by this demand as a decisive argument, there is nothing that lets one distinguish the *monstrosity* of this demand for female gratification from the monstrosity of its total interdiction in years past.

A similar ambiguity can be found in the male and his weakness. The panic men feel when faced with the "liberated" female subject is equalled only by their fragility before the pornographic chasm of the "alienated" female sex, the female sex object. Whether a woman demands sexual satisfaction "by becoming conscious of the rationality of her desire," or offers herself in a state of total prostitution – whether the female be subject or object, liberated or prostituted, her sex is to be devouring, a gaping voracity. It is no accident that all pornography turns around the female sex. This is because erections are never certain (no scenes of impotence in pornography, they are averted by the hallucination of unrestrained feminine supply). In a sexuality made problematic by demands to prove and demonstrate itself without discontinuity, the marked position, the masculine position, will be fragile. By contrast, the female sex remains equal to itself in its availability, in its chasm, its degree zero. The continuity of female sexuality, as opposed to male intermittency, is enough to ensure its superiority at the level of the organic representation of sexual pleasure, the representation of endless sex that has come to dominate our fantasies.

Sexual liberation, like that of the productive forces, is potentially limitless. It demands a profusion come true, a "sexually affluent society." It can no more tolerate a scarcity of sexual goods, than of material goods. Now, this *utopian* continuity and availability can only be incarnated by the female sex. This is why in this society everything – objects, goods, services, relations of all types – will be feminized, sexualized in a feminine fashion. In advertising it is not so much a matter of adding sex to washing machines (which is absurd) as conferring on objects the imaginary, female quality of being available at will, of never being retractile or aleatory.

In pornography sexuality is lulled by this yawning monoto-

ny, where flaccid or erectile men play only a nominal role. Hard core has changed nothing: the male is no longer interesting because too determined, too marked – the phallus as canonical signifier – and thus too fragile. Fascination moves towards the neuter, towards an indeterminate chasm, a mobile, diffuse sexuality. The feminine's historical revenge after so many centuries of repression and frigidity? Perhaps, but more likely, the exhaustion of sexuality, whether it be the masculine sexuality that once nourished all the schemes of erectility, verticality, ascendancy, growth, production, etc., and is at present lost in the obsessive simulation of all these themes – or a feminine sexuality, as incarnated from time immemorial in seduction. Today, behind the mechanical objectification of the signs of sex, it is the masculine as fragile, and the feminine as degree zero which have the upper hand.

We are indeed in an original situation as regards sexual violence – violence done to the "subsuicidal" male by unbridled, female sensualism. But it is not a matter of a reversal of the historical violence done to women by male sexual force. The violence involved here is relative to the neutralization, depression and collapse of the marked term before the irruption of the non-marked term. It is not a real, generic violence, but a violence of dissuasion, *the violence of the neuter*, the violence of the degree zero.

So too is pornography: the violence of sex neutralized.

STEREO-PORNO

Take me to your room and fuck me. There is something indefinable in your vocabulary, something left to be desired.

Philip Dick
The Schizos' Ball

Turning everything into reality
Jimmy Cliff

The *trompe l'oeil* removes a dimension from real space, and this accounts for its seduction. Pornography by contrast adds a dimension to the space of sex, it makes the latter more real than the real – and this accounts for its absence of seduction.

There is no need to search for the phantasies that haunt pornography (fetishisms, perversions, primal scenes, etc.,), for they are barred by an excess of "reality." Perhaps pornography is only an allegory, that is to say, a forcing of signs, a baroque enterprise of over-signification touching on the "grotesque" (literally, "grotesque" garden art added to a rocky nature as pornography adds the vividness of anatomical detail).

The obscenity itself burns and consumes its object. One sees from up close what one has never seen before; to one's good fortune, one has never seen one's genitals function from so close, nor for that matter, from so general a perspective. It is all too

true, too near to be true. And it is this that is fascinating, this excess of reality, this hyperreality of things. The only phantasy in pornography, if there is one, is thus not a phantasy of sex, but of the real, and its absorption into something other than the real, the hyperreal. Pornographic voyeurism is not a sexual voyeurism, but a voyeurism of representation and its perdition, a dizziness born of the loss of the scene and the irruption of the obscene.

Consequent to the anatomical zoom, the dimension of the real is abolished, the distance implied by the gaze gives way to an instantaneous, exacerbated representation, that of sex in its pure state, stripped not just of all seduction, but of its image's very potentiality. Sex so close that it merges with its own representation: the end of perspectival space, and therefore, that of the imaginary and of phantasy – end of the scene, end of an illusion.

Obscenity, however, is not pornography. Traditional obscenity still contains an element of transgression, provocation, or perversion. It plays on repression, with phantasies of violence. With sexual liberation this obscenity disappears: Marcuse's "repressive desublimation" goes this route (and even if it has not passed into general mores, the mythical triumph of release today, like that of repression yesterday, is total). The new obscenity, like the new philosophy (*la nouvelle philosophie*) arises on the burying grounds of the old, and has another meaning. It does not play with violent sex, sex with real stakes, but with sex neutralized by tolerance. Sex here is outrageously "rendered," but it is the rendering of something that has been removed. Pornography is its artificial synthesis, its ceremony but not its celebration. Something *neo* or *retro*, like those green spaces that substitute their chlorophyl effects for a defunct nature, and for this reason, partake of the same obscenity as pornography.

Modern unreality no longer implies the imaginary, it engages more reference, more truth, more exactitude – it consists in having everything pass into the absolute evidence of the real. As in hyperrealist paintings (the paintings of the "magic realists") where one can discern the grain of the face's skin, an unwonted microscopics that lacks even the charm of the uncanny. Hyperrealism is not surrealism, it is a vision that hunts down

seduction by means of visibility. One "gives you more." This is already true of colour in film or television. One gives you so much – colour, lustre, sex, all in high fidelity, and with all the accents (that's life!) – that you have nothing to add, that is to say, nothing to give in exchange. Absolute represssion: by giving you *a little too much* one takes away everything. Beware of what has been so well "rendered," when it is being returned to you without you ever having given it!

A bewildering, claustrophobic and obscene image, that of Japanese quadrophonics: an ideally conditioned room, fantastic technique, music in four dimensions, not just the three of the environing space, but a fourth, visceral dimension of internal space. The technical delirium of the perfect restitution of music (Bach, Monteverdi, Mozart!) *that has never existed* , that no one has ever heard, and that was not meant to be heard like this. Moreover, one does not "hear" it, for the distance that allows one to *hear* music, at a concert or somewhere else, is abolished. Instead it permeates one from all sides; there is no longer any musical space; it is the simulation of a total environment that dispossesses one of even the minimal analytic perception constitutive of music's *charm*. The Japanese have simple-mindedly, and in complete good faith, confused the real with the greatest number of dimensions possible. If they could construct hexaphonics, they would do it. Now, it is by this fourth dimension which they have added to music, that they castrate you of all *musical* pleasure. Something else fascinates (but no longer seduces) you: technical perfection, "high fidelity," which is just as obsessive and puritanical as the other, conjugal fidelity. This time, however, one no longer even knows what object it is faithful to, for no one knows where the real begins or ends, nor understands, therefore, the fever of perfectibility that persists in the real's reproduction.

Technique in this sense digs its own grave. For at the same time that it perfects the means of synthesis, it deepens the criteria of analysis and definition to such an extent that total faithfulness, exhaustiveness as regards the real becomes forever impossible. The real becomes a vertiginous phantasy of exactitude lost in the infinitismal.

In comparison with, for example, the *trompe-l'oeil*, which

saves on one dimension, "normal" three-dimensional space is already debased and impoverished *by virtue of an excess of means* (all that is real, or wants to be real, constitutes a debasement of this type). Quadrophonics, hyperstereo, or hifi constitute a conclusive debasement.

Pornography is the quadrophonics of sex. It adds a third and fourth track to the sexual act. It is the hallucination of detail that rules. Science has already habituated us to this microscopics, this excess of the real in its microscopic detail, this voyeurism of exactitude – a close-up of the invisible structures of the cell – to this notion of an inexorable truth that can no longer be measured with reference to the play of appearances, and that can only be revealed by a sophisticated technical apparatus. End of the secret.

What else does pornography do, in its sham vision, than reveal the inexorable, microscopic truth of sex? It is directly descended from a metaphysics that supposes the phantasy of a hidden truth and its revelation, the phantasy of "repressed" energy and its *production* – on the obscene scene of the real. Thus the impasse of enlightened thought when asked, should one censure pornography and choose a well-tempered repression? There can be no definitive response in the affirmative, for pornography has reason on its side; it is part of the devastation of the real, of the insane illusion of the real and its objective "liberation." One cannot liberate the productive forces without wanting to "liberate" sex in its brute function; they are both equally obscene. The realist corruption of sex, the productivist corruption of labour – same symptoms, same combat.

The equivalent of the conveyor belt here, is the Japanese vaginal cyclorama – it outdoes any strip-tease. Prostitutes, their thighs open, sitting on the edge of a platform, Japanese workers in their shirt-sleeves (it is a popular spectacle), permitted to shove their noses up to their eyeballs within the woman's vagina in order to see, to see better – but what? They clamber over each other in order to gain access, and all the while the prostitutes speak to them gently, or rebuke them sharply for the sake of form. The rest of the spectacle, the flagellations, the reciprocal masturbation and traditional strip-tease, pales before this moment of absolute obscenity, this moment of visual voracity that

goes far beyond sexual possession. A sublime pornography: if they could do it, these guys would be swallowed up whole within the prostitute. An exaltation with death? Perhaps, but at the same time they are comparing and commenting on the respective vaginas in mortal seriousness, without ever smiling or breaking out in laughter, and without ever trying to touch – except when playing by the rules. No lewdness, but an extremely serious, infantile act borne of an undivided fascination with the mirror of the female organ, like Narcissus' fascination with his own image. Beyond the conventional idealism of the strip-tease (perhaps there might even be some seduction here), pornography at its most sublime reverses itself into a purified obscenity, an obscenity that is purer, deeper, more visceral. But why stop with nudity, or the genitalia? If the obscene is a matter of representation and not of sex, it must explore the very interior of the body and the viscera. Who knows what profound pleasure is to be found in the visual dismemberment of mucous membranes and smooth muscles? Our pornography still retains a restricted definition. Obscenity has an unlimited future.

But take heed, it is not a matter of the deepening of a drive; what is involved is an *orgy of realism*, an orgy of *production*. A rage (perhaps also a drive, but one that substitutes itself for all the others) to summon everything before the jurisdiction of signs. Let everything be rendered in the light of the sign, in the light of a visible energy. Let all speech be liberated and proclaim desire. We are reveling in this liberalization, which, in fact, simply marks the growing progress of obscenity. All that is hidden and still enjoys a forbidden status, will be unearthed, rendered to speech and made to bow before the facts. The real is growing ever larger, some day the entire universe will be real, and when the real is universal, there will be death.

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Pornographic simulation: nudity is never anything but an extra sign. Nudity veiled by clothing functions as a secret, ambivalent referent. Unveiled, it surfaces as a sign and returns to the circulation of signs: nudity de-sign. The same occurs with hard core and blue porn: the sexual organ, whether erect or

open wide is just another sign in the hypersexual panoply. Phallus-design. The more one advances willy-nilly in sex's veracity, in the exposure of its workings, the more immersed one becomes in the accumulation of signs, and the more enclosed one becomes in the endless over-signification of a real that no longer exists, and of a body that never existed. Our entire body culture, with its concern for the "expression" of the body's "desires," for the stereophonics of desire, is a culture of irredeemable monstrosity and obscenity.

Hegel: "Just as when speaking of the exteriority of the human body, we said that its entire surface, in contrast to that of the animal world, reveals the presence and pulsation of the heart, we say of art that it has as its task to create in such a way that at all points of its surface the phenomenal, the appearance becomes an eye, the seat of the soul, rendering itself visible to the spirit." There is, therefore, never any nudity, never any nude body that is simply nude; there is never just a body. It is like the Indian said when the white man asked him why he ran around naked: "For me, it is all face." In a non-fetishistic culture (one that does not fetishize nudity as objective truth) the body is not, as in our own, opposed to the face, conceived as alone rich in expression and endowed with "eyes": it is itself a face, and looks at you. It is therefore not obscene, that is to say, made to be seen nude. It *cannot* be seen nude, no more than the face can for us, for the body is – and is only – a symbolic veil; and it is by way of this play of veils, which, literally, abolishes the body "as such," that seduction occurs. This is where seduction is at play and not in the tearing away of the veil in the name of some manifestation of truth or desire.

The indistinction of face and body in a total culture of appearances – the distinction between face and body in a culture of meaning (the body here becomes monstrously *visible*, it becomes the sign of a monster called desire) – then the total triumph in pornography of the obscene body, to the point where the face is effaced. The erotic models are faceless, the actors are neither beautiful, ugly, or expressive; functional nudity effaces everything in the "spectacularity" of sex. Certain films are no more than visceral sound-effects of a coital close-up; even the body disappears, dispersed amongst oversize, par-

tial objects. Whatever the face, it remains inappropriate, for it breaks the obscenity and reintroduces meaning where everything aspires to abolish it in sexual excess and a nihilistic vertigo.

At the end of this terrorist debasement, where the body (and its "desire") are made to yield to the evidence, appearances no longer have any secret. A culture of the desublimation of appearances: everything is materialized in accord with the most objective categories. A pornographic culture *par excellence*; one that pursues the workings of the real at all times and in all places. A pornographic culture with its ideology of the concrete, of facticity and use, and its concern with the preeminence of use value, the material infrastructure of things, and the body as the material infrastructure of desire. A one-dimensional culture that exalts everything in the "concreteness of production" or of pleasure – unlimited mechanical labour or copulation. What is obscene about this world is that nothing is left to appearances, or to chance. Everything is a visible, necessary sign. Like those dolls, adorned with genitalia, that talk, pee, and will one day make love. And the little girl's reaction: "My little sister, she knows how to do that too. Can't you give me a real one?"

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From the discourse of labour to the discourse of sex, from the discourse of productive forces to that of drives, one finds the same ultimatum, that of *pro-duction* in the literal sense of the term. Its original meaning, in fact, was not to fabricate, but to render visible or make appear. Sex is produced like one produces a document, or as one says of an actor that he performs (*se produit*) on stage.

To produce is to materialize by force what belongs to another order, that of the secret and of seduction. Seduction is, at all times and in all places, opposed to production. Seduction removes something from the order of the visible, while production constructs everything in full view, be it an object, a number or concept.

Everything is to be produced, everything is to be legible, everything is to become real, visible, accountable; everything is to be transcribed in relations of force, systems of concepts

or measurable energy; everything is to be said, accumulated, indexed and recorded. This is sex as it exists in pornography, but more generally, this is the enterprise of our entire culture, whose natural condition is obscene: a culture of monstration, of demonstration, of productive monstrosity.

No seduction here, nor in pornography, given the abrupt production of sexual acts, and the ferocity of pleasure in its immediacy. There is nothing seductive about bodies traversed by a gaze literally sucked in by a vacuum of transparency; nor can there be even a hint of seduction within the universe of production, where a principle of transparency governs the forces belonging to the world of visible, calculable phenomena – objects, machines, sexual acts, or the gross national product.

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The insoluble equivocalness of pornography: it puts an end to all seduction *via sex*, but at the same time it puts an end *to sex* via the accumulation of the signs of sex. Both triumphant parody and simulated agony – there lies its ambiguity. In a sense, pornography is true: it owes its truth to a system of sexual dissuasion by hallucination, dissuasion of the real by the hyperreal, and of the body by its forced materialization.

Pornography is usually faulted for two reasons – for manipulating sex in order to defuse the class struggle (always the old "mystified consciousness") and for corrupting sex (the good, true sex, the sex to be liberated, the sex to be considered amongst our natural rights) by its commodification. Pornography, then, is said to mask either the truth of capital and the infrastructure, or that of sex and desire. But in fact pornography does not mask anything (yes, that is indeed the case). It is not an ideology, i.e., it does not hide some truth; it is a simulacrum, i.e., it is a truth effect that hides the truth's non-existence.

Pornography says: there must be good sex somewhere, for I am its caricature. In its grotesque obscenity, it attempts to save sex's truth and provide the faltering sexual model with some credibility. Now, the whole question is whether good sex exists, or whether, quite simply, sex exists, somewhere – sex as

the body's ideal use value, sex as possible pleasures which can and must be "liberated." It is the same question demanded of political economy: is there "good" value, an ideal use value beyond exchange value understood as the inhuman abstraction of capital – an ideal value of goods or social relations which can and must be "liberated"?

SEDUCTION/PRODUCTION

In reality, pornography is but the paradoxical limit of the sexual. A "realistic" exacerbation, a maniacal obsession with the real: this is the obscene, in the etymological and every other sense. But is not the sexual itself already a forced materialization? Is not the advent of sexuality already part of occidental realistics, the compulsion proper to our culture to instantiate and instrumentalize everything?

It is absurd, when speaking of other cultures, to dissociate religion, economics, politics, and the legal system (i.e., the social and other classificatory phantasmagorias) for the reason that such a dissociation has not occurred, these concepts being like so many diseases with which we infect these cultures in order to better "understand" them. In the same manner, it is absurd to autonomize the sexual as a separate instance, an irreducible given, as something to which other instances or givens can be reduced. We need a critique of sexual Reason, or rather, a geneology of sexual Reason similar to Nietzche's geneology of good and evil, for it is our new morality. One might say of sexuality, as of death: "it is a new wrinkle to which consciousness became accustomed not so long ago."

We remain perplexed and vaguely compassionate when confronted with cultures for which the sexual act is not a finality

in itself, for which sexuality does not have the mortal seriousness of an energy to be liberated, of an ejaculation to be forced, a production at any price, or hygienic auditing of the body. Cultures that preserve lengthy procedures of enticement and sensuality, long series of gifts and counter-gifts, with sex being but one service amongst others, and the act of love one possible end-term to a prescribed, ritualistic interchange. Such proceedings no longer make sense to us; sex has become, strictly speaking, *the actualization of desire in pleasure* – all else is literature. An extraordinary crystalization around the orgasmic, and more generally, the energizing function.

Ours is a culture of premature ejaculation. Increasingly all seduction, all manner of enticement – which is always a highly *ritualized* process – is effaced behind a *naturalized* sexual imperative, behind the immediate and imperative realization of desire. Our center of gravity has been displaced towards a libidinal economy concerned with only the naturalization of desire, a desire dedicated to drives, or to a machine-like functioning, but above all, to the imaginary of repression and liberation.

Henceforth one no longer says: "You have a soul and it must be saved," but:

> "You have a sex, and you must put it to good use."
>
> "You have an unconscious, and you must let the id speak."
>
> "You have a body, and you must derive pleasure from it."
>
> "You have a libido, and you must expend it," etc.

This pressure towards liquidity, flux and the accelerated articulation of the sexual, psychic and physical body is an exact replica of that which regulates exchange value: capital must circulate, there must no longer be any fixed point, investments must be ceaselessly renewed, value must radiate without respite – this is the form of value's present realization, and sexuality, the sexual *model*, is simply its mode of appearance at the level of the body.

As a model sex takes the form of an *individual* enterprise based on natural energy: to each his desire and may the best man prevail (in matters of pleasure). It is the selfsame form as

capital, and this is why sexuality, desire and pleasure are *subaltern* values. When they first appeared, not so long ago, as a system of reference on the horizon of western culture, it was as fallen, residual values – the ideal of inferior classes, the bourgeoisie, then the petty-bourgeoisie – relative to the aristocratic values of birth and blood, valour and seduction, or the collective values of religion and sacrifice.

Moreover, the body – this selfsame body to which we ceaselessly refer – has no other reality than that implied by the sexual and productive model. It is capital that, in a single movement, gives rise to both the energizing body of labour power, and the body of our dreams, a sanctuary of desires and drives, of psychic energy and the unconscious, the impulsive body that haunts the primary processes – the body itself having become a primary process, and thereby an anti-body, an ultimate revolutionary referent. The two bodies are simultaneously engendered in repression, and their apparent antagonism is but a consequence of their reduplication. When one uncovers in the body's secret places an "unbound" libidinal energy opposed to the "bound" energy of the productive body, when one uncovers in desire the truth of the body's phantasms and drives, one is still only disintering the psychic metaphor of capital.

Here is your desire, your unconscious: a psychic metaphor of capital in the rubbish heap of political economy. And the sexual jurisdiction is but a fantastic extension of the commonplace ideal of private property, where everyone is assigned a certain amount of capital to manage: a psychic capital, a libidinal, sexual or unconscious capital, for which each person will have to answer individually, under the sign of his or her own liberation.

A fantastic reduction of seduction. This sexuality transformed by the revolution of desire, this mode of bodily production and circulation has acquired its present character, has come to be spoken of in terms of "sexual relations," only by forgetting all forms of seduction – just as one can speak of the social in terms of "relations" or "social relations," only after it has lost all symbolic substance.

Wherever sex has been erected into a function, an autono-

mous instance, it has liquidated seduction. Sex today generally occurs only in the place, and in place of a missing seduction, or as the residue and staging of a failed seduction. *It is then the absent form of seduction that is hallucinated sexually* – in the form of desire. The modern theory of desire draws its force from seduction's liquidation.

Henceforth, in place of a seductive form, there is a productive form, an "economy" of sex: the retrospective of a drive, the hallucination of a stock of sexual energy, of an unconscious in which the repression of desire and its clearance are inscribed. All this (and the psychic in general) results from the autonomization of sex – as nature and the economy were once the precipitate of the autonomization of production. Nature and desire, both of them idealized, succeed each other in the progressive designs for liberation, yesterday the liberation of the productive forces, today that of the body and sex.

One can speak of the birth of the sexual and of sex speech – just as one speaks of the birth of the clinic and clinical gaze – *where once there was nothing*, if not uncontrolled, unstable, insensate, or else highly ritualized forms. Where too, it follows, there was no repression, this thematic with which we have burdened all previous societies even more than our own. We condemn them as primitive from a technological perspective, but also from a sexual or psychic perspective, for they conceived of neither the sexual nor the unconscious. Fortunately, psychoanalysis has come along to lift the burden and reveal what was hidden. The incredible racism of the truth, the evangelical racism of the Word and its accession.

Where the sexual does not appear of and for itself, we act as though it were repressed; it is our way of saving it. And yet to speak of repressed or sublimated sexuality in primitive, feudal or other societies, or simply to speak of "sexuality" and the unconscious in such cases, is a sign of profound stupidity. It is not even certain that such talk holds the best key to unlocking our society. On this basis, that is, by calling into question the very hypothesis of sexuality, by questioning sex and desire as autonomous instances, it is possible to agree with Foucault and say (though not for the same reasons) that in our culture too there is no and *never has been any repression either.*

Sexuality as a discourse is, like political economy (and every other discursive system), only a montage or simulacrum which has always been traversed, thwarted and exceeded by actual practice. The coherence and transparency of *homo sexualis* has no more existence than the coherence and transparency of *homo economicus*.

It is a long process that simultaneously establishes the psychic and the sexual, that establishes the "other scene," that of the phantasy and the unconscious, at the same time as the energy produced therein – a psychic energy that is merely a direct consequence of the staged hallucination of repression, an energy hallucinated as sexual substance, which is then metaphorized and metonymized according to the various instances (topical, economic, etc.), and according to all the modalities of secondary and tertiary repression. Psychoanalysis, this most admirable edifice, the most beautiful hallucination of the back-world, as Nietzsche would say. The extraordinary effectiveness of this model for the simulation of scenes and energies – an extraordinary theoretical psychodrama, this staging of the psyche, this scenario of sex as a separate instance and insurmountable reality (akin to the hypostatization of production). What does it matter if the economic, the biological or the psychic bear the costs of this staging – of what concern is the "scene" or "the other scene": it is the entire scenario of sexuality (and psychoanalysis) as a model of simulation that should be questioned.

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It is true that in our culture the sexual has triumphed over seduction, and annexed it as a subaltern form. Our instrumental vision has inverted everything. For in the symbolic order seduction is primary, and sex appears only as an addendum. Sex in this latter order is like the recovery in an analytic cure, or a birth in a story of Levi-Strauss; it comes as an extra, without a relation of cause to effect. This is the secret of "symbolic efficacity": the world's workings are the result of a mental seduction . Thus the butcher Tchouang-Tseu whose understanding enabled him to describe the cow's interstitial structure without ever having used the blade of a knife: a sort of symbolic reso-

lution that, as an addendum, has a practical result.

Seduction too works on the mode of symbolic articulation, of a duel* affinity with the structure of the other – sex may result, as an addendum, but not necessarily. More generally, seduction is a challenge to the very existence of the sexual order. And if our "liberation" seems to have reversed the terms and successfully challenged the order of seduction, it is by no means certain that its victory is not hollow. The question of the ultimate superiority of the ritual logics of challenge and seduction over the economic logics of sex and production still remains unresolved.

For revolutions and liberations are fragile, while seduction is inescapable. It is seduction that lies in wait for them – seduced as they are, despite everything, by the immense setbacks that turn them from their truth – and again it is seduction that awaits them even in their triumph. The sexual discourse itself is continually threatened with saying something other than what it says.

In an American film a guy pursues a street-walker, prudently, according to form. The woman responds, aggressively: "What do you want? Do you want to jump me? Then, change your approach! Say, I want to jump you!" and the guy, troubled, replies: "yes, I want to jump you." "Then go fuck yourself!" And later, when he is driving her in his car: "I'll make coffee, and then you can jump me." In fact, this cynical conversation, which appears objective, functional, anatomical, and without nuance, is only a game. Play, challenge, and provocation are just beneath the surface. Its very brutality is rich with the inflections of love and complicity. It is a new manner of seduction.

Or this conversation taken from *The Schizophrenics' Ball* by Philip Dick:

> "Take me to your room and fuck me."
>
> "There is something indefinable in your vocabulary, something left to be desired."

One can understand this as: Your proposition is unacceptable, it lacks the poetry of desire, it is too direct. But in a sense the text says the exact opposite: that the proposition has some-

**Trans. note:* In French, the word *duel* means both duel/dual. Baudrillard is clearly playing on the double meaning of the word – agonal relations and reciprocal challenges. I translate the term 'duel', even in its adjectival form.

thing "indefinable" about it, which thereby *opens* the path to desire. A direct sexual invitation is too direct to be true, and immediately refers to something else.

The first version deplores the obscenity of the conversation. The second is more subtle; it is capable of disclosing a twist to obscenity – obscenity as an enticement, and thus as an "indefinable" allusion to desire. An obscenity too brutal to be true, and too impolite to be dishonest – obscenity as a challenge and therefore, again, as seduction.

In the last instance, a purely sexual statement, a pure demand for sex, is impossible. One cannot be free of seduction, and the discourse of anti-seduction is but its last metamorphosis.

It is not just that a pure discourse of sexual demand is absurd given the complexity of affective relations; it quite simply does not exist. To believe in sex's reality and in the possibility of speaking sex without mediation is a delusion – the delusion of every discourse that believes in transparency; it is also that of functional, scientific, and all other discourses with claims to the truth. Fortunately, the latter is continually undermined, dissipated, destroyed, or rather, circumvented, diverted, and *seduced*. Surreptitiously they are turned against themselves; surreptitiously they dissolve into a different game, a different set of stakes.

To be sure, neither pornography nor sexual transactions exercise any seduction. Like nudity, and like the truth, they are abject. They are the body's disenchanted form, just as sex is the suppressed and disenchanted form of seduction, just as use value is the disenchanted form of the object, and just as, more generally, the real is the suppressed and disenchanted form of the world.

Nudity will never abolish seduction, for it immediately becomes something else, the hysterical enticements of a different game, one that goes beyond it. There is no degree zero, no objective reference, no point of neutrality, but always and again, stakes. Today all our signs appear to be converging – like the body in nudity and meaning in truth – towards some conclusive objectivity, an entropic and metastable form of the neutral. (What else is the ideal-typical, vacationing nude body, given over to the sun, itself hygenic and neutralized, with its luciferi-

an parody of burning). But is there ever a cessation of signs at some zero point of the real or the neutral? Isn't there always a reversion of the neutral itself into a new spiral of stakes, seduction and death.

What seduction used to lie concealed in sex? What new seduction, what new challenge lies concealed in the abolition of what, within sex, was once at stake? (The same question on another plane: What challenge, what source of fascination, lies concealed in the masses, in the abolition of what was once at stake with the social?)

All descriptions of disenchanted systems, all hypotheses about the disenchantment of systems – the flood of simulation and dissuasion, the abolition of symbolic processes, the death of referentials – are perhaps false. The neutral is never neutral; it becomes an object of fascination. But does it then become an object of seduction?

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Agonistic logics, logics of ritual and seduction, are stronger than sex. *Like power, sex never has the last word.* In *The Empire of The Senses*, a film that from end to end is occupied with the sex act, the latter, by its very persistence, comes to be possessed by the logic of another order. The film is unintelligible in terms of sex, for sexual pleasure, by itself, leads to everything but death. But the madness that seizes hold of the couple (a madness only for us, in reality it is a rigourous logic) pushes them to extremes, where meaning no longer has sense and the exercise of the senses is not in the least sensual. Nor is it intelligible in terms of mysticism or metaphysics. Its logic is one of challenge, impelled by the two partners outbidding each other. Or more precisely, the key event is the passage from a logic of pleasure at the beginning, where the man leads the game, to a logic of challenge and death, that occurs under the impetus of the woman – who thereby becomes the game's mistress, even if at first she was only a sexual object. It is the feminine principle that brings about the reversal of sex/value into an agonistic logic of seduction.

There is here no perversion or morbid drive, no interpreta-

tion drawn from our psycho-sexual frontiers, no "affinity" of Eros for Thanatos nor any ambivalence of desire. It is not a matter of sex, nor of the unconscious. The sexual act is viewed as a ritual act, ceremonial or warlike, for which (as in ancient tragedies on the theme of incest) death is the mandatory denouement, the emblematic form of the challenge's fulfillment.

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Thus the obscene can seduce, as can sex and pleasure. Even the most anti-seductive figures can become figures of seduction. (It has been said of the feminist discourse that, beyond its total absence of seduction, there lies a certain homosexual allure). These figures need only move beyond their truth into a reversible configuration, a configuration that is also that of their death. The same holds true for that figure of anti-seduction *par excellence*, power.

Power seduces. But not in the vulgar sense of the masses' desire for complicity (a tautology that ultimately seeks to ground seduction in the *desire of others*). No, power seduces by virtue of the reversibility that haunts it, and on which a minor cycle is instituted. No more dominant and dominated, no more victims and executioners (but "exploiters" and "exploited," they certainly exist, though quite separately, for there is no reversibility in production – but then nothing essential happens at this level). No more *separate* positions: power is realized according to a duel relation, whereby it throws a challenge to society, and its existence is challenged in return. If power cannot be "exchanged" in accord with this minor cycle of seduction, challenge and ruse, then it quite simply disappears.

At bottom, power does not exist. The unilateral character of of the relation of forces on which the "structure" and "reality" of power and its perpetual movement are supposedly instituted, does not exist. This is the dream of power imposed by reason, not its reality. Everything seeks its own death, including power. Or rather, everything demands to be exchanged, reversed, and abolished within a cycle (this is why neither repression nor the unconscious exist, for reversibility is always already there). *This alone is profoundly seductive.* Power

seduces only when it becomes a challenge to itself; otherwise it is just an exercise, and satisfies only the hegemonic logic of reason.

Seduction is stronger than power because it is reversible and mortal, while power, like value, seeks to be irreversible, cumulative and immortal. Power partakes of all the illusions of production, and of the real; it wants to be real, and so tends to become its own imaginary, its own superstition (with the help of theories that analyze it, be they to contest it). Seduction, on the other hand, is not of the order of the real – and is never of the order of force, nor relations of force. But precisely for this reason, it enmeshes all power's *real* actions, as well as the entire reality of production, in this unremitting reversibility and disaccumulation – *without which there would be neither power nor accumulation.*

It is the emptiness behind, or at the very heart of power and production; it is this emptiness that today gives them their last glimmer of reality. Without that which reverses, annuls, and seduces them, they would never have had the authority of reality.

The real, moreover, has never interested anyone. It is a place of disenchantment, a simulacrum of accumulation against death. And there is nothing more tiresome. What sometimes renders the real fascinating – and the truth as well – is the imaginary catastrophe which lies behind it. Do you think that power, sex, economics – all these real, really big things – would have held up for a single moment unless sustained by fascination, a fascination that comes precisely from the mirror image in which they are reflected, from their continuous reversion, the palpable pleasure borne of their imminent catastrophe?

The real, particularly in the present, is nothing more than the stockpiling of dead matter, dead bodies and dead language – a residual sedimentation. Still we feel more secure when the *stock of reality* is assessed (the ecological lament speaks of material energies, but it conceals that what is disappearing is *the real's energy*, the real's reality, the possibility of its management, whether capitalist or revolutionary). If the horizon of production is beginning to vanish, that of speech, sex or desire can still take up the slack. To liberate, to give pleasure, to give

a speech, to give speech to others: this is real, it is something substantial, with a prospect of stocks. And, therefore, it is power.

Unfortunately not. That is to say, not for long. This "reality" is slowly dissipating. One wants sex, like power, to become an irreversible instance, and desire an irreversible energy (a *stock* of energy – desire, need it be said, is never far from capital). For we grant meaning only to what is irreversible: accumulation, progress, growth, production. Value, energy and desire imply irreversible processes – that is the very meaning of their liberation. (Inject the smallest dose of reversibility into our economic, political, sexual or institutional mechanisms, and everything collapses). This is what today assures sexuality of its mythical authority over hearts and bodies. But it is also what lies behind the fragility of sex, and of the entire edifice of production.

Seduction is stronger than production. It is stronger than sexuality, with which it must never be confused. It is not something internal to sexuality, though this is what it is generally reduced to. It is a circular, reversible process of challenges, oneupmanship and death. It is, on the contrary, sex that is the debased form, circumscribed as it is by the terms of energy and desire.

Seduction's entanglement with production and power, the irruption of a minimal reversibility within every irreversible process, such that the latter are secretly undermined, while simultaneously ensured of that minimal continuum of pleasure without which they would be nothing – this is what must be analyzed. At the same time knowing that production constantly seeks to eliminate seduction in order to establish itself on an economy of relations of force alone; and that sex, the production of sex, seeks to eliminate seduction in order to establish itself on an economy of relations of desire alone.

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This is why one must completely turn round what Foucault has to say in *The History of Sexuality I*, while still accepting its central hypothesis. Foucault sees only the *production* of sex as discourse. He is fascinated by the irreversible deployment

and interstitial saturation of a field of speech, which is at the same time the institution of a field of power, culminating in a field of knowledge that reflects (or invents) it. But from whence does power derive its somnambulistic functionality, this irresistible vocation to saturate space? If neither sociality nor sexuality exist unless reclaimed and staged by power, perhaps power too does not exist unless reclaimed and staged by knowledge (theory). In which case, the entire ensemble should be placed in simulation, and this too perfect mirror inverted, even if the "truth effects" it produces are marvelously decipherable.

Furthermore, the equation of power with knowledge, this convergence of mechanisms over a field of rule they have seemingly swept clean, this conjunction described by Foucault as complete and operational, is perhaps only the concurrence of two dead stars whose last glimmerings still illuminate each other, though they have lost their own radiance? In their original, authentic phase, knowledge and power were opposed to each other, sometimes violently (as were, moreover, sex and power). But if today they are merging, is this not due to the progressive extenuation of their reality principle, of their distinctive characteristics, their specific energies? Their conjunction then would herald not a reinforced positivity, but a twin indifferentiation, at the end of which only their phantoms would remain, mingling amongst themselves, left to haunt us.

In the last instance, behind the apparent *stasis* of knowledge and power which appears to arise from all sides, there would lie only the *metastasis* of power, the cancerous proliferation of a disturbed, disorganized structure. If power today is general, and can be detected at all levels ("molecular" power), if it has become cancerous, with its cells proliferating uncontrollably, without regard to the good old "genetic code" of politics, this is because it is itself afflicted and in a state of advanced decomposition. Or perhaps it is afflicted with hyperreality and in an acute crisis of simulation (the cancerous proliferation of only the *signs* of power) and, accordingly, has reached a state of general diffusion and saturation. Its somnambulistic operationality.

One must therefore always wager on simulation and take the

signs from behind – signs that, when taken at face value and in good faith, always lead to the reality and evidence of power. Just as they lead to the reality and evidence of sex and production. It is this positivism that must not be taken at face value; and it is to this reversion of power in simulation one must devote one's efforts. Power will never do it by itself; and Foucault's text should be criticized for failing to do it and, therefore, for reviving the illusion of power.

The whole, obsessed as it is with maximizing power and sex, must be questioned as to its emptiness. Given its obsession with power as continuous expansion and investment, one must ask it the question of the reversion of the space of power, and of the reversion of the space of sex and its speech. Given its fascination with production, one must ask it the question of seduction.

II

SUPERFICIAL ABYSSES

THE SACRED HORIZON OF APPEARANCES

Seduction takes from discourse its sense and turns it from its truth. It is, therefore, contrary to the psychoanalytic distinction between manifest and latent discourses. For the latent discourse turns the manifest discourse not *from* its truth, but *towards* its truth. It makes the manifest discourse say what it does not want to say; it causes determinations and profound indeterminations to show through in the manifest discourse. Depth always peeks through from behind the break, and meaning peeks from behind the line. The manifest discourse has the status of an appearance, a laboured appearance, traversed by the emergence of meaning. Interpretation is what breaks the appearance and play of the manifest discourse and, by taking up with the latent discourse, delivers the real meaning.

In seduction, by contrast, it is the manifest discourse – discourse at its most superficial – that turns back on the deeper order (whether conscious or unconscious) in order to invalidate it, substituting the charm and illusion of appearances. These appearances are not in the least frivolous, but occasions for a game and its stakes, and a passion for deviation – the seduction of the signs themselves being more important than the emergence of any truth – which interpretation neglects and destroys in its search for hidden meanings. This is why interpretation is what, *par excellence*, is opposed to seduction, and why

it is the least seductive of discourses. Not only does it subject the domain of appearances to incalculable damage, but this privileged search for hidden meanings may well be profoundly in error. For it is not somewhere else, in a *hinterwelt* or an unconscious, that one will find what leads discourse astray. What truly displaces discourse, "seduces" it in the literal sense, and renders it seductive, is its very appearance, its inflections, its nuances, the circulation (whether aleatory and senseless, or ritualized and meticulous) of signs at its surface. It is this that effaces meaning and is seductive, while a discourse's meaning has never seduced anyone. *All meaningful discourse seeks to end appearances*: this is its attraction, and its imposture. It is also an impossible undertaking. Inexorably, discourse is left to its appearances, and thus to the stakes of seduction, thus to *its own failure as discourse*. But perhaps discourse is secretly tempted by this failure, by the bracketing of its objectives, of its truth effects which become absorbed within a surface that swallows meaning. This is what happens at first, when discourse *seduces itself*; it is the original form by which discourse becomes absorbed within itself and emptied of its truth in order to better fascinate others: the primitive seduction of language.

Every discourse is complicit in this rapture, in this deviation, and if it does not do it itself, then others will do it in its place. All appearances conspire to combat and root out meaning (whether intentional or otherwise), and turn it into a game, into another of the game's rules, a more arbitrary rule – or into another elusive ritual, one that is more adventurous and seductive than the directive line of meaning. What discourse must fight against is not so much the unconscious secret as the superficial abyss of its own appearance; and if discourse must triumph over something, it is not over phantasies and hallucinations heavy with meaning and misinterpretation, but the shiny surface of non-sense and all the games that the latter renders possible. It was only a short while ago that one succeeeded in eliminating this stake of seduction (which has as its concern the sacred horizon of appearances) in order to substitute a stake "in depth," a stake in the unconscious, or in interpretation. But this substitution is fragile and ephemeral. No one knows if the reigning obsession with latent discourse one

finds in psychoanalysis (which in effect, generalizes the violence of interpretation to all levels), if this mechanism with which one has eliminated (or sought to eliminate) all seduction is not itself a model of simulation – a rather fragile one that gives itself the semblance of being insurmountable in order to better conceal all parallel effects, and most notably, the effects of seduction that are beginning to work their damage. For what is most damaging to psychoanalysis is the realization that the unconscious seduces: it seduces by its dreams and by its concept; it seduces as soon as the id speaks and even as the id wishes to speak. A double structure emerges, a parallel structure of the connivance of the signs of the unconscious and their exchange, which eats away at the other structure, the hard, pure structure of unconscious "labour" and transference and countertransference. The entire psychoanalytic edifice perishes of its own seduction, and with it all the others. Let us be analysts for one blazing instant, and say that it is the revenge of the repressed, the repression of seduction, that is at the origin of psychoanalysis as a "science," within the intellectural trajectory of Freud himself.

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The Freudian *oeuvre* unfolds between two poles that radically put into question the intermediary construction, these poles being seduction and the death drive. We have already spoken in *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* of the latter, considered as an inversion of the earlier psychoanalytic apparatus (topical, economic). Regarding the former, which after numerous turns links up with the death drive by some secret affinity, one has to say that it appears as psychoanalysis' lost object.

> It is classic to consider Freud's abandonment of the theory of seduction (1907) as a decisive step in the emergence of psychoanalytic theory and in moving to the foreground the notions of unconscious phantasy, psychic reality, infantile sexuality, etc.
>
> Laplanche and Pontalis
> *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*

Seduction, as an original form, is considered related to the state of the "primal phantasy"and thus treated, according to a logic that is not longer its own, as a residue, a vestige, or screen/formation in the henceforth triumphant logic and structure of psychic and sexual reality. But instead of considering seduction's downgrading as necessary to psychoanalysis' growth, one shoud think of it as a crucial event, heavy with consequences. As we know, seduction will disappear from psychoanalytic discourse, or will reappear only to be burried and forgotten, in accord with a logical repetition of the foundational act of denial by the master himself. It is not simply set aside as something secondary relative to the more decisive elements like infantile sexuality, repression, Oedipus, etc.; it is denied as a dangerous form that could well threaten the development and coherence of the ulterior edifice.

Exactly the same thing occurs in Saussure as in Freud. Saussure also began, in the *Anagrammes*, with a description of a form of language, or more precisely, of its subversion – a ritualized, meticulous form of the deconstruction of meaning and value. But then he took it all back and moved on to the construction of linguistics. Was this turn due to the manifest failure of his attempted proofs, or did it involve a renunciation of the anagrammatical challenge in order to undertake the more constructive, durable and scientific development of the mode of production of meaning, to the exclusion of its possible subversion? But what does it matter, the fact is that linguistics was born from this irrevocable redeployment, and it constitutes the fundamental axiom and rule for all those who continue Saussure's work. One does not return to the scene of the crime, and the forgetting of the original murder is part of the logical and triumphant unfolding of science. All the energy of the dead object and its last rites passes into the simulated resurrection of the living. Still it must be said that Saussure, at least, had the intutition towards the end that his linguistic enterprise had failed, leaving a hovering uncertainty, the glimpse of a weakness, of the possibly illusory character of so beautiful a mechanism of substitution. But such scruples, within which one can perceive something of the premature and violent burial of the *Anagrammes*, would be totally foreign to his heirs, who remain

content to manage the discipline without ever touching on the idea of an abyss of language, an abyss of linguistic seduction, a radically different operation that absorbs rather than produces meaning. The sarcophagus of linguistics was tightly sealed, and fell upon the shroud of the signifier.

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Thus the shroud of psychoanalysis has fallen over seduction, the shroud of hidden meanings and of a hidden excess of meaning, at the expense of the surface of absorption, the superficial abyss of appearances, the instantaneous and panicky surface of the exchange and rivalry of signs constituted by seduction (hysteria being but a "symptomatic" manifestation of the latter, one that has already been contaminated by the latent structure of the symptom, and is thus pre-psychoanalytic, thus degraded – which is why it was able to serve as a "conversion matrix" for psychoanalysis). Freud abolished seduction in order to put into place a machinery of interpretation, and of sexual repression, that offer all the characteristics of objectivity and coherence. Assuming that one disregards all the internal convulsions of psychoanalysis, be they personal or theoretical, that undermine its beautiful coherence – lest all the challenges and seductions buried under the discourse's rigour reemerge like the living dead. (But doesn't this suggest, so the beautiful souls will argue, that, at bottom, psychoanalysis is still alive?). Freud may have broken with seduction and taken the side of interpretation (at least until the last metapsychology which, very definitely, moves in a different direction), but all that was repressed by this admirable realignment has reemerged within the conflicts and vicissitudes of psychoanalysis' history, and within the course of almost every cure (one is never finished with hysteria!). And it is not an inconsiderable source of entertainment to see seduction sweep across psychoanalysis with Lacan, in the wild-eyed form of a play of signifiers from which psychoanalysis – in the rigour of its demands and in its form, in the form Freud wanted – is dying just as certainly, nay even more certainly, as from its institutional banalization.

The seduction of Lacanianism is, no doubt, an imposture;

but in its own way it corrects, rectifies and atones for the original imposture of Freud himself, that of the forclosure of the form/seduction to the advantage of a would-be science. The Lacanian discourse, which generalizes the seductive practices of psychoanalysis, avenges this foreclosed seduction, but in a manner that is itself contaminated by psychoanalysis. That is to say, the vengeance always occurs within the terms of the Law (of the symbolic), resulting in an insidious seduction exercised in terms of the law and (of the effigy) of a Master who rules by the Word over hysterical masses unfit for pleasure...

Nonetheless, with Lacan it is still a matter of the death of psychoanalysis, of a death due to the triumphant but posthumous reemergence of what at the beginning was denied. Isn't this the fulfillment of a destiny? At least psychoanalysis will have had the opportunity to end with a Great Impostor after having begun with a Great Denial.

That the most beautiful construction of meaning and interpretation ever erected thus collapses under the weight of its own signs, which were once terms heavy with meaning, but have once again become devices in an unrestrained seduction, terms in an untrammeled exchange that is both complicit with and empty of meaning (including in the cure) – this should exalt and comfort us. It is a sign that the truth at least (that for which impostors reign) will be spared us. And that what might appear as psychoanalysis' failure is but the temptation common to every great system of meaning, to sink into its own image and lose its sense – which indeed suggests the return of primitive seduction's flame and the revenge of appearances. But then where is the imposture? Having rejected the form/seduction from the start, psychoanalysis was perhaps only an illusion – an illusion of truth and interpretation – that would be contradicted and counterbalanced by the Lacanian illusion of seduction. Thus a cycle is completed, from which perhaps other interrogative and seductive forms will arise.

It was the same with God and the Revolution. To dispel all appearances so that God's truth could shine forth was the illusion of the Iconoclasts. An illusion because God's truth did not exist, and perhaps secretly they knew it, this being why their failure proceeded from the same intuition as that of the adorers

of images: *one can live only the idea of altered truth*. It is the only way to live in conformity with the truth. Otherwise life becomes unbearable (precisely because *the truth does not exist*). One need not want to dispel appearances (the seduction of images). But if one does, it is imperative that one not succeed lest the absence of the truth become manifest. Or the absence of God, or the Revolution. The Revolution, and in particular its ape-like travesty, Stalinism, lives only by the idea that everything is opposed to it. Stalinism is indestructible because it exists only in order to conceal the non-existence of the Revolution and its truth, and thereby to restore hope. "The people" Rivarol said, "did not want a Revolution, they wanted only its spectacle" – because this is the only way to preserve the Revolution's appeal, instead of abolishing it in its truth.

"We do not believe that the truth remains true once the veil has been lifted" (Nietzsche).

TROMPE L'OEIL
OR ENCHANTED SIMULATION

Disenchanted simulation: pornography – truer than true – the height of the simulacrum.

Enchanted simulation: the *trompe-l'oeil* – falser than false – the secret of appearances.

Neither fable, story or composition, nor theater, scene or action. The *trompe l'oeil* forgets all this and bypasses it by the low-level representation of second-rate objects. The latter figure in the great compositions of the time, but here they appear alone, as though the discourse on painting had been eliminated. Suddenly they no longer "represent," they are no longer objects, no longer anything. They are blank, empty signs that bespeak a social, religious or artistic anti-ceremony or anti-representation. Scraps of social life, they turn against the latter and parody its theatricality; this is why they are scattered, juxtaposed at random. The implication being that *these objects are not objects*. They do not describe a familiar reality, as does a still life. They describe a void, an absence, the absence of every representational hierarchy that organizes the elements of a tableau, or for that matter, the political order...

These are not mere extras displaced from the main scene, but ghosts that haunt the emptiness of the stage. Theirs is not the aesthetic appeal of painting and resemblance, but the acute, metaphysical appeal of the real's abolition. Haunted objects,

metaphysical objects, in their unreal reversion they are opposed to the entire representative space of the Renaissance.

Their very insignificance is offensive. Objects without referents, stripped of their decor – old newspapers, books, nails, boards, and scraps of food – isolated, decayed, spectral objects, disincarnated from all narrative, they alone were able to trace an obsession with a lost reality, something akin to life before the subject and his acquisition of consciousness. "For the transparent, allusive image that the art lover expects, the *trompe l'oeil* tends to substitute the intractable opacity of Presence" (Pierre Charpentrat). Simulacra without perspective, the figures in *trompe l'oeil* appear suddenly, with lustrous exactitude, as though denuded of the aura of meaning and bathed in ether. Pure appearances, they have the irony of too much reality.

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There is no nature in the *trompe l'oeil*, nor landscapes, skies, vanishing points or natural light. Nor faces, psychology or historicity. Everything is artifact. A vertical backdrop raises objects isolated from their referential context to the status of pure signs.

Translucency, suspense, fragility, obsolescence – hence the insistence on paper (frayed at the edges), the letter, the mirror or watch, the faded, untimely signs of a transcendence that has vanished into the quotidian. The mirror of worn-out boards whose knots and rings mark the time, like a clock without hands that leaves one to guess the hour: these are things that have lasted, in a time that has already passed. Anachrony alone stands out, the involuted representation of time and space.

There are no fruits, meats or flowers, no baskets or bouquets, nor any of the delightful things found in (a still) life. Nature is carnal, and a still life is a carnal arrangement on a horizontal plane, that provided by the ground or a table. Although a still life may sometimes play with disorder, with the ragged edge of things and the fragility of their use, it always retains the gravity of real things, as underscored by the horizontalness. Whereas the *trompe l'oeil* functions in weightlessness, as indicated by the vertical backdrop, everything being suspended, the objects,

time, even light and perspective. While the still life uses classic shapes and shades, the shadows borne by the *trompe l'oeil* lack the depth that comes from a *real* luminous source. Like the obsolescence of objects, they are the sign of a slight vertigo, the vertigo of a previous life, of an appearance prior to reality.

This mysterious light without origin, whose oblique rays are no longer real, is like stagnant water, water without depth, soft to the touch like a natural death. Here things have long since lost their shadows (their substance). Something other than the sun shines on them, a brighter star, without an atmosphere, or with an ether that doesn't refract. Perhaps death illuminates these things directly, and that is their sole meaning? These shadows do not move with the sun; they do not grow with the evening; without movement, they appear as an inevitable edging. Not the result of chiaroscuro, nor a skilful dialectic of light and shadow (for these are still painterly effects), they suggest the transparency of objects to a black sun.

One senses that these objects are approaching the black hole from which, for us, reality, the real world, and normal time emerge. With this forward decentering effect, this advance towards the subject of a mirror object, it is the appearance of the double, in the guise of trivial objects, that creates the effect of seduction, the startling impression characteristic of the *trompe l'oeil*: a tactile vertigo that recounts the subject's insane desire to obliterate his own image, and thereby vanish. For reality grips us only when we lose ourselves in it, or when it reappears as our own, hallucinated death.

A vague physical wish to grasp things, but which having been suspended, becomes metaphysical: the objects of the *trompe l'oeil* have something of the same fantastic vivacity as the child's discovery of his own image, an unmediated hallucination anterior to the perceptual order.

If there is a miracle of *trompe l'oeil*, it does not lie in the realism of its execution, like the grapes of Zeuxis which appeared so real that birds came to peck at them. This is absurd. Miracles never result from a surplus of reality but, on the contrary, from a sudden break in reality and the giddiness of feeling oneself fall. It is this loss of reality that the *surreal* familiarity of objects translates. With the disintegration of this hierarchi-

cal organization of space that privileges the eye and vision, of this perspectival simulation – for it is merely a simulacrum – something emerges that, for want of something better, we express in terms of *touch*, a tactile hyperpresence of things, "as though one could hold them." But this tactile fantasy has nothing to do with our sense of touch; it is a metaphor for the "seizure" resulting from the annihilation of the scene and space of representation. Suddenly this seizure rebounds onto the so-called "real" world, to reveal that this "reality" is naught but a staged world, objectified in accord with the rules of perspective. "Reality" appears as a *principle*, one that defines the painting, sculpture and architecture of the period, but a principle nonetheless – that is, a simulacrum which the experimental hypersimulation of the *trompe l'oeil*) undermines.

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The *trompe l'oeil* does not seek to confuse itself with the real. Consciously produced by means of play and artifice, it presents itself as a simulacrum. By mimicking the third dimension, it questions the reality of this dimension, and by mimicking and exceeding the effects of the real, it radically questions the reality principle.

The real is relinquished *by the very excess of its appearances*. The objects resemble themselves too much, this resemblance being like a second state; and by virtue of this *allegorical* resemblance, and of the diagonal lighting, they point to the irony of too much reality.

Depth appears to have been turned inside out. While the Renaissance organized all space in accord with a distant vanishing point, perspective in the *trompe l'oeil* is, in a sense, projected forward. Instead of fleeing before the panoramic sweep of the eye (the privilege of panoptic vision), the objects "fool" the eye (*"trompent l'oeil*) by a sort of internal depth – not by causing one to believe in a world that does not exist, but by undermining the privileged position of the gaze. The eye, instead of generating a space that spreads out, is but the internal vanishing point for a convergence of objects. A different universe occupies the foreground, a universe without horizon or

horizontality, like an opaque mirror placed before the eye, with nothing behind it. This is, properly speaking, the realm of appearances, where there is nothing to see, where things see you. They do not flee before your gaze, but position themselves in front of you, with a light that seems to come from another world, with shadows that never quite give them a true third dimension. For this dimension, that of perspective, always indicates the bad conscience of the sign relative to reality – a bad conscience that has eaten away at all painting since the Renaissance.

Whence independent of the aesthetic pleasure, comes the uncanniness of the *trompe l'oeil* – the strange light it casts on this entirely new, western reality which emerged triumphant with the Renaissance. The *trompe l'oeil* is the *ironic simulacrum* of that reality. It is what surrealism was to the functionalist revolution of the early twentieth century – surrealism being but an ironic reverie on the principle of functionality. And like *trompe l'oeil* surrealism is not quite part of art or art history, for their concern is with a metaphysical dimension, and not with matters of style. They attack our sense of reality or functionality and, therefore, our sense of consciousness. They seek out the wrong or reverse side of things, and undermine the world's apparent factuality. This is why the pleasure that they give us, their seductiveness, however small, is radical; for it comes from a radical surprise borne of appearances, from a life prior to the mode of production of the real world.

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The *trompe l'oeil* is no longer confined to painting. Like stucco, its contemporary, it can do anything, mimic or parody anything. It has become the prototype for the malevolent use of appearances. What began as a game took on fantastic dimensions in the XVIth century, and ended up eliminating the boundaries between painting, sculpture and architecture. In the murals and ceiling paintings of the Renaissance and Baroque, painting and sculpture converge. In the *trompe l'oeil* murals and streets of Los Angeles, architecture is deceived and defaced by illusion. The seduction of space by the signs of space. Having said

so much about the production of space, is it not time to speak about its seduction?

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And about the seduction of political space. For example. the studiolos of the Duke of Urbino and Federigo da Montefeltre in the ducal palace of Urbino and Gubbio: tiny sanctuaries entirely in *trompe l'oeil* at the heart of the immense space of the palace. The latter exemplifies the triumph of an architectural perspective, of a space deployed according to the rules, while the studiolo appears as an inverted microcosm. Cut off from the rest of the structure, without windows, literally without space – *here space is, actualized by simulation*. If the palace as a whole constitutes the architectural act *par excellence*, the manifest discourse of art (and power), then what is one to make of the miniscule studiolo that adjoins the chapel like yet another sacred place, but with an air of bewitchment? It is not clear what is happening with regard to space, and consequently, to the entire system of representations that gives order to the palace and republic.

It is a *privatissime* space, the prerogative of the Prince, like incest and transgression were once kingly prerogatives. A complete reversal of the rules of the game is in effect here, allowing us to surmise ironically, by the allegory of the *trompe l'oeil*, that the external space, that of the palace, and beyond it, the city, that is, the political space, the locus of power, *is itself perhaps only an effect of perspective*. Such a dangerous secret, such a radical hypothesis, the Prince must keep to himself in the strictest secrecy: *for it is the very secret of his power.*

Since Machiavelli politicians have perhaps always known that the mastery of a *simulated* space is at the source of their power, that politics is not a *real* activity, but a simulation model, whose manifest acts are but actualized impressions. It is this blind spot within the palace, cut off from architecture and public life, which in a sense reigns supreme, not by direct determination, but by a sort of internal reversion, by an abrogation of the rules enacted in secret, as in primitive rituals. A hole in reality, an ironic transfiguration, an exact simulacrum hidden at the

heart of reality, and on which the latter depends for its functioning. *This is the secret of appearances.*

Thus the Pope, the Grand Inquisitor, the great Jesuits and theologians all knew that God did not exist; this was their secret, and the secret of their strength. Similarly Montefeltre's studiolo in *trompe l'oeil* secretly suggests that, in the last instance, reality does not exist, that "real" in-depth space, including political space, is always potentially reversible – the secret that once commanded politics, but which have since been lost in the illusion of the masses' "reality."

I'LL BE YOUR MIRROR

In the *trompe l'oeil*, whether a mirror or painting, we are bewitched by the spell of the *missing dimension*. It is the latter that establishes the space of seduction and becomes a source of vertigo. For if the divine mission of all things is to find their meaning, or to find a structure on which to base their meaning, they also seek, by virtue of a diabolical nostalgia, to lose themselves in appearances, in the seduction of their image. That it to say, they seek to unite what should be separated into a single effect of death and seduction. Narcissus.

Seduction cannot possibly be represented, because in seduction the distance between the real and its double, and the distortion between the Same and the Other, is abolished. Bending over a pool of water, Narcissus quenches his thirst. His image is no longer "other;" it is a surface that absorbs and seduces him, which he can approach but never pass beyond. For there is no beyond, just as there is no reflexive distance between him and his image. The mirror of water is not a surface of reflection, but of absorption.

This is why of all the great figures of seduction in mythology and art – who seduce by a look, a song, an absence, by rouge, beauty or monstrosity, by masks or madness, by their fame, but also their failure and death – Narcissus stands out with singular force.

Not a mirror-reflection, in which the subject finds himself transformed – not a mirror phase, in which the subject establishes himself within the imaginary. All this belongs to the psychological domain of alterity and identity, not seduction.

All reflection theory is impoverished, particularly the idea that seduction is rooted in the attraction of like to like, in a mimetic exaltation of one's own image, or an ideal mirage of resemblance. Thus Vincent Descombes, in *L'Inconscient malgré lui*, writes:

> What seduces is not some feminine wile, but the fact that it is directed at you. It is seductive to be seduced, and consequently, it is being seduced that is seductive. In other words, the being seduced finds himself in the person seducing. What the person seduced sees in the one who seduces him, the unique object of his fascination, is his own seductive, charming self, his lovable self-image...

It is always a matter of self-seduction and its psychological vicissitudes. In the narcissistic *myth*, however, the mirror does not exist so that Narcissus can find within himself some living ideal. It is a matter of the mirror as an absence of depth, as a superficial abyss, which others find seductive and vertiginous only because they are each the first to be swallowed up in it.

All seduction in this sense is narcissistic, and its secret lies with this mortal absorption. Thus women, being closer to this other, hidden mirror (with which they shroud their image and body) are also closer to the effects of seduction. Men, by contrast, have depth, but no secrets; hence their power and fragility.

If seduction does not proceed from some ideal mirage of the subject, nor does it result from the mirror ideal of death. In Pausanias' version:

> Narkissos had a twin sister, they were exactly the same to look at with just the same hairstyle and the same clothes, and they even used to go hunting together. Narkissos was in love with his sister, and when she died he used to visit the spring; he

> knew that what he saw was his own reflection, but even so he found some relief in telling himself it was his sister's image.
>
> *Guide to Greece*. Vol. I, p. 376

According to H.-P. Jeudy, who accepts this version, Narcissus seduces himself, and conquers his power of seduction, only by embracing mimetically the lost image, restored by his own face, of his deceased twin sister.

But is a mimetic relation with the image of the deceased really necessary to investigate narcissistic vertigo? In truth, the latter has no need of a twin refraction. Its own illusion will do – which is perhaps the illusion of its own death. Perhaps death is always incestuous – a fact that would only add to its spell. The "soul sister" is its spiritualized version. The great stories of seduction, that of Phaedra or Isolde, are stories of incest, and always end in death. What are we to conclude, if not that death itself awaits us in the age-old temptation of incest, including *in the incestuous relation we maintain with our own image?* We are seduced by the latter because it consoles us with the imminent death of our sacrilegous existence. Our mortal self-absorption with our image consoles us for the irreversibility of our having been born and having to reproduce. It is by this sensual, incestuous transaction with our image, our double, and our death, that we gain our power of seduction.

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"*I'll be your mirror*" does not signify "' I'll be your reflection" but "I'll be your deception."

To seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion. It is to be taken in by one's own illusion and move in an enchanted world. It is the power of the seductive woman who takes herself for her own desire, and delights in the self-deception in which others, in their turn, will be caught. Narcissus too loses himself in his own illusory image; that is why he turns from his truth, and by his example turns others from their truth – and so becomes a model of love.

The strategy of seduction is one of deception. It lies in wait

for all that tends to confuse itself with its reality. And it is potentially a source of fabulous strength. For if production can only produce objects or real signs, and thereby obtain some power; seduction, by producing only illusions, obtains all powers, including the power to return production and reality to their fundamental illusion.

It even lies in wait for the unconscious and desire, by turning them into a mirror of the unconscious and desire. For the latter concerns only drives and their gratification, while the enchantment begins only after one has been taken in by one's desire. It is the illusion that, happily, saves us from "psychic reality." And it is the illusion of psychoanalysis, which confuses itself with its own desire for psychoanalysis and thereby enters into seduction, into auto-seduction, refracting the latter's power for its own ends.

Thus all science, reality, and production only postpone the due date of seduction, which shines as non-sense, as the sensual and intelligible form of non-sense, in the sky of their desire.

> The deception's *raison d'être*. Like the hawk that returns to a piece of red leather in the form of a bird, is it not the same illusion that, within repetition, confers an absolute reality onto the object that wins? Beyond all question of belief, warranted or unwarranted, the deception is, in a sense, *recognition of the endless power of seduction*. Narcissus, having lost his twin sister, mourns her loss, by constituting his own face into an illusory attraction. Neither conscious nor unconscious, the dupery is fully played out and sufficient unto itself.
>
> H.-P. Jeudy

The deception can be inscribed in the sky; its power will not be diminished. Every sign of the Zodiac has its form of seduction. For we all seek the favour of a meaningless fate, and place our hopes in the spell that might result from some absolutely irrational conjuncture – here lies the strength of of the horoscope and zodiacal signs. No one should laugh at astrology, for he who no longer seeks to seduce the stars is the sadder for

it. In effect, many a person's misfortune comes from their not having a place in the sky, within a field of signs that would agree with them – that is to say, in the last instance, from their not having been seduced by their birth and its constellation. They will bear this fate for life, and their very death will come at the wrong time. To fail to be seduced by one's sign is far more serious than the failure to have one's merits rewarded or one's desire gratified. Symbolic discredit is always much more serious than a real defect or misfortune.

Thus the charitable idea of founding an Institute of Zodiacal Semiurgy where, just as one's physical appearance can be corrected by plastic surgery, the injustices of the Sign could be righted and the horoscope's orphans finally receive the Sign of their choice in order that they might be reconciled with themselves. It would be a great success, at least the equal of that of the suicide motels where people will come to die in the manner of their choosing.

DEATH IN SAMARKAND

An ellipsis of the sign, an eclipse of meaning: an illusion. The mortal distraction that a single sign can cause instantaneously.

Consider the story of the soldier who meets Death at a crossing in the marketplace, and believes he saw him make a menacing gesture in his direction. He rushes to the king's palace and asks the king for his best horse in order that he might flee during the night far from Death, as far as Samarkand. Upon which the king summons Death to the palace and reproaches him for having frightened one of his best servants. But Death, astonished, replies: "I didn't mean to frighten him. It was just that I was surprised to see this soldier here, when we had a rendez-vous tomorrow in Samarkand."

Yes, one runs towards one's fate all the more surely by seeking to escape it. Yes, everyone seeks his own death, and the failed acts are the most successful. Yes, signs follow an unconscious course. But all this concerns the *truth* of the rendez-vous in Samarkand; it does not account for the *seduction* of the story, which is in no way an apologue of truth.

What is astounding about the story is that this seemingly inevitable rendez-vous need not have taken place. There is nothing to suggest that the soldier would have been in Samarkand without this chance encounter, and without the ill-luck of

Death's *naive* gesture, which *acted in spite of itself as a gesture of seduction*. Had Death been content to call the soldier back to order, the story would lose its charm. Everything here is hinged on a single, involuntary sign. The gesture does not appear to be part of a strategy, nor even an unconscious ruse; yet it takes on the unexpected depth of seduction, that is, it appears as something that moves laterally, as a sign that, unbeknownst to the protagonists (including Death, as well as the soldier), advances a deadly command, an aleatory sign behind which another conjunction, marvelous or disastrous, is being enacted. A conjunction that gives the sign's trajectory all the characteristics of a *witticism*.

No one in the story has anything to reproach himself with – or else the king who lent his horse, is as guilty as anyone else. No. Behind the apparent liberty of the two central characters (Death was free to make his gesture, the soldier to flee), they were both following a rule of which neither were aware. The rule of this game, which, like every fundamental rule, must remain secret, is that death is not a brute event, but *only occurs through seduction*, that is, by way of an instantaneous, indecipherable complicity, by a sign or signs that will not be deciphered in time.

Death is a rendez-vous, not an objective destiny. Death cannot fail to go since he is this rendez-vous, that is, the allusive conjunction of signs and rules which make up the game. At the same time, Death is an innocent player in the game. This is what gives the story its secret irony, whose resolution appears as a stroke of wit *[trait d'esprit]*, and provides us with such sublime pleasure – and distinguishes it from a moral fable or a vulgar tale about the death instinct. The spiritual character *[trait spirituel]* of the story extends the spirited character *[trait d'esprit gestuel]* of Death's gesture, and the two seductions, that of Death and of the story, fuse together.

Death's astonishment is delightful, an astonishment at the frivolity of an arrangement where things proceed by chance: "But this soldier should have known that he was expected in Samarkand tomorrow, and taken his time to get there..." However Death shows only surprise, as if his existence did not depend as much as the soldier's on the fact that they were to meet in

Samarkand. Death lets things happen, and it is his casualness that makes him appealing – this is why the soldier hastens to join him.

None of this involves the unconscious, metaphysics or psychology. Or even strategy. Death has no plan. He restores chance with a chance gesture; this is how he works, yet everything still gets done. There is nothing that cannot not be done, yet everything still preserves the lightness of chance, of a furtive gesture, an accidental encounter or an illegible sign. That's how it is with seduction...

Moreover, the soldier went to meet death because he gave meaning to a meaningless gesture which did not even concern him. He took personally something that was not addressed to him, as one might mistake for oneself a smile meant for someone else. The height of seduction is to be without seduction. The man seduced is caught in spite of himself in a web of stray signs.

And it is because the sign has been turned from its meaning or "seduced," that the story itself is seductive. It is when signs are seduced that they become seductive.

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Only signs without referents, empty, senseless, absurd and elliptical signs, absorb us.

A little boy asks a fairy to grant him his wishes. The fairy agrees on one condition, that he never think of the colour red in the fox's tail. "Is that all?" he replies offhandedly. And off he goes to find happiness. But what happens? He is unable to rid himself of this fox's tail, which he believed he had already forgotten. He sees it everywhere, with its red colour, in his thoughts, and in his dreams. Despite all his efforts, he cannot make it disappear. He becomes obsessed with this absurd, insignificant, but tenacious image, augmented by all the spite that comes from not having been able to rid himself of it. Not only do the fairy's promises not come true, but he loses his taste for life. Perhaps he dies without ever having gotten clear of it.

An absurd story, but absolutely plausible, for it *demonstrates the power of the insignificant signifier*, the power of a meaning-

less signifier.

The fairy was mischievous (she wasn't a good fairy). She knew that the mind is irresistibly attracted to a place devoid of meaning. Here the emptiness was seemingly provoked by the insignificance (this is why the child was not on his guard) of the colour red of a fox's tail. Elsewhere words and gestures are emptied of their meaning by unflagging repetition and scansion. To wear meaning out, to tire it out in order to liberate the pure seduction of the null signifier or empty term – such is the strength of ritual magic and incantation.

But it can just as well be a direct fascination with the void, as in the physical vertigo of a chasm, or the metaphorical vertigo of a door that opens onto the void. If you were to see written on a door panel: "This opens onto the void." – wouldn't you still want to open it?

That which looks onto nothing has every reason to be opened. That which doesn't say anything has every reason to never be forgotten. That which is arbitrary is simultaneously endowed with a total necessity. The predestination of the empty sign, the precession of the void, the vertigo of an obligation devoid of sense, a passion for necessity.

Here lies something of the secret of magic (the fairy was a magician). The power of words, their "symbolic efficacy" is greater when uttered in a void. When they have neither context nor referent, they can take on the power of a self-fulfilling (or self-defeating) prophecy. Like the colour red of a fox's tail. Unreal and insubstantial, it proves compelling because of its nullity. If the fairy had forbidden the child from doing something serious or significant, he would have pulled through easily, instead of being seduced against his will. For it is not the prohibition, *but its non-sense that seduces him*. Thus, against all logic, it is the improbable prophecies that come true; all that is required is that they not make too much sense. Otherwise they would not be prophecies. Such is the bewitchment of magical speech, such is the sorcery of seduction.

This is why neither magic nor seduction concerns belief or make-believe, for they employ signs without credibility and gestures without referents; their logic is not one of mediation, but of immediacy, whatever the sign.

Proof is unnecessary. Everybody knows that their spell is carried by the unmediated resonance of the signs. There is no official, intermediary time for the sign and its decipherment; it is not a matter of believing, doing, wanting, or knowing. Their attraction is foreign to the forms of discourse, as well as the distinctive logic of the utterance and statement. Their spell belongs to the order of declamation and prophecy, a discourse whose symbolic effectiveness requires neither decipherment nor belief.

★ ★ ★

The immediate attraction of a song, a voice or scent. The attraction of the panther's scent (Détienne: *Dionysos mis à mort*). According to the ancients, the panther is the only animal to emit a fragrant odour, which it uses to capture its victims. The panther has only to hide (his appearance strikes terror), and his victims are bewitched by his scent – an invisible trap to which they come to be caught. But this power of seduction can be turned against the panther: one hunts him by using spices, herbs and perfumes as bait.

But what does it mean to say that the panther seduces by its scent? Why is its scent seductive? (And why is this legend itself seductive? What sort of fragrance does it emit?) What accounts for the seduction of the song of the Sirens, the beauty of a face, the depths of a chasm, or the imminence of a catastrophe – as well as the scent of the panther or a door that opens onto the void? Is it some hidden force of attraction? or a powerful desire? No, these are empty terms. Seduction lies with the annulment of the signs, of their meaning, with their pure appearance. Eyes that seduce have no meaning, their meaning being exhausted in the gaze, as a face with makeup is exhausted in its appearance, in the formal rigour of a senseless labour. *Above all, seduction supposes not a signified desire, but the beauty of an artifice* .

The panther's scent is also a senseless message – and behind this message the panther is invisible, like a woman beneath her makeup. The Sirens too remained unseen. Sorcery is formed by what lies hidden.

The seduction of eyes. The most immediate, purest form of seduction, one that bypasses words. Where looks alone join in a sort of duel, an immediate intertwining, unbeknownst to others and their discourses: the discrete charm of a silent and immobile orgasm. Once the delightful tension of the gazes gives way to words or loving gestures, the intensity declines. A tactility of gazes that sums up the body's full potential (and that of its desires?) in a single, subtle instant, as in a stroke of wit. A duel that is simultaneouly sensual, even voluptuous, but disincarnated – a perfect foretaste of seduction's vertigo, which the more carnal pleasures that follow will not equal. That these eyes meet is accidental, but it is as though they had been fixed on each other forever. Devoid of meaning, what is exchanged are not the gazes. There is no desire here, for desire is not captivating, while eyes, like fortuitous appearances, cast a spell composed of pure, duel signs, with neither depth nor temporality.

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Any system that is totally complicit in its own absorption, such that signs no longer make sense, will exercise a remarkable power of fascination. Systems fascinate by their esotericism, which preserves them from external logics. The absorption of anything real by something self-sufficient, and self-destructive, proves fascinating. Whether a system of thought, an automatic mechanism, a perfect and perfectly useless object or a desert of stones, a woman or strip-tease artist (who must caress herself in order to "enchant" and exercise her power) – or, to be sure, God that most beautiful piece of esoteric machinery.

Or the woman with makeup, who is absent to herself, an absence of a focussed look, the absence of a face – how can one not be swallowed up in it? A beauty is one who abolishes herself, thereby constituting a challenge that we can only take up by the dazzling loss of what? Of what is not beautiful. The beautiful woman absorbed by the cares that her beauty demands is immediately infectious because, in her narcissistic excess, she is removed from her self, and because all that is removed from the self is plunged into secrecy and absorbs its surroundings.

The attraction of the void lies at the basis of seduction: not

the accumulation of signs, nor the messages of desire, but an esoteric complicity with the absorption of signs. Seduction begins in secrecy, in the slow, brutal exhaustion of meaning which establishes a complicity amongst the signs; it is here, more than in a physical being or the quality of a desire, that seduction is concocted. And it is what accounts for the enchantment of the games's rules.

THE SECRET AND THE CHALLENGE

The secret.

The seductive, initiatory quality of that which cannot be said because it makes no sense, and of that which is not said even though it gets around. Thus I know another's secret but do not reveal it and he knows that I know, but does not acknowledge it: the intensity between us is simply this secret about the secret. The complicity has nothing to do with some hidden piece of information. Besides, even if we wanted to reveal the secret we could not, since there is nothing to say... Everything that can be revealed lies outside the secret. For the latter is not a hidden signified, nor the key to something, but circulates through and traverses everything that can be said, just as seduction flows beneath the obscenity of speech. It is the opposite of communication, and yet it can be shared. The secret maintains its power only at the price of remaining unspoken, just as seduction operates only because never spoken nor intended.

The hidden or the repressed has a tendency to manifest itself, whereas the secret does not. It is an initiatory and implosive form: one enters into a secret, but cannot exit. The secret is never revealed, never communicated, never even "secreted" (Zempleny, *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, no. 14). Whence its strength, the power of an allusive, ritual exchange.

Thus in Kierkegaard's *Diary of the Seducer*, seduction takes the form of an enigma to be solved. The girl is an enigma, and in order to seduce her, one must become an enigma for her. It is an *enigmatic duel*, one that the seduction solves, but *without disclosing the secret*. If the secret were disclosed, sexuality would stand revealed. The story's true meaning, if it had one, would be about sex – but in fact it doesn't have one. In that place where meaning should be, where sex should occur, where words point to it, and where others think it to be – there is nothing. And this nothing/secret, this, the seduction's unsignified moves beneath the words and their meaning, and moves faster than their meaning. It is what touches you first, before the sentences arrive, in the time it takes for them to fade away. A seduction beneath discourse, an invisible seduction, moving from sign to sign – a secret circulation.

It is the exact opposite of the psychological relation: to share someone's secrets is not to share his or her phantasies or desires, nor it is to share something as yet unspoken. When the id speaks, it is not seductive. All that involves repression, expressive energies or the unconscious, everything that wishes to speak, everywhere the ego has to appear – all this belongs to an exoteric order that contradicts the esoteric form of secrecy and seduction.

Yet the unconscious, the "adventure" of the unconscious, appears as the last, large-scale attempt to reestablish secrecy in a society without secrets. The unconscious appears as our secret, our personal mystery in a confessional and transparent society. But it isn't really a secret, for it is merely psychological. It does not have an existence of its own, since the unconscious was created at the same time as psychoanalysis, that is to say, at the same time as the procedures for its assimilation, and the techniques for the retraction of the secrets lodged in its deep structures.

But perhaps something is taking its revenge on all the interpretations, and in a subtle way disrupting their development? Something that, most decidedly, does not want to be said and that, being an enigma, enigmatically possesses its own resolution, and so aspires to remain in secret and in the *joys* of secrecy.

Language returns to its secret seduction despite all the efforts

to uncover and betray it in order to make it signify, while we return to our own insoluble pleasures.

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There is neither a time of seduction, nor a time for seduction, but still it has its own indispensable rhythm. Unlike instrumental strategies, which proceed by intermediary stages, seduction operates instantaneously, in a single movement, and is always its own end.

The cycle of seduction cannot be stopped. One can seduce someone in order to seduce someone else, but also seduce someone else to please oneself. The illusion that leads from the one to the other is subtle. Is it to seduce, or to be seduced, that is seductive? But to be seduced is the best way to seduce. It is an endless refrain. There is no active or passive mode in seduction, no subject or object, no interior or exterior: seduction plays on both sides, and there is no frontier separating them. One cannot seduce others, if one has not oneself been seduced.

Because seduction never stops at the truth of signs, but operates by deception and secrecy, it inaugurates a mode of circulation that is itself secretive and ritualistic, a sort of immediate initiation that plays by its own rules.

To be seduced is to be turned from one's truth. To seduce is to lead the other from his/her truth. This truth then becomes a secret that escapes him/her (Vincent Descombes: *L'inconscient malgré lui*).

Seduction is immediately reversible, and its reversibility is constituted by the challenge it implies and the secret in which it is absorbed.

It is a power of attraction and distraction, of absorption and fascination, a power that cause the collapse of not just sex, but the real in general – a power of defiance. It is never an economy of sex or speech, but an escalation of violence and grace, an instantaneous passion that can result in sex, but which can just as easily exhaust itself in the process of defiance and death. It implies a radical indetermination that distinguishes it from a drive – drives being indeterminate in relation to their object, but determined as force and origin, while the passion of seduc-

tion has neither substance nor origin. It is not from some libidinal investment, some energy of desire that this passion acquires its intensity, but from gaming as pure form and from purely formal bluffing.

★ ★ ★

Likewise, the challenge. It too has a duel form that wears itself out in no time at all, drawing its intensity from this instantaneous reversion. It too is bewitching, like a meaningless discourse to which one cannot not respond *for the very reason that it is absurd*. Why does one respond to a challenge? The same mysterious question as: what is it that seduces?

What could be more seductive than a challenge? A seduction or challenge always drives the other mad, but with a vertigo that is reciprocal – an insanity borne by the vertiginous absence that unites them, and by their reciprocal engulfment. Such is the inevitability of the challenge, and why one cannot but respond to it. For it inaugurates a kind of insane relation, quite unlike relations of communication or exchange: a duel relation transacted by meaningless signs, but held together by a fundamental rule and its secret observance. A challenge terminates all contracts and exchanges regulated by the law (whether the law of nature or value), substituting a highly conventional and ritualized pact, with an unceasing obligation to respond and respond in spades – an obligation that is governed by a fundamental game rule, and proceeds in accord with its own rhythm. In contrast to the law, which is always inscribed in stone or the sky, or in one's heart, this fundamental rule never needs to be stated; indeed, *it must never be stated*. It is immediate, immanent, and inevitable (whereas the law is transcendent and explicit).

There can never be seduction or challenge by contract. In order for a challenge or seduction to exist, all contractual relations must disappear before the duel relation – a relation composed of secret signs that have been withdrawn from exchange, and derive their intensity from their formal division and immediate reverberation. In like manner, seduction's enchantment puts an end to all libidinal economies, and every sexual or psy-

chological contract, replacing them with a dizzying spiral of responses and counter-responses. It is never an investment but a risk; never a contract but a pact; never individual but duel; never psychological but ritual; never natural but artificial. It is no one's strategy, but a destiny.

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Challenge and seduction are quite similar. And yet there is a difference. In a challenge one draws the other into one's area of strength, which, in view of the potential for unlimited escalation, is also his or her area of strength. Whereas in a strategy (?) of seduction one draws the other into one's area of weakness, which is also his or her area of weakness. A calculated weakness, an incalculable weakness: one challenges the other to be taken in. A weakness or failure: isn't the panther's scent itself a weakness, an abyss which the other animals approach giddily? In fact, the panther of the mythical scent is simply the epicenter of death, and from this weakness subtle fragrances emerge.

To seduce is to appear weak. To seduce is to render weak. We seduce with our weakness, never with strong signs or powers. In seduction we enact this weakness, and this is what gives seduction its strength.

We seduce with our death, our vulnerability, and with the void that haunts us. The secret is to know how to play with death in the absence of a gaze or gesture, in the absence of knowledge or meaning.

Psychoanalysis tells us to assume our fragility and passivity, but in almost religious terms, turns them into a form of resignation and acceptance in order to promote a well tempered psychic equilibrium. Seduction, by contrast, plays triumphantly with weakness, making a game of it, with its own rules.

★ ★ ★

Everything is seduction and nothing but seduction.

They wanted us to believe that everything was production. The theme song of world transformation: the play of produc-

tive forces is what regulates the course of things. Seduction is merely an immoral, frivolous, superficial, and superfluous process, limited to the realm of signs and appearances, devoted to pleasure and the usufruct of useless bodies. But what if everything, contrary to appearances – in fact, in accord with a secret rule of appearances – operates by seduction?

the moment of seduction
the suspension of seduction
the risk of seduction
the accident of seduction
the delirium of seduction
the pause of seduction.

Production only accumulates, without deviating from its end. It replaces all illusions with just one, its own, which becomes the reality principle. Production, like revolution, puts an end to the epidemic of appearances. But seduction is inevitable. No one living escapes it – not even the dead. For the dead are only dead when there are no longer any echoes from this world to seduce them, and no longer any rites challenging them to exist.

For us, only those who can no longer produce are dead. In reality, only those who do not wish to seduce or be seduced are dead. But seduction gets hold of them nonetheless, just as it gets hold of all production and ends up destroying it.

For the void – the hole that, at any point, is burned out by the return of the flame of any sign, the meaninglessness that makes for seduction's unexpected charm – also lies in wait, without illusion, for production once the latter has reached its limits. Everything returns to the void, including our words and gestures. But before disappearing, certain words and gestures, by anticipating their demise, are able to exercise a seduction that the others will never know. Seduction's secret lies in this evocation and revocation of the other, with a slowness and suspense that are poetic, like the slow motion film of a fall or an explosion, because something had the time, prior to its completion, to makes its absence felt. And this, if there is such a thing, is the perfection of "desire."

THE EFFIGY OF THE SEDUCTRESS

The prismatic effect of seduction provides another space of refraction. Seduction does not consist of a simple appearance, nor a pure absence, but the eclipse of a presence. Its sole strategy is to be-there/not-there, and thereby produce a sort of flickering, a hypnotic mechanism that crystallizes attention outside all concern with meaning. Absence here seduces presence.

The sovereign power of the seductress stems from her ability to "eclipse" any will or context. She cannot allow other relations to be established – even the most intimate, affectionate, amorous or sexual (particularly not the latter) – without breaking them, or repaying them with a strange fascination. She constantly avoids all relations in which, at some given moment, the question of *truth* will be posed. She undoes them effortlessly, not by denying or destroying them, but by making them shimmer. Here lies her secret: in the flickering of a presence. She is never where one expects her, and never where one wants her. Seduction supposes, Virilio would say, an "aesthetics of disappearance."

The seductress turns desire itself into an illusion or trap. For her there is no more truth to desire – or to the body – than to anything else. Love itself, or the sex act, can become moments in a seduction if given the ecliptic form of appearance/dis-

appearance, that it to say, a discontinuous form that cuts short every emotion, pleasure and relation in order to reaffirm the superior character of seduction, its transcendent aesthetics relative to the immanent ethics of pleasure and desire. Love and the carnal act are only so much seductive finery, the most refined and subtle invented by women to seduce men. But modesty and rejection can play the same role. Everything is finery in this sense, and belongs to the genius of appearance.

"I do not want to love, cherish, or even please you, but to *seduce* you – and my only concern is not that you love or please me, but that you are *seduced*." The game of the seductress involves a certain mental cruelty, towards herself as well as others. Any affection on her part is a weakness relative to the ritual imperative. No quarter can be given in a challenge where love and desire are dissolved. Nor any respite, lest this fascination be reduced to nothing. The true seductress can only exist in a state of seduction. Outside this state, she is no longer a woman, neither an object nor subject of desire, faceless and unattractive – for she is borne by an all-consuming passion. Seduction is sovereign – the only ritual that eclipses all others – but its sovereignty is cruel, and carries a heavy price.

Thus, when seducing, her body and desires are no longer her own. But then what is this body, or these desires? She doesn't believe in them – and so plays with them. Without a body of her own, she turns herself into a pure appearance, an artificial construct with which to trap the desires of others. Seduction consists in letting the other believe himself to be the subject of his desire, without oneself being caught in this trap. It can also consist in becoming a "seductive" sex object, if that is the man's "desire." The spell cast by seduction passes through sexual attraction; but indeed, it passes through in order to transcend it. "I am attractive, but you are captivating." – "Life has its attractions, but death leaves one spellbound."

For seduction, desire is not an end but a hypothetical prize. More precisely, the objective is to provoke and deceive desire, which exists only to burn for a moment and then be disappointed – it being deluded as to its power, which is given to it only in order to be withdrawn. The person might not even know what has happened. It might be that the person seducing actu-

ally loves or desires the person seduced, but at a deeper level (or a more superficial level if one will, in the superficial abyss of appearances) another game is being played out, unbeknownst to the two protagonists who remain mere puppets.

For seduction, desire is a myth. If desire is a will to power and possession, seduction places before it an equal will to power by the simulacrum. In forming a web of appearances seduction both sustains this hypothetical power of desire and exorcizes it. Just as for Kierkegaard's seducer the girl's naive grace, her spontaneous erotic power is merely a myth, which is sustained only so that it can be annihilated (perhaps he loves her, but in the suprasensual realm of seduction the girl is but the mythical figure of a sacrifice); similarly, for the seductress, the power of man's desire is a myth that she uses in order to both evoke and destroy it. The seducer's artifice, directed at the girl's mythical grace, is fully equal to the seductress' artificial reworking of her body, which is directed at the man's mythical desire. In both cases the mythical power, whether the power of grace or desire, is to be reduced to nothing. Seduction always seeks to overturn and exorcize a power. If seduction is artifical, it is also sacrificial. One is playing with death, it always being a matter of capturing or immolating the desire of the other.

Seduction, by contrast, is immortal. The seductress, like the hysteric, *wants to be* immortal and live in an eternal present – much to everyone's astonishment, given the field of deception and despair in which she moves, and given the cruelty of her game. But here she survives because outside psychology, meaning or desire. What destroys people, wears them down, is the meaning they give their acts. But the seductress does not attach any meaning to what she does, nor suffer the weight of desire. Even if she speaks of reasons or motives, be they guilty or cynical, it is a trap. And her ultimate trap is to ask: "Tell me who I am" – when she is indifferent to what she is, when she is a blank, with neither age nor history. Her power lies in the irony and elusiveness of her presence. She may be blind to her own existence, but she is well aware of all the mechanisms of reason and truth people use to protect themselves from seduction; and she is aware that from behind the shelter of these mechanisms they will nonetheless, if handled correctly, let them-

selves be seduced.

"I am immortal," in other words, relentless. Which is to say that the game must never stop, this even being one of its fundamental rules. For just as no player can be greater than the game itself, so no seductress can be greater than seduction. None of the vicissitudes of love or desire can be allowed to break this rule. One must love in order to seduce, and not the reverse. Seduction consists of finery, it weaves and unweaves appearances, as Penelope weaved and unweaved her tapestry, as desire itself was woven and unwoven beneath her hands. For it is appearances, and the mastery of appearances, that rule.

No one has ever been dispossessed of the power associated with seduction and its rules, this fundamental form. Yes, women have been dispossessed of their bodies, their desires, happiness and rights. But they have always remained mistresses of this possibility of eclipse, of seductive disappearance and translucence, and so have always been capable of eclipsing the power of their masters.

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But is there a feminine figure of seduction or, for that matter, a masculine figure? Or is there but one form, variants of which crystallize around one or the other sex?

Seduction oscillates between two poles, a pole of strategy and a pole of animality (and thus ranges from the most subtle calculation to the most brutal physical suggestion) which we associate with the figures of the seducer and the seductress respectively. But doesn't this division mask a single form, an undivided seduction?

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Animal seduction.

With animals seduction achieves its purest form, in that the seductive display appears instinctual, immediately given in reflex behaviours and natural finery. But for all that, animal seduction does not cease to be perfectly ritualistic. In this sense, animals are the least natural of beings, for with them artifice

– the effects of mascarade and finery – is at its most naive. It is at the heart of this paradox, where the distinction between nature and culture is suppressed in the concept of *finery*, that the analogy between animality and femininity plays itself out.

If animals are seductive, is it not because they are strategic elements in a campaign to deride our pretensions to humanity? If the feminine is seductive, is it not because it too thwarts our claims to depth? The frivolous has a power of seduction which concurs with that of the bestial.

What we find seductive in animals is not their "natural" savagery. For that matter, are animals really characterized by savagery, by a high degree of contingency, unpredictability, or impulsiveness, or on the contrary by high degrees of ritualized behaviour? The same question can be posed for primitive societies. The latter were once seen as close to the animal realm, and indeed, in a sense, they are: for they share a common disregard for the law, tied to high levels of observance of fixed forms, whether in their relation to their territory, other animals or men.

Even in their dances and bodily ornamentation, their animal grace is a product of a series of observances, rules and analogies, which makes it the opposite of natural chance. All the prestigious attributes associated with animals are ritual traits. The "natural" finery of animals is similar to the artificial finery of humans, who, one might add, have always sought to incorporate the former into their rites. If there is a preference for animal masks, it is because animals immediately appear as ritual masks, as a play of signs and a strategy of finery – as is the case with human rituals. The very morphology of primitive rituals, their furs and feathers, gestures and dances are a prototype of ritual efficacy. That is, they never form a functional system (reproduction, sexuality, ecology, mimicry – the postulates of an extremely impoverished ethology reworked and corrected by functionalism), but an ostentatious ceremony for mastering signs, and a cycle for seducing meaning, where the signs gravitate irresistibly around each other so as to reproduce themselves as if by magnetic recurrence, resulting in dizziness, a loss of meaning, and the sealing of an indestructible pact amongst the participants.

Generally speaking, "rituality" is, as a form, superior to "sociality". The latter is only a recent, and not very seductive form of organization and exchange, one invented by humans for humans. Rituality is a much larger system, encompassing the living and the dead, humans and animals, as well as a "nature" whose periodic movements, recurrences and catastrophes serve, seemingly spontaneously, as ritual signs. By comparison, sociality appears rather impoverished: under the sign of the Law it is capable of bringing together only one species (and even then...). By contrast, rituality succeeds in maintaining – not by laws, but by rules and their infinite play of analogies – a form of cyclical order and universal exchange of which the Law and the social are quite incapable.

If we find animals appealing and seductive, it is because they remind us of this ritual arrangement. They do not evoke a nostalgia for the savage state, but a feline, theatrical nostalgia for finery, for the seduction and strategy of ritual forms which transcend all sociality and which, thereby, still enchant us.

In this sense one can say that, with seduction, one "becomes an animal," or that female seduction is animal-like, without implying some sort of instinctive nature. For one is saying that seduction is profoundly linked to body rituals which, like all other rituals, serve not to establish a nature and uncover its law, but to set up appearances and organize their cycle. Not that female seduction is ethically inferior. On the contrary, it is aesthetically superior. It is a strategy of finery.

Men, moreover, are never seduced by natural beauty, but by an artificial, ritual beauty – because the latter is esoteric and initiatory, whereas the former is merely expressive. And because seduction lies in the aura of secrecy produced by weightless, artificial signs, and not in some natural economy of meaning, beauty or desire.

The claim that anatomy (or the body) is not destiny is not recent, but was made far more stridently in all societies prior to our own. Rituals, ceremonies, raiments, masks, designs, mutilations and torture – all in order to seduce... the gods, the spirits, or the dead. The body was the first great medium of this immense undertaking. For us alone does it take on an aesthetic, decorative character. (With its true character thereby de-

nied: the very idea of decoration implies a moral denial of all the body's magic. For the savages, not to mention animals, it is not decoration, but finery. And a universal rule. He who is not painted is stupid, say the Caduveo).

We might find the forms disgusting: covering the body with mud, deforming the the skull or filing the teeth in Mexico, deforming the feet in China, distending the neck, or making incisions in the face, not to mention tattoos, jewelry, masks, fine raiments, ritual paintings, or even the bracelets made from tin cans worn by present-day Polynesians.

The body is made to signify, but with signs that, strictly speaking, have no meaning. All resemblance has vanished, all representation is absent. The body is covered with appearances, illusions, traps, animal parodies and sacrificial simulations, not in order to dissemble, nor to reveal (a desire, say, or a drive), nor even just for fun (the spontaneous expressiveness of children and primitives). What is involved here is an undertaking that Artaud would have termed metaphysical: a sacrificial challenge to the world to exist. For nothing exists naturally, *things exist because challenged, and because summoned to respond to that challenge.* It is by being challenged that the powers of the world, including the gods, are aroused; it is by challenging these powers that they are exorcized, seduced and captured; it is by the challenge that the game and its rules are resurrected. All this requires an artificial bluffing, that it to say, a systematic simulation that troubles itself with neither a preestablished state of the world nor bodily anatomy. A radical metaphysics of simulation, it need not even concern itself with "natural" harmony. In the facial paintings of the Caduveo, the facial features are not respected; the design's diagrams and symmetries being laid across the face from one end to the other. (Our makeup submits to the body as a referential system, in order to accentuate its features and orifices. But does this mean that it is closer to the nature of desire? Nothing could be less certain).

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Something of this radical metaphysics of appearances, this

challenge by simulation, still lives in the cosmetic arts and the glamour of modern fashion. The Church Fathers were well aware of this, and denounced it as diabolical. "To be attentive to one's body, to care for and paint it is to set oneself up as a rival of God and contest His creation." This stigmatization has continued ever since, but is now reflected in that other religion, that of the subject's liberty and essential desires. Our entire morality condemns the construction of the female as a sex object by the facial and bodily arts. The female is no longer denounced by God's judgment, but by the dictates of modern ideology, for prostituting her femininity in consumer culture, and subjecting her body to the reproduction of capital. "Femininity is woman's alienated being." "Femininity manifests itself as an abstract totality, devoid of any reality it can call its own, a product of the discourse and rhetoric of advertising." "The woman flushed with her beauty masks and perpetually fresh lips no longer lives her real life," etc., etc.

In opposition to all these pious discourses, we must again praise the sex object; for it bears, in the sophistication of appearances, something of a challenge to the naive order of the world and sex; and it, and it alone, escapes the realm of production (though one might like to believe it subjected to the latter) and returns to that of seduction. In its unreality, in the unreal defiance of its prostitution of signs, the sexual object moves beyond sex and attains seduction. It again becomes ceremonial. The feminine was always the effigy of this ritual, and there is a frightful confusion in wanting to de-sanctify it as a cult *object* in order to turn it into a *subject* of production, or in wanting to rescue it from artifice in order to return it to its own "natural" desires.

> Woman is well within her rights, and is indeed forming a sort of duty, in studying to appear magical and supernatural. It is necessary that she should astonish and bewitch. Being an idol, she must be gilded and adored. She must therefore borrow from all the arts the means of raising herself above nature, the better to subjugate hearts and stir souls. It matters very little that her tricks and

> artifices should be known to all, provided that their success is certain and their effect always irresistible. Such considerations provide the artist-philosopher with a ready justification for all the practices employed by women of every period to lend substance and, so to speak, divinity to their fragile beauty.
>
> An enumeration of these practices would be interminable. But to confine ourselves to what our contemporaries vulgarly call "the use of cosmetics," who can fail to see that the use of rice-powder (so stupidly anathematised by our candid philosophers) has the object and result of banishing from the complexion the blemishes which nature has outrageously sown there, and of creating an abstract unity in the texture and colour of the skin; and that this unity, like the unity produced by the sculptor's chisel, brings the human being directly nearer to the statue – in other words, to a being that is divine and superior? As for the lampblack that outlines the eye, and the rouge that emphasizes the upper part of the cheek, the planned result of these – although their use arises from the same principle, the need to transcend nature – is to satisfy an exactly opposite need. The red and the black represent life – a life surpassing and exceeding that of the nature. The black frame around the eye makes the glance stranger and more penetrating; it makes the eye more distinctly resemble a window open on the infinite. The red blaze on the cheek further enhances the brightness of the eye, and lends a woman's lovely face the mysterious passion of a priestess.
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> Charles Baudelaire, "In Praise of Cosmetics"[2]

If desire exists – as modernity hypothesizes – then nothing must interfere with its natural harmony, and cosmetics are hypocritical. But if desire is a myth – as seduction hypothe-

2. Charles Baudelaire, "In Praise of Cosmetics" in *My Heart Laid Bare and Other Prose Writings* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951) pp. 63-64.

sizes – then nothing can prevent it from being put to use by signs, unrestrained by natural limits. The power of signs lies in their appearance and disappearance; that is how they efface the world. Cosmetics too are a means of effacing the face, effacing the eyes behind more beautiful eyes, cancelling the lips behind more luxuriant lips. This "abstract unity that brings the human being nearer to a being that is divine," this "life surpassing and exceeding nature" about which Baudelaire speaks, results from a simple artificial stroke that suppresses all expression. Artifice does not alienate the subject, but mysteriously alters her/him. Women are aware of this transformation when, in front of their mirrors, they must erase themselves in order to apply their makeup, and when, by applying their makeup, they make themselves into a pure appearance denuded of meaning. How can one mistake this "exceeding of nature" for a vulgar camouflaging of truth? Only falsehoods can alienate the truth, but makeup is not false, or else (like the game of transvestites) it is falser than falsehood and so recovers a kind of superior innocence or transparency. It absorbs all expression within its own surface, without a trace of blood or meaning. Certainly this is challenging, and cruel – but who is alienated? Only those who cannot abide this cruel perfection, and cannot defend themselves except by moral repulsion – and they are wrong. How can one respond to pure appearances, whether hieratic or mobile, without first recognizing their sovereignty? By taking off the makeup, tearing off the veil, or enjoining the appearances to disappear? How ridiculous! An iconoclast's utopia. There is no God behind the images, and the very nothingness they conceal must remain a secret. The seduction, fascination and "aesthetic" attraction of all the great imaginary processes lies here: in the effacing of every instance, be it the face and every substance, be it desire – in the artificial perfection of the sign.

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Undoubtedly, the best example of this is to be found in the only important constellation of collective seduction produced by modern times, that of film stars or cinema idols. Now the

star, even if a man, is feminine; for if God is masculine, idols are always feminine. And in truth, the biggest stars were women. They were, however, no longer beings of flesh and desire, but transexual, suprasensual beings, around whom crystallized stern rituals and a wasteful profusion which turned them into a generation of sacred monsters, endowed with a power of absorption equal to and rivaling the real world's powers of production. They were our only myth in an age incapable of generating great myths or figures of seduction comparable to those of mythology or art.

The cinema's power lives in its myth. Its stories, its psychological portraits, its imagination or realism, the meaningful impressions it leaves – these are all secondary. Only the myth is powerful, and at the heart of the cinematographic myth lies seduction – that of the renowned seductive figure, a man or woman (but above all a woman) linked to the ravishing but specious power of the cinematographic image itself. A miraculous conjunction.

The star is by no means an ideal or sublime being: she is artifical. She need not be an actress in the psychological sense; her face is not the reflection of a soul or sensitivity which she does not have. On the contrary, her presence serves to submerge all sensibility and expression beneath a ritual fascination with the void, beneath the ecstacy of her gaze and the nullity of her smile. This is how she achieves mythical status and becomes subject to collective rites of sacrificial adulation.

The ascension of the cinema idols, the masses' divinities, was and remains a central story of modern times – it still counterbalances all political or social events. There is no point in dismissing it as merely the dreams of mystified masses. It is a seductive occurrence that counterbalances every productive occurrence.

To be sure, seduction in the age of the masses is no longer like that of *The Princess of Cleves, Les Liaisons Dangereuses* or *Diary of the Seducer*, nor for that matter, like that found in ancient mythology, which undoubtedly contains the stories richest in seduction. In these seduction is *hot*, while that of our modern idols is *cold*, being at the intersection of two cold mediums, that of the image and that of the masses.

This latter seduction has the spectral whiteness of the heavenly stars, after which they are so appropriately named. The masses have been "seduced" in the modern era by only two great events: the white light of the stars, and the black light of terrorism. These two phenomena have much in common. Terrorist acts, like the stars, "flicker:" they do not not enlighten; they do not radiate a continuous, white light, but an intermittent, cold light; they disappoint even as they exalt; they fascinate by the suddeness of their appearance and the imminence of their disappearance. And they are constantly being eclipsed as they each try to outdo each other.

The great stars or seductresses never dazzle because of their talent or intelligence, but because of their absence. They are dazzling in their nullity, and in their coldness – the coldness of makeup and ritual hieraticism (rituals are cool, according to McLuhan). They turn into a metaphor the immense glacial process which has seized hold of our universe of meaning, with its flickering networks of signs and images; but at the same time, at a specific historical conjuncture that can no longer be reproduced, they transform it into an effect of seduction.

The cinema has never shone except by pure seduction, by the pure vibrancy of non-sense – a hot shimmering that is all the more beautiful for having come from the cold.

Artifice and non-sense, they are the idol's esoteric face, its mask of initiation. The seduction of a face purged of all expression, except that of the ritual smile and a no less conventional beauty. A white face, with the whiteness of signs consecrated to ritualized appearances, no longer subject to some deep law of signification. The sterility of idols is well-known: they do not reproduce, but rise from the ashes, like the phoenix, or from their mirror, like the seductress.

These great seductive effigies are our masks, our Easter Island statues. But do not be mistaken: if once, historically, there were throngs hot with adoration, religious passion, sacrifice and insurrection, now there are masses cold with seduction and fascination. Their effigy is cinematographic and implies a different sacrifice.

The death of the stars is merely punishment for their ritualized idolatry. They must die, they must already be dead – so

that they can be perfect and superficial, with or without their makeup. But their death must not lead us to a negative abreaction. For behind the only existing form of immortality, that of artifice, there lies the idea incarnated in the stars, that *death itself shines by its absence*, that death can be turned into a brilliant and superficial appearance, that it is itself a seductive surface...

THE IRONIC STRATEGY OF THE SEDUCER

If it is characteristic of the seductress that she turns herself into an appearance in order to disturb appearances, what is characteristic of that other figure, the seducer?

He too turns himself into an illusion in order to sow confusion, but curiously, this illusion is part of a calculation, with finery giving way to strategy. Now if a woman's finery is also strategic, a calculated display, is not the seducer's strategy a display of calculation with which to defend himself from some opposing force? A strategy of finery vs. the finery of strategy...

Discourses that are too sure of themselves – as with strategies of love – must be understood differently. Though completely "rational," they are still only the instruments of a larger *fate*, of which they are as much the victims as the directors. Doesn't the seducer end up losing himself in his strategy, as in an emotional labyrinth? Doesn't he invent that strategy in order to lose himself in it? And he who believes himself the game's master, isn't he the first victim of strategy's tragic myth?

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Consider the seducer's obsession with the girl in Kierkegaard's *Diary of the Seducer.* An obsession with an inviolate, still asexual state, a charmed state of grace. And because she is graced, one must find grace in her eyes, "for like God she possesses a

matchless vantage. As a result, because *naturally endowed with all seduction*, she becomes the object of a savage challenge and must be destroyed.

The seducer's calling is the extermination of the girl's natural power by an artificial power of his own. He will deliberately undertake to equal or surpass the natural power to which, in spite of all that makes him appear as the seducer, he has succumbed since the beginning. His strategy, his intention and *destination* are a response to the young girl's grace and seductiveness, to a *predestination* that is all the more powerful because unconscious, and that must, as a result, be exorcized.

The last word cannot be left to nature: this, fundamentally, is what is at issue. Her exceptional, innate grace (which, like the accursed share, is immoral) must be sacrificed by the seducer, who will seek with all his skill to lead her to the point of erotic abandon, the point at which she will cease to be a seductive, that is, dangerous power.

The seducer by himself is nothing; the seduction originates entirely with the girl. This is why Johannes can claim to have learned everything from Cordelia. He is not being hypocritical. The calculated seduction mirrors the natural seduction, drawing from the latter as from its source, but all the better to eliminate it.

This is also why he does not leave anything to chance, the girl being deprived of initiative, a seemingly defenseless object in the game of seduction. She has already played her hand *before* the seducer begins to play his. Everything has already taken place; the seduction simply rights a natural imbalance by taking up the pre-existing challenge constituted by the girl's natural beauty and grace.

Seduction now changes its meaning. Instead of being an immoral and libertine exercise, a cynical deception for sexual ends (and thus without great interest), it becomes mythical and acquires the dimensions of a sacrifice. This is why the "victim's" consent is so easily obtained. In her abandon she is, in a sense, obeying the commands of a divinity who wants *every force to be overturned and sacrificed*, be it that of power or that of a natural seductiveness, because all force, and that of beauty in particular, is sacrilegious. Cordelia is sovereign, and is

sacrificed to her own sovereignty. The reversibility of sacrifice constitutes a murderous form of symbolic exchange; it spares nothing, not even life itself, nor even beauty or seduction, which is its most dangerous form. In this sense, the seducer cannot claim to be the hero of an erotic master plan; he is only the agent of a process that goes far beyond him. Nor is the victim entirely innocent, since, as a beautiful and seductive virgin, she is in herself a challenge which can only be met by her death (or her seduction, the equivalent of her murder).

The *Diary of the Seducer* is the script of a perfect crime. None of the seducer's calculations, none of his manoeuvres fail. It all unfolds with an infallibility that is neither real nor psychological, but mythical. The artifice's perfection, the apparent inevitability that guides the seducer's actions, simply reflects, as in a mirror, the perfection of the girl's innate grace, and the inexorable necessity of her sacrifice. This doesn't result from any specific person's strategy. It is fate, Johannes being only its instrument and, therefore, infallible.

There is something impersonal in every process of seduction, as in every crime, something ritualistic, something supra-subjective and supra-sensual, the lived experience, whether of the seducer or his victim, being only its unconsious reflection. Dramaturgy without a subject. The ritual execution of a form that consumes its subjects. This is why the piece takes on both the aesthetic form of a work of art and the ritual form of a crime.

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In the end, Cordelia is seduced, delivered to the erotic pleasures of a night and then abandoned. One mustn't be surprised at this, nor consider Johannes, in line with bourgeois psychology, a hateful person. Seduction, being a sacrificial process, ends with a murder (the deflowering) – though the latter need not have taken place. For once Johannes is certain of his victory, Cordelia is, for him, dead. It is the impure seduction that ends in love and pleasure, and is, therefore, no longer a sacrifice. Sexuality might be reexamined in this light, as the *economic residue* of seduction's sacrificial process, not unlike the residual portion that in ancient sacrifices was left to circulate within the

economy. Sex then would be merely the discount or balance of a more fundamental process, a crime or sacrifice, which fails to attain total reversibility. The gods take their part; humans share what's left.

The impure seducer, a Don Juan or Casanova, dedicates himself to the accumulation of this residue. Flying from one sexual conquest to another, he seduces for pleasure without attaining what Kierkegaard considered the "spiritual" dimension of seduction – where the challenge pushes the woman's seductive resources and powers to their limit, so that, in accord with a carefully laid plan, they can be turned against themselves.

The intrigue whereby Cordelia is slowly dispossessed of her powers, makes one think of the innumerable rites for the exorcism of female powers which can be found throughout primitive societies (Bettelheim). To cast out women's power of fertility, to encircle and circumscribe that power, and eventually simulate and appropriate it, is the purpose of the couvades, the artificial invaginations, excoriations and scarrings – all the innumerable symbolic wounds (up to and including the initiation and institution of a new power: political power) for suppressing the females' incomparable "natural" advantage. One might also consider ancient Chinese ideas on sexuality, according to which the male, by maintaining the orgasm in suspense, draws into himself the power of the female yang.

In any case, something has been given to women that must be exorcized by a deliberate campaign to dispossess her of her powers. And from this "sacrificial" perspective, there is no difference between feminine seduction and the seducer's strategy: they both involve the other's death and mental spoliation, the other's abduction and the abduction of his or her power. It is always the story of a murder, or better of an aesthetic and sacrificial immolation since, as Kierkegaard suggests, it always occurs at a spiritual level.

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Concerning the "spiritual" pleasure of seduction.

The scenario of seduction is, according to Kierkegaard, spiritual. It demands a certain *spirit* in the eighteenth century

sense, that is to say, intelligence, charm and refinement, but also in the modern sense of the *Witz* or stroke of wit.

Seduction never plays on the other's desires or amorous proclivities, this being vulgar, carnal, mechanical and, in short, uninteresting. Everything must respond by subtle allusions, *with all the signs enmeshed in the trap.* Thus the seducer's artifices reflect the girl's seductive nature, as though the latter was part of an ironic stage production, a deception made to measure, to which she would, effortlessly, come and be caught.

It is not, therefore, a matter of a frontal attack, but of a diagonal seduction that glides like a (brush?) stroke (and what is more seductive than a stroke of wit?), with its vivacity and economy, and its use of the same duplicated materials, to use Freud's terms. The seducer's weapons are the same as those of the girl, but turned against her; and it is this reversibility that gives the strategy its spiritual appeal.

It has been said, and justifiably so, that mirrors are spiritual – the reflection itself being a stroke of wit. For the mirror's spell does not lie with the fact that one recognizes oneself in it – in itself a rather appalling coincidence – but with the ironic and mysterious stroke of such a reduplication. Now the seducer's strategy is precisely that of the mirror. That is why, ultimately, he doesn't deceive anyone, and why he never deceives himself: for the mirror is infallible (if his manoeuvres and snares were taken from outside, he would undoubtedly commit some error).

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Consider another stroke of this type, worthy of being included in the annals of seduction: the same letter written by two different women – and written not out of perversity, but from a transparency of heart and soul. Both letters contain the same amorous emotions, these emotions are real, they each have their own quality. But the latter must not be confused with the "spiritual" pleasure that emanates from the mirror effect produced by the two letters, and between the two women, which is, strictly speaking, a pleasure of seduction. It is an entirely different, livelier, more subtle rapture than love. The emotions born of

desire can never equal the exuberant, secret joy one experiences when playing with desire itself. Desire is simply a referent like any other, which seduction immediately betters and transcends, precisely by virtue of its its *spirit*. Seduction is a *stroke*: here it short-circuits the two recipients in a kind of imaginary overprinting, wherein desire perhaps confuses them. At any rate, this stroke confuses desire, renders it indistint, producing a slight giddiness that proceeds from a superior indifference, and from the laughter that undermines its still too serious entanglement.

To seduce, then, is to make both the figures and the signs – the latter held by their own illusions – play amongst themselves. Seduction is never the result of physical attraction, a conjunction of affects or an economy of desire. For seduction to occur an illusion must intervene and mix up the images; a stroke has to bring disconnected things together, as if in a dream, or suddenly disconnect undivided things. Thus the second woman is irresistibly tempted to rewrite the first letter, as if a temptation could function autonomously and ironically, as if the very *idea* could be seductive. A game without end, in which the signs participate spontaneously, as if from a continuous sense of irony. Perhaps the signs *want* to be seduced, perhaps they desire, more profoundly than men, to seduce and be seduced.

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Perhaps signs are not destined to enter into fixed oppositions for meaningful ends, that being only their present *destination*. Their actual *destiny* is perhaps quite different: to seduce each other and, thereby, seduce us. If such is the case, an entirely different logic would lie behind their secret circulation.

Can one imagine a theory that would treat signs in terms of their seductive attraction, rather than their contrasts and oppositions? Which would break with the specular nature of the sign and the encoumbrance of the referent? An in which the terms would play amongst themselves within the framework of an enigmatic duel and an inexorable reversibility?

Suppose that all the major, diacritical oppositions with which we order our world were traversed by seduction, instead of being based on contrasts and oppositions. Suppose not just that

the feminine seduces the masculine, but that absence seduces presence, cold seduces hot, the subject seduces the object, and to be sure, the reverse. For seduction supposes that minimum reversibility which puts an end to every fixed opposition and, therefore, every conventional semiology. Towards an inverted semiology?

One might imagine (but why imagine it, when it occured in ancient Greece) that gods and mortals, instead of being separated by the moral abyss of religion, sought to seduce each other and, indeed, maintained no other relations but those of seduction. Moreover, perhaps all the major distinctions we use to decipher the world and confine it within its prison of meaning, those between, for example, good and evil, or true and false – all the terms that have been so carefully distinguished at such enormous costs of energy – have not always succeeded. The real catastrophes, the real revolutions always consist in the implosion of one of these two-term systems. A universe, or fragment of the universe, then comes to an end – though usually this implosion occurs slowly, the terms being gradually worn down. At present we are witnessing the slow and simultaneous erosion of all the polar structures, and the movement towards a universe that is losing the very dimension of meaning. Disinvested, disenchanted, and disaffected – the end of the world as will and representation.

But this neutralization is not seductive. Seduction pushes the terms towards each other, and unites them at a point of maximum energy and charm; it does not blur them together in a state of minimum intensity.

Now suppose that wherever relations of opposition presently exist, relations of seduction are put into play. Imagine a flash of seduction that causes the polar or differential, transistorized circuits of meaning to melt? There are examples of of a non-diacritical semiology (that is to say, a non-semiology). The elements of the ancient cosmogony, for example, did not enter into structural relations of classification (water/fire, air/earth, etc.): they were not "distinctive" elements, but "attractive" elements that seduced each other: water seduces fire, water seduced by fire.

Such seduction is still quite strong in the duel relations of

non-individualized castes and hierarchies, and in the analogical systems that preceded our logical systems of differentiation. And no doubt logical sequences of meaning are still worked over by analogical sequences of seduction – like an immense flash of inspiration that, at a single stroke, brings opposites together. Beneath meaning lies the secret circulation of seductive analogies.

We are not, however, dealing with a new version of universal attraction. The diagonals or transversals of seduction may well break the oppositions between terms; they do not lead to fused or con-fused relations (that's mysticism) but to dual relations. It is not a matter of a mystical fusion of subject or object, or signifier and signified, masculine and feminine, etc., but of a seduction, that is, a *duel and agonistic* relation.

★ ★ ★

A mirror hangs on the opposite wall
she does not reflect on it
but the mirror reflects her
Diary of the Seducer[3]

The seducer's strategm will be to merge with the mirror on the opposite wall in which the girl is reflected. She does not give it a thought, but the mirror is reflecting on her.

One should distrust the humility of mirrors. The humble servants of appearances, they can reflect only the objects that face them, without being able to conceal themselves. The whole world is grateful to them (except in death when, for this reason, one veils them); they are the watchdogs of appearance. But their faithfulness is specious, for they are waiting for someone to catch himself in their reflection. One does not easily forget their sidelong gaze. They recognize you, and when they surprise you when you least expect it, your time has come.

Such is the seducer's strategy: he gives himself the humility of the mirror, but a skilful mirror, like Perseus' shield, in which

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Diary of the Seducer*, appended to *Either/Or* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) p. 311.

Medusa found herself petrified. The girl too is going to fall captive to the mirror that reflects and analyzes her without her knowledge.

> He who does not know how to compass a girl about so that she loses sight of everything which he does not wish her to see, he who does not know how to poetize himself in a girl's feeling so that it is from her that everything issues as he wishes it, he is and remains a bungler; I do not begrudge him his enjoyment. A bungler he is and remains, a seducer, something one can by no means call me. I am an aesthete, an eroticist, one who has understood the nature and meaning of love, who believes in love and knows it from the ground up... I know, too, that the highest conceivable enjoyment lies in being loved... To poetize oneself into a young girl is an art, to poetize oneself out of her is a masterpiece. (pp. 363-64)

Seduction is never linear, and does not wear a mask (that is vulgar seduction) – it is *oblique*.

> ...what weapon is so sharp, so penetrating, so flashing in action, and hence so deceptive, as the eye? You feint a high quart, as fencers say, and attack in second... The moment of the feint is indescribable. The opponent, as it were, feels the slash, he is touched! Aye, that is true, but in quite a different place from where he thought. (p. 314)

> I do not meet her, I touch only the periphery of her existence I prefer to arrive a little early and then to meet her, if possible, at the door or upon the steps as she is coming and I am leaving, when I pass her by indifferently. This is the first net in which she must be entangled. I never stop her on the street; I may bow to her, but I never come close to her, but always keep my distance. Our continu-

> al encounters are certainly noticeable to her; she does indeed perceive that a new body has appeared on her horizon whose orbit in a strangely imperturbable manner affects her own disturbingly, but she has no conception of the law governing this movement; she is rather inclined to look about to see if she can discover the point controlling it, but she is as ignorant of being herself this focus as if she were a Chinaman. (pp. 336-37)

There is another type of indirect reverberation: hypnosis, a sort of psychic mirror in which, once again, the girl is reflected without her awareness, under someone else's gaze:

> Today my eyes have for the first time rested upon her. Someone has said that sleep can make the eyelids so heavy that they close of themselves; perhaps my glance has a similar effect upon Cordelia. Here eyes close, and yet an obscure force stirs within her. She does not see that I am looking at her, she feels it, feels it through her whole body. Her eyes close, and it is night; but within her it is luminous day. (pp. 360-61)

This obliquity of seduction is not duplicity. Where a linear movement knocks against the wall of consciousness and acquires only meager gains, seduction has the obliquity of a dream element or stroke of wit, and as such traverses the psychic universe and its different levels in a single diagonal, in order to touch, at the far end, the unknown blind spot, the secret that lies sealed, the enigma that constitutes the girl, even to herself.

Seduction has two simultaneous moments, or two instants of a single moment. Her entire character, all her feminine resources must be mobilized, and simultaneously suspended. It is not a question of surprising her in the passivity of her innocence; her freedom of action must be in play. Because it is by this freedom, by its movement – and by the curves and sudden twists imparted to it by seduction – that she must, seemingly spontaneously, reach that point where, unbeknownst to

herself, she will be lost. Seduction engages a fate; and in order for it to be realized, she must be completely free, but in her freedom she must reach out, as if somnabulistically, towards her own fall. The girl must be plunged into this second state which reduplicates the first, the state of grace and sovereignty. And this second, somnambulistic state must be sustained, so that a passion, once awakened and intoxicated with itself, slips into the trap fate has set for it. "Her eyes close, and it is night, but within her it is luminous day."

Omissions, denials, deflections, deceptions, diversions and humility – all aimed at provoking this second state, the secret of true seduction. Vulgar seduction might proceed by persistence, but true seduction proceeds by absence; or better it invents a kind of curved space, where the signs are deflected from their trajectory and returned to their source. This state of suspense is essential: it is the moment of the girl's disarray before what awaits her, even as she knows – and this is something new and already fatal – that something awaits her. A moment of high intensity, a "spiritual" moment (in Kierkegaard's sense), similar to that in games of chance between the throw and the moment when the dice stop rolling.

Thus the first time he hears her give out her address, he refuses to remember it:

> I will not listen to it, for I do not wish to deprive myself of surprise; I shall certainly meet her again in life, I shall recognize her, and perhaps she will recognize me... If she does not recognize me, if her glance does not immediately convince me of that, then I shall surely find an opportunity to look at her from the side. I promise that she will remember the situation. No impatience, no greediness, everything should be enjoyed in leisurely draughts; she is marked out, she shall be run down. (p. 312)

The seducer is playing *with himself*. At this point it is not even a ruse, with the seducer being the one delighted at the seduction's deferment. This, the pleasure of the approach, should not be slighted; for it is in this interval that he begins

to dig the pit into which she will fall. It is like fencing: one needs a field for the feint. Throughout this period, the seducer, far from seeking to close in on her, seeks to maintain his distance by various ploys: he does not speak directly to her but only to her aunt, and then about trivial or stupid subjects; he neutralizes everything by irony and feigned pedanticism; he fails to respond to any feminine or erotic movement, and even finds her a sitcom suitor to disenchant her of her love. To keep one's distance, to put her off, to disenchant and deceive her, to the point where she herself takes the initiative and breaks off her engagement, thus completing the seduction and creating the ideal situation for her total abandon.

The seducer knows how to let the signs hang. He knows that they are favourable only when left suspended, and will move of themselves towards their appointed destiny. He does not use the signs up all at once, but waits for the moment when they will all respond, one after the other, creating an entirely unique conjuncture of giddiness and collapse.

> When she is in the company of the three Jansens she talks very little, their chatter evidently bores her, and certainly the smile on her lips seems to indicate it. *I am relying on that smile.*
> Today I went to Mrs. Jansen's. I half opened the door without knocking... She sat alone at the piano... I might have rushed in, seized the moment – that would have been foolish. ...She is evidently concealing the fact that she plays... When sometime I can talk more confidentially with her, I shall slyly lead her to this point and let her fall into the trap.' (pp. 338-9).

He has not reached the vulgar diversions, the bits of libertine bravura, the erotic whims (which will occupy an increasingly large part of the story, with Cordelia hardly ever appearing except beneath a lively, libertine imagination: "To love one alone is too little; to love them all suggests the lightness of a superficial character; but to love as many as possible... What pleasure! What a life!") He has not acceded to the frivolous seduction

which is not part of the "grand game" of seduction, with its philosophy of obliquity and diversion. The "grand" seduction may make its way secretly along the same paths as vile seduction, but will play them as suspense or parody. Confusion is not possible: the one is a game of love, the other a spiritual duel. All the interludes only accentuate the slow, calculated, and inevitable rhythm of "high" seduction. The mirror still hangs on the opposite wall, even if we are no longer aware of it – and time in Cordelia's heart is on the march.

The process seems to reach its lowest point with the seducer's betrothal. Here one has the impression of having attained a point of extreme numbness, where the seducer pushes the subterfuge of disenchantment or dissuasion to an almost perverse degree of mortification. And one has the impression that, as a result, Cordelia's spirit is broken, her femininity run down, neutralized by the illusions that surround her. The moment of the engagement – which "has so much importance for a young girl that her entire soul can be fixed on it, like that of a dying man on his last will" – this moment, Cordelia will live without understanding, deprived of every reaction, muzzled, circumvented.

> One word, and she would have laughed at me, one word, and she would have been moved, one word, and she would have fled from me; but no word crossed my lips, I remained stolidly serious, and kept exactly to the ritual. As regards my engagement, I do not boast that it is poetic, it is in every way philistine and bourgeois. So now I am engaged; so is Cordelia (so is Cordelia!) and that is all she knows about the whole matter. (pp. 370-71)

It is all a kind of ordeal, as found in initiation rites. The initiated must pass through a phase that marks his or her death, not as pathetic suffering, but as nothingness, as emptiness – the final moment before the passion's illumination and the erotic abandon. In a sense, the seducer adds an ascetic moment to the aesthetic movement he imparts to the whole.

> Generally I can assure any girl who entrusts herself to me a perfect aesthetic conduct: only it ends with her being deceived... (p. 375)

There is a sort of humour in the fact that the engagement coincides with the apparent disappearance of all that was at stake in the seduction. What in the bourgeois vision of the nineteenth century constitutes a joyous prelude to marriage, is here an austere initiation into the sublime ends of passion (which are, simultaneously, the calculated ends of seduction) by the somnabulist passage across the deserts of betrothal. (Don't forget that the engagement was a crucial moment in the life of many a romantic, including Kierkegaard, but also and more dramatically of Kleist, Hölderlin, Novalis and Kafka. A painful moment of seemingly endless frustration, the almost mystical passion sustained by the engagement was perhaps (let us drop all talk of sexual impotence!) a matter of suspension, of a suspended enchantment, haunted by the fear of sexual or matrimonial disenchantment.)

However, Johannes continues to live the invisible dance of seduction, even as his objective and its presence appear to have faded. Indeed, he will never live it more intensely, for it is here, in the nullity, in the absence, in the mirror's face that its triumph is assured: she cannot but break off her former engagement and throw herself into his arms. All the fire of her passion lies revealed, just beneath the surface, in its transparence. He will never again find it as beautiful as in this premonition, for at this moment the girl still remains predestined – which will no longer be the case once this moment is over.

Now the giddiness of seduction, as of every passion, lies above all with its predestination. The latter alone provides that fatal quality at the basis of all pleasure – that stroke of wit, as it were, which ties, as if *in advance*, a movement of the soul to its destiny and its death. Here lies the seducer's triumph. And here, in the invisible dance of the betrothal, one is able to see his knowledge of seduction, of true seduction, as a spiritual economy.

> My relation to her is that of an unseen partner in

> a dance which is danced by only one, when it should really be danced by two. She moves as in a dream, and yet she dances with another, and this other is myself, who, in so far as I am visibly present, am invisible, in so far I am invisible, am visible. The movements of the dance require a partner, she bows to him, she takes his hand, she flees, she draws near him again. I take her hand, I complete her thought as if it were completed in herself. She moves to the inner melody of her own soul; I am only the occasion for her movement. *I am not amorous*, that would only awaken her; *I am* easy, yielding, impersonal, *almost like a mood*. (p. 376)

Thus seduction is presented in a single movement as:
– a conspiracy of power: a sacrificial form.
– a murder and, ultimately, a perfect crime.
– a work of art: "Seduction considered as one of the Beaux-Arts" (like murder, to be sure).
– a stroke of wit or flash of inspiration: a "spiritual" economy. With the same duel complity as a stroke of wit, where everything is exchanged allusively, without being spelled out, the equivalent of the allusive, ceremonial exchange of a secret.
– an ascetic form of a spiritual, but also pedagogical ordeal: a sort of school of passion, a simultaneously erotic and ironic maieutics.

> I shall always acknowledge that a young girl is a born teacher, from whom one can always learn, if nothing else, how to deceive her – for one only learns this best from the girls themselves... (pp. 382-83)

> Every young girl is, in relation to the labryinth of her heart, an Ariadne; she holds the thread by which one finds his way through it, but she has it, without herself knowing how to use it. (p. 396)

– a form of duel or war, an agonal form. It never takes the form of violence or a relation of force, but of a war game. In it one discovers the two simultaneous movements of seduction, as found in every strategy:

> So now the first war with Cordelia begins, in which I flee, and thereby teach her to triumph in pursuing me. I constantly retreat before her, and in this retreat, I teach her through myself to know all the power of love, its unquiet thoughts, its passion, what longing is, and hope, and impatient expectation... She will gain courage to believe in love... She must never suspect that she owes this freedom to me... When she at last feels free, so free that she is almost tempted to break with me, then the second war begins. Now she has power and passion, and the struggle becomes worthwhile to me.
>
> Let her forsake me, the second war is just beginning... The first war was a war of liberation, it was only a game; the second is a war of conquest, it is for life and death. (pp. 379-80)

The stakes are all organized around the girl as mythical figure. Both adversary and objective in this many-sided duel, she is, therefore, neither a sex object nor a figure of the Eternal Feminine – the two great, Western references to woman are equally foreign to seduction. And there is no more an ideal victim or ideal subject (the girl and her seducer respectively), than there is an executioner and victim in a sacrifice. The fascination she exercises is that of a mythical figure, an enigmatic partner, a protagonist equal to the seducer in this almost liturgical realm of challenge and duel.

★ ★ ★

How different from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses!* In Laclos the woman to be seduced appears as a stronghold to be taken, in the manner of the military strategy of the period – the strategy

may be less static than before, but the objective remains the same, her surrender. The Présidente is a fortress to be besieged, and she must fall. There is no seduction here – only siegecraft.

Where there is seduction is not in the relation between seducer and victim, but in that between the seducers, de Valmont and Merteuil, who share a criminal conspiracy by interposed victims. Similarly in the Marquis de Sade, there is only the secret society glorifying in its crimes, while the victims are nullities.

There is none of the subtle art of the turnaround which already appears in Sun-Tseu's *Art of War*, or in zen philosophy and the oriental martial arts. Or as here, in seduction, where the girl, her passion and liberty, are very much a part of the strategy's unfolding. "She was an enigma that, enigmatically, possessed in her its own resolution."

★ ★ ★

In this duel, everything turns on the movement from ethics to aesthetics, from a *naive* to a *conscious passion*:

> So far I should call her passion a naive passion. When the change comes, and I begin to draw back in earnest then she will really muster all her resources in order to captivate me. She has no way to accomplish this except by means of the erotic, but this will now appear on a very different scale. It then becomes the weapon in her hand which she swings against me. Then I have the reflected passion. She fights for her own sake because she knows that I possess the erotic; she fights for her own sake in order to overcome me. She develops in herself a higher form of the erotic. What I taught her to suspect by inflaming her, my coldness now teaches her to understand, but in such a way that she believes she discovered it herself. Through this she will try to take me by surprise; she will believe that her boldness has outstripped me, and that she has thereby caught me. Then her passion

> becomes definite, energetic, conclusive, logical; her kiss total, her embrace firm. (p. 406)

The ethics is formed of simplicity and naturalness (including the simplicity of desire), of which the girl's naive grace and spontaneity are a part. The aesthetics is formed of artifice, the play of signs – it is seduction. Every ethics must resolve itself into an aesthetics. For Kierkegaard's seducer, as for Schiller, Hölderlin, or even Marcuse, the passage to aesthetics is the highest movement granted the human species. But the seducer's aesthetics is quite different: it is not divine and transcendent, but ironic and diabolical; it does not have the form of an ideal, but of a stroke of wit; it does not go beyond ethics; it is deflection, inflection, seduction, and transfiguration, as realized by the mirror of deception. This, however, is not to say that the seducer's strategy is perverse; it is a part of that aesthetics of irony which seeks to transform a vulgar, physical eroticism into a passion, and stroke of wit.

> I have noticed that she always calls me *mine* when she writes to me; but she lacks the courage to say it to me. Today I begged her to do it, with all the insinuating and erotic warmth possible. She started to do so; an ironic glance, indescribably swift and brief, was enough to make it impossible for her, although my lips urged her with all their might. *This mood is entirely normal.* (p. 419)

> Erotically she is completely equipped for the struggle, she fights with the darts of her eyes, with the command of her brows, with the secretiveness of her forehead, with the eloquence of her bosom, with the dangerous allurement of the embrace, with the prayer of her lips, with the smile on her face, with all the sweet longing of her entire being. There is a power in her, an energy, as if she were a valkyrie; but this erotic force is in turn tempered by a certain languishing weakness which is breathed out over her. — *She must not be held too long at this peak...* (p. 419)

Irony always prevents the mortal emotional demonstrations that anticipate the game's end and threaten to cut short the untried possibilities held by each of the players. Seduction alone can deploy the latter, but only by keeping things in suspense, by an ironic clinamen, and by that disillusion which leaves the field of aesthetics open.

Sometimes the seducer has his weaknesses. Thus it happens that in a surfeit of emotion he launches into a panegyric to female beauty in its infinite divisibility, detailed in its minute erotic variations (pp. 423-24), and then assembled into a single figure, within the heated imagination of an inflamed desire. A vision of God — but immediately taken up and turned around in the imagination of the Devil, in the cold imagination of appearances. Woman is man's dream — God, moreover, drew her from man when he was asleep. She therefore has all the traits of a dream, and in her, one might say, the diurnal scraps of the real combine to form a mirage.

> She awakens first at the touch of love; before that time she is a dream. Yet in her dream life we can distinguish two stages: in the first love dreams about her; in the second, she dreams about love (p. 425)

The end comes when she has given herself fully. She is dead, she has lost the grace of her appearance and become her sex; she becomes a woman. For one last moment. "[W]hen she then stands decked out as a bride, and all the magnificence of her attire pales before her beauty, and she herself turns pale..." (p. 431), she still has the splendour of appearances — but soon it will be too late.

★ ★ ★

Such is the metaphysical lot of the seducer. Beauty, meaning, substance, and above everything else, God *are ethically jealous of themselves.* Most things are ethically possessive; they keep their secrets, and watch over their meanings. Seduction, being on the side of the appearances and the Devil, *is aesthetically possessive.*

After the final abandonment (Cordelia abandons herself, and

she is immediately abandoned), Johannes asks himself: "Have I been constantly faithful to my pact in my relation to Cordelia? That is to say, my pact with the aesthetic. For it is this which makes me strong, that I always have the idea on my side... Has the interesting always been preserved?" (p. 432). Merely to seduce is interesting only in the first degree; but here it is a matter of *what is interesting in the second degree.* This doubling is the secret of the aesthetics. Only what is interesting about the interesting has seduction's aesthetic force.

In a sense, the seducer strives to have the girl's natural charms rise to and shine in the world of pure appearances, i.e., in the sphere of seduction — and there destroy them. For most things, alas, have meaning and depth; but *only some of them rise to the level of appearances,* and they alone are truly seductive. Seduction lies in the transformation of things into pure appearances.

★ ★ ★

That is how seduction is realized as myth, in the giddiness of appearances, just before being committed to reality. "Everything is symbol; I myself am a myth about myself, for is it not as a myth that I hasten to this meeting? ...Drive now for dear life, even if the horses drop dead, only not a single second before we reach the place." (p. 439)

A single night, and it's all over. "I hope never to see her again." She gives everything and falls, like those countless virgins of Greek mythology who were transformed into flowers, and thereby achieved a vegetative and lugubrious grace, the echo of the seduction grace of their first life. But, adds Kierkegaard's seducer cruelly: "...the time is past when a girl suffering the pain of a faithless love can be changed into a sunflower." (p. 439) And in a still more cruel and unexpected manner: "If I were a god, I would do for her what Neptune did for a nymph: I would change her into a man." (p. 440). In a word, the woman does not exist. Only the girl exists by the sublime nature of her state, and the man, by his power to destroy her.

But the mythical passion of seduction does not cease to be ironic. It is crowned with one last melancholy stroke: the ar-

rangement of the interior that will be the setting for the lovers' abandon. One last moment of suspense as the seducer brings together all the scattered lines of his strategy and contemplates them as though before death. What should have been a triumphant setting is already no more than the doleful site of a defunct story. Everything in this house is reconstituted so as to seize hold of Cordelia's imagination at a stroke, at that final moment when she is to be toppled. There is the cabinet in which they met, with the same sofa, the same lamp, the same tea table, as it was all "purported to be" yesterday, and *is* here today, by virtue of an exact resemblance. On the open piano, on the music-rest the same little Swedish melody — Cordelia will enter by the door at the back. Everything is foreseen: she will discover all the scenes they lived together recapitulated. The illusion is perfect. In fact, the game has reached its end, but the seducer reaches new heights of irony by bringing together all the threads he has woven since the beginning in one last display of fireworks, which is, at the same time, a parodic funeral oration to their consummated love.

After which Cordelia will no longer appear, except in several desperate letters that open the story, and even her despair is strange. She was not exactly deceived or dispossessed, but *spiritually diverted* by a game whose rules she was not aware of. She was played with, as though under a spell. She has the impression of having been, without realizing it, the trophy in some very intimate and devastating plot, the object of a spiritual abduction. In effect, she was robbed of her own seduction, which was then turned against her. Hers is a nameless fate, and the stupor that results is different from mere despair.

> Such victims were of a quite distinct nature. ...There was no visible change in their appearance; they maintained their customary relationships, as respected as ever, and yet they were changed, almost inexplicably to themselves... Their lives were not like those snapped off or broken, but they had become introspective; lost to others, they vainly sought to find themselves. (p. 303)

THE FEAR OF BEING SEDUCED

If seduction is a passion or destiny, it is usually the opposite passion that prevails – that of not being seduced. We struggle to confirm ourselves in our truth: we fight against that which seeks to seduce us.

In this struggle all means are acceptable, ranging from relentlessly seducing the other in order not to be seduced oneself, to pretending to be seduced in order to cut all seduction short.

★ ★ ★

The hysteric combines the passion of seduction with that of simulation. She protects herself from seduction by offering booby-trapped signs which, even as they put themselves forward in exaggerated fashion, cannot be believed. The scruples, the excessive remorse, the pathetic advances and endless entreaties, her way of spinning events so that they dissolve and she herself becomes elusive, the giddiness she imposes on others, and the deception – it is all seductive deterrence, whose obscure objective is less to seduce than to never let oneself seduce.

The hysteric has no intimacy, emotions, or secrets. She is entirely given over to external blackmail, to the ephemeral but total credibility of her "symptoms," the absolute need to be be-

lieved (like the mythomaniac with his stories) but at the same time, to disappoint all belief – and this without appealing to some shared delusion. An uncompromising demand, but completely insensitive as to its response. A demand that is put into question by its choreography, and by the effect of its signs. Seduction too mocks the truth of signs, but makes it into a reversible appearance, while the hysteric plays with the signs but without sharing them. It is as if she appropriated the entire process of seduction for herself, as if she was bidding with herself, while leaving the other only the ultimatum of her hysterical *conversion*, without any possible *reversion*. The hysteric succeeds in making her own body a barrier to seduction: a seductress paralyzed by her own body and fascinated by her own symptoms. And who seeks to petrify others in turn, by an elusiveness that seeks to allay suspicions, but remains only a pathetic psychodrama. If seduction is a challenge, hysteria is blackmail.

Most signs and messages today solicit us in this hysterical manner. They would make-us-believe, make-us-speak and make-us-come by dissuasion. They would blackmail us with a blind, psychodramatic transaction, using signs devoid of meaning, that multiply and hypertrophy precisely because they no longer have any secrets or credibility. Signs without faith, without affect or history, signs terrified at the idea of signifying – just as the hysteric is terrified at the idea of being seduced.

In reality, the inner absence that inheres in the self terrifies the hysteric. She must drain herself, with her continual play, of this absence in the secrecy of which she could be loved, and could love herself. In this way she forms a mirror behind which – near suicide, but turning suicide, like everything else, into a bothersome, theatrical process of seduction – she remains immortal in her "spectacular" domain.

The same process, but reversed, can be found in anorexia, frigidity and impotence. By turning one's body into a mirror – but a mirror that has, as it were, been turned against the wall by effacing the potential seductiveness of one's body – by disenchanting and desexualizing it, one is still resorting to blackmail and delivering an ultimatum: "You will not seduce me, I dare you to try." Seduction, however, shows through in its very

negation, since the dare is one of its fundamental forms. A challenge must be met with a response, (without wanting to) a challenge has to let itself seduce – but here the game has been closed down. And closed down all the more emphatically by the body, by its dramatization of a refusal of seduction – while the hysteric gets out of the game by dramatizing a demand for seduction. In both cases, however, seduction, whether as seducer or seduced, is denied.

The problem, therefore, is not one of sexual or alimentary impotence, with its train of psychoanalytic reasons and unreason, but concerns an *impotence as regards seduction* . The disaffection, neurosis, anguish and frustration encountered by psychoanalysis comes no doubt from being unable to love or to be loved, from being unable to give or take pleasure, but the radical disenchantment comes from seduction and its failure. Only those who lie completely outside seduction are ill, even if they remain fully capable of loving and making love. Psychoanalysis believes it treats the disorders of sex and desire, but in reality it is dealing with the disorders of seduction (which it has helped, not inconsiderably, to place outside seduction and imprison within the dilemma of sex). The most serious deficiencies always concern charm and not pleasure, enchantment and not some vital or sexual satisfaction, the (game's) rule and not the (symbolic) Law. To be deprived of seduction is the only true form of castration.

Fortunately, the latter continuously fails. Seduction rises like the phoenix from the ashes, with the subject being unable to prevent all this from again becoming, as with anorexia or impotence, a last desperate attempt at seduction, and the denial from again becoming a dare. Perhaps it is in these aggravated forms of sexual self-denial that seduction expresses itself in its purest form, since it still asks the other to: "Prove to me that it's not just a matter of 'that.' "

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There are other passions opposed to seduction, though fortunately, they too usually fail when taken to extremes. The passion for collecting, for example, the fetishism of the collector.

Its antagonistic affinity with seduction is strong, perhaps because it too involves a game with rules, whose intensity is such that it can substitute itself for any other game. For it too invokes a passion for an abstraction that defies every moral law, in order to maintain the rigid ceremonial of the closed universe within which the subject confines himself.

The collector is possessive. He seeks exclusive rights over the dead object with which he appeases his fetishist passion. Reclusion and confinement: beyond all else he is collecting himself. And he is not to be distracted from his madness, since his love of the object, the amorous stratagems with which he surrounds it, display a hatred and fear of seduction. And not just the seductiveness of the object: he is just as repelled by any seduction that might emanate from himself.

The Collector, the film and novel, illustrate this delirium. The protagonist, being unable to seduce or be loved (but does he want seduction and the spontaneity of love? certainly not – he wants to force the seduction, he wants to force love), kidnaps a young woman and confines her in the basement of his country house, which has been specially equipped for the purpose. He installs her, cares for her, surrounds her with numerous courtesies, but checks all attempts at escape, outsmarts all her ruses, and will spare her only if she admits herself defeated and seduced, only if, in the end, she loves him spontaneously. In time, however, with this forced promiscuity, an indecisive and troubled connivence forms between them – and one evening he invites her to dine upstairs, with all precautions taken. And what happens? She genuinely tries to seduce him and offers herself to him. Perhaps she loves him at this moment, perhaps she only wants to disarm him. Both no doubt. But whatever the case, her behaviour provokes a panic reaction, and he hits her, insults her and throws her back in the cave. He no longer respects her, he undresses her and takes pornographic pictures which he places in a photo album (he collects butterflies, and has shown her his collection with pride). She gets sick and falls into a sort of coma: he no longer cares for her: she dies and he buries her in his yard. In the last scene, he is seen looking for another woman to kidnap and seduce at whatever cost.

A need to be loved, but an inability to be seduced. When,

finally, the woman is seduced (it is enough that she wants to seduce him) he cannot accept his victory: he prefers to see it as a sexual malediction and punishes her. It is not a question of impotence (it is never a question of impotence). He prefers the possessive spell cast by a collection of dead objects – the dead sex object being as beautiful as a butterfly with florescent wings – to the seduction of a living being who would demand his love in return. He prefers the monotonous fascination of the collection, the fascination with dead differences, this obsession with the same, over the seduction of the other. This is why one senses from the beginning that she will die, not because he is a dangerous madman, but because he is logical, motivated by an irreversible logic. To seduce without being seduced – without reversibility.

In this case, one of the two terms must die, and it is always the same since the other is already dead. The other is immortal and indestructible, as in every perversion. This is illustrated by the fact that the film ends where it began (and not without humour – possessive people, like perverse people, have a good sense of humour outside the sphere of their obsession, including in the minutiae of their proceedings). In any case, the collector has enclosed himself within an insoluble logic: all the signs of love she can give him will be interpreted in a contrary manner. And the most tender will be the most suspect. He might perhaps be satisfied with the appropriate signs, but he cannot bear the genuine enticements of love. Within his logic, she has signed her own death warrant.

This is not a story about sadism – it is too moving. Who said that the best proof of love is to respect the other and his or her desires? Perhaps the price paid by beauty and seduction is to be confined and put to death, because they are too dangerous, and because one will never be able to render her what she has given. One can then only reward her with her death. In a sense, the girl recognizes this since she responds to this higher seduction offered her in the metaphor of her confinement. It is just that she cannot respond except by offering herself sexually – and this appears trivial relative to the challenge she herself poses by her beauty. Sexual pleasure will never abolish the need for seduction. Formerly all mortals were obliged

to redeem their living bodies with a sacrifice; today all seductive forms, perhaps all living forms, have to redeem themselves by their death. This is a symbolic law – which is, moreover, not a law but an unavoidable rule, that is, we adhere to it without grounds, as something arbitrary yet obvious, and not in accord with some transcendent principle.

Should one conclude that every attempt at seduction ends with the murder of the object, or that it always – and this is a variation on the same theme – involves an attempt to drive the other mad? Is the spell one exercises over the other always harmful? Is one only seeking to avenge the spell that the other exercises over you? Is the game being played here a game of life or death, or at least closer to death than the serene exchange of sexual pleasure? To seduce implies that the other will pay for the fact of being seduced, that is, for having been torn from him/herself and made into an object of sorcery. Here everything obeys the symbolic rule of immediate apportionment which dictates the sacrificial relations between men and their gods in cultures of cruelty, that is, relations of recognition and dispensation of unlimited violence. Now seduction belongs to cultures of cruelty, and is the only ceremonial form of the latter left to us. It is what draws our attention to death, not in its organic and accidental form, but as something necessary and rigorous, the inevitable consequence of the game's rules. Death remains the ultimate risk in every symbolic pact, be it that supposed by a challenge, a secret, a seduction or a perversion.

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Seduction and perversion maintain subtle relations. Doesn't seduction imply a form of the diversion of the world's order? And yet, of all the passions, of all the movements of the soul, perversion is perhaps the most opposed to seduction.

Both are cruel and indifferent relative to sex.

Seduction is something that seizes hold of all pleasures, affects and representations, and gets ahold of dreams themselves in order to reroute them from their primary course, turning them into a sharper, more subtle game, whose stakes have neither an end nor an origin, and concerns neither drives nor desires.

If sex has a *natural law*, a pleasure principle, then seduction consists in denying that principle and replacing it with a rule, the *arbitrary* rule of a game. In this sense, seduction is *perverse*. The immorality of perversion, like that of seduction, does not come from abandoning oneself to the joys of sex in opposition to all morality; it results from something more serious and subtle, the abandonment of sex itself as a referent and a morality, even in its "joys."

Play, not sensual pleasure. The pervert is cold when it comes to sex. He transmutes sex and sexuality into a ritual carrier, a ritual and ceremonial abstraction, a burning concern with signs rather than an exchange of desires. With the pervert, all the intensity of sex is dispaced onto the signs and their sequence, just as in Artaud this intensity is displaced onto the theaterical unfolding (the savage irruption of signs into reality). Their violence is ceremonial – and by no means instinctual; only the rite is violent, only the rules of the game are violent, because they put an end to the system formed by reality. This is true cruelty, and has nothing to do with bloodlust. And in this sense, perversion is cruel.

Perversion's power of fascination comes from a ritual cult based on rules. The pervert is not someone who transgresses the law, but someone who eludes the law in order to dedicate himself to the rule, someone, then, who evades not just the reproductive finality of the sexual order, but that order itself, with its symbolic law, in order to link up with a regulated, ritualized, ceremonial form.

Perversion supposes a contract that is not a contract, that is, a transaction between two free agents, but a *pact* upholding the obsevance of a rule. As such it establishes a duel relation (like a challenge) that excludes all third parties (unlike a contract) and cannot be dissociated into its individual terms. It is this pact, this duel relation, with its web of obligations *foreign to the law*, which renders perversion invulnerable to the external world – and impenetrable to analysis in terms of the individual unconscious, and thus to psychoanalysis. For the realm of the rule is not part of psychoanalysis's jurisdiction, which concerns law alone. Perversion, on the other hand, belongs to this other universe.

The duel relation abolishes the law of exchange. The rules of perversion abolish sex's natural law. Arbitrary, like the rules of a game, the contents are of little consequence; what is essential is the imposition of a rule or sign, or system of signs, which abstracts from the sexual order (it might be, as with Klossowski, coins that, oblivious to the natural law of exchange, become the ritual carrier of perversion).

Hence the affinity between convents, secret societies, Sade's chateaux, and the universe of perversion. The oaths, the rites, the interminable Sadian protocols. What joins them together is a cult of the rule – and not its absence in licentiousness. And within these rules, the pervert or perverse couple can admit social strains and distortions without difficulty, since the latter concern the law alone (thus, according to Goblot, within the the bourgeois class, one can do anything provided the class rule, the system of arbitrary signs that defines it as a caste, remains unharmed). All transgressions are possible, but not an infraction of the Rule.

Thus, in their common challenge to the natural order, perversion and seduction resemble each other. But on numerous occasions they are violently opposed, as in the story of *The Collector*, where a perverse, possessive passion triumphs over seduction. Or in the story of "The Dancer" related by Leo Scheer: A concentration camp guard forces a young Jewess to dance for him before her death. She does so, and as her dancing leaves him spellbound, she is able to approach him, steal his weapon and kill him. Of the two universes, that of the SS, exemplifying a staggering, perverse power, a power of fascination (that vested in the sovereignty of the person who holds a life in his hands), and that of the girl, exemplifying seduction by the dance, the latter triumphs. Seduction invades the order of fascination and turns it upside down (though most of the time it is not even given the chance to enter). It is clear here that the two logics exclude each other, and that each represents a mortal danger for the other.

But isn't there a continuous cycle of reversion between the two? The collector's passion ends up, after all, exercising a kind of seduction over the girl (or is it only fascination? But, once again, where's the difference?). A certain vertigo results from

her desperate attempt to circumscribe a foreclosed universe, whereby, at the same time, she discloses a sink hole or void that exercises, by its anti-seduction, a new form of attraction.

A certain kind of seduction is perverse: hysteria, since it uses seduction to defend itself from seduction. But a certain perversion is seductive, since it uses the detour of perversion to seduce.

With hysteria seduction becomes obscene. But in certain forms of pornography, obscenity again becomes seductive. Violence can seduce, and even rape. The odious and the abject can seduce. Where does the detour of seduction stop? Where does the cycle of reversion end, and should it be stopped?

However, a profound difference remains: the pervert is radically suspicious of seduction and tries to codify it. He tries to fix its rules, formalize them in a text, express them in a pact. In so doing, he breaks a basic rule, that of the secret. Instead of upholding seduction's supple ceremonial, the pervert wants a fixed ceremonial, a fixed duel. By making the rule into something sacred and obscene, by designating it as an end, *that is to say, as a law*, he traces an uncompromising defense: for it is the theater of the rule that gains ascendancy, as in hysteria the theater of the body. More generally, all the perverse forms of seduction have the following in common: they betray its secret and the fundamental rule, which is that the rule remain unspoken.

In this sense, the seducer himself is perverse. For he too deflects seduction from its rule of secrecy, and does so intentionally. He is to seduction what the cheater is to the game. If the purpose of the game is to win, then the cheater is the only true player. If seduction had an objective, then the seducer would be its ideal figure. But neither seduction nor the game can be thus characterized, and there is a good chance that what determines the cheater's actions, his cynical stratagems to win at all costs, is his hatred of the game, his rejection of the seduction proper to the game – just as there is a good chance that the seducer's behaviour is determined by his fear of being seduced, and of having to face the risk of a challenge to his own truth. This is what leads him to his first sexual conquest, and then to the countless conquests where he can fetishize his

strategy.

The pervert always gets involved in a maniacal universe of mastery and the law. He seeks mastery over the fetishized rule and absolute ritual circumscription. The latter is no longer playful. It no longer moves. It is dead, and can no long put anything into play except its own death. Fetishism is the seduction of death, including the death of the rule in perversion.

Perversion is a frozen challenge; seduction, a living challenge. Seduction is shifting and ephemeral; perversion, monotonous and interminable. Perversion is theatrical and complicit; seduction, secret and reversible.

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Systems obsessed with their systematicity are fascinating: they tune in death as an energy of fascination. Thus the collector's passion tries to circumscribe and immobilize seduction before transforming it into a death energy. It is then *the flaw of such systems that becomes seductive.* Terror is dissipated by irony. Or else seduction lies in wait for systems at their point of inertia, that point at which they stop, where there is no longer any beyond, nor any possible representation – a point of no return where the trajectories slow down and the object is absorbed by its own force of resistance and density. What happens in the environs of this point of inertia? The object is distorted like the sun refracted by the different layers of the horizon; crushed by its own mass, it no longer obeys its own laws. We know almost nothing about such processes of inertia, except that at the edge of this black hole the point of no return becomes a point of total reversibility, a catastrophic point where death is pulled tight to be released in a new seduction effect.

III

THE POLITICAL DESTINY OF SEDUCTION

THE PASSION FOR RULES

No player must be greater than the game itself

Rollerball

The *Diary of the Seducer* claims that in seduction the subject is never the master of his master plan, and even when the latter is deployed in full consciousness, it still submits to the rules of a game that goes beyond it. A ritual dramaturgy beyond the law, seduction is both game and fate, and as such pushes the protagonists towards their inevitable end without the rule being broken – for it is the rule that binds them. And the rule's basic dictum is that the game continue whatever the cost, be it death itself. There is, then, a sort of passion that binds the players to the rule that ties them together – without which the game would not be possible.

Ordinarily we live within the realm of the Law, even when fantasizing its abolition. Beyond the law we see only its transgression or the lifting of a prohibition. For the discourse of law and interdiction determines the inverse discourse of transgression and liberation. *However, it is not the absence of the law that is opposed to the law, but the Rule.*

The Rule plays on an immanent sequence of arbitrary signs, while the Law is based on a transcendent sequence of necessary signs. The one concerns cycles, the recurrence of conventional procedures, while the other is an instance based in an irreversible continuity. The one involves obligations, the other constraints and prohibitions. Because the Law establishes a line, it can and must be transgressed. By contrast, it makes no sense

to "transgress" a game's rules; within a cycle's recurrence, there is no line one can jump (instead, one simply leaves the game). Because the Law – whether that of the signifier, castration, or a social interdiction – claims to be the discursive sign of a legal instance and hidden truth, it results in repression and prohibitions, and thus the division into a manifest and a latent discourse. Given that the rule is conventional and arbitrary, and has no hidden truth, it knows neither repression nor the distinction between the manifest and the latent. It does not carry any meaning, it does not lead anywhere; by contrast, the Law has a determinate finality. The endless, reversible cycle of the Rule is opposed to the linear, finalized progression of the Law.

Signs do not have the same status in the one as in the other. The Law is part of the world of representation, and is therefore subject to interpretation or decipherment. It involves decrees or statements, and is not indifferent to the subject. It is a *text*, and falls under the influence of meaning and referentiality. By contrast, the Rule has no subject, and the form of its utterance is of little consequence; one does not decipher the rules, nor derive pleasure from their comprehension – only their observance matters, and the resulting giddiness. This also distinguishes the passion for the game's rituals and intensity from the pleasure that attaches to obedience to the Law, or its transgression.

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In order to understand the intensity of ritual forms, one must rid oneself of the idea that all happiness derives from nature, and all pleasure from the satisfaction of a desire. On the contrary, games, the sphere of play, reveal a passion for rules, a giddiness born of rules, and a force that comes from ceremony, and not desire.

Does the delight one experiences in a game come from a dream-like situation, where one moves free of reality, but which one can quit at any time? Not at all. Games, unlike dreams, are subject to rules, and one just doesn't leave a game. Games create obligations like those found in challenges. To leave a game is unsportsmanlike. And the fact that one cannot refuse to play

a game from within – a fact that explains its enchantment and differentiates it from "reality" – creates a symbolic pact which compels one to observe the rules without reserve, and to pursue the game to the end, as one pursues a challenge to the end.

The order instituted by the game, being conventional, is incommensurable with the necessary order of the real world: it is neither ethical nor psychological, and its acceptance (the acceptance of the rules) implies neither resignation nor constraint. As such, there is no freedom in our moral and individual sense of that term, in games. They are not to be equated with liberty. Games do not obey the dialectic of free will, that hypothetical dialectic of the sphere of the real and the law. To enter into a game is to enter a system of ritual obligations. Its intensity derives from its initiatory form – not from our liberty, as we would like to believe, following an ideology that sees only a single, "natural" source of happiness and pleasure.

The game's sole principle, though it is never posed as universal, is that *by choosing the rule one is delivered from the law.*

Without a psychological or metaphysical foundation, the rule has no grounding in belief. One neither believes nor disbelieves a rule – one observes it. The diffuse sphere of belief, the need for credibility that encompasses the real, is dissolved in the game. Hence their immorality: *to proceed without believing in it*, to sanction a direct fascination with conventional signs and groundless rules.

Debts too are annuled. In games there is nothing to redeem, no accounts to settle with the past. For this reason, games appear unaware of the dialectic of the possible and impossible, there being no accounts to settle with the future. There is nothing "possible," since everything is played, everything decided, without hope and without alternatives, according to a relentless, unmediated logic. That is why there is no laughter around the poker table, for its logic is cool (but not casual); and the game being without hope, is never obscene and never lends itself to laughter. Games are serious, more serious than life, as seen in the paradoxical fact that in a game lives can be at stake.

Games, therefore, are no more based on the pleasure principle than the reality principle. They suppose the enchantment of the rule, and the sphere that the rule describes. And the lat-

ter is not a sphere of illusion or diversion, but involves another logic, an artificial, initiatory logic wherein the natural determinants of life and death have been abolished. This constitutes the specificity of games and their stakes. It makes no sense to reduce them to an economic logic that would speak of conscious investment, or to a logic of desire that would speak of unconscious motives. Conscious or unconscious – this double determination may be valid for the sphere of meaning and law, but not for rules and games.

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The Law describes a potentially universal system of meaning and value. It aims at objective recognition. On the basis of its underlying transcendence, the Law constitutes itself into an instance for the totalization of the real, with all the revolutions and transgressions clearing the way to the law's universalization. By contrast, the Rule is immanent to a limited and restricted system, which it describes without transcending, and within which it is immutable. The rule does not aspire to universality and, strictly speaking, it lacks all exteriority since it does not institute an internal scission. It is the Law's transcendence that establishes the irreversibility of meaning and value. And it is the rule's immanence, its arbitrary, circumscriptive character, that leads, in its own sphere, to the reversibility of meaning and the reversion of the Law.

The inscription of rules in a sphere without a beyond (it's no longer a universe, since it no longer aspires to universality) is as difficult to understand as the idea of a finite universe. A boundary without something beyond it is unimaginable. For us the finite is always set against the infinite; but the sphere of games is neither finite nor infinite – transfinite perhaps. It has its own finite contours, with which it resists the infinity of analytic space. To reinvent a rule is to resist the linear infinitude of analytic space in order to recover a reversible space. For a rule has its own revolution, in the literal sense of the word: the convection towards a central point and the cycle's reversion (this is how rituals function within a cyclical world), independent of every logic of cause and effect, origin and end.

This marks the end of the centrifugal dimension: the sudden, intensive gravitation of space and abolition of time, which implodes in a flash to become so dense that it escapes the traditional laws of physics – its entire course spiraling inwards towards the center where the density is greatest. This is the game's fascination, the crystalline passion that erases memory traces and forfeits meaning. All passion comes close, in its form, to the latter, but the passion for gaming is the purest.

The best analogy would be with primitive cultures, which have been described as closed in on themselves, incapable of conceiving of the rest of the world. But in our society the rest of the world exists only for us. Their closure, far from being restrictive, derives from a different logic which, because we are trapped within the imaginary of the universal, can no longer conceive of except pejoratively, as limited.

The symbolic sphere of these cultures knows no remains. In games too, unlike the real, there is nothing left over. Because they have neither history, memory nor internal accumulation (the stakes are constantly being consumed and reversed, it being an unspoken rule that, while the game is in progress, one cannot withdraw anything in the form of a gain or "surplus value"), they leave no residue within. Nor is there anything that remains outside the game. The "remainder" supposes an unsolved equation, an unrealized destiny, something subtracted or repressed. But a game's *equation is always perfectly balanced*, and its destiny always fulfilled, without leaving any traces (something that distinguishes it from the unconscious).

The theory of the unconscious supposes that certain affects, scenes or signifiers can no longer be put into play, that they are foreclosed, outside-the-game. The game, on the other hand, is based on the hypothesis that everything can be put into play. Otherwise it would have to be admitted that one has always already lost, that one is playing in order to always lose. In the game, however, no objects are wasted. There is nothing irreducible to the game which precedes the game – and in particular, no previous debts. If within games, something is exorcised, it is not some debt contracted vis-a-vis the law. It is *the Law itself that is exorcised as an unforgivable crime*, as discriminatory, an irreconcilable transcendence within the real. And its

transgression only adds a new crime to that of the law – and new debts and griefs.

The Law establishes equality as a principle: in principle everyone is equal before the Law. By contrast, there is no equality before the rule; for the latter has no jurisdiction over principles. Moreover, in order for everyone to be equal they must be separated. The players, however, are not separate or individualized: they are instituted in a dual and agonistic relation. They are not even solidary – solidarity supposing a *formal* conception of the social, the moral ideal of a group in competition. The players are *tied* to each other; their parity entails an obligation that does not require solidarity, at least not as something that needs to be conceptualized or interiorized.

The rule has no need of a formal structure or superstructure – whether moral or psychological – to function. Precisely because rules are arbitrary and ungrounded, because they have no referents, they do not require a consensus, nor any collective will or truth. They exist, that's all. And they exist only when shared, while the Law floats above scattered individuals.

Their logic is clearly illustrated by what Goblot claims, in *La Barrière et le Niveau*, is the cultural rule of castes (and of the bourgeois class as well):

1. Total parity amongst the players within the space created by the Rule: this is the "level."
2. Beyond the Rule, the foreclosing of the rest of the world: this is the "barrier."

Within its own domain, extraterritoriality, in the obligations and privileges, absolute reciprocity: games restore this logic in its pure state. The agonistic relation between the players can never jeopardize their reciprocal, privileged status. The game might come to naught and its stakes lost – still the reciprocal enchantment, and the arbitrariness of the Rule at its source, must be preserved.

This is why duel relations can exclude all effort, merit or personal qualities (above all, in the pure form of games of chance). Personal traits are admitted only as a kind of favour or enticement, and have no psychological equivalents. This is how games go – as demanded by the divine transparency of the Rule.

In a finite space, one is delivered from the universal – with

an immediate, duel parity, one is delivered from equality – with obligations one is delivered from freedom – in the arbitrariness of the Rule and its ceremonial, one is delivered from the law. Thus the enchantment of games.

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In a sense, we are more equal within ceremonials than before the Law (perhaps this accounts for the insistence on politeness, on ceremonial conformity, particularly amongst the less cultivated classes; it being easier to share conventional signs than signs laden with meaning or signs of "intelligence"). We also have more freedom in games than anywhere else, for we do not have to internalize the rules; we owe the rules only a token fidelity, and do not feel we have to transgress them, as is the case with the law. With the rule we are free of the Law – and of all the constraints of choice, freedom, responsibility and meaning! The terrorism of meaning can only be dissipated by arbitrary signs.

However, make no mistake about it: conventional or ritual signs are *binding*. One is not free to signify in isolation while still maintaining a coherent relation with reality or truth. The freedom demanded by modern signs, like modern individuals, to articulate themselves according to their affects or desire (for meaning) does not exist for conventional signs. The latter cannot set off aimlessly, with their own referent or scrap of meaning as ballast. Each sign is tied to others, not within the abstract structure of language, but within the senseless unfolding of a ceremonial; they echo each other and reduplicate themselves in other, equally arbitrary signs.

The ritual sign is not a representative sign. It is not, therefore, something worth understanding. Instead, it delivers us from meaning. This is why we are so committed to such signs. The gaming debt is a debt of honour; everything concerning the game is sacred because conventional.

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In *A Lover's Discourse* Roland Barthes justifies his choice of

an alphabetical order in the following terms: "to discourage the temptation of meaning, it was necessary to choose an *absolutely insignificant* order," that is to say, neither an intended order, nor one of pure chance, but a perfectly conventional order. For "we must not," he writes, citing a mathematician, "underestimate the power of chance to engender monsters," that is, logical sequences – meaning.

In other words, total liberty, or total indeterminacy are not opposed to meaning. One can produce meaning simply by playing with chance or disorder. New diagonals of meaning, new sequences can be engendered from the untamed flood tides of desire – as in certain modern philosophies, the molecular or intensive philosophies, which claim to undermine meaning by diffraction, hook-ups and the Brownian movements of desire. As with chance, we must not underestimate the power of desire to engender (logical) monsters.

One does not escape meaning by dissociation, disconnection or deterritorialization. One escapes meaning by replacing it with a more radical simulacrum, a still more conventional order – like the alphabetical order for Barthes, or the rules of a game, or the innumerable rituals of everyday life which frustrate both the (political, historical or social) order of meaning and the disorder (chance) which one would impose on them.

Indeterminacy, dissociation or proliferation in the form of a star or rhizome only generalize meaning's sphere of influence to the entire sphere of non-sense. That is, they merely generalize meaning's pure form, an abstract finality with neither a determinate end nor contents. *Only rituals abolish meaning.*

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This is why there are no "rituals of transgression." The very expression makes no sense, especially when applied to the festival. The latter has proved very problematic for our revolutionaries: is the festival a transgression or regeneration of the Law? An absurd question, for rituals, including the ritual liturgy of the festival, belong to neither the domain of the Law, nor its transgression, but to that of the Rule.

The same applies to magic. We are constantly interpreting

what falls under the rule in the terms of the law. Thus, magic is seen as an attempt to outwit the laws of production and hard work. Primitives have the same "utilitarian" ends as us, but in order to realize them, they would rather avoid rational exertion. Magic, however, is something very different: it is a ritual for the maintenance of the world as a play of analogical relations, a cyclical progression where everything is linked together by their signs. An immense game, rule governs magic, and the basic problem is to ensure, by means of ritual, that everything continues to play thus, by analogical contiguity and creeping seduction. It has nothing to do with linear relations of cause and effect. The latter – our way of understanding the world – is objective but unsettled. For it has broken the rule.

Magic does not seek to fool the law. It doesn't cheat – and to judge it as such is absurd. One might just as well dispute the arbitrariness of a game's rules in terms of the "objective" givens of nature.

The same simplistic and objectivistic misunderstanding occurs with gambling. Here the objective would be economic: to become rich without exerting oneself. The same attempt to skip steps as in magic. The same transgression of the principle of equivalence and hard work which rules the "real" world. The claim, then, is that gambling's truth is to be found in the tricks it plays on value.

But one is forgetting here the game's power of seduction. Not just the power one experiences when momentarily carried away, but the power to transmute values that comes with the rule. In gambling money is *seduced*, deflected from its truth. Having been cut off from the law of equivalences (it "burns") and the law of representation, money is no longer a sign or representation once transformed into a stake. And a stake is not something one invests. As an investment money takes the form of capital, but as a stake it appears in the form of a challenge. Placing a bet has as little to do with placing an investment, as libidinal investment with the stakes of seduction.

Investments and counter-investments – they belong to the psychic economy of drives and sex. Games, stakes and challenges are the figures of passion and seduction. More generally, all the stuff of money, language, sex and affect undergo

a complete change of meaning depending on whether they are mobilized as an investment or transposed into a stake. The two moments are irreducible.

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If games had a finality, the only true player would be the cheater. Now, if a certain amount of prestige can be acquired by transgressing the law, there is no prestige in cheating or transgressing a rule. In truth, the cheater cannot transgress the rules since the game, not being a system of interdictions, does not have lines one can cross. One does not "trangress" a rule, one fails to observe it. And non-observance does not lead to a state of transgression; it brings one back under the jurisdiction of the law.

This is the case with the cheater, who denies or, even better, profanes the game's ceremonial conventions for economic reasons (or psychological reasons, if he cheats simply for the pleasure of winning), and thereby restores the laws of the real world. By introducing factors of an individual nature, he destroys the game's "duel" enchantment. If cheating was once punished by death and is still condemned strongly, it is because, as a crime, it resembles incest: cultural rules being broken to the sole profit of the "laws of nature."

For the cheater, there is no longer anything at stake. He confuses the stakes with surplus-value. But the stakes are what enables one to play, and to turn them into the game's purpose is to abuse one's position of trust. In a similar manner, the rules establish the very possibility of playing, the space within which the sides confront each other. To treat the rules as ends (or as laws or truths) is to destroy both the game and its stakes. The rules have no autonomy, that quality which, according to Marx, characterizes commodities, both individually and in general, and is the sacrosanct value of the economic domain. The cheater too is *autonomous*: he establishes a law, his own law, against the arbitrary rituals of the rule – this is what disqualifies him. And he is free – this explains his downfall. Moreover, he is rather dreary, because he no longer exposes himself to the seduction of games, because he refuses the vertigo of seduction. By way

of hypothesis, one might postulate that personal advantage is only an alibi: in reality he cheats *in order to escape seduction*; he cheats because he is afraid of being seduced.

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The challenge of a game is very different, and games are always a challenge – and not just when played around a table. Consider the American who had the following classified advertisement printed in the paper: "Send me a dollar!" And then received tens of thousands of dollars. He did not promise anything – he was not, therefore, swindling anyone. Nor did he say: "I need a dollar" – nobody would have ever given him a dollar under such circumstances. Somewhere he had let float the off-chance of a miraculous exchange. *Something more than an equivalence.* A bluff. He was offering the public a challenge...

What sort of sublime transaction were they negotiating when, instead of buying a dollar's worth of ice cream, they sent in their money? They never really believed they would receive ten thousand dollars in return. In truth, they took up the challenge in their own way, and it was as valid as any other, for they were being offered a wishbone where one wins on both counts:

> One never knows, it might work (ten thousand dollars in the mail), in which case, one has received a sign of the Gods' favour (which Gods? those who had printed the ad).
>
> If it doesn't work, it is because the obscure instance that gave me the sign did not take up my challenge. So much the better. Psychologically I have beaten the Gods.

A double challenge: the con man challenges the sucker and the latter challenges fate. If he is overwhelmed by fate, he is in the clear. One can always count on culpability to look for ways of being exorcised, but it really isn't a question of guilt. To send a dollar in response to the absurd challenge of the advertisement, is the sacrificial response *par excellence.* It can be

summed up as: "There must be something behind this. I will summon the Gods to respond or else to disappear" – and reducing the Gods to nothing is always a source of pleasure.

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Stakes and challenges, summoning and bluffing – there is no question of belief in all this. Moreover, one never "believes" in anything. It is never a question of believing or not believing, no more than for Santa Claus. Belief is an absurd concept, of the same type as motivation, need, instinct, i.e., drive, desire, and God knows what else – facile tautologies that hide from us the fact that our actions are never grounded psychologically in belief, but in stakes and challenges. It is never a matter of carefully reasoned speculation on existence (on the existence of God, or of someone with a dollar), but of continual provocation, of a game. One does not believe in God, just as one does not "believe" in chance – except in the humdrum discourses of religion or psychology. One challenges them, they challenge you, one plays with them, and they play with you: for this *one does not have to believe in them*.

Thus faith in the religious sphere is similar to seduction in the game of love. Belief is turned to *the existence of God* – and existence has only an impoverished, residual status, being what is left when all else has been removed – while faith is a *challenge to God's existence*, a challenge to God to exist, and in return, to die. One *seduces* God with faith, and He cannot but respond, for seduction, like the challenge, is a reversible form. And He responds a hundredfold by His grace to the challenge of faith. As with all ritual exchanges, the whole forms a system of obligations, with God being obliged and even compelled to respond – even as *He is never compelled to exist*. Belief is satsified with asking Him to exist and underwrite the world's existence – it is the disenchanted, contractual form. But faith turns God into a stake: God challenges man to exist (and he can respond to this challenge with his death), and man challenges God to respond to his sacrifice, that is, to disappear in return.

One always aspires to something more than mere existence, and something more than an equivalent value – and this some-

thing more, the challenge's immoderation compared to the contract, its intemperance compared to the equivalence of cause and effect, is clearly the result of seduction – that of games and magic. If we have experienced this in amorous seduction, why not in our relations with the world? Symbolic efficacy is not an empty concept. It reflects the existence of another form of the circulation of goods and signs, a form far more effective and powerful than economic circulation. What is fascinating about a miraculous win at the gaming tables is not the money: it is the resumption of ties with these other, symbolic circuits of unmediated and immoderate bidding, which concern the *seduction of the order of things*.

In the last analysis, there is nothing to prevent things from being seduced like beings – one simply has to find the game's rules.

The entire problem of chance appears here. Magic, as a wager, is similar to our games of chance. What is at stake is the particle of value thrown in the face of chance considered as a transcendent instance, not in order to win its favours, but to dismiss its transcendence, its abstraction, and turn it into a partner, an adversary. The stake is a summons, the game a duel: chance is summoned to respond, obliged by the player's wager to declare itself either favourable or hostile. Chance is never neutral, the game tranforms it into a player and agonistic figure.

Which is another way of saying that the basic assumption behind the game is that *chance does not exist*.

Chance in its modern, rational sense, chance as an aleatory mechanism, pure probability subjected to the *laws* of probability (and not to the rules of a game) – a sort of Great Neutral Aleatorium (G.N.A.), the epitome of a fluctuating universe dominated by statistical abstractions, a secularized, disenchanted and unbound divinity. This kind of chance does not exist in games; they exist to ward it off. Games of chance deny that the world is arranged contingently; on the contrary they seek to override any such neutral order and recreate a ritual order of obligations which undermines the free world of equivalences. In this manner games are radically opposed to the economy and Law. They question the *reality* of chance as an objective law and replace it with an inter-connected, propitious, duel, agonistic and non-

contingent universe – a charmed universe (charmed, in the strong sense of the term), a universe of seduction.

Thus the superstitious manipulations surrounding games, which many (Caillois) view only in terms of debasement. The resort to magical practices, from playing one's birth date to looking for recurrent series (the eleven came up eleven times running in Monte Carlo), from the most subtle winning formulas to the rabbit's foot in one's coat pocket, they all feed on the idea that chance does not exist, that the world is built of networks of symbolic relations – not contingent connections, but webs of obligation, webs of seduction. One has only to play one's hand right...

The bettor defends himself at all costs from the idea of a neutral universe, of which objective chance is a part. The bettor claims that anything can be seduced – numbers, letters, or the laws that govern their distribution. *He would seduce the Law itself*. The least sign, the least gesture has a meaning, which is not to say that it is part of some rational progression, but that every sign is vulnerable to, and can be seduced by other signs. The world is held together by unbreakable chains, but they are not those of the Law.

Here lies the "immorality" of games, often attributed to the fact that they encourage one to want to win too much too quickly. But this is to give them too much credit. Games are more immoral than that. They are immoral because they substitute an order of seduction for an order of production.

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If a game is a *venture for the seduction of chance* that attaches itself to combinations of signs (but not those of cause and effect, nor those of contingent series) and if games tend to eliminate the objective neutrality of chance and its statistical "liberty" by harnessing them to the form of the duel, the challenge, and orderly bidding – then it is absurd to imagine, as does Gilles Deleuze in *Logique du Sens*, an "ideal game" that would consist of a fury of contingencies and, thus, of a radically increased indeterminacy which, in turn, would give rise to the simultaneous play of every series and, therefore, to the

radical expression of becoming and desire.

The probability that two sequences will never – or hardly ever – cross eliminates the game's very possibility (if sequences never cross one cannot even speak of chance). But so does the likelihood that an indefinite number of sequences will cross each other at any given moment. For games are only conceived from the junction of a few sequences within a time-space frame limited by rules. Indeed, the latter is a condition for the production of chance; the rules do not restrict the freedom of a "total" chance, but constitute the very mode of the game's appearance.

It is not the case that the "more" chance there is, the more intense the game. This is to conceptualize both games and chance in terms of a sort of "freedom" of combination, an immanent drifting, a constant dissociation of orders and sequences, an unbridled improvisation of desire – a kind of *daimôn* who blows in all directions, breathing a little uncertainty, an additional incidence into the world's orderly economy.

Now all this is absurd. Becoming is not a matter of more or less. There is no dose or overdose. Either the world is engaged in a cycle of becoming, and is so engaged at all times, or it is not. At any rate, it makes no sense to "take the side" of becoming, assuming it exists – no more than that of chance, or desire. For one has no choice: "To take the side of the primary process is still a consequence of secondary processes" (Lyotard).

The very idea that games can be intensified by the acceleration of chance (as though one were speaking of the acidic content of a chemical solution), the idea that becoming can thereby be extended exponentially, turns chance into an energizing function, and stems directly from a confusion with the notion of desire. But this is not chance. Perhaps one should even admit, as the bettor secretly postulates, that chance does not exist. Quite a number of cultures have neither the word nor the concept, for they do not view anything in terms of contingency, *nor even in terms of probability.* Only our culture has invented the possibility of a statistical response, an inorganic, objective and fluctuating response, the *dead response* of the phenomena's objective indeterminacy and instability. When one thinks about it, the assumption of a contingent universe,

stripped of all obligations and purged of every symbolic or formal rule, the idea that the world of things is subjected to a molecular and *objective disorder* – the same disorder that is idealized and glorified in the molecular vision of desire – this assumption is insane. Scarcely less demented than the assumption of an *objective order*, of an unbroken chain of cause and effect, which belongs to the glory days of classical reason, and from which, furthermore, the assumption of disorder follows in accord with the logic of residues.

The idea of chance first emerged as the residue of a logical order of determination. But even hypostasized as a revolutionary variable, it still remains the mirror image of the principle of causality. Its generalization, its unconditional "liberation," as in Deleuze's "ideal game," is part of the political and mystical economy of residues at work everywhere today, with its structural inversion of weak into strong terms. Chance, once perceived as obscene and insignificant, is to be revived in its insignificance and so become the motto of a nomadic economy of desire.

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Games are not to be confused with "becoming," they are not nomadic, and do not belong to the realm of desire. They are characterized, even when games of chance, by their capacity to reproduce a given arbitrary constellation in the same terms an indefinite number of times. Their true form is cyclical or recurrent. And as such they, and they alone, put a definite stop to causality and its principle – not by the massive introduction of random series (which results only in the dispersal of causality, its reduction to scattered fragments, and not its overcoming) – but by the potential return (the eternal return if one will) to an orderly, conventional situation.

Neither the temporality of desire and its "freedom," nor that of some natural development (as with the play of children, or the play of the world described by Heraclitus), but that of the eternal return of a ritual form – and willed as such. Thus each of the game's sequences delivers us from the linearity of life and death.

There are two kinds of eternal return. The statistical kind – neutral, objective and insipid – where, given that the combinations, however numerous, in a finite system cannot be infinite, probability demands that the same arrangement eventually recur, according to an immense cycle. A thin metaphysics: it is a *natural* eternal return, in accord with a natural, statistical causality. The other vision is tragic and ritual: it is the willed recurrence, as in games, of an arbitrary and non-causal configuration of signs, where each sign seeks out the next relentlessly, as in the course of a ceremonial. It is the eternal return demanded by rules – as in a mandatory succession of throws and wagers. And it makes no difference whether they be the rules of the game of the universe itself: there is no metaphysics looming on the horizon of the game's indefinitely reversible cycle – and certainly not the metaphysics of desire, which is still dependent on the world's natural order, or natural disorder.

Desire may well be the *Law* of the universe, but the eternal return is its rule . Luckily for us – otherwise, where would be the pleasure in playing?

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The consummate vertigo induced by a game: when the throw of the dice ends up "eliminating chance," when, for example, the same number appears against all odds several times in a row. A game's ultimate fantasy, the ecstasy of checking chance – when, in the grip of a challenge, the same throw is repeated, the prisoner of a recurring series, and as a result the law and chance are abolished. One plays in anticipation of this symbolic transcursion, that is to say, in anticipation of an event that *will put an end to a random process without, however, falling prey to an objective law* . By itself each throw produces only a moderate giddiness, but when fate raises the bid – a sign that it is truly caught up in the game – when fate itself seems to throw a challenge to the natural order of things and enters into a frenzy or ritual vertigo, then the passions are unleashed and the spirits seized by a truly deadly fascination.

There is nothing imaginary about this, but an imperious

necessity to put a stop to the natural play of differences as well as the historical development of the law. There is no greater moment. The only way to respond to the natural advances of desire is in terms of the ritual one-upmanship of seduction and games; and the only way to respond to the contractual proposals of the law is in terms of the one-upmanship and formal vertigo of rules. A crystalline passion without equal.

★ ★ ★

Games do not belong to the realm of fantasy, and their recurrence is not the repetition of a phantasy. The latter proceeds from an-"other" scene, and is a figure of death. The game's recurrence proceeds from a rule, and is a figure of seduction and pleasure. Every repetitive figure of meaning, whether affect or representation, is a figure of death. Pleasure is released only by a meaningless recurrence, one that proceeds from neither a conscious order nor an unconscious disorder, but results from the reversion and reiteration of a pure form that challenges and outdoes the law of contents and their accumulation.

The game's recurrence proceeds directly from fate, and exists as fate. Not as a death drive or tendential lowering of the rate of difference, resulting in the entropic twilights of systems of meaning, but as a form of ritual incantation – a form of ceremonial where the signs, because they are so violently attracted to each other, no longer leave any room for meaning, and can only duplicate themselves. Here too one finds the vertigo of *seduction*, the vertigo that comes of being absorbed in a recurrent fate. All societies other than our own are familiar with this theater of ritual, which is also a theater of cruelty. Games rediscover something of this cruelty. Compared with games, everything real is sentimental. The truth, and the Law itself are sentimental relative to the pure forms of repetition.

Just as it is not liberty that is opposed to the law, but the rule, similarly *it is not indeterminacy that is opposed to causality, but obligation*. The latter is neither a linear chain, nor an unchaining (which is merely the romanticism of a deranged causality); it forms a *reversible chain* that, moving from sign to sign, inexorably completes its cycle, turning its origin into an ellipse

and economizing on its end, like the shells and bracelets in Polynesian exchange relationships. The cycle of obligations is not a code. We have confused obligation in the strong sense, in its timeless, ritual sense, with laws and codes, and their commonplace constraints, which rule over us under the opposite sign, that of liberty.

In Deleuze's pure, nomadic chance, in his "ideal game," there is only disjunction and dispersed causality. But only a conceptual error allows one to dissociate the game from its rules in order to radicalize its utopian form. And the same intemperance, or the same facility, allows one to dissociate chance from what defines it – an objective calculus of series and probabilities – in order to turn it into the theme song for an ideal indeterminacy, an ideal desire composed of the endless occurrence of countless series. But why more series? Why not a pure Brownian movement? But then the latter, though it seems to have become the physical model for radical desire, has its laws, and is not a game.

To generalize chance, in the form of an "ideal game," without simultaneously generalizing the game's rules, is akin to the fantasy of radicalizing desire by ridding it of every law and every lack. The objective idealism of the "ideal game," and the subjective idealism of desire.

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A game forms a system with neither contradiction nor internal negativity. That is why one cannot laugh at it. And if it cannot be parodied, it is because its entire organization is parodic. The rule functions as the parodic simulacrum of the law. Neither an inversion nor subverion of the law, but its reversion in simulation. The pleasure of the game is twofold: the invalidation of time and space within the enchanted sphere of an indestructible form of reciprocity – pure seduction – and the parodying of reality, the formal outbidding of the law's constraints.

Can one produce a finer parody of the ethics of value than by submitting oneself, with all the intransigence of virtue, to the outcomes of chance or the absurdity of a rule? Can there be a finer parody of the values of work, economy, production

and calculation than the challenge and the wager, or the fantastic non-equivalence between what is at stake and what might be won (or lost – both being equally immoral)? Or a finer parody of every idea of contract and exchange than this magical complicity, this "duel" obligation relative to the rules, this agonistic attempt to seduce one's opponent, and to seduce chance itself? What better denial of the values of will, responsibility, equality and justice than this exaltation of (good and bad) luck, this exultation in playing with fate as an equal? Can there be a more beautiful parody of our ideologies of liberty than this passion for rules?

Is there a better parody of "sociality" itself than that found in Borges' fable, "The Lottery in Babylon," with its inescapable and fateful logic and its simulation of the social by the game?

★ ★ ★

"I come from a dizzy land where the lottery is the basis of reality." Thus begins a story about a society where the lottery has swallowed up all the other institutions. In the beginning it was only a game of plebeian character, and the most one could do was win. But "the lotteries" were boring, since "they were not directed at all of man's faculties, but only at hope." One then "tried a reform: the interpolation of a few unfavourable tickets in the list of favourable numbers" – with the risk of paying a considerable fine. This was a radical modification: it eliminated the illusion that the game had an economic purpose. Henceforth one entered a pure game, and the dizziness that seized hold of Babylonian society knew no limits. Anything could happen by drawing lots, the lottery became "secret, free and general," "every free man automatically participated in the sacred drawings which took place every sixty nights and which determined his destiny until the next drawing." A lucky draw could make him a rich man or a magi, or give him the women he desired; an unlucky draw could bring him mutilation or death.

In short, the interpolation of chance in all the interstices of the social order and "in the order of the world." All the lottery's errors were good, since they only intensified its logic.

Impostures, ruses, and manipulation could be perfectly integrated into the aleatory system: who could say if they were "real," that is, whether they were the result of some natural or rational causality, or resulted from chance as determined by the lottery? In principle no one. Predestination encompassed everything, *the lottery's* effects were universal. The Lottery and the Company could cease to exist, their silent functioning would be exercised over a field of *total simulation*. All "reality" had entered the secret decisions of the Company, and there was, in all likelihood, no longer any difference between the real reality and the contingent reality.

Indeed it is possible that the Company never existed, and the world's order would remain the same. But the assumption of its existence changes everything. The assumption alone is enough to change reality, as it is, as it cannot be otherwise, into one immense simulacrum. Reality is nothing other than its own simulation.

In our "realist" societies, the Company has ceased to exist. Our societies are oblivious to and built on the ruins of this possible total simulation. We are no longer conscious of the spiral of simulation *that preceded reality*. In truth, our unconscious is found here: in our incomprehension before the vertiginous indetermination and simulation that rules the sacred disorder of our lives. Not in the repression of a few affects or representations – our insipid conception of the unconscious – but in our blindness before the Big Game, before the fact that our "real" fate with all its "real" events has already passed through, not some anterior life (though by itself this hypothesis is superior to our metaphysics of objective causes), but a cycle of indetermination, a game cycle that is simultaneously arbitrary and fixed. Borges' Lottery is the symbolic incarnation of this game, which has given our fate that hallucinatory quality we take for its truth. The logic escapes us, though our consciousness of the real is based on our unconsciousness of simulation.

Remember the Babylonian Lottery. Whether or not it exists, the veil of indetermination it throws over our life is absolute. Its arbitrary decrees rule the least details of our existence. We dare not speak of a hidden infrastructure, for the latter will eventually be called upon to appear as truth – while here it is a mat-

ter of fate, that is, of a game that has always already been worked out, yet remains forever indecipherable.

Borges' originality is to have extended this game to the entire social structure. Where we see games as superstructure, as relatively weightless compared to the good, solid infrastructure of social relations, he has turned the entire edifice upside down and made indetermination into the determinant instance. It is no longer economic reason, that of labour and history, nor the "scientific" determinism of exchanges which determines the social structure and fate of individuals, but a total indeterminism, that of the Game and of Chance. Predestination coincides here with a total mobility, and an arbitrary system with the most radical democracy (the instantaneous exchange of all positions – something to satisfy the present-day's thirst for polyvalence).

This reversal is extremely ironic relative to every contract, every rational foundation of the social. Pacts concerning rules, and concerning their arbitrariness (the Lottery) eliminate the social as we understand it, just as rituals put an end to the law. It has never been otherwise with secret societies; in their efflorescence one should see a resistance to the social.

The nostalgia for a pactual, ritual, and contingent sociality, the yearning to be free of the contract and social relation, the longing for a crueler if more fascinating destiny for exchange, is deeper than the rational imperatives of the social with which we have been lulled. Borges' tale is perhaps not a fiction, but a description that comes close to our former dreams, that is to say, to our future as well.

In Byzantium, social life, the political order, its hierarchies and expenditures were regulated by horse races. Today one still bets on the horses, but the mirror of democracy produces only a faint reflection. The enormous amount of money exchanged in betting is nothing compared to the extravagance of the Byzantines, where all public life was tied to equestrian competitions. Still it is symptomatic of the game's importance in many social activities and in the rapid circulation of goods and social positions. In Brazil there is the Jogo de Bicho: betting, lotteries and other games have seized hold of entire sectors of the population who risk their life's savings and status. A distraction from underdevelopment one might claim, but even in its wretched

modern version, it provides an echo of cultures where ludic and sumptuary practices generated the essential forms and structures of exchange – a schema that goes very much against the grain of our own culture, most notably in its Marxist version. Underdeveloped? Only the privileged, those elevated by the social contract, or by their social status – itself only a simulacrum, and one without even the value of a destiny – can judge such aleatory practices as worthless when they are quite superior to their own. For it is as much a challenge to the social as to chance, and indicative of a yearning for a more adventurous world, where one plays with value more recklessly.

THE DUAL, THE POLAR AND THE DIGITAL

A lottery is a simulacrum – there being nothing more artificial than to regulate the course of events by the absurd decrees of chance. But let us not forget that this is what antiquity did with the arts of divination, using the entrails of chickens and the flight of birds; and isn't it what the modern art of interpretation continues to do, though with fewer grounds? It is all a simulacrum. The difference is that in Borges' *Ficciones* the game's rules completely replace the law and the game decides one's destiny, while in our society games are simply marginal and frivolous diversions.

Compared to Borges' fictional society, based on chance decrees and a type of predestination by the game, relative to such a cruel order where the risks are never-ending and the stakes absolute, we live in a society of minimal stakes and risks. If the terms were not contradictory, one could say that security has become our destiny. It might be the case, moreover, that this outcome will be fatal for our society – the mortality of overprotected species which, in their domestication, are dying of too much security.

Now if the Babylonians succumbed to the lottery's vertigo, it was because there was something in the lottery that completely seduced them, that enabled them to challenge everything worth existing, including their own existence – and their

own death. By contrast, for us the social is without seduction. What is less seductive than the very idea of the social? The degree zero of seduction. Even God never fell so low.

Relative to the dangers of seduction that haunt the universe of games and rituals, our own sociality and the forms of communication and exchange it institutes, appear in direct proportion to their secularization under the sign of the Law, as extremely impoverished, banal and abstract.

But this is still only an intermediary state, for the age of the Law has passed, and with it that of the socius and the social contract. Not only are we no longer living in an era of rules and rituals, we are no longer living in an era of laws and contracts. We live today according to Norms and Models, and we do not even have a term to designate that which is replacing sociality and the social.

the RULE	the LAW	the NORM
Ritual(ity)	Social(ity)	????????

We are presently living with a minimum of real sociality and a maximum of simulation. Simulation neutralizes the poles that organize the perspectival space of the real and the Law, while draining off the energy potential that still drives the space of the Law and the social. In the era of models, one must speak of the deterrence of the antagonistic strategies that gave the Law and the social their stakes – including a stake in their transgression. No more transgression, and no more transcendence. But for all that, we are no longer in the tragic immanence of rules and rituals, but in the cool immanence of norms and models. Deterrence, regulation, feed-back, sequences of tactical elements in a non-referential space... But above all, in this age of models, the digitality of the signal as a replacement for the polarity of the sign.

DUALITY	POLARITY	DIGITALITY

These three logics are exclusive of each other:
– the *dual relation* dominates the game, the ritual and the entire sphere of the rule.

– the *polar relation*, or the dialectical or contradictory relation, organizes the universe of the Law, the social and meaning.
– the *digital relation* (but it is no longer a "relation" – let us speak instead of the digital connection) allocates the space of Norms and Models.

In the cross-play of these three logics, the concept of seduction in its radical sense (as duel, ritualistic, agonistic, with the stakes maximized) must be replaced by seduction in its "soft" sense – the seduction of an "ambience," or the playful eroticization of a universe without stakes.

THE "LUDIC" AND COLD SEDUCTION

For we are living off seduction
but will die in fascination.

The play of models with their ever-changing combinations, is characteristic of a ludic universe, where everything operates as possible simulation, where everything, in the absence of a God to acknowledge his creations, can act as counter-evidence. Subversive values have only to wait their turn, and violence and critique are themselves presented as models. We are living in a supple, curved universe, that no longer has any vanishing points. Formerly the reality principle was defined in terms of the coherence of objects and their use, functions and their institution, things and their objective determination – today the pleasure principle is defined in terms of the conjunction of desires and models (of a demand and its anticipation by simulated responses).

The "ludic" is formed of the "play" of the model with the demand. But given that the demand is prompted by the model, and the model's precession is absolute, challenges are impossible. Most of our exchanges are regulated by game strategies; but the latter, defined as a capacity to foresee all of one's opponent's moves and check them in advance, renders all stakes impossible. Game theory describes the ludic character of a world

where, paradoxically, nothing is at stake.

The "Werbung," the solicitation of advertisements and polls, all the models of the media and politics, no longer claim credence, only credibility. They are no longer objects of libidinal investment; for they are made selectively available within a range of choices – with leisure itself now appearing, relative to work, as just another channel on the screen of time (and will there soon be a third or fourth channel?). American television, one might add, with its 83 channels is the living incarnation of the ludic: one can no longer do anything but play – change channels, mix programs and create one's own montage (the predominance of TV games is merely an echo, at the level of content, of this ludic employment of the medium). And like every combinatorial, it is a source of fascination. But one can no longer speak of a sphere of enchantment or seduction; instead, an era of fascination is beginning.

Obviously, the ludic cannot be equated with having fun. With its propensity for making connections, the ludic is more akin to detective work. More generally, it connotes networks and their mode of functioning, the forms of their permeation and manipulation. The ludic encompasses all the different ways one can "play" with networks, not in order to establish alternatives, but to discover their state of optimal functioning.

We have already witnessed the debasement of play to the level of function – in play therapy, play school, play-as-catharsis and play-as-creativity. Throughout the fields of education and child psychology, play has become a "vital function" or necessary phase of development. Or else it has been grafted onto the pleasure principle to become a revolutionary alternative, a dialectical overcoming of the reality principle in Marcuse, an ideology of play and the festival for others. But even as transgression, spontaneity, or aesthetic disinterestedness, play remains only a sublimated form of the old, directive pedagogy that gives it a meaning, assigns it an end, and thereby purges it of its power of seduction. Play as dreaming, sport, work, rest or as a transitional object – or as the physical hygiene necessary for psychological equilibrium or for a system's regulation or evolution. The very opposite of that passion for illusion which once characterized it.

We are still speaking, however, of *functional* attempts to subject play to the law of value. What is more serious is the *cybernetic* absorption of play into the general category of the ludic.

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The general evolution of games is revealing: from competitive games – team sports, old-fashioned card games, or even table football – to the generation of pinball machines (which already had screens but were not yet "televised," a mixture of electronics and hand movements), now rendered obsolete by electronic tennis and other computerized games, their screens streaked with high-speed molecules. And the atomistic manipulation required by the latter is not to be distinguished from the practices of information control in the "labour process" or the future employment of computers in the domestic sphere, which were also preceded by television and other audiovisual aids. The ludic is everywhere, even in the "choice" of a brand of laundry detergent in the supermarket. Without too much effort one sees similarities with the world of psychotropic drugs: for the latter too is ludic, being nothing but the manipulation of a sensorial keyboard or neuronic instrument panel. Electronic games are a soft drug – one plays them with the same somnambular absence and tactile euphoria.

Even the genetic code appears as a command keyboard for the living, on which are played the infinitesimal combinations and variations that determine their "destiny" – a "tele"-onomic destiny that unfolds on the molecular screen of the code. Much can be said about the objectivity of the genetic code that serves as a "biological" prototype for the entire universe, this combinatory, aleatory and ludic universe that now surrounds us. After all, what is "biology"? What is this truth it possesses? Or is it that it possesses *only* truth... destiny transformed into an operational instrument panel. Behind the screen of biological remote control, there is no longer any play – no stakes, illusions, or representations. It is simply a matter of modulating the code, playing with it as one plays with the tonalities and timbres of a stereophonic system.

The latter is a good example of the ludic. When manipulat-

ing the stereo's controls, one's concerns are no longer musical but technological: the optimal modulation of the system's range. With the magic of the console and instrument panel, the manipulation of the medium predominates.

Consider a game of computer chess. Where is the intensity of the game of chess, or the pleasure proper to computers? The one involves play, the other the ludic. The same applies to a soccer match that has been televised. Don't think that they are the same match: one is hot, the other cool – one is a game, with its emotional charge, its bravado and choreography, the other is tactile, modulated (play-backs, close-ups, sweeps, slow motion shots, different angles of vision, etc.). The televised match is, above all else, a televised event, like the *Holocaust* or the war in Vietnam, and is barely distinguishable from the latter. Thus the introduction of colour television in the United States, which had been slow and difficult, only took off when one of the major networks decided to introduce colour to televised journalism. It was the period of the war in Vietnam, and studies have shown that the "play" of colours, and the technical sophistication borne by this innovation, rendered the images of war more bearable to the viewing public. The "more" truth, the greater the ludic distantiation from the event.

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The *Holocaust*, the television special.

The Jews are no longer forced to pass through the gas chambers and crematorium ovens, but through the sound track and picture strip, the cathodic screen and microprocessor. The amnesia, the oblivion, thereby finally attains an aesthetic dimension – consummated in retrospective and retrogressive fashion, raised here to mass dimensions. Television as the event's true "final solution."

The dimension of history that once remained in the shadows as guilt, no longer exists, since now "the whole world knows," the whole world has been shaken – a sure sign that "it" will never happen again. In effect, what is exorcized at the cost of only a few tears will not happen again, because it is now recurring, and in the very form of its alleged denunciation, the very

medium of its alleged exorcism – television. The same forgetfulness, the same liquidation, extermination, and even annihilation of memory and history – the same recessive irradiation, the same echoless absorption, the same black hole as Auschwitz. And one would have us believe that television is going to release us from the burden of Auschwitz by raising collective consciousness, when television perpetuates it in other ways, no longer under the auspices of a place of annihilation, but of a medium of dissuasion.

The *Holocaust* is, *first of all* (and exclusively) a *televised* event (one must not forget McLuhan's basic rule). That is, it is an attempt to reheat a tragic but *cold* historical event, the first great event of the cold systems, the cooling systems, the systems of dissuasion and extermination which would then be deployed in other forms (including the Cold War, etc.) – and an event that concerns cold masses (the Jews no longer implicated, but in the end forced to manage their own death, the masses no longer rebellious – dissuaded by death, dissuaded unto death). A cold event warmed up by a cold medium for masses, themselves cold, who are going to experience only a posthumous emotion, a tactile and dissuasive shudder that will enable them to let the catastrophe slip into oblivion with a sort of aesthetic good conscience.

In order to reheat all this, the political and pedagogical orchestration that followed the (televised) event in an attempt to give it meaning was not excessive. The panic before the program's possible consequences on the minds of children; all those social workers mobilized to filter it, as if this artificial resurrection carried a danger of contagion! In fact, the danger was quite the opposite: that resulting from the social inertia of cold systems – cold producing cold. Thus the whole world had to be mobilized in order to reconstitute the social (warmth) of communication out of the cold monster of extermination. The program served to capture the artificial warmth of a dead event in order to reheat the dead body of the social. Hence the supplementary contributions of the other media attempting to extend the program's effects by its feed-back: the concurrent polls seconding the program's enormous, collective impact – when, needless to say, these polls only verified the televisual success of the medium itself.

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One should speak of television's cold light, and why it is inoffensive to the imagination (including the imagination of children). It is innocuous because it no longer conveys an imaginary, for the simple reason that *it is no longer an image.* Here it contrasts with the cinema which (though increasingly contaminated by television) is still endowed with an intense imaginary – because it is an image. This is not simply to speak of film as a mere screen or visual form, but as a *myth*, something that still resembles a double, a mirror, a fantasy, a dream, etc. None of this in the TV image. It doesn't suggest anything, it mesmerizes... It is only a screen or, better, it is a miniaturized terminal that immediately appears in your head (you are the screen and the television is watching you), transistorizes all your neurons and passes for a magnetic tape – a tape, not an image.

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All this belongs to the ludic realm where one encounters a *cold seduction* – the "narcissistic" spell of electronic and information systems, the cold attraction of the terminals and mediums that we have become, surrounded as we are by consoles, isolated and seduced by their manipulation.

The possiblity of modulations within an undifferentiated universe and of the "play" of unstable sets of elements, is never without fascination. It is even highly possible that ludic and libinal flirt with each other somewhere in the direction of random systems, by virtue of a desire that no longer leads to *infractions* in the legal sense, but entails *diffraction* in all senses within a universe that no longer knows the legal sphere. This desire also belongs to the ludic realm with its topology of shifting systems, and is *an added source of pleasure* (or anguish) for each of the particles moving within the networks. We are all accorded this light, psychedelic giddiness which results from multiple or successive connections and disconnections. We are all invited to become miniaturized "game systems," i.e., microsystems with the potential to regulate their own random functioning.

This is the modern meaning of play, the "ludic" sense, connoting the suppleness and polyvalence of combinations. Understood in this sense, "play," its very possibility, is at the basis of the metastability of systems. It has nothing to do with play as a dual or agonistic relation; it is the cold seduction that governs the spheres of information and communication. And it is in this cold seduction that the social and its representations are now wearing themselves thin.

We are all quite familiar with this immense process of simulation. Non-directive interviews, call-in shows, all-out participation – the extortion of speech: "It concerns you, you are the majority, you are what's happening." And the probing of opinions, hearts, minds, and the unconscious to show how much "it" speaks. The news has been invaded by this phantom content, this homeophathic transplant, this waking dream of communication. A circular construction where one presents the audience with what it wants, an integrated circuit of perpetual solicitation. The immense energies spent in maintaining this simulacrum at arm's length, to avoid the brutal dis-simulation that would occur should the reality of a radical loss of meaning become too evident.

Seduction/simulacrum: communication as the functioning of the social within a closed circuit, where signs duplicate an undiscoverable reality. The social contract has become a "simulation pact" sealed by the media and the news. And nobody, one might add, is completely taken in: the news is experienced as an ambience, a service, or hologram of the social. The masses respond to the simulation of meaning with a kind of reverse simulation; they respond to dissuasion with disaffection, and to illusions with an enigmatic belief. It all moves around, and can give the impression of an operative seduction. But such seduction has no more meaning than anything else, seduction here connotes only a kind of ludic adhesion to simulated pieces of information, a kind of tactile attraction maintained by the models.

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"Tele-phathics."

"Rogers here – I am receiving you five on five." "Do you hear me? Yes, I hear you." "We receive you, come in." "Yes, we are speaking." This is the litany of the radio bands, particularly the alternative or pirate stations. One plays at speaking and listening; one plays at communication using the most sophisticated technology for the latter's *mise en scène*. The phatic function of language, used to establish contact and sustain speech's formal dimension: this function first isolated and described by Malinowski with reference to the Melanesians, then by Jakobson in his grid of language's functions, becomes hypertrophied in the tele-dimension of the communications networks. Contact for contact's sake becomes the empty form with which language seduces itself when it no longer has anything to say.

The latter concerns our own culture. What Malinowski described was something quite different: a symbolic altercation or duel of words. By these ritual phrases and palavers without content, the natives were still throwing a challenge and offering a gift, as in a pure ceremonial. Language has no need for "contact": it is *we* who need communication to have a specific "contact" function, precisely because it is eluding us. That is why Jakobson was able to isolate it in his analysis of language, while both the concept and the terms to express it are absent from other cultures. Jakobson's grid and his axiomatics of communication are contemporaneous with a change in language's fortune – it is beginning to no longer communicate anything. It has thus become urgent to analytically restore the functional possibility of communication, and in particular the "phatic" function that, in logical terms, is a simple truism: if it speaks, then it speaks. But in effect it no longer speaks, and the discovery of the "phatic" function is symptomatic of the need to inject contact, establish connections, and speak tirelessly simply in order to render language possible. A desperate situation where even simple contact appears wondrous.

If the phatic has become hypertrophied in all our communications systems (i.e., within the media and information processing systems), it is because tele-distance ensures that speech literally no longer has any meaning. One says that one is speaking, but by speaking one is only verifying the network and the

fact that one is linked up with it. There is not even an "other" at the other end, for in a simple reciprocation of signals of recognition there is no longer an identifiable transmitter or receiver, but simply two terminals. The one terminal's signal to the other is merely an indication that something is going through and that, therefore, nothing is happening. Perfect dissuasion.

Two terminals do not two interlocutors make. In "tele" space (the following also holds true for television), there are no longer any *determinate terms* or positions. Only *terminals* in a position of *ex-termination*. It is here, morever, that Jakobson's entire grid falls apart, for its validity is restricted to the classic configuration of discourse and communication. The grid loses its meaning when applied to networks where pure "digitality" reigns. In discourse there is still a polarity of terms, distinctive oppositions that regulate the advent of meaning. A structure, syntax and space of difference, still regulate dialogue, as implied by the sign (signifier/signified) and the message (transmitter/receiver), etc. But the 0/1 of binary or digital systems is no longer a distinctive opposition or established difference. It is a "bit," the smallest unit of electronic impulse – *no longer a unit of meaning*, but an identificatory pulse. It is no longer language, but its radical dissuasion. This is what the matrix of information and communication is like, and how the networks function. The need for "contact" is most cruelly felt, for not only is there no duel relation as with the Melanesian's linguistic potlach, but there is no longer even the inter-individual logic of exchange found in classical language (that of Jakobson). Discursive duality and polarity have been succeeded by the digitality of data processing. The total ascendancy of the media and networks. The cold elevation of the electronic media, and of the mass itself as medium.

TELE: there are no longer anything but terminals. AUTO: each person is his or her own terminal. ("Tele" and "auto" can themselves be seen as working pieces or commuting particles that are connected to words, like a video is connected to a group of people, or television to those watching it). The group with a video camera is itself its own terminal. It records, adjusts and manages itself electronically. It turns itself on, seduces itself. The group is seduced and even eroticized by the instantane-

ous report it has of itself. Soon self-management will be universal, the province of every person, group and terminal. Self-seduction will become the norm of all the charged particles in the networks or systems.

The body itself, operated by remote control from the genetic code, is itself no more than its own terminal; it has no other concern than the optimal self-management of its memory banks.

Pure magnetization – that of the response by the question, the real by the model, the 0 by the 1, the network by its very existence, the speakers by their mere connection, the pure tactility of the signal, the sheer virtue of "contact," the total affinity of one terminal for another: this is the image of seduction, scattered and diffused throughout all our current systems. A self-seduction/self-management that simply reflects the networks" circularity, and the shortcircuiting of each of their atoms or particles. (Some might speak here of narcissism, and why not? If only because one should not transpose terms like narcissism and seduction to a register that does not concern them, that of *simulation*).

Thus according to Jean Querzola in "Le silicium fleur de peau" (*Traverses*, no. 14/15): psychobiological technology – all the computer prosthesis and self-adjusting electronic networks we possess – provides us with a kind of strange bioelectronic mirror, in which each person, like some digital narcissus, is going to slide along the trajectory of a death drive and sink in his or her own image. Narcissus = narcosis (McLuhan had already made the connection):

> Electronic narcosis: it is the ultimate risk of digital simulation... We would slip from Oedipus to Narcissus... At the end of the self-management of our bodies and pleasures there would be a slow narcissistic narcosis. In a word, with silicon, what happens to the reality principle? I am not saying that the world's digitalization will soon put an end to Oedipus. I am noting that the development of biology and information technology is accompanied by the dissolution of the personality structure we call Oedipal. The dissolution of these

> structures uncovers another region, where the father is absent: it has to do with the maternal, the oceanic feeling and the death drive. It is not a neurosis that threatens, but something of the order of a psychosis. A pathological narcissism... We believe that we understand the forms of the social bond built on Oedipus. But when the latter no longer functions, what will power do? After authority, seduction?

The finest example of this "bionic mirror" and "narcissistic necrosis" is cloning, the extreme form of self-seduction: from the Same to the Same without going through the Other.

In the United States a child might be born in the same way as a geranium, by taking cuttings. The first child-clone – genealogy by vegetative multiplication. The first child born from the single cell of an individual, his "father," the sole parent, of which he will be the exact copy, the perfect twin, the double (D. Rorvik, "A son image: la copie d'un homme"). Infinite human propagation by cuttings, with each cell of an individuated organism capable of becoming the matrix for an identical individual.

> My genetic inheritance was fixed once and for all when a certain spermatozoid met a certain ovary. This inheritance bears the formula for all the biochemical processes that have created me and ensure my functioning. A copy of this formula is inscribed in each of the tens of billions of cells that constitute me. Each of them knows my makeup; before being a cell of my liver or blood, it is a cell of me. It is therefore theoretically possible to construct an individual identical to myself from any one of them. (Pr. A. Jacquard)

Projection and internment in the mirror of the genetic code. There is no better prosthesis than D.N.A., no finer narcissistic extension than that new image bestowed on modern beings in place of their specular image: their molecular formula. Here is where one will find one's "truth" – in the indefinite repeti-

tion of one's "real," biological being. This narcissism, whose source is no longer a mirror but a formula, is a monstrous parody of the myth of Narcissus. A cold narcissism, a cold self-seduction, without even that minimal distance necessary for the experience of oneself as an illusion. The materialization of the real, biological double in the clone cuts short the possibility of playing with one's own image and, thereby, playing with one's own death.

The double is an imaginary figure that, like the soul or one's shadow, or one's image in a mirror, haunts the subject with a faint death that has to be constantly warded off. If it materializes, death is imminent. This fantastic proposition is now literally realized in cloning. The clone is the very image of death, but without the symbolic illusion that once gave it its charm.

Something of the subject's intimacy with himself rests on the immateriality of his double, on the fact that it is and remains a phantasy. One can and must dream throughout one's life of the perfect duplication or multiplication of one's being, but it remains a dream, and is destroyed when one tries to make it real. The same holds for the primal scene or that of seduction: they too only work when recalled and phantasized, never when real. It was up to our period to try and materialize this phantasy – like so many others – and by way of total confusion, change the play with one's double from a subtle exchange with death and the other into an eternity of the same.

The dream of eternal twins as a substitute for sexual reproduction. A cellular dream of schizogenesis – the surest form of parenthood, since it finally allows one to bypass the other, and go from the same to the same (one will still require a woman's uterus, and a hollowed out ovum, but these aids are short-lived and anonymous – any female prosthesis will do). A monocellular utopia that, by way of genetics, will enable complex beings to attain the destiny of protozoa.

Is there a death drive that pushes sexed beings towards a form of reproduction anterior to their acquisition of sexual identities – (moreover, doesn't this fissiparous form, this proliferation by contiguity conjure up death in the deepest recesses of our imaginary – as something that denies sexuality and seeks to annihilate it, the latter being the bearer of life and therefore

a critical and mortal form of reproduction?) – and that simultaneously pushes them to deny all alterity so that they need no longer strive for anything but the perpetuation of an identity, the transparency of a genetic code all the more dedicated to procreation?

Let us leave the death drive. Perhaps we are dealing with a fantasy of self-engendering? But no, for the subject might dream of eliminating the parental figures and even substituting himself for them, but he cannot eliminate the symbolic structure of procreation: when one becomes one's own child, one is still the child of someone. Cloning by contrast, abolishes not just the Mother, but the Father, the crossing of their genes, the immixture of their differences, and above all the duel act that engendering supposes. The person cloned does not engender himself: he comes to bud from a segment. One might speculate on the wealth of these plant-like branchings that dissolve Oedipal sexuality in favour of an "non-human" sex – but the fact remains that both the Father and Mother have disappeared, and in favour of a *matrix/code* [the word *"matrice"* means both "matrix" and "womb"]. No more mother, just a matrix. And henceforth it is the matrix of the genetic code that will "give birth" without end in an operative manner purged of all contingent sexuality.

Nor can one speak any longer of a subject, since the identitarian reduplication puts an end to its division. The mirror stage is abolished, or rather parodied in monstrous fashion, marking the end of the age-old dream of the subject's narcissistic projection. For the latter still supposes a mirror, the mirror in which the subject alienates himself in order to find himself, or stares at himself only to see his own death. But here there is no mirror: an industrial object within a series does not "mirror" the identical object that succeeds it. The one is never a mirage, an ideal or danger for the other. At most such objects can be added up, for they have not been engendered sexually and are not aware of death.

A segment does not require the mediation of the imaginary for its reproduction – no more than an earthworm. Each segment of a worm is reproduced directly as the complete worm – each cell of an American industrialist can give rise to a new

industrialist. Just as each fragment of a hologram can become a matrix of the complete hologram; all the information being contained in each of the scattered fragments.

The same logic marks the end of the concept of totality. If all the information can be found in each of the parts, the whole loses its meaning. It also marks the end of the body, of this singular being we call the body, this singular configuration that cannot be segmented into additional cells, as witnessed by the fact of sexuality. Paradoxically, cloning will fabricate sexed beings in perpetuity, since they will resemble their models, even as the sex organs lose their function. But then sex is not a function, for it exceeds all the body's parts and functions. Indeed, it exceeds all the data that can be obtained about the body, which the genetic code claims to collect. This is why the latter can only clear the way to a type of autonomous reproduction, independent of sex and death.

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The bio-physio-anatomical sciences had already begun the analytical decomposition of the body with its dissection into organs and functions. Micro-molecular genetics is its logical consequence at a much higher level of abstraction and simulation: the nuclear level of the command cell, the directive level of the genetic code around which this entire phantasmagoria is organized.

In the mechanistic vision we can still speak of "traditional" simulation, each organ being only a partial and differentiated prosthesis. In the bio-cybernetic vision, the smallest undifferentiated element, the cell becomes an embryonic prosthesis of the entire body. The formula inscribed in each cell becomes the true modern prosthesis of all bodies. For if a prosthesis is generally an artifact that replaces a failing organ, or an instrumental prolongation of the body, then the DNA molecule that contains all the data relative to a living being, is the prosthesis *par excellence*, since it will allow that being to prolong itself indefinitely. In truth, it will become nothing more than the indefinite series of its cybernetic avatars.

We are speaking of a prosthesis even more artificial than any

mechanical prosthesis. For the genetic code is not "natural." Whenever a part is abstracted from the whole and rendered autonomous, it alters the whole by substituting itself for it (prothesis – this is its etymological meaning). In this sense one can say that the genetic code, which claims to condense an entire living being because it contains all the latter's "data" (genetic simulation is incredibly violent) is an artifact, an artificial matrix, a simulation matrix, from which will proceed, no longer by reproduction, but by pure and simple repetition, identical beings assigned to the same commands.

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Cloning is, therefore, the ultimate state of the body's simulation, where the individual, reduced to an abstract genetic formula, is destined to serial multiplication. Walter Benjamin said that in the age of mechanical reproduction the work of art loses its "aura," the unique quality of its here and now, its aesthetic form: it is no longer destined for seduction but reproduction, and in its new destiny, takes on a *political* form. The original is lost, and only nostalgia can restore its "authenticity." The extreme form of this process is to be found in our contemporary mass media, where there never was an original, things being conceived from the start in terms of their unlimited reproducibility.

This is exactly what happens to human beings with cloning. This is what happens to the body when conceived only as informational stock, or as data to be processed. Nothing then prevents its serial reproduction in the same terms Benjamin used when speaking of industrial objects or images. The genetic model has precedence over all possible bodies.

Behind this reversal lies the incursion of a technology that Benjamin had already described as a total medium – an enormous prosthesis for the generation of identical and indistinguishable *objects* and images – but without yet conceiving of the current deepening of this technology, which makes possible the generation of identical *beings*, without any possible return to an original being. The prosthesis of the industrial age were still external, *exotechnical* – while those that we are coming

to know have branched out and been interiorized: *esotechnical*.

We live in an age of soft technologies, of genetic and mental software. The prosthesis of the industrial age, its machines, still paid heed to the body in order to modify its image – and were themselves metabolized in an imaginary, this metabolism becoming part of the body's image. But when simulation reaches the point of no return, when the prosthesis infiltrate the body's anonymous, micro-molecular core, when they force themselves on the body as its matrix, and burn out all the succeeding symbolic circuits such that all future bodies will be only its immutable repetition – then the body and its history have come to an end, the individual being no more than the *cancerous metastasis of his basic formula*.

Is not the cloning of individuals from an individual X similar to the proliferation of a single cell one identifies with cancer? There is a close relation between the concept of the genetic code and the pathology of cancer. The code designates the minimal formula to which one can reduce an individual such that he can (and can only) be repeated, while with cancer the same type of cell proliferates without concern for the organic laws of the whole. Thus with cloning one witnesses the repetition of the Same, the proliferation of a single matrix. Formerly sexual reproduction prevented this, but today one can finally isolate the genetic matrix of identity, and eliminate all the differential vicissitudes that gave individuals their aleatory charm. Or their seductiveness.

The metastasis that began with industrial objects ends in cellular organization. Cancer is the disease that dominates contemporary pathology, because it is *the very form of the code's virulence*: the aggravated redundancy of the same cells, or the same signals.

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Cloning is very much in keeping with the irreversible tendency to "extend and deepen the system's internal transparency by increasing its possibilities of self-regulation and modifying its informational economy" (Querzola).

All drives will be expelled. Everything interior (networks,

functions, organs, conscious or unconscious circuits) will be exteriorized in the form of prosthesis that will constitute an ideal corpus orbiting around the body, but with the latter as its own satellite. Every nucleus will be enucleated and projected into spatial orbit.

The clone is the materialization of the genetic formula in human form. But it will not stop there. All the body's secrets – sex, anguish, even the subtle pleasures derived from mere existence – everything that you do not, and do not want to know about yourself, will be turned into bio-feed-back, and returned to you in the form of "built-in" digital information. It is the *bionic mirror stage* (Querzola).

A digital Narcissus instead of a triangular Oedipus. The hypostasis of the artificial double, the clone will be your guardian angel, the visible form of your unconscious and the flesh of your flesh, *not metaphorically but literally.* Your "fellow creature" will henceforth be the clone with its hallucinatory resemblance, such that you will never be alone, and will never have any secrets. "Love your neighbour as yourself" – the difficulties of living the Gospel will be resolved. Your neighbour *is yourself*. Love is therefore total. Total self-seduction.

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The masses themselves form a clone-like apparatus that functions without the mediation of the other. In the last analysis, the masses are simply the sum of all the systems' terminals – a network travelled by digital impulses (this is what forms a mass). Oblivious to external injunctions, they constitute themselves into integrated circuits given over to manipulation (self-manipulation) and "seduction" (self-seduction).

In truth, nobody any longer knows how a representational apparatus works, or even if it still exists. Still, it is becoming increasingly urgent to rationalize possible occurrences in the universe of simulation. What happens between an absent, hypothetical pole of power and the neutral, elusive pole formed by the masses? The answer: seduction. Things work by seduction.

But such seduction suggests the workings of a social world

that we no longer comprehend, and a political world whose structures have faded. In place of the latter, seduction gives rise to an immense blank area traversed by tepid currents of speech, or a malleable network lubricated by magnetic impulses. The world is no longer driven by power, but fascination, no longer by production, but seduction. This seduction is, however, no more than an empty declaration formed of simulated concepts. The discourses held by both the "strategists" of mass desire (the politicians, advertisers, organizers, engineers of the soul, and of the mind, etc.) and the "analysts" of their strategies, these discourses that describe the functioning of the social or the political, or what remains of them, in terms of seduction, they are as vacuous as the political space itself. They simply refract the emptiness of that about which they speak. "The media seduce the masses," "the masses seduce themselves" – the use of the word seduction here is incredibly shallow and hackneyed. Corrupted of its literal meaning, which implies charm and mortal enchantment, the term comes to signify the social and technical lubrication required for smooth relations – a smooth semiurgy, a soft technology. The term then has an "ecological" connotation, and marks the passage from hard to soft energies. Soft energy, soft seduction. The social made scarce.

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With this diffuse, tensile form of seduction, one is no longer speaking of the aristocratic seduction of duel relations. One is speaking of a seduction reviewed and revised by the ideology of desire. A psychologized seduction that results from its vulgarization with the rise in the West of the imaginary figure of desire.

This figure does not belong to the masters, but was historically produced by the oppressed under the sign of their liberation, and has been deepened by the failure of successive revolutions. As a form, desire marks the passage from their status as objects to that of subjects, but this passage is itself only a more refined, interiorized perpetuation of their servitude. The first glimmerings of mass subjectivity at the dawn of modern and revolutionary times – the first glimmerings of the fact that the masses were subjects and could manage their own servi-

tude under the sign of their own desires! Large-scale seduction now begins. For if an object can simply be dominated, the subject of desire, by contrast, has to be seduced.

This soft strategy will spread, socially and historically. The masses will be psychologized in order to be seduced; they will be rigged up with desires in order to be distracted. Yesterday they had a (mystified!) consciousness and were alienated – today they have an unconscious and (repressed and corrupted) desires and are seduced. Yesterday they were diverted from the (revolutionary) truth of history – today they are diverted from the truth of their own desires. The poor, seduced and manipulated masses! Where once they had to endure domination under the threat of violence, now they must accept it by dint of seduction.

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Speaking more generally, the theoretical hallucination of desire, with its diffuse libidinal psychology, serves as a backdrop to that simulacrum of seduction which one now finds everywhere. Having replaced the world of surveillance, it characterizes the vulnerability of both individuals and masses to soft injunctions. Distilled in homeophatic doses throughout all personal and social relations, the seductive shadow of this discourse hovers today over the desert of social relations, and of power itself.

In this sense, we truly live in an era of seduction. But we can no longer speak of that form of absorption or potential engulfment, that fateful distraction from which no one or no "reality" can ever be completely safe (perhaps there is no longer enough reality to deflect, nor truth to subvert). Nor even of the corruption of innocence or virtue (there is no longer sufficient morality – or perversion – for that). All that remains is to seduce in order to seduce? "Seduce me." "Let me seduce you." It is the seduction that remains when all the stakes have been withdrawn. We are no longer speaking about a violence committed against meaning or about its silent extermination, but about what is left to language when it no longer has anything to say. No longer a vertiginous loss, but the minimalist form of mutu-

al gratification two linguistic beings can give each other in an enervated social relation. "Seduce me." "Let me seduce you."

In this sense, seduction is everywhere, surreptitiously or openly, blending in with the ambiance, the constant solicitations, with exchange pure and simple. It is the seduction of student and teacher (I am seducing you and you are seducing me, there being nothing else to do), of the politician and his public, of power (ah, the seduction of power and the power of seduction!), of the analyst and the analysand, etc.

The Jesuits were already famous for having used seduction in a religious guise, for having returned the throngs to the bosom of the Catholic church by the worldly and aesthetic seduction of the baroque, and having recaptured the consciences of the powerful by the expedient of fancy goods and fancy women. In effect, the Jesuits provide the first modern example of the elaboration of a strategy of mass desire and a society of mass seduction. And they were relatively successful. It is entirely possible that, once the austere charms of political economy and producer capitalism – capitalism's puritan cycle – have been swept away, a catholic and Jesuitical era will begin, with a soft technology of seduction and a soft, rosy semiurgy.

It is no longer a matter of seduction as passion, but of a *demand for seduction*. Of an invocation of desire and its realization in place of the faltering relations of power and knowledge that inhere in love and transference. What happens to the master-slave dialectic when the master has been seduced by the slave, and the slave by the master? Seduction becomes no more than an effusion of differences or a discursive libidinal striptease. With a vague collusion between supply and demand, *seduction becomes nothing more than an exchange value*, serving the circulation of exchanges and the lubrication of social relations.

What remains of the enchantment of that labyrinthine structure within which one could lose oneself? What is left of seduction's imposture? "There is another type of violence, which has neither its name nor outward appearance, but which is no less dangerous. I am speaking of seduction" (Rollin). Traditionally, the seducer was an impostor who employed subterfuge and villainy to achieve his ends – or at least who *believed* he was employing them. For the other, by allowing herself to be seduced,

by succumbing to the imposture, often voided it, stripped the seducer of his control. In effect, he falls into his own trap for having failed to consider seduction's reversible power.

The following always holds: the one who seeks to please the other has already succumbed to the other's charms. On this basis, an entire religion or culture can be organized around *relations of seduction* (as opposed to relations of production). Thus the Greek gods – seducers/impostors – used their power to seduce men, but were seduced in turn, and indeed were often reduced to seducing men, this being their main task. Thus they provided the image of a world order ruled not by laws, as in the Christian universe or political economy, but by a mutual seduction that ensured the *symbolic* equilibrium between gods and men.

What remains of this violence trapped by its own artifice? That universe where gods and men sought to please each other – even by the violent seduction of sacrifice – has ended. As has the secret understanding of signs and analogies that provided magic with its power of enchantment. And with it, the assumption that the entire world is susceptible to seduction and reversible in signs – not just the gods, but inanimate beings, things, and the dead themselves who have always had to be seduced, bewitched and cast out with the aid of numerous signs and rituals, lest they do any harm. Today one has to work through one's own mourning, an individual and eerie task of reorientation and redeployment. We now live in a universe of forces and relations of force, a universe that has materialized as in a void, an object of mastery and not seduction. A universe of production, investments, counter-investments and the liberation of energies, a universe of the Law and objective laws, a universe of the master-slave dialectic.

Sexuality itself arose within this universe as one of its objective functions, and now tends to overdetermine all the others, substituting itself as an alternative finality for those that are disappearing or already defunct. Everything is sexualized and thereby acquires something of a terrain for adventure and play. Everywhere the id speaks. Every discourse appear as an eternal commentary on sex and desire. In this sense, one might say that they have all become discourses of seduction, discourses

that register an explicit demand for seduction, but a soft seduction, whose weakened condition has become synonymous with so much else in this society – the ambience, the manipulation, the persuasion, the gratification, the strategies of desire, the mystique of personal relations, the libidinal economy and its smoothed over relations of transference which relays the competitive economy and its relations of force. This seduction, which permeates the entire expanse of language, has no more substance or sense than the power that pervades all the interstices of the social network. This is why they are able to combine their discourses so easily. The degenerated metalanguage of seduction combined with the degenerated metalanguage of politics is everywhere operative (or if one will, is absolutely non-operative). It is enough that there be a consensus concerning the *model of seduction's simulation*, the diffuse stream of speech and desire – just as the murky metalanguage of participation suffices to safeguard an appearance of sociality.

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The discourse of simulation is not an imposture. It has only to have seduction act as a simulacrum of affect, desire, or libidinal investment, in a world where the need for these is cruelly felt. However, just as the "relations of force" were never able to explain the vicissitudes of power in the panoptic age – except in Marxian idealism – similarly seduction, or the relations of seduction, cannot account for contemporary political events. If everything is driven by seduction, it would not be by this soft seduction, as revised by the ideology of desire, but by a defiant seduction, a dual, antagonistic seduction with the stakes maximized, including those that are secret. It would not be by a game strategy, but by a mythical seduction, not a psychological and operative seduction, not a cold, minimalist seduction.

SEDUCTION AS DESTINY

Are we to think that this diffuse seduction, which is neither attractive nor dangerous, this specter of seduction that haunts our circuits without secrets, our phantasies without affect, and our contact networks without contacts, that this is its pure form? As if the modern happening with its participation and expressiveness, where the stage and its magic have disappeared, would be the theater's pure form? Or as if the hypothetical and hyperreal mode of intervention in reality – in acting pictures, land-art and body art – where the object, frame and staging of illusions have disappeared, would be the pure form of painting and art?

We are living, in effect, amongst pure forms, in a radical obscenity, that is to say, in the visible, undifferentiated obscenity of figures that were once secret and discrete. The same is true of the social, which today rules in its pure – i.e., empty and obscene – form. The same for seduction, which in its present form, having lost its elements of risk, suspense and sorcery, takes the form of a faint, undifferentiated obscenity.

Shall we refer to Walter Benjamin's geneology of the work of art and its destiny? At first, the work of art has the status of a *ritual* object, related to an ancestral form of cult. Next it takes on a cultural or *aesthetic* form in a system with fewer obligations; it still retains a singular character, though the latter

is no longer immanent to the ritual object, but transcendental and individualized. Lastly, the aesthetic form gives way to a *political* form in which the work of art as such disappears before the inevitable progress of mechanical reproduction. If in the ritual form there are no originals (the aesthetic originality of cult objects is of little concern in the sacred), the original is again lost in the political form. There is only the multiplication of objects; the political form corresponding to the object's maximum circulation and minimum intensity.

Seduction too would have had its ritual phase (duel, magical, agonistic); its aesthetic phase (as reflected in the "aesthetic strategy" of the seducer, whose domain approaches that of the feminine and sexuality, the ironic and the diabolic – it is then that seduction takes on the meaning it has for us: the possibly accursed distraction of appearances, their strategies, their play); and finally its "political" phase (taking up Benjamin's term, here somewhat ambiguous). In this last phase the original of seduction, its ritual and aesthetic form, disappears in favour of an all-out ventilation whereby seduction becomes *the informal form of politics*, the scaled-down framework for an elusive politics devoted to the endless reproduction of a form without content. (This informal form is inseparable from its technical nature, which is that of networks – just as the political form of the object is inseparable from the techniques of serial reproduction). As with the object, this "political" form corresponds to seduction's maximum diffusion and minimum intensity.

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Is this to be seduction's destiny? Or can we oppose this involutional fate, and lay a wager on *seduction as destiny*? Production as destiny, or seduction as destiny? Against the deep structures and their truth, appearances and their destiny? Be that as it may, we are living today in non-sense, and if simulation is its disenchanted form, seduction is its enchanted form.

Anatomy is not destiny, nor is politics: seduction is destiny. It is what remains of a magical, fateful world, a risky, vertiginous and predestined world; it is what is quietly effective in a visibly efficient and stolid world.

The world is naked, the king is naked, and things are clear. All of production, and truth itself, are directed towards disclosure, the unbearable "truth" of sex being but the most recent consequence. Luckily, at bottom, there is nothing to it. And seduction still holds, in the face of truth, a most sibylline response, which is that "perhaps we wish to uncover the truth because it is so difficult to imagine it naked."

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SEDUCTION

Jean Baudrillard

translated by Brian Singer

NOTHING CAN BE GREATER THAN SEDUCTION ITSELF, NOT EVEN THE ORDER THAT DESTROYS IT

"*Seduction* is a theory-fiction which resembles nothing which has preceded it. It turns many contemporary discourses inside out, even the most radical, and could very well challenge all modern theory, even, indeed, the rules of theoretical production itself." *Libération*

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"... for Baudrillard, is not seduction a new figure of our freedom?" *L'Express*

Seduction is Jean Baudrillard's most provocative book. Here, under the sign of seduction all of modern theory is put into question, feminism and psychoanalysis most of all. *Seduction* speaks of the sudden reversibility in the order of things where discourse is absorbed into its own signs without a trace of meaning. In the sudden triumph of seduction in apocalyptic culture there is also signalled the end of history.

Jean Baudrillard is lecturer in Sociology, University of Nanterre. Among his works translated into English are *America, Simulations and Simulacra, Forget Foucault, In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities,* and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign.*

Brian Singer teaches at Glendon College, York University, and is the author of *Society, Theory and the French Revolution* (Macmillan/St. Martin's Press, 1986).

Cover: Man Ray *Femme aux longs cheveux*, 1929 © VIS ART

Book and Cover Design: Marilouise Kroker

ISBN 0-333-51077-1

Printed in Canada

£ 8.99P

Simulacra and simulation >

By Jean Baudrillard

Originally published in French by Editions Galilee 1981

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< THE PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA >

The simulacrum is never what hides the truth - it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.
-Ecclesiastes

If once we were able to view the Borges fable in which the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly (the decline of the Empire witnesses the fraying of this map, little by little, and its fall into ruins, though some shreds are still discernible in the deserts - the metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction testifying to a pride equal to the Empire and rotting like a carcass, returning to the substance of the soil, a bit as the double ends by being confused with the real through aging) - as the most beautiful allegory of simulation, this fable has now come full circle for us, and possesses nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra.*1

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself.

In fact, even inverted, Borges's fable is unusable. Only the allegory of the Empire, perhaps, remains. Because it is with this same imperialism that present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation. But it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction. Because it is difference that constitutes the poetry of the map and the charm

of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real. This imaginary of representation, which simultaneously culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographers mad project of the ideal coextensivity of map and territory, disappears in the simulation whose operation is nuclear and genetic, no longer at all specular or discursive. It is all of metaphysics that is lost. No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. No more imaginary coextensivity: it is genetic miniaturization that is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control - and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.

By crossing into a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor that of truth, the era of simulation is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials - worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself - such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer even gives the event of death a chance. A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and for the simulated generation of differences.

THE DIVINE IRREFERENCE OF IMAGES

To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: "Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms" (Littré). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary." Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces "true" symptoms? Objectively one cannot treat him as being either ill or not ill. Psychology and medicine stop at this point, forestalled by the illness's henceforth undiscoverable truth. For if any symptom can be "produced," and can no longer be taken as a fact of nature, then every illness can be considered as simulatable and simulated, and medicine loses its meaning since it only knows how to treat "real" illnesses according to their objective causes. Psychosomatics evolves in a dubious manner at the borders of the principle of illness. As to psychoanalysis, it transfers the symptom of the organic order to the unconscious order: the latter is new and taken for "real" more real than the other - but why would simulation be at the gates of the unconscious? Why couldn't the "work" of the unconscious be "produced" in the same way as any old symptom of classical medicine? Dreams already are.

Certainly, the psychiatrist purports that "for every form of mental alienation there is a particular order in the succession of symptoms of which the simulator is ignorant and in the absence of which the psychiatrist would not be deceived." This (which dates from 1865) in order to safeguard the principle of a truth at all costs and to escape the interrogation posed by simulation - the knowledge that truth, reference, objective cause have ceased to exist. Now, what can medicine do with what floats on either side of illness, on either side of health, with the duplication of illness in a discourse that is no longer either true or false? What can psychoanalysis do with the duplication of the discourse of

the unconscious in the discourse of simulation that can never again be unmasked, since it is not false either?*2

What can the army do about simulators? Traditionally it unmasks them and punishes them, according to a clear principle of identification. Today it can discharge a very good simulator as exactly equivalent to a "real" homosexual, a heart patient, or a madman. Even military psychology draws back from Cartesian certainties and hesitates to make the distinction between true and false, between the "produced" and the authentic symptom. "If he is this good at acting crazy, it's because he is." Nor is military psychology mistaken in this regard: in this sense, all crazy people simulate, and this lack of distinction is the worst kind of subversion. It is against this lack of distinction that classical reason armed itself in all its categories. But it is what today again outflanks them, submerging the principle of truth.

Beyond medicine and the army favored terrains of simulation, the question returns to religion and the simulacrum of divinity: "I forbade that there be any simulacra in the temples because the divinity that animates nature can never be represented." Indeed it can be. But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp of fascination - the visible machinery of icons substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? This is precisely what was feared by Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today.*3 This is precisely because they predicted this omnipotence of simulacra, the faculty simulacra have of effacing God from the conscience of man, and the destructive, annihilating truth that they allow to appear - that deep down God never existed, that only the simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum - from this came their urge to destroy the images. If they could have believed that these images only obfuscated or masked the Platonic Idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the image

didn't conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination. Thus this death of the divine referential must be exorcised at all costs.

One can see that the iconoclasts, whom one accuses of disdaining and negating images, were those who accorded them their true value, in contrast to the iconolaters who only saw reflections in them and were content to venerate a filigree God. On the other hand, one can say that the icon worshipers were the most modern minds, the most adventurous, because, in the guise of having God become apparent in the mirror of images, they were already enacting his death and his disappearance in the epiphany of his representations (which, perhaps, they already knew no longer represented anything, that they were purely a game, but that it was therein the great game lay - knowing also that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them).

This was the approach of the Jesuits, who founded their politics on the virtual disappearance of God and on the worldly and spectacular manipulation of consciences - the evanescence of God in the epiphany of power - the end of transcendence, which now only serves as an alibi for a strategy altogether free of influences and signs. Behind the baroqueness of images hides the éminence grise of politics.

This way the stake will always have been the murderous power of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model, as the Byzantine icons could be those of divine identity. To this murderous power is opposed that of representations as a dialectical power, the visible and intelligible mediation of the Real. All Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be exchanged for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange - God of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say can be reduced to the signs that constitute faith? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum - not unreal,

but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.

Such is simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the Utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.

Such would be the successive phases of the image:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the absence of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;
it is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a good appearance - representation is of the sacramental order. In the second, it is an evil appearance - it is of the order of maleficence. In the third, it plays at being an appearance - it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation.

The transition from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing marks a decisive turning point. The first reflects a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates the era of simulacra and of simulation, in which there is no longer a God to recognize his own, no longer a Last Judgment to separate the false from the true, the real from its artificial resurrection, as everything is already dead and resurrected in advance.

When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality - a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us - a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence.

RAMSES, OR THE ROSY-COLORED RESURRECTION

Ethnology brushed up against its paradoxical death in 1971, the day when the Philippine government decided to return the few dozen Tasaday who had just been discovered in the depths of the jungle, where they had lived for eight centuries without any contact with the rest of the species, to their primitive state, out of the reach of colonizers, tourists, and ethnologists. This at the suggestion of the anthropologists themselves, who were seeing the indigenous people disintegrate immediately upon contact, like mummies in the open air.

In order for ethnology to live, its object must die; by dying, the object takes its revenge for being "discovered" and with its death defies the science that wants to grasp it.

Doesn't all science live on this paradoxical slope to which it is doomed by the evanescence of its object in its very apprehension, and by the pitiless reversal that the dead object exerts on it? Like Orpheus, it always turns around too soon, and, like Eurydice, its object falls back into Hades.

It is against this hell of the paradox that the ethnologists wished to protect themselves by cordoning off the Tasaday with virgin forest. No one can touch them anymore: as in a

mine the vein is closed down. Science loses precious capital there, but the object will be safe, lost to science, but intact in its "virginity." It is not a question of sacrifice (science never sacrifices itself, it is always murderous), but of the simulated sacrifice of its object in order to save its reality principle. The Tasaday, frozen in their natural element, will provide a perfect alibi, an eternal guarantee. Here begins an antiethnology that will never end and to which Jaulin, Castaneda, Clastres are various witnesses. In any case, the logical evolution of a science is to distance itself increasingly from its object, until it dispenses with it entirely: its autonomy is only rendered even more fantastic - it attains its pure form.

The Indian thus returned to the ghetto, in the glass coffin of the virgin forest, again becomes the model of simulation of all the possible Indians from before ethnology. This model thus grants itself the luxury to incarnate itself beyond itself in the "brute" reality of these Indians it has entirely reinvented - Savages who are indebted to ethnology for still being Savages: what a turn of events, what a triumph for this science that seemed dedicated to their destruction!

Of course, these savages are posthumous: frozen, cryogenized, sterilized, protected to death, they have become referential simulacra, and science itself has become pure simulation. The same holds true at Cruesot, at the level of the "open" museum where one museumified in situ, as "historical" witnesses of their period, entire working-class neighborhoods, living metallurgic zones, an entire culture, men, women, and children included - gestures, languages, customs fossilized alive as in a snapshot. The museum, instead of being circumscribed as a geometric site, is everywhere now, like a dimension of life. Thus ethnology, rather than circumscribing itself as an objective science, will today, liberated from its object, be applied to all living things and make itself invisible, like an omnipresent fourth dimension, that of the simulacrum. We are all Tasadays, Indians who have again become what they were - simulacral Indians who at last proclaim the universal truth of ethnology.

We have all become living specimens in the spectral light of ethnology, or of antiethnology, which is nothing but the pure form of triumphal ethnology, under the sign of dead differences, and of the resurrection of differences. It is thus very naive to look for ethnology in the Savages or in some Third World - it is here, everywhere, in the metropolises, in the White community, in a world completely cataloged and analyzed, then artificially resurrected under the auspices of the real, in a world of simulation, of the hallucination of truth, of the blackmail of the real, of the murder of every symbolic form and of its hysterical, historical retrospection - a murder of which the Savages, noblesse oblige, were the first victims, but that for a long time has extended to all Western societies.

But in the same breath ethnology grants us its only and final lesson, the secret that kills it (and which the Savages knew better than it did): the vengeance of the dead.

The confinement of the scientific object is equal to the confinement of the mad and the dead. And just as all of society is irremediably contaminated by this mirror of madness that it has held up to itself, science can't help but die contaminated by the death of this object that is its inverse mirror. It is science that masters the objects, but it is the objects that invest it with depth, according to an unconscious reversion, which only gives a dead and circular response to a dead and circular interrogation.

Nothing changes when society breaks the mirror of madness (abolishes the asylums, gives speech back to the insane, etc.) nor when science seems to break the mirror of its objectivity (effacing itself before its object, as in Castaneda, etc.) and to bend down before the "differences." The form produced by confinement is followed by an innumerable, diffracted, slowed-down mechanism. As ethnology collapses in its classical institution, it survives in an antiethnology whose task it is to reinject the difference fiction, the Savage fiction everywhere, to conceal that it is this world, ours, which has again become savage in its way, that is to say, which is devastated by difference and by death.

In the same way, with the pretext of saving the original, one forbade visitors to enter the Lascaux caves, but an exact replica was constructed five hundred meters from it, so that everyone could see them (one glances through a peephole at the authentic cave, and then one visits the reconstituted whole). It is possible that the memory of the original grottoes is itself stamped in the minds of future generations, but from now on there is no longer any difference: the duplication suffices to render both artificial.

In the same way science and technology were recently mobilized to save the mummy of Ramses II, after it was left to rot for several dozen years in the depths of a museum. The West is seized with panic at the thought of not being able to save what the symbolic order had been able to conserve for forty centuries, but out of sight and far from the light of day. Ramses does not signify anything for us, only the mummy is of an inestimable worth because it is what guarantees that accumulation has meaning. Our entire linear and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view. To this end the pharaohs must be brought out of their tomb and the mummies out of their silence. To this end they must be exhumed and given military honors. They are prey to both science and worms. Only absolute secrecy assured them this millennial power - the mastery over putrefaction that signified the mastery of the complete cycle of exchanges with death. We only know how to place our science in service of repairing the mummy, that is to say restoring a visible order, whereas embalming was a mythical effort that strove to immortalize a hidden dimension.

We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end. Because finally we have never believed in them. Whence this historic scene of the reception of the mummy at the Orly airport. Why? Because Ramses was a great despotic and military figure? Certainly. But mostly because our culture dreams, behind this defunct power that it tries to annex, of an order that would have had nothing to do with it, and it dreams of it because it exterminated it by exhuming it as its own past.

We are fascinated by Ramses as Renaissance Christians were by the American Indians, those (human?) beings who had never known the word of Christ. Thus, at the beginning of colonization, there was a moment of stupor and bewilderment before the very possibility of escaping the universal law of the Gospel. There were two possible responses: either admit that this Law was not universal, or exterminate the Indians to efface the evidence. In general, one contented oneself with converting them, or even simply discovering them, which would suffice to slowly exterminate them.

Thus it would have been enough to exhume Ramses to ensure his extermination by museumification. Because mummies don't rot from worms: they die from being transplanted from a slow order of the symbolic, master over putrefaction and death, to an order of history, science, and museums, our order, which no longer masters anything, which only knows how to condemn what preceded it to decay and death and subsequently to try to revive it with science. Irreparable violence toward all secrets, the violence of a civilization without secrets, hatred of a whole civilization for its own foundation.

And just as with ethnology, which plays at extricating itself from its object to better secure itself in its pure form, demuseumification is nothing but another spiral in artificiality. Witness the cloister of Saint-Michel de Cuxa, which one will repatriate at great cost from the Cloisters in New York to reinstall it in "its original site." And everyone is supposed to applaud this restitution (as they did "the experimental campaign to take back the sidewalks" on the Champs Elysees!). Well, if the exportation of the cornices was in effect an arbitrary act, if the Cloisters in New York are an artificial mosaic of all cultures (following a logic of the capitalist centralization of value), their reimportation to the original site is even more artificial: it is a total simulacrum that links up with "reality" through a complete circumvolution.

The cloister should have stayed in New York in its simulated environment, which at least fooled no one. Repatriating it is nothing but a supplementary subterfuge, acting as if nothing had happened and indulging in retrospective hallucination.

In the same way, Americans flatter themselves for having brought the population of Indians back to pre-Conquest levels. One effaces everything and starts over. They even flatter themselves for doing better, for exceeding the original number. This is presented as proof of the superiority of civilization: it will produce more Indians than they themselves were able to do. (With sinister derision, this overproduction is again a means of destroying them: for Indian culture, like all tribal culture, rests on the limitation of the group and the refusal of any "unlimited" increase, as can be seen in Ishi's case. In this way, their demographic "promotion" is just another step toward symbolic extermination.)

Everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original - things are doubled by their own scenario. But this doubling does not signify, as it did traditionally, the imminence of their death - they are already purged of their death, and better than when they were alive; more cheerful, more authentic, in the light of their model, like the faces in funeral homes.

THE HYPERREAL AND THE IMAGINARY

Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra. It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms: the Pirates, the Frontier, the Future World, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation. But what attracts the crowds the most is without a doubt the social microcosm, the religious, miniaturized pleasure of real America, of its constraints and joys. One parks outside and stands in line inside, one is altogether abandoned at the exit. The only phantasmagoria in this imaginary world lies in the tenderness and warmth of the crowd, and in the sufficient and excessive number of gadgets necessary to create the multitudinous effect. The contrast with the absolute solitude of the parking lot - a veritable concentration camp - is total. Or, rather:

inside, a whole panoply of gadgets magnetizes the crowd in directed flows - outside, solitude is directed at a single gadget: the automobile. By an extraordinary coincidence (but this derives without a doubt from the enchantment inherent to this universe), this frozen, childlike world is found to have been conceived and realized by a man who is himself now cryogenized: Walt Disney, who awaits his resurrection through an increase of 180 degrees centigrade.

Thus, everywhere in Disneyland the objective profile of America, down to the morphology of individuals and of the crowd, is drawn. All its values are exalted by the miniature and the comic strip. Embalmed and pacified. Whence the possibility of an ideological analysis of Disneyland (L. Marin did it very well in Utopiques, jeux d'espace [Utopias, play of space]): digest of the American way of life, panegyric of American values, idealized transposition of a contradictory reality. Certainly. But this masks something else and this "ideological" blanket functions as a cover for a simulation of the third order: Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America that is Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.

The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp. Whence the debility of this imaginary, its infantile degeneration. This world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere - that it is that of the adults themselves who come here to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness.

Disneyland is not the only one, however. Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World: Los Angeles is surrounded by these imaginary stations that feed reality, the energy of the real to a city whose mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation - a city of incredible proportions but without space, without dimension. As much as electrical and atomic power stations, as much as cinema studios, this city, which is no longer anything but an immense scenario and a perpetual pan shot, needs this old imaginary like a sympathetic nervous system made up of childhood signals and faked phantasms.

Disneyland: a space of the regeneration of the imaginary as waste-treatment plants are elsewhere, and even here. Everywhere today one must recycle waste, and the dreams, the phantasms, the historical, fairylike, legendary imaginary of children and adults is a waste product, the first great toxic excrement of a hyperreal civilization. On a mental level, Disneyland is the prototype of this new function. But all the sexual, psychic, somatic recycling institutes, which proliferate in California, belong to the same order. People no longer look at each other, but there are institutes for that. They no longer touch each other, but there is contactotherapy. They no longer walk, but they go jogging, etc. Everywhere one recycles lost faculties, or lost bodies, or lost sociality, or the lost taste for food. One reinvents penury, asceticism, vanished savage naturalness: natural food, health food, yoga. Marshall Sahlins's idea that it is the economy of the market, and not of nature at all, that secretes penury, is verified, but at a secondary level: here, in the sophisticated confines of a triumphal market economy is reinvented a penury/sign, a penury/simulacrum, a simulated behavior of the underdeveloped (including the adoption of Marxist tenets) that, in the guise of ecology, of energy crises and the critique of capital, adds a final esoteric aureole to the triumph of an esoteric culture. Nevertheless, maybe a mental catastrophe, a mental implosion and involution without precedent lies in wait for a system of this kind, whose visible signs would be those of this strange obesity, or the incredible coexistence of the most bizarre theories and practices, which correspond to the improbable coalition of luxury, heaven, and money, to the improbable luxurious materialization of life and to undiscoverable contradictions.

POLITICAL INCANTATION

Watergate. The same scenario as in Disneyland (effect of the imaginary concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the limits of the artificial perimeter): here the scandal effect hiding that there is no difference between the facts and their denunciation (identical methods on the part of the CIA and of the Washington Post journalists). Same operation, tending to regenerate through scandal a moral and political principle, through the imaginary, a sinking reality principle.

The denunciation of scandal is always an homage to the law. And Watergate in particular succeeded in imposing the idea that Watergate was a scandal - in this sense it was a prodigious operation of intoxication. A large dose of political morality reinjected on a world scale. One could say along with Bourdieu: "The essence of every relation of force is to dissimulate itself as such and to acquire all its force only because it dissimulates itself as such," understood as follows: capital, immoral and without scruples, can only function behind a moral superstructure, and whoever revives this public morality (through indignation, denunciation, etc.) works spontaneously for the order of capital. This is what the journalists of the Washington Post did.

But this would be nothing but the formula of ideology, and when Bourdieu states it, he takes the "relation of force" for the truth of capitalist domination, and he himself denounces this relation of force as scandal - he is thus in the same deterministic and moralistic position as the Washington Post journalists are. He does the same work of purging and reviving moral order, an order of truth in which the veritable symbolic violence of the social order is engendered, well beyond all the relations of force, which are only its shifting and indifferent configuration in the moral and political consciences of men.

All that capital asks of us is to receive it as rational or to combat it in the name of rationality, to receive it as moral or to combat it in the name of morality. Because these

are the same, which can be thought of in another way: formerly one worked to dissimulate scandal - today one works to conceal that there is none.

Watergate is not a scandal, this is what must be said at all costs, because it is what everyone is busy concealing, this dissimulation masking a strengthening of morality, of a moral panic as one approaches the primitive (mise en) scène of capital: its instantaneous cruelty, its incomprehensible ferocity, its fundamental immorality - that is what is scandalous, unacceptable to the system of moral and economic equivalence that is the axiom of leftist thought, from the theories of the Enlightenment up to Communism. One imputes this thinking to the contract of capital, but it doesn't give a damn - it is a monstrous unprincipled enterprise, nothing more. It is "enlightened" thought that seeks to control it by imposing rules on it. And all the recrimination that replaces revolutionary thought today comes back to incriminate capital for not following the rules of the game. "Power is unjust, its justice is a class justice, capital exploits us, etc." - as if capital were linked by a contract to the society it rules. It is the Left that holds out the mirror of equivalence to capital hoping that it will comply, comply with this phantasmagoria of the social contract and fulfill its obligations to the whole of society (by the same token, no need for revolution: it suffices that capital accommodate itself to the rational formula of exchange).

Capital, in fact, was never linked by a contract to the society that it dominates. It is a sorcery of social relations, it is a challenge to society, and it must be responded to as such. It is not a scandal to be denounced according to moral or economic rationality, but a challenge to take up according to symbolic law.

MÖBIUS - SPIRALING NEGATIVETY

Watergate was thus nothing but a lure held out by the system to catch its adversaries - a simulation of scandal for regenerative ends. In the film, this is embodied by the character of "Deep Throat," who was said to be the eminence grise of the Republi-cans,

manipulating the left-wing journalists in order to get rid of Nixon - and why not? All hypotheses are possible, but this one is superfluous: the Left itself does a perfectly good job, and spon-taneously, of doing the work of the Right. Besides, it would be naive to see an embittered good conscience at work here. Because manipulation is a wavering causality in which positivity and negativity are engendered and overlap, in which there is no longer either an active or a passive. It is through the arbitrary cessation of this spiraling causality that a principle of political reality can be saved. It is through the simulation of a narrow, con-ventional field of perspective in which the premises and the con-sequences of an act or of an event can be calculated, that a politi-cal credibility can be maintained (and of course "objective" analysis, the struggle, etc.). If one envisions the entire cycle of any act or event in a system where linear continuity and dialecti-cal polarity no longer exist, in a field unhinged by simulation, all determination evaporates, every act is terminated at the end of the cycle having benefited everyone and having been scattered in all directions.

Is any given bombing in Italy the work of leftist extremists, or extreme-right provocation, or a centrist mise-en-scène to dis-credit all extreme terrorists and to shore up its own failing power, or again, is it a police-inspired scenario and a form of blackmail to public security? All of this is simultaneously true, and the search for proof, indeed the objectivity of the facts does not put an end to this vertigo of interpretation. That is, we are in a logic of simula-tion, which no longer has anything to do with a logic of facts and an order of reason. Simulation is characterized by a precession of the model, of all the models based on the merest fact - the models come first, their circulation, orbital like that of the bomb, con-stitutes the genuine magnetic field of the event. The facts no longer have a specific trajectory, they are born at the intersection of models, a single fact can be engendered by all the models at once. This anticipation, this precession, this short circuit, this confusion of the fact with its model (no more divergence of meaning, no more dialectical polarity, no more negative elec-tricity, implosion of antagonistic poles), is what allows each time for all possible interpretations, even the most contradictory - all true, in the sense that their

truth is to be exchanged, in the image of the models from which they derive, in a generalized cycle.

The Communists attack the Socialist Party as if they wished to shatter the union of the Left. They give credence to the idea that these resistances would come from a more radical political need. In fact, it is because they no longer want power. But do they not want power at this juncture, one unfavorable to the Left in gen-eral, or unfavorable to them within the Union of the Left - or do they no longer want it, by definition? When Berlinguer declares: "There is no need to be afraid to see the Communists take power in Italy," it simultaneously signifies:
-: that there is no need to be afraid, since the Communists, if they come to power, will change nothing of its fundamental capital-ist mechanism;
-: that there is no risk that they will ever come to power (because they don't want to) - and even if they occupy the seat of power, they will never exercise it except by proxy;
-: that in fact, power, genuine power no longer exists, and thus there is no risk whoever seizes power or seizes it again;
-: but further: I, Berlinguer, am not afraid to see the Communists take power in Italy - which may seem self-evident, but not as much as you might think, because
-: it could mean the opposite (no need for psychoanalysis here): I am afraid to see the Communists take power (and there are good reasons for that, even for a Communist).

All of this is simultaneously true. It is the secret of a discourse
that is no longer simply ambiguous, as political discourses can be, but that conveys the impossibility of a determined position of power, the impossibility of a determined discursive position. And this logic is neither that of one party nor of another. It traverses all discourses without them wanting it to.

Who will unravel this imbroglio? The Gordian knot can at least be cut. The Möbius strip, if one divides it, results in a supplementary spiral without the reversibility of surfaces being resolved (here the reversible continuity of hypotheses). Hell of simulation, which is no

longer one of torture, but of the subtle, maleficent, elusive twisting of meaning*4 - where even the condemned at Burgos are still a gift from Franco to Western democracy, which seizes the occasion to regenerate its own flagging humanism and whose indignant protest in turn consolidates Franco's regime by uniting the Spanish masses against this foreign intervention? Where is the truth of all that, when such collusions admirably knot themselves together without the knowledge of their authors?

Conjunction of the system and of its extreme alternative like the two sides of a curved mirror, a "vicious" curvature of a political space that is henceforth magnetized, circularized, reversibilized from the right to the left, a torsion that is like that of the evil spirit of commutation, the whole system, the infinity of capital folded back on its own surface: transfinite? And is it not the same for desire and the libidinal space? Conjunction of desire and value, of desire and capital. Conjunction of desire and the law, the final pleasure as the metamorphosis of the law (which is why it is so widely the order of the day): only capital takes pleasure, said Lyotard, before thinking that we now take pleasure in capital. Overwhelming versatility of desire in Deleuze, an enigmatic reversal that brings desire "revolutionary in itself, and as if involuntarily, wanting what it wants," to desire its own repression and to invest in paranoid and fascist systems? A malign torsion that returns this revolution of desire to the same fundamental ambiguity as the other, the historical revolution.

All the referentials combine their discourses in a circular, Möbian compulsion. Not so long ago, sex and work were fiercely opposed terms; today both are dissolved in the same type of demand. Formerly the discourse on history derived its power from violently opposing itself to that of nature, the discourse of desire to that of power - today they exchange their signifiers and their scenarios.

It would take too long to traverse the entire range of the operational negativity of all those scenarios of deterrence, which, like Watergate, try to regenerate a moribund principle through simulated scandal, phantasm, and murder - a sort of hormonal

treatment through negativity and crisis. It is always a question of proving the real through the imaginary, proving truth through scandal, proving the law through transgression, proving work through striking, proving the system through crisis, and capital through revolution, as it is elsewhere (the Tasaday) of proving ethnology through the dispossession of its object - without taking into account:

the proof of theater through antitheater;
the proof of art through antiart;
the proof of pedagogy through antipedagogy;
the proof of psychiatry through antipsychiatry, etc.

Everything is metamorphosed into its opposite to perpetuate itself in its expurgated form. All the powers, all the institutions speak of themselves through denial, in order to attempt, by simulating death, to escape their real death throes. Power can stage its own murder to rediscover a glimmer of existence and legitimacy. Such was the case with some American presidents: the Kennedys were murdered because they still had a political dimension. The others, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, only had the right to phantom attempts, to simulated murders. But this aura of an artificial menace was still necessary to conceal that they were no longer anything but the mannequins of power. Formerly, the king (also the god) had to die, therein lay his power. Today, he is miserably forced to feign death, in order to preserve the blessing of power. But it is lost.

To seek new blood in its own death, to renew the cycle through the mirror of crisis, negativity, and antipower: this is the only solution - alibi of every power, of every institution attempting to break the vicious circle of its irresponsibility and of its fundamental nonexistence, of its already seen and of its already dead.

THE STRATEGY OF THE REAL

The impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real is of the same order as the impossibility of staging illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible. It is the whole political problem of parody, of hypersimulation or offensive simulation, that is posed here.

For example: it would be interesting to see whether the repressive apparatus would not react more violently to a simulated holdup than to a real holdup. Because the latter does nothing but disturb the order of things, the right to property, whereas the former attacks the reality principle itself. Transgression and violence are less serious because they only contest the distribution of the real. Simulation is infinitely more dangerous because it always leaves open to supposition that, above and beyond its object, law and order themselves might be nothing but simulation.

But the difficulty is proportional to the danger. How to feign a violation and put it to the test? Simulate a robbery in a large store: how to persuade security that it is a simulated robbery? There is no "objective" difference: the gestures, the signs are the same as for a real robbery, the signs do not lean to one side or another. To the established order they are always of the order of the real.

Organize a fake holdup. Verify that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage, so that no human life will be in danger (or one lapses into the criminal). Demand a ransom, and make it so that the operation creates as much commotion as possible - in short, remain close to the "truth," in order to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulacrum. You won't be able to do it: the network of artificial signs will become inextricably mixed up with real elements (a policeman will really fire on sight; a client of the bank will faint and die of a heart attack; one will actually pay you the phony ransom), in short, you will immediately find yourself once again, without wishing it, in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour any attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to the real - that is, to the established order itself, well before institutions and justice come into play.

It is necessary to see in this impossibility of isolating the process of simulation the weight of an order that cannot see and conceive of anything but the real, because it cannot function anywhere else. The simulation of an offense, if it is established as such, will either be punished less severely (because it has no "consequences") or punished as an offense against the judicial system (for example if one sets in motion a police operation "for nothing") - but never as simulation since it is precisely as such that no equivalence with the real is possible, and hence no repression either. The challenge of simulation is never admitted by power. How can the simulation of virtue be punished? However, as such it is as serious as the simulation of crime. Parody renders submission and transgression equivalent, and that is the most serious crime, because it cancels out the difference upon which the law is based. The established order can do nothing against it, because the law is a simulacrum of the second order, whereas simulation is of the third order, beyond true and false, beyond equivalences, beyond rational distinctions upon which the whole of the social and power depend. Thus, lacking the real, it is there that we must aim at order.

This is certainly why order always opts for the real. When in doubt, it always prefers this hypothesis (as in the army one prefers to take the simulator for a real madman). But this becomes more and more difficult, because if it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation, through the force of inertia of the real that surrounds us, the opposite is also true (and this reversibility itself is part of the apparatus of simulation and the impotence of power): namely, it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real.

This is how all the holdups, airplane hijackings, etc. are now in some sense simulation holdups in that they are already inscribed in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their presentation and their possible consequences. In short, where they function as a group of signs dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs, and no longer at all to their "real" end. But this does not make them harmless. On the

contrary, it is as hyperreal events, no longer with a specific content or end, but indefinitely refracted by each other (just like so-called historical events: strikes, demonstrations, crises, etc.),*5 it is in this sense that they cannot be controlled by an order that can only exert itself on the real and the rational, on causes and ends, a referential order that can only reign over the referential, a determined power that can only reign over a determined world, but that cannot do anything against this indefinite recurrence of simulation, against this nebula whose weight no longer obeys the laws of gravitation of the real, power itself ends by being dismantled in this space and becoming a simulation of power (disconnected from its ends and its objectives, and dedicated to the effects of power and mass simulation).

The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject the real and the referential everywhere, to persuade us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production. To this end it prefers the discourse of crisis, but also, why not? that of desire. "Take your desires for reality!" can be understood as the ultimate slogan of power since in a nonreferential world, even the confusion of the reality principle and the principle of desire is less dangerous than contagious hyperreality. One remains among principles, and among those power is always in the right.

Hyperreality and simulation are deterrents of every principle and every objective, they turn against power the deterrent that it used so well for such a long time. Because in the end, throughout its history it was capital that first fed on the destructuration of every referential, of every human objective, that shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power. Capital was the first to play at deterrence, abstraction, disconnection, deterritorialization, etc., and if it is the one that fostered reality, the reality principle, it was also the first to liquidate it by exterminating all use value, all real equivalence of production and wealth, in the very sense we have of the unreality of the stakes and the omnipotence of manipulation. Well, today it is this same logic that is even more set against capital. And as soon as it wishes to combat this disastrous spiral by

secreting a last glimmer of reality, on which to establish a last glimmer of power, it does nothing but multiply the signs and accelerate the play of simulation.

As long as the historical threat came at it from the real, power played at deterrence and simulation, disintegrating all the contradictions by dint of producing equivalent signs. Today when the danger comes at it from simulation (that of being dissolved in the play of signs), power plays at the real, plays at crisis, plays at remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, and political stakes. For power, it is a question of life and death. But it is too late.

Whence the characteristic hysteria of our times: that of the production and reproduction of the real. The other production, that of values and commodities, that of the belle epoque of political economy, has for a long time had no specific meaning. What every society looks for in continuing to produce, and to overproduce, is to restore the real that escapes it. That is why today this "material" production is that of the hyperreal itself. It retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production, but it is no longer anything but its scaled-down refraction (thus hyper-realists fix a real from which all meaning and charm, all depth and energy of representation have vanished in a hallucinatory resemblance). Thus everywhere the hyperrealism of simulation is translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself.

Power itself has for a long time produced nothing but the signs of its resemblance. And at the same time, another figure of power comes into play: that of a collective demand for signs of power - a holy union that is reconstructed around its disappearance. The whole world adheres to it more or less in terror of the collapse of the political. And in the end the game of power becomes nothing but the critical obsession with power - obsession with its death, obsession with its survival, which increases as it disappears. When it has totally disappeared, we will logically be under the total hallucination of power - a haunting memory that is already in evidence everywhere, expressing at once the compulsion to get rid of it (no one wants it anymore, everyone unloads it on everyone else) and the

panicked nostalgia over its loss. The melancholy of societies without power: this has already stirred up fascism, that overdose of a strong referential in a society that cannot terminate its mourning.

With the extenuation of the political sphere, the president comes increasingly to resemble that Puppet of Power who is the head of primitive societies (Clastres).

All previous presidents pay for and continue to pay for Kennedy's murder as if they were the ones who had suppressed it - which is true phantasmatically, if not in fact. They must efface this defect and this complicity with their simulated murder. Because, now it can only be simulated. Presidents Johnson and Ford were both the object of failed assassination attempts which, they were not staged, were at least perpetrated by simulation. The Kennedys died because they incarnated something: the political, political substance, whereas the new presidents are nothing but caricatures and fake film - curiously, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, all have this simian mug, the monkeys of power.

Death is never an absolute criterion, but in this case it is significant: the era of James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and the Kennedys, of those who really died simply because they had a mythic dimension that implies death (not for romantic reasons, but because of the fundamental principle of reversal and exchange) - this era is long gone. It is now the era of murder by simulation, of the generalized aesthetic of simulation, of the murder-alibi - the allegorical resurrection of death, which is only there to sanction the institution of power, without which it no longer has any substance or an autonomous reality.

These staged presidential assassinations are revealing because they signal the status of all negativity in the West: political opposition, the "Left," critical discourse, etc. - a simulacral contrast through which power attempts to break the vicious circle of its nonexistence, of its fundamental irresponsibility, of its "suspension." Power floats like money, like language, like theory. Criticism and negativity alone still secrete a phantom of

the reality of power. If they become weak for one reason or another, power has no other recourse but to artificially revive and hallucinate them.

It is in this way that the Spanish executions still serve as a stimulant to Western liberal democracy, to a dying system of democratic values. Fresh blood, but for how much longer? The deterioration of all power is irresistibly pursued: it is not so much the "revolutionary forces" that accelerate this process (often it is quite the opposite), it is the system itself that deploys against its own structures this violence that annuls all substance and all finality. One must not resist this process by trying to confront the system and destroy it, because this system that is dying from being dispossessed of its death expects nothing but that from us: that we give the system back its death, that we revive it through the negative. End of revolutionary praxis, end of the dialectic. Curiously, Nixon, who was not even found worthy of dying at the hands of the most insignificant, chance, unbalanced person (and though it is perhaps true that presidents are assassinated by unbalanced types, this changes nothing: the leftist penchant for detecting a rightist conspiracy beneath this brings out a false problem - the function of bringing death to, or the prophecy, etc., against power has always been fulfilled, from primitive societies to the present, by demented people, crazy people, or neurotics, who nonetheless carry out a social function as fundamental as that of presidents), was nevertheless ritually put to death by Watergate. Watergate is still a mechanism for the ritual murder of power (the American institution of the presidency is much more thrilling in this regard than the European: it surrounds itself with all the violence and vicissitudes of primitive powers, of savage rituals). But already impeachment is no longer assassination: it happens via the Constitution. Nixon has nevertheless arrived at the goal of which all power dreams: to be taken seriously enough, to constitute a mortal enough danger to the group to be one day relieved of his duties, denounced, and liquidated. Ford doesn't even have this opportunity anymore: a simulacrum of an already dead power, he can only accumulate against himself the signs of reversion through murder - in fact, he is immunized by his impotence, which infuriates him.

In contrast to the primitive rite, which foresees the official and sacrificial death of the king (the king or the chief is nothing without the promise of his sacrifice), the modern political imaginary goes increasingly in the direction of delaying, of concealing for as long as possible, the death of the head of state. This obsession has accumulated since the era of revolutions and of charismatic leaders: Hitler, Franco, Mao, having no "legitimate" heirs, no filiation of power, see themselves forced to perpetuate themselves indefinitely - popular myth never wishes to believe them dead. The pharaohs already did this: it was always one and the same person who incarnated the successive pharaohs.

Everything happens as if Mao or Franco had already died several times and had been replaced by his double. From a political point of view, that a head of state remains the same or is someone else doesn't strictly change anything, so long as they resemble each other. For a long time now a head of state - no matter which one - is nothing but the simulacrum of himself, and only that gives him the power and the quality to govern. No one would grant the least consent, the least devotion to a real person. It is to his double, he being always already dead, to which allegiance is given. This myth does nothing but translate the persistence, and at the same time the deception, of the necessity of the king's sacrificial death.

We are still in the same boat: no society knows how to mourn the real, power, the social itself, which is implicated in the same loss. And it is through an artificial revitalization of all this that we try to escape this fact. This situation will no doubt end up giving rise to socialism. Through an unforeseen turn of events and via an irony that is no longer that of history, it is from the death of the social that socialism will emerge, as it is from the death of God that religions emerge. A twisted advent, a perverse event, an unintelligible reversion to the logic of reason. As is the fact that power is in essence no longer present except to conceal that there is no more power. A simulation that can last indefinitely, because, as distinct from "true" power - which is, or was, a structure, a strategy, a relation of force, a stake - it is nothing but the object of a social demand, and thus as the object of the law of supply and demand, it is no longer subject to violence and death.

Completely purged of a political dimension, it, like any other commodity, is dependent on mass production and consumption. Its spark has disappeared, only the fiction of a political universe remains.

The same holds true for work. The spark of production, the violence of its stakes no longer exist. The whole world still produces, and increasingly, but subtly work has become something else: a need (as Marx ideally envisioned it but not in the same sense), the object of a social "demand," like leisure, to which it is equivalent in the course of everyday life. A demand exactly proportional to the loss of a stake in the work process.*6 Same change in fortune as for power: the scenario of work is there to conceal that the real of work, the real of production, has disappeared. And the real of the strike as well, which is no longer a work stoppage, but its alternate pole in the ritual scansion of the social calendar. Everything occurs as if each person had, after declaring a strike, "occupied" his place and work station and recommenced production, as is the norm in a "self-managed" occupation, exactly in the same terms as before, all while declaring himself (and in virtually being) permanently on strike.

This is not a dream out of science fiction: everywhere it is a question of doubling the process of work. And of a doubling of the process of going on strike - striking incorporated just as obsolescence is in objects, just as crisis is in production. So, there is no longer striking, nor work, but both simultaneously, that is to say something else: a magic of work, a trompel'oeil, a scenodrama (so as not to say a melodrama) of production, a collective dramaturgy on the empty stage of the social.

It is no longer a question of the ideology of work - the traditional ethic that would obscure the "real" process of work and the "objective" process of exploitation - but of the scenario of work. In the same way, it is no longer a question of the ideology of power, but of the scenario of power. Ideology only corresponds to a corruption of reality through signs; simulation corresponds to a short circuit of reality and to its duplication through signs. It

is always the goal of the ideological analysis to restore the objective process, it is always a false problem to wish to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum.

This is why in the end power is so much in tune with ideological discourses and discourses on ideology, that is they are discourses of truth - always good for countering the mortal blows of simulation, even and especially if they are revolutionary.

THE END OF THE PANOPTICON

It is still to this ideology of lived experience - exhumation of the real in its fundamental banality, in its radical authenticity - that the American TV verite experiment attempted on the Loud family in 1971 refers: seven months of uninterrupted shooting, three hundred hours of nonstop broadcasting, without a script or a screenplay, the odyssey of a family, its dramas, its joys, its unexpected events, nonstop - in short, a "raw" historical document, and the "greatest television performance, comparable, on the scale of our day-to-day life, to the footage of our landing on the moon." It becomes more complicated because this family fell apart during the filming: a crisis erupted, the Louds separated, etc. Whence that insoluble controversy: was TV itself responsible? What would have happened if TV hadn't been there?

More interesting is the illusion of filming the Louds as if TV weren't there. The producer's triumph was to say: "They lived as if we were not there." An absurd, paradoxical formula - neither true nor false: Utopian. The "as if we were not there" being equal to "as if you were there." It is this Utopia, this paradox that fascinated the twenty million viewers, much more than did the "perverse" pleasure of violating someone's privacy. In the "verite" experience it is not a question of secrecy or perversion, but of a sort of frisson of the real, or of an aesthetics of the hyperreal, a frisson of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a frisson of simultaneous distancing and magnification, of distortion of scale, of an excessive transparency. The pleasure of an excess of meaning, when the bar of the sign falls below the usual waterline of meaning: the nonsignifier is exalted by the camera

angle. There one sees what the real never was (but "as if you were there"), without the distance that gives us perspectival space and depth vision (but "more real than nature"). Pleasure in the microscopic simulation that allows the real to pass into the hyperreal. (This is also somewhat the case in porno, which is fascinating more on a metaphysical than on a sexual level.)

Besides, this family was already hyperreal by the very nature of its selection: a typical ideal American family, California home, three garages, five children, assured social and professional status, decorative housewife, upper-middle-class standing. In a way it is this statistical perfection that dooms it to death. Ideal heroine of the American way of life, it is, as in ancient sacrifices, chosen in order to be glorified and to die beneath the flames of the medium, a modern fatum. Because heavenly fire no longer falls on corrupted cities, it is the camera lens that, like a laser, comes to pierce lived reality in order to put it to death. "The Louds: simply a family who agreed to deliver themselves into the hands of television, and to die by it," the director will say. Thus it is a question of a sacrificial process, of a sacrificial spectacle offered to twenty million Americans. The liturgical drama of a mass society.

TV verite. A term admirable in its ambiguity, does it refer to the truth of this family or to the truth of TV? In fact, it is TV that is the truth of the Louds, it is TV that is true, it is TV that renders true. Truth that is no longer the reflexive truth of the mirror, nor the perspectival truth of the panoptic system and of the gaze, but the manipulative truth of the test that sounds out and interrogates, of the laser that touches and pierces, of computer cards that retain your preferred sequences, of the genetic code that controls your combinations, of cells that inform your sensory universe. It is to this truth that the Loud family was subjected by the medium of TV, and in this sense it amounts to a death sentence (but is it still a question of truth?).

End of the panoptic system. The eye of TV is no longer the source of an absolute gaze, and the ideal of control is no longer that of transparency. This still presupposes an

objective space (that of the Renaissance) and the omnipotence of the despotic gaze. It is still, if not a system of confinement, at least a system of mapping. More subtly, but always externally, playing on the opposition of seeing and being seen, even if the panoptic focal point may be blind.

Something else in regard to the Louds. "You no longer watch TV, it is TV that watches you (live)," or again: "You are no longer listening to Don't Panic, it is Don't Panic that is listening to you" - a switch from the panoptic mechanism of surveillance (Discipline and Punish [Surveiller et punir]) to a system of deterrence, in which the distinction between the passive and the active is abolished. There is no longer any imperative of submission to the model, or to the gaze "YOU are the model!" "YOU are the majority!" Such is the watershed of a hyperreal sociality, in which the real is confused with the model, as in the statistical operation, or with the medium, as in the Louds' operation. Such is the last stage of the social relation, ours, which is no longer one of persuasion (the classical age of propaganda, of ideology, of publicity, etc.) but one of deterrence: "YOU are information, you are the social, you are the event, you are involved, you have the word, etc." An about-face through which it becomes impossible to locate one instance of the model, of power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, because you are always already on the other side. No more subject, no more focal point, no more center or periphery: pure flexion or circular inflexion. No more violence or surveillance: only "information," secret virulence, chain reaction, slow implosion, and simulacra of spaces in which the effect of the real again comes into play.

We are witnessing the end of perspectival and panoptic space (which remains a moral hypothesis bound up with all the classical analyses on the "objective" essence of power), and thus to the very abolition of the spectacular. Television, for example in the case of the Louds, is no longer a spectacular medium. We are no longer in the society of the spectacle, of which the situationists spoke, nor in the specific kinds of alienation and repression that it implied. The medium itself is no longer identifiable as such, and the confusion of the medium and the message (McLuhan)*7 is the first great formula of this

new era. There is no longer a medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real, and one can no longer even say that the medium is altered by it.

Such a blending, such a viral, endemic, chronic, alarming presence of the medium, without the possibility of isolating the effects - spectralized, like these advertising laser sculptures in the empty space of the event filtered by the medium - dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV - indiscernible chemical solution: we are all Louds doomed not to invasion, to pressure, to violence and blackmail by the media and the models, but to their induction, to their infiltration, to their illegible violence.

But one must watch out for the negative turn that discourse imposes: it is a question neither of disease nor of a viral infection. One must think instead of the media as if they were, in outer orbit, a kind of genetic code that directs the mutation of the real into the hyperreal, just as the other micromolecular code controls the passage from a representative sphere of meaning to the genetic one of the programmed signal.

It is the whole traditional world of causality that is in question: the perspectival, determinist mode, the "active," critical mode, the analytic mode - the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between the end and the means. It is in this sense that one can say: TV is watching us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us ... In all this, one remains dependent on the analytical conception of the media, on an external active and effective agent, on "perspectival" information with the horizon of the real and of meaning as the vanishing point.

Now, one must conceive of TV along the lines of DNA as an effect in which the opposing poles of determination vanish, according to a nuclear contraction, retraction, of the old polar schema that always maintained a minimal distance between cause and effect, between subject and object: precisely the distance of meaning, the gap, the difference,

the smallest possible gap (PPEP!),*8 irreducible under pain of reabsorption into an aleatory and indeterminate process whose discourse can no longer account for it, because it is itself a determined order.

It is this gap that vanishes in the process of genetic coding, in which indeterminacy is not so much a question of molecular randomness as of the abolition, pure and simple, of the relation. In the process of molecular control, which "goes" from the DNA nucleus to the "substance" that it "informs," there is no longer the traversal of an effect, of an energy, of a determination, of a message. "Order, signal, impulse, message": all of these attempt to render the thing intelligible to us, but by analogy, retranscribing in terms of inscription, of a vector, of decoding, a dimension of which we know nothing - it is no longer even a "dimension," or perhaps it is the fourth (which is denned, however, in Einsteinian relativity by the absorption of the distinct poles of space and time). In fact, this whole process can only be understood in its negative form: nothing separates one pole from another anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapse of the two traditional poles into each other: implosion - an absorption of the radiating mode of causality, of the differential mode of determination, with its positive and negative charge - an implosion of meaning. That is where simulation begins.

Everywhere, in no matter what domain - political, biological, psychological, mediatized - in which the distinction between these two poles can no longer be maintained, one enters into simulation, and thus into absolute manipulation - not into passivity, but into the differentiation of the active and the passive. DNA realizes this aleatory reduction at the level of living matter. Television, in the case of the Louds, also reaches this indefinite limit in which, vis-à-vis TV, they are neither more nor less active or passive than a living substance is vis-a-vis its molecular code. Here and there, a single nebula whose simple elements are indecipherable, whose truth is indecipherable.

THE ORBITAL AND THE NUCLEAR

The apotheosis of simulation: the nuclear. However, the balance of terror is never anything but the spectacular slope of a system of deterrence that has insinuated itself from the inside into all the cracks of daily life. Nuclear suspension only serves to seal the trivialized system of deterrence that is at the heart of the media, of the violence without consequences that reigns throughout the world, of the aleatory apparatus of all the choices that are made for us. The most insignificant of our behaviors is regulated by neutralized, indifferent, equivalent signs, by zero-sum signs like those that regulate the "strategy of games" (but the true equation is elsewhere, and the unknown is precisely that variable of simulation which makes of the atomic arsenal itself a hyperreal form, a simulacrum that dominates everything and reduces all "ground-level" events to being nothing but ephemeral scenarios, transforming the life left us into survival, into a stake without stakes - not even into a life insurance policy: into a policy that already has no value).

It is not the direct threat of atomic destruction that paralyzes our lives, it is deterrence that gives them leukemia. And this deterrence comes from that fact that even the real atomic clash is precluded - precluded like the eventuality of the real in a system of signs. The whole world pretends to believe in the reality of this threat (this is understandable on the part of the military, the gravity of their exercise and the discourse of their "strategy" are at stake), but it is precisely at this level that there are no strategic stakes. The whole originality of the situation lies in the improbability of destruction.

Deterrence precludes war - the archaic violence of expanding systems. Deterrence itself is the neutral, implosive violence of metastable systems or systems in involution. There is no longer a subject of deterrence, nor an adversary nor a strategy - it is a planetary structure of the annihilation of stakes. Atomic war, like the Trojan War, will not take place. The risk of nuclear annihilation only serves as a pretext, through the sophistication of weapons (a sophistication that surpasses any possible objective to such an extent that it is itself a symptom of nullity), for installing a universal security system, a universal lockup and

control system whose deterrent effect is not at all aimed at an atomic clash (which was never in question, except without a doubt in the very initial stages of the cold war, when one still confused the nuclear apparatus with conventional war) but, rather, at the much greater probability of any real event, of anything that would be an event in the general system and upset its balance. The balance of terror is the terror of balance.

Deterrence is not a strategy, it circulates and is exchanged between nuclear protagonists exactly as is international capital in the orbital zone of monetary speculation whose fluctuations suffice to control all global exchanges. Thus the money of destruction (without any reference to real destruction, any more than floating capital has a real referent of production) that circulates in nuclear orbit suffices to control all the violence and potential conflicts around the world.

What is hatched in the shadow of this mechanism with the pretext of a maximal, "objective," threat, and thanks to Damocles' nuclear sword, is the perfection of the best system of control that has ever existed. And the progressive satellization of the whole planet through this hypermodel of security.

The same goes for peaceful nuclear power stations. Pacification does not distinguish between the civil and the military: everywhere where irreversible apparatuses of control are elaborated, everywhere where the notion of security becomes omnipotent, everywhere where the norm replaces the old arsenal of laws and violence (including war), it is the system of deterrence that grows, and around it grows the historical, social, and political desert. A gigantic involution that makes every conflict, every finality, every confrontation contract in proportion to this blackmail that interrupts, neutralizes, freezes them all. No longer can any revolt, any story be deployed according to its own logic because it risks annihilation. No strategy is possible any longer, and escalation is only a puerile game given over to the military. The political stake is dead, only simulacra of conflicts and carefully circumscribed stakes remain.

The "space race" played exactly the same role as nuclear escalation. This is why the space program was so easily able to replace it in the 1960s (Kennedy/Khrushchev), or to develop concurrently as a form of "peaceful coexistence." Because what, ultimately, is the function of the space program, of the conquest of the moon, of the launching of satellites if not the institution of a model of universal gravitation, of satellization of which the lunar module is the perfect embryo? Programmed microcosm, where nothing can be left to chance. Trajectory, energy, calculation, physiology, psychology, environment - nothing can be left to contingencies, this is the total universe of the norm - the Law no longer exists, it is the operational immanence of every detail that is law. A universe purged of all threat of meaning, in a state of asepsis and weightlessness - it is this very perfection that is fascinating. The exaltation of the crowds was not a response to the event of Rinding on the moon or of sending a man into space (this would be, rather, the fulfillment of an earlier dream), rather, we are dumbfounded by the perfection of the programming and the technical manipulation, by the immanent wonder of the programmed unfolding of events. Fascination with the maximal norm and the mastery of probability. Vertigo of the model, which unites with the model of death, but without fear or drive. Because if the law, with its aura of transgression, if order, with its aura of violence, still taps a perverse imaginary, the norm fixes, fascinates, stupefies, and makes every imaginary involute. One no longer fantasizes about the minutiae of a program. Just watching it produces vertigo. The vertigo of a world without flaws.

Now, it is the same model of programmatic infallibility, of maximum security and deterrence that today controls the spread of the social. There lies the true nuclear fallout: the meticulous operation of technology serves as a model for the meticulous operation of the social. Here as well, nothing will be left to chance, moreover this is the essence of socialization, which began centuries ago, but which has now entered its accelerated phase, toward a limit that one believed would be explosive (revolution), but which for the moment is translated by an inverse, implosive, irreversible process: the generalized deterrence of chance, of accident, of transversality, of finality, of contradiction, rupture, or complexity in a sociality illuminated by the norm, doomed to the descriptive transparency

of mechanisms of information. In fact, the spatial and nuclear models do not have their own ends: neither the discovery of the moon, nor military and strategic superiority. Their truth is to be the models of simulation, the model vectors of a system of planetary control (where even the superpowers of this scenario are not free - the whole world is satellized).*9

Resist the evidence: in satellization, he who is satellized is not who one might think. Through the orbital inscription of a spatial object, it is the planet earth that becomes a satellite, it is the terrestrial principle of reality that becomes eccentric, hyperreal, and insignificant. Through the orbital instantiation of a system of control like peaceful coexistence, all the terrestrial microsystems are satellized and lose their autonomy. All energy, all events are absorbed by this eccentric gravitation, everything condenses and implodes toward the only micromodel of control (the orbital satellite), as conversely, in the other, biological, dimension, everything converges and implodes on the molecular micromodel of the genetic code. Between the two, in this forking of the nuclear and the genetic, in the simultaneous assumption of the two fundamental codes of deterrence, every principle of meaning is absorbed, every deployment of the real is impossible.

The simultaneity of two events in the month of July 1975 illustrated this in a striking manner: the linkup in space of the two American and Soviet supersatellites, apotheosis of peaceful coexistence - the suppression by the Chinese of ideogrammatic writing and conversion to the Roman alphabet. The latter signifies the "orbital" instantiation of an abstract and modelized system of signs, into whose orbit all the once unique forms of style and writing will be reabsorbed. The satellization of language: the means for the Chinese to enter the system of peaceful coexistence, which is inscribed in their heavens at precisely the same time by the linkup of the two satellites. Orbital flight of the Big Two, neutralization and homogenization of everyone else on earth.

Yet, despite this deterrence by the orbital power - the nuclear or molecular code - events continue at ground level, misfortunes are even more numerous, given the global process

of the contiguity and simultaneity of data. But, subtly, they no longer have any meaning, they are no longer anything but the duplex effect of simulation at the summit. The best example can only be that of the war in Vietnam, because it took place at the intersection of a maximum historical and "revolutionary" stake, and of the installation of this deterrent authority. What meaning did this war have, and wasn't its unfolding a means of sealing the end of history in the decisive and culminating historic event of our era?

Why did this war, so hard, so long, so ferocious, vanish from one day to the next as if by magic?

Why did this American defeat (the largest reversal in the history of the USA) have no internal repercussions in America? If it had really signified the failure of the planetary strategy of the United States, it would necessarily have completely disrupted its internal balance and the American political system. Nothing of the sort occurred.

Something else, then, took place. This war, at bottom, was nothing but a crucial episode of peaceful coexistence. It marked the arrival of China to peaceful coexistence. The nonintervention of China obtained and secured after many years, Chinas apprenticeship to a global modus vivendi, the shift from a global strategy of revolution to one of shared forces and empires, the transition from a radical alternative to political alternation in a system now essentially regulated (the normalization of Peking - Washington relations): this was what was at stake in the war in Vietnam, and in this sense, the USA pulled out of Vietnam but won the war.

And the war ended "spontaneously" when this objective was achieved. That is why it was deescalated, demobilized so easily.

This same reduction of forces can be seen on the field. The war lasted as long as elements irreducible to a healthy politics and discipline of power, even a Communist one, remained unliquidated. When at last the war had passed into the hands of regular troops

in the North and escaped that of the resistance, the war could stop: it had attained its objective. The stake is thus that of a political relay. As soon as the Vietnamese had proved that they were no longer the carriers of an unpredictable subversion, one could let them take over. That theirs is a Communist order is not serious in the end: it had proved itself, it could be trusted. It is even more effective than capitalism in the liquidation of "savage" and archaic precapitalist structures.

Same scenario in the Algerian war.

The other aspect of this war and of all wars today: behind the armed violence, the murderous antagonism of the adversaries - which seems a matter of life and death, which is played out as such (or else one could never send people to get themselves killed in this kind of thing), behind this simulacrum of fighting to the death and of ruthless global stakes, the two adversaries are fundamentally in solidarity against something else, unnamed, never spoken, but whose objective outcome in war, with the equal complicity of the two adversaries, is total liquidation. Tribal, communitarian, precapitalist structures, every form of exchange, of language, of symbolic organization, that is what must be abolished, that is the object of murder in war - and war itself, in its immense, spectacular death apparatus, is nothing but the medium of this process of the terrorist rationalization of the social - the murder on which sociality will be founded, whatever its allegiance, Communist or capitalist. Total complicity, or division of labor between two adversaries (who may even consent to enormous sacrifices for it) for the very end of reshaping and domesticating social relations.

"The North Vietnamese were advised to countenance a scenario for liquidating the American presence in the course of which, of course, one must save face."

This scenario: the extremely harsh bombardments of Hanoi. Their untenable character must not conceal the fact that they were nothing but a simulacrum to enable the Vietnamese to seem to countenance a compromise and for Nixon to make the Americans

swallow the withdrawal of their troops. The game was already won, nothing was objectively at stake but the verisimilitude of the final montage.

The moralists of war, the holders of high wartime values should not be too discouraged: the war is no less atrocious for being only a simulacrum - the flesh suffers just the same, and the dead and former combatants are worth the same as in other wars. This objective is always fulfilled, just like that of the charting of territories and of disciplinary sociality. What no longer exists is the adversity of the adversaries, the reality of antagonistic causes, the ideological seriousness of war. And also the reality of victory or defeat, war being a process that triumphs well beyond these appearances.

In any case, the pacification (or the deterrence) that dominates us today is beyond war and peace, it is that at every moment war and peace are equivalent. "War is peace," said Orwell. There also, the two differential poles implode into each other, or recycle one another - a simultaneity of contradictions that is at once the parody and the end of every dialectic. Thus one can completely miss the truth of a war: namely, that it was finished well before it started, that there was an end to war at the heart of the war itself, and that perhaps it never started. Many other events (the oil crisis, etc.) never started, never existed, except as artificial occurrences - abstract, ersatz, and as artifacts of history, catastrophes and crises destined to maintain a historical investment under hypnosis. The media and the official news service are only there to maintain the illusion of an actuality, of the reality of the stakes, of the objectivity of facts. All the events are to be read backward, or one becomes aware (as with the Communists "in power" in Italy the retro, posthumous rediscovery of the gulags and Soviet dissidents like the almost contemporary discovery, by a moribund ethnology, of the lost "difference" of Savages) that all these things arrived too late, with a history of delay, a spiral of delay, that they long ago exhausted their meaning and only live from an artificial effervescence of signs, that all these events succeed each other without logic, in the most contradictory, complete equivalence, in a profound indifference to their consequences (but this is because there are none: they exhaust themselves in their spectacular promotion) - all "newsreel"

footage thus gives the sinister impression of kitsch, of retro and porno at the same time - doubtless everyone knows this, and no one really accepts it. The reality of simulation is unbearable - crueler than Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, which was still an attempt to create a dramaturgy of life, the last gasp of an ideality of the body, of blood, of violence in a system that was already taking it away, toward a reabsorption of all the stakes without a trace of blood. For us the trick has been played. All dramaturgy, and even all real writing of cruelty has disappeared. Simulation is the master, and we only have a right to the retro, to the phantom, parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials. Everything still unfolds around us, in the cold light of deterrence (including Artaud, who has the right like everything else to his revival, to a second existence as the referential of cruelty).

This is why nuclear proliferation does not increase the risk of either an atomic clash or an accident - save in the interval when the "young" powers could be tempted to make a nondeterrent, "real" use of it (as the Americans did in Hiroshima - but precisely only they had a right to this "use value" of the bomb, all of those who have acquired it since will be deterred from using it by the very fact of possessing it). Entry into the atomic club, so prettily named, very quickly effaces (as unionization does in the working world) any inclination toward violent intervention. Responsibility, control, censure, self-deterrence always grow more rapidly than the forces or the weapons at our disposal: this is the secret of the social order. Thus the very possibility of paralyzing a whole country by flicking a switch makes it so that the electrical engineers will never use this weapon: the whole myth of the total and revolutionary strike crumbles at the very moment when the means are available - but alas precisely because those means are available. Therein lies the whole process of deterrence.

It is thus perfectly probable that one day we will see nuclear powers export atomic reactors, weapons, and bombs to every latitude. Control by threat will be replaced by the more effective strategy of pacification through the bomb and through the possession of the bomb. The "little" powers, believing that they are buying their independent striking force, will buy the virus of deterrence, of their own deterrence. The same goes for the

atomic reactors that we have already sent them: so many neutron bombs knocking out all historical virulence, all risk of explosion. In this sense, the nuclear everywhere inaugurates an accelerated process of implosion, it freezes everything around it, it absorbs all living energy.

The nuclear is at once the culminating point of available energy and the maximization of energy control systems. Lockdown and control increase in direct proportion to (and undoubtedly even faster than) liberating potentialities. This was already the aporia of the modern revolution. It is still the absolute paradox of the nuclear. Energies freeze in their own fire, they deter themselves. One can no longer imagine what project, what power, what strategy, what subject could exist behind this enclosure, this vast saturation of a system by its own forces, now neutralized, unusable, unintelligible, nonexplosive - except for the possibility of an explosion toward the center, of an implosion where all these energies would be abolished in a catastrophic process (in the literal sense, that is to say in the sense of a reversion of the whole cycle toward a minimal point, of a reversion of energies toward a minimal threshold).

* NOTES *

1. Cf. J. Baudrillard, "L'ordre des simulacres" (The order of simulacra), in L'echange symbolique et la mort (Symbolic exchange and death) (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

2. A discourse that is itself not susceptible to being resolved in transference. It is the entanglement of these two discourses that renders psychoanalysis interminable.

3. Cf. M. Perniola, Icônes, visions, simulacres (Icons, visions, simulacra), 39.

4. This does not necessarily result in despairing of meaning, but just as much in the improvisation of meaning, of nonmeaning, of many simultaneous meanings that destroy each other.

5. Taken together, the energy crisis and the ecological mise-en-scène are themselves a disaster movie, in the same style (and with the same value) as those that currently comprise the golden days of Hollywood. It is useless to laboriously interpret these films in terms of their relation to an "objective" social crisis or even to an "objective" phantasm of disaster. It is in another sense that it must be said that it is the social itself that, in contemporary discourse, is organised along the lines of a disaster-movie script. (Cf. M. Makarius, La stratégic de la catastrophe [The strategy of disaster], 115.)

6. To this flagging investment in work corresponds a parallel decline in the investment in consumption. Goodbye to use value or to the prestige of the automobile, goodbye amorous discourses that neatly opposed the object of enjoyment to the object of work. Another discourse takes hold that is a discourse of work on the object of consumption aiming for an active, constraining, puritan reinvestment (use less gas, watch out for your safety, you've gone over the speed limit, etc.) to which the characteristics of automobiles pretend to adapt. Rediscovering a stake through the transposition of these two poles. Work becomes the object of a need, the car becomes the object of work. There is no better proof of the lack of differentiation among all the stakes. It is through the same slippage between the "right" to vote and electoral "duty" that the divestment of the political sphere is signaled.

7. The medium/message confusion is certainly a corollary of that between the sender and the receiver, thus sealing the disappearance of all dual, polar structures that formed the discursive organization of language, of all determined articulation of meaning reflecting Jakobson's famous grid of functions. That discourse "circulates" is to be taken literally: that is, it no longer goes from one point to another, but it traverses a cycle that without distinction includes the positions of transmitter and receiver, now unlocatable as such. Thus there is no instance of power, no instance of transmission - power is something that circulates and whose source can no longer be located, a cycle in which the positions of the dominator and the dominated are exchanged in an endless reversion that is also the

end of power in its classical definition. The circularization of power, of knowledge, of discourse puts an end to any localization of instances and poles. In the psychoanalytic interpretation itself, the "power" of the interpreter does not come from any outside instance but from the interpreted himself. This changes everything, because one can always ask of the traditional holders of power where they get their power from. Who made you duke? The king. Who made you king? God. Only God no longer answers. But to the question: who made you a psychoanalyst? the analyst can well reply: You. Thus is expressed, by an inverse simulation, the passage from the "analyzed" to the "analysand," from passive to active, which simply describes the spiraling effect of the shifting of poles, the effect of circularity in which power is lost, is dissolved, is resolved in perfect manipulation (it is no longer of the order of directive power and of the gaze, but of the order of tactility and commutation). See also the state/family circularity assured by the fluctuation and metastatic regulation of the images of the social and the private (J. Donzelot, La police des/amilles [The policing of families]).

Impossible now to pose the famous question: "From what position do you speak?" - "How do you know?" "From where do you get your power?" without hearing the immediate response: "But it is of you (from you) that I speak" - meaning, it is you who are speaking, you who know, you who are the power. Gigantic circumvolution, circumlocution of the spoken word, which is equal to a blackmail with no end, to a deterrence that cannot be appealed of the subject presumed to speak, leaving him without a reply, because to the question that he poses one ineluctably replies: but you are the answer, or: your question is already an answer, etc. - the whole strangulatory sophistication of intercepting speech, of the forced confession in the guise of freedom of expression, of trapping the subject in his own interrogation, of the precession of the reply to the question (all the violence of interpretation lies there, as well as that of the conscious or unconscious management of the "spoken word" [parole]).

This simulacrum of the inversion or the involution of poles, this clever subterfuge, which is the secret of the whole discourse of manipulation and thus, today, in every domain, the

secret of any new power in the erasure of the scene of power, in the assumption of all words from which has resulted this fantastic silent majority characteristic of our time - all of this started without a doubt in the political sphere with the democractic simulacrum, which today is the substitution for the power of God with the power of the people as the source of power, and of power as emanation with power as representation. Anti-Copernican revolution: no transcendental instance either of the sun or of the luminous sources of power and knowledge - everything comes from the people and everything returns to them. It is with this magnificent recycling that the universal simulacrum of manipulation, from the scenario of mass suffrage to the present-day phantoms of opinion polls, begins to be put in place.

8. PPEP is an acronym for smallest possible gap, or "plus petit écart possible."-TRANS.

9. Paradox: all bombs are clean: their only pollution is the system of security and of control they radiate as long as they don't explode.

< HISTORY: A RETRO SCENARIO >

In a violent and contemporary period of history (let's say between the two world wars and the cold war), it is myth that invades cinema as imaginary content. It is the golden age of despotic and legendary resurrections. Myth, chased from the real by the violence of history, finds refuge in cinema.

Today, it is history itself that invades the cinema according to the same scenario - the historical stake chased from our lives by this sort of immense neutralization, which is dubbed peaceful coexistence on a global level, and pacified monotony on the quotidian level - this history exorcised by a slowly or brutally congealing society celebrates its

resurrection in force on the screen, according to the same process that used to make lost myths live again.

History is our lost referential, that is to say our myth. It is by virtue of this fact that it takes the place of myths on the screen. The illusion would be to congratulate oneself on this "awareness of history on the part of cinema," as one congratulated oneself on the "entrance of politics into the university." Same misunderstanding, same mystification. The politics that enter the university are those that come from history, a retro politics, emptied of substance and legalized in their superficial exercise, with the air of a game and a field of adventure, this kind of politics is like sexuality or permanent education (or like social security in its time), that is, posthumous liberalization.

The great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation. Whereas so many generations, and particularly the last, lived in the march of history, in the euphoric or catastrophic expectation of a revolution - today one has the impression that history has retreated, leaving behind it an indifferent nebula, traversed by currents, but emptied of references. It is into this void that the phantasms of a past history recede, the panoply of events, ideologies, retro fashions - no longer so much because people believe in them or still place some hope in them, but simply to resurrect the period when at least there was history, at least there was violence (albeit fascist), when at least life and death were at stake. Anything serves to escape this void, this leukemia of history and of politics, this hemorrhage of values - it is in proportion to this distress that all content can be evoked pell-mell, that all previous history is resurrected in bulk - a controlling idea no longer selects, only nostalgia endlessly accumulates: war, fascism, the pageantry of the belle epoque, or the revolutionary struggles, everything is equivalent and is mixed indiscriminately in the same morose and funereal exaltation, in the same retro fascination. There is however a privileging of the immediately preceding era (fascism, war, the period immediately following the war - the innumerable films that play on these themes for us have a closer, more perverse, denser, more confused essence). One can explain it by

evoking the Freudian theory of fetishism (perhaps also a retro hypothesis). This trauma (loss of referentials) is similar to the discovery of the difference between the sexes in children, as serious, as profound, as irreversible: the fetishization of an object intervenes to obscure this unbearable discovery, but precisely, says Freud, this object is not just any object, it is often the last object perceived before the traumatic discovery. Thus the fetishized history will preferably be the one immediately preceding our "irreferential" era. Whence the omnipresence of fascism and of war in retro - a coincidence, an affinity that is not at all political; it is naive to conclude that the evocation of fascism signals a current renewal of fascism (it is precisely because one is no longer there, because one is in something else, which is still less amusing, it is for this reason that fascism can again become fascinating in its filtered cruelty, aestheticized by retro).*1

History thus made its triumphal entry into cinema, posthumously (the term historical has undergone the same fate: a "historical" moment, monument, congress, figure are in this way designated as fossils). Its reinjection has no value as conscious awareness but only as nostalgia for a lost referential.

This does not signify that history has never appeared in cinema as a powerful moment, as a contemporary process, as insurrection and not as resurrection. In the "real" as in cinema, there was history but there isn't any anymore. Today, the history that is "given back" to us (precisely because it was taken from us) has no more of a relation to a "historical real" than neofiguration in painting does to the classical figuration of the real. Neofiguration is an invocation of resemblance, but at the same time the flagrant proof of the disappearance of objects in their very representation: hyperreal. Therein objects shine in a sort of hyperresemblance (like history in contemporary cinema) that makes it so that fundamentally they no longer resemble anything, except the empty figure of resemblance, the empty form of representation. It is a question of life or death: these objects are no longer either living or deadly. That is why they are so exact, so minute, frozen in the state in which a brutal loss of the real would have seized them. All, but not only, those historical films whose very perfection is disquieting: Chinatown, Three Days of the

Condor, Barry Lyndon, 1900, All the President's Men, etc. One has the impression of it being a question of perfect remakes, of extraordinary montages that emerge more from a combinatory culture (or McLuhanesque mosaic), of large photo-, kino-, historicosynthesis machines, etc., rather than one of veritable films. Let's understand each other: their quality is not in question. The problem is rather that in some sense we are left completely indifferent. Take The Last Picture Show: like me, you would have had to be sufficiently distracted to have thought it to be an original production from the 1950s: a very good film about the customs in and the atmosphere of the American small town. Just a slight suspicion: it was a little too good, more in tune, better than the others, without the psychological, moral, and sentimental blotches of the films of that era. Stupefaction when one discovers that it is a 1970s film, perfect retro, purged, pure, the hyperrealist restitution of 1950s cinema. One talks of remaking silent films, those will also doubtlessly be better than those of the period. A whole generation of films is emerging that will be to those one knew what the android is to man: marvelous artifacts, without weakness, pleasing simulacra that lack only the imaginary, and the hallucination inherent to cinema. Most of what we see today (the best) is already of this order. Barry Lyndon is the best example: one never did better, one will never do better in ... in what? Not in evoking, not even in evoking, in simulating. All the toxic radiation has been filtered, all the ingredients are there, in precise doses, not a single error.

Cool, cold pleasure, not even aesthetic in the strict sense: functional pleasure, equational pleasure, pleasure of machination. One only has to dream of Visconti (Guepard, Senso, etc., which in certain respects make one think of Barry Lyndon) to grasp the difference, not only in style, but in the cinematographic act. In Visconti, there is meaning, history, a sensual rhetoric, dead time, a passionate game, not only in the historical content, but in the mise-en-scène. None of that in Kubrick, who manipulates his film like a chess player, who makes an operational scenario of history. And this does not return to the old opposition between the spirit of finesse and the spirit of geometry: that opposition still comes from the game and the stakes of meaning, whereas we are entering an era of films

that in themselves no longer have meaning strictly speaking, an era of great synthesizing machines of varying geometry.

Is there something of this already in Leone's Westerns? Maybe. All the registers slide in that direction. Chinatown: it is the detective movie renamed by laser. It is not really a question of perfection: technical perfection can be part of meaning, and in that case it is neither retro nor hyperrealist, it is an effect of art. Here, technical perfection is an effect of the model: it is one of the referential tactical values. In the absence of real syntax of meaning, one has nothing but the tactical values of a group in which are admirably combined, for example, the CIA as a mythological machine that does everything, Robert Redford as polyvalent star, social relations as a necessary reference to history, technical virtuosity as a necessary reference to cinema.

The cinema and its trajectory: from the most fantastic or mythical to the realistic and the hyperrealistic.

The cinema in its current efforts is getting closer and closer, and with greater and greater perfection, to the absolute real, in its banality, its veracity, in its naked obviousness, in its boredom, and at the same time in its presumption, in its pretension to being the real, the immediate, the unsignified, which is the craziest of undertakings (similarly, functionalism's pretension to designating - design - the greatest degree of correspondence between the object and its function, and its use value, is a truly absurd enterprise); no culture has ever had toward its signs this naive and paranoid, puritan and terrorist vision.

Terrorism is always that of the real.

Concurrently with this effort toward an absolute correspondence with the real, cinema also approaches an absolute correspondence with itself - and this is not contradictory: it is the very definition of the hyperreal. Hypotyposis and specularity. Cinema plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths, remakes the silent

film more perfectly than the original, etc.: all of this is logical, the cinema is fascinated by itself as a lost object as much as it (and we) are fascinated by the real as a lost referent. The cinema and the imaginary (the novelistic, the mythical, unreality, including the delirious use of its own technique) used to have a lively, dialectical, full, dramatic relation. The relation that is being formed today between the cinema and the real is an inverse, negative relation: it results from the loss of specificity of one and of the other. The cold collage, the cool promiscuity, the asexual nuptials of two cold media that evolve in an asymptotic line toward each other: the cinema attempting to abolish itself in the cinematographic (or televised) hyperreal.

History is a strong myth, perhaps, along with the unconscious, the last great myth. It is a myth that at once subtended the possibility of an "objective" enchainment of events and causes and the possibility of a narrative enchainment of discourse. The age of history, if one can call it that, is also the age of the novel. It is this fabulous character, the mythical energy of an event or of a narrative, that today seems to be increasingly lost. Behind a performative and demonstrative logic: the obsession with historical fidelity, with a perfect rendering (as elsewhere the obsession with real time or with the minute quotidianeity of Jeanne Hilmann doing the dishes), this negative and implacable fidelity to the materiality of the past, to a particular scene of the past or of the present, to the restitution of an absolute simulacrum of the past or the present, which was substituted for all other value - we are all complicitous in this, and this is irreversible. Because cinema itself contributed to the disappearance of history, and to the advent of the archive. Photography and cinema contributed in large part to the secularization of history, to fixing it in its visible, "objective" form at the expense of the myths that once traversed it. Today cinema can place all its talent, all its technology in the service of reanimating what it itself contributed to liquidating. It only resurrects ghosts, and it itself is lost therein.

* NOTE *

1. Fascism itself, the mystery of its appearance and of its collective energy, with which no interpretation has been able to come to grips (neither the Marxist one of political manipulation by dominant classes, nor the Reichian one of the sexual repression of the masses, nor the Deleuzian one of despotic paranoia), can already be interpreted as the "irrational" excess of mythic and political referentials, the mad intensification of collective value (blood, race, people, etc.), the reinjection of death, of a "political aesthetic of death" at a time when the process of the disenchantment of value and of collective values, of the rational secularization and unidimensionalization of all life, of the operationalization of all social and individual life already makes itself strongly felt in the West. Yet again, everything seems to escape this catastrophe of value, this neutralization and pacification of life. Fascism is a resistance to this, even if it is a profound, irrational, demented resistance, it would not have tapped into this massive energy if it hadn't been a resistance to something much worse. Fascism's cruelty, its terror is on the level of this other terror that is the confusion of the real and the rational, which deepened in the West, and it is a response to that.

< HOLOCAUST >

Forgetting extermination is part of extermination, because it is also the extermination of memory, of history, of the social, etc. This forgetting is as essential as the event, in any case unlocatable by us, inaccessible to us in its truth. This forgetting is still too dangerous, it must be effaced by an artificial memory (today, everywhere, it is artificial memories that efface the memory of man, that efface man in his own memory). This artificial memory will be the restaging of extermination - but late, much too late for it to be able to make real waves and profoundly disturb something, and especially, especially through a medium that is itself cold, radiating forgetfulness, deterrence, and extermination in a still more systematic way, if that is possible, than the camps themselves. One no longer makes the Jews pass through the crematorium or the gas chamber, but through the sound track and

image track, through the universal screen and the microprocessor. Forgetting, annihilation, finally achieves its aesthetic dimension in this way - it is achieved in retro, finally elevated here to a mass level.

Even the type of sociohistorical dimension that still remained forgotten in the form of guilt, of shameful latency, of the not-said, no longer exists, because now "everyone knows," everybody has trembled and bawled in the face of extermination - a sure sign that "that" will never again occur. But what one exorcises in this way at little cost, and for the price of a few tears, will never in effect be reproduced, because it has always been in the midst of currently reproducing itself, and precisely in the very form in which one pretends to denounce it, in the medium itself of this supposed exorcism: television. Same process of forgetting, of liquidation, of extermination, same annihilation of memories and of history, same inverse, implosive radiation, same absorption without an echo, same black hole as Auschwitz. And one would like to have us believe that TV will lift the weight of Auschwitz by making a collective awareness radiate, whereas television is its perpetuation in another guise, this time no longer under the auspices of a site of annihilation, but of a medium of deterrence.

What no one wants to understand is that Holocaust is primarily (and exclusively) an event, or, rather, a televised object (fundamental rule of McLuhan's, which must not be forgotten), that is to say, that one attempts to rekindle a cold historical event, tragic but cold, the first major event of cold systems, of cooling systems, of systems of deterrence and extermination that will then be deployed in other forms (including the cold war, etc.) and in regard to cold masses (the Jews no longer even concerned with their own death, and the eventually self-managed masses no longer even in revolt: deterred until death, deterred from their very own death) to rekindle this cold event through a cold medium, television, and for the masses who are themselves cold, who will only have the opportunity for a tactile thrill and a posthumous emotion, a deterrent thrill as well, which "vill make them spill into forgetting with a kind of good aesthetic conscience of the catastrophe.

In order to rekindle all that, the whole political and pedagogical orchestration that came from every direction to attempt to give meaning to the event (the televised event this time) was not at all excessive. Panicked blackmailing around the possible consequence of this broadcast on the imagination of children and others. All the pedagogues and social workers mobilized to filter the thing, as if there were some danger of infection in this artificial resurrection! The danger was really rather the opposite: from the cold to the cold, the social inertia of cold systems, of TV in particular. It was thus necessary that the whole world mobilize itself to remake the social, a hot social, heated discussion, hence communication, from the cold monster of extermination. One lacks stakes, investment, history, speech. That is the fundamental problem. The objective is thus to produce them at all cost, and this broadcast served this purpose: to capture the artificial heat of a dead event to warm the dead body of the social. Whence the addition of the supplementary medium to expand on the effect through feedback: immediate polls sanctioning the massive effect of the broadcast, the collective impact of the message - whereas it is well understood that the polls only verify the televisual success of the medium itself. But this confusion will never be lifted. From there, it is necessary to speak of the cold light of television, why it is harmless to the imagination (including that of children) because it no longer carries any imaginary and this for the simple reason that it is no longer an image. By contrast with the cinema, which is still blessed (but less and less so because more and more contaminated by TV) with an intense imaginary - because the cinema is an image. That is to say not only a screen and a visual form, but a myth, something that still retains something of the double, of the phantasm, of the mirror, of the dream, etc. Nothing of any of this in the "TV" image, which suggests nothing, which mesmerizes, which itself is nothing but a screen, not even that: a miniaturized terminal that, in fact, is immediately located in your head - you are the screen, and the TV watches you - it transistorizes all the neurons and passes through like a magnetic tape - a tape, not an image.

< THE CHINA SYNDROME >

The fundamental stake is at the level of television and information. Just as the extermination of the Jews disappeared behind the televised event Holocaust - the cold medium of television having been simply substituted for the cold system of extermination one believed to be exorcising through it - so The China Syndrome is a great example of the supremacy of the televised event over the nuclear event which, itself, remains improbable and in some sense imaginary.

Besides, the film shows this to be the case (without wanting to): that TV is present precisely where it happens is not coincidental, it is the intrusion of TV into the reactor that seems to give rise to the nuclear incident - because TV is like its anticipation and its model in the everyday universe: telefission of the real and of the real world; because TV and information in general are a form of catastrophe in the formal and topological sense Rene Thorn gives the word: a radical qualitative change of a whole system. Or, rather, TV and the nuclear are of the same nature: behind the "hot" and negentropic concepts of energy and information, they have the same power of deterrence as cold systems do. TV itself is also a nuclear process of chain reaction, but implosive: it cools and neutralizes the meaning and the energy of events. Thus the nuclear, behind the presumed risk of explosion, that is to say of hot catastrophe, conceals a long, cold catastrophe, the universalization of a system of deterrence.

At the end of the film again comes the second massive intrusion of the press and of TV that instigates the drama - the murder of the technical director by the Special Forces, a drama that substitutes for the nuclear catastrophe that will not occur.

The homology of the nuclear and of television can be read directly in the images: nothing resembles the control and telecommand headquarters of the nuclear power station more than TV studios, and the nuclear consoles are combined with those of the recording and broadcasting studios in the same imaginary. Thus everything takes place between these

two poles: of the other "center," that of the reactor, in principle the veritable heart of the matter, we will know nothing; it, like the real, has vanished and become illegible, and is at bottom unimportant in the film (when one attempts to suggest it to us, in its imminent catastrophe, it does not work on the imaginary plane: the drama unfolds on the screens and nowhere else).

Harrisburg,*1 Watergate, and Network: such is the trilogy of The China Syndrome - an indissoluble trilogy in which one no longer knows which is the effect and which is the symptom: the ideological argument (Watergate effect), isn't it nothing but the symptom of the nuclear (Harrisburg effect) or of the computer science model (Network effect) - the real (Harrisburg), isn't it nothing but the symptom of the imaginary (Network and China Syndrome) or the opposite? Marvelous indifferentiation, ideal constellation of simulation. Marvelous title, then, this China Syndrome, because the reversibility of symptoms and their convergence in the same process constitute precisely what we call a syndrome - that it is Chinese adds the poetic and intellectual quality of a conundrum or supplication.

Obsessive conjunction of The China Syndrome and Harrisburg. But is all that so involuntary? Without positing magical links between the simulacrum and the real, it is clear that the Syndrome is not a stranger to the "real" accident in Harrisburg, not according to a causal logic, but according to the relations of contagion and silent analogy that link the real to models and to simulacra: to television's induction of the nuclear into the film corresponds, with a troubling obviousness, the film's induction of the nuclear incident in Harrisburg. Strange precession of a film over the real, the most surprising that was given us to witness: the real corresponded point by point to the simulacrum, including the suspended, incomplete character of the catastrophe, which is essential from the point of view of deterrence: the real arranged itself, in the image of the film, to produce a simulation of catastrophe.

From there to reverse our logic and to see in The China Syndrome the veritable event and in Harrisburg its simulacrum, there is only one step that must be cheerfully taken.

Because it is via the same logic that, in the film, nuclear reality arises from the television effect, and that in "reality" Harrisburg arises from the China Syndrome cinema effect.

But The China Syndrome is also not the original prototype of Harrisburg, one is not the simulacrum of which the other would be the real: there are only simulacra, and Harrisburg is a sort of second-order simulation. There is certainly a chain reaction somewhere, and we will perhaps die of it, but this chain reaction is never that of the nuclear, it is that of simulacra and of the simulation where all the energy of the real is effectively swallowed, no longer in a spectacular nuclear explosion, but in a secret and continuous implosion, and that today perhaps takes a more deathly turn than that of all the explosions that rock us.

Because an explosion is always a promise, it is our hope: note how much, in the film as in Harrisburg, the whole world waits for something to blow up, for destruction to announce itself and remove us from this unnameable panic, from this panic of deterrence that it exercises in the invisible form of the nuclear. That the "heart" of the reactor at last reveals its hot power of destruction, that it reassures us about the presence of energy, albeit catastrophic, and bestows its spectacle on us. Because unhappiness is when there is no nuclear spectacle, no spectacle of nuclear energy in itself (Hiroshima is over), and it is for that reason that it is rejected - it would be perfectly accepted if it lent itself to spectacle as previous forms of energy did. Parousia of catastrophe: substantial food for our messianic libido.

But that is precisely what will never happen. What will happen will never again be the explosion, but the implosion. No more energy in its spectacular and pathetic form - all the romanticism of the explosion, which had so much charm, being at the same time that of revolution - but the cold energy of the simulacrum and of its distillation in homeopathic doses in the cold systems of information.

What else do the media dream of besides creating the event simply by their presence? Everyone decries it, but everyone is secretly fascinated by this eventuality. Such is the logic of simulacra, it is no longer that of divine predestination, it is that of the precession of models, but it is just as inexorable. And it is because of this that events no longer have meaning: it is not that they are insignificant in themselves, it is that they were preceded by the model, with which their processes only coincided. Thus it would have been marvelous to repeat the script for The China Syndrome at Fessenheim, during the visit offered to the journalists by the EDF (French Electric Company), to repeat on this occasion the accident linked to the magic eye, to the provocative presence of the media. Alas, nothing happened. And on the other hand yes! so powerful is the logic of simulacra: a week after, the unions discovered fissures in the reactors. Miracle of contagions, miracle of analogic chain reactions.

Thus, the essence of the film is not in any respect the Watergate effect in the person of Jane Fonda, not in any respect TV as a means of exposing nuclear vices, but on the contrary TV as the twin orbit and twin chain reaction of the nuclear one. Besides, just at the end - and there the film is unrelenting in Regard to its own argument - when Jane Fonda makes the truth explode directly (maximum Watergate effect), her image is juxtaposed with what will inexorably follow it and efface it on the screen: a commercial of some kind. The Network effect goes far beyond the Watergate effect and spreads mysteriously into the Harrisburg effect, that is to say not into the nuclear threat, but into the simulation of nuclear catastrophe.

So, it is simulation that is effective, never the real. The simulation of nuclear catastrophe is the strategic result of this generic and universal undertaking of deterrence: accustoming the people to the ideology and the discipline of absolute security - to the metaphysics of fission and fissure. To this end the fissure must be a fiction. A real catastrophe would delay things, it would constitute a retrograde incident, of the explosive kind (without changing the course of things: did Hiroshima perceptibly delay, deter, the universal process of deterrence?).

In the film, also, real fusion would be a bad argument: the film would regress to the level of a disaster movie - weak by definition, because it means returning things to their pure event. The China Syndrome, itself, finds its strength in filtering catastrophe, in the distillation of the nuclear specter through the omnipresent hertzian relays of information. It teaches us (once again without meaning to) that nuclear catastrophe does not occur, is not meant to happen, in the real either, any more than the atomic clash was at the dawning of the cold war. The equilibrium of terror rests on the eternal deferral of the atomic clash. The atom and the nuclear are made to be disseminated for deterrent ends, the power of catastrophe must, instead of stupidly exploding, be disseminated in homeopathic, molecular doses, in the continuous reservoirs of information. Therein lies the true contamination: never biological and radioactive, but, rather, a mental destructuration through a mental strategy of catastrophe.

If one looks carefully, the film introduces us to this mental strategy, and in going further, it even delivers a lesson diametrically opposed to that of Watergate: if every strategy today is that of mental terror and of deterrence tied to the suspension and the eternal simulation of catastrophe, then the only means of mitigating this scenario would be to make the catastrophe arrive, to produce or to reproduce a real catastrophe. To which Nature is at times given: in its inspired moments, it is God who through his cataclysms unknots the equilibrium of terror in which humans are imprisoned. Closer to us, this is what terrorism is occupied with as well: making real, palpable violence surface in opposition to the invisible violence of security. Besides, therein lies terrorism's ambiguity.

* NOTE *

1. The incident at the nuclear reactor on Three Mile Island, which will shortly follow the release of the film.

< APOCALYPSE NOW >

Coppola makes his film like the Americans made war - in this sense, it is the best possible testimonial - with the same immoderation, the same excess of means, the same monstrous candor . . . and the same success. The war as entrenchment, as technological and psychedelic fantasy, the war as a succession of special effects, the war become film even before being filmed. The war abolishes itself in its technological test, and for Americans it was primarily that: a test site, a gigantic territory in which to test their arms, their methods, their power. Coppola does nothing but that: test cinema's power of intervention, test the impact of a cinema that has become an immeasurable machinery of special effects. In this sense, his film is really the extension of the war through other means, the pinnacle of this failed war, and its apotheosis. The war became film, the film becomes war, the two are joined by their common hemorrhage into technology.

The real war is waged by Coppola as it is by Westmoreland: without counting the inspired irony of having forests and Phillipine villages napalmed to retrace the hell of South Vietnam. One revisits everything through cinema and one begins again: the Molochian joy of filming, the sacrificial joy of so many millions spent, of such a holocaust of means, of so many misadventures, and the remarkable paranoia that from the beginning conceived of this film as a historical, global event, in which, in the mind of the creator, the war in Vietnam would have been nothing other than what it is, would not fundamentally have existed - and it is necessary for us to believe in this: the war in Vietnam "in itself" perhaps in fact never happened, it is a dream, a baroque dream of napalm and of the tropics, a psychotropic dream that had the goal neither of a victory nor of a policy at stake, but, rather, the sacrificial, excessive deployment of a power already filming itself as it unfolded, perhaps waiting for nothing but consecration by a superfilm, which completes the mass-spectacle effect of this war.

No real distance, no critical sense, no desire for "raising consciousness" in relation to the war: and in a sense this is the brutal quality of this film - not being rotten with the moral psychology of war. Coppola can certainly deck out his helicopter captain in a ridiculous hat of the light cavalry, and make him crush the Vietnamese village to the sound of Wagner's music - those are not critical, distant signs, they are immersed in the machinery, they are part of the special effect, and he himself makes movies in the same way, with the same retro megalomania, and the same non-signifying furor, with the same clownish effect in overdrive. But there it is, he hits us with that, it is there, it is bewildering, and one can say to oneself: how is such a horror possible (not that of the war, but that of the film strictly speaking)? But there is no answer, there is no possible verdict, and one can even rejoice in this monstrous trick (exactly as with Wagner) - but one can always retrieve a tiny little idea that is not nasty, that is not a value judgment, but that tells you the war in Vietnam and this film are cut from the same cloth, that nothing separates them, that this film is part of the war - if the Americans (seemingly) lost the other one, they certainly won this one. Apocalypse Now is a global victory. Cinematographic power equal and superior to that of the industrial and military complexes, equal or superior to that of the Pentagon and of governments.

And all of a sudden, the film is not without interest: it retrospectively illuminates (not even retrospectively, because the film is a phase of this war without end) what was already crazy about this war, irrational in political terms: the Americans and the Vietnamese are already reconciled, right after the end of the hostilities the Americans offered economic aid, exactly as if they had annihilated the jungle and the towns, exactly as they are making their film today. One has understood nothing, neither about the war nor about cinema (at least the latter) if one has not grasped this lack of distinction that is no longer either an ideological or a moral one, one of good and evil, but one of the reversibility of both destruction and production, of the immanence of a thing in its very revolution, of the organic metabolism of all the technologies, of the carpet of bombs in the strip of film . . .

< THE BEAUBOURG EFFECT: IMPLOSION AND DETERRENCE >

The Beaubourg effect, the Beaubourg machine, the Beaubourg thing - how to give it a name? Enigma of this carcass of flux and signs, of networks and circuits - the final impulse to translate a structure that no longer has a name, the structure of social relations given over to superficial ventilation (animation, self-management, information, media) and to an irreversibly deep implosion. Monument to the games of mass simulation, the Pompidou Center functions as an incinerator absorbing all the cultural energy and devouring it - a bit like the black monolith in 2001: insane convection of all the contents that came there to be materialized, to be absorbed, and to be annihilated. All around, the neighborhood is nothing but a protective zone - remodeling, disinfection, a snobbish and hygienic design - but above all in a figurative sense: it is a machine for making emptiness. It is a bit like the real danger nuclear power stations pose: not lack of security, pollution, explosion, but a system of maximum security that radiates around them, the protective zone of control and deterrence that extends, slowly but surely, over the territory - a technical, ecological, economic, geopolitical glacis. What does the nuclear matter? The station is a matrix in which an absolute model of security is elaborated, which will encompass the whole social field, and which is fundamentally a model of deterrence (it is the same one that controls us globally, under the sign of peaceful coexistence and of the simulation of atomic danger).

The same model, with the same proportions, is elaborated at the Center: cultural fission, political deterrence.

This said, the circulation of fluids is unequal. Ventilation, cooling, electrical networks - the "traditional" fluids circulate there very well. Already the circulation of the human flux is less assured (the archaic solution of escalators in plastic sleeves, one ought to be aspirated, propelled, or something, but with a mobility that would be up to this baroque theatricality of fluids that is the source of the originality of the carcass). As for the

material of the works, of objects, of books and the so-called polyvalent interior space, these no longer circulate at all. It is the opposite of Roissy, where from a futurist center of "spatial" design radiating toward "satellites," etc., one ends up completely flat in front of . . . traditional airplanes. But the incoherence is the same. (What happened to money, this other fluid, what happened to its mode of circulation, of emulsion, of fallout at Beaubourg?)

Same contradiction even in the behavior of the personnel, assigned to the "polyvalent" space and without a private work space. On their feet and mobile, the people affect a cool demeanor, more supple, very contemporary, adapted to the "structure" of a "modern" space. Seated in their corner, which is precisely not one, they exhaust themselves secreting an artificial solitude, remaking their "bubble." Therein is also a great tactic of deterrence: one condemns them to using all their energy in this individual defense. Curiously, one thus finds the same contradiction that characterizes the Beaubourg thing: a mobile exterior, commuting, cool and modern - an interior shriveled by the same old values.

This space of deterrence, articulated on the ideology of visibility, of transparency, of polyvalency, of consensus and contact, and sanctioned by the blackmail to security, is today, virtually, that of all social relations. All of social discourse is there, and on this level as well as on that of the treatment of culture, Beaubourg flagrantly contradicts its explicit objectives, a nice monument to our modernity. It is nice to think that the idea did not come to some revolutionary spirit, but to the logicians of the established order, deprived of all critical intelligence, and thus closer to the truth, capable, in their obstinacy, of putting in place a machine that is fundamentally uncontrollable, that in its very success escapes them, and that is the most exact reflection, even in its contradictions, of the current state of things.

Certainly, all the cultural contents of Beaubourg are anachronistic, because only an empty interior could correspond to this architectural envelope. The general impression being that

everything here has come out of a coma, that everything wants to be animation and is only reanimation, and that this is good because culture is dead, a condition that Beaubourg admirably retraces, but in a dishonest fashion, whereas one should have triumphantly accepted this death and erected a monument or an anti-monument equivalent to the phallic inanity of the Eiffel Tower in its time. Monument to total disconnection, to hyperreality and to the implosion of culture-achieved today for us in the effect of transistorized circuits always threatened by a gigantic short circuit.

Beaubourg is already an imperial compression - figure of a culture already crushed by its own weight - like moving automobiles suddenly frozen in a geometric solid. Like the cars of Caesar, survivors of an ideal accident, no longer external, but internal to the metallic and mechanical structure, and which would have produced tons of cubic scrap iron, where the chaos of tubes, levers, frames, of metal and human flesh inside is tailored to the geometric size of the smallest possible space - thus the culture of Beaubourg is ground, twisted, cut up, and pressed into its smallest simple elements - a bundle of defunct transmissions and metabolisms, frozen like a science-fiction mecanoid.

But instead of breaking and compressing all culture here in this carcass that in any case has the appearance of a compression, instead of that, one exhibits Caesar there. One exhibits Dubuffet and the counterculture, whose inverse simulation acts as a referential for the defunct culture. In this carcass that could have served as a mausoleum to the useless operationality of signs, one reexhibits Tinguely's ephemeral and autodestructive machines under the sign of the eternity of culture. Thus one neutralizes everything together: Tinguely is embalmed in the museal institution, Beaubourg falls back on its supposed artistic contents.

Fortunately, this whole simulacrum of cultural values is annihilated in advance by the external architecture.*1 Because this architecture, with its networks of tubes and the look it has of being an expo or world's fair building, with its (calculated?) fragility deterring any traditional mentality or monumentality, overtly proclaims that our time will never again be

that of duration, that our only temporality is that of the accelerated cycle and of recycling, that of the circuit and of the transit of fluids. Our only culture in the end is that of hydrocarbons, that of refining, cracking, breaking cultural molecules and of their recombination into synthesized products. This, the Beaubourg Museum wishes to conceal, but the Beaubourg cadaver proclaims. And this is what underlies the beauty of the cadaver and the failure of the interior spaces. In any case, the very ideology of "cultural production" is antithetical to all culture, as is that of visibility and of the polyvalent space: culture is a site of the secret, of seduction, of initiation, of a restrained and highly ritualized symbolic exchange. Nothing can be done about it. Too bad for the masses, too bad for Beaubourg.

What should, then, have been placed in Beaubourg?

Nothing. The void that would have signified the disappearance of any culture of meaning and aesthetic sentiment. But this is still too romantic and destructive, this void would still have had value as a masterpiece of anticulture.

Perhaps revolving strobe lights and gyroscopic lights, striating the space, for which the crowd would have provided the moving base element?

In fact, Beaubourg illustrates very well that an order of simulacra only establishes itself on the alibi of the previous order. Here, a cadaver all in flux and surface connections gives itself as content a traditional culture of depth. An order of prior simulacra (that of meaning) furnishes the empty substance of a subsequent order, which, itself, no longer even knows the distinction between signifier and signified, nor between form and content.

The question: "What should have been placed in Beaubourg?" is thus absurd. It cannot be answered because the topical distinction between interior and exterior should no longer be posed. There lies our truth, the truth of Mobius-doubtless an unrealizable Utopia, but

which Beaubourg still points to as right, to the degree to which any of its contents is a countermeaning and annihilated in advance by the form.

Yet-yet ... if you had to have something in Beaubourg - it should have been a labyrinth, a combinatory, infinite library, an aleatory redistribution of destinies through games or lotteries - in short, the universe of Borges - or even the circular Ruins: the slowed-down enchainment of individuals dreamed up by each other (not a dreamworld Disneyland, a laboratory of practical fiction). An experimentation with all the different processes of representation: defraction, implosion, slow motion, aleatory linkage and decoupling - a bit like at the Exploratorium in San Francisco or in the novels of Philip K. Dick - in short a culture of simulation and of fascination, and not always one of production and meaning: this is what might be proposed that would not be a miserable anticulture. Is it possible? Not here, evidently. But this culture takes place elsewhere, everywhere, nowhere. From today, the only real cultural practice, that of the masses, ours (there is no longer a difference), is a manipulative, aleatory practice, a labyrinthine practice of signs, and one that no longer has any meaning.

In another way, however, it is not true that there is no coherence between form and content at Beaubourg. It is true if one gives any credence to the official cultural project. But exactly the opposite occurs there. Beaubourg is nothing but a huge effort to transmute this famous traditional culture of meaning into the aleatory order of signs, into an order of simulacra (the third) that is completely homogeneous with the flux and pipes of the facade. And it is in order to prepare the masses for this new semiurgic order that one brings them together here - with the opposite pretext of acculturating them to meaning and depth.

One must thus start with this axiom: Beaubourg is a monument of cultural deterrence. Within a museal scenario that only serves to keep up the humanist fiction of culture, it is a veritable fashioning of the death of culture that takes place, and it is a veritable cultural mourning for which the masses are joyously gathered.

And they throw themselves at it. There lies the supreme irony of Beaubourg: the masses throw themselves at it not because they salivate for that culture which they have been denied for centuries, but because they have for the first time the opportunity to massively participate in this great mourning of a culture that, in the end, they have always detested.

The misunderstanding is therefore complete when one denounces Beaubourg as a cultural mystification of the masses. The masses, themselves, rush there to enjoy this execution, this dismemberment, this operational prostitution of a culture finally truly liquidated, including all counterculture that is nothing but its apotheosis. The masses rush toward Beaubourg as they rush toward disaster sites, with the same irresistible elan. Better: they are the disaster of Beaubourg. Their number, their stampede, their fascination, their itch to see everything is objectively a deadly and catastrophic behavior for the whole undertaking. Not only does their weight put the building in danger, but their adhesion, their curiosity annihilates the very contents of this culture of animation. This rush can no longer be measured against what was proposed as the cultural objective, it is its radical negation, in both its excess and success. It is thus the masses who assume the role of catastrophic agent in this structure of catastrophe, it is the masses themselves who put an end to mass culture.

Circulating in the space of transparency, the masses are certainly converted into flux, but at the same time, through their opacity and inertia, they put an end to this "polyvalent" space. One invites the masses to participate, to simulate, to play with the models - they go one better: they participate and manipulate so well that they efface all the meaning one wants to give to the operation and put the very infrastructure of the edifice in danger. Thus, always a sort of parody, a hypersimulation in response to cultural simulation, transforms the masses, who should only be the livestock of culture, into the agents of the execution of this culture, of which Beaubourg was only the shameful incarnation.

One must applaud this success of cultural deterrence. All the antiartists, leftists, and those who hold culture in contempt have never even gotten close to approaching the dissuassive efficacy of this monumental black hole that is Beaubourg. It is a truly revolutionary operation, precisely because it is involuntary, insane and uncontrolled, whereas any operation meant to put an end to culture only serves, as one knows, to resurrect it.

To tell the truth, the only content of Beaubourg is the masses themselves, whom the building treats like a converter, like a black box, or, in terms of input-output, just like a refinery handles petroleum products or a flood of unprocessed material.

It has never been so clear that the content - here, culture, elsewhere, information or commodities - is nothing but the phantom support for the operation of the medium itself, whose function is always to induce mass, to produce a homogeneous human and mental flux. An immense to-and-fro movement similar to that of suburban commuters, absorbed and ejected at fixed times by their workplace. And it is precisely work that is at issue here - a work of testing, polling, and directed interrogation: the people come here to select objects - responses to all the questions they might ask themselves, or rather they come themselves in response to the functional and directed question that the objects constitute. More than a chain of work it is thus a question of a programmatic discipline whose constraints have been effaced behind a veneer of tolerance. Well beyond traditional institutions of capital, the hypermarket, or the Beaubourg "hypermarket of culture," is already the model of all future forms of controlled socialization: retotalization in a homogeneous space - time of all the dispersed functions of the body and of social life (work, leisure, media culture), retranscription of all the contradictory currents in terms of integrated circuits. Space-time of a whole operational simulation of social life.

For that, the mass of consumers must be equivalent or homologous to the mass of products. It is the confrontation and the fusion of these two masses that occurs in the hypermarket as it does at Beaubourg, and that makes of them something very different

from the traditional sites of culture (monuments, museums, galleries, libraries, community arts centers, etc.). Here a critical mass beyond which the commodity becomes hypercommodity and culture hyperculture, is elaborated - that is to say no longer linked to distinct exchanges or determined needs, but to a kind of total descriptive universe, or integrated circuit that implosion traverses through and through - incessant circulation of choices, readings, references, marks, decoding. Here cultural objects, as elsewhere the objects of consumption, have no other end than to maintain you in a state of mass integration, of transistorized flux, of a magnetized molecule. It is what one comes to learn in a hypermarket: hyperreality of the commodity - it is what one comes to learn at Beaubourg: the hyperreality of culture.

Already with the traditional museum this cutting up, this regrouping, this interference of all cultures, this unconditional aestheticization that constitutes the hyperreality of culture begins, but the museum is still a memory. Never, as it did here, has culture lost its memory in the service of stockpiling and functional redistribution. And this translates a more general fact: that throughout the "civilized" world the construction of stockpiles of objects has brought with it the complementary process of stockpiles of people - the line, waiting, traffic jams, concentration, the camp. That is "mass production," not in the sense of a massive production or for use by the masses, but the production of the masses. The masses as the final product of all sociality, and, at the same time, as putting an end to sociality, because these masses that one wants us to believe are the social, are on the contrary the site of the implosion of the social. The masses are the increasingly dense sphere in which the whole social comes to be imploded, and to be devoured in an uninterrupted process of simulation.

Whence this concave mirror: it is from seeing the masses in the interior that the masses will be tempted to rush in. Typical marketing method: the whole ideology of transparency here takes on its meaning. Or again: it is in staging a reduced ideal model that one hopes for an accelerated gravitation, an automatic agglutination of culture as an automatic

agglomeration of the masses. Same process: nuclear operation of a chain reaction, or specular operation of white magic.

Thus for the first time, Beaubourg is at the level of culture what the hypermarket is at the level of the commodity: the perfect circulatory operator, the demonstration of anything (commodity, culture, crowd, compressed air) through its own accelerated circulation.

But if the supply of objects brings along with it the stockpiling of men, the latent violence in the supply of objects brings with it the inverse violence of men.

Every stock is violent, and there is a specific violence in any mass of men also, because of the fact that it implodes - a violence proper to its gravitation, to its densification around its own locus of inertia. The masses are a locus of inertia and through that a locus of a completely new, inexplicable violence different from explosive violence.

Critical mass, implosive mass. Beyond thirty thousand it poses the risk of "bending" the structure of Beaubourg. If the masses magnetized by the structure become a destructive variable of the structure itself - if those who conceived of the project wanted this (but how to hope for this?), if they thus programmed the chance of putting an end with one blow to both architecture and culture - then Beaubourg constitutes the most audacious object and the most successful happening of the century!

Make Beaubourg bend! New motto of a revolutionary order. Useless to set fire to it, useless to contest it. Do it! It is the best way of destroying it. The success of Beaubourg is no longer a mystery: the people go there for that, they throw themselves on this building, whose fragility already breathes catastrophe, with the single goal of making it bend.

Certainly they obey the imperative of deterrence: one gives them an object to consume, a culture to devour, an edifice to manipulate. But at the same time they expressly aim, and without knowing it, at this annihilation. The onslaught is the only act the masses can

produce as such - a projectile mass that challenges the edifice of mass culture, that wittly replies with its weight (that is to say with the characteristic most deprived of meaning, the stupidest, the least cultural one they possess) to the challenge of culturality thrown at it by Beaubourg. To the challenge of mass acculturation to a sterilized culture, the masses respond with a destructive irruption, which is prolonged in a brutal manipulation. To mental deterrence the masses respond with a direct physical deterrence. It is their own challenge. Their ruse, which is to respond in the very terms by which they are solicited, but beyond that, to respond to the simulation in which one imprisions them with an enthusiastic social process that surpasses the objectives of the former and acts as a destructive hypersimulation.*2

People have the desire to take everything, to pillage everything, to swallow everything, to manipulate everything. Seeing, deciphering, learning does not touch them. The only massive affect is that of manipulation. The organizers (and the artists and intellectuals) are frightened by this uncontrollable watchfulness, because they never count on anything but the apprenticeship of the masses to the spectacle of culture. They never count on this active, destructive fascination, a brutal and original response to the gift of an incomprehensible culture, an attraction that has all the characteristics of breaking and entering and of the violation of a sanctuary.

Beaubourg could have or should have disappeared the day after the inauguration, dismantled and kidnapped by the crowd, which would have been the only possible response to the absurd challenge of the transparency and democracy of culture - each person taking away a fetishized bolt of this culture itself fetishized.

The people come to touch, they look as if they were touching, their gaze is only an aspect of tactile manipulation. It is certainly a question of a tactile universe, no longer a visual or discursive one, and the people are directly implicated in a process: to manipulate/to be manipulated, to ventilate/to be ventilated, to circulate/to make circulate, which is no

longer of the order of representation, nor of distance, nor of reflection. It is something that is part of panic, and of a world in panic.

Panic in slow motion, no external variable. It is the violence internal to a saturated ensemble. Implosion.

Beaubourg cannot even burn, everything is foreseen. Fire, explosion, destruction are no longer the imaginary alternative to this type of building. It is implosion that is the form of abolishing the "quaternary" world, both cybernetic and combinatory.

Subversion, violent destruction is what corresponds to a mode of production. To a universe of networks, of combinatory theory, and of flow correspond reversal and implosion.

The same for institutions, the state, power, etc. The dream of seeing all that explode by dint of contradictions is precisely nothing but a dream. What is produced in reality is that the institutions implode of themselves, by dint of ramifications, feedback, overdeveloped control circuits. Power implodes, this is its current mode of disappearance.

Such is the case for the city. Fires, war, plague, revolutions, criminal marginality, catastrophes: the whole problematic of the anticity, of the negativity internal or external to the city, has some archaic relation to its true mode of annihilation.

Even the scenario of the underground city - the Chinese version of the burial of structures - is naive. The city does not repeat itself any longer according to a schema of reproduction still dependent on the general schema of production, or according to a schema of resemblance still dependent on a schema of representation. (That is how one still restored after the Second World War.) The city no longer revives, even deep down - it is remade starting from a sort of genetic code that makes it possible to repeat it indefinitely starting with an accumulated cybernetic memory. Gone even the Borgesian

Utopia, of the map coextensive with the territory and doubling it in its entirety: today the simulacrum no longer goes by way of the double and of duplication, but by way of genetic miniaturization. End of representation and implosion, there also, of the whole space in an infinitesimal memory, which forgets nothing, and which belongs to no one. Simulation of an immanent, increasingly dense, irreversible order, one that is potentially saturated and that will never again witness the liberating explosion.

We were a culture of liberating violence (rationality). Whether it be that of capital, of the liberation of productive forces, of the irreversible extension of the field of reason and of the field of value, of the conquered and colonized space including the universal - whether it be that of the revolution, which anticipates the future forms of the social and of the energy of the social - the schema is the same: that of an expanding sphere, whether through slow or violent phases, that of a liberated energy - the imaginary of radiation.

The violence that accompanies it is that of a wider world: it is that of production. This violence is dialectical, energetic, cathartic. It is the one we have learned to analyze and that is familiar to us: that which traces the paths of the social and which leads to the saturation of the whole field of the social. It is a violence that is determined, analytical, liberating.

A whole other violence appears today, which we no longer know how to analyze, because it escapes the traditional schema of explosive violence: implosive violence that no longer results from the extension of a system, but from its saturation and its retraction, as is the case for physical stellar systems. A violence that follows an inordinate densifkation of the social, the state of an overregulated system, a network (of knowledge, information, power) that is overencumbered, and of a hypertrophic control investing all the interstitial pathways.

This violence is unintelligible to us because our whole imaginary has as its axis the logic of expanding systems. It is indecipherable because undetermined. Perhaps it no longer even

comes from the schema of indeterminacy. Because the aleatory models that have taken over from classical models of determination and causality are not fundamentally different. They translate the passage of defined systems of expansion to systems of production and expansion on all levels - in a star or in a rhizome, it doesn't matter - all the philosophies of the release of energy, of the irradiation of intensities and of the molecularization of desire go in the same direction, that of a saturation as far as the interstitial and the infinity of networks. The difference from the molar to the molecular is only a modulation, the last perhaps, in the fundamental energetic process of expanding systems.

Something else if we move from a millennial phase of the liberation and disconnection of energies to a phase of implosion, after a kind of maximum radiation (see Bataille's concepts of loss and expenditure in this sense, and the solar myth of an inexhaustible radiation, on which he founds his sumptuary anthropology: it is the last explosive and radiating myth of our philosophy, the last fire of artifice of a fundamentally general economy, but this no longer has any meaning for us), to a phase of the reversion of the social - gigantic reversion of a field once the point of saturation is reached. The stellar systems also do not cease to exist once their radiating energy is dissipated: they implode according to a process that is at first slow, and then progressively accelerates - they contract at a fabulous speed, and become involutive systems, which absorb all the surrounding energies, so that they become black holes where the world as we know it, as radiation and indefinite energy potential, is abolished.

Perhaps the great metropolises - certainly these if this hypothesis has any meaning - have become sites of implosion in this sense, sites of the absorption and reabsorption of the social itself whose golden age, contemporaneous with the double concept of capital and revolution, is doubtless past. The social involutes slowly or brutally, in a field of inertia, which already envelops the political. (The opposite energy?) One must stop oneself from taking implosion for a negative process -inert, regressive - like the one language imposes on us by exalting the opposite terms of evolution, of revolution. Implosion is a process specific to incalculable consequences. May 1968 was without a doubt the first implosive

episode, that is to say contrary to its rewriting in terms of revolutionary prosopopeia, a first violent reaction to the saturation of the social, a retraction, a challenge to the hegemony of the social, in contradiction, moreover, to the ideology of the participants themselves, who thought they were going further into the social - such is the imaginary that still dominates us - and moreover a good part of the events of 1968 were still able to come from that revolutionary dynamic and explosive violence, but something else began at the same time there: the violent involution of the social, determined on that score, and the consecutive and sudden implosion of power, in a brief moment of time, but that never stopped afterward - fundamentally it is that which continues, the implosion, of the social, of institutions, of power - and not at all an unlocatable revolutionary dynamic. On the contrary, revolution itself, the idea of revolution also implodes, and this implosion carries weightier consequences than the revolution itself.

Certainly, since 1968, and thanks to 1968, the social, like the desert, grows-participation, management, generalized self-management, etc. - but at the same time it comes close in multiple places, more numerous than in 1968, to its disaffection and to its total reversion. Slow seism, intelligible to historical reason.

* NOTES *

1. Still something else annihilates the cultural project of Beaubourg: the masses themselves also flood in to take pleasure in it (we will return to this later).

2. In relation to this critical mass, and to its radical understanding of Beaubourg, how derisory seems the demonstration of the students from Vincennes the evening of its inauguration!

< HYPERMARKET AND HYPERCOMMODITY >

From thirty kilometers all around, the arrows point you toward these large triage centers that are the hypermarkets, toward this hyperspace of the commodity where in many regards a whole new sociality is elaborated. It remains to be seen how the hypermarket centralizes and redistributes a whole region and population, how it concentrates and rationalizes time, trajectories, practices - creating an immense to-and-fro movement totally similar to that of suburban commuters, absorbed and ejected at fixed times by their work place.

At the deepest level, another kind of work is at issue here, the work of acculturation, of confrontation, of examination, of the social code, and of the verdict: people go there to find and to select objects - responses to all the questions they may ask themselves; or, rather, they themselves come in response to the functional and directed question that the objects constitute. The objects are no longer commodities: they are no longer even signs whose meaning and message one could decipher and appropriate for oneself, they are tests, they are the ones that interrogate us, and we are summoned to answer them, and the answer is included in the question. Thus all the messages in the media function in a similar fashion: neither information nor communication, but referendum, perpetual test, circular response, verification of the code.

No relief, no perspective, no vanishing point where the gaze might risk losing itself, but a total screen where, in their uninterrupted display, the billboards and the products themselves act as equivalent and successive signs. There are employees who are occupied solely in remaking the front of the stage, the surface display, where a previous deletion by a consumer might have left some kind of a hole. The self-service also adds to this absence of depth: the same homogeneous space, without mediation, brings together men and things - a space of direct manipulation. But who manipulates whom?

Even repression is integrated as a sign in this universe of simulation. Repression become deterrence is nothing but an extra sign in the universe of persuasion. The circuits of

surveillance cameras are themselves part of the decor of simulacra. A perfect surveillance on all fronts would require a heavier and more sophisticated mechanism of control than that of the store itself. It would not be profitable. It is thus an allusion to repression, a "signal" of this order, that is put in place; this sign can thus coexist with all the others, and even with the opposite imperative, for example those that huge billboards express by inviting you to relax and to choose in complete serenity. These billboards, in fact, observe and surveil you as well, or as badly, as the "policing" television. The latter looks at you, you look at yourself in it, mixed with the others, it is the mirror without silvering (tain) in the activity of consumption, a game of splitting in two and doubling that closes this world on itself.

The hypermarket cannot be separated from the highways that surround and feed it, from the parking lots blanketed in automobiles, from the computer terminal - further still, in concentric circles - from the whole town as a total functional screen of activities. The hypermarket resembles a giant montage factory, because, instead of being linked to the chain of work by a continuous rational constraint, the agents (or the patients), mobile and decentered, give the impression of passing through aleatory circuits from one point of the chain to another. Schedules, selection, buying are aleatory as well, in contrast to work practices. But it is still a question of a chain, of a programmatic discipline, whose taboos are effaced beneath a veneer of tolerance, facility, and hyperreality. The hypermarket is already, beyond the factory and traditional institutions of capital, the model of all future forms of controlled socialization: retotalization in a homogeneous space - time of all the dispersed functions of the body, and of social life (work, leisure, food, hygiene, transportation, media, culture); retranscription of the contradictory fluxes in terms of integrated circuits; space - time of a whole operational simulation of social life, of a whole structure of living and traffic.

A model of directed anticipation, the hypermarket (especially in the United States) preexists the metropolitan area; it is what gives rise to metro areas, whereas the traditional market was in the heart of a city, a place where the city and the country came

to rub elbows. The hypermarket is the expression of a whole lifestyle in which not only the country but the town as well have disappeared to make room for "the metro area" - a completely delimited functional urban zoning, of which the hypermarket is the equivalent, the micromodel, on the level of consumption. But the role of the hypermarket goes far beyond "consumption," and the objects no longer have a specific reality there: what is primary is their serial, circular, spectacular arrangement - the future model of social relations.

The "form" hypermarket can thus help us understand what is meant by the end of modernity. The large cities have witnessed the birth, in about a century (1850-1950), of a generation of large, "modern" stores (many carried this name in one way or another), but this fundamental modernization, linked to that of transportation, did not overthrow the urban structure. The cities remained cities, whereas the new cities are satellited by the hypermarket or the shopping center, serviced by a programmed traffic network, and cease being cities to become metropolitan areas. A new morphogenesis has appeared, which comes from the cybernetic kind (that is to say, reproducing at the level of the territory, of the home, of transit, the scenarios of molecular control that are those of the genetic code), and whose form is nuclear and satellitic. The hypermarket as nucleus. The city, even a modern one, no longer absorbs it. It is the hypermarket that establishes an orbit along which suburbanizaiton moves. It functions as an implant for the new aggregates, as the university or even the factory sometimes also does - no longer the nineteenth-century factory nor the decentralized factory that, without breaking the orbit of the city, is installed in the suburbs, but the montage factory, automated by electronic controls, that is to say corresponding to a totally deterritorialized function and mode of work. With this factory, as with the hypermarket or the new university, one is no longer dealing with functions (commerce, work, knowledge, leisure) that are autonomized and displaced (which still characterizes the "modern" unfolding of the city), but with a model of the disintegration of functions, of the indeterminacy of functions, and of the disintegration of the city itself, which is transplanted outside the city and treated as a hyperreal model, as the nucleus of a metropolitan area based on synthesis that no longer

has anything to do with a city. Negative satellites of the city that translate the end of the city, even of the modern city, as a determined, qualitative space, as an original synthesis of a society.

One could believe that this implantation corresponds to the rationalization of diverse functions. But, in fact, from the moment a function becomes hyperspecialized to the point of being capable of being projected from every element on the terrain "keys in hand," it loses the finality proper to it and becomes something else altogether: a polyfunctional nucleus, an ensemble of "black boxes" with multiple input-outputs, the locus of convection and of destructuration. These factories and these universities are no longer factories nor universities, and the hypermarkets no longer have the quality of a market. Strange new objects of which the nuclear power station is without a doubt the absolute model and from which radiates a kind of neutralization of the territory, a power of deterrence that, behind the apparent function of these objects, without a doubt constitutes their fundamental function: the hyperreality of functional nuclei that are no longer at all functional. These new objects are the poles of simulation around which is elaborated, in contrast to old train stations, factories, or traditional transportation networks, something other than a "modernity": a hyperreality, a simultaneity of all the functions, without a past, without a future, an operationality on every level. And doubtless also crises, or even new catastrophes: May 1968 begins at Nanterre, and not at the Sorbonne, that is to say in a place where, for the first time in France, the hyperfunctionalization "extra muros" of a place of learning is equivalent to deterritorialization, to disaffection, to the loss of the function and of the finality of knowledge in a programmed neofunctional whole. There, a new, original violence was born in response to the orbital satellization of a model (knowledge, culture) whose referential is lost.

< THE IMPLOSION OF MEANING IN THE MEDIA >

We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.

Consider three hypotheses.

Either information produces meaning (a negentropic factor), but cannot make up for the brutal loss of signification in every domain. Despite efforts to reinject message and content, meaning is lost and devoured faster than it can be reinjected. In this case, one must appeal to a base productivity to replace failing media. This is the whole ideology of free speech, of media broken down into innumerable individual cells of transmission, that is, into "antimedia" (pirate radio, etc.).

Or information has nothing to do with signification. It is something else, an operational model of another order, outside meaning and of the circulation of meaning strictly speaking. This is Shannon's hypothesis: a sphere of information that is purely functional, a technical medium that does not imply any finality of meaning, and thus should also not be implicated in a value judgment. A kind of code, like the genetic code: it is what it is, it functions as it does, meaning is something else that in a sense comes after the fact, as it does for Monod in Chance and Necessity. In this case, there would simply be no significant relation between the inflation of information and the deflation of meaning.

Or, very much on the contrary, there is a rigorous and necessary correlation between the two, to the extent that information is directly destructive of meaning and signification, or that it neutralizes them. The loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving, dissuasive action of information, the media, and the mass media.

The third hypothesis is the most interesting but flies in the face of every commonly held opinion. Everywhere socialization is measured by the exposure to media messages. Whoever is underexposed to the media is desocialized or virtually asocial. Everywhere information is thought to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus value of meaning homologous to the economic one that results from the accelerated rotation of

capital. Information is thought to create communication, and even if the waste is enormous, a general consensus would have it that nevertheless, as a whole, there be an excess of meaning, which is redistributed in all the interstices of the social - just as consensus would have it that material production, despite its dysfunctions and irrationalities, opens onto an excess of wealth and social purpose. We are all complicitous in this myth. It is the alpha and omega of our modernity, without which the credibility of our social organization would collapse. Well, the fact is that it is collapsing, and for this very reason: because where we think that information produces meaning, the opposite occurs.

Information devours its own content. It devours communication and the social. And for two reasons.

1. Rather than creating communication, it exhausts itself in the act of staging communication. Rather than producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning. A gigantic process of simulation that is very familiar. The nondirective interview, speech, listeners who call in, participation at every level, blackmail through speech: "You are concerned, you are the event, etc." More and more information is invaded by this kind of phantom content, this homeopathic grafting, this awakening dream of communication. A circular arrangement through which one stages the desire of the audience, the antitheater of communication, which, as one knows, is never anything but the recycling in the negative of the traditional institution, the integrated circuit of the negative. Immense energies are deployed to hold this simulacrum at bay, to avoid the brutal desimulation that would confront us in the face of the obvious reality of a radical loss of meaning.

It is useless to ask if it is the loss of communication that produces this escalation in the simulacrum, or whether it is the simulacrum that is there first for dissuasive ends, to short-circuit in advance any possibility of communication (precession of the model that calls an end to the real). Useless to ask which is the first term, there is none, it is a

circular process - that of simulation, that of the hyperreal. The hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished.

Thus not only communication but the social functions in a closed circuit, as a lure - to which the force of myth is attached. Belief, faith in information attach themselves to this tautological proof that the system gives of itself by doubling the signs of an unlocatable reality.

But one can believe that this belief is as ambiguous as that which was attached to myths in ancient societies. One both believes and doesn't. One does not ask oneself, "I know very well, but still." A sort of inverse simulation in the masses, in each one of us, corresponds to this simulation of meaning and of communication in which this system encloses us. To this tautology of the system the masses respond with ambivalence, to deterrence they respond with disaffection, or with an always enigmatic belief. Myth exists, but one must guard against thinking that people believe in it: this is the trap of critical thinking that can only be exercised if it presupposes the naivete and stupidity of the masses.

2. Behind this exacerbated mise-en-scène of communication, the mass media, the pressure of information pursues an irresistible destructuration of the social.

Thus information dissolves meaning and dissolves the social, in a sort of nebulous state dedicated not to a surplus of innovation, but, on the contrary, to total entropy.*1

Thus the media are producers not of socialization, but of exactly the opposite, of the implosion of the social in the masses. And this is only the macroscopic extension of the implosion of meaning at the microscopic level of the sign. This implosion should be analyzed according to McLuhan's formula, the medium is the message, the consequences of which have yet to be exhausted.

That means that all contents of meaning are absorbed in the only dominant form of the medium. Only the medium can make an event - whatever the contents, whether they are conformist or subversive. A serious problem for all counterinformation, pirate radios, antimedia, etc. But there is something even more serious, which McLuhan himself did not see. Because beyond this neutralization of all content, one could still expect to manipulate the medium in its form and to transform the real by using the impact of the medium as form. If all the content is wiped out, there is perhaps still a subversive, revolutionary use value of the medium as such. That is - and this is where McLuhan's formula leads, pushed to its limit - there is not only an implosion of the message in the medium, there is, in the same movement, the implosion of the medium itself in the real, the implosion of the medium and of the real in a sort of hyperreal nebula, in which even the definition and distinct action of the medium can no longer be determined.

Even the "traditional" status of the media themselves, characteristic of modernity, is put in question. McLuhan's formula, the medium is the message, which is the key formula of the era of simulation (the medium is the message - the sender is the receiver - the circularity of all poles - the end of panoptic and perspectival space - such is the alpha and omega of our modernity), this very formula must be imagined at its limit where, after all the contents and messages have been volatilized in the medium, it is the medium itself that is volatilized as such. Fundamentally, it is still the message that lends credibility to the medium, that gives the medium its determined, distinct status as the intermediary of communication. Without a message, the medium also falls into the indefinite state characteristic of all our great systems of judgment and value. A single model, whose efficacy is immediate, simultaneously generates the message, the medium, and the "real."

Finally, the medium is the message not only signifies the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. There are no more media in the literal sense of the word (I'm speaking particularly of electronic mass media) - that is, of a mediating power between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another. Neither in content, nor in form. Strictly, this is what implosion signifies. The absorption of one pole into

another, the short-circuiting between poles of every differential system of meaning, the erasure of distinct terms and oppositions, including that of the medium and of the real - thus the impossibility of any mediation, of any dialectical intervention between the two or from one to the other. Circularity of all media effects. Hence the impossibility of meaning in the literal sense of a unilateral vector that goes from one pole to another. One must envisage this critical but original situation at its very limit: it is the only one left us. It is useless to dream of revolution through content, useless to dream of a revelation through form, because the medium and the real are now in a single nebula whose truth is indecipherable.

The fact of this implosion of contents, of the absorption of meaning, of the evanescence of the medium itself, of the reabsorption of every dialectic of communication in a total circularity of the model, of the implosion of the social in the masses, may seem catastrophic and desperate. But this is only the case in light of the idealism that dominates our whole view of information. We all live by a passionate idealism of meaning and of communication, by an idealism of communication through meaning, and, from this perspective, it is truly the catastrophe of meaning that lies in wait for us.

But one must realize that "catastrophe" has this "catastrophic" meaning of end and annihilation only in relation to a linear vision of accumulation, of productive finality, imposed on us by the system. Etymologically, the term itself only signifies the curvature, the winding down to the bottom of a cycle that leads to what one could call the "horizon of the event," to an impassable horizon of meaning: beyond that nothing takes place that has meaning for us - but it suffices to get out of this ultimatum of meaning in order for the catastrophe itself to no longer seem like a final and nihilistic day of reckoning, such as it functions in our contemporary imaginary.

Beyond meaning, there is the fascination that results from the neutralization and the implosion of meaning. Beyond the horizon of the social, there are the masses, which result from the neutralization and the implosion of the social.

What is essential today is to evaluate this double challenge the challenge of the masses to meaning and their silence (which is not at all a passive resistance) - the challenge to meaning that comes from the media and its fascination. All the marginal, alternative efforts to revive meaning are secondary in relation to that challenge.

Evidently, there is a paradox in this inextricable conjunction of the masses and the media: do the media neutralize meaning and produce unformed [informe] or informed [informée] masses, or is it the masses who victoriously resist the media by directing or absorbing all the messages that the media produce without responding to them? Sometime ago, in "Requiem for the Media," I analyzed and condemned the media as the institution of an irreversible model of communication without a response. But today? This absence of a response can no longer be understood at all as a strategy of power, but as a counterstrategy of the masses themselves when they encounter power. What then?

Are the mass media on the side of power in the manipulation of the masses, or are they on the side of the masses in the liquidation of meaning, in the violence perpetrated on meaning, and in fascination? Is it the media that induce fascination in the masses, or is it the masses who direct the media into the spectacle? Mogadishu-Stammheim: the media make themselves into the vehicle of the moral condemnation of terrorism and of the exploitation of fear for political ends, but simultaneously, in the most complete ambiguity, they propagate the brutal charm of the terrorist act, they are themselves terrorists, insofar as they themselves march to the tune of seduction (cf. Umberto Eco on this eternal moral dilemma: how can one not speak of terrorism, how can one find a good use of the media - there is none). The media carry meaning and countermeaning, they manipulate in all directions at once, nothing can control this process, they are the vehicle for the simulation internal to the system and the simulation that destroys the system, according to an absolutely Mobian and circular logic - and it is exactly like this. There is no alternative to this, no logical resolution. Only a logical exacerbation and a catastrophic resolution.

With one caution. We are face to face with this system in a double situation and insoluble double bind - exactly like children faced with the demands of the adult world. Children are simultaneously required to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible, free and conscious, and to constitute themselves as submissive, inert, obedient, conforming objects. The child resists on all levels, and to a contradictory demand he responds with a double strategy. To the demand of being an object, he opposes all the practices of disobedience, of revolt, of emancipation; in short, a total claim to subjecthood. To the demand of being a subject he opposes, just as obstinately and efficaciously, an object's resistance, that is to say, exactly the opposite: childishness, hyperconformism, total dependence, passivity, idiocy. Neither strategy has more objective value than the other. The subject-resistance is today unilaterally valorized and viewed as positive - just as in the political sphere only the practices of freedom, emancipation, expression, and the constitution of a political subject are seen as valuable and subversive. But this is to ignore the equal, and without a doubt superior, impact of all the object practices, of the renunciation of the subject position and of meaning - precisely the practices of the masses - that we bury under the derisory terms of alienation and passivity. The liberating practices respond to one of the aspects of the system, to the constant ultimatum we are given to constitute ourselves as pure objects, but they do not respond at all to the other demand, that of constituting ourselves as subjects, of liberating ourselves, expressing ourselves at whatever cost, of voting, producing, deciding, speaking, participating, playing the game - a form of blackmail and ultimatum just as serious as the other, even more serious today. To a system whose argument is oppression and repression, the strategic resistance is the liberating claim of subjecthood. But this strategy is more reflective of the earlier phase of the system, and even if we are still confronted with it, it is no longer the strategic terrain: the current argument of the system is to maximize speech, the maximum production of meaning. Thus the strategic resistance is that of the refusal of meaning and of the spoken word - or of the hyperconformist simulation of the very mechanisms of the system, which is a form of refusal and of non-reception. It is the strategy of the masses: it is equivalent to returning to the system its

own logic by doubling it, to reflecting meaning, like a mirror, without absorbing it. This strategy (if one can still speak of strategy) prevails today, because it was ushered in by that phase of the system which prevails.

To choose the wrong strategy is a serious matter. All the movements that only play on liberation, emancipation, on the resurrection of a subject of history, of the group, of the word based on "consciousness raising," indeed a "raising of the unconscious" of subjects and of the masses, do not see that they are going in the direction of the system, whose imperative today is precisely the overproduction and regeneration of meaning and of speech.

* NOTE *

1. Here we have not spoken of information except in the social register of communication. But it would be enthralling to consider this hypothesis even within the parameters of cybernetic information theory. There also, the fundamental thesis calls for this information to be synonymous with negentropy with the resistance to entropy, with an excess of meaning and organization. But it would be useful to posit the opposite hypothesis: INFORMATION = ENTROPY. For example: the information or knowledge that can be obtained about a system or an event is already a form of the neutralization and entropy of this system (to be extended to science in general, and to the social sciences and humanities in particular). Information in which an event is reflected or broadcast is already a degradedform of this event. Do not hesitate to analyze the media's intervention in May 1968 in these terms. The extension of the student action permitted the general strike, but the latter was precisely a black box that neutralized the original virulence of the movement. Amplification was itself a mortal trap and not a positive extension. One should be wary of the universalization of struggles through information. One should be wary of solidarity campaigns at every level, of this simultaneously electronic and worldly solidarity. Every strategy of the universalization of differences is an entropic strategy of the system.

< ABSOLUTE ADVERTISING, GROUND-ZERO ADVERTISING >

Today what we are experiencing is the absorption of all virtual modes of expression into that of advertising. All original cultural forms, all determined languages are absorbed in advertising because it has no depth, it is instantaneous and instantaneously forgotten. Triumph of superficial form, of the smallest common denominator of all signification, degree zero of meaning, triumph of entropy over all possible tropes. The lowest form of energy of the sign. This unarticulated, instantaneous form, without a past, without a future, without the possiblity of metamorphosis, has power over all the others. All current forms of activity tend toward advertising and most exhaust themselves therein. Not necessarily advertising itself, the kind that is produced as such - but the form of advertising, that of a simplified operational mode, vaguely seductive, vaguely consensual (all the modalities are confused therein, but in an attenuated, agitated mode). More generally, the form of advertising is one in which all particular contents are annulled at the very moment when they can be transcribed into each other, whereas what is inherent to "weighty" enunciations, to articulated forms of meaning (or of style) is that they cannot be translated into each other, any more than the rules of a game can be.

This long movement toward translatability and thus toward a complete combinatorial, which is that of the superficial transparency of everything, of their absolute advertising (of which professional advertising is, once again, only an episodic form), can be read in the vicissitudes of propaganda.

The whole scope of advertising and propaganda comes from the October Revolution and the market crash of 1929. Both languages of the masses, issuing from the mass production of ideas, or commodities, their registers, separate at first, progressively converge. Propaganda becomes the marketing and merchandising of idea-forces, of political men and parties with their "trademark image." Propaganda approaches

advertising as it would the vehicular model of the only great and veritable idea-force of this competing society, the commodity and the mark. This convergence defines a society-ours-in which there is no longer any difference between the economic and the political, because the same language reigns in both, from one end to the other; a society therefore where the political economy, literally speaking, is finally fully realized. That is to say dissolved as a specific power (as an historical mode of social contradiction), resolute, absorbed in a language without contradictions, like a dream, because traversed by purely superficial intensities.

A subsequent stage is crossed once the very language of the social, after that of the political, becomes confused with this fascinating solicitation of an agitated language, once the social turns itself into advertising, turns itself over to the popular vote by trying to impose its trademark image. From the historical destiny that it was, the social itself fell to the level of a "collective enterprise" securing its publicity on every level. See what surplus value of the social each advertisement tries to produce: werben werben (advertise advertise) - the solicitation of the social everywhere, present on walls, in the hot and bloodless voices of female radio announcers, in the accents of the sound track and in the multiple tonalities of the image track that is played everywhere before our eyes. A sociality everywhere present, an absolute sociality finally realized in absolute advertising - that is to say, also totally dissolved, a vestige of sociality hallucinated on all the walls in the simplified form of a demand of the social that is immediately met by the echo of advertising. The social as a script, whose bewildered audience we are.

Thus the form of advertising has imposed itself and developed at the expense of all the other languages as an increasingly neutral, equivalent rhetoric, without affects, as an "asyntactic nebula," Yves Stourdze would say, which envelops us from every side (and which at the same time eliminates the hotly controversial problem of "belief" and efficacy: it does not offer signifieds in which to invest, it offers a simplified equivalence of all the formerly distinctive signs, and deters them with this very equivalence). This defines the limits of advertising's current power and the conditions of its disappearance, since today

advertising is no longer a stake, it has both "entered into our customs" and at the same time escaped the social and moral dramaturgy that it still represented twenty years ago.

It is not that people no longer believe in it or that they have accepted it as routine. It is that if its fascination once lay in its power to simplify all languages, today this power is stolen from it by another type of language that is even more simplified and thus more functional: the languages of computer science. The sequence model, the sound track, and the image track that advertising, along with the other big media, offers us - the model of the combinatory, equal distribution of all discourses that it proposes - this still rhetorical continuum of sounds, signs, signals, slogans that it erects as a total environment is largely overtaken, precisely in its function of simulation, by the magnetic tape, by the electronic continuum that is in the process of being silhouetted against the horizon of the end of this century. Microprocessing, digitality, cybernetic languages go much further in the direction of the absolute simplification of processes than advertising did on its humble - still imaginary and spectacular-level. And it is because these systems go further that today they polarize the fascination that formerly devolved on advertising. It is information, in the sense of data processing, that will put an end to, that is already putting an end to the reign of advertising. That is what inspires fear, and what is thrilling. The "thrill" of advertising has been displaced onto computers and onto the miniaturization of everyday life by computer science.

The anticipatory illustration of this transformation was Philip K. Dick's papula - that transistorized advertising implant, a sort of broadcasting leech, an electronic parasite that attaches itself to the body and that is very hard to get rid of. But the papula is still an intermediary form: it is already a kind of incorporated prosthesis, but it still incessantly repeats advertising messages. A hybrid, then, but a prefiguration of the psychotropic and dataprocessing networks of the automatic piloting of individuals, next to which the "conditioning" by advertising looks like a delightful change in fortune.

Currently, the most interesting aspect of advertising is its disappearance, its dilution as a specific form, or even as a medium. Advertising is no longer (was it ever?) a means of communication or of information. Or else it is overtaken by the madness specific to overdeveloped systems, that of voting for itself at each moment, and thus of parodying itself. If at a given moment, the commodity was its own publicity (there was no other) today publicity has become its own commodity. It is confused with itself (and the eroticism with which it ridiculously cloaks itself is nothing but the autoerotic index of a system that does nothing but designate itself - whence the absurdity of seeing in it an "alienation" of the female body).

As a medium become its own message (which makes it so that now there is a demand for advertising in and of itself, and that thus the question of "believing" in it or not is no longer even posed), advertising is completely in unison with the social, whose historical necessity has found itself absorbed by the pure and simple demand for the social: a demand that the social function like a business, a group of services, a mode of living or of survival (the social must be saved just as nature must be preserved: the social is our niche) - whereas formerly it was a sort of revolution in its very project. This is certainly lost: the social has lost precisely this power of illusion, it has fallen into the register of supply and demand, just as work has passed from being a force antagonistic to capital to the simple status of employment, that is to say of goods (eventually rare) and services just like the others. One can thus create advertising for work, the joy of finding work, just as one will be able to create advertising for the social. And, today, true advertising lies therein: in the design of the social, in the exaltation of the social in all its forms, in the fierce, obstinate reminder of a social, the need for which makes itself rudely felt.

Folkloric dances in the metro, innumerable campaigns for security, the slogan "tomorrow I work" accompanied by a smile formerly reserved for leisure time, and the advertising sequence for the election to the Prud-hommes (an industrial tribunal): "I don't let anyone choose for me" - an Ubuesque slogan, one that rang so spectacularly falsely, with a mocking liberty, that of proving the social while denying it. It is not by chance that

advertising, after having, for a long time, carried an implicit ultimatum of an economic kind, fundamentally saying and repeating incessantly, "I buy, I consume, I take pleasure," today repeats in other forms, "I vote, I participate, I am present, I am concerned" - mirror of a paradoxical mockery, mirror of the indifference of all public signification.

The opposite panic: one knows that the social can be dissolved in a panic reaction, an uncontrollable chain reaction. But it can also be dissolved in the opposite reaction, a chain reaction of inertia, each microuniverse saturated, autoregulated, computerized, isolated in automatic pilot. Advertising is the prefiguration of this: the first manifestation of an uninterrupted thread of signs, like ticker tape - each isolated in its inertia. Disaffected, but saturated. Desensitized, but ready to crack. It is in such a universe that what Virilio calls the aesthetic of disappearance gathers strength, that the following being to appear: fractal objects, fractal forms, fault zones that follow saturation, and thus a process of massive rejection, of the abreaction or stupor of a society purely transparent to itself. Like the signs in advertising, one is geared down, one becomes transparent or uncountable, one becomes diaphanous or rhizomic to escape the point of inertia - one is placed in orbit, one is plugged in, one is satellized, one is archived - paths cross: there is the sound track, the image track, just as in life there is the work track, the leisure track, the transport track, etc., all enveloped in the advertising track. Everywhere there are three or four paths, and you are at the crossroads. Superficial saturation and fascination.

Because fascination remains. One need only look at Las Vegas, the absolute advertising city (of the 1950s, of the crazy years of advertising, which has retained the charm of that era, today retro in some sense, because advertising is secretly condemned by the programmatic logic that will give rise to very different cities). When one sees Las Vegas rise whole from the desert in the radiance of advertising at dusk, and return to the desert when dawn breaks, one sees that advertising is not what brightens or decorates the walls, it is what effaces the walls, effaces the streets, the facades, and all the architecture, effaces any support and any depth, and that it is this liquidation, this reabsorption of everything into the surface (whatever signs circulate there) that plunges us into this

stupefied, hyperreal euphoria that we would not exchange for anything else, and that is the empty and inescapable form of seduction.

Language allows itself to be dragged along by its double, and joins the best to the worst for a phantom of rationality whose formula is "Everyone must believe in it." Such is the message of what unites us.
- J. L. Bouttes, Le destructeur d'intensites (The Destroyer of Intensities)

Advertising, therefore, like information: destroyer of intensities, accelerator of inertia. See how all the artifices of meaning and of nonmeaning are repeated in it with lassitude, like all the procedures, all the mechanisms of the language of communication (the function of contact: you understand me? Are you looking at me? It will speak! - the referential function, the poetic function even, the allusion, the irony, the game of words, the unconscious), how all of that is staged exactly like sex in pornography, that is to say without any faith, with the same tired obscenity. That is why, now, it is useless to analyze advertising as language, because something else is happening there: a doubling of language (and also of images), to which neither linguistics nor semiology correspond, because they function on the veritable operation of meaning, without the slightest suspicion of this caricatural exorbitance of all the functions of language, this opening onto an immense field of the mockery of signs, "consumed" as one says in their mockery, for their mockery and the collective spectacle of their game without stakes - just as porno is a hypertrophied fiction of sex consumed in its mockery, for its mockery, a collective spectacle of the inanity of sex in its baroque assumption (it was the baroque that invented this triumphal mockery of stucco, fixing the disappearance of the religious in the orgasm of statues).

Where is the golden age of the advertising project? The exaltation of an object by an image, the exaltation of buying and of consumption through the sumptuary spending of

advertising? Whatever the subjugation of publicity to the management of capital (but this aspect of the question - that of the social and economic impact of publicity - always remains unresolved and fundamentally insoluble), it always had more than a subjugated function, it was a mirror held out to the universe of political economy and of the commodity, it was for a moment their glorious imaginary, that of a torn-up world, but an expanding one. But the universe of the commodity is no longer this one: it is a world both saturated and in involution. In one blow, it lost both its triumphal imaginary, and, from the mirror stage, it passed in some sense to the stage of mourning.

There is no longer a staging of the commodity: there is only its obscene and empty form. And advertising is the illustration of this saturated and empty form.

That is why advertising no longer has a territory. Its recoverable forms no longer have any meaning. The Forum des Halles, for example, is a gigantic advertising unit - an operation of publicitude. It is not the advertising of a particular person, of any firm, the Forum also does not have the status of a veritable mall or architectural whole, any more than Beaubourg is, in the end, a cultural center: these strange objects, these supergadgets simply demonstrate that our social monumentality has become advertising. And it is something like the Forum that best illustrates what advertising has become, what the public domain has become.

The commodity is buried, like information is in archives, like archives are in bunkers, like missiles are in atomic silos.

Gone the happy and displayed commodity, now that it flees the sun, and suddenly it is like a man who has lost his shadow. Thus the Forum des Halles closely resembles a funeral home - the funereal luxury of a commodity buried, transparent, in a black sun. Sarcophagus of the commodity.

Everything there is sepulchral - white, black, salmon marble. A bunker-case-in deep, snobbish, dull black-mineral underground space. Total absence of fluids; there is no longer even a liquid gadget like the veil of water at Parly 2,*1 which at least fooled the eye - here not even an amusing subterfuge, only pretentious mourning is staged. (The only amusing idea in the whole thing is precisely the human and his shadow who walk in trompe l'oeil on the vertical dais of concrete: a gigantic, beautiful gray, open-air canvas, serving as a frame to the trompe l'oeil, this wall lives without having wished to, in contrast to the family vault of haute couture and pret-a-porter that constitutes the Forum. This shadow is beautiful because it is an allusion in contrast to the inferior world that has lost its shadow.)

All that one could hope for, once this sacred space was opened to the public, and for fear that pollution, as in the Lascaux caves, cause it to deteriorate irremediably (think of the waves of people from the RER) ,*2 was that it be immediately closed off to circulation and covered with a definitive shroud in order to keep this testimony to a civilization that has arrived, after having passed the stage of the apogee, at the stage of the hypogee, of the commodity, intact. There is a fresco here that traces the long route traversed, starting with the man of Tautavel passing through Marx and Einstein to arrive at Dorothee Bis . . .Why not save this fresco from decomposition? Later the speleologists will rediscover it, at the same time that they discover a culture that chose to bury itself in order to definitively escape its own shadow, to bury its seductions and its artifices as if it were already consecrating them to another world.

* NOTES *

1. Parly 2 is a mall that was built in the 1970s on the outskirts of Paris.-TRANS.

2. The RER is a high-speed, underground commuter train.-TRANS.

< CLONE STORY >

Of all the prostheses that mark the history of the body, the double is doubtless the oldest. But the double is precisely not a prosthesis: it is an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul, the shadow, the mirror image, haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death. This is not always the case, however: when the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death.

In other words, the imaginary power and wealth of the double - the one in which the strangeness and at the same time the intimacy of the subject to itself are played out (heimlich/ unheimlich) - rests on its immateriality, on the fact that it is and remains a phantasm. Everyone can dream, and must have dreamed his whole life, of a perfect duplication or multiplication of his being, but such copies only have the power of dreams, and are destroyed when one attempts to force the dream into the real. The same is true of the (primal) scene of seduction: it only functions when it is phantasmed, reremembered, never real. It belonged to our era to wish to exorcise this phantasm like the others, that is to say to want to realize, materialize it in flesh and bone and, in a completely contrary way, to change the game of the double from a subtle exchange of death with the Other into the eternity of the Same.

Clones. Cloning. Human cuttings ad infinitum, each individual cell of an organism capable of again becoming the matrix of an identical individual. In the United States, a child was born a few months ago like a geranium: from cuttings. The first clone child (the lineage of an individual via vegetal multiplication). The first born from a single cell of a single individual, his "father," the sole progenitor, of which he would be the exact replica, the perfect twin, the double.*1

Dream of an eternal twining substituted for sexual procreation that is linked to death. Cellular dream of scissiparity, the purest form of parentage, because it finally allows one to do without the other, to go from the same to the same (one still has to use the uterus of a woman, and a pitted ovum, but this support is ephemeral, and in any case anonymous: a female prosthesis could replace it). Monocellular Utopia which, by way of genetics, allows complex beings to achieve the destiny of protozoas.

What, if not a death drive, would push sexed beings to regress to a form of reproduction prior to sexuation (besides, isn't it this form of scissiparity, this reproduction and proliferation through pure contiguity that is for us, in the depths of our imaginary, death and the death drive - what denies sexuality and wants to annihilate it, sexuality being the carrier of life, that is to say of a critical and mortal form of reproduction?) and that, at the same time, would push them metaphysically to deny all alterity, all alteration of the Same in order to aim solely for the perpetuation of an identity, a transparency of the genetic inscription no longer even subject to the vicissitudes of procreation?

Let's leave the death drive aside. Is it a question of the phantasm of auto-genesis? No, because such a fantasy still passes through the figures of the mother and the father, sexed parental figures that the subject can dream of effacing by substituting himself for them, but without denying the symbolic structure of procreation at all: becoming one's own child is still being someone's child. Whereas cloning radically abolishe's the Mother, but also the Father, the intertwining of their genes, the imbrication of their differences, but above all the joint act that is procreation. The cloner does not beget himself: he sprouts from each of his segments. One can speculate on the wealth of each of these vegetal branchings that in effect resolve all oedipal sexuality in the service of "nonhuman" sex, of sex through immediate contiguity and reduction - it is still the case that it is no longer a question of the fantasy of auto-genesis. The Father and the Mother have disappeared, not in the service of an aleatory liberty of the subject, but in the service of a matrix called code. No more mother, no more father: a matrix. And it is the matrix, that of

the genetic code, that now infinitely "gives birth" based on a functional mode purged of all aleatory sexuality.

The subject is also gone, since identical duplication puts an end to his division. The mirror stage is abolished in cloning, or rather it is parodied therein in a monstruous fashion. Cloning also retains nothing, and for the same reason, of the immemorial and narcissistic dream of the subject's projection into his ideal alter ego, since this projection still passes through an image: the one in the mirror, in which the subject is alienated in order to find himself again, or the one, seductive and mortal, in which the subject sees himself in order to die there. None of this occurs in cloning. No more medium, no more image - any more than an industrial object is the mirror of the identical one that succeeds it in the series. One is never the ideal or mortal mirage of the other, they can only be added to each other, and if they can only be added, it means that they are not sexually engendered and know nothing of death.

It is no longer even a question of being twins, since Gemini or Twins possess a specific property, a particular and sacred fascination of the Two, of what is two together, and never was one. Whereas cloning enshrines the reiteration of the same: I + I + I + I, etc.

Neither child, nor twin, nor narcissistic reflection, the clone is the materialization of the double by genetic means, that is to say the abolition of all alterity and of any imaginary. Which is combined with the economy of sexuality. Delirious apotheosis of a productive technology.

A segment has no need of imaginary mediation in order to reproduce itself, any more than the earthworm needs earth: each segment of the worm is directly reproduced as a whole worm, just as each cell of the American CEO can produce a new CEO. Just as each fragment of a hologram can again become the matrix of the complete hologram: the information remains whole, with perhaps somewhat less definition, in each of the dispersed fragments of the hologram.

This is how one puts an end to totality. If all information can be found in each of its parts, the whole loses its meaning. It is also the end of the body, of this singularity called body, whose secret is precisely that it cannot be segmented into additional cells, that it is an indivisible configuration, to which its sexuation is witness (paradox: cloning will fabricate sexed beings in perpetuity, since they are similar to their model, whereas thereby sex becomes useless - but precisely sex is not a function, it is what makes a body a body, it is what exceeds all the parts, all the diverse functions of this body). Sex (or death: in this sense it is the same thing) is what exceeds all information that can be collected on a body. Well, where is all this information collected? In the genetic formula. This is why it must necessarily want to forge a path of autonomous reproduction, independent of sexuality and of death.

Already, biophysioanatomical science, by dissecting the body into organs and functions, begins the process of the analytic decomposition of the body, and micromolecular genetics is nothing but the logical consequence, though at a much higher level of abstraction and simulation - at the nuclear level of the command cell, at the direct level of the genetic code, around which this whole phantasmagoria is organized.

From a functional and mechanistic point of view, each organ is still only a partial and differentiated prosthesis: already simulation, but "traditional." From the point of view of cybernetics and computer science, it is the smallest undifferentiated element, each cell of a body becomes an "embryonic" prosthesis of this body. It is the genetic formula inscribed in each cell that becomes the veritable modern prosthesis of all bodies. If the prosthesis is commonly an artifact that supplements a failing organ, or the instrumental extension of a body, then the DN A molecule, which contains all information relative to a body, is the prosthesis par excellence, the one that will allow for the indefinite extension of this body by the body itself - this body itself being nothing but the indefinite series of its prostheses.

A cybernetic prosthesis infinitely more subtle and still more artificial than any mechanical prosthesis. Because the genetic code is not "natural": just as every abstract and autonomized part of a whole becomes an artificial prosthesis that alters this whole by substituting itself for it (pro-thesis: this is the etymological meaning), one can say that the genetic code, where the whole of a being is supposedly condensed because all the "information" of this being would be imprisoned there (there lies the incredible violence of genetic simulation) is an artifact, an operational prosthesis, an abstract matrix, from which will be able to emerge, no longer even through reproduction, but through pure and simple renewal, identical beings assigned to the same controls.

My genetic patrimony was fixed once and for all when a certain spermatozoa encountered a certain ovum. This heritage contains the recipe for all the biochemical processes that realized me and ensure my functioning. A copy of this recipe is inscribed in each of the dozens of millions of cells that constitute me today. Each of these cells knows how to manufacture me; before being a cell of my liver or of my blood, it is a cell of me. It is thus theoretically possible to manufacture an individual identical to me starting with one of these cells. (Professor A. Jacquard)

Cloning is thus the last stage of the history and modeling of the body, the one at which, reduced to its abstract and genetic formula, the individual is destined to serial propagation. It is necessary to revisit what Walter Benjamin said of the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility. What is lost in the work that is serially reproduced, is its aura, its singular quality of the here and now, its aesthetic form (it had already lost its ritual form, in its aesthetic quality), and, according to Benjamin, it takes on, in its ineluctable destiny of reproduction, a political form. What is lost is the original, which only a history itself nostalgic and retrospective can reconstitute as "authentic." The most advanced, the most modern form of this development, which Benjamin described in cinema, photography, and contemporary mass media, is one in which the original no

longer even exists, since things are conceived from the beginning as a function of their unlimited reproduction.

This is what happens to us with cloning, no longer only at the level of messages, but at the level of individuals. In fact this is what happens to the body when it ceases to be conceived as anything but a message, as a stockpile of information and of messages, as fodder for data processing. Thus nothing is opposed to the body being serially reproduced in the same way Benjamin describes the reproduction of industrial objects and the images of the mass media. There is a precession of reproduction over production, a precession of the genetic model over all possible bodies. It is the irruption of technology that controls this reversal, of a technology that Benjamin was already describing, in its total consequences, as a total medium, but one still of the industrial age - a gigantic prosthesis that controlled the generation of objects and identical images, in which nothing could be differentiated any longer from anything else - but still without imagining the current sophistication of this technology, which renders the generation of identical beings possible, though there is no possibility of a return to an original being. The prostheses of the industrial age are still external, exotechnical, those that we know have been subdivided and internalized: esotechnical. We are in the age of soft technologies - genetic and mental software.

As long as the prostheses of the old industrial golden age were mechanical, they still returned to the body in order to modify its image - conversely, they themselves were metabolized in the imaginary and this technological metabolism was also part of the image of the body. But when one reaches a point of no return (deadend) in simulation, that is to say when the prosthesis goes deeper, is interiorized in, infiltrates the anonymous and micro-molecular heart of the body, as soon as it is imposed on the body itself as the "original" model, burning all the previous symbolic circuits, the only possible body the immutable repetition of the prosthesis, then it is the end of the body, of its history, and of its vicissitudes. The individual is no longer anything but a cancerous metastasis of its base formula. All the individuals produced through cloning individual X,

are they anything other than a cancerous metastasis - the proliferation of the same cell such as occurs with cancer? There is a narrow relation between the key concept of the genetic code and the pathology of cancer: the code designates the smallest simple element, the minimal formula to which an entire individual can be reduced, and in such a way that he can only reproduce himself identically to himself. Cancer designates a proliferation ad infinitum of a base cell without taking into consideration the organic laws of the whole. It is the same thing with cloning: nothing opposes itself any longer to the renewal of the Same, to the unchecked proliferation of a single matrix. Formerly, sexed reproduction still stood in opposition to this, today one can finally isolate the genetic matrix of identity, and one will be able to eliminate all the differential vicissitudes that once constituted the aleatory charm of individuals.

If all cells are conceived primarily as a receptacle of the same genetic formula - not only all the identical individuals, but all the cells of the same individual - what are they but the cancerous extension of this base formula? The metastasis that began with industrial objects ends with cellular organization. It is useless to ask oneself if cancer is an illness of the capitalist age. It is in effect the illness that controls all contemporary pathology, because it is the very form of the virulence of the code: an exacerbated redundancy of the same signals, an exacerbated redundancy of the same cells.

The stage of the body changes in the course of an irreversible technological "progression": from tanning in the sun, which already corresponds to an artificial use of the natural medium, that is to say to making it a prosthesis of the body (itself becoming a simulated body, but where lies the truth of the body?) - to domestic tanning with an iodine lamp (yet another good old mechanical technique) - to tanning with pills and hormones (chemical and ingested prosthesis) - and finally to tanning by intervening in the genetic formula (an incomparably more advanced stage, but a prosthesis nonetheless, that is, it is simply definitively integrated, it no longer even passes through either the surface or the orifices of the body), one passes by different bodies. It is the schema of the whole that is metamorphosed. The traditional prosthesis, which serves to repair a failing

organ, changes nothing in the general model of the body. Organ transplants are still of this order. But what should be said of mental modeling via psychotropic agents and drugs? It is the stage of the body that is changed by them. The psychotropic body is a body modeled "from the inside," no longer passing through the per-spectival space of representation, of the mirror, and of discourse. A silent, mental, already molecular (and no longer specular) body, a body metabolized directly, without the mediation of the act or the gaze, an immanent body, without alterity without a mise en scéne, without transcendence, a body consecrated to the implosive metabolism of cerebral, endocrinal flows, a sensory, but not sensible, body because it is connected only to its internal terminals, and not to objects of perception (the reason why one can enclose it in a "white," blank sensoriality - disconnecting it from its own sensorial extremities, without touching the world that surrounds it, suffices), a body already homogeneous, at this stage of plastic tactility, of mental malleability, of psychotropism at every level, already close to nuclear and genetic manipulation, that is to say to the absolute loss of the image, bodies that cannot be represented, either to others or to themselves, bodies enucleated of their being and of their meaning by being transfigured into a genetic formula or through biochemical instability: point of no return, apotheosis of a technology that has itself become interstitial and molecular.

* NOTES *

One must take into account that cancerous proliferation is also a silent disobedience of the injunctions of the genetic code. Cancer, if it fits with the logic of a nuclear/computer science vision of human beings, is also its monstrous excrescence and negation, because it leads to total disinformation and to disaggregation. "Revolutionary" pathology of organic abandonment, Richard Pinhas would say, in Fictions ("Notes synoptiques a propos d'un mal mysterieux" [Synoptic notes on a mysterious illness]). Entropic delirium of organisms, resisting the negentropy of informational systems. (It is the same conjunction as that of the masses vis-a-vis structured social formations: the masses are also cancerous metastases outside any social organicity.)

The same ambiguity is operative in cloning: it is at once the triumph of a controlling hypothesis, that of the code and of genetic information, and an eccentric distortion that destroys its coherence. Besides, it is probable (but this is left to a future story) that even the "clonic twin" will never be identical to its progenitor, will never be the same, if only because it will have had another before it. It will never be "just like what the genetic code in itself would have changed it to." Millions of interferences will make of it, despite everything, a different being, who will have the very same blue eyes of its father, which is not new. And the cloning experiment will at least have the advantage of demonstrating the radical impossibility of mastering a process simply by mastering information and the code. Note: A version of this essay with a different ending appeared under the title "The Hell of the Same" in Baudrillard's The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena, trans. James Benedict (London and New York: Verso, 1993).-TRANS.

I. Cf. D. Rorvik, A son image: La copie d'un homme (In his image: The copy of a man) (Paris: Grasset, 1978).

< HOLOGRAMS >

It is the fantasy of seizing reality live that continues - ever since Narcissus bent over his spring. Surprising the real in order to immobilize it, suspending the real in the expiration of its double. You bend over the hologram like God over his creature: only God has this power of passing through walls, through people, and finding Himself immaterially in the beyond. We dream of passing through ourselves and of finding ourselves in the beyond: the day when your holographic double will be there in space, eventually moving and talking, you will have realized this miracle. Of course, it will no longer be a dream, so its charm will be lost.

The TV studio transforms you into holographic characters: one has the impression of being materialized in space by the light of projectors, like translucid characters who pass through the masses (that of millions of TV viewers) exactly as your real hand passes through the unreal hologram without encountering any resistance - but not without consequences: having passed through the hologram has rendered your hand unreal as well.

The hallucination is total and truly fascinating once the hologram is projected in front of the plaque, so that nothing separates you from it (or else the effect remains photo- or cinematographic). This is also characteristic of trompe l'oeil, in contrast to painting: instead of a field as a vanishing point for the eye, you are in a reversed depth, which transforms you into a vanishing point . . . The relief must leap out at you just as a tram car and a chess game would. This said, which type of objects or forms will be "hologenic" remains to be discovered since the hologram is no more destined to produce three-dimensional cinema than cinema was destined to reproduce theater, or photography was to take up the contents of painting.

In the hologram, it is the imaginary aura of the double that is mercilessly tracked, just as it is in the history of clones. Similitude is a dream and must remain one, in order for a modicum of illusion and a stage of the imaginary to exist. One must never pass over to the side of the real, the side of the exact resemblance of the world to itself, of the subject to itself. Because then the image disappears. One must never pass over to the side of the double, because then the dual relation disappears, and with it all seduction. Well, with the hologram, as with the clone, it is the opposite temptation, and the opposite fascination, of the end of illusion, the stage, the secret through the materialized projection of all available information on the subject, through materialized transparency.

After the fantasy of seeing oneself (the mirror, the photograph) comes that of being able to circle around oneself, finally and especially of traversing oneself, of passing through one's own spectral body - and any holographed object is initially the luminous ectoplasm

of your own body. But this is in some sense the end of the aesthetic and the triumph of the medium, exactly as in stereo-phonia, which, at its most sophisticated limits, neatly puts an end to the charm and the intelligence of music.

The hologram simply does not have the intelligence of trompe l'oeil, which is one of seduction, of always proceeding, according to the rules of appearances, through allusion to and ellipsis of presence. It veers, on the contrary, into fascination, which is that of passing to the side of the double. If, according to Mach, the universe is that of which there is no double, no equivalent in the mirror, then with the hologram we are already virtually in another universe: which is nothing but the mirrored equivalent of this one. But which universe is this one?

The hologram, the one of which we have always already dreamed (but these are only poor bricolages of it) gives us the feeling, the vertigo of passing to the other side of our own body, to the side of the double, luminous clone, or dead twin that is never born in our place, and watches over us by anticipation.

The hologram, perfect image and end of the imaginary. Or rather, it is no longer an image at all - the real medium is the laser, concentrated light, quintessentialized, which is no longer a visible or reflexive light, but an abstract light of simulation. Laser/scalpel. A luminous surgery whose function here is that of the double: one operates on you to remove the double as one would operate to remove a tumor. The double that hid in the depths of you (of your body, of your unconscious?) and whose secret form fed precisely your imaginary, on the condition of remaining secret, is extracted by laser, is synthesized and materialized before you, just as it is possible for you to pass through and beyond it. A historical moment: the hologram is now part of this "subliminal comfort" that is our destiny, of this happiness now consecrated to the mental simulacrum and to the environmental fable of special effects. (The social, the social phantasmagoria, is now nothing but a special effect, obtained by the design of participating networks converging in emptiness under the spectral image of collective happiness.)

Three-dimensionality of the simulacrum - why would the simulacrum with three dimensions be closer to the real than the one with two dimensions? It claims to be, but paradoxically, it has the opposite effect: to render us sensitive to the fourth dimension as a hidden truth, a secret dimension of everything, which suddenly takes on all the force of evidence. The closer one gets to the perfection of the simulacrum (and this is true of objects, but also of figures of art or of models of social or psychological relations), the more evident it becomes (or rather to the evil spirit of incredulity that inhabits us, more evil still than the evil spirit of simulation) how everything escapes representation, escapes its own double and its resemblance. In short, there is no real: the third dimension is only the imaginary of a two-dimensional world, the fourth that of a three-dimensional universe . . . Escalation in the production of a real that is more and more real through the addition of successive dimensions. But, on the other hand, exaltation of the opposite movement: only what plays with one less dimension is true, is truly seductive.

In any case, there is no escape from this race to the real and to realistic hallucination since, when an object is exactly like another, it is not exactly like it, it is a bit more exact. There is never similitude, any more than there is exactitude. What is exact is already too exact, what is exact is only what approaches the truth without trying. It is somewhat of the same paradoxical order as the formula that says that as soon as two billiard balls roll toward each other, the first touches the other before the second, or, rather, one touches the other before being touched. Which indicates that there is not even the possibility of simultaneity in the order of time, and in the same way no similitude possible in the order of figures. Nothing resembles itself, and holographic reproduction, like all fantasies of the exact synthesis or resurrection of the real (this also goes for scientific experimentation), is already no longer real, is already hyperreal. It thus never has reproductive (truth) value, but always already simulation value. Not an exact, but a transgressive truth, that is to say already on the other side of the truth. What happens on the other side of the truth, not in what would be false, but in what is more true than the true, more real than the real? Bizarre effects certainly, and sacrileges, much more destructive of the order of truth than

its pure negation. Singular and murderous power of the potentialization of the truth, of the potentialization of the real. This is perhaps why twins were deified, and sacrificed, in a more savage culture: hypersimilitude was equivalent to the murder of the original, and thus to a pure non-meaning. Any classification or signification, any modality of meaning can thus be destroyed simply by logically being elevated to the nth power - pushed to its limit, it is as if all truth swallowed its own criteria of truth as one "swallows one's birth certificate" and lost all its meaning. Thus the weight of the world, or the universe, can eventually be calculated in exact terms, but initially it appears absurd, because it no longer has a reference, or a mirror in which it can come to be reflected - this totalization, which is practically equivalent to that of all the dimensions of the real in its hyperreal double, or to that of all the information on an individual in his genetic double (clone), renders it immediately pataphysical. The universe itself, taken globally, is what cannot be represented, what does not have a possible complement in the mirror, what has no equivalence in meaning (it is as absurd to give it a meaning, a weight of meaning, as to give it weight at all). Meaning, truth, the real cannot appear except locally, in a restricted horizon, they are partial objects, partial effects of the mirror and of equivalence. All doubling, all generalization, all passage to the limit, all holographic extension (the fancy of exhaustively taking account of this universe) makes them surface in their mockery.

Viewed at this angle, even the exact sciences come dangerously close to pataphysics. Because they depend in some way on the hologram and on the objectivist whim of the deconstruction and exact reconstruction of the world (in its smallest terms) founded on a tenacious and naive faith in a pact of the similitude of things to themselves. The real, the real object is supposed to be equal to itself, it is supposed to resemble itself like a face in a mirror - and this virtual similitude is in effect the only definition of the real - and any attempt, including the holographic one, that rests on it, will inevitably miss its object, because it does not take its shadow into account (precisely the reason why it does not resemble itself) - this hidden face where the object crumbles, its secret. The holographic attempt literally jumps over its shadow, and plunges into transparency, to lose itself there.

< CRASH >

From a classical (even cybernetic) perspective, technology is an extension of the body. It is the functional sophistication of a human organism that permits it to be equal to nature and to invest triumphally in nature. From Marx to McLuhan, the same functionalist vision of machines and language: they are relays, extensions, media mediators of nature ideally destined to become the organic body of man. In this "rational" perspective the body itself is nothing but a medium.

On the other hand, in the apocalyptic and baroque version of Crash*1 technology is the mortal deconstruction of the body - no longer a functional medium, but the extension of death - the dismemberment and cutting to pieces, not in the pejorative illusion of a lost unity of the subject (which is still the horizon of psychoanalysis), but in the explosive vision of a body delivered to "symbolic wounds," of a body confused with technology in its violating and violent dimension, in the savage and continual surgery that violence exercises: incisions, excisions, scarifications, the chasms of the body, of which the sexual wounds and pleasures of the body are only a particular case (and mechanical servitude in work, its pacified caricature) - a body without organs or pleasure of the organs, entirely subjected to the mark, to cutting, to the technical scar - under the shining sign of a sexuality without a referential and without limits.

Her mutilation and death became a coronation of her image at the hands of a colliding technology, a celebration of her individual limbs and facial planes, gestures and skin tones. Each of the spectators at the accident site would carry away an image of the violent transformation of this woman, of the complex of wounds that fused together her own sexuality and the hard technology of the automobile. Each of them would join his own imagination, the tender membranes of his mucous surfaces, his grooves of erectile

tissue, to the wounds of this minor actresss through the medium of his own motorcar, touching them as he drove in a medley of stylized postures. Each would place his lips on those bleeding apertures, lay his own nasal septum against the lesions of her left hand, press his eyelids against the exposed tendon of her forefinger, the dorsal surface of his erect penis against the ruptured lateral walls of her vagina. The automobile crash had made possible the final and longed-for union of the actress and the members of her audience. (Pp. 189-90)

Technology is never grasped except in the (automobile) accident, that is to say in the violence done to technology itself and in the violence done to the body. It is the same: any shock, any blow, any impact, all the metallurgy of the accident can be read in the semiurgy of the body - neither an anatomy nor a physiology, but a semiurgy of contusions, scars, mutilations, wounds that are so many new sexual organs opened on the body. In this way, gathering the body as labor in the order of production is opposed to the dispersion of the body as anagram in the order of mutilation. Goodbye "erogeneous zones": everything becomes a hole to offer itself to the discharge reflex. But above all (as in primitive initiation tortures, which are not ours), the whole body becomes a sign to offer itself to the exchange of bodily signs. Body and technology diffracting their bewildered signs through each other. Carnal abstraction and design.

No affect behind all that, no psychology, no flux or desire, no libido or death drive. Naturally, death is implicated in an unlimited exploration of the possible violence done to the body, but this is never, as in sadism or masochism, with an express and perverse aim of violence, a distortion of meaning and of sex (in relation to what?). No repressed unconscious (affects or representations), except in a second reading that would still reinject a forced meaning, based on the psychoanalytic model. The non-meaning, the savagery, of this mixture of the body and of technology is immanent, it is the immediate reversion of one to the other, and from this results a sexuality without precedent - a sort

of potential vertigo linked to the pure inscription of the empty signs of this body. Symbolic ritual of incision and marks, like the graffiti on New York subways.

Another point in common: it is no longer a question, in Crash, of accidental signs that would only appear at the margins of the system. The Accident is no longer this interstitial bricolage that it still is in the highway accident - the residual bricolage of the death drive for the new leisure classes. The car is not the appendix of a domestic, immobile universe, there is no longer a private and domestic universe, there are only incessant figures of circulation, and the Accident is everywhere, the elementary, irreversible figure, the banality of the anomaly of death. It is no longer at the margin, it is at the heart. It is no longer the exception to a triumphal rationality, it has become the Rule, it has devoured the Rule. It is no longer even the "accursed share," the one conceded to destiny by the system itself, and included in its general reckoning. Everything is reversed. It is the Accident that gives form to life, it is the Accident, the insane, that is the sex of life. And the automobile, the magnetic sphere of the automobile, which ends by investing the entire universe with its tunnels, highways, toboggans, exchangers, its mobile dwelling as universal prototype, is nothing but the immense metaphor of life.

Dysfunction is no longer possible in a universe of the accident - therefore no perversion is either. The Accident, like death, is no longer of the order of the neurotic, the repressed, the residual or the transgressive, it is the instigator of a new mode of nonperverse pleasure (contrary to the author himself, who speaks in the introduction of a new perverse logic, one must resist the moral temptation of reading Crash as perversion), of a strategic organization of life that starts from death. Death, wounds, mutilations are no longer metaphors of castration, exactly the opposite - not even the opposite. Only the fetishistic metaphor is perverse, seduction via the model, via the interposed fetish, or via the medium of language. Here, death and sex are read on the same level as the body, without phantasms, without metaphor, without sentences - different from the Machine of The Penal Colony, where the body in its wounds is still only the support of a textual inscription. Thus one, Kafka's machine, is still puritan, repressive, "a signifying machine"

Deleuze would say, whereas the technology in Crash is shining, seductive, or dull and innocent. Seductive because denuded of meaning, and because it is the simple mirror of torn-up bodies. And Vaughan's body is in its turn the mirror of bent chrome, of crumpled fenders, of sheet iron stained with sperm. Bodies and technology combined, seduced, inextricable.

As Vaughan turned the car into a filling station courtyard the scarlet light from the neon sign over the portico flared across these grainy photographs of appalling injuries: the breasts of teenage girls deformed by instrument binnacles, the partial mamoplasties . . . nipples sectioned by manufacturers' dashboard medallions; injuries to male and female genitalia caused by steering wheel shrouds, windshields during ejection . . . A succession of photographs of mutilated penises, sectioned vulvas and crushed testicles passed through the flaring light as Vaughan stood by the girl filling-station attendant at the rear of the car, jocularly talking to her about her body. In several of the photographs the source of the wound was indicated by a detail of that portion of the car which had caused the injury: beside a casualty ward photograph of a bifurcated penis was an inset of a handbrake unit; above a close-up of a massively bruised vulva was a steering-wheel boss and its manufacturer's medallion. These unions of torn genitalia and sections of car body and instrument panel formed a series of disturbing modules, units in a new currency of pain and desire. (P. 134)

Each mark, each trace, each scar left on the body is like an artificial invagination, like the scarifications of savages, which are always a vehement response to the absence of the body. Only the wounded body exists symbolically - for itself and for others - "sexual desire" is never anything but the possiblity bodies have of combining and exchanging their signs. Now, the few natural orifices to which one usually attaches sex and sexual activities are nothing next to all the possible wounds, all the artificial orifices (but why "artificial"?), all the breaches through which the body is reversibilized and, like certain topological

spaces, no longer knows either interior nor exterior. Sex as we know it is nothing but a minute and specialized definition of all the symbolic and sacrificial practices to which a body can open itself, no longer though nature, but through artifice, through the simulacrum, through the accident. Sex is nothing but this rarefaction of a drive called desire on previously prepared zones. It is largely overtaken by the fan of symbolic wounds, which is in some sense the ana-grammatization of sex on the whole length of the body - but now precisely, it is no longer sex, it is something else, sex, itself, is nothing but the inscription of a privileged signifier and some secondary marks - nothing next to the exchange of all the signs and wounds of which the body is capable. The savages knew how to use the whole body to this end, in tattooing, torture, initiation - sexuality was only one of the possible metaphors of symbolic exchange, neither the most significant, nor the most prestigious, as it has become for us in its obsessional and realistic reference, thanks to its organic and functional character (including in orgasm).

As the car travelled for the first time at twenty miles an hour Vaughan drew his fingers from the girl's vulva and anus, rotated his hips and inserted his penis in her vagina. Headlamps flared above us as the stream of cars moved up the slope of the overpass. In the rear-view mirror I could still see Vaughan and the girl, their bodies lit by the car behind, reflected in the black trunk of the Lincoln and a hundred points of the interior trim. In the chromium ashtray I saw the girl's left breast and erect nipple. In the vinyl window gutter I saw deformed sections of Vaughan's thighs and her abdomen forming a bizarre anatomical junction. Vaughan lifted the young woman astride him, his penis entering her vagina again. In a triptych of images reflected in the speedometer, the clock and revolution counter, the sexual act between Vaughan and this young woman took place in the hooded grottoes of these luminescent dials, moderated by the surging needle of the speedometer. The jutting carapace of the instrument panel and the stylized sculpture of the steering column shroud reflected a dozen images of her rising and falling buttocks. As I propelled the car at fifty miles an hour along the open deck of the overpass Vaughan arched his back and lifted the young woman into the full glare of the headlamps behind us. Her sharp breasts flashed within the chromium and glass cage of the speeding

car. Vaughan's strongpelvic spasms coincided with the thudding passage of the lamp standards anchored in the overpass at hundred-yard intervals. As each one approached his hips kicked into the girl, driving his penis into her vagina, his hands splaying her buttocks to reveal her anus as the yellow light filled the car. (R 143)

Here, all the erotic terms are technical. No ass, no dick, no cunt but: the anus, the rectum, the vulva, the penis, coitus. No slang, that is to say no intimacy of sexual violence, but a functional language: the adequation of chrome and mucous as of one form to another. The same goes for the correspondence of death and sex: it is more as if they are covered together in a sort of technical superdesign than articulated according to pleasure. Besides, it is not a question of orgasm, but of pure and simple discharge. And the coitus and sperm that traverse the book have no more sensual value than the filigree of wounds has violent meaning, even metaphorically speaking. They are nothing but signatures - in the final scene, X imprints the car wrecks with his sperm.

Pleasure (whether perverse or not) was always mediated by a technical apparatus, by a mechanism of real objects but more often of phantasms - it always implies an intermediary manipulation of scenes or gadgets. Here, pleasure is only orgasm, that is to say, confused on the same wave length with the violence of the technical apparatus, and homogenized by the only technique, one summed up by a single object: the automobile.

We had entered an immense traffic jam. From the junction of the motorway and Western Avenue to the ascent ramp of the flyover the traffic lanes were packed with vehicles, windshields bleaching out the molten colours of the sun setting above the western suburbs of London. Brake-lights flared in the evening air, glowing in the huge pool of cellulosed bodies. Vaughan sat with one arm out of the passenger window. He slapped the door impatiently, pounding the panel with his fist. To our right the high wall of a double-decker airline coach formed a cliff of faces. The passengers at the windows

resembled rows of the dead looking down at us from the galleries of a columbarium. The enormous energy of the twentieth century, enough to drive the planet into a new orbit around a happier star, was being expended to maintain this immense motionless pause. (P. 151)

Around me, down the entire length of Western Avenue, along both ramps of the flyover, stretched an immense congestion of traffic held up by the accident. Standing at the centre of this paralysed hurricane, I felt completely at ease, as if my obsessions with the endlessly multiplying vehicles had at last been relieved. (P. 156)

Yet in Crash, another dimension is inseparable from the confused ones of technology and of sex (united in a work of death that is never a work of mourning): it is that of the photograph and of cinema. The shining and saturated surface of traffic and of the accident is without depth, but it is always doubled in Vaughan's camera lens. The lens stockpiles and hoards accident photos like dossiers. The general repetition of the crucial event that it foments (his automobile death and the simultaneous death of the star in a collision with Elizabeth Taylor, a crash meticulously simulated and refined over a period of months) occurs outside a cinematographic take. This universe would be nothing without this hyperreal disconnection. Only the doubling, the unfolding of the visual medium in the second degree can produce the fusion of technology, sex, and death. But in fact, the photograph here is not a medium nor is it of the order of representation. It is not a question of a "supplementary" abstraction of the image, nor of a spectacular compulsion, and Vaughan's position is never that of the voyeur or the pervert. The photographic film (like transistorized music in automobiles and apartments) is part of the universal, hyperreal, metallized, and corporeal layer of traffic and flows. The photo is no more of a medium than technology or the body - all are simultaneous in a universe where the anticipation of the event coincides with its reproduction, indeed with its "real" production. No more temporal depth either - just like the past, the future ceases to exist in turn. In fact, it is the eye of the camera that is substituted for time, just as it is for any other

depth, that of affect, space, language. It is not another dimension, it simply signfies that this universe is without secrets.

The mannequin rider sat well back, the onrushing air lifting his chin. His hands were shackled to the handlebars like a kamikaze pilot's. His long thorax was plastered with metering devices. In front of him, their expressions equally vacant, the family of four mannequins sat in their vehicle. Their faces were marked with cryptic symbols.

A harsh whipping noise came toward us, the sound of the metering coils skating along the grass beside the rail. There was a violent metallic explosion as the motorcycle struck the front of the saloon car. The two vehicles veered sideways towards the line of startled spectators. I regained my balance, involuntarily holding Vaughan's shoulder, as the motorcycle and its driver sailed over the bonnet of the car and struck the windshield, then careened across the roof in a black mass of fragments. The car plunged ten feet back on its hawsers. It came to rest astride the rails. The bonnet, windshield and roof had been crushed by the impact. Inside the cabin, the lopsided family lurched across each other, the decapitated torso of the front-seat woman passenger embedded in the fractured windshield . . . Shavings of fibreglass from its face and shoulders speckled the glass around the test car like silver snow, a death confetti. Helen Remington held my arm. She smiled at me, nodding encouragingly as if urging a child across some mental hurdle. "We can have a look at it again on the Ampex. They're showing it in slow-motion." (Pp. 124-25)

In Crash, everything is hyperfunctional, since traffic and accident, technology and death, sex and simulation are like a single, large synchronous machine. It is the same universe as that of the hypermarket, where the commodity becomes "hypercom-modity," that is to say itself always already captured, and the whole atmosphere with it, in the incessant figures of traffic. But at the same time, the functionalism of Crash devours its own

rationality, because it does not know dysfunction. It is a radical functionalism that reaches its paradoxical limits and burns them. At once it again becomes an indefinable, therefore fascinating, object. Neither good nor bad: ambivalent. Like death or fashion, it becomes all of a sudden an object at the crossroads, whereas good old functionalism, even contested, no longer is at all - that is to say, it becomes a path leading more quickly than the main road, or leading where the main road does not lead or, better yet, and to parody Littre in a pataphysical mode, "a path leading nowhere, but leading there faster than the others."

This is what distinguishes Crash from all science fiction or almost all, which most of the time still revolves around the old couple function/dysfunction, which it projects in the future along the same lines of force and the same finalities that are those of the normal universe. There fiction surpasses reality (or the opposite), but according to the same rules of the game. In Crash, no more fiction or reality, it is hyperreality that abolishes both. Not even a critical regression is possible. This mutating and commutating world of simulation and death, this violently sexed world, but one without desire, full of violated and violent bodies, as if neutralized, this chromatic world and metallic intensity, but one void of sensuality, hypertechnology without finality - is it good or bad? We will never know. It is simply fascinating, though this fascination does not imply a value judgement. There lies the miracle of Crash. Nowhere does this moral gaze surface - the critical judgment that is still part of the functionality of the old world. Crash is hypercriticism (there also in contrast to its author who, in the introduction, speaks of the "warning against that brutal, erotic, and overlit realm that beckons more and more persuasively to us from the margins of the technological landscape"*2). Few books, few films reach this resolution of all finality or critical negativity, this dull splendor of banality or of violence. Nashville, Clockwork Orange.

After Borges, but in another register, Crash is the first great novel of the universe of simulation, the one with which we will all now be concerned - a symbolic universe, but

one which, through a sort of reversal of the mass-mediated substance (neon, concrete, car, erotic machinery), appears as if traversed by an intense force of initiation.

The last of the amublances drove away, its siren wailing. The spectators returned to their cars, or climbed the embankment to the break in the wire fence. An adolescent girl in a denim suit walked past us, her young man with an arm around her waist. He held her right breast with the back of his hand, stroking her nipple with his knuckles. They stepped into a beach buggy slashed with pennants and yellow paint and drove off, horn hooting eccentrically. A burly man in a truck-driver's jacket helped his wife up the embankment, a hand on her buttocks. This pervasive sexuality filled the air, as if we were members of a congregation leaving after a sermon urging us to celebrate our sexualities with friends and strangers, and were driving into the night to imitate the bloody eucharist we had observed with the most unlikely partners. (R 157)

* NOTES *

1. J. G. Ballard, Crash (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973).

2. This introduction first appeared in the French edition published in Paris by Clamann-Levy in 1974.-TRANS.

< SIMULACRA AND SCIENCE FICTION >

Three orders of simulacra:

simulacra that are natural, naturalist, founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit, that are harmonious, optimistic, and that aim for the restitution or the ideal institution of nature made in God's image;

simulacra that are productive, productivist, founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production - a Promethean aim of a continuous globalization and expansion, of an indefinite liberation of energy (desire belongs to the Utopias related to this order of simulacra);

simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game - total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.

To the first category belongs the imaginary of the Utopia. To the second corresponds science fiction, strictly speaking. To the third corresponds - is there an imaginary that might correspond to this order? The most likely answer is that the good old imaginary of science fiction is dead and that something else is in the process of emerging (not only in fiction but in theory as well). The same wavering and indeterminate fate puts an end to science fiction - but also to theory, as specific genres.

There is no real, there is no imaginary except at a certain distance. What happens when this distance, including that between the real and the imaginary, tends to abolish itself, to be reabsorbed on behalf of the model? Well, from one order of simulacra to another, the tendency is certainly toward the reabsorption of this distance, of this gap that leaves room for an ideal or critical projection.

This projection is maximized in the Utopian, in which a transcendent sphere, a radically different universe takes form (the romantic dream is still the individualized form of Utopia, in which transcendence is outlined in depth, even in unconscious structures, but in any case the dissociation from the real world is maximized, the island of Utopia stands opposed to the continent of the real).

This projection is greatly reduced in science fiction: it is most often nothing other than an unbounded projection of the real world of production, but it is not qualitatively different from it. Mechanical or energetic extensions, speed, and power increase to the nth power, but the schemas and the scenarios are those of mechanics, metallurgy, etc. Projected hypostasis of the robot. (To the limited universe of the preindustrial era, Utopia opposed an ideal, alternative universe. To the potentially infinite universe of production, science fiction adds the multiplication of its own possibilities.)

This projection is totally reabsorbed in the implosive era of models. The models no longer constitute either transcendence or projection, they no longer constitute the imaginary in relation to the real, they are themselves an anticipation of the real, and thus leave no room for any sort of fictional anticipation - they are immanent, and thus leave no room for any kind of imaginary transcendence. The field opened is that of simulation in the cybernetic sense, that is, of the manipulation of these models at every level (scenarios, the setting up of simulated situations, etc.) but then nothing distinguishes this operation from the operation itself and the gestation of the real: there is no more fiction.

Reality could go beyond fiction: that was the surest sign of the possibility of an ever-increasing imaginary. But the real cannot surpass the model - it is nothing but its alibi.

The imaginary was the alibi of the real, in a world dominated by the reality principle. Today, it is the real that has become the alibi of the model, in a world controlled by the principle of simulation. And, paradoxically, it is the real that has become our true Utopia - but a Utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object.

Perhaps science fiction from the cybernetic and hyperreal era can only exhaust itself, in its artificial resurrection of "historical" worlds, can only try to reconstruct in vitro, down to the smallest details, the perimeters of a prior world, the events, the people, the ideologies of

the past, emptied of meaning, of their original process, but hallucinatory with retrospective truth. Thus in Simulacra by Philip K. Dick, the war of Secession. Gigantic hologram in three dimensions, in which fiction will never again be a mirror held toward the future, but a desperate rehallucination of the past.

We can no longer imagine any other universe: the grace of transcendence was taken away from us in that respect too. Classical science fiction was that of an expanding universe, besides, it forged its path in the narratives of spatial exploration, counterparts to the more terrestrial forms of exploration and colonization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is no relationship of cause and effect there: it is not because terrestrial space today is virtually coded, mapped, registered, saturated, has thus in a sense closed up again in universalizing itself - a universal market, not only of merchandise, but of values, signs, models, leaving no room for the imaginary - it is not exactly because of this that the exploratory universe (technical, mental, cosmic) of science fiction has also ceased to function. But the two are narrowly linked, and they are two versions of the same general process of implosion that follows the gigantic process of explosion and expansion characteristic of past centuries. When a system reaches its own limits and becomes saturated, a reversal is produced - something else takes place, in the imaginary as well.

Until now we have always had a reserve of the imaginary - now the coefficient of reality is proportional to the reserve of the imaginary that gives it its specific weight. This is also true of geographic and spatial exploration: when there is no longer any virgin territory, and thus one available to the imaginary, when the map covers the whole territory, something like the principle of reality disappears. In this way, the conquest of space constitutes an irreversible crossing toward the loss of the terrestrial referential. There is a hemorrhaging of reality as an internal coherence of a limited universe, once the limits of this universe recede into infinity. The conquest of space that follows that of the planet is equal to derealizing (dematerializing) human space, or to transferring it into a hyperreal of simulation. Witness this two-bedroom/kitchen/shower put into orbit, raised to a spatial power (one could say) with the most recent lunar module. The every-dayness of the

terrestrial habitat itself elevated to the rank of cosmic value, hypostatized in space - the satellization of the real in the transcendence of space - it is the end of metaphysics, the end of the phantasm, the end of science fiction - the era of hyper-reality begins.

From then onward, something must change: the projection, the extrapolation, the sort of pantographic excess that constituted the charm of science fiction are all impossible. It is no longer possible to fabricate the unreal from the real, the imaginary from the givens of the real. The process will, rather, be the opposite: it will be to put decentered situations, models of simulation in place and to contrive to give them the feeling of the real, of the banal, of lived experience, to reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because it has disappeared from our life. Hallucination of the real, of lived experience, of the quotidian, but reconstituted, sometimes down to disquietingly strange details, reconstituted as an animal or vegetal reserve, brought to light with a transparent precision, but without substance, derealized in advance, hyperrealized.

In this way, science fiction would no longer be a romantic expansion with all the freedom and naivete that the charm of discovery gave it, but, quite the contrary, it would evolve implosively in the very image of our current conception of the universe, attempting to revitalize, reactualize, requotidianize fragments of simulation, fragments of this universal simulation that have become for us the so-called real world.

Where would the works be that would meet, here and now, this situational inversion, this situational reversion? Obviously the short stories of Philip K. Dick "gravitate" in this space, if one can use that word (but that is precisely what one can't really do any more, because this new universe is "antigravitational," or if it still gravitates, it is around the hole of the real, around the hole of the imaginary). One does not see an alternative cosmos, a cosmic folklore or exoticism, or a galactic prowess there - one is from the start in a total simulation, without origin, immanent, without a past, without a future, a diffusion of all coordinates (mental, temporal, spatial, signaletic) - it is not about a parallel universe, a double universe, or even a possible universe - neither possible, impossible, neither real

nor unreal: hyperreal - it is a universe of simulation, which is something else altogether. And not because Dick speaks specifically of simulacra - science fiction has always done so, but it played on the double, on doubling or redoubling, either artificial or imaginary, whereas here the double has disappeared, there is no longer a double, one is always already in the other world, which is no longer an other, without a mirror, a projection, or a Utopia that can reflect it - simulation is insuperable, unsurpassable, dull and flat, without exteriority - we will no longer even pass through to "the other side of mirror," that was still the golden age of transcendence.

Perhaps a still more convincing example would be that of Ballard and of his evolution from the first very "phantasmagoric" short stories, poetic, dreamlike, disorienting, up to Crash, which is without a doubt (more than IGH or Concrete Island) the current model of this science fiction that is no longer one. Crash is our world, nothing in it is "invented": everything in it is hyper-functional, both the circulation and the accident, technique and death, sex and photographic lens, everything in it is like a giant, synchronous, simulated machine: that is to say the acceleration of our own models, of all models that surround us, blended and hyperoperational in the void. This is what distinguishes Crash from almost all science fiction, which mostly still revolves around the old (mechanical and mechanistic) couple function/ dysfunction, which it projects into the future along the same lines of force and the same finalities that are those of the "normal" universe. Fiction in that universe might surpass reality (or the opposite: that is more subtle) but it still plays by the same rules. In Crash, there is neither fiction nor reality anymore - hyper-reality abolishes both. It is there that our contemporary science fiction, if there is one, exists. "Jack Barron or Eternity", some passages from "Everyone to Zanzibar".

In fact, science fiction in this sense is no longer anywhere, and it is everywhere, in the circulation of models, here and now, in the very principle of the surrounding simulation. It can emerge in its crude state, from the inertia itself of the operational world. What writer of science fiction would have "imagined" (but precisely it can no longer be "imagined") this "reality" of East German factories - simulacra, factories that reemploy all the

unemployed to fill all the roles and all the posts of the traditional production process but that don't produce anything, whose activity is consumed in a game of orders, of competition, of writing, of bookkeeping, between one factory and another, inside a vast network? All material production is redoubled in the void (one of these simulacra factories even "really" failed, putting its own unemployed out of work a second time). That is simulation: not that the factories are fake, but precisely that they are real, hyperreal, and that because of this they return all "real" production, that of "serious" factories, to the same hyperreality. What is fascinating here is not the opposition between real factories and fake factories, but on the contrary the lack of distinction between the two, the fact that all the rest of production has no greater referent or deeper finality than this "simulacra!" business. It is this hyperreal indifference that constitutes the real "science-fictional" quality of this episode. And one can see that it is not necessary to invent it: it is there, emerging from a world without secrets, without depth.

Without a doubt, the most difficult thing today, in the complex universe of science fiction, is to unravel what still complies (and a large part still does) with the imaginary of the second order, of the productive/projective order, and what already comes from this vagueness of the imaginary, of this uncertainty proper to the third order of simulation. Thus one can clearly mark the difference between the mechanical robot machines, characteristic of the second order, and the cybernetic machines, computers, etc., that, in their governing principle, depend on the third order. But one order can certainly contaminate another, and the computer can certainly function as a mechanical supermachine, a superrobot, a superpower machine, exposing the productive genie of the simulacra of the second order: the computer does not come into play as a process of simulation, and it still bears witness to the reflexes of a finalized universe (including ambivalence and revolt, like the computer from 2001 or Shalmanezer in Everyone to Zanzibar).

Between the operatic (the theatrical status of theatrical and fantastical machinery, the "grand opera" of technique) that corresponds to the first order, the operative (the

industrial, productive status, productive of power and energy) that corresponds to the second order, and the operational (the cybernetic, aleatory, uncertain status of "metatechnique") that corresponds to the third order, all interference can still be produced today at the level of science fiction. But only the last order can still truly interest us.

< THE ANIMALS: TERRITORY AND METAMORPHOSES >

What did the torturers of the Inquisition want? The admission of evil, of the principle of evil. It was necessary to make the accused say that he was not guilty except by accident, through the incidence of the principle of Evil in the divine order. Thus confession restored a reassuring causality, and torture, and the extermination of evil through torture, were nothing but the triumphal coronation (neither sadistic nor expiatory) of the fact of having produced Evil as cause. Otherwise, the least heresy would have rendered all of divine creation suspect. In the same way, when we use and abuse animals in laboratories, in rockets, with experimental ferocity in the name of science, what confession are we seeking to extort from them from beneath the scalpel and the electrodes?

Precisely the admission of a principle of objectivity of which science is never certain, of which it secretly despairs. Animals must be made to say that they are not animals, that bestiality, savagery - with what these terms imply of unintelligibility, radical strangeness to reason - do not exist, but on the contrary the most bestial behaviors, the most singular, the most abnormal are resolved in science, in physiological mechanisms, in cerebral connections, etc. Bestiality, and its principle of uncertainty, must be killed in animals.

Experimentation is thus not a means to an end, it is a contemporary challenge and torture. It does not found an intelligibility, it extorts a confession from science as previously one extorted a profession of faith. A confession whose apparent distances - illness, madness, bestiality - are nothing but a provisional crack in the transparency of

causality. This proof, as before that of divine reason, must be continually redone and everywhere redone - in this sense we are all animals, and laboratory animals, whom one continually tests in order to extort their reflex behaviors, which are like so many confessions of rationality in the final moment. Everywhere bestiality must yield to reflex animality, exorcising an order of the indecipherable, of the savage, of which, precisely in their silence, animals have remained the incarnation for us.

Animals have thus preceded us on the path of liberal extermination. All the aspects of the modern treatment of animals retrace the vicissitudes of the manipulation of humans, from experimentation to industrial pressure in breeding.

Gathered at a convention in Lyons, European veterinarians became concerned about the diseases and psychological troubles that develop in industrial breeding farms.
-Science and the Future, July 1973

Rabbits develop a morbid anxiety, they become coprophagous and sterile. The rabbit is "anxious," "maladapted" from birth, so it seems. Greater sensitivity to infections, to parasites. The antibodies lose their efficacy, the females become sterile. Spontaneously, if one can say so, mortality increases.

The hysteria of chickens infects the whole group, a "psychic" collective tension that can reach a critical threshold: all the animals begin to fly and scream in all directions. The crisis over, there is a collapse, general terror, the animals take refuge in the corner, mute and as if paralyzed. At the first shock, the crisis begins again. It can last several weeks. One attempted to give them tranquilizers . . .

Cannibalism on the part of pigs. The animals wound themselves. The calves begin to lick everything that surrounds them, sometimes even unto death.

"It is certainly necessary to establish that bred animals suffer psychically... A zoo psychiatry becomes necessary... A psychic life of frustration represents an obstacle to normal development."

Darkness, red light, gadgets, tranquilizers, nothing works. In birds there is a hierarchy of access to food - the pecking order. In these conditions of overpopulation, the last in the order is never able to get to the food. One thus wished to break the pecking order and democratize access to food through another system of distribution. Failure: the destruction of this symbolic order brings along with it total confusion for the birds, and a chronic instability. Good example of absurdity: one knows the analogous ravages of good democratic intentions in tribal societies.

Animals somatize! Extraordinary discovery! Cancers, gastric ulcers, myocardial infarction in mice, pigs, chickens!

In conclusion, the author says, it certainly seems that the only remedy is space - "a bit more space, and a lot of the problems observed would disappear." In any case, "the fate of these animals would become less miserable." He is thus satisfied with this conference: "The current concern about the fate of bred animals is witness, once again, to the alliance of the morality and the meaning of a well - understood interest." "One cannot simply do whatever one wants with nature." The problems having become serious enough to damage the profitability of business, this drop in profitability may lead the breeders to return the animals to more normal living conditions. "In order to be raised in a healthy manner, it is now necessary to be always concerned with the mental equilibrium of the animals." And he foresees the time when one will send animals, like people, to the country, to restore their mental equilibrium.

One has never said better how much "humanism," "normality," "quality of life" were nothing but the vicissitudes of profitability. The parallel between these animals sick from

surplus value and humans sick from industrial concentration, from the scientific organization of work and assembly - line factories is illuminating. In the latter case as well, the capitalist "breeders" were led to a revision that was destructive of the mode of exploitation, innovating and reinventing the "quality of work," the "enrichment of tasks," discovering the "human" sciences and the "psycho-sociological" dimension of the factory. Only the inevitability of death renders the example of the animals more shocking still than that of men on an assembly line.

Against the industrial organization of death, animals have no other recourse, no other possible defiance, except suicide. All the anomalies described are suicidal. These resistances are a failure of industrial reason (drop in profits), but also one senses that they run counter to the logical reasoning of the specialists. In the logic of reflex behaviors and of the animal - machine, in rational logic, these anomalies are not qualifiable. One will therefore bestow on animals a psychic life, an irrational and derailed psychic life, given over to liberal and humanist therapy, without the final objective ever having changed: death.

With ingenuity, one thus discovers, like a new and unexplored scientific field, the psychic life of the animal as soon as he is revealed to be maladapted to the death one is preparing for him. In the same way one rediscovers psychology, sociology, the sexuality of prisoners as soon as it becomes impossible to purely and simply incarcerate them.*1 One discovers that the prisoner needs liberty, sexuality, "normalcy" to withstand prison, just as industrially bred animals need a certain "quality of life" to die within the norm. And nothing about this is contradictory. The worker also needs responsibility, self-management in order to better respond to the imperative of production. Everyone needs a psychic life to adapt. There is no other reason for the arrival of the psychic life, conscious or unconscious. And its golden age, which still continues, will have coincided with the impossibility of a rational socialization in every domain. Never would the humanities or psychoanalysis have existed if it had been miraculously possible to reduce man to his "rational" behaviors. The whole discovery of the psychological, whose complexity can

extend ad infinitum, comes from nothing but the impossibility of exploiting to death (the workers), of incarcerating to death (the detained), of fattening to death (the animals), according to the strict law of equivalences:

so much caloric energy and time = so much work power such an infraction = such an equivalent punishment so much food = optimal weight and industrial death.

Everything is blocked, so psychic life, the mental, neurosis, the psychosocial, etc. are born, not at all in order to break this delirious equation, but to restore the principle of mutually agreed upon equivalences.

Beasts of burden, they had to work for man. Beasts of demand, they are summoned to respond to the interrogation of science.*2 Beasts of consumption, they have become the meat of industry. Beasts of somatization, they are now made to speak the "psy" language, to answer for their psychic life and the misdeeds of their unconscious. Everything has happened to them that has happened to us. Our destiny has never been separated from theirs, and this is a sort of bitter revenge on Human Reason, which has become used to upholding the absolute privilege of the Human over the Bestial.

Besides, animals were only demoted to the status of inhumanity as reason and humanism progressed. A logic parallel to that of racism. An objective animal "reign" has only existed since Man has existed. It would take too long to redo the genealogy of their respective statuses, but the abyss that separates them today, the one that permits us to send beasts, in our place, to respond to the terrifying universes of space and laboratories, the one that permits the liquidation of species even as they are archived as specimens in the African reserves or in the hell of zoos - since there is no more room for them in our culture than there is for the dead - the whole covered by a racist sentimentality (baby seals, Brigitte Bardot), this abyss that separates them follows domestication, just as true racism follows slavery.

Once animals had a more sacred, more divine character than men. There is not even a reign of the "human" in primitive societies, and for a long time the animal order has been the order of reference. Only the animal is worth being sacrificed, as a god, the sacrifice of man only comes afterward, according to a degraded order. Men qualify only by their affiliation to the animal: the Bororos "are" macaws. This is not of the prelogical or psychoanalytic order - nor of the mental order of classification, to which Levi-Strauss reduced the animal effigy (even if it is still fabulous that animals served as a language, this was also part of their divinity)-no, this signifies that Bororos and macaws are part of a cycle, and that the figure of the cycle excludes any division of species, any of the distinctive oppositions upon which we live. The structural opposition is diabolic, it divides and confronts distinct identities: such is the division of the Human, which throws beasts into the Inhuman - the cycle, itself, is symbolic: it abolishes the positions in a reversible enchainment - in this sense, the Bororos "are" macaws, in the same way that the Canaque say the dead walk among the living. (Does Deleuze envision something like that in his becoming-animal and when he says "Be the rose panther!"?)

Whatever it may be, animals have always had, until our era, a divine or sacrificial nobility that all mythologies recount. Even murder by hunting is still a symbolic relation, as opposed to an experimental dissection. Even domestication is still a symbolic relation, as opposed to industrial breeding. One only has to look at the status of animals in peasant society. And the status of domestication, which presupposes land, a clan, a system of parentage of which the animals are a part, must not be confused with the status of the domestic pet - the only type of animals that are left to us outside reserves and breeding stations - dogs, cats, birds, hamsters, all packed together in the affection of their master. The trajectory animals have followed, from divine sacrifice to dog cemeteries with atmospheric music, from sacred defiance to ecological sentimentality, speaks loudly enough of the vulgarization of the status of man himself - it once again describes an unexpected reciprocity between the two.

In particular, our sentimentality toward animals is a sure sign of the disdain in which we hold them. It is proportional to this disdain. It is in proportion to being relegated to irresponsibility, to the inhuman, that the animal becomes worthy of the human ritual of affection and protection, just as the child does in direct proportion to being relegated to a status of innocence and childishness. Sentimentality is nothing but the infinitely degraded form of bestiality, the racist commiseration, in which we ridiculously cloak animals to the point of rendering them sentimental themselves.

Those who used to sacrifice animals did not take them for beasts. And even the Middle Ages, which condemned and punished them in due form, was in this way much closer to them than we are, we who are filled with horror at this practice. They held them to be guilty: which was a way of honoring them. We take them for nothing, and it is on this basis that we are "human" with them. We no longer sacrifice them, we no longer punish them, and we are proud of it, but it is simply that we have domesticated them, worse: that we have made of them a racially inferior world, no longer even worthy of our justice, but only of our affection and social charity, no longer worthy of punishment and of death, but only of experimentation and extermination like meat from the butchery.

It is the reabsorption of all violence in regard to them that today forms the monstrosity of beasts. The violence of sacrifice, which is one of "intimacy" (Bataille), has been succeeded by the sentimental or experimental violence that is one of distance.

Monstrosity has changed in meaning. The original monstrosity of the beast, object of terror and fascination, but never negative, always ambivalent, object of exchange also and of metaphor, in sacrifice, in mythology, in the heraldic bestiary, and even in our dreams and our phantasms - this monstrosity, rich in every threat and every metamorphosis, one that is secretly resolved in the living culture of men, and that is a form of alliance, has been exchanged for a spectacular monstrosity: that of King Kong wrenched from his jungle and transformed into a music-hall star. Formerly, the cultural hero annihilated the beast, the dragon, the monster - and from the spilt blood plants,

men, culture were born; today, it is the beast King Kong who comes to sack our industrial metropolises, who comes to liberate us from our culture, a culture dead from having purged itself of all real monstrosity and from having broken its pact with it (which was expressed in the film by the primitive gift of the woman). The profound seduction of the film comes from this inversion of meaning: all inhumanity has gone over to the side of men, all humanity has gone over to the side of captive bestiality, and to the respective seduction of man and of beast, monstrous seduction of one order by the other, the human and the bestial. Kong dies for having renewed, through seduction, this possibility of the metamorphosis of one reign into another, this incestuous promiscuity between beasts and men (though one that is never realized, except in a symbolic and ritual mode).

In the end, the progression that the beast followed is not different form that of madness and childhood, of sex or negritude. A logic of exclusion, of reclusion, of discrimination and necessarily, in return, a logic of reversion, reversible violence that makes it so that all of society finally aligns itself on the axioms of madness, of childhood, of sexuality, and of inferior races (purged, it must be said, of the radical interrogation to which, from the very heart of their exclusion, they lent importance). The convergence of processes of civilization is astounding. Animals, like the dead, and so many others, have followed this uninterrupted process of annexation through extermination, which consists of liquidation, then of making the extinct species speak, of making them present the confession of their disappearance. Making animals speak, as one has made the insane, children, sex (Foucault) speak. This is even deluded in regard to animals, whose principle of uncertainty, which they have caused to weigh on men since the rupture in their alliance with men, resides in the fact that they do not speak.

The challenge of madness has historically been met by the hypothesis of the unconscious. The Unconscious is this logistical mechanism that permits us to think madness (and more generally all strange and anomalous formations) in a system of meaning opened to nonmeaning, which will make room for the terrors of the nonsensical, now intelligible under the auspices of a certain discourse: psychic life, drive, repression, etc. The mad

were the ones who forced us to the hypothesis of the unconscious, but we are the ones in return who have trapped them there. Because if, initially, the Unconscious seems to turn against Reason and to bring to it a radical subversion, if it still seems charged with the potential of the rupture of madness, later it turns against madness, because it is what enables madness to be annexed to a reason more universal than classical reason.

The mad, once mute, today are heard by everyone; one has found the grid on which to collect their once absurd and indecipherable messages. Children speak, to the adult universe they are no longer those simultaneously strange and insignificant beings - children signify, they have become significant - not through some sort of "liberation" of their speech, but because adult reason has given itself the most subtle means to avert the threat of their silence. The primitives also are heard, one seeks them out, one listens to them, they are no longer beasts. Levi-Strauss pointed out that their mental structures were the same as ours, psychoanalysis rallied them to Oedipus, and to the libido - all of our codes functioned well, and they responded to them. One had buried them under silence, one buries them beneath speech, "different" speech certainly, but beneath the word of the day, "difference," as formerly one did beneath the unity of Reason; let us not be misled by this, it is the same order that is advancing. The imperialism of reason, neoimperialism of difference.

What is essential is that nothing escape the empire of meaning, the sharing of meaning. Certainly, behind all that, nothing speaks to us, neither the mad, nor the dead, nor children, nor savages, and fundamentally we know nothing of them, but what is essential is that Reason save face, and that everything escape silence.

They, the animals, do not speak. In a universe of increasing speech, of the constraint to confess and to speak, only they remain mute, and for this reason they seem to retreat far from us, behind the horizon of truth. But it is what makes us intimate with them. It is not the ecological problem of their survival that is important, but still and always that of their silence. In a world bent on doing nothing but making one speak, in a world assembled

under the hegemony of signs and discourse, their silence weighs more and more heavily on our organization of meaning.

Certainly, one makes them speak, and with all means, some more innocent than others. They spoke the moral discourse of man in fables. They supported structural discourse in the theory of totemism. Every day they deliver their "objective" - anatomical, physiological, genetic - message in laboratories. They served in turns as metaphors for virtue and vice, as an energetic and ecological model, as a mechanical and formal model in bionics, as a phantasmatic register for the unconscious and, lastly, as a model for the absolute deterritorialization of desire in Deleuze's "becoming-animal" (paradoxical: to take the animal as a model of deterritorialization when he is the territorial being par excellence).

In all this - metaphor, guinea pig, model, allegory (without forgetting their alimentary "use value") - animals maintain a compulsory discourse. Nowhere do they really speak, because they only furnish the responses one asks for. It is their way of sending the Human back to his circular codes, behind which their silence analyzes us.

One never escapes the reversion that follows any kind of exclusion. Refusing reason to madmen leads sooner or later to dismantling the bases of this reason - the mad take revenge in some way. Refusing animals the unconscious, repression, the symbolic (confused with language) is, one can hope, sooner or later (in a sort of disconnection subsequent to that of madness and of the unconscious) to put in question once again the validity of these concepts, just as they govern and distinguish us today. Because, if formerly the privilege of Man was founded on the monopoly of consciousness, today it is founded on the monopoly of the unconscious.

Animals have no unconscious, this is well known. Without a doubt, they dream, but this is a conjecture of a bioelectrical order, and they lack language, which alone gives meaning to the dream by inscribing it in the symbolic order. We can fantasize about them, project

our fantasies on them and think we are sharing this mise-en-scéne. But this is comfortable for us - in fact animals are not intelligible to us either under the regime of consciousness or under that of the unconscious. Therefore, it is not a question of forcing them to it, but just the opposite of seeing in what way they put in question this very hypothesis of the unconscious, and to what other hypothesis they force us. Such is the meaning, or the non-meaning of their silence.

Such was the silence of madmen that it forced us to the hypothesis of the unconscious - such is the resistance of animals that it forces us to change hypotheses. For if to us they are and will remain unintelligible, yet we live in some kind of understanding with them. And if we live in this way, under the sign of a general ecology where in a sort of planetary niche, which is only the enlarged dimension of the Platonic cave, the ghosts of animals and the natural elements would come to rub against the shadow of men who survived the political economy - no, our profound understanding with beasts, even on the road to disappearance, is placed under the conjugated sign, opposite in appearance, of metamorphosis and of territory.

Nothing seems more fixed in the perpetuation of the species than animals, but yet they are for us the image of metamorphosis, of all possible metamorphoses. Nothing more errant, more nomadic in appearance than animals, and yet their law is that of the territory.*3 But one must push aside all the countermeanings on this notion of territory. It is not at all the enlarged relation of a subject or of a group to its own space, a sort of organic right to private property of the individual, of the clan or of the species - such is the phantasm of psychology and of sociology extended to all of ecology - nor this sort of vital function, of an environmental bubble where the whole system of needs is summed up.*4 A territory is also not a space, with what this term implies for us about liberty and appropriation. Neither instinct, nor need, nor structure (be it "cultural" and "behavioral"), the notion of territory is also opposed in some way to that of the unconscious. The unconscious is a "buried," repressed, and indefinitely subdivided structure. The territory is open and circumscribed. The unconscious is the site of the indefinite repetition of

subjective repression and fantasies. The territory is the site of a completed cycle of parentage and exchanges - without a subject, but without exception: animal and vegetal cycle, cycle of goods and wealth, cycle of parentage and the species, cycle of women and ritual - there is no subject and everything is exchanged. The obligations are absolute therein - total reversibility - but no one knows death there, since all is metamorphosed. Neither subject, nor death, nor unconscious, nor repression, since nothing stops the enchainment of forms.

Animals have no unconscious, because they have a territory. Men have only had an unconscious since they lost a territory. At once territories and metamorphoses have been taken from them - the unconscious is the individual structure of mourning in which this loss is incessantly, hopelessly replayed - animals are the nostalgia for it. The question that they raise for us would thus be this one: don't we live now and already, beyond the effects of the linearity and the accumulation of reason, beyond the effects of the conscious and unconscious, according to this brute, symbolic mode, of indefinite cycling and reversion over a finite space? And beyond the ideal schema that is that of our culture, of all culture maybe, of the accumulation of energy, and of the final liberation, don't we dream of implosion rather than of explosion, of metamorphosis rather than energy, of obligation and ritual defiance rather than of liberty, of the territorial cycle rather than of . . . But the animals do not ask questions. They are silent.

* NOTES *

1. Thus, in Texas, four hundred men and one hundred women experiment with the sweetest penitentiary in the world. A child was born there last June and there were only three escapes in two years. The men and women take their meals together and get together outside of group therapy sessions. Each prisoner possesses the only key to his individual room. Couples are able to be alone in the empty rooms. To this day, thirty-five prisoners have escaped, but for the most part they have returned of their own accord.

2. In French, betes de somme means beasts of burden. Baudrillard plays with the word somme in the phrase that follows: "Betes de sommation, elles sont sommees de repondre a l'interrogatoire de la science," and in the use of the word consommation in the following phrase.-TRANS.

3. That animals wander is a myth, and the current representation of the unconscious and of desire as erratic and nomadic belongs to the same "order. Animals have never wandered, were never deterritorialized. A whole liberatory phantasmagoria is drawn in opposition to the constraints of modern society, a representation of nature and of beasts as savagery, as the freedom to "fulfill all needs," today "of realizing all his desires" - because modern Rousseauism has taken the form of the indeterminacy of drive, of the wandering of desire and of the nomadism of infinitude - but it is the same mystique of unleashed, noncoded forces with no finality other than their own eruption.

Now, free, virgin nature, without limits or territories, where each wanders at will, never existed, except in the imaginary of the dominant order, of which this nature is the equivalent mirror. We project (nature, desire, animality, rhizome . . .) the very schema of deterritorialization that is that of the economic system and of capital as ideal savagery. Liberty is nowhere but in capital, it is what produced it, it is what deepens it. There is thus an exact correlation between the social legislation of value (urban, industrial, repressive, etc.) and the imaginary savagery one places in opposition to it: they are both "deterritorialized" and in each other's image. Moreover, the radicality of "desire," one sees this in current theories, increases at the same rate as civilized abstraction, not at all antagonistically, but absolutely according to the same movement, that of the same form always more decoded, more decentered, "freer," which simultaneously envelops our real and our imaginary. Nature, liberty, desire, etc., do not even express a dream the opposite of capital, they directly translate the progress or the ravages of this culture, they even anticipate it, because they dream of total deterritorialization where the system never imposes anything but what is relative: the demand of "liberty" is never anything but going further than the system, but in the same direction.

Neither the beasts nor the savages know "nature" in our way: they only know territories, limited, marked, which are spaces of insurmountable reciprocity.

4. Thus, Henri Laborit refuses the interpretation of territory in terms of instinct or private property: "One has never brought forth as evidence, either in the hypothalamus or elsewhere, either a cellular group or neural pathways that are differentiated in relation to the notion of territory... No territorial center seems to exist... It is not useful to appeal to a particular instinct" - but it is useful to do so in order to better return it to a functionality of needs extended to include cultural behaviors, which today is the vulgate common to economics, psychology, sociology, etc.: "The territory thus becomes the space necessary to the realization of the act of bestowing, the vital space... The bubble, the territory thus represent the morsel of space in immediate contact with the organism, the one in which it 'opens' its thermodynamic exchanges in order to maintain its own structure... With the growing interdependence of human individuals, with the promiscuity that characterizes the great modern cities, the individual bubble has shrunk considerably..." Spatial, functional, homeostatic conception. As if the stake of a group or of a man, even of an animal, were the equilibrium of his bubble and the homeostasis of his exchanges, internal and external!

< THE REMAINDER >

When everything is taken away, nothing is left.

This is false.

The equation of everything and nothing, the subtraction of the remainder, is totally false.

It is not that there is no remainder. But this remainder never has an autonomous reality, nor its own place: it is what partition, circumscription, exclusion designate... what else? It is through the subtraction of the remainder that reality is founded and gathers strength... what else?

What is strange is precisely that there is no opposing term in a binary opposition: one can say the right/the left, the same/the other, the majority/the minority, the crazy/the normal, etc. - but the remainder/ ? Nothing on the other side of the slash.

"The sum and the remainder," the addition and the remainder, the operation and the remainder are not distinctive oppositions.

And yet, what is on the other side of the remainder exists, it is even the marked term, the powerful moment, the privileged element in this strangely asymmetrical opposition, in this structure that is not one. But this marked term has no name. It is anonymous, it is unstable and without definition. Positive, but only the negative gives it the force of reality. In a strict sense, it cannot be defined except as the remainder of the remainder.

Thus the remainder refers to much more than a clear division in two localized terms, to a turning and reversible structure, an always imminent structure of reversion, in which one never knows which is the remainder of the other. In no other structure can one create this reversion, or this mise-en-abyme: the masculine is not the feminine of the feminine, the normal is not the crazy of the crazy, the right is not the left of the left, etc. Perhaps only in the mirror can the question be posed: which, the real or the image, is the reflection of the other? In this sense one can speak of the remainder as a mirror, or of the mirror of the remainder. It is that in both cases the line of structural demarcation, the line of the sharing of meaning, has become a wavering one, it is that meaning (most literally: the possibility of going from one point to another according to a vector determined by the respective position of the terms) no longer exists. There is no longer a respective position - the real disappearing to make room for an image, more real than the real, and

conversely - the remainder disappearing from the assigned location to resurface inside out, in what it was the remainder of, etc.

The same is true of the social. Who can say if the remainder of the social is the residue of the nonsocialized, or if it is not the social itself that is the remainder, the gigantic waste product... of what else? Of a process, which even if it were to completely disappear and had no name except the social would nevertheless only be its remainder. The residue can be completely at the level of the real. When a system has absorbed everything, when one has added everything up, when nothing remains, the entire sum turns to the remainder and becomes the remainder.

Witness the "Society" column of Le Monde, in which paradoxically, only immigrants, delinquents, women, etc. appear - everything that has not been socialized, "social" cases analogous to pathological cases. Pockets to be reabsorbed, segments that the "social" isolates as it grows. Designated as "residual" at the horizon of the social, they enter its jurisdiction in this way and are destined to find their place in an enlarged sociality. It is for this remainder that the social machine is recharged and finds new energy. But what happens when everything is sponged up, when everything is socialized? Then the machine stops, the dynamic is reversed, and it is the whole social system that becomes residue. As the social in its progression eliminates all the residue, it itself becomes residual. In designating residual categories as "Society," the social designates itself as a remainder.

The impossibility of determining what is the remainder of the other characterizes the phase of simulation and the death throes of distinctive systems, a phase when everything becomes a remainder and a residual. Inversely, the disappearance of the fatidic and structural slash that isolated the rest of ??? and that now permits each term to be the remainder of the other term characterizes a phase of reversibility during which there is "virtually" no more remainder. The two propositions are simultaneously "true" and are not mutually exclusive. They are themselves reversible.

Another aspect as surprising as the absence of an opposing term: the remainder makes you laugh. Any discussion on this theme unleashes the same language games, the same ambiguity, and the same obscenity as do discussions of sex or death. Sex and death are the great themes recognized for unleashing ambivalence and laughter. But the remainder is the third, and perhaps the only one, the two others amounting to this as to the very figure of reversibility. For why does one laugh? One only laughs at the reversibility of things, and sex and death are eminently reversible figures. It is because the stake is always reversible between masculine and feminine, between life and death, that one laughs at sex and death. How much more, then, at the remainder, which does not even have an opposing term, which by itself traverses the whole cycle, and runs infinitely after its own slash, after its own double, like Peter Schlemihl after his shadow?*I The remainder is obscene, because it is reversible and is exchanged for itself. It is obscene and makes one laugh, as only the lack of distinction between masculine and feminine, the lack of distinction between life and death makes one laugh, deeply laugh.

Today, the remainder has become the weighty term. It is on the remainder that a new intelligibility is founded. End of a certain logic of distinctive oppositions, in which the weak term played the role of the residual term. Today, everything is inverted. Psychoanalysis itself is the first great theorization of residues (lapses, dreams, etc.). It is no longer a political economy of production that directs us, but an economic politics of reproduction, of recycling-ecology and pollution-a political economy of the remainder. All normality sees itself today in the light of madness, which was nothing but its insignificant remainder. Privilege of all the remainders, in all domains, of the not - said, the feminine, the crazy, the marginal, of excrement and waste in art, etc. But this is still nothing but a sort of inversion of the structure, of the return of the repressed as a powerful moment, of the return of the remainder as surplus of meaning, as excess (but excess is not formally different from the remainder, and the problem of the squandering of excess in Bataille is not different from that of the reabsorption of remainders in a political economy of calculation and penury, only the philosophies are different), of a higher order of meaning

starting with the remainder. The secret of all the "liberations" that play on the hidden energies on the other side of the slash.

Now we are faced with a much more original situation: not that of the pure and simple inversion and promotion of remainders, but that of an instability in every structure and every opposition that makes it so that there is no longer even a remainder, due to the fact that the remainder is everywhere, and by playing with the slash, it annuls itself as such.

It is not when one has taken everything away that nothing is left, rather, nothing is left when things are unceasingly shifted and addition itself no longer has any meaning.

Birth is residual if it is not symbolically revisited through initiation.

Death is residual if it is not resolved in mourning, in the collective celebration of mourning.

Value is residual if it is not reabsorbed and volitalized in the cycle of exchanges.

Sexuality is residual once it becomes the production of sexual relations.

The social itself is residual once it becomes a production of "social relations."

All of the real is residual, and everything that is residual is destined to repeat itself indefinitely in phantasms.

All accumulation is nothing but a remainder, and the accumulation of remainders, in the sense that it is a rupture of alliance, and in the linear infinity of accumulation and calculation, in the linear infinity of production, compensates for the energy and value that used to be accomplished in the cycle of alliance. Now, what traverses a cycle is completely realized, whereas in the dimension of the infinite, everything that is below the

line of the infinite, below the line of eternity (this stockpile of time that itself is also, as with any stockpile, a rupture of alliances), all of that is nothing but the remainder.

Accumulation is nothing but the remainder, and repression is nothing but its inverse and asymmetrical form. It is on the stockpile of repressed affects and representations that our new alliance is based.

But when everything is repressed, nothing is anymore. We are not far from this absolute point of repression where the stockpiles are themselves undone, where the stockpiles of phantasms collapse. The whole imaginary of the stockpile, of energy, and of what remains of it, comes to us from repression. When repression reaches a point of critical saturation where its presence is put in question, then energy will no longer be available to be liberated, spent, economized, produced: it is the concept of energy itself that will be volatilized of its own accord.

Today the remainder, the energies left us, the restitution and the conservation of remainders, is the crucial problem of humanity. It is insoluble in and of itself. All new freed or spent energy will leave a new remainder. All desire, all libidinal energy, will produce a new repression. What is surprising in this, given that energy itself is not conceived except in the movement that stockpiles and liberates it, that represses it and "produces" it, that is to say in the figure of the remainder and its double?

One must push at the insane consumption of energy in order to exterminate its concept. One must push at maximal repression in order to exterminate its concept. Once the last liter of energy has been consumed (by the last ecologist), once the last indigenous person has been analyzed (by the last ethnologist), once the ultimate commodity has been produced by the last "work force," then one will realize that this gigantic spiral of energy and production, of repression and the unconscious, thanks to which one has managed to enclose everything in an entropic and catastrophic equation, that all this is in effect

nothing but a metaphysics of the remainder, and it will suddenly be resolved in all its effects.

* NOTE *

1. The allusion to Peter Schlemihl, the Man Who Lost His Shadow, is not accidental. Since the shadow, like the image in the mirror (in The Student from Prague), is a remainder par excellence, something that can "fall" from the body, just like hair, excrement, or nail clippings to which it "is" compared in all archaic magic. But they are also, one knows, "metaphors" of the soul, of breath, of Being, of essence, of what profoundly gives meaning to the subject. Without an image or without a shadow, the body becomes a transparent nothing, it is itself nothing but a remainder. It is the diaphanous substance that remains once the shadow is gone. There is no more reality: it is the shadow that has carried all reality away with it (thus in The Student from Prague, the image broken by the mirror brings with it the immediate death of the hero - classic sequence of fantastic tales - see also The Shadow by Hans Christian Andersen). Thus the body can be nothing but the waste product of its own residue, the fallout of its own fallout. Only the order said to be real permits privileging the body as reference. But nothing in the symbolic order permits betting on the primacy of one or the other (of the body or the shadow). And it is this reversion of the shadow onto the body, this fallout of the essential, by the terms of the essential, under the rubric of the insignificant, this incessant defeat of meaning before what remains of it, be they nail clippings or the "objet petit a," that creates the charm, the beauty, and the disquieting strangeness of these stories.

< THE SPIRAIING CADAVER >

The university is in ruins: nonfunctional in the social arenas of the market and employment, lacking cultural substance or an end purpose of knowledge.

Strictly speaking, there is no longer even any power: it is also in ruins. Whence the impossibility of the return of the fires of 1968: of the return of putting in question knowledge versus power itself - the explosive contradiction of knowledge and power (or the revelation of their collusion, which comes to the same thing) in the university, and, at the same time, through symbolic (rather than political) contagion in the whole institutional and social order. Why sociologists? marked this shift: the impasse of knowledge, the vertigo of nonknowledge (that is to say at once the absurdity and the impossibility of accumulating value in the order of knowledge) turns like an absolute weapon against power itself, in order to dismantle it according to the same vertiginous scenario of dispossession. This is the May 1968 effect. Today it cannot be achieved since power itself, after knowledge, has taken off, has become ungraspable - has dispossessed itself. In a now uncertain institution, without knowledge content, without a power structure (except for an archaic feudalism that turns a simulacrum of a machine whose destiny escapes it and whose survival is as artificial as that of barracks and theaters), offensive irruption is impossible. Only what precipitates rotting, by accentuating the parodic, simulacral side of dying games of knowledge and power, has meaning.

A strike has exactly the opposite effect. It regenerates the ideal of a possible university: the fiction of an ascension on everyone's part to a culture that is unlocatable, and that no longer has meaning. This ideal is substituted for the operation of the university as its critical alternative, as its therapy. This fiction still dreams of a permanency and democracy of knowledge. Besides, everywhere today the Left plays this role: it is the justice of the Left that reinjects an idea of justice, the necessity of logic and social morals into a rotten apparatus that is coming undone, which is losing all conscience of its legitimacy and renounces functioning almost of its own volition. It is the Left that secrets and desperately reproduces power, because it wants power, and therefore the Left believes in it and revives it precisely where the system puts an end to it. The system puts an end one by one to all its axioms, to all its institutions, and realizes one by one all the objectives of the historical and revolutionary Left that sees itself constrained to revive the wheels of capital

in order to lay seige to them one day: from private property to the small business, from the army to national grandeur, from puritan morality to petit bourgeois culture, justice at the university - everything that is disappearing, that the system itself, in its atrocity, certainly, but also in its irreversible impulse, has liquidated, must be conserved.

Whence the paradoxical but necessary inversion of all the terms of political analysis.

Power (or what takes its place) no longer believes in the university. It knows fundamentally that it is only a zone for the shelter and surveillance of a whole class of a certain age, it therefore has only to select - it will find its elite elsewhere, or by other means. Diplomas are worthless: why would it refuse to award them, in any case it is ready to award them to everybody; why this provocative politics, if not in order to crystallize energies on a fictive stake (selection, work, diplomas, etc.), on an already dead and rotting referential?

By rotting, the university can still do a lot of damage (rotting is a symbolic mechanism - not political but symbolic, therefore subversive for us). But for this to be the case it is necessary to start with this very rotting, and not to dream of resurrection. It is necessary to transform this rotting into a violent process, into violent death, through mockery and defiance, through a multiplied simulation that would offer the ritual of the death of the university as a model of decomposition to the whole of society, a contagious model of the disaffection of a whole social structure, where death would finally make its ravages, which the strike tries desperately to avert, in complicity with the system, but succeeds, on top of it all, only in transforming the university into a slow death, a delay that is not even the possible site of a subversion, of an offensive reversion.

That is what the events of May 1968 produced. At a less advanced point in the process of the liquefaction of the university and of culture, the students, far from wishing to save the furniture (revive the lost object, in an ideal mode), retorted by confronting power with the challenge of the total, immediate death of the institution, the challenge of a

deterritorialization even more intense than the one that came from the system, and by summoning power to respond to this total derailment of the institution of knowledge, to this total lack of a need to gather in a given place, this death desired in the end - not the crisis of the university, that is not a challenge, on the contrary, it is the game of the system, but the death of the university - to that challenge, power has not been able to respond, except by its own dissolution in return (only for a moment maybe, but we saw it).

The barricades of 10 May seemed defensive and to be defending a territory: the Latin Quarter, old boutique. But this is not true: behind this facade, it was the dead university, the dead culture whose challenge they were launching at power, and their own eventual death at the same time - a transformation into immediate sacrifice, which was only the long-term operation of the system itself: the liquidation of culture and of knowledge. They were not there to save the Sorbonne, but to brandish its cadaver in the face of the others, just as black people in Watts and in Detroit brandished the ruins of their neighborhoods to which they had themselves set fire.

What can one brandish today? No longer even the ruins of knowledge, of culture - the ruins themselves are defunct. We know it, we have mourned Nanterre for seven years. 1968 is dead, repeatable only as a phantasm of mourning. What would be the equivalent in symbolic violence (that is to say beyond the political) would be the same operation that caused nonknowledge, the rotting of knowledge to come up against power - no longer discovering this fabulous energy on the same level at all, but on the superior spiral: causing nonpower, the rotting of power to come up against - against what precisely? There lies the problem. It is perhaps insoluble. Power is being lost, power has been lost. All around us there are nothing but dummies of power, but the mechanical illusion of power still rules the social order, behind which grows the absent, illegible, terror of control, the terror of a definitive code, of which we are the minuscule terminals. Attacking representation no longer has much meaning either. One senses quite clearly, for the same reason, that all student conflicts (as is the case, more broadly, on the level of global

society) around the representation, the delegation of power are no longer anything but phantom vicissitudes that yet still manage, out of despair, to occupy the forefront of the stage. Through I don't know what Mobius effect, representation itself has also turned in on itself, and the whole logical universe of the political is dissolved at the same time, ceding its place to a transfinite universe of simulation, where from the beginning no one is represented nor representative of anything any more, where all that is accumulated is deaccumulated at the same time, where even the axiological, directive, and salvageable phantasm of power has disappeared. A universe that is still incomprehensible, unrecognizable, to us, a universe with a malefic curve that our mental coordinates, which are orthogonal and prepared for the infinite linearity of criticism and history, violently resist. Yet it is there that one must fight, if even fighting has any meaning anymore. We are simulators, we are simulacra (not in the classical sense of "appearance"), we are concave mirrors radiated by the social, a radiation without a light source, power without origin, without distance, and it is in this tactical universe of the simulacrum that one will need to fight - without hope, hope is a weak value, but in defiance and fascination. Because one must not refuse the intense fascination that emanates from this liquefaction of all power, of all axes of value, of all axiology, politics included. This spectacle, which is at once that of the death throes and the apogee of capital, surpasses by far that of the commodity described by the situationists. This spectacle is our essential force. We are no longer in a relation toward capital of uncertain or victorious forces, but in a political one, that is the phantasm of revolution. We are in a relation of defiance, of seduction, and of death toward this universe that is no longer one, precisely because all axiality that escapes it. The challenge capital directs at us in its delirium - liquidating without shame the law of profit, surplus value, productive finalities, structures of power, and finding at the end of its process the profound immorality (but also the seduction) of primitive rituals of destruction, this very challenge must be raised to an insanely higher level. Capital, like value, is irresponsible, irreversible, ineluctable. Only to value is capital capable of offering a fantastic spectacle of its decomposition - only the phantom of value still floats over the desert of the classical structures of capital, just as the phantom of religion floats over a world now long desacralized, just as the phantom of knowledge floats over the university.

It is up to us to again become the nomads of this desert, but disengaged from the mechanical illusion of value. We will live in this world, which for us has all the disquieting strangeness of the desert and of the simulacrum, with all the veracity of living phantoms, of wandering and simulating animals that capital, that the death of capital has made of us - because the desert of cities is equal to the desert of sand - the jungle of signs is equal to that of the forests - the vertigo of simulacra is equal to that of nature - only the vertiginous seduction of a dying system remains, in which work buries work, in which value buries value - leaving a virgin, sacred space without pathways, continuous as Bataille wished it, where only the wind lifts the sand, where only the wind watches over the sand.

What can one make of all this in the political order? Very little.

But we also have to fight against the profound fascination exerted on us by the death throes of capital, against the staging by capital of its own death, when we are really the ones in our final hours. To leave it the initiative of its own death, is to leave it all the privileges of revolution. Surrounded by the simulacrum of value and by the phantom of capital and of power, we are much more disarmed and impotent than when surrounded by the law of value and of the commodity, since the system has revealed itself capable of integrating its own death and since we are relieved of the responsibility for this death, and thus of the stake of our own life. This supreme ruse of the system, that of the simulacrum of its death, through which it maintains us in life by having liquidated through absorption all possible negativity, only a superior ruse can stop. Challenge or imaginary science, only a pataphysics of simulacra can can remove us from the system's strategy of simulation and the impasse of death in which it imprisons us.

< VALUE'S LAST TANGO >

Where nothing is in its place, lies disorder
Where in the desired place there is nothing, lies order
-Brecht

Panic on the part of university administrators at the idea that diplomas will be awarded without a "real"-work counterpart, without an equivalence in knowledge. This panic is not that of political subversion, it is that of seeing value become dissociated from its contents and begin to function alone, according to its very form. The values of the university (diplomas, etc.) will proliferate and continue to circulate, a bit like floating capital or Eurodollars, they will spiral without referential criteria, completely devalorized in the end, but that is unimportant: their circulation alone is enough to create a social horizon of value, and the ghostly presence of the phantom value will only be greater, even when its reference point (its use value, its exchange value, the academic "work force" that the university recoops) is lost. Terror of value without equivalence.

This situation only appears to be new. It is so for those who still think that a real process of work takes place in the university, and who invest their lived experience, their neuroses, their raison d'être in it. The exchange of signs (of knowledge, of culture) in the university, between "teachers" and "taught" has for some time been nothing but a doubled collusion of bitterness and indifference (the indifference of signs that brings with it the disaffection of social and human relations), a doubled simulacrum of a psychodrama (that of a demand hot with shame, presence, oedipal exchange, with pedagogical incest that strives to substitute itself for the lost exchange of work and knowledge). In this sense the university remains the site of a desperate initiation to the empty form of value, and those who have lived there for the past few years are familiar with this strange work, the true desperation of nonwork, of nonknowledge. Because current generations still dream of reading, of learning, of competing, but their heart isn't in it - as a whole, the ascetic cultural mentality has run body and possessions together. This is why the strike no longer means anything.*l

It is also why we were trapped, we trapped ourselves, after 1968, into giving diplomas to everybody. Subversion? Not at all. Once again, we were the promoters of the advanced form, of the pure form of value: diplomas without work. The system does not want any more diplomas, but it wants that - operational values in the void - and we were the ones who inaugurated it, with the illusion of doing the opposite.

The students' distress at having diplomas conferred on them for no work complements and is equal to that of the teachers. It is more secret and more insidious than the traditional anguish of failure or of receiving worthless diplomas. No-risk insurance on the diploma - which empties the vicissitudes of knowledge and selection of content - is hard to bear. Also it must be complicated by either a benefit - alibi, a simulacrum of work exchanged against a simulacrum of a diploma, or by a form of aggression (the teacher called on to give the course, or treated as the automatic distributor) or by rancor, so that at least something will still take place that resembles a "real" relation. But nothing works. Even the domestic squabbles between teachers and students, which today make up a great part of their exchanges, are nothing but the recollection of, and a kind of nostalgia for a violence or a complicity that heretofore made them enemies or united them around a stake of knowledge or a political stake.

The "hard law of value," the "law set in stone" - when it abandons us, what sadness, what panic! This is why there are still good days left to fascist and authoritarian methods, because they revive something of the violence necessary to life - whether suffered or inflicted. The violence of ritual, the violence of work, the violence of knowledge, the violence of blood, the violence of power and of the political is good! It is clear, luminous, the relations of force, contradictions, exploitation, repression! This is lacking today, and the need for it makes itself felt. The teacher's reinvestment of his power through "free speech," the self-management of the group and other modern nonsense - it is still all a game, for example, in the university (but the entire political sphere is articulated in the same way). No one is fooled. Simply in order to escape profound disillusionment, to escape the catastrophe brought on by the loss of roles, statutes, responsibilities, and the

incredible demagoguery that is deployed through them, it is necessary to recreate the professor either as a mannequin of power and knowledge, or to invest him with a modicum of legitimacy derived from the ultra-Left - if not the situation is intolerable for everyone. It is based on this compromise - artificial figuration of the teacher, equivocal complicity on the part of the student - it is based on this phantom scenario of pedagogy that things continue and this time can last indefinitely. Because there is an end to value and to work, there is none to the simulacrum of value and of work. The universe of simulation is transreal and transfmite: no test of reality will come to put an end to it - except the total collapse and slippage of the terrain, which remains our most foolish hope.

* Note *

1. Moreover, contemporary strikes naturally take on the same qualities as work: the same suspension, the same weight, the same absence of objectives, the same allergy to decisions, the same turning round of power, the same mourning of energy, the same undefined circularity in todays strike as in yesterday's work, the same situation in the counterinstitution as in the institution: the contagion grows, the circle is closed - after that it will be necessary to emerge elsewhere. Or, rather, the opposite: take this impasse itself as the basic situation, turn the indecision and the absence of an objective into an offensive situation, a strategy. In searching at any price to wrench oneself from this mortal situation, from this mental anorexia of the university, the students do nothing but breathe energy again into an institution long since in a coma; it is forced survival, it is the medicine of desperation that is practiced today on both institutions and individuals, and that everywhere is the sign of the same incapacity to confront death. "One must push what is collapsing," said Nietzsche.

< ON NIHILISM >

Nihilism no longer wears the dark, Wagnerian, Spenglerian, fuliginous colors of the end of the century. It no longer comes from a Weltanschauung of decadence nor from a metaphysical radicality born of the death of God and of all the consequences that must be taken from this death. Today's nihilism is one of transparency, and it is in some sense more radical, more crucial than in its prior and historical forms, because this transparency, this irresolution is indissolubly that of the system, and that of all the theory that still pretends to analyze it. When God died, there was still Nietzsche to say so - the great nihilist before the Eternal and the cadaver of the Eternal. But before the simulated transparency of all things, before the simulacrum of the materialist or idealist realization of the world in hyperreality (God is not dead, he has become hyper-real), there is no longer a theoretical or critical God to recognize his own.

The universe, and all of us, have entered live into simulation, into the malefic, not even malefic, indifferent, sphere of deterrence: in a bizarre fashion, nihilism has been entirely realized no longer through destruction, but through simulation and deterrence. From the active, violent phantasm, from the phantasm of the myth and the stage that it also was, historically, it has passed into the transparent, falsely transparent, operation of things. What then remains of a possible nihilism in theory? What new scene can unfold, where nothing and death could be replayed as a challenge, as a stake?

We are in a new, and without a doubt insoluble, position in relation to prior forms of nihilism:

Romanticism is its first great manifestation: it, along with the Enlightenment's Revolution, corresponds to the destruction of the order of appearances.

Surrealism, dada, the absurd, and political nihilism are the second great manifestation, which corresponds to the destruction of the order of meaning.

The first is still an aesthetic form of nihilism (dandyism), the second, a political, historical, and metaphysical form (terrorism).

These two forms no longer concern us except in part, or not at all. The nihilism of transparency is no longer either aesthetic or political, no longer borrows from either the extermination of appearances, nor from extinguishing the embers of meaning, nor from the last nuances of an apocalypse. There is no longer an apocalypse (only aleatory terrorism still tries to reflect it, but it is certainly no longer political, and it only has one mode of manifestation left that is at the same time a mode of disappearance: the media - now the media are not a stage where something is played, they are a strip, a track, a perforated map of which we are no longer even spectators: receivers). The apocalypse is finished, today it is the precession of the neutral, of forms of the neutral and of indifference. I will leave it to be considered whether there can be a romanticism, an aesthetic of the neutral therein. I don't think so - all that remains, is the fascination for desertlike and indifferent forms, for the very operation of the system that annihilates us. Now, fascination (in contrast to seduction, which was attached to appearances, and to dialectical reason, which was attached to meaning) is a nihilistic passion par excellence, it is the passion proper to the mode of disappearance. We are fascinated by all forms of disappearance, of our disappearance. Melancholic and fascinated, such is our general situation in an era of involuntary transparency.

I am a nihilist.

I observe, I accept, I assume the immense process of the destruction of appearances (and of the seduction of appearances) in the service of meaning (representation, history, criticism, etc.) that is the fundamental fact of the nineteenth century. The true revolution of the nineteenth century, of modernity, is the radical destruction of appearances, the disenchantment of the world and its abandonment to the violence of interpretation and of history.

I observe, I accept, I assume, I analyze the second revolution, that of the twentieth century, that of postmodernity, which is the immense process of the destruction of meaning, equal to the earlier destruction of appearances. He who strikes with meaning is killed by meaning.

The dialectic stage, the critical stage is empty. There is no more stage. There is no therapy of meaning or therapy through meaning: therapy itself is part of the generalized process of indifferentiation.

The stage of analysis itself has become uncertain, aleatory: theories float (in fact, nihilism is impossible, because it is still a desperate but determined theory, an imaginary of the end, a weltanschauung of catastrophe).*1

Analysis is itself perhaps the decisive element of the immense process of the freezing over of meaning. The surplus of meaning that theories bring, their competition at the level of meaning is completely secondary in relation to their coalition in the glacial and four-tiered operation of dissection and transparency. One must be conscious that, no matter how the analysis proceeds, it proceeds toward the freezing over of meaning, it assists in the precession of simulacra and of indifferent forms. The desert grows.

Implosion of meaning in the media. Implosion of the social in the masses. Infinite growth of the masses as a function of the acceleration of the system. Energetic impasse. Point of inertia.

A destiny of inertia for a saturated world. The phenomena of inertia are accelerating (if one can say that). The arrested forms proliferate, and growth is immobilized in excrescence. Such is also the secret of the hypertelie, of what goes further than its own end. It would be our own mode of destroying finalities: going further, too far in the same direction - destruction of meaning through simulation, hypersimulation, hypertelie. Denying its own end through hyperfinality (the crustacean, the statues of Easter Island) -

is this not also the obscene secret of cancer? Revenge of excrescence on growth, revenge of speed on inertia.

The masses themselves are caught up in a gigantic process of inertia through acceleration. They are this excrescent, devouring, process that annihilates all growth and all surplus meaning. They are this circuit short-circuited by a monstrous finality.

It is this point of inertia and what happens outside this point of inertia that today is fascinating, enthralling (gone, therefore, the discreet charm of the dialectic). If it is nihilistic to privilege this point of inertia and the analysis of this irreversibility of systems up to the point of no return, then I am a nihilist.

If it is nihilistic to be obsessed by the mode of disappearance, and no longer by the mode of production, then I am a nihilist. Disappearance, aphanisis, implosion, Fury of Verschwindens. Transpolitics is the elective sphere of the mode of disappearance (of the real, of meaning, of the stage, of history, of the social, of the individual). To tell the truth, it is no longer so much a question of nihilism: in disappearance, in the desertlike, aleatory, and indifferent form, there is no longer even pathos, the pathetic of nihilism - that mythical energy that is still the force of nihilism, of radicality, mythic denial, dramatic anticipation. It is no longer even disenchantment, with the seductive and nostalgic, itself enchanted, tonality of disenchantment. It is simply disappearance.

The trace of this radicality of the mode of disappearance is already found in Adorno and Benjamin, parallel to a nostalgic exercise of the dialectic. Because there is a nostalgia of the dialectic, and without a doubt the most subtle dialectic is nostalgic to begin with. But more deeply, there is in Benjamin and Adorno another tonality, that of a melancholy attached to the system itself, one that is incurable and beyond any dialectic. It is this melancholia of systems that today takes the upper hand through the ironically transparent forms that surround us. It is this melancholia that is becoming our fundamental passion.

It is no longer the spleen or the vague yearnings of the fin-de-siecle soul. It is no longer nihilism either, which in some sense aims at normalizing everything through destruction, the passion of resentment (ressentiment).*2 No, melancholia is the fundamental tonality of functional systems, of current systems of simulation, of programming and information. Melancholia is the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of meaning, of the mode of the volatilization of meaning in operational systems. And we are all melancholic.

Melancholia is the brutal disaffection that characterizes our saturated systems. Once the hope of balancing good and evil, true and false, indeed of confronting some values of the same order, once the more general hope of a relation of forces and a stake has vanished. Everywhere, always, the system is too strong: hegemonic.

Against this hegemony of the system, one can exalt the ruses of desire, practice revolutionary micrology of the quotidian, exalt the molecular drift or even defend cooking. This does not resolve the imperious necessity of checking the system in broad daylight.

This, only terrorism can do.

It is the trait of reversion that effaces the remainder, just as a single ironic smile effaces a whole discourse, just as a single flash of denial in a slave effaces all the power and pleasure of the master.

The more hegemonic the system, the more the imagination is struck by the smallest of its reversals. The challenge, even infinitesimal, is the image of a chain failure. Only this reversibility without a counterpart is an event today, on the nihilistic and disaffected stage of the political. Only it mobilizes the imaginary.

If being a nihilist, is carrying, to the unbearable limit of hegemonic systems, this radical trait of derision and of violence, this challenge that the system is summoned to answer

through its own death, then I am a terrorist and nihilist in theory as the others are with their weapons. Theoretical violence, not truth, is the only resource left us.

But such a sentiment is Utopian. Because it would be beautiful to be a nihilist, if there were still a radicality - as it would be nice to be a terrorist, if death, including that of the terrorist, still had meaning.

But it is at this point that things become insoluble. Because to this active nihilism of radicality, the system opposes its own, the nihilism of neutralization. The system is itself also nihilistic, in the sense that it has the power to pour everything, including what denies it, into indifference.

In this system, death itself shines by virtue of its absence. (The Bologna train station, the Oktoberfest in Munich: the dead are annulled by indifference, that is where terrorism is the involuntary accomplice of the whole system, not politically, but in the accelerated form of indifference that it contributes to imposing.) Death no longer has a stage, neither phantasmatic nor political, on which to represent itself, to play itself out, either a ceremonial or a violent one. And this is the victory of the other nihilism, of the other terrorism, that of the system.

There is no longer a stage, not even the minimal illusion that makes events capable of adopting the force of reality-no more stage either of mental or political solidarity: what do Chile, Biafra, the boat people, Bologna, or Poland matter? All of that comes to be annihilated on the television screen. We are in the era of events without consequences (and of theories without consequences).

There is no more hope for meaning. And without a doubt this is a good thing: meaning is mortal. But that on which it has imposed its ephemeral reign, what it hoped to liquidate in order to impose the reign of the Enlightenment, that is, appearances, they, are immortal, invulnerable to the nihilism of meaning or of non-meaning itself.

This is where seduction begins.

* NOTES *

1. There are cultures that have no imaginary except of their origin and have no imaginary of their end. There are those that are obsessed by both... Two other types of figures are possible... Having no imaginary except of the end (our culture, nihilistic). No longer having any imaginary, neither of the origin nor of the end (that which is coming, aleatory).

2. Cf. Nietzsche's use of the word "ressentiment" throughout Thus Spoke Zaralhustra.-TRANS.

-(The End)-

Jean Baudrillard

FATAL STRATEGIES

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SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS SERIES

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Originally published in 1983 as *Les Stratégies fatales* by Editions Grasset, Paris.

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Published by Semiotext(e)
2007 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 427, Los Angeles, CA 90057
www.semiotexte.com

Special thanks to Justin Cavin and Robert Dewhurst.

Cover Art by Matt Fishbeck. "We Never Close," 2007.
Back Cover Photography by Marine Baudrillard
Design by Hedi El Kholti

ISBN-13: 978-1-58435-061-3

Distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England
Printed in the United States of America

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Jean Baudrillard

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Introduction

A Belated Invitation to the Orgy

"Too bad. We're in paradise."
—Jean Baudrillard

WHEN I FIRST ENCOUNTERED the writings of Jean Baudrillard, it felt as if I had discovered the ideal life-coach for an age in which life made very little sense. His various works appeared as an almost seamless soliloquy, distributed over, and parceled into, a series of books that functioned more as chapters in an overarching compendium, than discrete texts of their own. To step midway into Baudrillard's stream-of-consciousness, was to treat his compulsively calm commentary on the present as an illuminating guide for the perplexed. Indeed, few other thinkers could, to my mind, account for the mystifying "events" that were claiming the attention of the world at large at the time: Michael Jackson's unfolding follies, baroque conspiracy theories, newsless news reports, wars staged for prime-time audiences, and pseudoscandals which seemed to stimulate debate in direct inverse ratio to the changes they inspired. To come of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s was to find oneself in a sociopolitical echo chamber, robbed even of the false promise of revolution, or compensatory hope of utopia. For

Baudrillard had insisted that *this* was indeed utopia: this lurching tableaux of strip malls, Sony Walkman-cocooned joggers, terrorist-themed fashion shows, designer painkillers, and poll results, announced with obscene confidence into hushed clinical waiting rooms. "The crisis of achieved utopia," is one of the many names Baudrillard christened the postmodern world, in which we were now obliged to endure the consequences of getting what we had collectively asked for. (The ultra-absorbent utility of Baudrillard's "we," however, is something that his critics have rightly questioned.) The orgy was over. Long live the orgy!

Revisiting *Fatal Strategies* fifteen years after the initial encounter, and twenty-five years after it was first published in France, I still have the sense that I am being introduced to an unclouded and fearless perspective, intent on breaking the rules of polite discourse by pointing out the strings, wires, smoke, and mirrors that many of us have been trained not to notice. Baudrillard's words resonate with those troubled, inchoate intuitions about the sinister mechanics of the system, bypassing the rational methods and assumptions of his peers. (After all, Baudrillard was a sociologist who had little patience with sociology.) The temptation is to simplify the insights contained in his own countersystem, and interpret the hyperreal condition as a political conspiracy or localizable menace, just as the Wachowski brothers did in their naive homage to the great man, *The Matrix*. (As Baudrillard eventually pointed out, *The Matrix* is the kind of film the Matrix itself would have made about the Matrix.) Rescuing Baudrillard's ideas from caricature thus becomes a challenging and important task, now that he is no longer with us.

One of Baudrillard's final appearances in the US was at the New School in New York, to deliver a paper entitled simply "Cannibal/

Carnival." A line of people extended out onto 12th Street and down Sixth Avenue an hour before the lecture was scheduled to begin. Those walking by were under the impression a rock concert was imminent, as the auditorium, and then the overflow room, filled to capacity, forcing disappointed punters of all ages to be turned away. Clearly Baudrillard's star had not dimmed, in spite of the ongoing disdain sanctioned by fickle academic fashions. For while part of this turnout could be explained by a morbid curiosity to see the last of the living postmodern giants, there was also a genuine desire to hear his pronouncements on the current "situation."

But what does it mean to read Baudrillard not only after the orgy, but after Baudrillard himself—now that his words have sadly ceased midstream?[1] What kind of legacy has he left those who would enter the remarkably comprehensive and coherent universe of his ideas? Well, perhaps the most significant gift he has bequeathed his readers is precisely that: a durable map of hyperreality on the same 1:1 scale as Borges's map of the empire. Where hyperreality exactly covers the territory of the real, Baudrillard's *oeuvre* exactly covers the deterritorialized cartography of the hyperreal. In doing so, his books function as sophisticated tools for navigating an age which has leap-frogged alienation to arrive at pure simulation.

What's more (and this might seem a strange claim at face value), Baudrillard has given us *hope*. Clearly noone could write with such a poisonous pen unless it was filled with the bile of his own disillusionments and disappointments. To call him a lapsed romantic is much too crude and misleading. However, there is an aestheticism at work in his ideas—a belief in the potential of

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1. Before he himself committed the "delinquency" of dying, Baudrillard had argued that death had become the ultimate *faux pas* one can make nowadays.

changing course, "if only for the sake of change," that appeals to those cliché-phobic people who have managed to cut their own beautiful souls like an umbilical cord. For instance, in reference to wholly pessimistic readings of his statement that we are living *post-festum*, Baudrillard reminds us that a woman is whispering into the man's ear, "what are you doing after the orgy?" It is a potential rendezvous, an occasion to look forward to, and build toward: a slight shift in perspective, which creates a more promising view of the orgy itself. And so, by extending the poetic praxis of the Situationists into his own complex vision of the enemy (no longer life-draining Capital, but the biopolitical logic of the code), we find plenty of room to breathe inside those same concepts which impatient and obtuse readers simply dismiss as a litany of negative epiphanies.

Another great gift from Baudrillard is his style, which is nothing if not seductive. His ideas are complex, but fit together perfectly, like a particularly fiendish Chinese box. And like other great thinkers, he creates his own vocabulary—often counterintuitive—where "crisis" stands diametrically opposed to "catastrophe," "ceremony" to "spectacle," and "domination" to "hegemony." When reading several titles in a row, his ideas can seem terribly repetitive. And yet, his phrasing is so exquisite, his examples so compelling, his rhetoric so uncompromising, that the diligent reader may feel obliged to take notes by simply transcribing page for page. (Indeed, were one to actually take the time to do so, then the strength of the skeleton supporting the dance comes into sharper relief.)

No work was more important to Baudrillard himself than *Fatal Strategies*, and it is indeed one of the best places to start for an overview of his thought. Here in these pages we find a holographic style; for the entire vision is contained in each fragment. From whichever unit one might choose to approach it—the sentence, the

paragraph, the chapter, or the entire book—a crystallized sense of the argument shines through. What is more, there is a fugue-like persistence at work between the pages: a Pachelbel's Canon of Genteel Disgust. Despite using academic language, and assuming some familiarity with the history of ideas, this book is not at all obscure or precious or esoteric. The author proceeds with the confidence of someone who has much to say, and wants others to understand it. To this end, he creates a formidably coherent textual universe; totalizing, despite—or due to—its reliance on paradox.

Along with *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, *Fatal Strategies* is one of Baudrillard's most emphatic and comprehensive statements.[2] Within these pages we are not only introduced to the key motifs developed in this earlier book, during his post-Marxist rehab—reversibility, value, impossible exchange, the object, transparency, virtuality, chance, etc.—but we are also witness to the underlying force (destiny/evil) which holds them together in the same constellation. Having previously noted that symbolic exchange is "a functioning principle that is sovereignly external and antagonistic to our economic 'reality principle'" (SED, 120), Baudrillard goes on to develop the ecstatic challenge of the "counter-gift" to the restricted economy. Namely, that this anthropological specter cannot be assimilated without damage to the commodity system, based as it is

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2. Of course there is no consensus on Baudrillard's key works, as illustrated by Mark Poster's description of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* as "bleak," "pathetic" and "flawed" in his overall positive introduction to Baudrillard's *Selected Writings* (5). Mike Gane, in contrast, describes it as "without doubt Jean Baudrillard's most important book" (viii). This new edition of *Fatal Strategies* will no doubt inspire similar polaraties of opinion, while claiming its retrospecitve, prominent place amongst his collected titles.

on utility, (re)production, exchange value, and profit. As a kind of "accursed share," the symbolic embodies the fatal strategy of achieving liberation through "the deepening of negative conditions" (223). In other words, the sociocybernetic code can successfully absorb everything *except* a homeopathic dose of its own logic of exclusion. Thus, the violence of the symbolic—the obligation to reciprocate on levels deeper than objects tethered to exchange value—haunts the diminished contemporary world in the way kryptonite haunts Superman. The social law would have us believe that time is linear, and that gifts are unilateral. However, a more profound law invites the cyclical and the reversible to reenter the frame from which they had been rudely excluded.

Reversibility, for instance, denotes the limit point in which all alternative values spasm into their opposite: such as life and death, good and evil, chance and fate, male and female, human and inhuman, etc. As such, reversibility can also be considered a strategy emerging from *within* any given arrangement: the immanent potential for subversion or metamorphosis. At the general level of forms, and according the deeper laws of exchange mandated by the symbolic, such binary oppositions do not progress in a linear fashion, according to the dialectics of human history. Rather, they push each other to the outer limits, the object barrier, of their own moral values. No matter how we moderns strive to charge life with the positive, and death with the negative, there is "a kind of universal collusiveness of inseparable forms" (Pass 16–17) that makes a mockery of our digital desire to sort the quick from the dead. As such, the ideal Kantian subject is simply not qualified to parse a world plagued by third order simulation technologies. How can one argue rationally against "the malicious curvature that puts an end to the horizon of meaning" (45)? One can't. How can one definitively

decode a code based on signifiers *sans* signifieds? One cannot. Thus every system is pregnant with the possibility that it will "overflow its own reality principle and ... be refracted in another logic" (211).

Reality itself, then, is a victim of what Baudrillard would later call "the perfect crime" (in which perfection itself—or at least the attempt to achieve perfection—is the criminal). The hyperreal is *not* an illusion. It is not a false world of Platonic cave shadows, from which one could escape. It is the *more real than real.* Reality, as experienced in the different classical times preceding postmodernism, was indexed against illusion, dreams, art, magic. Today, reality has been swallowed up and disappears in its own hyperbole, just as sex disappears in porn, and events in the news. The traditional division between culture and nature no longer holds in the hyperreal, since both have been so thoroughly mediated. Virtual reality is thus both an oxymoron and a tautology at the same time. For Baudrillard, this calls for a "pataphysical" perspective: a concept taken from the proto-Surrealist Alfred Jarry, whose writings promoted the "science of imaginary solutions": a counterintuitive, ametaphysical, rendering of ruses, rules, predestinations, and interconnections. In a pataphysical climate, there is no foundation to distinguish between the cosmic and the political, the real or imagined, so that each infects the other in unprecedented ways.

Philosophizing with a Spanner

Fatal Strategies can therefore be read as a perverse manual of conduct, pointing out common temptations and traps to avoid. I shall leave the ever-green, ever-vexed question of the "lived" or practical application of theory aside, and rather note that Baudrillard's playbook initially

disorients and then liberates, as it introduces the reader to a procession of ideas, blasphemous to both the secular priests of high reason and the neoromantic revolutionaries of the various "isms" of our time.

Inscribed within the title is a paradox and a pun. The paradox involves the nature of the conjunction, for as Baudrillard himself asks explicitly in the concluding pages, "how could there be fatality if there is strategy?" By what "sarcastic variable" could the strategic be figured as a subspecies of fate, or vice versa? Herein lies the enigma that powers not only this book, but Baudrillard's entire wager of believing "for a single instant the hypothesis that there is a fatal and enigmatic bias in the order of things." To do so is to throw into question all the fixed cultural algorithms the culture has relied upon to sort "right" from "wrong," and distribute guilt or blame where necessary: "We have abolished the real world," wrote Nietzsche, "what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? *... But no! with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*"[3] (Nietzsche cast a long and cooling shadow over Baudrillard's work.)[4] The pun embedded in the title, on the other hand, concerns the duel use of "fatal," meaning primarily fate-as-destiny, but also the symbolically lethal forces described in his earlier works: Freud's death-drive détourned toward objects and forms, rather than to biographical beings.

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3. *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. RJ Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p.51.

4. A less noted influence is Theodor Adorno, whose Mandarin melancholy could be read as a precedent to Baudrillard's project: "Art is least to be saved by stuffing the extinct subject like a museum piece, and the object, the purely inhuman, which alone is worthy of art today, escapes its reach at once by excess and inhumanity" (*Minima Moralia: Reflections of a Damaged Life*, Verso, 2005, p.145).

Baudrillard dismisses current critical radicality as "useless." Certainly it takes courage to claim one's own system as the antidote to banality and denounce dialectics as obsolete. But it isn't just a flippant statement on his part. The multipolar polemic of *Fatal Strategies* begins by noting that, "Things have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of meaning that was beginning to bore them." In other words, the rhetorical and/or revolutionary strategy of opposition is now corrupt and paralyzed, so that it has become necessary—in an age of rampant indeterminism—to deepen negative conditions until they flip, according to the cultural-cosmic principles or reversibility detailed throughout. (A point pushed by Žižek a decade or so later.) Fatal strategies themselves differ from other such techniques, such as Machiavelli's or Sun Tzu's, in that they are not about securing the sovereignty or prosperity of the subject, but are deployed by forces enigmatic to us: evil genies, sly objects, ironic events, and spanners in the works which escape the centripetal will and best laid plan's of the individual.

We are thus witness to "a dizzying overmultiplication of formal qualities." All the elements of our world—science, politics, fashion, love—have become prey to a flabby hyperdeterminacy (which is equivalent to indeterminacy). This in turn leads to "the frenzy to explain everything, attribute everything, footnote everything." Fatal strategies, in contrast, are those phenomena that slip away from the harsh light of interrogation, the presumption of explanation, and the tyranny of causality. Meanwhile, human activity continues to unfold in a kind of endless extratime, in which the results are meaningless, because no one can remember what they are playing for. "The worst thing," writes Baudrillard, "is that there is no Promethean challenge involved here, no excess of passion or pride. It simply seems that the species has crossed some specific,

mysterious point, from which it is impossible to retreat, decelerate or slow down." To put it somewhat differently, the audience collectively feels *de trop*, yet stubbornly refuses to leave after the credits have rolled.

Going back is certainly not an option. Neither is allowing things to continue in their default trajectory. One difficult question is the degree to which the eponymous fatal strategies belong to "us" humans (potentially at least), and to what extent we are merely caught in their logic. Take the example of terrorism, which had a different tenor during the time of composition (the most visible form being left-wing extremism such as the Red Brigade), but nevertheless continues to have the same structural relationship to the media, the masses, and the State. Baudrillard argues that to take a hostage is to wrench someone from their own fate, so that they are suspended—"neither dead nor alive." From a "fatal" perspective, we are all hostages, stripped of our symbolic connection to death and destiny by the infantile demand for security. In a passage which echoes uncannily through the halls of the Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, Baudrillard asks: "what kind of State would be capable of dissuading and annihilating all terrorism in the bud? It would have to arm itself with such terrorism and generalize terror on every level. If this is the price of security, is everybody deep down dreaming of this?"[5]

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5. In 2003, Baudrillard revisited the question of terrorism, post-September 11, with a brilliant reading of the "retrospective" and "preventative" counterterror of the US and its epigones: "There is a ferocious irony here: an antiterrorist world system that ends up internalizing terror, inflicting terror on itself and emptying itself of all political substance—to the point of turning against its own population" (*In the Shadow of the Silent Majority*, 115). Yet this is where power also becomes "spectral and vulnerable."

Terrorism is not something Baudrillard advocates on an individual, pragmatic level. He is certainly not asking his readers to hijack planes. And yet he understands the symbolic and semiotic conditions which summoned it into existence. When the drama of alienation gives way to the melodrama of terrorism, Baudrillard is bold enough to point out the silver lining. "It is worse than the one that replaces it, but at least it liberates us from liberal nostalgia and the ruses of history."

Fatal strategies are beyond human control, since they seem to be woven into the quantum fabric of the cosmos. That mysterious would-be holistic entity known as "the world," will—it seems—continue to use its own diabolical techniques to thwart human hubris and lack of imagination (which may or may not amount to the same thing). For instance, the object may only *pretend* to obey the laws of physics, "because it gives so much pleasure to the observer." Some scientists would probably throw the book across the room at such a suggestion. The silent majority, however, may read on intrigued.

On the level of the individual then, fatal strategies are secret social tendencies or cosmic "objective" ironies which can provide a model for how to approach certain situations. One can, for instance, refuse to treat seduction as a narcissistic game of capture and control (as Don Juan might), and rather consider it as a way to "soak pleasure from this charming and absurd difference that nature has put between the sexes." How successful one might be in replacing the obscene, demanding (and intrinsically alienating) discourse of love with the subtle, challenging (and inherently inclusive) challenge of seduction, is no means certain, given the cultural pressures set up against it. No doubt the stakes are against such an endeavor, given that the free-floating "ecological libido" of modern times represents "a product specific to our epoch, spread

out everywhere in homeopathic and homeostatic doses .... [which] can be drained, diverted, magnetized from one niche to another, according to the flow. It corresponds ideally to an order of manipulation." And yet, Baudrillard suggests, merely registering a willingness to change the rules of erotic engagement, to tinker with the semiotic code, and alter the assumptions they represent, has the potential to transform human intimacy beyond the unthinking form of personal blackmail that it has largely become.

On the level of the masses, it matters little what any given individual seeks to achieve in terms of strategic behavior. Taken collectively, the masses are themselves a transpolitical condition, and thus a stronger medium than all the media. That is to say, they comprise a kind of headless body, whose radical passivity absorbs all attempts at manipulation from above through gestalt apathy, thus reversing the flow of power, which traditionally relies on at least a modicum of civic consciousness. Woven throughout such a scandalous view of the populace, however, is a challenge, should we decide to read it along a certain grain. The text notes:

> Publicity, abstract, abject circulation of Eurodollars, stock prices, immorality of fashion cycles, useless technologies of prestige, electoral parades, arms escalation, all this is not only the historical sign of the domination of capital, but the most decisive proof of a fact more important than capital itself: no social project worthy of the name has ever really existed, that in the end no group has ever really conceived itself as social, that is to say in solidarity with its own values and coherent in its collective project, in short, there has never been even the shadow nor the embryo of a responsible collective subject, nor even the possibility of an objective of this kind. (101–102)

What may sound like a categorical dismissal of politics, anthropology, history—in fact, the entire set of Enlightenment trading cards—can be, from a different angle, considered a starting point for an unprecedented rethinking of what it means to exist as a social being without a society of any traditional description. Indeed, the important question of what it means to *belong*, in an age which has pushed far beyond alienation, has been taken up by contemporary Continental political philosophers, often via the trope of the "multitude." Thinking through the possibility of a "community-of-those-who-have-nothing-in-common"—along with the conditions which block this possibility—is a supremely challenging task. Baudrillard's ideas will have to be reread in the light of this seemingly endless "state of exception" (a phrase mentioned more than once in *Fatal Strategies*, and deployed most recently by Giorgio Agamben).

The Last Laugh

> "This revolution will not be symbolic, dazzling, and subjective, but obscure and ironic. It won't be dialectical, it will be fatal."
>
> —Jean Baudrillard

Half-way through *Fatal Strategies*, the author insists: "This is not ... a cynical philosophical view, but an objective view of societies, and possibly of all systems of thought. The energy itself is cynical and immoral." In other words: "You must be cynical or perish." The choice between cynicism or death is not one peddlers of emo music or "the new sincerity" care to contemplate these days.

However, the mistake is to think of this stance as inimical to what Bataille called "the practice of joy before death." Indeed, Baudrillard's entire project can be glimpsed in his firm belief that "there is perhaps another, more joyous way of seeing things, and of finally substituting for eternally critical theory an ironic theory" (120). The task is thus to be more cynical than cynical, in a global culture which is more real than real. Hence his habit of promoting ideas, "if only for the sake of change": a noble attempt, in an age of simulated novelty and profound stagnation; where the Eternal Return has been replaced by the Eternal Rerun. But if radical pessimism has the latent ability to "save us," is there not a subtext of salvation running through Baudrillard's narrative? And how does this messianic trope square with his impatience toward the various cargo cults (evangelism, capitalism, etc.) attempting to thaw the cryogenically frozen body of history?[6]

Indeed, it seems at times that this author cannot shake off the *soixante-huitard* advocation of action: "We need to coalesce all the centrifugal forces to escape from this force of inertia" (125). Then again, such words may represent merely a description of our dilemma, in the free indirect mode. Were Baudrillard still here to put us straight on this question, it would be surprising to hear an unambiguous answer, for that would be to smother the fatal force of its challenge. After all, the function of polite (i.e., neutralized) communication is transparency—something Baudrillard considered the most sterile form of evil yet concocted. "[S]ynthesis is a soft solution; dialectics a nostalgic one. The only radical and modern answer: potentiate what is new, original, unexpected ..."

6. It is surely significant that, in the watershed year of 1968, Baudrillard translated W. E. Mühlmann's *Les Messianismes Revolutionnaires.*

Baudrillard's list of targets includes psychoanalysis, moralism, "America," second-wave feminism, pornography, cloning, false radicality... even yoga! In their stead, he seeks to locate a genuine revolution, on a scale or front that we—as the species-centric being *par excellence*—have not anticipated. Namely, the "insurrection of the object," which he describes as "a silent revolution, but the only one left now." The fate of the object is one strategy which, according to this book, has long languished unclaimed in the Lost & Found office of radical ideas; at least until now. And for this reason alone, it is a useful expansion of agency beyond the rather self-serving principles of the human subject. "Only the subject desires; only the object seduces" (141).[7]

Consistent to the end—and even in the last years of his life—Baudrillard shruggingly acknowledged the possibility of "a confrontation that is no longer precisely political but metaphysical and symbolic in the strong sense." As the West continues to both carnivalize and cannibalize itself under the self-appointed mandate of an endless and abstract "war on terror," the oppressed, exploited and colonized suffer from "a kind of enormous Stockholm syndrome," parroting the values of those who hold them hostage, both economically and ethically. And yet, just as he did a couple of decades earlier in *Fatal Strategies*, the great pataphysician sees an ongoing "justice in reversibility."[8]

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7. In a later interview, Baudrillard admitted that a fatal strategy is "not really strategy. That's a play on words to dramatize the total passage from the subject to the object" (95).

8. "Cannibal/Carnival." Unpublished paper, delivered at New School (November 4, 2005).

The strategies Baudrillard documented so well, in an attempt to marshal them into some kind of beneficial pattern, for the sake of a new and vital currency, continue to pulse today without their master of ceremonies. Thankfully we can confidently assume that worldly ruses and cosmic twists are still in store. Baudrillard was many things to many people: a prophet of the present, a writer of science fiction, the most quotable thinker since Nietzsche, an alchemist who managed to leach every last drop of sentimentality out of nostalgia, the original Ronin of critical theory, and a man who talked incessantly about the power of silence. The crystalline, high-altitude pleasure of reading this particular book is the clarity of being liberated from banal hope, and ushered toward a more fatal kind of orientation toward the future. Recognizing and appreciating the difference between a fatal strategy, and common-or-garden *fatalism*, is the challenge that Baudrillard himself has left us.

— Dominic Pettman

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1

Ecstasy and Inertia

THINGS HAVE FOUND A WAY of avoiding a dialectics of meaning that was beginning to bore them: by proliferating indefinitely, increasing their potential, outbidding themselves in an ascension to the limit, an obscenity that henceforth becomes their immanent finality and senseless reason.

But nothing prevents us from assuming that we could obtain the same effects in reverse—another unreason, also triumphant. Unreason is victorious in every sense, which is the very principle of Evil.

The world is not dialectical—it is sworn to extremes, not to equilibrium, sworn to radical antagonism, not to reconciliation or synthesis. This is also the principle of Evil, as expressed in the "evil genie" of the object, in the ecstatic form of the pure object and in its strategy, victorious over that of the subject.

We will find subtle forms of radicalizing secret qualities; we will fight obscenity with its own weapons. To the truer than true we will oppose the falser than false. We will not oppose the beautiful to the ugly, but will look for the uglier than ugly: the monstrous. We will not oppose the visible to the hidden, but will look for the more hidden than hidden: the secret.

We will not be looking for change, and will not oppose the fixed to the mobile; we will look for the more mobile than mobile:

metamorphosis... We will not distinguish the true from the false, but will look for the falser than false: illusion and appearance....

In this ascent to extremes, we should perhaps radically oppose obscenity and seduction; but, perhaps, their effects are cumulative.

We will be looking for something faster than communication: challenge, the duel. Communication is too slow; it is an effect of slowness, working through contact and speech. Looking is much faster; it is the medium of the media, the most rapid one. Everything must come into play instantaneously. We never communicate. In the to-and-fro of communication, the instantaneity of looking, light and seduction is already lost.

But against the acceleration of networks and circuits, we will also look for slowness—not the nostalgic slowness of the mind, but insoluble immobility, the slower than slow: inertia and silence, inertia insoluble by effort, silence insoluble by dialogue. There is a secret here too.

Just as the model is truer than true (being the quintessence of the significant features of a situation), and thus procures a vertiginous sensation of truth, fashion has the fabulous character of the more beautiful than beautiful: fascinating. The seduction it exerts is independent of all value judgement. It surpasses the aesthetic form in the ecstatic form of unconditional metamorphosis.

The ecstatic is an immoral form, while the aesthetic form always implies the moral distinction between the beautiful and the ugly. If there is a secret to fashion, beyond its own particular pleasures of art and taste, it is this immorality, this sovereignty of ephemeral models, this fragile and total passion that excludes all sentiment, this arbitrary metamorphosis, superficial and regulated, that excludes all desire (unless that is what desire is).

If that is desire, nothing prevents us from imagining that in the social, in politics and in all domains other than dress, desire also preferably turns to immoral forms, equally affected by this same potential denial of all value judgement and much more bound to that ecstatic destiny which tears things away from their "subjective" quality and leaves them to the sole attraction of the redoubled trait, of the redoubled definition that tears them away from their "objective" causes and surrenders them to the sole power of their unleashed effects.

Every trait thus raised to the superlative power, caught up in a spiral of redoubling—the truer than true, the more beautiful than beautiful, the realer than real—is assured of having an effect of vertigo independent of any content or quality of its own. This effect today tends to become our only passion. A passion for intensifying, for escalation, for an increase in power, for ecstasy—for any quality at all, provided that, ceasing to be relative to its opposite (the true to the false, the beautiful to the ugly, the real to the imaginary) it becomes superlative, positively sublime, as if it had absorbed all the energy of its opposite. Imagine a thing of beauty that has absorbed all the energy of the ugly: that's fashion.... Imagine the true that has absorbed all the energy of the false: there you have simulation.

Seduction itself is vertiginous in that it is achieved not by an effect of simple attraction, but by the redoubled attraction of a sort of challenge, or a fatality of its essence—"I'm not beautiful; I'm worse," said Marie Dorval.

We have passed alive into the models. We have passed alive into fashion and into simulation. Perhaps Roger Caillois was correct in his terminology, and our entire culture is in the process of slipping

from competitive and expressive games to games of chance and vertigo. The very uncertainty about the purpose of it all pushes us toward a dizzying over-multiplication of formal qualities, and therefore to the form of ecstasy. Ecstasy is the quality proper to any body that spins until all sense is lost, and then shines forth in its pure and empty form. Fashion is the ecstasy of the beautiful: pure and empty form of an aesthetic spinning about itself. Simulation is the ecstasy of the real: just look at television, where real events follow each other in a perfectly ecstatic relation, that is, in dizzying, stereotyped, unreal and recurrent ways that allow their senseless and uninterrupted concatenation. In ecstasy: this is the object in advertising, as is the consumer in contemplation of the advertisement—the spinning of use-value and exchange-value into annihilation in the pure and empty form of the brand-name.

But we must go further: antipedagogy is the ecstatic—that is, pure and empty—form of pedagogy. Antitheater is the ecstatic form of theater: no more stages or scenes, no more content, but theater in the street, actor-less, theater of all for all, which even becomes confused with the regular unfolding of our lives without illusion. Where is the power of illusion if it delights in retracing our daily life and transfiguring our workplace?

Yet this is precisely how and where today's art seeks to go beyond itself, to deny itself, and the more it seeks to fulfill itself in this way, the more hyperreal it becomes and the more it transcends itself towards its empty essence. There is vertigo here too, vertigo, *mise en abyme*, and stupefaction. Nothing did more to stupefy the creative act, to make it shine resplendent in its pure and inane form, than suddenly to exhibit, as Duchamp did, a bottle rack in an art gallery. The ecstasy of a common object at the same time

pushes the pictorial act to its ecstatic form—without an object, it will spin about itself and in some sense disappear, but not without exerting on us a definitive fascination. Today art no longer creates anything but the magic of its disappearance.

Imagine a good resplendent with all the power of Evil: this is God, a perverse god creating the world on a dare and calling on it to destroy itself ....

What might also make us wonder is this going beyond the social, the irruption of the more social than social—the mass; this is a social that has absorbed all the inverse energies of the antisocial, of inertia, resistance and silence. Here the logic of the social reaches its limit—the point where it inverts its finalities and reaches its point of inertia and extermination, but at the same time approaches ecstasy. Masses are the ecstasy of the social, the ecstatic form of the social, the mirror where it is reflected in all its immanence.

The real does not efface itself in favor of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favor of the more real than real: the hyperreal. The truer than true: this is simulation.

Presence does not efface itself before emptiness, but before a redoubling of presence which effaces the opposition between presence and absence.

Nor does the empty efface itself before the full, but before repletion and saturation—the fuller than full. This is the reaction of the body in obesity, of sex in obscenity: an abreaction to the void.

Movement does not disappear as much into immobility as into speed and acceleration—into the more mobile than movement, so to speak, which pushes it to the limit while stripping it of sense.

Sexuality does not fade into sublimation, repression and morality, but fades much more surely into the more sexual than sex: porn, the hypersexuality contemporaneous with the hyperreal.

More generally things visible do not come to an end in obscurity and silence—instead they fade into the more visible than visible: obscenity.

An example of this ex-centricity of things, of this drift into excrescence, is the irruption, into our system, of chance, indeterminacy and relativity. The reaction to this new state of things has not been a resigned abandonment of old values but rather a mad overdetermination, an exacerbation of these values of reference, function, finality and causality. Maybe nature does abhor a vacuum, for it is there that, in order to dispel the void, plethoric, hypertrophic, saturated systems arise—something redundant always establishes itself where there is nothing left.

Determinacy does not disappear in favor of indeterminacy, but of hyperdeterminacy—the redundancy of determinacy in the void.

Finality does not give way to the aleatory, but to a hyperfinality, a hyperfunctionality: more functional than the functional, more final than the final—hypertely.

Plunged by chance into an abnormal uncertainty, we have responded with an excess of causality and finality. Hypertely is no accident in the evolution of a few animal species, but a challenge of finality to a growing indeterminacy. In a system where things are increasingly governed by chance, finality turns into delirium, and elements develop that know only too well how to exceed their end—until they wind up invading the whole system.

This goes for the behavior of the cancerous cell (hypervitality in only one direction), the hyperspecialization of objects and subjects, the operationality of the slightest detail and the hyper-

signification of the slightest sign: the leitmotif of our daily lives, this is also the secret canker of all obese and cancerous systems—communication, information, production, destruction—all of which have long passed the limits of their function, of their use-value, and entered upon a ghostly escalation of finalities.

A hysteria the inverse of that of finalities: the hysteria of causality, corresponding to the simultaneous erasure of origins and causes: the obsessive search for origin, responsibility, and reference—an attempt to exhaust phenomena back to their infinitesimal causes. But it is also the complex of genesis and genetics that inspires, to varying degrees, psychoanalytic palingenesis (all of the psyche hypostasized in early childhood, all signs become symptoms), biogenetics (all probabilities saturated by the fatal agency of molecules), the hypertrophy of historical research, the frenzy to explain everything, attribute everything, footnote everything. All this becomes a fantastic encumbrance—the references all living off each other and at each other's expense. An excrescent system of interpretation develops with no relation to its objects. All this comes from a headlong flight forward from the hemorrhage of objective causality.

The phenomena of inertia accelerate, frozen forms proliferate, and growth is immobilized in excrescence. This is the form of hypertely, which goes further than its own end: the crustacean that leaves the sea far behind (to what secret ends?) and will never have the time to come back. The growing gigantism of the statues of Easter Island.

Tentacular, protuberant, excrescent, hypertelic: this is the fate of inertia in a saturated world. To deny its own end through hyper-finality—is this not also the process of cancer? The revenge of

growth in excrescence. Revenge and denunciation of speed in inertia. Masses are also swept up in this gigantic process of inertia by acceleration. Mass is this excrescent process that hurls all growth to its doom. It is a circuit shortcircuited by a monstrous finality.

Exxon: the American government asks the multinational for a general report on all its activities throughout the world. The result is twelve volumes of a thousand pages each, which would take years of work to read, let alone analyze. Where is the information?

Must we put information on a diet? Must we remove the fat from the obese, the obese systems, and create disinformation clinics?

There is an incredible overpotentiality of strategic weapons, equaled only by the demographic excrescence of the world. As paradoxical as it seems, both are of the same kind and correspond to the same logic of excrescence and inertia. This is a triumphant anomaly: no principle of law or measure can temper either one or the other—they reciprocally imply each other. And the worst thing is that there is no Promethean challenge involved here, no excess of passion or pride. It simply seems that the species has crossed some specific, mysterious point, from which it is impossible to retreat, decelerate, or slow down.

> "A painful thought: past a certain point in time, history has not been real. Without realizing it, the whole human race seems to have suddenly left reality behind. Everything that is supposed to have happened since then would no longer be true, but we wouldn't be able realize it. Our task and our duty would now be to uncover this point, and until we did we would have to persist in our present destruction."
>
> — Canetti

Dead point*: the dead center where every system crosses this subtle limit of reversibility, contradiction and doubt and enters live into noncontradiction, into its own exalted contemplation, into ecstasy....

Here begins a pataphysics of systems. This logical going beyond, this escalation, incidentally offers some advantages as well, even if it always assumes the form of a catastrophe in slow motion, as is the case for destructive and strategic weapons systems. At the point of the overcoming of destructive forces, the war scene is over. There is no longer any useful correlation between the potential for annihilation and its objective, so it becomes senseless to employ it. The system dissuades itself, and this is the paradoxically beneficial aspect of dissuasion: there is no more space for war. We should therefore hope for the continuation of this nuclear escalation and arms race as the price we pay for pure war; that is, for the pure and empty form—the hyperreal and eternally deterring form—of war, where for the first time we can congratulate ourselves on the absence of the event. War, just like the real, will never again take place, unless of course the nuclear powers succeed in their deescalation and manage to circumscribe new spaces for war. If military power, at the price of a deescalation of this madness so marvellously useful at one remove, once again finds a theater for war, a restricted space—in a word, a human one—for war, then weapons will once again find their use-value—and their exchange-value: it will again be possible to exchange war. In its orbital and ecstatic form war has become impossible to exchange, and this orbitality protects us.

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* Translators' note: Words or phrases in Baudrillard's text which originally appear in English (or languages other than French) will be designated with an asterisk.

What about Canetti's wish to seize this blind point beyond which "things have stopped being true," where history has stopped existing without our realizing it—without which realization we can only persevere in our current destruction?

Even supposing we could determine this point, what would we do? By what miracle would history become true again? By what miracle could we go back in time to head off its disappearance? For this point is also that of the end of linear time, and all the marvels of science-fiction for "going back in time" are useless if from now on time no longer exists, if behind us the past has already totally disappeared.

What precautions should we have taken to avoid this historical collapse, this coma, this volatization of the real? Did we commit some error? Did the human race commit some error, violate some secret, commit some fatal imprudence? It is as useless wondering about that as asking yourself the mysterious reason why a woman has left you: nothing could have been changed in any event. The terrifying aspect of an event of this kind is that, beyond a certain point, all efforts to exorcize it only precipitate it; no foreboding has ever been of any use; each event makes the one which preceded it completely right. It is the naïveté of imputing every event to causes that makes us think it could not have happened—the pure event, without any causes, can only unfold ineluctably. On the other hand it can never be reproduced, whereas a causal process can always be, which is exactly why it is no longer an event.

Canetti's wish, therefore, is a pious one, even if his hypothesis is a radical one. The point he refers to is by definition impossible to find, for if we could grasp it, time would be given back to us. The point from which we could turn the process of the dispersion of time and history around escapes us—that is really why we

have crossed it without noticing it, and of course without having wanted to.

Furthermore, perhaps Canetti's point does not even exist. It exists only if you can prove that there was in fact a history before it—which becomes impossible once you have passed the point. In a sphere foreign to history, history itself can no longer reflect or prove itself. This is why we call on every previous epoch, every way of life, every mentality to historicize itself, to recount itself with proof and documents in hand (everything becomes documentary): it is because we feel that all this has been invalidated in our own sphere, which is that of the end of history.

We can neither go backward nor accept this situation. Some have cheerfully resolved the dilemma: they have discovered the anti-Canetti point, that of a deceleration which would allow us to come back into history, the real, and the social, like a satellite lost in hyperspace reentering Earth's atmosphere. A false radicality had scattered us into centrifugal spaces; a vital leap will bring us back to reality. Everything becomes real and takes on meaning again once this specter of historical unreality, this sudden collapse of time and the real, is conjured away.

Perhaps they're right. Perhaps we should have stopped this hemorrhage of value. Enough of this terrorist radicalism; enough simulacra—let us have a rebirth of morality, belief and meaning. Down with twilight analyses!

Beyond this point there are only inconsequential events (and inconsequential theories), precisely because they absorb their sense into themselves. They reflect nothing, presage nothing.

Beyond this point there are only catastrophes. Perfect is the event or language which assumes its own mode of disappearance, knows how to stage it, and thus reaches the maximal energy of appearances.

The catastrophe is the maximal brute event, here too more eventful than the event—but an event without consequences, one that leaves the world in suspense.

Once the meaning of history is over, once this point of inertia has been passed, every event becomes catastrophe, becomes an event pure and without consequence (but that is its power).

The event without consequence—like Musil's man without qualities, the body without organs, or time without memory.

When light is captured and swallowed by its own source, there is then a brutal involution of time into the event itself. Catastrophe in the literal sense: the inflection or curve that has its origin and end coincide in one, that makes the end return to the origin and annul it, yielding to an event without precedent and without consequences—pure event.

This is also the catastrophe of sense: the event without consequence is signaled by the fact that all causes can be imputed to it indifferently without its being possible to choose among them. Its origin is unintelligible, its destination equally so. You cannot go back against the course of time nor the course of meaning.

Every event is today virtually inconsequential, open to all possible interpretations, none of which could determine its meaning: the equiprobability of all causes and of all consequences—multiple and aleatory imputation.

If the waves of meaning, if the waves of memory and historical time are receding, if the waves of causality around the effect are

fading (and the event today comes at us like a wave; it doesn't travel only "over the waves"—it is a wave indecipherable in terms of language and meaning, decipherable only and instantly in terms of color, tactility, ambiance, in terms of sensory effects), it is because light is slowing down, because somewhere a gravitational effect is forcing the light from the event, the light which carries the event's meaning beyond itself, bearing messages, to slow to a standstill, and the same is true for political and historical light, which we no longer perceive but feebly, and for the light from bodies, of which we receive only faint simulacra.

We must grasp the catastrophe lying in wait for us in the slowing of light—the slower light is, the less it escapes its source. Things and events have a tendency to no longer allow their meaning to escape, to slow down its emanation, to capture what they formerly refracted and absorb it into a black body.

Science fiction has always been attracted by speeds greater than that of light. Far stranger, however, would be the register of lower speeds to which light itself could descend.

The speed of light is what protects the reality of things because it is what guarantees that the images we have of them are contemporaneous. All plausibility of a causal universe would disappear with a perceptible change of this speed. Everything would interfere, in total disorder, so true is it that this speed is our referent and our God, and serves as a figure of the absolute for us. If light drops to relative speeds, there is no more transcendance, no more God to recognize his own, and the universe lapses into indeterminacy.

This is what is happening today with electronic media, as information starts to circulate everywhere at the very speed of light. There is no longer an absolute by which to measure the rest. But

behind this acceleration something is beginning to slow down absolutely. Are we now slowing down absolutely?

What if light slowed, dropping to "human" speeds? What if it bathed us in a slow-motion flux of images, until it was slower than our own movement?

We would then need to generalize from the case of light reaching us from stars that have long ceased to exist—their image is still crossing light-years to get to us. If light was infinitely slower, a lot of things, even the closest ones, would have already suffered the fate of those stars: we would see them, and they'd be here, but they would no longer be there. Wouldn't this be the case for the real itself: something whose image is still coming at us, but which no longer exists? We can make the analogy with mental objects and the mental ether.

Or supposing light were very slow, could bodies approach us faster than their image—then what would happen? They would rub into us without our seeing them coming. We could further imagine, unlike our universe, where slow bodies all move at speeds much lower than that of light, a universe where bodies move at prodigious speeds, except light itself, which would be very slow. Total chaos, no longer regulated by the instantaneity of luminous messages.

Light like the wind, with variable speeds, even dead calms, where no image could get to us from the zones affected.

Light like perfume: differing according to the body, scarcely diffusing outside of an immediate environment. A sphere of luminous messages attentuating as they go. The images of the body scarcely propagate beyond a certain luminous territory: beyond that, it no longer exists.

Or also, light moving with the slowness of continents, continental plates, one slipping over the other, and thus provoking shocks that would distort all our images and visions of space.

Can one imagine a slow refraction of faces and gestures, like the movements of swimmers in heavy water? How do you look someone in the eyes, how do you seduce him if you are not sure he is still there? What if a cinematic slow-motion took control of the whole universe? A comical exaltation of the accelerated, which transcends sense by explosion but also the poetic enchantment of slow-motion, which destroys sense by implosion.

Suspense and slow-motion are our current tragic forms, since acceleration has become our banal condition. Time is no longer evident in its normal passing, since it has been distended, enlarged to the floating dimension of reality. It is no longer illuminated by will. Nor is space illuminated any longer by movement. Since their destination has been lost, some kind of predestination would have to intervene again to give them back a tragic effect. We can read this predestination in suspense and slow-motion, that which so suspends the development of the form that the meaning no longer crystallizes. Or else beneath the discourse of meaning another flows slowly and implodes under it.

So slow that it could curl up on itself and even stop totally in its progression, light could lead to a total suspension of the universe.

This kind of play of systems around a point of inertia is illustrated by the catastrophic form congenital to the era of simulation: the seismic form, where the ground is missing, that of fault and failure, dehiscence and fractal objects, where immense plates, entire layers slide one under the other and produce intense surface tremors. No longer is it the devouring fires of heaven that smite us: that generating thunderbolt that was still a punishment and a purification and which fructified the earth. It is not the deluge: that is rather a maternal catastrophe, which is at the origin of the world. These are the great

legendary and mythical forms that haunt us. More recently we have the explosion, which culminated in the obsession with nuclear catastrophe (but, inversely, it fed the myth of the Big Bang, of the explosion as origin of the universe). Even more current is the seismic form, so true is it that catastrophes take on the form of their culture. Cities are even distinguished by the catastrophic forms they presuppose and which are a vital part of their essential charm. New York is King Kong, or the blackout, or vertical bombardment: "Towering Inferno."* Los Angeles is the horizontal fault, California breaking off and sliding into the Pacific: Earthquake.* This is a form that today is more proximal and evocative: on the order of fission and instantaneous propagation, undulatory, spasmodic and brutal commutation. The sky no longer falls on you from on high; instead whole territories slide away. We are in a fissile universe, of wandering ice-floes and horizontal drifts. Interstitial collapse—that is the seismic effect (mental, too), that waits in ambush for us. The dehiscence of the things most firmly attached, the trembling of things tightening and contracting over their emptiness. For at bottom (!) the ground never existed, only a cracked epidermis; nor were there any depths, which we now know are in fusion. Seisms tell us as much; they are a requiem for the infrastructure. We are no longer waiting for the stars or the heavens, but for the subterranean gods who threaten us with a collapse into emptiness.

We dream of capturing that energy, too. But that is pure madness. We might as well hope to capture the energy of automobile accidents, of dogs that have been run over, or of anything that collapses. (New hypothesis: if things have a greater tendency to disappear and collapse, perhaps the principal source of future energy will be accident and catastrophe). One thing is certain: even if we don't succeed in capturing seismic energy, the symbolic wave of the earthquake is not about to subside: the symbolic energy, so to

speak, the fascinating and derisory power that such an event affords, is incomparable to the material destruction.

It is that power, that symbolic energy of rupture, that they are really trying to capture in that mad project, or in that other, more immediate one, of heading off seisms through scenarios of evacuation. The funny part is that experts have calculated that the state of emergency decreed by an earthquake warning would unleash such a panic that its effects would be greater than the earthquake itself. Here we fall into full derision: lacking a real catastrophe, it will be easy to unleash a simulated one, one which will be as good as the first and can even replace it. You wonder if that is not what "experts" fantasize about—and it is exactly the same case in the nuclear domain: don't all the preventive and dissuasive systems act like virtual foci of catastrophe? On the pretense of prevention, they materialize all the consequences in the immediate future. How true it is that we cannot rely on chance to bring on catastrophe: we have to find its programmed equivalent in the preventive measures.

It is thus evident that a State or a power sophisticated enough to predict earthquakes and prevent the consequences would constitute a danger to the community and the species much more fantastic than the earthquakes themselves. The *terremotati** of Southern Italy have violently attacked the Italian State for its negligence (the media arrived before the emergency rescue teams, an obvious sign of the current hierarchy of priorities). They correctly blamed the catastrophe on the political order (inasmuch as it claims universal solicitude for the population); but never would they dream of an order capable of such a dissuasion of catastrophe: the price would be such that people would at bottom prefer catastrophe—with all its misery it at least fulfils the prophetic demand for a violent end. It at least answers a profound need for derision

of the political order. The same is true of terrorism: what kind of State would be capable of dissuading and annihilating all terrorism in the bud (Germany)? It would have to arm itself with such terrorism and generalize terror on every level. If this is the price of security, is everybody deep down dreaming of this?

Pompei. Everything is metaphysical in this city, including its dreamy geometry, which is not a spatial but mental geometry, labyrinthine—time seems more harrowingly frozen here than even in the noonday heat.

The tactile presence of these ruins is magnificent for the psyche, with their suspense, their twisting shadows, their sheer matter-of-factness. A conjunction of the banality of a promenade and the immanence of another time, another moment, unique, that of catastrophe. It is surely the murderous but abolished presence of Vesuvius which lends the dead streets the charm of hallucination—the illusion of being here and now, at the moment before the eruption, and the same reinstated two thousand years later, by a miracle of nostalgia, in the immanence of a former life.

Few places leave such an impression of worrisome uncanniness (it is no surprise that Jansen and Freud set the psychic action of *Gradiva* there). Here one feels all the heat of death, rendered all the more vivid by the fossilized and fugitive signs of daily life: wheel-ruts in the stone, worn curbs, the petrified wood of a half-open door, the fold of a toga on a body buried beneath the ashes. No history stands between these things and us, like the kind that gives monuments their prestige: they materialize for us here, right now, in the very heat where death caught them.

Neither monumentality nor beauty are essential to Pompei, only the fatal intimacy of things, the fascination of their instantaneity as well as that of the perfect simulacrum of our own death.

Pompei is thus a kind of *trompe-l'oeil* or primal scene: the same vertigo of a missing dimension, that of time, the same hallucination of an added dimension, that of the transparency of the slightest details, like that precise vision of submerged trees living at the bottom of an artificial lake over which you pass while swimming.

This is the mental effect of catastrophe: stopping things before they end, thus maintaining them indefinitely in the suspense of their apparition.

Pompei once again destroyed by earthquake. What kind of catastrophe is this descending on these ruins? What kind of ruin is it that needs to be once again dismantled and buried? The sadistic irony of catastrophe, secretly waiting for things, even ruins, to regain their beauty and meaning in order to destroy them all over again. Catastrophe jealously makes sure to destroy the illusion of eternity, but it plays with it too, fixing things into a second eternity. This fixed-medusified blasting of a swarming presence of life in a catastrophic instantaneity is what makes for the charm of Pompei. The first catastrophe—Vesuvius—was a success. The recent seism is much more problematic. It seems to follow the rule of the duplication of events, to parodic effect. A petty rehearsal or repetition of the great premiere. The end of a great destiny with a push from a miserable divinity. But there is perhaps another meaning here, come to warn us that we are no longer in the age of grandiose collapses and resurrections, of games of death and eternity, but of little fractal events, smooth annihilations and gradual slides, with no tomorrow from here on, since it is the traces themselves that are erased by this new destiny. This leads us into the horizontal era of events without consequences, the last act being directed by nature herself in a glare of parody.

2

Figures of the Transpolitical

THE TRANSPOLITICAL IS THE TRANSPARENCY and obscenity of all structures in a destructured universe, the transparency and obscenity of change in a dehistoricized universe, the transparency and obscenity of information in a universe emptied of event, the transparency and obscenity of space in the promiscuity of networks, transparency and obscenity of the social in the masses, of the political in terror, of the body in obesity and genetic cloning.... The end of the scene of the historical, the end of the scene of the political, the end of the scene of fantasy, the end of the scene of the body—the irruption of the obscene. The end of the secret—the irruption of transparency.

The transpolitical is the mode of disappearance of all of that (it is no longer the mode of production but the mode of disappearance that excites us); it is the malicious curvature that puts an end to the horizon of meaning. The saturation of systems brings them to their point of inertia: the equilibrium of terror and deterrence, the orbital round of floating capital, H-bombs, information satellites—and of theories, themselves floating, satellites of an abstract referential. Obesity of memory systems, of information stocks that are henceforth no longer treatable—obesity, the saturation of a system of nuclear destruction now exceeding its own ends, excrescent, hypertelic.

The transpolitical is also this: the passage from growth to excrescence, from finality to hypertely, from organic equilibria to cancerous metastases. This is the site of a catastrophe and no longer of a crisis. Things rush into it at the rhythm of a technology, including soft and psychedelic technologies, which drag us ever further away from any reality, any history, any destiny.

But if the secret is being increasingly harried by transparency, if the scene (not only that of meaning, but also the power of illusion and the seduction of appearances) is being increasingly harried by the obscene, we may take consolation in the fact that the enigma remains whole—including that of the transpolitical.

The era of the political was one of *anomie*: crisis, violence, madness, and revolution. The era of the transpolitical is that of anomaly: an aberration of no consequence, contemporaneous with the event of no consequence.

Anomie is that which escapes the jurisdiction of the *law*; anomaly is that which escapes the jurisdiction of the *norm*. (Law is an institution, but the norm is a curve; law is a transcendence, but the norm is a mean.) Anomaly is at play in an aleatory, statistical field, a field of variations and modulations which no longer knows the margin or transgression characteristic of the law, since all of that is reduced to a statistical and operational equation, a field so normalized that abnormality no longer has a place in it, even as a kind of madness or subversion. Yet there still remains anomaly.

There is something mysterious about this; we don't know exactly where it comes from. As for *anomie*, we at least knew what it is about: law is allegedly known, and *anomie* not an aberration, but an infraction of a specific system. For anomaly, there is doubt about the very law it escapes, the rule it breaks. This law no longer exists or is not known. There is infraction, or rather waywardness,

with respect to a state of things we no longer know to be a system of cause and effect.

Anomaly no longer has the tragic side of abnormality, nor even the dangerous and deviant side of *anomie*. It is somehow harmless, harmless and inexplicable. It is on the order of a pure and simple apparition, the rising to the surface of a system (ours) something come from elsewhere. From another system?

Anomaly has no critical incidence in the system. Its figure is rather that of a mutant.

The Obese

I would like to talk about an anomaly—that fascinating obesity, such as you find all over the U.S., that kind of monstrous conformity to empty space, of deformity by excess of conformity that translates the hyperdimension of a sociality at once saturated and empty, where the scene of the social as well as that of the body are left behind.

This strange obesity is no longer that of a protective layer of fat nor the neurotic one of depression. It is neither the compensatory obesity of the underdeveloped nor the alimentary one of the overnourished. Paradoxically, it is a mode of disappearance for the body. The secret rule that delimits the sphere of the body has disappeared. The secret form of the mirror, by which the body watches over itself and its image, is abolished, yielding to the unrestrained redundancy of a living organism. No more limits, no more transcendence: it is as if the body was no longer opposed to an external world, but sought to digest space in its own appearance.

These obese people are fascinating for their total oblivion of seduction. Furthermore, they no longer worry about it; they have

no complexes about how they live, insouciant, as if there was not even an ego ideal left for them. They are not ridiculous and they know it. They claim a sort of truth, and in fact they do display something of the system, of its empty inflation. They are its nihilist expression, that of the general incoherence of signs, morphologies, forms of alimentation and of the city—hypertrophied cellular tissue, proliferating in all directions.

A fetal obesity, primal and placental: as if they were pregnant with their own bodies but could not be delivered of them. The body grows and grows without being able to deliver itself. But also a secondary obesity, the obesity of simulation in the image of present systems, bloated with information they can never deliver, the obesity characteristic of operational modernity, in its frenzy to store and memorize everything, to pass, in the most total uselessness, to the very limits of the inventory of the world and of information, and in the process to set up a monstrous potentiality for which there is no representation possible, which can no longer even be put into play, a vain redundancy that, a century after larry, but in a cool universe without irony, and without pataphysical acid, evokes Père Ubu's famous paunch.

Pataphysics or metaphysics, this pregnancy hysteria is one of the strangest signs of American culture, of this spectral environment where each cell (each function, each structure), is left with the possibility, as in cancer, of ramifying, of multiplying indefinitely, of occupying virtually all the space by itself, of monopolizing all the information unto itself (feedback is already an obese structure, the matrix of all structural obesities), of settling down into a contented genetic redundancy. Each molecule happy in the paradise of its own formula....

It is therefore not the obesity of a few individuals that is at stake, but that of a whole system, the obscenity of a whole culture. It is when the body loses its rule and its stage or scene that it reaches this obscene form of obesity. It is when the social body loses its law, its scene and its stakes that it also reaches the pure and obscene form we know it to be, its visible and too visible form, its ostentation, the investment and overinvestment of all spaces by the social—the spectral and transparent character of the whole remaining unchanged.

This obesity too is spectral—in no way heavy, it floats in the good conscience of sociality. It incarnates the formless form, the amorphous morphology of the currently social: the ideal individual paradigm of reconciliation, of the closed and self-managed niche. These are no longer bodies, strictly speaking, but specimens of a certain cancerous inorganicity that now lie in wait for us everywhere.

To remain in the oral dimension (although there is nothing compulsive or orally repressive about this obesity), you could say that the social is just like the sense of taste in Amencan cuisine. It is a gigantic enterprise of dissuasion from the taste of food: its savor is, as it were, isolated, expurgated and resynthesized in the form of burlesque and artificial sources. This is flavor*, just as once there was cinematic glamor*: erasing all personal character in favor of an aura of the studio and the fascination of models. Likewise for the social: just as the function of taste is isolated in the sauce, the social is isolated as a function in all the therapeutic sauces in which we float. A sociosphere of contact, control, persuasion and dissuasion, of exhibition of inhibitions in massive or homeopathic doses ("Have a problem? We solve it!"*): this is obscenity. All structures turned inside out and exhibited, all operations rendered visible. In America this goes all the way from the bewildering network of aerial telephone and electric wires (the

whole system is on the surface) to the concrete multiplication of all the bodily functions in the home, the litany of ingredients on the tiniest can of food, the exhibition of income or I.Q., and includes harassment by signals, the obsession with displaying the innards of power, the equivalent of the mad desire to locate the critical function in the lobes of the brain....

Living determination is lost in desperate programming, and everything reinvents itself as overdetermination and looks for its hysterical hypostasis. Likewise, the social, once the mirror of conflict, class, and the proletariat, finds its definitive hypostasis among the handicapped. Historical contradictions have taken the pataphysical form of mental or physical deficiency. There is something strange about this conversion hysteria of the social—the most probable diagnosis is that, for the handicapped as well as for the feeble-minded or the obese, the social is haunted by its disappearance. Having lost its credibility and the rules of its political game, the social looks in what it sees as its own its living waste for a son of transpolitical legitimacy—after the management of the crisis, overt self-management of the deficit and monstrosity.[1]

It used to be, "To each according to his deserts," then, "to each according to his needs," and later, "to each according to his desire." Today it is: "to each according to his lack."

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1. But "deficit" management of the social results, as we know, in all sorts of impasses, of which the following is an allegory: all over the US, they have adapted the sidewalks to afford access to motorized handicapped persons. But the blind who used to be guided by the curbs are disoriented, and are often run over. So they came up with the idea of a handrail for the blind along the street, but then the handicapped get caught on these rails in their wheelchairs ....

The obese somehow escape sexuality and sexual division by the indivisibility of the full body. They resolve the void of sex by absorption of the surrounding space. They are pregnant, symbolically speaking, with all the objects from which they have been unable to separate, or those from which they have not found enough distance to love. They do not separate the body from the non-body. Their bodies are convex or concave mirrors; they have not succeeded in producing the flat mirror that could reflect them.

This break—the mirror stage, which allows the child, by distinguishing limits, to open himself to the scene of imagination and representation—doesn't occur with the obese, and lacking access to this internal division, they enter into the undivided multiplication of bodies without images.

There are no obese animals, just as there is no obscene animal. Could it be that the animal is never confronted with the scene, nor with its own image? Not being subjected to this scenic obligation, it could not be obscene. For man, on the other hand, this obligation is absolute, but for the obese there is a kind of release from this obligation, from all pride of representation, from any seductive impulse—the loss of the body as face. The pathology of the obese is not endocrine, but a pathology of the scene and the obscene.

It is difficult to say what constitutes the scene of the body. We can at least say this: it is where the body is in play, and particularly where it plays itself, where it escapes into the ellipsis of forms and movements, into dance, where it escapes its inertia, into gesture, where it is unbound itself, into the aura of looking, where it makes itself into allusion and absence—in short, where it offers itself as seduction. It is the absence of all this which transforms the obese into an obscene mass.

Suddenly the obese, in its redundancy, makes sex appear like too much, superfluous. It has this in common with the clone—another mutant which has never yet appeared, but which the obscene prefigures rather well. Does not the obese person cherish the dream of hypertrophying in order one day to divide into two like beings? Transsexual in his own way, does he not aim at going beyond sexual reproduction, at going back once again to scissiparous single-celled being? The proliferation of the body is not far from genetic proliferation.

The paradox of cloning is precisely that of producing beings identical to their genetic parent (non-Oedipal!), and therefore sexual, even though sexuality has become perfectly useless in the matter. The sex of the clone is superfluous. This is not Georges Bataille's excessive superfluity—it is simply a useless residue, like certain animal organs or appendages, whose finality we can no longer conceive and which seem anomalous and monstrous. Sex has become an excrescence, an eccentric difference that no longer produces meaning as such (such dead differences are scattered in heaps throughout our history and that of the species).

Perhaps there exists in all organic unity a drive to develop by pure contiguity, a tendency to linear and cellular monotony? This is what Freud called the death drive, which is only the undifferentiated excrescence of the living. This process knows neither crisis nor catastrophe: it is hypertelic, in the sense that it has no other end than limitless increase, without any consideration of limits.

At a given moment something happens to stop this process. In obesity the process doesn't stop. The body, losing its specific traits, pursues the monotonous expansion of its tissues. Not longer even individualized or sexual, it is no more than an indefinite extension: metastasis.

Franz von Baader calls metastasis, which he likens to ecstasy—in his essay, "Uber den Begriff der Ekstasis als Metastasis" ("On the Concept of Ecstasy as Metastasis")—the anticipation of death, and of the beyond of its own end at the heart of life itself. And certainly there is some of this for the obese, whom we may think of as having swallowed their own dead bodies while still alive—which makes for too much body and suddenly makes the body seem like too much. This is the engorgement of a useless organ. He has somehow swallowed his own sex, and it is this swallowing of the sex that makes for the obscenity of this hypertrophied body.

Baader's ecstatic or metastatic form, that of the death which comes to haunt the living and makes them appear like useless incarnations, can be readily generalized to present-day information systems. These too are metastatic in their anticipation of dead meaning in living signification, thereby producing too much meaning, a production of superfluous meaning, like a useless prosthesis. The same is true of porn; its ghostly ambiance comes to it from its anticipation of dead sex in living sexuality, from the weight of all the dead sex (as one used to speak of the weight of dead labor on living labor). In so doing, porn makes sexuality appear superfluous—that is what is obscene: not that there is too much sex, but that sex is too much. What makes the obese obscene is not that there is too much body, but that the body is superfluous, *de trop*.

What is the secret end in all of this (for there must be one)? What lewd demon would hold this deforming mirror up to the body (for there is lewdness in it)?

Perhaps it is a matter of revolt, as in cancer? Once, revolts were political; there were groups or individuals oppressed in their desire, their energy or their intelligence. Today these hardly ever break out. In our quartenary universe, revolt has become genetic, like the cells in

cancer and metastases: uncontrollable vitality and undisciplined proliferation. This is a revolt too, a nondialectical, subliminal one which escapes us. But who knows the destiny of cancerous formations? Perhaps their hypertely corresponds to the hyperreality of our social formations. It is as if the body, its cells, were rebelling against their genetic decree, against the commandments (as they've rightly been termed) of DNA. The body rebels against its own "objective" definition. Is it a pathological act (as occurs elsewhere in the deregulation of antibodies)? In traditional pathology, somatic or psychosomatic, the body reacts to external aggressions—physical, social, psychological: exoteric reaction. With cancer it's a matter of an esoteric reaction: the body rebels against its own internal organization, undoes its own structural equilibrium. It's as if the species had had enough of its own definition and had thrown itself into an organic delirium.[2]

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2. We can observe that the pathology related to the metaphorical body, with its division and repression, no longer operates in this metastatic phase. The body, that of the obese, the clone, the cancer, is a prosthesis, a metastasis, an ex-crescence—it is no longer a scene, and fantasy and repression no longer hold for it. In some sense it no longer has an unconscious, and this is the end of psychoanalysis. But this is doubtless also the beginning of another pathology: we know this clonic (chronic) melancholy of infinitely divisible beings, of single-celled, nonsexual protozoans that proceed by extension and expulsion and no longer by drive and intensity, that proceed not by growth but by excrescence, not by seduction but by transduction (that of bodies that have become networks and which thread their way through a network). We know this melancholy of being and of narcissistic society—narcissistic by indivisibility and indefiniteness—for which analysis can no longer do anything. In any event, this kind of analysis, psychoanalysis, can only say something in the field of metaphor, which is that of a symbolic order. It has nothing to say in a different order—neither in that of metamorphosis nor, at the other extreme, in that of metastasis.

The obese is also in a total delirium. For he is not only large, of a size opposed to normal morphology: he is larger than large. He no longer makes sense in some distinctive opposition, but in his excess, his redundancy, his hypeneality.

He exceeds his own pathology. This is why he escapes both dietetics and psychotherapy, and goes back to that other logic, that exponential strategy where things deprived of their finality or of their reference redouble each other in a kind of hall of mirrors.

Obesity would thus be a good example of the turn of events lying in wait for all of us, this revolution in things which lies no longer in their dialectical transcendence (*Aufhebung*) but rather in their potentialization (*Steigerung*), in their elevation to the second power, to the nth power—in that ascension to extremes related to the absence of rules for the game.

Like speed—which is the sole perfect expression of mobility, because it is unlike movement (which has meaning or direction)—obesity no longer has any meaning or direction either; it goes nowhere and no longer has anything to do with movement: it is the ecstasy of movement. Thus there is something about the body, of which, in its aberration, obesity may be the perfect confirmation and ecstatic truth, because in it the body, instead of being reflected, captures itself in its own magnifying mirror. "Only tautological sentences are perfectly true," says Canetti.

The Hostage

Violence is anomic, but terror is anomalous. Like obesity, terror is a sort of convex and deforming mirror of order and the political scene: the mirror of its disappearance. It too seems to come from

some other set of connections, aleatory and vertiginous, from a panic by contiguity, and no longer seems to respond to the determinations of mere violence. More violent than the violent—such is terrorism, whose transpolitical spiral corresponds to the same ascension to the limits in the absence of any rules for the game.

Neither dead nor alive, the hostage is suspended by an incalculable outcome. It is not his destiny that awaits for him, nor his own death, but anonymous chance, which can only seem to him something absolutely arbitrary. There are no longer even any rules for the game of his life or death. This is why he is beyond alienation, beyond the terms of alienation and exchange. He is in a state of radical emergency, of virtual extermination.

He may no longer even run the risk of his own life: it too is stolen from him to serve as a cover. That is somehow the worst part of it—the hostage himself no longer risks anything: he is perfectly covered, and is removed from his own fate.

He is no longer a victim at all, since he is not the one who dies—he merely answers for the death of another. His sovereignty is not even alienated; it is congealed.

This is how it is in war, according to a law of equivalence that is precisely not one of war: ten hostages shot for every assassinated officer. But whole peoples can serve as hostages to their leaders: the German people were destined for death by Hitler if he was not victorious. And in nuclear strategy, civilian populations and great urban centers are used as hostages by military high commands: their death and destruction serve as a dissuasive argument.

We are all hostages. We all now serve as dissuasive arguments. Objective hostages: we answer collectively for something, but for what? This is a kind of fate that is fixed, and whose manipulators we can no longer even see. But we know the scales on which our death

is decided are no longer in our own hands, and we now live in a state of permanent suspense and emergency whose symbol is the nuclear bomb. Objective hostages of a savage god, we don't even know what event, what accident will touch off the ultimate manipulation.

But we are also subjective hostages. We answer for ourselves; we serve as a cover for ourselves, we answer for our risks with our own heads. This is the law of the insured society, where all risks must be covered. This situation corresponds to that of the hostage. We are hospitalized by society, taken hostage.* Neither life nor death: this is security—this, paradoxically, is also the status of the hostage.

This is an extreme and caricatured form of responsibility: an anonymous, statistical, formal and aleatory one that plays on the terrorist act or the taking of hostages. But if you think about it, terrorism is only the executioner for a system which itself also seeks both total anonymity and, at the same time and contradictorily, total responsibility for each of us. With the death of anyone, it executes the sentence of anonymity that is henceforth ours, that of the anonymous system, anonymous power, the anonymous terror of our real lives. The principle behind extermination is not death, but rather statistical indifference.

Terrorism is only the operator of a concept that denies itself in its very realization, that of unlimited, indeterminate responsibility (anyone is responsible for anything at any given moment). It only carries to its extreme consequences the essential proposition of liberal and Christian humanism: all men are in solidarity; you, here, are in solidarity with and responsible for the wretched poverty of the pariah of Calcutta. While asking ourselves about the monstrosity of terrorism, we should perhaps ask ourselves if it does not really derive from a proposition of universal responsibility itself monstrous and terrorist in its essence.

Our paradoxical situation is this: because nothing any longer has meaning, everything should work perfectly. Because there is no longer a responsible subject, each event, even a minimal one, must be desperately imputed to someone or something—everyone is responsible, some maximal floating responsibility is there, waiting to be invested in any kind of incident. Every anomaly must be justified and every irregularity must find its guilty party, its criminal link. This too is terror and terrorism: this hunt for responsibility without any common measure with the event—this hysteria of responsibility that is itself a consequence of the disappearance of causes and the almighty power of effects.

The problem of security, as we know, haunts our societies and long ago replaced the problem of liberty. This is not as much a moral or philosophical change as an evolution in the objective state of systems:

– a relatively loose, diffuse and extensive state of the system produces liberty;
– a different state of the system (denser) produces security (self-regulation, control, feedback, etc.);
– a further state of the system, that of proliferation and saturation, produces panic and terror.

There is no metaphysics in any of this: these are objective states of the system. You can apply it just as well to the circulation of traffic or to the system of circulation of responsibility—it amounts to the same thing. Liberty, security, terror: we have successively passed through these stages in every domain. First personal responsibility, then control (the assumption of responsibility by an

objective entity), then terror (generalized responsibility and blackmail for responsibility).

It is for the purpose of making amends and putting a stop to the scandal of accidental death (unacceptable for our system of liberty, law and profitability) that the great systems of terror have been set up, that is, programs for the prevention of accidental death by systematic and organized death. That is our monstrously logical situation: the death systems put an end to death as a accident. And it is that logic that terrorism tries desperately to disrupt by replacing systematic death (institutionalized terror) with elective logic: that of the hostage.

The Pope, by offering himself as a substitute victim for the hostages in Mogadishu, seeks to replace anonymous terror with an elective death, a sacrifice, similar to the Christ-like model of universal redemption. But this offer is a parody without intending to be, for it puts forth a solution and model that are altogether inconceivable in our present systems, whose province is not sacrifice but extermination, not the elected victim but spectacular anonymity. Even the "sacrifice" of terrorists, trying to resolve the situation by their own death, has nothing expiatory about it; it raises for only an instant the veil of anonymous terror.

There is nothing to redeem. Both terrorists and hostages have lost their names: they all have become unnamable.

They no longer have any territory, either. We speak of "terrorist space": airports, embassies, fractile zones, nonterritorial zones. The embassy is the infinitesimal space in which a whole country can be taken hostage. The plane, with its passengers, is a parcel of land, a wandering molecule of enemy territory, and therefore almost no longer a territory, therefore almost a hostage already, since to take

something hostage is to tear it from its territory and revert it to the equilibrium of terror. Today this terror is our normal, silent condition everywhere, but it materializes more visibly in orbital space, the sidereal space that everywhere now hovers over our own.

It is from this no man's land of terror that the world is now managed; it is from this in some sense extraterritorial, extraplanetary space that the world is literally taken hostage. That is what the equilibrium of terror means: the world is held collectively responsible for the order that reigns there—if anything were to come dangerously close to infringing this order, the world would have to be destroyed. And from where could it be done more efficiently than from those places outside the world, from satellites and bombs in orbit? From there, definitively no longer a territory, all territories are ideally neutralized and held hostage. We have become the satellites of our satellites.

The space of terrorism is no different than the orbital space of control. By satellites and flights into space, civilian as well as military, planetary space is *mise en abyme*, suspended in an uncertain imminence, just like the hostage in the space of his detention: 'exstasized,' literally, then exterminated.[3]

Just as there is a space of terrorism, there is a circulation of hostages. Every hostage-taking, every terrorist act is an answer to another act, and one gets the impression, on a global level, of a chain, a linking of transpolitical terrorist acts (while the political scene doesn't give this impression of a chain reaction at all) like an

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3. The abstraction of orbital control should not hide the fact that this equilibrium of terror is present on the infinitesimal and individual level: we are held responsible for the order that rules in us. If this order came to be seriously threatened, we are psychologically programmed to destroy ourselves....

uninterrupted circuit, also orbital, conveying a sort of sacrificial information from one point to another on the planet a little like the *kula* circulated throughout the Melanesian archipelago.

Nothing is more like this putting hostages into circulation, this absolute form of human convertibility, a sort of pure and impossible form of exchange, than the form of Euro-petro dollars and other floating currencies, deterritorialized to such an extent, and beyond gold and national currencies, that they are virtually no longer exchanged, but follow their orbital cycle among themselves, incarnating an abstract delirium of transcendence and control. And it is also the pure and impossible form of war that is incarnated in orbital bombs.

We are all hostages, and we are all terrorists. This circuit has replaced that other one of masters and slaves, the dominating and the dominated, the exploiters and the exploited. Gone is the constellation of the slave and the proletarian: from now on it is the hostage and the terrorist. Gone is the constellation of alienation: from now on it is that of terror. It is worse than the one it replaces, but at least it liberates us from liberal nostalgia and the ruses of history. It is the era of the transpolitical that is beginning.

We have entered the constellation of blackmail not only in the "political" sphere, but everywhere. Everywhere the insane multiplication of responsibility operates as dissuasion.

Even including our own identity, whose hostages we are: called upon to assume it, to answer for it with our own lives (this is called security, occasionally social), called on to be ourselves, to talk, delight, realize ourselves—under pain of... Under pain of what? A provocation. Provocation—unlike seduction, which allows things to come into play and appear in secret, dual and ambiguous—does not leave you free to be; it calls on you to reveal yourself as you are. It is

always blackmail by identity (and thus a symbolic murder, since you are never that, except precisely by being condemned to it).

The entire sphere of manipulation is of the same order. Manipulation is a soft technology of violence by blackmail. And blackmail always functions by taking hostage a parcel of the other, a secret, an affect, a desire, a pleasure, his suffering, his death; this is what we play on in manipulation (and this covers the whole field of psychology). It is our way of arousing, by forced solicitation, a demand equivalent to our own.

In the interindividual regime of demand (as opposed to love, passion, or seduction), we are submitted to affective blackmail, and we are the affective hostage of the other: "If you don't give me that, you will be responsible for my depression—if you don't love me, you will be responsible for my death," and of course, "if you don't allow yourself to be loved, you will be responsible for your own death." In short, a hysterical envelopment—a summons and solicitation to respond.

In order not to be taken, take others hostage. Don't hesitate. It's the common rule anyway, and it's the general condition. The only transpolitical condition is that of masses. The only transpolitical act is terrorism, the one which reveals our transpolitical wretchedness and draws its own extreme conclusions. And this, unfortunately for our critical spirits, is true on either side. In the taking of a hostage there is no message; it has no meaning or political efficacy. It is an event without consequences (and always leads to a dead end). But do political events themselves ever offer anything but a false continuity? It is the solution of continuity that is interesting. Once it seemed to present itself as revolution; today it ends up as special effects. And terrorism itself is only a gigantic special effect.

However, this is not because no meaning is intended. Against the general transparence, terrorism wishes to call on things to regain their meaning again, but does no more than accelerate this sentence of death and indifference. Its effect is nevertheless of a type special enough to be distinguished and opposed to others as the catastrophic form of transparence, the crystalline form, the intensive form—unlike all the extensive forms that surround us. It reflects the dilemma we are unfortunately locked into—that there is doubtless no solution to the latent extension of terror save in its visible intensification.

The only revolution in things is today no longer in their dialectical transcendence (*Aufhebung*), but in their potentialization, in their elevation to the second power, in their elevation to the nth power, whether that of terrorism, irony, or simulation. It is no longer dialectics, but ecstasy that is in process.

Thus terrorism is the ecstatic form of violence; thus the state is the ecstatic form of society; thus porn is the ecstatic form of sex, the obscene the ecstatic form of the scene, etc. It seems that things, having lost their critical and dialectical determination, can only redouble themselves in their exacerbated and transparent form, as in Virilio's "pure war": the ecstasy of unreal war, contingent and present everywhere. Spatial exploration likewise is a *mise en abyme* of this world. Everywhere the virus of potentialization and *mise en abyme* carries the day, carries us towards an ecstasy which is also that of indifference.

Terrorism—hostage-taking—would be a political act if it were solely an act of the desperate oppressed. (Perhaps it still is in certain cases.) But it has in fact become normal and generalized behavior on the part of all nations and all groups. So the Soviet Union doesn't liquidate Sakharov, nor does it annex Afghanistan: it takes Sakharov

hostage; it takes Afghanistan hostage: "if you upset the balance of power, then I will stiffen into cold war...." The Olympic Games serve as America's hostage against the Soviet Union: "if you don't back off, the Games are off...." Oil serves as a hostage for the producing countries against the West. There is no point in deploring this situation in the name of human rights or anything else. We are already far beyond that, and hostage-takers do nothing but openly translate the truth of the system of dissuasion (which we counter with the system of morality).

More commonly, we are all in this way hostages of the social: "if you don't participate—if you don't manage your capital, money, health, desire—if you're not social, you destroy yourself." This baroque idea of taking oneself hostage in order to have one's demands met is not so singular—this is the act committed by "madmen" who hole up and resist to the death.

Blackmail is worse than interdiction. Dissuasion is worse than sanctions. In dissuasion it is no longer, "Don't do that," but rather, "if you don't do it..." And it stops there—the threatening eventuality is left in suspense. The whole art of blackmail and manipulation lies in this suspense—the "suspense" peculiar to terror (just as in hostage-taking the hostage is suspended, not condemned: suspended over an outcome that escapes him). Needless to say, we all live collectively under nuclear blackmail—not under the direct threat, but under the blackmail of the nuclear, which is strictly speaking not a system of destruction, but of planetary manipulation.

This institutes a wholly different type of relation to power than that based on the violence of interdiction. The latter had a specific referent and object, and therefore transgression of it was a possibility. Blackmail, however, is allusive, and is no longer

based either on an imperative or on the utterance of a law (we should invent the dissuasive mode, based on the nonutterance of the law and on floating retorsion) but plays on the enigmatic form of terror.

Terror is obscene, in that it puts an end to the scene of interdiction and violence, which at least was familiar to us.

Blackmail is obscene, in that it puts an end to the scene of exchange.

The hostage is himself obscene. He is obscene because he no longer represents anything (this is the very definition of obscenity). He is in a state of pure and simple exhibition. A pure object, without an image, deceased before being dead. Frozen in a state of decease. Cryogenized in his own way.

This was the triumph of the Red Brigades in the kidnapping of Aldo Moro: to demonstrate, by putting him out of action (with the complicity of the Christian Democrats, who rushed to drop him), that he represented nothing, and suddenly to make him the nul equivalent of the State. Power, thus reduced to its anonymous remains, no longer even has any importance as a cadaver, and can end up in the trunk of a car, in a way shameful to all, and thus also obscene, since it no longer even has any meaning. (In the traditional political order one never would have taken a prince or a king hostage—one might kill him, but even then his corpse is powerful.)

The obscenity of the hostage is verified by the impossibility of getting rid of him (the Red Brigades experienced that with Moro, too). It is the obscenity of someone who is already dead—this is why he is politically unusable. Obscene by his disappearance, he becomes the mirror of the visible obscenity of power. (In this, the Red Brigades had completely succeeded; his death, on the other

hand, was much more problematic, for while it is true that dying in itself serves no purpose—you have to know how to disappear—it is also true that it serves no purpose to kill: you have to know how to make someone disappear).

Imagine Judge D'Urso, found bound and gagged in a car—not dead, but with headphones on his head and symphonic music blasting through them: transistorized. Sacred shit that the Red Brigades managed each time to throw at the feet of the Communist Party.

This obscenity, this exhibitionist stand of terrorism, contrary to the opposite stand of secrecy in sacrifice and ritual, explains its affinity with the media, themselves the obscene stage of information. It is said that without the media there would be no terrorism. And it is true that terrorism does not exist in itself as an original political act: it is the hostage of the media, just as they are hostage to it. There is no end to this chain of blackmail—everyone is the hostage of the other: this is the end of our so-called "social" relation. Besides, there is another factor behind all of this, which is something like the womb of this circular blackmail: the masses, without which there would be neither media nor terrorism.

The masses are the absolute prototype of the hostage, of the thing taken hostage, that is, annulled in its sovereignty, abolished and nonexistent as subject—but take note—radically inexchangeable as object. As with the hostage, there is nothing one can do with him, and one doesn't know how to get rid of him. This is the unforgettable revenge of the the masses. This is the fatality of manipulation: that it can never be, or take the place of, strategy.

Only by nostalgia, in fact, can we even distinguish an active manipulator from someone who is passively manipulated—thus

reverberating the old relationships of domination and violence into this new era of soft technologies. Take just one of the figures of manipulation, the minimal unit question/answer in interviews, polls and other forms of directive solicitation. Certainly, the answer is induced by the question. But the one who asks the question has no more autonomy: he can only ask questions which have a chance of getting a circular reply—he is caught in exactly the same vicious circle. There can be no strategy on his part; there is manipulation on both sides. The game is even, or rather the stakes are equally nil.

The Moro case already offered a beautiful example of this zero-sum strategy, whose black-box was the media, with the inert and fascinated masses acting as amplifier. A gigantic cycle with four protagonists, where an unfindable responsibility circulates—the revolving stage of the transpolitical.

In the translucent person of Moro it is the empty, absent State (the power that traverses us without reaching us, that we traverse without reaching it) that is held hostage by terrorists, themselves clandestine and untakable—both sides desperately aping power and counterpower. Impossible to negotiate—Moro's death means that there is nothing left to negotiate between two partners who are, in fact, each other's hostage, as in any system of unlimited responsibility. (Traditional society is a society of limited responsibility* and it is for this reason that it can function. In a society of unlimited responsibility—that is, where the terms of exchange no longer exchange anything, but are continually exchanged among themselves—the whole just revolves about itself, producing nothing more than effects of vertigo and fascination. One must admit that

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* Translator's note: Société a responsabilité limitée (S.A.R.L.) is the French equivalent of the English business term "incorporated" (Inc.)

Italy, which has already given history its most beautiful spectacles, Venice, the Church, *trompe-l'oeil*, and opera, presents us today, in the spectacle of terrorism, with its most fertile and baroque episode, and this with the general complicity of the whole of Italian society: *terrorismo dell'arte*.)

In the kidnapping of Judge D'Urso things take another turn. It is no longer so much the official State against the free and clandestine terrorists; it is the imprisoned terrorists, promoted to the rank of judges from the depths of their prisons (while Judge D'Urso is symbolically taken into detention) against the confidentiality of official investigations (the media pretends they do not exist). The poles have switched: the terrorist prisoners, in some sense liberated from clandestinity, no longer negotiate with the political class, but with the "media" class.

In reality, it also appears that:

–There is nothing to negotiate: the texts whose distribution the Red Brigades demanded are politically ridiculous and, furthermore, an open secret.
–The State has no more idea of what to do with the prisoners—more trouble in prison than underground—than the Red Brigades with their hostage.

There remains the effect of revolving responsibility that the Red Brigades manage to create, and where the State, the political class and the media themselves are found responsible for the likely death of D'Urso, as much as the terrorists. To circulate maximal responsibility gratuitously is equivalent to setting off general irresponsibility, thereby demolishing the social contract. The rules of

the political game are abolished not by the strict exercise of violence, but by the maddened circulation of acts and implications, effects and causes, and by the forced circulation of values of State such as violence, responsibility, justice, etc.

Such pressure is fatal for the political scene. It is accompanied by an implicit ultimatum which goes approximately as follows: "What price will you pay to be rid of terrorism?" Understood: terrorism is still a lesser evil than a police state capable of ending it. It is possible that we secretly acquiesce in this fantastic proposition. There's no need of "political consciousness" for this; it's a secret balance of terror that makes us guess that a spasmodic eruption of violence is preferable to its rational exercise within the framework of the State, or to total prevention at the price of a total programmatic domination.

It is in any case preferable that something offsets the State in its omnipotence. If the mediations which assured this relative equilibrium have disappeared, along with the rules of the political game, if the social contract has disappeared at the same time as the possibility of our inventing ourselves socially, that is to say, of spontaneously sacrificing a portion of our liberty with a view to the collective well-being, for the simple reason that everything is already virtually taken care of by the State (here, too, there is an end of exchange: the individual can no longer even negotiate his parcel of liberty, lacking which he looks upon himself as a hostage, an insured zombie), it is then inevitable that the State—in keeping with the disappearance of the political scene—arouse a form, at the same time radical and phantasmatic, of contestation: the phantom of terrorism, which plays the same game as it does, and with whom the State draws up a sort of perverse new social contract.

In any case this ultimatum leaves the State with no response left, for it calls on it to make itself more terrorist than the terrorists. And it throws the media into an insoluble dilemma: if you want no more terrorism, then you must renounce information itself.

This question of the hostage is fascinating because it poses the problem of the inexchangeable. Exchange is our law, and exchange has its rules. We are now in a society where exchange is becoming more and more improbable, where fewer and fewer things can really be negotiated because the rules for them have been lost, or because exchange, by becoming more generalized, has brought about the emergence of the last objects irreducible to exchange—and these have become the real stakes.

We are living the end of exchange. However, only exchange protects us from destiny. Where exchange is no longer possible, we find ourselves in a fatal situation, a situation of destiny.

The inexchangeable is the pure object, whose power forbids either possessing or exchanging it. It is something very precious that we don't quite know how to get rid of. It burns, and isn't negotiable. It can be killed, but it takes revenge. The corpse always plays this role. Beauty, too, and the fetish as well. It has no value, but is priceless. It is an object of no interest, and at the same time absolutely singular, without equivalent, and almost sacred.

The hostage has both qualities at the same time: an annulled, abolished, anonymous object, and at the same time absolutely different, exceptional, of high intensity, dangerous, sublime (as dangerous as the terrorist: ask those whose job it is to free the hostages if the latter do not inspire, by their very existence, by their very presence, the same terror as the terrorist. Furthermore, to liquidate the situation, the elimination of the hostages is objectively equivalent to that of the terrorists; governments will

choose sometimes one solution, sometimes the other, according to the juncture).

For all these reasons the hostage is secretly no longer negotiable, precisely because of his absolute convertibility. No situation embodies this paradox to such an extent: torn from the circuit of exchange, the hostage becomes exchangeable against anything at all. Become sacred by substraction, by the state of radical exception in which he is put, the hostage becomes the fantastic equivalent of everything else.

The hostage is not far from the fetish or talisman—an object also cut off from the context of the world to become the center of a singular operation, that of the omnipotence of thought. Games, in particular, games of chance, are about nothing else: money, taken out of circulation and destined to be lost, becomes the stakes of a prodigious convertibility, a mental manipulation by thought only possible when money has taken the form of pure object, perfectly artificial: fictitious, a fetish.

But we know that the fetish cannot be reabsorbed into the ordinary world (which excludes the omnipotence thought), nor can gaming money be put back into the economic circuit—this is the secret law of the other circuit. Likewise, there are the greatest difficulties in converting the hostage into financial or political currency. That is the illusion of the terrorist—the terrorist illusion in general: the exchange never happens, and is impossible. Just as in torture, where the suffering of the tortured is inconvertible into political profits, or even into pleasure for the torturers, the terrorist can never change the hostage back; he has somehow ripped him too violently from reality to be able to give it back to him.

Taking a hostage is at once the desperate attempt to radicalize the balance of power and to recreate an exchange at the summit, to

render an object or an individual inestimably valuable by seizure and disappearance (therefore by absolute scarcity), and at the same time the paradoxical failure of this attempt, for, since the violation amounts to an annulment of the subject, this exchange-value collapses in the very hands of the terrorists. On the other hand, in the kind of situation created in this way, the system quickly manages to notice that it can function without this individual (Moro, for example) and that in some sense it is even better not to get him back, for a hostage who gets off is more dangerous than a dead one: he is contaminated; his only power is one of malefic contamination. (It would have been good strategy, on the part of the Red Brigades, after having annuled Moro as a statesman, to throw back this zombie whom no one wanted anymore, the marked card that would have upset the whole political game. It would then have been up to others to get rid of him.)

If convertibility is impossible, it turns out that, in the final analysis, the terrorist never exchanges anything but his own life against the life of the hostage. And this explains the strange complicity that ends up bringing them together. Violently withdrawing the hostage from the circuit of value, the terrorist also withdraws him from the circuit of negotiation. The two are out of circulation, accomplices in their state of exception, and what is established between them, beyond an impossible convertibility, is a dual figure, a figure of reduction perhaps—the only modern figure of shared death, while still being the extreme figure of indifferent death—so indifferent as to be inexchangeable.

Or else one should realize that hostage-taking never has negotiation as its goal: it produces the inexchangeable. The "How do we get rid of terrorism?" is a false problem. The situation is original in that it is inextricable. One must conceive of terrorism as a utopian

act, proclaiming inexchangeability from the beginning, and violently so, experimentally staging an impossible exchange, and thereby verifying at its limit a banal situation, our own, that of the historical loss of the scene of exchange, the rule(s) of exchange, and the social contract. For where is the other now? With whom do we negotiate what is left of our liberty and sovereignty, with whom do we play the game of subjectivity and alienation, with whom do we negotiate over my image in the mirror?

What has disappeared is that good old alterity of relation, that good old investment of the subject in the contract and rational exchange, the site of both profitability and hope. It all yields to a state of exception, a mad speculation which is more like a duel or a provocation. Hostage-taking is a speculation of this order—ephemeral, senseless, instantaneous. It is not essentially political, but insists on identifying itself from the very first as the dream of a fantastic deal, the dream of an impossible exchange, and also as a denunciation of the impossibility of this exchange.

The Obscene

All these figures that appear to be those of an exacerbated indifference, of an exacerbation of emptiness, of obesity, of terror, are also figures of the loss of illusion, play and scene, and therefore figures of the obscene.

Loss of the scene of the body for the obese, loss of the scene of exchange for the hostage, loss of the sexual scene in obscenity, etc. But also an evanescence of the scene of the social, political and theatrical. And everywhere a loss of the secret, of distance, and of the mastery of illusion.

We have completely forgotten the form of sovereignty that consists of the operation of simulacra as such. But culture has never been anything but that: the collective sharing of simulacra, as opposed to the compulsory sharing of the real and of meaning today. Sovereignty lies only in the mastery of appearances, and complicity lies only in the collective sharing of illusion and secret.

Everything that forgets this scene and this mastery of illusion and veers toward the simple hypothesis and mastery of the real falls into the obscene. The mode of apparition of illusion is that of the scene; the mode of apparition of the real is that of the obscene.

There exists a terror, as well as a fascination, of the perpetual engendering of the same by the same. This confusion is exactly that of nature, the natural confusion of things, and only artifice can put an end to it. Only artifice can dispel this lack of differentiation, this coupling of same to same.

Nothing is worse than the truer than the true. Take the clone, or the automaton in the story of the illusionist. In the latter, what is terrifying is not the disappearance of the natural into the perfection of the artificial (the automaton made by the illusionist imitated every human movement so perfectly as to be indiscernible from the illusionist himself). It is, on the contrary, the disappearance of artifice into the obviousness of the natural. Here lies something unbearably scandalous. This lack of differentiation brings us back to terrifying nature. This is why the magician will instead counterfeit the real robot, with its slightly mechanical rigidity of motion, to restore, against the terror of resemblance, the play and power of illusion.

That which is no longer illusion is dead and inspires terror. This is what the cadaver does, as does the clone, and more generally,

anything that can be so confused with itself that it is no longer even capable of playing its own appearance. This limit of disillusion is that of death.

Against the true of the true, against the truer than true (which immediately becomes pornographic), against the obscenity of obviousness, against this unclean promiscuity with itself that we call resemblance, we must remake illusion, rediscover illusion, this power, at once immoral and maleficent, to tear the same away from the same, called seduction. Seduction against terror: these are the stakes. There are no others.

The erasure of all scene, of all power of illusion, the disappearance of distance, of that space maintained by ceremonial or the rules of the game—the triumph of promiscuity in every domain. Eroticization and sexualization are only the expression of this mix-up, of this confusion of all roles. Psychology in particular, always ambiguous and unhappy, is linked to the loss of distinct scenic spaces and all rules of the game. The "other scene," that of the unconscious and of fantasy, cannot make up for the loss of that more fundamental one of illusion.

Illusion is not false, for it doesn't use false signs; it uses senseless signs, signs that point nowhere. This is why it deceives and disappoints our demand for meaning, but it does so enchantingly.

This is what the image does in general, more subtly than the real, since it has only two dimensions and is therefore always more seductive (it really is the devil who peopled the world with them). The same is true of *trompe l'oeil*: adding the illusion of the real to painting, it is somehow falser than false—a second-degree simulacrum.

Seduction is also falser than the false, since it uses signs, which are already semblances, to make them lose their meaning—it abuses signs and subjects. Someone who has never lost the

meaning of a word or a look cannot know what this loss is, that of abandoning oneself to the total illusion of signs, to immediate control by appearances, that is, going beyond the false into the absolute abyss of artifice.

The false does nothing but intrigue our sense of truth; the falser than false carries us beyond this, and ravishes us without the possibility of appeal. In the real world the true and the false balance each other, and what is gained by one is lost to the other. In the movement of seduction (this also applies to the work of art) it is as if the false were resplendent in all the power of the true. It is as if illusion were resplendent in all the power of truth. What can we do about any of this? No more real, no more meaning holds. When a form is resplendent with inverse energy, when the energy of the false shines with the power of the true, or when the Good shines with the energy of Evil—when, instead of setting them in opposition to each other, a kind of singular anamorphosis guides the transparition of one form into the other, the transparition of one energy into its inverse, what could one oppose to this singular movement?

In this ascent to the limit a logic of the simultaneity of inverse effects comes into play. Perhaps we should radically oppose the effects of obscenity to those of seduction; but might it not also be necessary to accumulate them and grasp them together in their inextricable anamorphosis?

Thus, in the movement of money both the total obscenity and the secret illusion of value are combined in striking fashion.

Gaming is wonderful, because it is at the same time the locus of the ecstasy of value and that of its disappearance. Not its transgression in potlach and expenditure—that would still be Bataille's transcendental utopia, the ultimate dream of political economy. No, in gaming money is neither produced nor destroyed; it disappears as

value and rises again as appearance, returned to its pure appearance, in the immediate reversibility of gain and loss.

The obscenity of gaming is total, because there is no longer any appeal to any depth or value whatsoever: here money is naked, metamorphosed into pure circulation, pure fascination, formal passion, transparent, cold and superficial *jouissance*. Disembodied lewdness, the ecstatic form of value.

But the secret of gaming is also total: it is that money does not exist. It is like the secret of power: that there is none—or that of seduction: that desire does not exist. Money exists neither as essence, nor as substance, nor as value. And gaming returns it to its inexistence.

This is just the opposite of political economy and exchange, where money is loaded with the whole symbolic operation of value. Here, money is distributed as pure simulacrum, relieved of all obscenity and circulating only according to the arbitrary rules of the game.

The secret of gaming is that money has no meaning. It exists only as appearance. There the substance of value is volatilized by the play of appearances, by the arbitrariness of play.

If money can self-generate so insanely, just as numbers can be multiplied by a simple mental operation, it is possible only because it does not exist. It's like in the game where one is supposed to memorize as many words as possible; you get much further when you can forget the meaning of the words.

This is not a matter of consumption or spending; you must passionately believe in money and value in order to consume them, just as you must believe passionately in the law in order to transgress it. Those are hot passions. Here, one must believe in nothing; you must have a secret, that of the nonexistence of money, if not its

power of appearance and metamorphosis (or what amounts to the same thing, the absolute power of simulation of gaming). It is a cool passion, a form of cold ecstasy. Calculation is part of it, as are the rules and anything that shares in the savage ritual of appearance. Calculation here functions as a mask, with the same intensity as the mask. It regulates, beyond appearances, the play of mobile divinities, the hidden objectivity behind the subjectivity of appearances.

But if the false can be transparent with all the power of the true—such is the sublime form of illusion and seduction—the true, too, can be transparent with all the power of the false—and this is the form of obscenity.

This is the obscene: the truer than true, the fullness of sex, the ecstasy of sex, pure and empty form, the truly tautological form of sexuality (tautology alone is perfectly true), the joining of same to same. It is sex caught in its own exhibition, fixed in its organic, orgasmic excrescence, like the body in obesity, or cells in cancerous metastases. Not a vile, caricatured and simplified form of sexuality, but the logical exacerbation of the sexual function, the more sex than sex, sex elevated to the set power—what is obscene is not the copulation of bodies, but rather the mental redundancy of sex, the escalation of truth which leads to the cold vertigo of the pornographic.

This is the very same process that leads to the enchanted vertigo of seduction. The full through which only the empty appears (this spectacular absence of sensuality and pleasure is the failure of the pornographic universe)—that is the obscene. The fading of sense, the ephemerality of the sign through which the most extreme pleasure appears—that is seduction. But in both cases we see a quality outbid itself in its reaching towards its pure form, its ecstatic radiation.

And it is not only a quality which can go into such ecstasy; the absence of a quality can do so as well: there is an ecstatic radiation of the neutral, and the neutral itself can be potentiated. This leads to something monstrous, monstrous effect, a good part of which comes from obscenity. Pornography is precisely an art of exhibiting the neutral, of the compulsory radiation of the neutral.

Essentially sexual obscenity is pious and hypocritical, for it distracts us from conceiving of obscenity in its general form. This is characteristic of any form that becomes fixed in its apparition, that loses the ambiguity of absence to exhaust itself in an exacerbated visibility.

More visible than the visible—this is the obscene.

More invisible than the invisible—this is the secret.

The scene is in the order of the visible. But there is no longer a scene of the obscene; there is nothing but the dilation of the visibility of all things to the point of ecstasy. The obscene is the end of any scene. Furthermore it is a bad omen, as its name indicates. For this hypervisibility of things is also the imminence of their end, the sign of the apocalypse. All signs carry it on themselves, and not only the infrasensual and disembodied signs of sex. Along with the end of the secret, it is our fatal condition. If all enigmas are resolved, the stars go out. If everything secret is returned to the visible (and more than to the visible: to obscene obviousness), if all illusion is returned to transparence, then heaven becomes indifferent to the earth. In our culture everything is sexualized before disappearing. This is no longer sacred prostitution but a sort of spectral lewdness taking hold of idols, signs, institutions, discourses; the allusion, the obscene inflection that takes hold of every discourse, is the surest sign of their disappearance.

There is no obscenity when sex is in sex, or when the social is in the social and nowhere else. But today it overflows everywhere, like sexuality—we speak of the social "relationship" like the sexual "relationship." This is no longer a mythical, transcendent sociality, but a pathetic sociality of rapprochement, of contact (as in lenses), prosthesis, reassurance. It is a social in mourning, an incessant group hallucination of its lost determination. The group is haunted by sociality like the individual is by sex—both are haunted sexually by their disappearance.

Today we are all social workers. What is this social, that is no more than work? That no longer even believes in its own existence in fact or in law, that believes only in its forced reproduction, in the framework of a market where it sees itself as subjected, like any other commodity, to the law of scarcity, production and exchange? And also to advertising, since everywhere in the media, in ideology and in discourses, it is the social that does its own advertising.

In a world where the energy of the public scene, the energy of the social as myth and illusion (whose intensity is maximal in utopias) is in the process of disappearing, the social becomes monstrous and obese, and dilates to the dimension of a kennel, a mammary body, cellular and glandular. Once exemplified in its heroes, it is now indexed on its handicapped, defectives, degenerates, feeble-minded, and asocial—in a gigantic enterprise of therapeutic nursery school.

The social can exist only within certain limits, where it is imposed as something at stake, as myth—I would almost say as destiny, as a challenge, and never as reality, in which case it is annihilated in the game of supply and demand. The body also is annulled in the game of sexual supply and demand, and it, too, loses that mythical power which makes it an object of seduction ....

As for the social, one can say that its obscenity is today fully realized; it is that of the body you don't know how to get rid of, or more exactly it enters the accursed phase of decay. It is then, before drying out and taking on the beauty of death, that the body passes through a truly obscene phase and must at all costs be conjured and exorcized, for it no longer represents anything, no longer has a name, and its unnamable contamination invades everything.

Everything that is imposed by its objective presence, that is, by abjection, everything that no longer possesses either the secret or the lightness of absence, everything that, like the rotting body, is given over solely to the material operation of its decomposition, everything which, with no illusion possible, is surrendered to the sole operation of the real, everything which, without mask, makeup or face, is given over to the pure operation of sex and death—all this can be called obscene and pornographic.

Many things are obscene because they have too much meaning, because they take up too much space. They thus attain an exorbitant representation of the truth, that is to say, the apogee of the simulacrum.

When everything is political, it is the end of the political as destiny; it is the beginning of the political as culture, and means the immediate impoverishment of this political culture.

When everything becomes cultural, it is the end of culture as destiny; it is the beginning of culture as politics, and means the immediate impoverishment of this cultural politics.

The same is true for the social, for history, economy, and sex. The point of maximal extension of these categories, once distinct and specific, marks a point of banalisation and the inauguration of a transpolitical sphere that is first of all that of their disappearance. The end of fatal strategies—and the beginning of banal strategies.

We thought we discovered something subversive when we affirmed that the body, sports and fashion were political.

We have only precipitated their indifferentiation into an analytical and ideological fog—a little like discovering that all illnesses are psychosomatic. A wonderful discovery, but one which gets you nowhere: it just assigns them to a more poorly defined category.

Everywhere the widely accepted obviousness of a generalization of this order—political, cultural, social, sexual, psychological—marks its death sentence. Interdisciplinary structures in all their forms are symptoms of this: every discipline is aligned on the degenerated concepts of another.

Or else, with this mélange of concepts and categories, as with the mixing and promiscuity of the races, one should imagine the baroque effects of transfiguration—effects visible in America in the violence of indifference, the violence of juxtaposition, the violence of promiscuity—the new scene of the obscene. It is as if obscenity has been transfigured by acceleration, by the corpuscular speed of bodies, signs, and images.

Obscenity takes on all the semblances of modernity. We are used to seeing it, first of all, in the perpetration of sex, but it extends to everything that can be perpetrated in the visible—it becomes the perpetration of the visible itself. Murderous prostitution, like certain hyperreal films from South America, where the sadistic violence on the screen is perpetrated for real during the filming. A murderous aberration? This is not so certain, for it is consistent with the fantasy of the integral restitution of the real, and of the resurrection of detail characteristic of porn, but also of "retro," in the register of the past, or of the "rendered" and the "lived" in the register of life pure and simple.

Porn is after what can be rendered from sex, and "retro" aims at what can be rendered from the event, the cultural trait and the historical character—almost hallucinated in its detail and expurgated of all nostalgia by virtue of its overexact signs. This really is exaction: you expel things into the real, and force them to mean something. But perhaps things are never "true" except at this price: being led under too garish a light, with too high a standard of fidelity.

So from here on everything real has passed into pornographic hyperreality, all of the present has passed into "retro," and that entire charming little music of meaning has passed into the stereophony of signals which lulls us to sleep.

This is the obscenity of everything that is tirelessly filmed, filtered, reviewed and corrected under the wide-angle lens of the social, of morality and information. Those lives extorted right on television, the whole of *la France profonde* made to submit to public confession and contrition, even animals are subjected to educational blackmail: previously you could see a giraffe giving birth on a live broadcast; today the program goes to a school, where we see the animals as seen by children, etc. The slightest film will be shown only at the price of an aimless and idiotic discussion: the soft technology of culture, outrageous socialization, the rampant obscenity of uninterrupted social commentary.

Solicitation, sensitivization, being plugged in, targeting, contact, connection—all this terminology is that of a white obscenity, one of dejection and uninterrupted abjection. This is the obscenity of change, of this ferocious fluidity of signs and values, of this total extroversion of behaviour into the operational.... The white and impersonal objectivity of polls and statistics—the masses having to reveal their secrets, even if they don't have any. Everyone must deliver his secret, cross the threshold of silence and enter the

immanent space of communication, where even that minimal dimension of looking is erased. Looking is never obscene, whatever one says about it. What is obscene, on the other hand, is that which can no longer be looked at, nor, it follows, seduced—everything, animate or inanimate, that can no longer be enveloped by the minimal seduction of the glance and is doomed, naked and with no secret, to immediate devouring.

Obscenity is the absolute proximity of the thing seen, the gaze stuck in the screen of vision—hypervision in close-up, a dimension without any distance, the total promiscuity of the look with what it sees. Prostitution.

We, particularly in the West, devour faces like sexes, in their psychological nudity, in their affectation of truth and desire. Stripped of masks, of signs, of ceremonial, they shine, in effect, with the obscenity of their demand. And we submit to the solicitation of this unfindable truth, and spend all our energy on this vacuous decipherment. Only appearances, that is to say, signs that do not let meanings filter through, protect us from this irradiation, this loss of substance in the empty space of truth.

The face stripped of its masks is no more than a sexual organ; the body stripped of its appearances is naked and obscene (although nudity can clothe the body and protect it from obscenity).

It is doubtless impossible to strip a body or a face totally of its appearances and yield it up to the pure concupiscence of looking, to strip it of its aura and yield it to the pure concupiscence of desire, to strip it of its secret and yield it to the pure operation of decipherment. But we shouldn't underestimate the power of the obscene, its power to exterminate all ambiguity and all seduction and deliver us to the definitive fascination of bodies without faces, faces without eyes, and eyes that don't look. Maybe this, by the way,

is what attracts us in advance: a perfectly ecstatic and obscene universe of pure objects, transparent to each other, which would shatter against each other like pure kernels of truth.

This obscenity drags away with it whatever remained of an illusion of depth and the last question that could still be asked of a disenchanted world: is there a hidden meaning?

When everything is oversignified, meaning itself becomes impossible to grasp. When all values are overexposed, in some kind of indifferent ecstasy (including the social in the socialism of present-day France), it is the very credibility of the value which is annihilated.

Thus there could have been a kind of ruse on the part of traditional pornography. Porn basically says: there is good sex somewhere, since I am its caricature. There is some measure, since I am its excess. But this is precisely the question: is there good sex somewhere, sex as an ideal value of the body, as a "desire" that must be liberated? The virtual state of things, that of total explicitness of sex, answers: no. Sex can be perfectly liberated, perfectly transparent, without desire and without pleasure (it still functions).

This same question was put to political economy: beyond the exchange-value incarnating the abstraction and inhumanity of capitalism, is there some good substance to value, some ideal use-value of commodity which can and should be liberated? We know very well that the answer is no, that use-value has disappeared over the horizon of exchange-value and was only a paradoxical dream of political economy.

This is the very issue of the social: above and beyond, beneath this terrorist and hyperreal sociality, this ubiquitous blackmail of communication, is there some good substance to the social, some ideality of

social relationship that can and should be liberated? The answer is obviously no: the equilibrium and harmony of a certain social contract has disappeared over the horizon of history, and we are doomed to this diaphanous obscenity of change. We mustn't believe we are living the realization of some evil utopia—we are living the realization of utopia, period. That is to say, its collapse into the real.

The same is true for theater and scenic illusion.

Baroque theater was still a kind of extravagance of representation. Indissociable from feasts, fountains, fireworks, machine-like artifices (the great mechanical technologies were inaugurated then, in the production of theatrical illusion) the scenic illusion (of the stage) is total. Just like *trompe-l'oeil*, its contemporary simulacrum, more real than the real, but without trying to confuse itself with the real: on the contrary: by virtue of machines, artifact, technique, and counterfeit the real is challenged according to its own rules. Likewise for perspective in painting from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century: the way it is used is often illusionist and operatic. It remains a staging, a strategy of appearances, not of the real—illusion keeps its power without giving up its secret (there isn't any).

But we will make it confess anyway. We will capture theater in the trap of representation. Starting in the eighteenth century, it becomes loaded with the "real"; the stage moves away from machine-like simulation and the metaphysics of illusion, and the naturalist form wins out. The stage trades the prestige of metamorphosis for the discreet charm of transcendence. The critical era of theater begins, the contemporary of social antagonisms, psychological conflicts, and of the critical age in general.

There is still something at stake, however, at the level of this representation. Theater, even if it no longer has the energy of

metamorphosis or the sacred effects of illusion, retains a critical energy and a sort of sacrilegious charm—this includes the separation of the stage from the audience, also a critical form, a space of transcendence and judgment.

Artaud is no doubt the latest figure who has wanted to save the theater by tearing it from the decaying scenario of the real, anticipating the end of representation, and reinjecting it, by virtue of cruelty, with something prior even to illusion and simulacrum, something of the savage operation of sign upon reality or of the lack of distinction between the two that still characterizes theaters of the unreal (the Peking Opera, Balinese theater, and sacrifice itself as a scene of murderous illusion).

Today this critical energy of the stage—not to mention, of course, its power of illusion—is in the process of being swept away. All that theatrical energy goes into the denial of the scenic illusion and into antitheater in all its forms. If for a while the form of theater and the form of the real were in dialectical play with each other, today it is the pure and empty form of theater which plays with the pure and empty form of the real. Illusion is proscribed; the scission between stage and audience is abolished; theater goes down into the street and into everydayness; it claims to invest the whole of the real, dissolve into it, and at the same time transfigure it. The paradox is at its height. All the "exploded" forms of animation, creativity and expression, happening and acting out—theater takes on the form of a generalized therapeutic psychodrama. This is no longer the famous Aristotelian catharsis of the passions. Rather, it is a treatment of detoxicification and reanimation. Illusion is no longer valid here: it is truth which bursts into free expression. We are all actors and spectators; there is no more stage: the stage is everywhere; no more rules: everyone plays out his own drama, improvising on his own fantasies.

The obscene form of antitheater, present everywhere.

But also that of antipedagogy and antipsychiatry, where madness and knowledge are lost in psychodramatic complicity, as well as of antipsychoanalysis, where the analysand and the analyst end up exchanging roles. Everywhere a stage disappears, and everywhere the poles that sustained intensity or difference are stricken with inertia.

Or that of artificial resurrection, which is one of the forms obscenity takes. One of the most significant turns of events is seeing the scene of work—also in the process of disappearing—reactivated, vacuum-packed, so to speak, in the German factory-simulacra where the psychosocial lived experience of the work process is preserved for the use of the unemployed, and in the absence of any "real" production. A marvelous hallucination of the modern world: the unemployed are paid to reperform gratuitously, so to speak, the same actions as for production, but in a sphere that is now perfectly useless. This is truly the ecstasy of work; they are living out the ecstatic form of work. And at the same time, there is nothing more obscene or more melancholy than this parody of work. Here the proletarian becomes a cellophane-wrapped whore.

This white obscenity, this escalation of transparence, reaches its peak in the collapse of the political scene.

From the eighteenth century on, the latter is moralized and becomes serious. It becomes the locus of a fundamental signified: the people, the will of the people, social contradictions, etc. It is called upon to fulfil the ideal of a good representation.

'While previous political life, like that of the court, was played out in a theatrical mode, with a basis in play and machination, now there exists a public space and a system of representation (the break

occurs simultaneously in the theater with the separation of stage and audience). This is the end of an aesthetics, and the begining of an ethics of the political, just like some figurative space, from now on no longer assigned to scenic illusion, but to historical objectivity.

This ethical crystallization of the political scene engenders a long process of repression (just as linguistic structuring engenders a repressed of the sign). The obscene has its birth here, in the off-stage, in the shadows of the system of representation. It is therefore first of all dark: this is what foils the transparence of the scene, just as the unconscious and repression destroyed the transparence of consciousness. The obscene is what is neither visible, nor representable, and thus possesses an energy of rupture, of transgression, and a hidden violence. This is traditional obscenity, of the sexually or socially repressed, of what is neither represented nor representable.

It's otherwise for us: obscenity today is, on the contrary, that of over-representation. Our own radical obscenity is no longer that of the hidden and the repressed, it's the transparency of the social itself, emergence of the social (and of sex) as meaning, reference, evidence. A total reversal has taken place. And if obscenity was once only a secondary trait of the repressed? If it was once the Hell of Representation—as they talk about the Hell of the National Library—conveying the charm of interdiction, its fantasies and perversions, today it bursts out as the principle characteristic of the repressed, exploding the visible scene into a kind of ecstatic representation.

In the beginning was the secret, and this was the rule of the game of appearance. Then there was the repressed, and this was the rule of the game of depth. Finally comes the obscene, and this is the rule of the game of a world without appearance or depth—a transparent universe. White obscenity.

Everything obscene is a matter of surface. But there are no more secrets beneath these superficies. What was kept secret, or even what didn't exist found itself expelled forcibly into the real, represented beyond all necessity and all resemblance. Forcing of representation. As with porn: an orgasm in color and close up is neither necessary nor convincing—it is merely implacably true, even if it is the truth of nothing at all. It is only abjectly visible, even if it represents nothing at all.

For something to be meaningful, there has to be a scene, and for there to be a scene, there has to be an illusion, a minimum of illusion, of imaginary movement, of defiance to the real, which carries you off, seduces or revolts you. Without this properly aesthetic dimension, mythical, ludic, there is not even a political scene where something can happen. And this minimal illusion has disappeared for us: there is no necessity nor credibility for us in the events of Biafra, Chile, Poland in terrorism, inflation and nuclear war. We are exposed to an over-representation of these things by the media, but still we can't really imagine them. All of that, for us, is simply obscene, since images in the media are made to be seen but not really looked at, hallucinated in silhouette, absorbed—like sex absorbs the voyeur: from a distance. Neither spectators, nor actors—we are voyeurs without illusion.

If we're anesthetized it's because there's no more aesthetics (in the extended meaning of the word) of the political scene, no more stakes, rules of the game. For information and media are not a scene, a prospective space, or something that's performed, but a screen without depth, a tape perforated with messages and signals to which corresponds a receiver's own perforated reading.

Nothing can compensate for this loss of all scene and illusion—in the automatic simulation of the social, in the automatic

simulation of the political. Especially not the discourses of politicos, all compelled to simulate each other's pathetic gesticulation—pornographers of indifference whose official obscenity redoubles and calls attention to the obscenity of a world without illusion. Furthermore, nobody cares. We are in the ecstasy of the political and the historical—perfectly formless and impotent, in perfect solidarity, yet paralyzed, perfectly frozen in a worldwide stereophonic complex, transpoliticized alive.

Today there is no longer transcendence, but the immanent surface of the development of operations, smooth surface, operational, of communication. The Faustian, Promethean period of production and consumption yields to the Protean era of networks, to the narcissistic, equally Protean form of branching, contact, contiguity, feedback, and generalized interface. As with television, the entire surrounding world, and our own body, becomes a control screen.

The decisive changes in objects and the modern environment arise from a drift toward formal operational abstraction of elements and functions, toward their homogenization in a single virtual process, toward the displacement of gestures, bodies, affects in electric and electronic control, toward the miniaturization in time and space of processes whose real scene is that of infinitesimal memory and the microprocessor.

The time has come of a miniaturization of time, bodies, pleasures. There is no longer any ideal principle for these things on the scale of the human. There are no longer any but nucleated effects. This change from the human scale to the nuclear one is obvious everywhere: this body, our body, appears basically superfluous, useless in the extension, multiplicity and complexity of its organs, tissues, functions, since everything today is concentrated on the

brain and genetic formula that resume themselves an operational definition of being. The countryside, the geographically immense countryside, seems a desert body whose very extension is needless (and that eventually it is even boring to traverse), since all events crystallize in the cities, themselves in the process of reduction to a few miniaturized showplaces. And time: what to say about this immense free time that is left to us, too much time, by far, that envelopes us like a vague terrain, a dimension henceforward useless to explore, since instantaneity of communication has miniaturized our exchanges into a succession of instants?

We are no longer in the drama of alienation, we are in the ecstasy of communication.

The private world was certainly alienated, because it separated us from others, but it reaped also a symbolic benefit from the alienation, which is that there is such a thing as difference to suffer or enjoy, as the case may be. So the consumer society was lived under the sign of alienation, as society of the spectacle; but still the spectacle is only spectacle, it is never obscene; obscenity starts when there is no longer a scene, when everything becomes inexorably transparent.

Man already denounced the obscenity of the commodity, linked to the abject principle of its free circulation. The obscenity of the commodity comes from its abstraction, formal and light, against the weight and density of the object. The commodity is readable: contrary to the object, which never confesses completely its secret, the commodity manifests always its visible essence, which is its price. It is the formal place of transcription of all posssible objects: through it they all communicate—it is the first great medium of communication of the modern world. But the message it delivers

is extremely simplified, and it's always the same: it is exchange-value. Basically, therefore, the message already no longer exists; it's the medium that imposes itself in its pure circulation.

We have only to extend this analysis of Marx of the obscenity of the commodity to decipher the universe of communication.

Not only the sexual becomes obscene in pornography, today there's a whole pornography of information and communication, circuits and networks, a pornography of functions and objects in their readability, fluidity, availability, regulation, polyvalence, compulsory meaning, free expression.... This is the obscenity of what is entirely soluble in communication.

To the black obscenity succeeds a white one—to the hot obscenity, a cold. The two imply a form of promiscuity: one is that of the viscera in the body, objects piled up in the private universe, of what swarms in the silence of repression—organic promiscuity, visceral, charnel. The other is more a matter of surface saturation, incessant solicitation and an extermination of interstitial space.

I lift my telephone receiver, that's it, the whole marginal network hooks into me, annoys me, with the intolerable good faith of all that pretends to communicate. Free radio: talks, sings, expresses—wonderful!—all of that, a fantasy of contents. In terms of media the result is: a space, that of FM, finds itself saturated, stations on top of one another mix to the point that there is no further communication. Something that was free is no longer so at all—I no longer even get to the point of finding out what it is I want to hear, so saturated is the space, so urgent is the pressure from all that wants to be heard.

I fall into the negative ecstasy of radio. There is certainly a proper state of fascination linked to this delirium of communication,

and therefore a singular pleasure. If you follow Caillois in his classification of games—games of expression, competitition, chance, vertigo—then the drift of contemporary culture is from forms of expression and competition toward aleatory and vertiginous forms that are no longer games of scene, mirror, challenge, duel games, but rather ecstatic, solitary and narcissistic games, where pleasure is no longer a dramatic and aesthetic matter of meaning, but an aleatory, psychotropic one of pure fascination. And this is by no means a negative judgment, since we are certainly dealing here with a basic mutation in the forms of perception and pleasure. We would be poor judges of the consequences of this phenomenon, if we try to apply the criteria and reflexes of our traditional sensibility to it; we would doubtless be misunderstanding the potentialities of the event in this new sensorial sphere.

One thing is certain: the scene makes us passionate, but the obscene fascinates us. In fascination and ecstasy, passion disappears. The hot universe is investment, desire, passion, seduction, and also, according to Caillois, expression and competition. The world of ecstasy, obscenity, fascination, on the other hand, and also, following Caillois, of the aleatory and vertiginous, is cold, cool (vertigo is cold, even a drugged one).

In any event we'll have to tolerate this compulsory extraversion of all interiority and this forced irruption of all exteriority that signifies properly the categorical imperative of communication. Should we call upon the metaphors of pathology? If hysteria was the pathology of the exacerbated drama of the subject, pathology of expression, theatrical and operational conversion of the body—if paranoia was the pathology of the rigid and jealous organization and structuring of the world on the other hand, with communication,

information and the immanent promiscuity of all networks, with this cultural branching, we would instead be inside a new form of schizophrenia. No more hysteria, properly speaking, or projective paranoia; it is the normal state that terrifies the schizophrenic: the too-great proximity of everything, unworldly promiscuity of all things, that contact, invest, penetrate each other without resistance: no protective aura, not even the body envelopes one. The schizo is deprived of all scene, open to all in spite of himself, and in the greatest confusion. He is himself obscene, the obscene prey of the world's obscenity. What characterizes him is less his light-years distance from the real, a radical break, than absolute proximity, the total instantaneousness of things, defenseless, with no retreat; end of interiority and intimacy, overexposure and transparency of the world that traverses him without his being able to interpose any barrier: for he can no longer produce the limits of his own being, and reflect himself; he is only an absorbant screen, a spinning and insensible plate for all the networks of influence.

If it was true, if it were possible, this obscene and generalized ecstasy of all functions could well be the state of desired transparency, of reconciliation of subject and world, that would be for us basically the Last Judgment; and it already would have taken place.

Two alternatives, equally possible: nothing has yet happened, our unhappiness comes from nothing having really begun (liberation, revolution, progress)—finalist utopia. The other eventuality is that everything has already happened. We are already beyond the end. All that was metaphor has already materialized, collapsed into reality. This is our destiny: the end of the end. We are in a transfinite universe.

3

Ironic Strategies

WE HAVE TRANSGRESSED EVERYTHING, including the limits of scene and truth.

We've really gone beyond. Imagination is in power; light, intelligence is in power, we're living, or soon will be living, the perfection of the social. Everything is here, heaven has come down to earth, the heaven of utopia, and what existed in profile as a radiant perspective is now lived as a catastrophe in slow motion. We can almost taste the fatal flavor of material paradises; and transparency, which was the ideal maxim for the age of alienation, is realized today in the form of a homogeneous and terrorist space—hyperinformation, hypersensibility.

No more black magic of the forbidden, alienation and transgression, but the white magic of ecstasy, fascination, transparency. It's the end of the pathos of law. There will be no Final Judgement. We've passed beyond it without realizing it.

Too bad. We're in paradise. Illusion is no longer possible. It has always braked the real, but now no longer holds; and we are witnesses to the unfurling of the real in a world without illusions. Even the historical illusion which maintained the hope of the convergence in the infinite of the real and the rational, and thereby a metaphysical tension, is dissipated: the real has become the rational.

This conjunction has been realized under the sign of the hyperreal, ecstatic form of the real. All metaphysical tension has been dissipated, yielding a pataphysical ambiance, that is, the tautological and grotesque perfection of the truth processes. Ubu: the small intestine and the splendor of the void. Ubu: full and obese form, grotesquely immanent, strikingly true, a figure of genius, replete with that which has absorbed everything, transgressed everything, and radiates in the void like an imaginary solution.

Would God have fallen into this strategy, unworthy of him, of reconciling man with his own image, at the end of a Last Judgement that would bring him indefinitely closer to his ideal goal? Fortunately not: God's strategy is such that he maintains man in suspense, hostile to his image, elevating Evil to the power of a principle and marvelously sensitive to any seduction that turns him away from his goal.

There is no reality principle, nor one of pleasure. There is only a final principle of reconciliation and an infinite one of Evil and Seduction.

Beyond the ecstasy of the social, of sex, of the body, information, the Evil Principle keeps watch, evil genie of the social, the object, irony of passion.

Beyond the final principle of the subject there stands the fatal reversibility of the object, pure object, pure event (the fatal), mass-object (silence), fetish-object, femininity-object (seduction). Everywhere today, after centuries of triumphant subjectivity, the irony of the object lies in wait for us, an objective irony readable at the very heart of information and of science, at the very heart of the system and its laws, at the heart of desire and of all psychology.

The Evil Genie of the Social

Neither the morality nor the positive value system of a society makes for progress, but rather its immorality and vice.

It is never the Good nor the Virtuous, whether it be the ideal and platonic one in morality, or the pragmatic and objective one in science and technology that controls the changes or the vitality of a society; the catalytic impulse comes from debauchery, whether of images, ideas or signs.

The rational systems of morality, value, science, reason command only the linear evolution of societies, their visible history. But the deeper energy that pushes even these things forward comes from elsewhere. From prestige, challenge, from all the seductive or antagonistic impulses, including suicidal ones, which have nothing to do with asocial morality or a morality of history or progress.

Competition is stronger than any morality, and competition is immoral. Fashion is more powerful than any aesthetic, and fashion is immoral. Glory, our ancestors would have said, is more powerful than merit, and glory is immoral. The debauchery of signs, in every domain, is much more powerful than reality, and the debauchery of signs is immoral. Gambling, whose rules are immemorial, is more powerful than work, and gambling is immoral. Seduction, in all its forms, is more powerful than love or interest, and seduction is immoral.

This is not, nor was it with Mandeville either, a cynical philosophical view, but an objective view of societies, and possibly of all systems of thought. The energy itself is cynical and immoral: no thinker who follows only the logic of his concepts has ever seen farther than the end of his nose. You must be cynical or perish, and

this, if we may say so, is not immoral; it is the cynicism of the secret order of things.

It is not that individuals or groups would obey some secret instinct, but the fact remains that the powers which have attempted to extirpate this disobedience, this debauch, this evil genie, by annihilating everything right up to the "irrational" motivations in the mind of man, have always condemned people to a more or less slow death. The energy of vice is irreplaceable, precisely because it is an energy of fission and rupture, for which they have very naively wanted to substitute a mechanical energy of production.

How do our supposedly rational and programmed societies function? What makes them work, what makes whole populations run? Scientific progress, "objective" information, the increase of collective happiness, the understanding of facts and causes, the proper punishment for the guilty, or the quality of life? Not at all: none of this interests anyone, except in reply to public opinion polls. What fascinates everyone is the debauchery of signs, that reality, everywhere and always, is debauched by signs. This is the interesting game, and this is what happens in the media, in fashion, in publicity and more generally, in the spectacle of politics, technology, science, in the spectacle of anything at all, because the perversion of reality, the spectacular distortion of facts and representations, the triumph of simulation is as fascinating as catastrophe—and it is one, in effect; it is avertiginous subversion of all effects of meaning. For this effect of simulation, or of seduction, as you please, we are ready to pay any price, much more than for the "real" quality of our life.

This is the secret of advertising, fashion, gambling, of all the lewd systems that break apart moral energies and liberate immoral energies, those that feed gaily on the signs of things alone, in defiance of their truth. In this, they go back to magical and archaic

energies which have always gambled on the omnipotence of thought against the power of the real world, immoral energy that shatters meaning, that traverses facts, representations, traditional values, and electrifies societies blocked in their Platonic images.

A good example of this "diabolical" power of change, this immoral energy of transformation, for and against all value systems, is the United States. In spite of its morality, puritanism, obsession with virtue, and pragmatic idealism, everything there changes irresistibly according to an impulse that is not at all one of progress, by definition linear—no, the true motor is the abjection of free enterprise. Still both social and wild even today, refractory to any coherent social project: everything there is examined, paid for, promoted and fails according to that standard. West Coast music, therapies, sexual "perversions," the skyscrapers of the East, leaders, gadgets, artistic movements, all parade by in successive waves in the same ceaseless rhythm. And our own cultural unconscious, deeply nourished on culture and meaning, can howl in dismay at the sign of this spectacle; the fact remains that it is there, in the immoral promiscuity of all forms, all races, in the violent spectacle of change in which lies the success of a society and the sign of its vitality.

Publicity, abstract, abject circulation of Eurodollars, stock prices, immorality of fashion cycles, useless technologies of prestige, electoral parades, arms escalation, all this is not only the historical sign of the domination of capital, but the most decisive proof of a fact more important than capital itself: the proof that no social project worthy of the name has ever really existed, that in the end no group has ever really conceived itself as social, that is to say in solidarity with its own values and coherent in its collective project, in short, there has never been even the shadow nor

the embryo of a responsible collective subject, nor even the possibility of an objective of this kind.

Public morality, collective responsibility, progress, the rationalization of social rapports—nonsense! What group has ever dreamt of that? Sociologists and ideologues, yes, and politicians who have lost precisely this sense of politics, of the imposture and fallacy of politics, which is not just the quality of Machiavelli's Prince, but also, if you follow Mandeville into the abysses of the social, the Machiavellianism of society in its real functioning.

The energy of the social as such, the energy of the social contract and of its idealization in socialism, is an impoverished energy. It is a reasonable energy, a slow and artificial energy. But one can easily see that this isn't what people obey; it's only their history. Even the Revolution, which can be seen as the culminating point of this "conscious" energy, is not history's final word on the subject. As Rivarol says: "The people didn't really want a Revolution, they wanted a spectacle of it." Is there anything more deceitful than this? More immoral? (Especially when it's a matter of Revolution!—but, rest assured: when it's a question of wanting order, the people are only interested in the spectacle of it.)

If our perversion lies in this, that we never desire the real event, but its spectacle, never things, but their sign, and the secret derision of their sign, it means that we don't really want things to change; the change must also seduce us.

In order for Revolution to come it has to seduce us, and it can do that only by signs—it's in the same situation as today's politicians laboring for election. But you can wind up paying a very high price for being seduced, for however meaningful Revolution can be

historically, only its spectacle is sublime. And what will we choose? Why do people who have paid so dearly for their Revolution so frequently, to the regret of its advocates, allow it to languish in indifference, treating the "event" like so much bad luck, having sacrificed their life to the spectacle of Revolution?

It is this cunning impulse that delivers us from terror.

Another example of an immoral society living off its own profound immorality: Italy. Why isn't Italy morose (as France is, even socialist)?

Doubtless because it is the only society to have crossed, collectively, the virtual threshold of simulation—a collective virtuosity for living in the at once derisory and subtle order of simulation. It does not desperately fight—and this is the reason why life there is in the end happier—this loss of substance, value and sense which makes others unhappy and depressed. Others live in a state of thwarted simulation; Italy, for the most part, lives in a state of joyous simulation. There, law has already—and maybe it always has—yielded to the game and the rules of the game. All Italians, from the Red Brigades to the secret service, from Momma to the Mafia, from earthquake victims to the P2 Cell (miracle of the State become secret society!) are somehow in complicity, maintaining an ironic connivance in the theatricality and now in the simulation of power, law, living order or disorder—a secret pact sealing the strategy of appearances that dominate all of this. The pact also concerns the *trompe-l'oeil* effect of the political and social which comes into play and is undone in a twitch, as well as the intense pleasure we take in effects (here we are not far from the Renaissance model). The true social distribution is the collective distribution of seduction.

What cement could be more fantastic than that? What could you find, collectively or individually, beyond the fission of referential

worlds, but the fiction and ironical strategy of appearance? And it's not the French socialism from beyond the grave that will convince us otherwise, for it only plays on the unhappy appearance of the social, incarnated in the funereal statue of Commander Mitterrand and the moral bureaucracy of his Companions.

Does not this secret disobedience of a group to its own principles, this profound immorality and duplicity, reflect a universal order? We need to reawaken the principle of Evil active in Manicheism and all the great mythologies in order to affirm, against the principle of Good, not exactly the supremacy of Evil, but the fundamental duplicity that demands that any order exists only to be disobeyed, attacked, exceeded, and dismantled.

Primitive people did not see it any differently, and we know they had a vision of their gods much different from our own: they invented them only to put them to death, and drew their energy from this intermittent sacrifice. With the Aztecs, the gods sacrifice themselves one by one in order to give birth to the sun, the moon, the people. In order for something to come alive the god who incarnates it has to die.

That is the basic rule: for a group or an individual to live, it can never aim at its own good, its own interest, its own ideal. It always has to aim elsewhere, to the side, beyond, off center, like the combatant in the Japanese martial arts. It is useless to attempt to reconcile these two principles. Duplicity is strategic and fatal.

This is exactly what Bataille saw with his concept of expenditure and accursed shares. It is precisely the superfluous, the excessive that is essential. It's there that all the stakes converge, where the energy of a society is fomented. The social is thus no

longer a contractual organization for the management of a group's interest (which, then, would only be the management of misery, including and especially the penury of the social itself—the principle of economics begins with the fact that there's never enough for everyone, Bataille's principle with the fact that there's always too much for everyone, and that excess is our destiny), but rather a risky, precarious organization, possibly even absurd, a project of devastating energy, an antieconomy, a prodigy, a challenge to conservative nature. The social is a luxury; our own merely characterizes the poverty of our societies.

Another encouraging sign: the extraordinary collective fascination and passion of a people to sacrifice or to see sacrificed its chief, when the occasion offers itself. We should not underestimate this properly political passion for empowering men or castes whom people then continually watch collapse or whom they themselves hasten to their end.

This is only the political version of the law of reversibility and a form of political intelligence at least equal, if not superior, to that of the social contract and delegation of power, which it exalts only to deny. Of course people choose leaders and obey them, of course they invest their representatives with power and legitimacy. But can we suppose that there doesn't always remain the logical necessity to take vengeance on them? Power, whatever it is and wherever it comes from, is a symbolic murder and it must be expiated by murder. We may also be sure that every society is perfectly cognizant of this, at the very moment when it puts someone in power and this someone, if he is intelligent, is perfectly conscious of it as well. This goes back to the rule of the game which says that a group or an individual should never aim at its own preservation. Neither should power, if it really wants to be effective in its exercise, aim at

its own continuity: it should somehow desire its own death. Lacking which it falls into the illusion of power, in the ridiculousness of perpetual engendering, and perpetual ceding of power. If it doesn't understand this it will be swept away. If the group doesn't understand it, it will itself be lost. The institution of power is based on the equal necessity of its dissolution.

Even modern leaders, although obsessed with their permanence and not given to ritual sacrifice, sense this rule and do not hesitate to stage their demise and death through assassination attempts that are more or less orchestrated. Certain of them, moreover, do not always escape unharmed, but that is not the important thing, for in this case, too, merely dying is of no use, you have to know how to fade and pass away. And the property of modern systems, bureaucratic or administrative, is no longer knowing how to die, no longer knowing how to do anything but succeed themselves. Today's leaders believe in their virtue because they believe in designation by the people. They have only banal strategies of power. But other politicians have always known that power is never this unilateral ability of disposing of another's will, but always the subtle and ambiguous orchestration of its own disappearance. They know that power, like truth, is the empty place you must know how never to occupy, but that you must know how to produce so that others will be swallowed up in it. On the other hand, power that insists on occupying this place, power that incarnates power, is obscene and impure, and sooner or later it collapses, amidst blood and ridicule.

Furthermore, a strategy of intelligent subversion would also be to avoid aiming directly at power, but rather to force it into occupying this obscene position of absolute obviousness. For it is there that, mistaking itself for real, it falls into the imaginary—it's there that it no longer exists except to violate its own secret.

This was the nonconcerted tactic of May '68: to force power to coincide with its own nonsimulated exercise—precisely through multiple decoys—and to make power appear as repressive, an apparently naive and useless objective.

What's the use of sacrificing oneself to prove this? But there lay the trap: forcing it to be more repressive than it was in reality. The demonstrators thus in truth exercised a power of simulation, by obliging power to add to repression the obscenity of repression. And that is what kills: simulation is always the most effective weapon. It's enough to annihilate yourself in front of what opposes you to oblige that force to turn against itself with all the power of its inertia. May '68 therefore was not an offensive action (power would win that battle hands down), but a defensive simulation, which is to rob power of its own secret (precisely that it doesn't exist) and so to leave it defenseless before its own enormity.

We should remember that power revolves around a secret monstrosity, and that to elevate someone to power is to plunge that person into the difficult exercise, always on the verge of ridiculousness, of privilege without any counterpart. He can manage the situation only through ambiguity and duplicity. If you end all uncertainty in the exercise of his rule you condemn him absolutely.

The very principle of Evil is in objective irony and in the strategies that emanate from it.

All epochs, philosophies, and metaphysics have formulated at some moment (manicheans, heretics, cathars, witches, but also Nervalians, Jarryites, Lautreamontists) the hypothesis of the derisiveness and the fundamental unreality of the world, that is to say,

really of a Principle of Evil, and they have always been persecuted and burned for this, the ultimate sin.

The unreality of the world and its corollary, the omnipotence of thought, were rigorously conceived only by societies that were missing the real (rather than by societies without history or writing). All mythologies, all dawning religions have lived by a violent denial of the real, a violent defiance of existence. And all that denies and defies the real is certainly the closer for it to making a world out of thought alone.

We've made irony a Mephistophelian form, but it is only what filters all things and saves them from confusion. It filters words, spirits, bodies, concepts, and pleasures and protects them from amorous promiscuity or coagulation. It plays from one form to another, in anamorphosis, and it plays from one species to another, in metamorphosis—and thus the copulation of humans and gods in the Greek myths is ironic. The difference between gods and humans, and between humans and beasts, is a seductive philter. When like couple with like, everything becomes obscene. The necessity of irony, like that of pleasure, is part of the necessity of Evil.

The Evil Genie of the Object

By the beginning of the twentieth century science recognized that any means of microscopic observation provokes such an alteration in the object that knowledge of it becomes imperiled. This is already a revolution because the conventional hypothesis of an objective reality and science is thereby abandoned, but the principle of experimentation itself was left intact. What was at stake was only certainty, and what was established in its place was a new convention, that of

uncertainty. The results became relative to the functioning of science itself as a medium—but this relativization somehow testifies to a supreme pride: "My certainty stops at the reading of the instruments," says a microphysicist. Or again: "Is the plate on which this particle of light stops not in fact its 'cause'? Can we really speak of the photon before (or after) having captured it on a screen or photographic plate?" In the human sciences the equivalent, intuited but never analyzed for its ultimate consequences, is the presupposition and induction of any possible response by the question itself, and therefore the vanity of analysis and interpretation (many, of course, are not bothered by such scruples).

This is, however, only a limited revolution, in the sense that no other hypothesis is entertained than that of an altered object, submitted to the violence of the means of observation without the possibility of response (except by attributing this to the insoluble problem of our inability, like Orpheus' Eurydice, to summon an object without making it disappear), or else an object condemned to total simulation, that is to say, projected into the aleatory form of models.

The hypothesis is never entertained, beyond an object's being distorted, of its active reply to the fact of being questioned, solicited, violated.

Perhaps unhappy with being alienated by observation, the object is fooling us? Perhaps it's inverting its own answers, and not only those that are solicited? Possibly it has no desire at all to be analyzed and observed, and taking this process for a challenge (which it is) it's answering with a challenge. We sense this victorious ruse of the analyzed object very definitely in the so-called human sciences (when we prefer not to forget it). There we can already register a point of no return, where not only every position of the analytical subject is

stricken with relativity and uncertainty, but where supremacy is completely inverted: today the analyzed object triumphs everywhere, by its very position as object, over the subject of analysis. It escapes the analyst everywhere, pushing him back to his indeterminable position of subject. By its complexity it not only overflows, but also annuls the questions that the other can ask of it. In the reversibility even natural processes baffle all solicitation (reversibility is the absolute weapon against the determination, of whatever kind, that one tries to impose on phenomena, but it does not spare indeterminacy, either, for reversibility is not a matter of chance, but would rather be a kind of perfectly inverted and simultaneous determination, or perverse counter determination). Pushed into retreat by analysis, the objects become reversible, just like appearance; pushed into retreat by meaning, they metamorphose. The subject of analysis has become fragile everywhere, and this revenge of the object has only just begun. It is itself part of a general reversibility.

Worse: perhaps the subject will see itself one day seduced by its object (which is quite natural), and it will become once more the prey of appearance—which is by far the best thing that can happen to it, to it and to science.

This kind of reversibility, this turning of knowledge into an enigmatic duel between the subject and the object, this form readable, until the present, in the sphere of language: physicists themselves sense it at the limits of the "exact sciences" of matter.

Measurements made on a particle do not allow us to say what would happen with another particle produced under the same conditions. A measurement made on a particle, a photon for example, disturbs the experimental apparatus to such a degree that another particle separated from the first by an infinite distance, equal on our scale to several light years, instantly produces an echo of this movement.

"A measurement propagates its long-range effects at a speed greater than that of light. The photons awaken each other, send information back to the light source, and think up ways to avoid the disturbance caused by the system of observation. The photons communicate: it's fantastic. And to do so it seems that they employ instantaneous interactions at a distance—beyond the limit of the speed of light. Energy coming from the future could modify the present state of the system."

How to resist the faster-than-light irony of these photons with their ultra-rapid secret service, defying any analytic apparatus? At all events this hypothesis of an active and refractory response of a non-inertia of "matter," an irreducible antagonism, and to tell it like it is, a duel-to-the-death between the subject, whoever he may be, as he has been hypostatized in analysis, and the object, whatever it might be, which this subject claims to subordinate to his calculations and manipulations—this hypothesis is fascinating. When you think about it, it is fantastically obvious. It is the ("scientific") hypothesis of the dead objectivity of the universe that is implausible. If one wishes to be a materialist, one should by no means attribute to matter this inertia and passivity, but instead a genie, even an evil one, able to undo all attempts to subjugate him.

Until now reversibility has in effect remained metaphysical. ("If the universe can be explained as an effect of a cause, it is naturally because cause and effect cannot be considered as equivalent and interchangeable terms. Just as a mixture of water and ink cannot in the end be redivided into two distinct liquids... every physical phenomenon remains subordinate to the irreversibility of the chain of cause and effect.") But it may now be in the process of disturbing the physical order and shaking it to its very foundations.

With it disappears the rational principle that prevents the effect from turning back on the cause to cancel it out; it prevents the effect from being the cancellation of the cause or prevents there never having been causes, but a pure and simple chain of effects. Reversibility kills any determinist (or indeterminist) principle of causality in ovum, in the egg. And when I say "in the egg" I mean it in the sense of the riddle of the chicken and the egg—which comes first?—the famous aporia of causal linkage; even the causal order does not escape parodic circularity, which is somehow the revenge of the reversible order.

Stories of reversibility are always the funniest, like the one about the rat and the psychologist: the rat tells about how he ended up by perfectly conditioning the psychologist to give him a piece of bread every time he lifted the gate of his cage. Based on this story you could imagine, on the level of scientific observation, that the experiment would have been faked—not involuntarily altered by the observer, but faked by the object, with the purpose of amusement or vengeance (as in the unintelligible trajectories of particles), or better yet: that the object only pretends to obey the laws of physics because it gives so much pleasure to the observer.

Such would be the pataphysics (the science of imaginary solutions) that lies in wait for all physics at its inadmissible limits.

Anticipate the desire of the other, reflect his demand like a mirror, satisfy it in advance: we can scarcely imagine what power of deception and absorption, entrapment and diversion—in a word, of subtle revenge—there is in this instantaneous seduction. Likewise the manner in which the masses become blurred as reality on the horizon of simulated systems of capture, such as polls or the photographic plates for particles; or else, the way these selfsame events

hide behind the screen of media and television. For it is true that events, like particles, have no probable existence beyond the deflecting screen—no longer a reflecting one, like a mirror. The mirror was the place of imaginary reproduction of the subject, the screen (by which I mean networks, circuits, perforated tape, magnetic tape, simulation models, all systems of recording and control, all the surfaces of inscription) is rightfully the place of its disappearance. The light from a television, it has been pointed out, is endogenous; it comes from within and reflects nothing. Everything happens entirely as if the screen itself were the cause and origin of the phenomena that appear there, so serious are the consequences of the current sophistication of the systems of "objective" capture that they have annihilated the very objectivity of their processes.

The other, the object, disappears on the horizons of science. The event, the meaning, disappears on the horizons of the media.

But one may see that the disappearance itself can also be a strategy—not a necessary consequence of the information system, but a strategy proper to the object, for which the monitor's screen would serve somehow as a screen of disappearance.

To this cathodic recording surface the individual or the masses reply by a parodic behavior of disappearance. What are they, and what do they do behind this screen? They make themselves into an impenetrable and unintelligible surface, which is a way of fading. They eclipse themselves, they melt into the shallow screen, in such a way that their reality, like that of particles of matter, can be radically cast into doubt without affecting the probabilistic analysis of their behavior. In "reality," behind this "objective" fortification of networks and models which think they capture them, and where a whole population of investigators, analysts, scientists, observers (as well as mediaticians and politicians) is in motion, there passes a

whole wave of derision, reversion, and parody which is the active exploitation, the parodic set-up by the object itself of its own method of disappearance!

The media make the event, the object, the referent, disappear. But perhaps they only serve as support for a strategy of disappearance which would be that of the object itself?

The masses destroy and eclipse the individual. But perhaps for the individual they represent the long dreamed of occasion to disappear?

The media provide no response. But perhaps they are only the surface which the masses take advantage of to remain silent?

It might still be a matter of seduction, but exactly of the opposite kind—no longer the subversion of the masses by the media, but instead the subversion of the media by the masses, in their strategy of disappearance on the horizon of the media.

Just as the observation of a particle under given conditions does not allow us to draw any conclusions as to the behavior of another particle under these same conditions, so everything happens as if individuals and masses only comply so well with analytical models and polls to make them more indeterminate. Polls are indeterminite; this is their charm, so to speak, and they are charming because they are screens behind which the object has disappeared to such a degree that we can no longer make decisive statements about its causal existence, nor about the effective consequences of the models. This results in a justified suspicion or a general casualness regarding the value of polls, a kind of spontaneous "verdict of simulation," a verdict of incredulity and mistrust, which today extends to everything that is delivered to us via the media and information, and even science. We record everything, but we don't believe it, because we have become screens ourselves, and who can ask of a

screen to believe what it records? To simulation we reply by simulation; we have ourselves become systems of simulation. There are people today (the polls tell us so!) who don't even believe in the space shuttle. Here it is no longer a matter of philosophical doubt as to being and appearance, but a profound indifference to the reality principle as an effect of the loss of all illusion. All the old structures of knowledge, the concept, the scene, the mirror, attempt to create illusions, and thus they emphasize a truthful projection of the world. Electronic surfaces, on the other hand, are without illusion; they offer only the inconclusive.

It is this that makes good old critical and ironical judgement no longer possible. We used to be able to say about something, in order to unmask its rhetoric: "It's only literature!"; to reveal its artificiality: "It's only theatre!"; to denounce its mystification: "It's only a movie!" But we cannot say, in order to denounce anything: "It's only TV!" Because there is no longer a universe of reference. Because illusion is dead or because it is total. The day we will be able to say: "It's only TV! It's only information!" will be the day when everything will have changed.

Perhaps it will be when we have had more experiences like that of *Capricorn One*, where an exhibition to Mars, essential to American prestige, and prevented at the last moment, is instead wholly staged in TV studios in the desert, with simultaneous, life-like retransmission on screens all over the world. Why not? Simulation is no crime. Credibility is only a special effect, and even space, cosmic space, is for us only a shallow screen. Spatial effect becomes special effect.

A screen, whether TV or survey, represents nothing. It's a mistake to think that polls can be representative of anything at all, as a word can be of a thing, an image of a reality, or a face of inner feelings. The

electoral system can still claim that it is representative, because it stages a relative dialectic of representatives and the represented. But this isn't the case here. The model, unlike the concept, is not of the order of representation, but of simulation (virtual, aleatory, dissuasive and nonreferential), and it is a total misunderstanding to apply to it the logic of a representative system. From this arise all the misunderstandings and the unending useless polemics on their worth and "good use" (as in the ad: Séguéla / Mitterrand: Who has brought in socialism?) Absurd and insoluble: there is a confusion of two heterogeneous systems whose postulates cannot be translated from one into the other. An illogical projection of an operational, statistical, international simulatory system on a traditional value system, on a system of representation, will and opinion. The misunderstanding is enough to crystallize an entire moral philosophy of information.

However you perfect them, polls will never represent anything, because the rule of their game is representation. Their logic is perfectly attuned to objectivity, but at the end of the process there is no object: this is therefore objectivity in its pure state. Marvelous mockery! This is true for all of the media: when you're in simulation, that is, in the neither true nor false, all moral science is perfectly hypocritical. It is equally implausible to speak of an ethics of polls (or of the media) as of an ethics of fashion—impossible to find as soon as the domain of style is no longer to play on an opposition between beautiful and ugly, but on the indistinguishability of the two and the undifferentiatied whirling of the two in a generalized effect of seduction.

Furthermore, even supposing that one could perfect polls to the point of total reliability and could credit the information with some degree of truth, that would be the beginning of the drama.

For this ideal snapshot that you would obtain from the social would amount to absolving us from its dramatic feasibility. This truth would mean that the social had been vanquished by the technique of the social. Which, in fact, is exactly the diabolical objective of all simulation. It is there that the soft technology of extermination begins. This is why the real problem begins with the hypothesis of effective functioning, for what is critical is not the distortions of truth inside the machine, but the distortion of everything real by the objective reliability of this machine.

How sweet was information in the days of truth! How sweet was science in the days of the real! How sweet was objectivity in the time of the object! How sweet was alienation in the days of the subject! Etc.

We should therefore believe neither those who exalt the beneficial use of the media nor those who complain about manipulation, for the simple reason that there is nothing in common between a system of meaning and a system of simulation. Advertising and polls are quite incapable of alienating the will or the opinion of anyone, for the simple reason that they don't operate in this space-time of will and representation where judgement is formed. For the same reason it's quite impossible for them to shed any light on anyone's will or opinion, since they are foreign to the scene of opinion, at once theatrical and representative, that constituted the very scene of politics. So we may rest assured that they cannot possibly destroy this scene. But let us not have any illusions about them either: they have nothing to teach us.

It's this dehiscence or hiatus between the two systems that today plunges us collectively into a state of hebetude and uncertainty as to our own will to choice, opinion, and judgment. We will never know if an advertisement or a public Opinion poll has really influenced

anyone's will or not, but we will never know what would have happened if there had been no advertising or surveys, either. The screen that media (information) weaves around us is a screen of total uncertainty. And of totally new uncertainty—since it is no longer the kind that results from a lack of information, but one that comes from information itself, from an excess of information. Unlike traditional uncertainty, which could always be resolved, this one is irreparable and, therefore, will never be lifted.

Such is our destiny as the polled, the informed, the measured: confronted with the anticipated verification of our behavior, absorbed by this permanent refraction, we are never again confronted with our own will or with that of the other. We are no longer even alienated, for there is no more other; the scene of the other, like that of the social and political, has disappeared. Each individual is forced into the undivided coherence of statistics. Extraversion without appeal, like uncertainty.

The obscenity proper to polls comes not from their betrayal of the secret of an opinion, the intimacy of a desire, or from the violation of some imprescriptable right of the private person (if there really was a secret, no one, not even its keeper, would be able to betray it), but from statistical exhibitionism, from this continual voyeurism of the group spying on itself. At every moment it must know what it wants, what it thinks, it must see itself in numbers on the video screen, decipher its temperature curves, in a sort of hypochondriacal mania—the social is obsessed with itself, it becomes its own vice, its own perversion. Overinformed, it becomes obese with itself.

The masses also are made of this useless gluttony of information that claims to enlighten when it only encumbers space and cancels itself out in silent equivalence.

No one can do anything about this circularity of the masses and information. The two phenomena fit each other: the masses have no opinions, nor does information inform them: one and the other continue monstrously to feed each other the speed of the rotation of information increasing the weight of the masses, but not at all their level of consciousness.

All of this would be dramatic if there was an objective truth of needs, an objective truth of public opinion. The influence of advertising, polls, media, information (the pollution of the pollution of consciousness), all this would be dramatic if we were certain that there existed a human nature and social essence somewhere with their own values and will. For that would pose the eternal problem of alienation.

We need to go even farther and revise all utopias tied to information theory. Things have gone very rapidly since the beginning of the century. Today it is information itself, the excess of information that is pushing us along the road of a general involution.

Today knowledge about an event is only the degraded form of this event. A lower form of the energy of the event. Likewise knowledge about opinion is only a degraded form of this opinion.

When knowledge, through its models, anticipates the event, in other words, when the event (or opinion) is preceded by its degraded form (or its simulated form) its energy is entirely absorbed into the void.

The total predictability of the universe, such as the one science aspires to, constitutes in this sense the most degraded form of the universe. Could it be that the counterfinality of science and information is in a position to forestall the end of the world by a

systematic though unconscious degradation, purposely lost in an inverted utopia, that of saving the world through information (though there seem also to have surfaced some flickerings of bad conscience)?

Assembling the maximum amount of information on the universe can put an end to the world. As in the fable of the nine billion names of God: when, thanks to the computer, we've been able to decline them all, the world will end, and the stars will go out.

Information would thus be the only way of putting an end to the universe, which would never run down by itself.

But there is perhaps another, more joyous way of seeing things, and of finally substituting for eternally critical theory an ironic theory.

If in fact you consider the inconclusiveness of polls, the uncertainty of their effects, close to divinatory meteorology, if you consider that they say whatever they want, that everyone already knows it, doesn't believe, does nothing with them (but always demands ever more of them), their capability of simultaneously validating contradictory tendencies, or, when the results are unacceptable, piously falsifying their objectivity (as with polls on the death penalty and immigration), but especially the perpetual denial we oppose to them, even and particularly if they "verify" our behavior—no one accepts being "verified," nor coinciding with his probabilities, and no one can live in the anticipated image of what he is, nor in the exorbitant mirror of his statistical truth. (An amusing example of this stubborn denial of statistical chance in the very act of its application: "if it makes you feel safer, the Paris Underground Transport Authority has calculated that if fifty people take the subway twice a day for sixty years only one will be attacked. There is no reason it should be you!"). Just as the gambler doesn't

believe in chance but only in Luck (with a capital letter: Grace, not probability), likewise no one gives up on destiny; this is why no one believes in statistics.

At all events the greatness of statistics is not in their objectivity but in their involuntary humor.

And that's how one has to take things, in terms of their humor. To the basic casualness with which the polls treat the social and social phenomena corresponds a similar casualness in their reading and use. And to the seriousness with which they claim to treat the social there is a reply by way of the ferocious irony of their very failure and of all those aleatory distortions. There is something like a humorous providence that sees to the derailing of this all too smoothly running machine, and that arranges for it to trap itself in the mirror of objectivity. A sort of absolute weapon emerges from the depths of the social (?), that of a radical dissimulation in response to the simulation of response staged by polls and statistics. This is what one could call the evil genie of the object, the evil genie of the masses, eternally blocking the truth of the social and its analyses.

The object is never innocent, it exists and takes revenge. The flawed refraction of the luminous ray of information on the "matter" of the social is neither an accident nor an imperfection in the system, it comes from the genie of the object, from an offensive resistance of the social to its investigation, and which takes the form of an occult duel between master pollsters and the polled, between the masses and the political class, etc. In this duel all the naiveté comes from the side of the manipulators, for whom it is assumed that one can at all events oblige the object to deliver its truth for its own good. If it doesn't understand the questions, if it answers incorrectly, if it answers too well, if it asks questions itself, it is understood that this

is only a form of maladjustment to the analytical set-up. Science, through some fantastic aberration, believes itself always assured of the complicity of its object. It underestimates its vices, derision, nonchalance, false complicity, anything that could make the process ironic, anything that feeds the original strategy, which may even be victorious, of the object as opposed to that of the subject.

If you understand the polls in this sense, you see that they achieve exactly the opposite effects of their stated objective. They function as a spectacle of information (information is like revolution: people care only for its spectacle), therefore as a mockery of information and of the political class.

The involuntary humor of polls (and the sly pleasure that we take in this "scientific" phantasmagoria) comes from the fact that they erase all political credibility.

Who are these people who need polls in order to decide, for whom testing takes the place of strategy? They are dispossessed of any initiative, and caught in the trap of the medium to which they entrust their power. All media conceal this dazzling trap: they annihilate the political function of a society and thus satisfy the ironic unconscious of the masses, whose deep instinct remains the symbolic murder of the political class.

The people, who have always served as alibi for the representative system, indemnified itself by allowing itself the spectacle of a political scene. Today it takes revenge through the spectacle of its own disappearance. We think we're polling it, while day after day it enjoys the home movies of the fluctuations of its own opinion in its reading of the polls.

It is only in one sense that the people believe in polls, that we all believe in them, as a game of predicting an evil outcome, a bet of double or nothing on a gaming table. A game of the equal finality

of all tendencies, effects of truth, and of the circularity of questions and answers, etc. Are we perhaps all thereby inaugurating a collective form of ironic existence that, in its great wisdom, no longer questions its own grounds and can only accept its own capture in the spectacle of its disappearance?

The best example of this is the masses. They are not at all an object of oppression and manipulation. The masses do not have to be liberated and, in any case, they cannot be. All their (transpolitical) power is in being there as pure object—that is to say, in opposing their silence and their absence of desire against any political wish to make them speak. Everyone tries to seduce, solicit, invest them. Atonal, amorphous, abysmal, they exercise a passive and opaque sovereignty; they say nothing, but subtly, perhaps like animals in their brute indifference (although the masses are "essentially" rather hormonic or endocrinic—that is, antibodies), they neutralize the whole political scene and discourse. If these seem today so empty, if no stakes, no project can still mobilize a political scene that remains committed to artificial theatrics and the effects of useless powers this is due to the massive obscenity of this enormous silent antibody and to the retractility of this unnameable "thing" that has the absurd bestial power of suction and absorption of the monsters of science fiction: which in effect feeds its inertia on all the accelerating energy of the system with the myriad pieces of information that the system secretes to try to exorcize this inertia and absence.

Nothing can be done about it. The masses are pure object, that which has vanished from the horizon of the subject, that which has disappeared from the horizon of history—just as silence is the

pure object that disappears from the horizon of the word, and the secret is the pure object that disappears every day from the horizon of meaning.

The stupefying power of the mass-as-object. The masses incarnate the pure object of the political, that is to say, the ideal of an absolute power, a power of death over the social body, they are the incarnation of a terrifying dream of power—and at the same time they are its empty object, its null and void materialization, the radical antibody, inaccessible to all political subjectivity and therefore perfectly useless and dangerous. The political scenario is reversed: it's no longer power that pulls the masses in its wake; it's the masses that drag power down to its fall. Likewise, political men, in the mood, as it were, for seducing the masses, would do well to ask themselves if they are not going to be cannibalized in return and if they won't have to pay for their simulacrum of power by being devoured, like the male by the female after copulation.

Anything that was once constituted as an object by a subject represents for the latter a virtual death threat. No more than the slave accepts his servitude does the object accept its compulsory objectivity. The subject can attain only an imaginary mastery of it, ephemeral at all events, but will not escape this insurrection of the object—a silent revolution, but the only one left now.

This revolution will not be symbolic, dazzling, and subjective, but obscure and ironic. It won't be dialectical, it will be fatal. Against the seduction of every object stripped of its sense, against the possibility for any object to be an object of seduction and dread, any strategy will be a good one.

All information, the incessant activity of the media, the mass of messages, aims only at conjuring away this mortal contamination.

Informational, "mediatic," communicated energy is expended today only for the purpose of tearing a bit of sense, a bit of life from the cold and indifferent antibody, from this silent mass whose attraction grows ever greater. We need to coalesce all the centrifugal forces to escape from this force of inertia. From now on, information can at bottom have no other meaning than this.

There is and always will be a major difficulty in analyzing media and the sphere of information through the traditional categories of the philosophy of the subject: will, representation, choice, liberty, knowledge and desire. For it is obvious that they are absolutely contradicted there and that the subject is totally alienated in its sovereignty. There's a basic contradiction between this sphere, that of information, and the moral law that still masters us and that says: Thou shalt know thy will and desire. Looking at it this way, neither the media nor technology and science teach us anything; rather they have pushed back the limits of will and representation, shuffled the cards and taken from each subject the disposition of his own body, his desire and his own choice and liberty.

But this idea of alienation was never more than an ideal perspective of philosophy for the use of the hypothetical masses. It never expressed anything but the alienation of the philosopher himself, that is, of one who thinks he is other. Hegel is very clear about this in his judgement on the *Aufklärer*,* on the Enlightenment philosopher who denounces the "reign of error" and scorns it.

It's enough to reverse this idea—the masses alienated by the media—to appreciate how much the whole media universe, possibly even the entire technical world, results from a secret strategy of the supposedly alienated masses, from a secret form of denial of will, from an involuntary challenge to all that was asked of the

subject by philosophy and morals, that is, a challenge to any exercise of will, knowledge, or liberty.

This would be no longer a matter of revolution but of a massive *devolution*, of a massive delegation of power and responsibility either to political and intellectual systems or technical and operational ones. Massive *de-volition* and withdrawal of the will. Not by way of alienation or voluntary servitude (the mystery of which remains total since Boethius, as soon as the problem is posed in terms of the subject's consent to his own slavery, in terms of renunciation of the subject of his own being; but does he really have one?)—but by another sovereign philosophy of the involuntary, of the "un-will," by a kind of antimetaphysics whose secret is that the masses (or Man) know with certainty that they don't need to pass judgment on themselves or on the world, that they don't have to will, know, or desire. The deepest wish is perhaps the wish to hand one's desire over to another. A strategy of disillusion with their "own" desire, disillusion with their own will, a strategy of ironical investment, of expulsion toward others of philosophical, moral and political injunction.

That's what the professionals are there for, the tenants and lieutenants of the concept and of desire. All of advertising and information, all of the entire political class are there to tell us what we want, to tell the masses what they want—and we basically assume this massive transfer of responsibility with joy, because it is simply neither obvious, nor of great interest to know, to will, to have faculties or desires. Who has imposed these upon us but the philosophers?

Choice is an ignoble imperative. Any philosophy that assigns man the exercise of his will can only plunge him into despair. For if, on the one hand, nothing is more flattering for consciousness than to know what it wants, on the other hand, nothing is more seductive for the other consciousness (the unconscious?), that obscure

and vital one which makes happiness depend on the despair of the will, than *not* to know what it wants, to be at the same time delivered from choice and diverted from its own objective will. It makes more sense to give in to some insignificant whim than to be suspended on your own will or on the necessity of choosing. Brummel had a servant for that. Before a splendid landscape constellated with lakes, he turns to his valet to ask: "Which lake do I prefer?"

Not only do people surely not want to be told what they want, but they don't even want to know it, and it's not even certain that they want to want. Faced with such a solicitation, it is their evil genie that whispers in their ear to leave it to the advertising or information systems to "persuade" them, to make a choice for them (or to leave to politicians the job of making things better), just like Brummel with his servant.... So who is being trapped?

The masses know that they know nothing and they have no desire to know. The masses know they are powerless, and they don't want power. We reproach them vigorously for these signs of stupidity and passivity. But they're not that at all: the masses are very snobbish; they act like Brummel and sovereignly delegate the faculty of choice to someone else, in a sort of game of irresponsibility, ironic challenge, sovereign lack of will, or secret ruse. All mediators (political, intellectual, heirs to the philosophers of the Enlightenment in their contempt of the masses) are only good basically for this: to administer by delegation, by proxy, this tedious business of power and will, to relieve the masses of this transendence for their greater pleasure, and then to reward them with the spectacle of it. Vicarious*, to recall Veblen's concept, the status of these "privileged" classes, whose will would have been diverted, without their realizing it, toward the secret finalities of the very masses they despise.

We live all of this, subjectively, in a paradoxical mode, since these masses coexist in us with the intelligent and voluntary being who condemns and scorns them. No one knows what the true opposite of consciousness is—unless it be this unconscious of repression that psychoanalysis has imposed upon us. But perhaps our true unconscious is in this ironic power of withdrawal, of nondesire, nonknowledge, silence, absorption then expulsion of all powers, wills, of all enlightenment and depths of meaning, because of an insistance which is thereby bathed in the light of a ridiculous looking halo. Our unconscious might not be composed of desires properly sworn to the sad destiny of repression. It might not even be repressed at all. It would instead be made up out of what's left after this joyous expulsion of all encumbering superstructures of being and will.

We always had a sad vision of the masses (alienated), a sad vision of the unconscious (repressed). Upon our entire philosophy lies the heavy weight of these sad correlations. If only for the sake of change, it would be interesting to conceive of the masses, the object-masses, as possessing a delusive, illusive, allusive strategy, corresponding to an unconscious that is finally ironic, joyous and seductive.

The Evil Genie of Passion

About love you can say anything, but you don't know what to say. Love exists, and that's about it. You love your mother, God, nature, a woman, little birds and flowers: the term, become the leitmotif of our deeply sentimental culture, is the most strongly emotional one in our language, but also the most diffuse, vague, and unintelligible. Compared to the crystalline state of seduction, love is a liquid, even a gaseous solution. Everything is soluble in love, by love. The

resolution, the dissolution of all things into a passionate harmony or a subconjugal libido, love is a kind of universal answer, the hope of an ideal conviviality, the virtuality of a world of relations in fusion. Hate separates; love unites. Eros is what binds, couples, conjugates, foments associations, projections, identifications. "Love one another." Who ever could have said: "Seduce one another"?

I prefer the form of seduction, which maintains the hypothesis of an enigmatic duel, of a violent solicitation or attraction, which is a form not of response, but of challenge, of a secret distance and perpetual antagonism that allows the playing out of a rule—I prefer this form and its pathos of distance to that of love and its pathetic rapprochment. I prefer the dual form of seduction to the universal form of love. (Heraclitus: it is the antagonism of elements, beings and gods which comprises the game of becoming, not a universal solvent, or an amorous con-fusion—here the gods affront and seduce each other; and love, when it comes along with Christianity as the principle of creation, will put an end to this great game.)

It is possible to speak of seduction because it is a dual and intelligible form, while love is a universal and unintelligible one. It may be even that only seduction is truly a form, while love is only the diffuse metaphor of the fall of beings into individuation and the compensatory invention of a universal energy that would incline these beings to each other. By what providential effect, by what miracle of will, by what stroke of theatre would beings have been destined to love one another, by what crazy imagination could one conceive that "I love you," that people love each other, that we love each other? Here we are dealing with the wildest projection of a universal principle of attraction and equilibrium, pure phantasmagoria. Subjective phantasmagoria, modern passion *par excellence*.

Where there is no longer game or rule, a law and affect must be invented, a mode of universal effusion, a form of salvation to overcome the separation of souls and bodies, to put an end to hatred, predestination, discrimination, fate: this is our gospel of sentimentality, putting an end to seduction as fate.

This elevation of love to the highest level of divine right, to an ethical form of universal fulfillment (love still serves everywhere as moral justification for happiness), has thrown seduction into a vaguely immoral, vaguely perverse zone, a form of playing preliminary to love. Love remains the only serious or sublime finality, the only possible absolution for an impossible universe. Any concern with providing seduction with other titles of nobility runs up against mechanisms of sublimation and idealization which are those of love.

Seduction is linked not to affects but to the fragility of appearance; it has no model and seeks no form of salvation—it is therefore immoral. It obeys no morality of exchange; it is based rather on the pact, the challenge and the alliance, which are not universal and natural forms, but artificial and initiatory ones. It is therefore frankly perverse.

The matter is complicated further by the play of terminology. Neither seduction nor love being precise notions (they have no place in the great conceptual systems, nor in psychoanalysis), they can easily switch or be confused. So if one takes seduction to be a challenge, a game where the bets are never down, an uninterrupted ritual exchange, an infinite escalation of the ante, a secret complicity, etc., one can always answer: "But so defined, wouldn't seduction be simply love?"

We can even invert the relation and make love something more decisive, more challenging than seduction. Love is fulfillment only

if you think of it, say, narcissistically: I love the other because he is like me, therefore I duplicate myself—I love the other because he is my opposite; therefore I complete myself. However, one can conceive of love as gratuitous, as an élan towards the other that expects no answer, as a challenge that incites the other to love me more than I love him, therefore as a perpetually higher bid, while one can also take seduction as endgame, a tactic that attempts to manipulate the other to one's own ends.

There's no argument possible against turning these terms around. Seduction and love may exchange their sublime and most vulgar meanings, which makes it almost impossible to talk about them. All the more so in that we are caught up today in a revival of the discourse of love, a reactivation of the affect by *ennui* and saturation. An effect of amorous simulation. Mad love, love as passion, are quite dead as heroic and sublime movements. What is at stake today is a demand for love, affect, passion, at a time when the need for it is cruelly felt. A whole generation has gone through the liberation of desire and of pleasure, a whole generation that is tired of sex and which reinvents love as an affective or passionate supplement. Other generations, romantic or postromantic, have lived it as passion, destiny. Our own is only neoromantic.

After so much sexual bathos, here we have the neopathos of the amorous relation. After the libidinal and instinctual, here is the neoromanticism of passion. But it is no longer a matter of predestination or fatality, it's only a matter of liberating one potentiality among others and, after such a long phase of "repressive desublimation," as Marcuse would say, of clearing the way for a progressive resublimation.

Sex—like the relations of production—was too simple. It is never too late to go beyond Marx and Freud.

There is, then, a kind of love that is only the froth of a culture of sex, and we shouldn't have too many illusions about this new apparatus of ambiance. Forms of simulation can be recognized by the fact that nothing sets them off from each other; sex, love, seduction, perversion, porn, can all coexist on one and the same libidinal band, without exclusivity, with the blessing of psychoanalysis. A stereophonic concerto: one adds love, passion, seduction to sex in exactly the same way psychosociology and "teamwork" were added to the assembly line.

This situation is interesting as a symptom of the exhaustion of a whole obscene constellation of sexuality (obscene not because of sex itself, but because of the obscenity of truth when it is spoken and revealed). We've come to the end of the cycle of sexuality as truth. This makes possible once again a reversion to forms whose profile and charm found themselves eclipsed by the hegemonic perspective of sex.

To find again a kind of distinction, a hierarchy for all these figures—seduction, love, passion, desire, sex—is without doubt an absurd wager, but it's the only one we have left.

In our culture, seduction has known a kind of golden age, which lasted from the Renaissance to the 18th century: it is then—like politeness, or court manners—a conventional, aristocratic form, a game of strategy without any special connection to love. The latter has for us tonalities that are different, ulterior, romantic and romanesque: no longer a game or a ceremony, it is a passion, a discourse. What sweeps you away is the force of desire; what calls you is death. It has nothing to do with seduction. Love, of course, knew courtly forms, in the Mediterranean culture of the thirteenth century. But the meaning it has for us was fashioned essentially at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth,

counter to the superficial game of seduction. There occurs a rupture between a form of dual game of strategic illusion and a new individual finality of fulfillment of desire, whose great advent is that of the constellation of desire, whether sexual or psychic, of the individual, or political desire of the masses. Whatever the case may be with this desire and its "liberation," it no longer has anything to do with the aristocratic game of challenge and seduction.

Another thing: seduction is pagan, love is Christian. It is Christ who begins wanting to love and to be loved. Religion becomes affect, suffering and love, none of which the archaic and ancient mythologies cared about in the least; for them the world's sovereignty resides in the regulated play of signs and appearances, in ceremonials of metamorphosis, and therefore in acts of seduction *par excellence*. No affect in any of this, no love, nothing like a great divine or natural flux, no need of psychology, either, of this subjective interiority where the myth of love will flower.[4] Only the ritual exists, and ritual is in the realm of seduction. Love is born from the destruction of ritual forms, from their liberation. Its energy is an energy of the dissolution of these forms, including the magic rituals of the seduction of the world (which continued in Christian heresies, in the form of Manichean or revolutionary denials of the real world). Cruel, rigorous forms of the sign in its pure functioning, opposed

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4. But if you take seduction in the Christian sense, then everything changes: seduction begins with Christianity; it is the diabolical curse that comes to fracture the divine order—or else it is Christ himself, according to Nietzsche, Christ come to seduce people to his own person, come to pervert them with psychology and love? Conversely, there is no seduction in Greece, where love is homosexual and pedagogic—a virtue, not a passion.

to the reality of the world, a mastery of pure appearances, without psychology, without affect, without love. The maximal intensity of these cultures—from which love and its entire metaphysics of salvation issue as if by decomposition—is an effusion of forms until then secret, initiatory, jealous of themselves, intensive, whereas love is a proselytizing energy, radiant and extensive—exoteric, whereas ritual is esoteric. Love is expression, heat, avowal, communication, and therefore a passage of energy from a potential, concentrated state to one that is liberated, radiating, caloric, and thereby endemic and degraded. It will therefore be the ferment of a popular and democratic religion, as opposed to hierarchical and aristocratic orders governed by rule.

Love is the end of the rule and the beginning of the law. It is the beginning of a disorder where things will be ordered according to feeling, affective investment, that is to say, a heavy substance, heavy with meaning, and no longer according to the play of signs—a lighter substance, more ductile, more superficial. God is going to love his own, which he had never done, and the world will no longer be a game. We have inherited all of this—and love is only the effect of this dissolution of rules and of the energy liberated by this fusion. The form opposite to love would then be observance: wherever a rule and a game are reinvented, love disappears. Compared to the regulated and highly conventional intensities of the game or the ceremony, love is a system of freely circulating energy. It is therefore charged with a whole ideology of liberation and free circulation; it is the pathos of modernity.

The distinctive quality of a universal passion like love is that it is individual and that everyone finds himself alone in it. Seduction is dual: I cannot seduce if I am not already seduced, no one can seduce me if he is not already seduced. No one can play without

another—that is the basic rule—while I may love without being loved in return. I love without being loved, that's my problem. If I don't love you, that's your problem. If someone doesn't please me, that's his problem. This is why jealousy is like a natural dimension of love while it is foreign to seduction—the affective bond is never absolutely sure, whereas the pact of signs is without ambiguity and without appeal. Furthermore, to seduce someone is not to invest him, nor to absorb him psychologically; seduction does not know this territorial jealousy that goes by the name of love.

I am not saying that love is only jealousy, but that some well-tempered jealousy always enters into it, something exclusive, some subjective claim. Perhaps it even precedes love: a primordial passion, as with the Greek gods, who know neither love nor sentimentality but are already tremendously jealous of each other.

To love someone is to isolate him from the world, wipe out every trace of him, dispossess him of his shadow, drag him into a murderous future. It is to circle around the other like a dead star and absorb him into a black light. Everything is gambled on an exorbitant demand for the exclusivity of a human being, whoever it may be. This is doubtless what makes it a passion: its object is interiorized as an ideal end, and we know that the only ideal object is a dead one.

In comparison to seduction, love would be, then, a looser form, a more far-reaching solution and even a way of dissolution. But a pathetic dissolution, at least in its more elevated forms, those that have produced the novel, for instance. This pathetic relief is going to disappear in the later peripety, which is simply that of sexuality. The latter becomes only a relational style articulated on the "objective" difference between the sexes. Seduction is still ceremonial, love is still pathetic, but sexuality is no longer anything but relational. From one form to another, what is at stake in signs is eliminated in

favor of organic, energetic, and economic functioning, based on the smallest possible difference, that between the sexes.

It's a mystification, in effect, to think of sexual difference as original difference, the source of all other differences, which would be only metaphors for this one. This is to forget that from time immemorial men have produced greater differential intensities through artificial systems than from bodies and biology. At least they have never thought of "natural" differences as anything but a particular example of artificial ones. Literally, pure sexual difference is of no interest. (Yin and Yang are another thing: these are two metaphysical poles between which exist the tensions that organize the world.) In certain cultures the differences warrior/nonwarrior, brahmin/nonbrahmin mean a lot more than sexual difference: they produce more differential energy, they organize things with more rigor and complexity. In all cultures except our own, the distinction between dead and alive, noble and ignoble, initiated and noninitiated, is infinitely more significant than the distinction between the sexes. Sexuality signals, in fact, with its biological and pretentious evidence, the weakest and poorest difference, the one that's left over after all other differences have been lost.

Any naturalistic principle of differentiation is necessarily weaker, and is far from being able to support—as is the powerful artifice of signs—a meticulous arrangement, a ceremony of the world.

Seduction is the era of an aesthetic and ceremonial difference between the sexes.

Love (passion) is the era of a moral and affective sexual difference.

Sexuality is the era of psychological, biological and political difference between the sexes.

This is why seduction is more intelligible than love: because it operates at the level of a higher form, a dual form, a perfect

differential form. Sex, of all differential forms, is the one where difference matters least. As to love, it is found always occupying an intermediary place in the spectral parade of figures: from the limits of seduction to the borders of sex, it describes a universe which goes from a pure form of difference to an equally pure one of indifference—but it doesn't have its own form and, as such, it is indescribable. It is not the dual form of seduction that is mysterious, it is, rather, the individual figure of the subject tracked by his own desire or in quest of his own image.

Destiny is imposed on us with stunning irrefutability: but it is nondestiny that needs to be explained. This, too, is all we can really do with it: rationalize it. Because somehow, profoundly, as with love's banality, there's nothing to say about it.

Seduction is not mysterious; it is enigmatic. The enigma, like the secret, is not unintelligible.

It is, on the contrary, fully intelligible, but it cannot be said or revealed. Such is seduction: inexplicable evidence. Such is the game. At the heart of any game is a fundamental, secret rule, an enigma; nevertheless, the whole process is no mystery; nothing is more intelligible than a game in progress.

Love itself is charged with all the world's mystery, but it's not enigmatic. It is, on the contrary, heavy with meaning, being of the order, not of the enigmatic but of the solution. "The key to the enigma is love," or more brutally: "Sex is at the bottom of everything." (Miraculous truth, revealed in the 20th century, but why? Don't believe a word of it: the enigma remains entire and retains all its seductive power.)

From one figure to the other, from seduction to love, then to desire, sexuality, finally to pure and simple porno; the farther you

go, the closer you come to the lesser secret, the smaller enigma, towards avowal, expression, unveiling, liberation of the repressed; the closer you come to truth, in a word, which soon becomes, in the obscenity of our culture, the compulsory statement of truth, the forced confession, the obliged revelation... of what, moreover? Of nothing, exactly. There is nothing to reveal.

From where could there have originated the crazy idea of revealing the secret, exposing the bare substance, touching radical obscenity? That, in itself, is a utopia. There is no real, there never was a real. Seduction knows this, and preserves its enigma. All other forms, and love in particular, are gossipy and prolix. They say too much, they want to say too much. Love talks a lot, it's a discourse. It declares itself and culminates often in this declaration where it is at an end. Highly ambiguous act of language, almost indecent; these things aren't said; how can you say to someone "I love you"? They appear too fragile to be wrapped in an enunciation, unless that is the only life they really have, in which case they are no longer secret at all. These things live only in their silence, or on their denial: "I don't love you at all," or even "I won't see you anymore," phrases still weighted with the challenge and suspense of seduction, imminence of love, but which still maintain, by the grace of denial, a quality of game, a lightness of lure.

Happily, anyway, "I love you" does not mean what it says, and it should be understood otherwise—in the seductive mood (all verbs have a secret mood, beyond the indicative and imperative, the seductive). Seduction is a modality of all discourse, including the discourse of love (at least, let's hope so). Which means that it plays games with its enunciation and affects the other differently than stated. So with "I love you"; isn't it said not to tell you you're loved, but to seduce you? It is a proposition that oscillates on its two sides,

and which thereby retains the insoluble charm of appearances, of what is senseless and therefore useless to believe. Believing "I love you" puts an end to everything, including love, since that would be to accord meaning to that which has none.

This is a best-case scenario, when ambiguity still controls discourse. In the case of sexual demand, there is no longer a trace of ambiguity. Everything is meant, all is said, there is no secret demand, all is in its expression. If desire is really being avowed, then it would be enough to hear the words of confession, the play of appearances would be useless. Likewise, "I love you" then takes on another meaning; it is no longer seductive, it is no more than a desperate optative: "I demand to love you," "I demand that you love me."

We can agree with Lacan: there is no sexual rapport, there is no truth of sex. Either "I love you" and "I desire you" mean something else entirely—seduction—or they signify a demand for the love of desire, never love or sex in themselves. There's always a missed rendezvous, and sexuality, as Lacan has it, is the story of this missed meeting. But that isn't the last word, because the subtler spiral of seduction describes not the history but the game of the missed encounter, and also that other pleasure it knows how to soak from this charming and absurd difference that nature has put between the sexes.

And so what was challenge and seduction ends in solicitude. Seduce me, love me, make me come, pay attention to me. Characteristic and obsessional trait, that can go all the way to an almost fetal demand for love (the fetal strategies).

There has been, for the last two or three centuries in our culture, an overdetermination of all forms of love (including love of nature) through maternal love and the sentimentality that derives

from it. Seduction alone escapes this, because it is not a demand but a challenge; it opposes this overdetermination the way the duel is opposed to fusion.

That kind of love (maternal) is no more than a floating libido that is vented just about everywhere and tries desperately to invest its environment, according to an economy that is no longer that of passionate systems but that of subsystems of intensity—cold and dispassionate. Ecological libido, a product specific to our epoch, spread out everywhere in homeopathic and homeostatic doses, is the minimal differential of affect that is enough to fuel social and psychological demand. Floating, it can be drained, diverted, magnetized from one niche to another, according to the flow. It corresponds ideally to an order of manipulation.

And so the energy of dissolution of seduction passes into the passionate order of love, and ends up in the aleatory order of demand.

Fortunately, there is a backfire, which corrects all that I've just said about demand. For by responding in the terms in which the situation is posed—in which it pretends to be posed—one runs the risk of misunderstanding. Perhaps it is simply soliciting—in its very hysteria—being denied, being refused, being disappointed, seeking the reply that that's not how things really happen. Just as any other discourse is proferred only in the hope of being denied and exorcized, so the demand can, actually, be only toying with the confession of desire, the call to solicitude of another, in order to set a trap for him, to lure and therefore seduce him.

4

The Object and Its Destiny

The Supremacy of the Object

"Only the subject desires; only the object seduces."

We have always lived off the splendor of the subject and the poverty of the object. It is the subject that makes history, it's the subject that totalizes the world. Individual subject or collective subject, the subject of consciousness or of the unconscious, the ideal of all metaphysics is that of world subject; the object is only a detour on the royal road of subjectivity.

The fate of the object, to my knowledge, has been claimed by no one. It is not even intelligible as such: it is only the alienated, accursed part of the subject. The object is shamed, obscene, passive, prostituted, the incarnation of Evil, of pure alienation. A slave, its only glory would be to enter into a master-slave dialectic, where one can see the dawning of a new gospel, the promise of the object changing into a subject.

Who has ever sensed the foreboding of the particular and sovereign potency of the object? In our philosophy of desire, the subject retains an absolute privilege, since it is the subject that desires. But everything is inverted if one passes on to the thought of seduction. There, it's no longer the subject which desires, it's the object which seduces.

Everything comes from the object and everything returns to it, just as everything started with seduction, not with desire. The immemorial privilege of the subject is overthrown. For the subject is fragile and can only desire, whereas the object gets on very well even when desire is absent; the object seduces through the absence of desire; it plays on the other with the effect of desire, provoking or annuling it, exalting and deceiving it—precisely the power that we've wanted or preferred to forget.

Why privilege the position of the subject, why support this fiction of a will, a conscience, even of an unconscious for the subject? Because the subject has an economy and a history which is quite reassuring; it is the equilibrium betweeen a will and a world, a drive and an object, the balancing principle of the universe, and again this is quite reassuring, for then it is not delivered up to the multiple, monstrous and fascinating universe, the cruel and aleatory universe of seduction come from out of the blue, nor is it the victim or the prey of all surrounding forms, living or dead, nor traversed by incessant seductions. We've really protected the subject: it will have been there from the beginning, with its drives, its desire, its will, in its fief, miraculously equipped to no longer be the object of anything at all.

Calling the subject into question hasn't changed much concerning the metaphysical postulate of its preeminence. Summoned to put into play, as a subject, its weakness, fragility, femininity and death, summoned to resign as a subject (not only the psychological subject, but also the subject of power and knowledge), the subject has only found itself trapped in the melodrama of its own disappearance—it has overdosed on resignation, it is convulsing on its foundations, looking for a gentleman's agreement with its object, the world, which it had felt strong enough to manipulate

to its own advantage. There results only a confusion, reflected today in all the vagaries of its "liberation." But the subject, the metaphysics of the subject, was beautiful only in its arrogant glory, in its caprice, in its inexhaustible will to power, in its transcendence as the subject of power, the subject of history, or in the dramaturgy of its alienation. Finished with all that, it is now only a miserable carcass in conflict with its own desire or its own image, incapable of managing a coherent representation of the world, pointlessly sacrificed on the corpse of history in an attempted resurrection.

The subject cannot play the card of its own fragility, nor of its own death, for the simple reason that it had been invented precisely as a safeguard against these things, as well as against the seductions—those of destiny, for instance—that carried the subject down to its ruin. Here there is an insoluble contradiction in the perspective of its own economy. And therefore, today, the position of the subject has become simply untenable. No one today can be assumed as the subject of power, knowledge, or history. And no one, furthermore, tries to. No one assumes this incommensurable role, which began to founder in ridicule with the world of bourgeois psychology, and today subjectivity finds itself simply erased into transparency and indifference. We are living through the convulsions of this subjectivity, and we haven't stopped inventing new ones—but this is no longer even diverting: the problematic of alienation has collapsed; the solidity of desire has become myth.

We arrive then at this paradox, at this conjuncture where the position of the subject has become untenable, and where the only possible position is that of the object. The only strategy possible is that of the object. We should understand, by this, not the "alienated" object in the process of de-alienation, the enslaved

object claiming its autonomy as a subject, but the object such as it challenges the subject, and pushes it back upon its own impossible position.

A strategy whose secret is: the object does not believe in its own desire; the object does not live off the illusion of its own desire; the object has no desire. It does not believe that anything belongs to it as property, and it entertains no fantasies of reappropriation or autonomy. It doesn't seek to ground itself in some nature proper to it, not even a nature of desire, but at the same time it knows no alterity and is inalienable. It is not divided with itself—which is the destiny of the subject—and it knows nothing of the mirror phase, where it would come to be caught by its own imaginary.

It *is* the mirror. It is that which returns the subject to its mortal transparency. So if it can fascinate or seduce the subject, it is because it radiates no substance or meaning of its own. The pure object is sovereign, because it is what breaks up the sovereignty of the other and catches it in its own trap. The crystal takes revenge.

The object is what has disappeared on the horizon of the subject, and it is from the depths of this disappearance that it envelopes the subject in its fatal strategy. It is the subject that then disappears from the horizon of the object.

This is true of the sexual object, powerful in its absence of desire; this is true of the masses, powerful in their silence.

Desire does not exist; the only desire is to be the destiny of the other, to become for him the event that exceeds all subjectivity, that checks, in its fatal advent, all possible subjectivity, that absolves the subject of its ends, its presence, and of all responsibility to itself and to the world, in a passion that is—finally, definitively—objective.

The possibility, the will of the subject to situate itself at the transcendental heart of the world and to think of itself as universal

causality, under the sign of a law of which it remains master, this will does not prevent the subject from invoking the object secretly, like a fetish, like a talisman, like a figure of the reversal of causality, like the locus of a violent hemorrhage of subjectivity. "Behind the subjectivity of appearances there is always an occulted objectivity."

The entire destiny of the subject passes into the object. For universal causality, irony substitutes the fatal power of a singular object.

The fetish illustrates the profound objection we entertain towards normal causality, towards the derisory pretention of assigning a cause to each event and each event to its cause.

Any effect is sublime if not reduced to its cause. Furthermore, only the effect is necessary; the cause is accidental.

The fetish performs this miracle of erasing the accidentality of the world and substituting for it an absolute necessity.

We sense in the apperception of causes only a relative necessity—and therefore a relative happiness. Only an absolute, ecstatic necessity can transport us. This is exactly what is realized by the pure and singular object, through which we at one stroke obtain the answer to all our worldly prayers.

We may live in the universal, pursue objective ends, distribute our life among the clear forms of alterity, accord things a more-or-less rational aspect (which can never equal the one we accord ourselves); nevertheless, at a given moment happiness and unhappiness, and the very fact of being alive at all, must be incarnated in an absolutely particular being or thing, which no longer corresponds to any universal determination, but where all the recapitulated forms of identity and otherness are precipitated in the form of a specific unjustifiable affect, completely artificial with respect to the "natural" qualities of this object.

No one escapes from this experience of investing an object, as an object, with all the occulted force of objectivity. This is also part of the absurd wagers we make, as was the case for Pascal's famous wager on the existence of God.

We need to believe that the wager we're making is somehow right, for if reason has it that a single object alone could not be at the origin of the world, but, on the contrary, should be explained objectively by all the worldly givens—if this reasoning cannot manage to sway our conviction; if, in spite of the rational evidence, we continue to adore the world in the unintelligible quintessence of a single one of its details, then this is because reason itself is a hypothetical wager.

No longer to explain things and to set their value in objective criteria and in an unbounded system of references, but, on the contrary, to implicate the whole world in a single one of its details, an entire event in a single one of its features, all the energy of nature in a single one of its objects, dead or alive—to find the esoteric ellipsis, the perfect shortcut toward the pure object, the one which is not involved in the division of meaning, and which shares its secret and power with no other.

The Absolute Commodity

The absolute object is one that is worthless, whose quality is a matter of indifference, but which escapes objective alienation in that it has made itself more of an object than the object—this gives it a fatal quality.

This escalation to the limit, this doubly revolutionary movement—responding to alienation in its own terms, following the

inexorable ways of indifference—is found prefigured in the absolute commodity, according to Baudelaire.[5] Art (the work of art),

5. Giorgio Agamben, *Stances* (Paris: Christian Bourgois): "He (Baudelaire) approves the new character conferred on the object by its transformation into commodity; and he shows himself conscious of the attraction that this trait would fatally exert on the work of art... The greatness of Baudelaire, before the invasion of commodities, is to have answered to this invasion by transforming the work of art itself into commodity and fetish... In other words he's brought the separation of exchange-value from use-value right up to the work of art itself ... whence Baudelaire's implacable polemic against any utilitarian interpretation of art, his insistence on the intangible character of the aesthetic experience, and his theory of the beautiful as instantaneous and impenetrable epiphany. The aura of cold materiality which begins at that point to surround the work of art is equivalent to the character of fetish conferred upon commodities by exchange-value...

Baudelaire was not content only with reproducing in the work of art the scission between exchange-value and use-value. He proposed the creation of a commodity somehow absolute, in which the process of fetishization would be pushed to the point of annihilating the very reality of commodification as such; he conceived of commodities in which use-value and exchange-value would abolish each other mutually, whose value consists, therefore, in its inutility and whose use is its own intangibility, and which is no longer commodity: the transformation of the work of art into absolute commodity is therefore the most radical abolition of commodity. Here is where originates the casualness with which Baudelaire places the experience of 'shock' at the center of his artistic work. The 'shock' is the potential for strangeness that objects are charged with, when—in order to assume the enigmatic mask of commodity—they lose the authority conferred upon them by use-value... Baudelaire understood that to assure the survival of art in industrial civilization, the artist would have to seek the reproduction in his work of this destruction of use-value and traditional intelligibility.... The auto-negation of art became therefore its only possibility for survival.

It's fortunate that the founder of modern poetry was a fetishist. Without his passion for feminine makeup and hairstyle, for jewelry and ornament, Baudelaire would have been painfully hard put to emerge victorious in his confrontation with commodities."

confronted in modern times with the challenge of the commodity, does not, nor should it, look for its rescue in a critical denial (in which case it would only be its own derisory and impotent mirror, just as, by dint of critical denial, dialectical thought has become nothing but the powerless and derisory mirror of capital), but rather in outbidding the very formal and fetishized abstraction of commodities, under the enchantment of exchange-value—becoming more commodity than commodity, since even farther from all use-value.

If the commodity form breaks down the anterior ideality of the object (its beauty, its authenticity, even its functionality), then we shouldn't try to resuscitate it by denying the formal essence of commodities, we should, on the contrary—and here's the whole strategy of modernity, which constitutes for Baudelaire the entire perverse and adventurous seduction of the modern world—push to the absolute its division of value. No dialectic between the two; synthesis is a soft solution, dialectics a nostalgic one. The only radical and modern answer: potentiate what is new, original, unexpected in the commodity—for example, its formal indifference to utility and value, the preeminence given to circulation. That is what the work of art should be: it should adopt all the qualities of shock, strangeness, surprise, disquietude, liquidity, even autodestruction, the instantaneity and unreality which belong to the commodity.

The inhumanity of exchange-value is to be exponentially multiplied in a kind of ecstatic but ironic orgasm over the indifferent ways of alienation. This is why, in the enchanted, ironic (and non-dialectical) logic of Baudelaire, the work of art becomes one with fashion, advertising, the "fairy land of the code"—a work of art that bewilders in its venality, mobility, effects of missing referent, chance, vertigo—a pure object of marvellous commutability, since, the causes having disappeared, all effects are virtually equivalent.

These effects can amount to nothing also, as we well know, but it's the business of the work of art to make a fetish of this nullity, this disappearance, and to draw from it extraordinary consequences. A new form of seduction: no longer a matter of the mastery of conventional effects, the mastery of illusion and of the aesthetic order, but rather of the vertigo of obscenity—but who can tell the difference? A vulgar commodity can generate only a universe of production—and God knows that this universe is a sad one! Raised to the power of absolute commodity, it produces effects of seduction.

The work of art—a new and triumphant fetish and not a sad alienated one—should work to deconstruct its own traditional aura, its authority and power of illusion, in order to shine resplendent in the pure obscenity of the commodity. It must annihilate itself as familiar object and become monstrously foreign. But this foreignness is not the disquieting strangeness of the repressed or alienated object; this object does not shine from its being haunted, or out of some secret dispossession; it glows with a veritable seduction that comes from elsewhere, from having exceeded its own form and become pure object, pure event.

This perspective, whose source for Baudelaire is the spectacle of the transfiguration of the commodity in the Universal Exposition of 1855, is superior in many ways to that of Walter Benjamin. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin derives from the object's loss of aura and authenticity, in the age of reproduction, a desperately political determination (that is to say, politically desperate), opening on melancholy modernity—while the idea of Baudelaire, infinitely more modern (but could one possibly be modern in the nineteenthth century?), embraces the exploration of new forms of seduction linked to pure objects and events, to that modern passion which is fascination.

In this, Baudelaire was better at resisting the depressing theory of alienation (which has had only damaging effects on the slack thought of the twentieth century); he better grasped—possibly because of the historical novelty of the eruption of commodities—what would be the only real response, aesthetic and metaphysical, ironical and joyous, to the challenge. And we shouldn't be fooled by Baudelaire's "aesthetic preoccupations." His idea of an absolute commodity is tantamount to a radical perspective in every domain.[6]

In Praise of the Sexual Object

Only the object is seductive.

The vulgar seducer has understood nothing at all. He thinks of himself as subject, of the other as victim of his strategy. A naive psychology, as much as that of the "beautiful souls" who take the role

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6. This said, Marx also began with the idea of the commodity as an inescapable little fact and supreme foreigness of the modern world. He begins with the inexplicable, not really in order to explain it but to change it into an enigma, upon which all his dogma founders. Hieroglyphics. Marx had allowed something enigmatic and enchanting to float above the commodity, its anxiously foreign quality, its challenge to the meaningful arrangement of things, to the real, morality, utility, to all values including the very idea of value itself.

It is this ambiguous fascination that we find in all the phenomena of capital, in the enchantment of this universal code, at least in its original aspects. Marxist dogma has crushed all that (Marx contributed to this himself). The entire enigma of capital, of the commodity, has been massacred by revolutionary morality; but where is—where could there be—a revolutionary immorality?

of victim: neither realizes that all initiative and power are on the other side, the side of the object.

Furthermore, the vulgarity of this analysis of seduction recurs in the analysts themselves; the seducer himself is not so stupid (neither is the victim), and he knows implicitly that if seduction amounted to nothing more than this pitiful psychology, it would never work. Is it not rather the seducer who is seduced, and does the initiative not revert secretly to the object? The seducer believes he envelopes it in his strategy, but he is caught by the lure of this banal strategy and it is rather the object that envelopes him in its fatal strategy.

What charms us is that which takes the shape of a predestined object. This is what raises the ante on pure objectness, as Sartre would say, so that you are delivered from it in your turn—just as the absolute commodity liberates you more radically from commodities.

Sartre: "In seduction I am not at all trying to expose my subjectivity to the other. To seduce is to assume entirely, and as a risk to be run, my objectness for the other; it is to put myself before his gaze and to be looked at by him; it is to run the risk of being seen to appropriate the other in and by my objectness. I refuse to leave the terrain of my object-ness: it is on this ground that I wish to engage the struggle by making myself into a fascinating object..."

Only that which no longer poses the problem of its own desire (the hysteric, for example, who couldn't care less about it), is seductive, only that which has passed through the absolution and resolution of its own desire.

And so the cruel story of the woman to whom a man has written a passionate letter and who asks in her turn: "What part of me

seduced you the most?" To which he replies, "Your eyes," and receives by return mail, wrapped in a package, the eye which seduced him.

The beauty and violence of this defiance against the platitude of the seducer. But also the diabolism of this woman, who takes revenge against the very wish to be seduced: trap for trap, eye for eye. Never did punishment take so awful a form as in this unscrupulous offering. She loses an eye, but he loses face—how will he be able from now on to "cast an eye" on a single woman without being afraid of getting one in return? For really nothing is worse than to utter a wish and to have it literally fulfilled; nothing is worse than to be rewarded on the exact level of one's demand. He is caught in the trap by the object that surrenders to him as a literal object.

This is the portion of fatal provocation which is in each object, always ready to renew the cruel game of seduction. The man cannot but respond to the woman's engaging question: "What part of me do you find most attractive?" and commits thereby an irreparable mistake. The vengeful logic of the object is there first of all. (We might wonder what would have happened if he had replied: your voice, your mouth, your sex, your soul, your look, whatever—but this question is no doubt meaningless, for in the courtly context the only possible reply is the eyes as metaphor for the soul.)

This is, in fact, exactly the metaphor that the woman chooses to repudiate, which privileges her absolutely. He, as subject, can play only the game of the metaphor. She, abjuring all metaphor, becomes the fatal object which drags the subject down to annihilation.

For this to happen a confusion of sign and body suffices, a shortcut basically like Harpo Marx showing a real swordfish instead and in place of the password "swordfish." Here the witticism is

crueler, but it denies the password "your eyes" in the same way, and along with it the entire idealized rhetoric of seduction. For he only speaks to her of her eyes and her look as if he were talking about her: she is free to respond to this by the gift of herself, but not of her eye as object pure and simple. This cruel realist short circuit isn't far removed from what can be translated elsewhere as the cannibalistic consumption of the loved object—here it's the extraversion of the self as pure object that operates as pitiless gratification. The object strategy, that of the woman, consists in interdicting the metaphorical displacement of discourse, from the eye to the look and from the look to being, the only way the subject can exist and allow itself to be seduced.

This liquidation of metaphor, this precipitation of the sign into brute, senseless matter, is a thing of murderous efficacy. It is of the same order as the meaningless event, the catastrophe, which is also a blind reply, without metaphor, of the world as object to man as subject. It's always like this that destiny becomes specific: at a given moment, at a given point, signs become objects, impossible to turn into metaphors, cruel, without appeal. They cut short any decipherment, become confused with things (which is why fate is a dreamer, with the unintelligible instantaneity signs and words have in dreams).

The strategy of the object, like that of the woman in the story, is to be confused with the thing desired. All the irony and cruelty lies in this excessively objective form of answer: it leaves the subject without recourse.

This is also a beautiful example of the woman's ability to play in two registers: that of directly sexual supply and demand (she can reply without condition to the demand, like the woman with her eye, and the man finds himself naked and obscene in his own eyes, naked and humiliated in his enjoyment of the object)—or else that

of the game, the lure, the metaphor, deferred sexuality. The man has no such possibility. The woman remains free to choose the terrain. The man is continually exposed to loss of face: if he risks sexual advances, he always runs the danger of refusal; if he engages in a subtler game, he falls prey to a subtler form of rejection. The inverse is not true. The woman is not in the position of desire; she's in the much higher position of object of desire.

Naturally she loses this prerogative when she turns away from the indifference of the object to desire. She then becomes as vulnerable as any subject, and she will, as such, come to know all the forms of this useless suffering.

The transfer of sexual initiative to the woman has created a new situation. For the masculine prerogative, from the time of the "woman as object," at least gave rise to a whole culture of passion and seduction, to a novelistic culture linked to the game of sexual interdiction. Such a culture is scarcely possible in the opposite direction. One doesn't see the man assuming the modesty and secrecy, provocations and withdrawl, the whole sublime and subliminal strategy of the object which made for the eternal feminine. There is no eternal masculine because there is no interdiction which protects the man from the sexual demand of the woman. The woman who wants a man has no need to seduce. The man, if the woman so wishes, will still have to seduce her.

And if the constraint of object femininity has ceased for the woman, on the other hand the constraint of virility has not ceased for the man. He finds himself called upon to respond, to keep from losing face, to the sexual demand of the woman—a situation in which the latter has never found herself, for she has always had the possibility of eluding it, in seduction and refusal in particular, where she did not risk losing face (quite the contrary).

This is perhaps the meaning of Fellini's film (*The City of Women*): man is defenseless, naked and uncertain before the monsters of deployed femininity, erratic fantasies of all possible femininity without the shadow of a hint of seduction.

The situation is therefore no longer dual but unilateral. The object woman was sovereign and remained mistress of seduction (by a secret rule of the game of desire). The object man is only a subject stripped naked, an orphan of desire, dreaming of a lost mastery—neither a subject nor truly an object of desire, but only the mythical instrument of a cruel liberty.

One can say of any object, in its immobility and aphasia, what Canetti says about animals: "If you look attentively at an animal, you get the feeling that a man is hidden inside and is making fun of you."

We could say of women that someone else is hidden inside and is mocking us. Women are so skilled, they seem to be so submissive, they know so well, too well, how to be unhappy—there must be something there that is hiding and lying in wait. That same objective irony that lies in wait for all subjectivity with every chance of conquering it.

Something in the woman ignores possession. Something in the object ignores possession. Possession is the preoccupation and pride of the subject, but not of the object, which is totally indifferent to it, as to its liberation. The object wants only to seduce—that is how it plays its servitude, just as animals do their silence, the stones their indifference, and women their look—the object always wins.

So why pride oneself on difference, when indifference is sure to prevail? Why avail oneself of meaning when silence is sure to win?

The power of the object lies in its irony. Difference is always serious, but indifference is ironic.

Thus the woman can demand to be recognized as a subject in her own right (besides, this is a new style of seduction, and the game of the emancipation of subjects is not without charm when it leads to objective delights on both sides), and the man willingly allows himself to be caught in this trap, for he too likes to consent to some sacrifice. But if he lets himself be trapped, he is lost, lost by looking ridiculous in the eyes of the woman which watch him from the depths of her objective irony (from that occult irony that belies any pretention of liberation), just as he would be lost by looking ridiculous in the eyes of an animal he would like to recognize as a subject in its own right. That is where the trap is set; that is where it closes.

No one can regard as anything but ridiculous the pretension of recognizing anyone as "a subject in its own right." And therefore, when the woman pretends to this ("I don't want to be seduced; I want to be recognized"), it is a trap into which the man easily falls, because it is pleasant to be regarded as a source of recognition. Actually, this demand is ironic, but he doesn't know it.

What this woman wants, what we all want as objects (and we are objects as much as subjects, and doubtless in a more original way—not passive objects, but passionate objects, with drives that come from the depths of their object-being) is not to be hallucinated and exalted as a subject in her own right, but rather to be taken profoundly as object, just as she is, with her senseless, immoral, supersensual character—object, that is to say, delivered over to everything and everyone, prey and universal predator, maybe even possessed, prostituted, enslaved, manipulated and

marked as such, but also, from the depths of all that, perfectly seductive and inalienable. Once we recognize this fundamental character (this liberty) of the sexual object, the woman is ready for all the games of love and psychology; but it is as a pure object, not as a subject, that she'll seduce you, that you'll seduce her. She can be dominated, exploited, seduced—but not through alienation, submission, or masochism (the mistake is always to bring the object down to the level of the defective and perverse psychology of the subject). What makes for her power is, on the contrary, her triumphal indifference, her triumphal lack of subjectivity. She remains mistress of the game; the object remains master of the game and only reinforces its ironic sovereignty.

You insult her by being too attentive to games of modesty and wit, just as you insult a child by being too sensitive to its age or strength. The child, deep down, knows he is not a child. And he is not concerned with the affectation of liberty and responsibility with which you wish to dignify him in order better to dignify the pedagogical difference between adult and child. He competes rather on equal terms. He is neither free nor inferior, and leaves it to others to believe that. He envelopes you with his shamelessness, for which precisely all means are justified. He can choose to play up difference, to play the fragile child facing the adult; and you then owe it to him to protect him, to valorize him, to attenuate the difference. Or else at any moment he can choose to return you to the absence of difference, real and fundamental (childhood doesn't exist; there is no child). He would be right in both cases. This confers upon him an absolute superiority.

In the same way the woman can always choose to abandon herself as a sexual object and to give herself without scruples (which always profoundly surprises the man), or to play at being

recognized as a subject, at letting herself be seduced, but refusing indefinitely, and so on. She can always abandon one role for another, without, for all that, becoming hysterical or capricious or whatnot: this is not psychology, it is strategy—which here also confers upon her an absolute superiority over the man.

Everyone gets off in his or her own way. The very possibility of sexuality rests on the fact that each of us is ignorant of how the other comes (or even if). This is a vital misunderstanding, one could say. It's the biological form of the secret. There exist other mysterious manifestations, but this one, this enigma, shines resplendently in the firmament of sexuality: the *jouissance* of the other escapes us. Therefore, there is no possession, for we wouldn't possess the other unless we felt their orgasm.

Fortunately it is so, for this is how the woman can eternally seduce us, by means of this hidden *jouissance*, which thus becomes an incalculable pleasure.

The wonderful story of Tiresias! Between two copulating snakes, he was able to tell the male from the female. He would be a man, then a woman. And he would say afterwards that the woman has nine times the pleasure of the man. For this indiscretion he was to be blinded by Hera, and would receive the gift of clairvoyance.

Must we betray the secret of the climax? To whom is it granted to pass from one sex to the other, not by surgical operation, but by a metamorphosis of the orgasm? And who could still be able to talk about it?

Happily there exists this absolute singularity, the mythical orgasm of the other, to found sexual difference. That is why it is an enigma, and it is for having resolved this enigma, for having passed on the other side of sex, that Tiresias, like Oedipus, will be

condemned to blindness—he could also have been transformed into a hermaphroditic tree. Not for having betrayed the secret (?) of the feminine orgasm, for the latter does not exist: the multiplication by nine of feminine *jouissance* is only the ironic multiplication of the man's desire. It bears witness to the fact that the woman is only the ironic ecstasy of the man's desire.

Who would worry about that? The only worrisome thing is what distances us from this enigmatic difference and pulls us toward the sharing of the pleasure, therefore towards indifference. Therein lies the whole misunderstanding about sexual liberation.

But in the end the greatest singularity is to be found not on the side of orgasm, but in this more extraordinary rapport of seduction. It alone leads to this strange situation: making of the opposite sex a destiny, making of it not a final object (of orgasm) but a fatal object (of death and metamorphosis). Because seduction plays on a register incomparable to anatomical (or psychological) difference. Because it pushes the game of difference to the point of challenge and absolute attraction, to a vertigo where it is no longer a question of who comes nine times more than the other because it is a vertigo from raising the stakes and not from accounting. Because here the bets are placed according to a higher set of rules, which may not have any ends, and certainly no computation of pleasures (a computation is forced to stop somewhere). Seduction alone can put an end to the domination of one sex over the other.

The dream in love would be to become a woman. The profound fantasy of physical and mental love is one not of possession but of metamorphosis, of sexual transfiguration. At the high point in lovemaking we're haunted by the enigma of the opposite sex. All copulation aims only at that: to touch upon the other sex as

upon adversity, to integrate it by divination. An insoluble dream that exhausts itself in the possession of all women, continuously.

But how is it for women? Apparently they do not dream of being men. They do not have this weakness. They are not consumed by curiosity about the other sex, rather they faint rather into their own, by effusion or hysteria, in a rapport with the body which implies no mystery for themselves, but a meticulous affection and attention. Makeup, narcissism, seduction, attraction, hysteria: sacred forms of concupiscence, transitory and hallowed forms of concupiscence that the woman constitutes at every moment for herself. By all the care that she takes, she metamorphoses constantly into herself. What remains for the man but to seek through her this power of metamorphosis?

He is himself bound to sexual difference. All the drama of difference is on the side of the man; all the charm of difference is on the side of the woman. No misery, no oppression of the woman will ever depreciate this supremely unequal destiny, that will always swing the balance of dream, obsession, enigma, and strategem to the side of the sex that prefers itself and thus delineates that deliciously empty hollow—that of pleasure—where the other comes to lose himself.

What Tiresias's story tells us is that what we dream of most profoundly is not sex but the reversibility of the sexes, the ability to see sex from both sides, just as the clairvoyant or prophet (Tiresias) is able to see the two sides of time. We dream of a state of clairvoyance which is that of the mastery and reversibility of time, just as we dream of a state of sexual pleasure that would be a state of mastery over the reversibility of sex.

The supreme orgasm is metamorphosis.

The Gray Imminence

A strange pride obliges us not only to possess the other, but also to force out his secret, not only to be precious to him, but to be fatal. The voluptuousness of the gray imminence: the art of making the other disappear. A whole ceremony is required for this.

First follow people you meet in the street, at random, for an hour, two hours, brief sequences, disorganized—with the idea that people's lives are arbitrary trajectories, directionless, going nowhere, and that for this very reason they are fascinating. The network of the other is used as a means of absenting yourself from yourself. You exist only in the other's trace, but without his knowledge; in fact you follow your own trace almost without knowing it yourself. It is therefore not in order to discover something about the other, nor about where he's going, nor a "drift" in quest of some random aleatory course: all this, which corresponds to various contemporary ideologies, isn't particularly seductive, whereas this enterprise itself depends entirely upon seduction.

You seduce yourself into being no more than the mirror of the other, who doesn't know it—just like Kierkegaard's mirror suspended on the opposite wall: the young lady doesn't think about it, but the mirror does. You seduce yourself into being the destiny of the other, the double of his course, which for him has meaning, but which, duplicated, no longer has any. It's as if someone, behind him, knew that he was going nowhere. This is somehow stealing his objective from him: an evil genie comes and slips subtly between him and it. This is so magnetic that people often sense they are being followed, through a sort of intuition that something has entered their space and has altered its curve.

One day S. decides to add another dimension to this "experience." She learns that a man whom she barely knows, from having followed him once by chance, is taking a trip to Venice. She decides to follow him all through his voyage. Once in Venice, she explores a hundred hotels, and finally locates the one where he's staying. She rents a room with a window opposite so as to be able to follow his comings and goings. She has binoculars and a camera, and she photographs him on each occasion, the places he has gone, the objects he has touched. She expects nothing from him. She doesn't want to know him. She is not particularly attracted to him. It's Carnival time in Venice. Since he might be able to recognize her (they once talked), she becomes a blond (she has been a brunette). She puts on makeup and disguises herself. But the pleasures of Carnival do not interest her; everything is a function of shadowing him. She spends two whole weeks, at the price of incalculable effort, in keeping on his trail. She manages to find out about his plans, by questioning people in the shops where he goes, and about what seats he has reserved for the theatre. Even the time of his return train to Paris, where, having taken the preceeding train, she will be waiting for him when he gets off, in order to take a last picture of him.

No, not the last. She doesn't abandon the trail, and contacts people who work with him, a writer with whom he's going to collaborate as a photographer. But things turn out badly. Two or three times he has noticed her following him; there was an incident in Venice. In Paris it's even more serious; he becomes violent. The charm is lost and she gives up.

Deep down, did she want him to kill her or, finding the shadowing intolerable (especially since she has expected nothing, much less a sexual adventure), did she want him to throw himself upon her to do her violence? Or that turning on her, like Orpheus leading

Eurydice back from Hell, he might make her suddenly disappear? Did she simply want to be his destiny, or want him to become hers? Like all games, this one had its fundamental rule: nothing was to happen that might have created a contact or a relation between them. That was the price of the seduction. The secret must not be lifted, under penalty of falling into *cliché*.

Of course there is something murderous about this for someone who is being followed. He can take umbrage over it, feel persecuted, become paranoid. But that was not S's goal (even if this fantasy could be aroused sometimes during the course of the days and hours; but she also takes a risk: the other could reverse the situation, having sensed the strategem, go after her, obliging her to accept his terms—he is no victim, he is as strong as she is). No, the murder is subtler: it consists, as you follow someone step by step, of erasing his trace as you go. Now no one can live without leaving a trace. This is what makes anyone who is being followed turn around after a certain time. Even without clues, how could he not have a presentiment of the spell that surrounds him? The gray, or blonde, eminence that is following him leaves no trace, but she steals his trace from him. She photographs him incessantly. Photography here has no perverse or archival function. It simply says: here, at such an hour, at such a place, under such a light there was someone. And it says simultaneously: it made no sense to be here, at such a place and moment—in fact, there was no one—and I, who followed him, can guarantee no one was there. These are not the snapshot memories of a presence, but shots of an absence—that of the person followed, of the follower, and even of their absence from each other.

"Follow me instead," said another to whom she had spoken of her shadowing, "I'm more interesting to follow than the housewife

next door." But this is a misinterpretation, and confuses interest with a higher degree of seduction. It is uninteresting to find out that someone is leading a double life, for example, except for the little flavor of strangeness it might lend them. The important thing is that it is being followed itself that is the double life of the other. Anyone's banal existence can be transformed, but anyone's exceptional life can be made banal by this act. Once again, it's not a matter of persecution, but of seduction.

The Duke of Palagonia also understood how to warp the fatal shadow of deforming mirrors. This noble Spaniard, deformed and monstrous, built in the vicinity of Palermo a villa in his own image, peopled with gnomes, surrounded with convex mirrors, so that the most beautiful girl in Sicily, whom he had married, should think of herself as ugly, and therefore be resigned to love him who resembled her.

Or does he assure power for himself by inventing a world of lubricious forms (ugliness is lewd), where beauty would be caught out of defiance, out of weakness, because its perfection is intolerable?

That is probably the secret of all seduction: it offers beauty a deforming mirror where it is finally liberated from its perfection. More generally, it offers the other a strange mirror where it is finally liberated from its being, its liberty, its image, its resemblance—all things that in the secrecy of the self weigh heavily upon one. God himself is seduced by the devil.

Is there a secret of the Villa Palagonia? No, beauty wants something worse than itself, it wants to be sequestered, raped, tortured (the Christ in the chapel himself floats hanging by the shoulders, suspended from the vault like a stuffed bird). The first one who presents himself will seduce her by monstrosity.

But not the first to come along. The Duke of Palagonia had a lofty soul.

The young and beautiful A. is courted by a prince, who, not being able to see her, writes her every day. She knows nothing of this, for these letters come to her mother, who responds faithfully for her and so maintains an amorous conespondance with the prince. A. will find out the truth, along with all the letters and answers, later, after the mother's death, among her papers. *And she will not hate her for this.* This betrayal, on the contrary, absolutely dazzles her posthumously.

A. possesses only the spontaneous charm of seduction, and there is no mystery in the prince's attraction to her. But the fatal power, the one which holds the secret, the symbolic power (aesthetic, Kierkegaard would say) of seduction, the true seducer, is the mother.

She is the one who reflects, intercepts and distills the seduction of her daughter *without her knowledge*. This ignorance is essential; it is the fundamental rule. Only the other knows that you are a queen; only the other knows that you are loved, that you are going nowhere, that your life is senseless. He somehow shadows you, sneaks your *raison d'être*, and thus obliges you to exist, through this subversion, more intensely than if he engendered you.

This story is beautiful for the incestuous shadow it projects, but we need to rid it of all Oedipal foolishness about incest. Seducing what one has engendered is, in its banal version, crime *par excellence*. But in a deeper order of things, incest is natural and required. One must seduce what one has produced and engendered. On the contrary, it is perhaps the fact of being engendered and engendering that is the crime above all others, and that which must be resolved, redeemed, expiated by the initiatory fact of

seducing and being seduced. And this seduction is always more or less incestuous because, like incest, it is an esoteric form: it consists in having you enter into the secret, and not only into life; it consists in giving you a destiny, and not only an existence.

It is thus that the mother redeems, in a way, this secret intervention, the fact of having brought her daughter into the world. That is why the story of the secret destiny that the mother had given her is so beautiful, like another life she might have given in addition to the first.

Incest does not proceed from some desire, from the interdiction of desire; it does not proceed from a natural or antinatural instinct; there is nothing libidinal about it. But neither can it be the basis for the law or the symbolic order. It expresses the fundamental rule that *all that has been produced must be seduced* (initiated into disappearance after having been initiated into existence). It is for this that we exert ourselves in every possible way. We are called upon at every moment to seduce (that is, to lure to immolate and to destroy, to subvert and to *ravish*) that which the law summons us to produce. The law imposes production upon us, but the secret rule, never spoken, hidden behind the law, imposes seduction upon us, and that rule is stronger than the law.

Destiny is profiled only in this enigmatic conjuncture: my secret is elsewhere. No one holds the key to his own secret—this is the error of all psychology, including that of the unconscious. All that is linked outside of myself (in dream or language as well as in event or catastrophe), all of this constitutes for me a fatal object—even if it doesn't bring on death, it implies a dispossession of the subject, draws him into the secret, beyond his own end, in spite of himself, outside of himself, there also in a kind of ecstasy.

This is the enigma: how can one be in on the secret without knowing it? The enigmatic resolution is this: only the other knows, God alone knows, destiny alone knows. The secret is what envelopes you without your knowing it.

So in A.'s story. A. is in on the secret, she has a secret destiny, but she doesn't know it. There is no risk of her betraying it: only her mother knows.

In certain cases it is only language that knows. It is in language alone that the ironic and fatal chain is linked.

As in Alphonse Allais's story, *Only in Paris*. Two young people, two young lovers, each receive an anonymous letter, denouncing to each of them the infidelity of the other. If the woman wants proof she has only to go to a certain masked ball; her lover will be there, disguised as Harlequin. The other receives the same secret advice. Go to this certain ball, your wife will be there, disguised as a Congolese boatman. On the evening in question, in the middle of the ball, two people sit, off to the side. Finally, he advances towards her and invites her to go off with him, to a private little room where they throw themselves upon each other to tear off the masks. And, as the story tells it, to their stupefaction, *it was neither one nor the other!*

All the illogical charm of the story is in the movement where the two rush to raise their masks and there's nothing behind them. As if the two masks (Harlequin and Boatman) were acting on their own, looking to remarry each other, as a function of a pure inertia of language, of the tale, while they have no reason for doing so. (But by what miracle do they find themselves there, by what uncanny conjuncture, and where are the two others, the real ones, during this time?) The real is *out*; only the appearances function, and they combine according to their own logic, where logic should

have forever separated them: such is the game of pure appearance. This is exactly the function of wit. For precisely in the *Witz*,* the word becomes a line—no longer a carrier sign but a pure vector of appearance. *Fragments of language unknown to each other, without causal links, meet there as if by enchantment and discover with delight that they were "neither one nor the other."* The terms tear off each other's masks, but do not recognize each other.

Of course all of this is connected to language's possibility of continuing on the thrust of the real (to make it seem like something is there to be represented) and then to collide with pure appearance, that is to say, to continue to function beyond its end. Which allows Allais to slip in this little phrase: "...and it was neither one nor the other"—which is made possible as a logical utterance by the very functioning, mad and fantastic, of language alone—unintelligible to reason. Now all the vertigo resides in this little phrase. The story could easily be told without it: the two lovers recognize each other and fall into each other's arms, reconciled—that supplies a spicy and edifying story, in the style of the sentimental eighteenth century (in the image of Sade's novella, where a transvestite seduces a woman he believes to be a transvestite—but both are homosexuals. Disappointment at the moment of the respective discovery of their sexes, but with sex you always wind up managing somehow). You might also suppose that one of the two would really be himself, and the other would not be the other: that would be a gallant tale. *But it wouldn't be a seductive one.*

With Allais the strongest part lies in the conclusion, when he says that "since this episode, they have never again had any married couples' spats"—letting it be understood that this pure effect of fiction and unreality had some consequences on the level of the real, letting hover just the shadow of the dizzying hypothesis

that "all the same it was really them" (otherwise there could be no consequences).

Furthermore who could know "it was neither one nor the other," since no one was there to recognize it? They (the two real characters) do not even know that they are not there, but *language itself knows it, and it alone knows it.* Exactly like in Kierkegaard's mirror: "A mirror is hanging on the wall opposite her—she doesn't think about this at all, but the mirror thinks about it."

In order for there to be seduction, signs or words must thus function without knowing it, as in the *Witz**. Things must be absent from themselves, and words must be meaningless. But the characters cannot know even this (only language knows)—as in the case of S., where the one who shadows is alone in knowing that the other is going nowhere, or inversely, as in *Death at Samarkand*, where he who thinks he's escaping, no matter where, is mistaken, because the other, Death, knows where he's going and waits for him there.

In this sense, by an unexpected detour, it could be that Allais' conclusion isn't so absurd as it seems (that the two young lovers would never again have those "married couples' spats"!). We must admit into the order of events what we can easily verify in the order of language: when two words, two signs, seduce each other, even without their knowing it, in the unfolding of language (*Witz**), this seduction, as unique as it is, has dazzling effects on the entire sentence and on the whole effect of communication. Nothing prevents, therefore, the seductive conjunction of just the masks alone, in this unintelligible episode, from having on the real lovers some positive consequence. Somehow, they found and seduced each other again. Somehow, whatever happens on the level of the pure appearance of the tale always impinges on the real. We can ask no more of language. Once magic asked this of it—and got it.

It's not enough for a story to be illogical and meaningless to be seductive; it is still necessary that this be *signaled* in an unintelligible way. And so Allais's story isn't soluble in logical terms, but not any more so in terms of chance or probability, either (there is no chance that such an event could occur by chance). Nothing can be articulated in it; there is no solution, but this ironic and unexpected linkage of language is itself necessary. Which makes the irresolution stunning, instead of being banal, since it is the operation of a pure sign. There lies the prestige of illusion.

This is also the way those little phrases operate that come to us from somewhere else. According to Canetti:

"We never forget these phrases. They probably take from us an innocence that could be very pleasant to keep. But through these cruel breaks a man is initiated into his own nature. Without them he could never really see himself. They must intervene by surprise, must come from the outside. Any phrase that comes to us from elsewhere is efficacious because it is unexpected: we have nothing to counterbalance it with. We help it with an energy identical to that with which we would have opposed it in other circumstances."

These little phrases are the opposite of those banal ones where we recognize ourselves, of those phrases that make us ashamed, where suddenly the subject becomes ashamed of what he is. Instead of which these little fatal phrases are like the eruption of a pure unidentified object that renders the subject unidentifiable to himself. Nothing in the subject can counterbalance the efficacy of these phrases, since they no longer serve as mirror and he can no longer exercise, as he can on others, his flattery on them. Suddenly all the energy with which he ordinarily would have opposed them finds itself transferred and thrown back upon them. The irruption of the pure object inverts all rapports: the object becomes powerful with

all the power of the subject. All our energy is ravished from us, instantaneously diverted by this object come from elsewhere. We accept it willingly; we are ourselves ravished by this "cruel break" in the order of things, by this unexpected revolution, by this turn-about of energy and the inversion of the poles of power.

The Crystal Revenge

Psychoanalysis has privileged one aspect of our lives and hidden another. It has overestimated one of our births—the biological and genital one—and has forgotten the other—the initiatic birth. It has forgotten that if two beings are there presiding at our biological birth, it always happens that others seduce you (they may even be the same ones), and these others are in a sense our initiatic parents. This second birth redeems the first one, along with all the Oedipal conflicts so well described by psychoanalysis, but which really concern only the first birth.

This first birth imposes a history upon us, necessarily an Oedipal one. A history of repression and unconscious work, a psychological history of complexes and mourning, of the always altered and mortifying rapports with the Father, the Law, and the Symbolic Order. What psychoanalysis has not seen is that what happens to us is always fortunately something else, an event without precedent that inaugurates not a history but a destiny, and which, because it is without precedent, liberates us from this genesis and this history. This event *without precedent* is seduction; it is also without origin, coming from somewhere else and arriving always unexpectedly—a pure event that erases in one fell swoop all conscious and unconscious determination.

We were all once produced, we must all be seduced. That is the only true "liberation," that which opens beyond the Oedipus complex and the Law, and which delivers us from a stern psychological calvary as well as from the biological fatality of having been sexually engendered.

The only invalids are those sick from seduction. Precisely the ones to whom this event without precedent did not happen, those that have never known this second, initiatory birth and who, for this reason, remain strapped in their Oedipal history and destined for psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis takes them on the basis of an economy of desire, that is to say, of a refusal of seduction, within whose walls psychoanalysis has helped not a little to enclose them.

For it is from psychoanalysis (though not only from it, of course) that this inconceivable hallucination of the individual about his own desire proceeds. As Monique Schneider has shown in her book, *Freud and Pleasure*, it is psychoanalysis which, at the end of the "psychological revolution" of the nineteenth century, succeeded in this mad substitution of an individual psychic economy, of a libido, of one's own desire, and the Oedipal reversals of this desire at the event come from elsewhere, for the initiatory, seductive, and fatal incidence of the other as an event without precedent, for the surprise, for the coincidence of the world and the signs that make you not a subject but a preferred object of election and seduction.

What makes you exist is not the force of your desire (wholly a nineteenth-century imaginary of energy and economy), but the play of the world and seduction; it is the passion of playing and being played, it is the passion of illusion and appearance, it is that which comes from elsewhere, from others, from their face, their language, their gestures—and that which bothers you, lures you,

summons you into existence; it is the encounter, the surprise of what exists before you, outside of you, *without you*—the marvelous exteriority of the pure object, of the pure event, of what happens without your having anything to do with it. What a relief—this alone is enough to seduce you; we've been so solicited to be the cause of everything, to find a cause for everything. Mineral object, solstice event, sensual object, desert form—all these are seductive because they have nothing to do with our economy of desire and because, basically, being doesn't give a damn about its own being; it is nothing, and exists only when it is lifted out of itself, into the play of the world and the vertigo of seduction.

It's against all this that psychoanalysis takes a stand when it forms the hypothesis of an exterior world as aggression, of the ego as a system of defense and investment, of pleasure as resolution of tensions. The whole problem for Freud was how to destroy the wild event of seduction.

It is a paradoxical situation for analysis when it refers to dream material, for precisely in this fatal perspective the dream is event, while in analysis it is no more than a symptom. The same is true for madness, neurosis, and the parapraxis: everywhere psychoanalysis has missed their irruptive, illusive, seductive power, bypassed them as facts and made of them mere symptoms, stripping all sovereignty from the irruption of things, from the magic of appearances, and from the challenge they imply, pushed them back to the particular subject of interpretation. Against all of this psychoanalysis has hoisted its desiring subject, its Robinson Crusoe of the unconscious, sworn to an insular economy and to the exorcism of all external aggression. Even the very conception of the outside world as a source of disequilibrium and of the internal drive itself as a threat of rupture is symptomatic: the only destiny of the subject

should be to discharge its tensions, to purge itself of its internal excitations, to neutralize the irruption of demonic forces that continually threaten the psychological fortress with disintegration. It's no longer even a destiny of drives, but a destiny of expulsion. Like Ulysses, closed off from any incantation by outside forms, the subject's only task will be to liberate itself from its instinctual energy, in a defensive organization sworn to pleasure as a principle (!) and to death as resolution—even to the death drive itself as a way to get rid of these tensions.

Monique Schneider shows how Freud the theorist recants before the first assaults of seduction (of the concept of seduction), glimpsed for a moment by organizing the psychic apparatus of psychoanalysis, itself centered on a whole individual protected from the very beginning—a pure instinctual enclosure destined to administer its own desire, to distribute its investments, to invent its object relations, to fantasize about its image—that is, a being for whom everything will basically happen from the inside, in an essentially individual process, and nothing from the outside, in a dual process.

For Oedipus to return to Thebes and to the Oedipal problematic (sleeping with his mother, going blind as symbolic castration, etc.), the Sphinx has to be dead, which means an end has to be put to seduction and its vertigo, to the enigma and secret, in favor of a hidden history whose drama lies entirely in repression and whose key is in interpretation (while the enigma is never to be revealed, it seduces by way of a secret intelligibility which is on the order of divination); an end must be put to the seductive enigma, in favor of deadly truth.

Similarly, for Freud to enter upon the royal and Oedipal road of psychoanalytic interpretation, for him to enter into the kingdom of

the unconscious, for him to sleep with psychoanalysis, with consequences in the end as dramatic for us as those of Oedipus's adventure for his people, he too had to put an end to seduction, had to kill the enigmatic beast, the Sphinx of appearances, that forbade the entry of "psychic reality." Freud privately perpetuates this execution of the seductress "in the wish either to raze or to entomb inside the self a maternal archaic seduction, Sphinx, witch or perverse nurse."

However, Monique Schneider, if she clearly points out this inaugural exorcism of psychoanalysis and how the whole Freudian edifice is constructed on this conjuration of seduction, here only substitutes the murder of the Mother for that of the Father, in the sense that for her seduction is never anything but that of the archaic Mother, of the devouring seductress, of the fusional womb. Seduction reduced to the seductress, and she in turn to the woman's, and the womb's, unfathomable power of absorption. This is the dirty trick played by modern feminism, itself misled by psychoanalysis: to resuscitate the feminine as a dangerous, archaic, fusional power is in some sense to side with Freud, whose purpose is to bar the Mother's power of absorbing desire by the Name of the Father. If seduction is a matter only of fusion, then we might as well have the Oedipal complex as well as the Law. That kind of seduction is really nothing but seduction seen through the prism of the Oedipal complex and the Law, like a sort of spectrum of diabolical, incestuous temptation. Like Jocasta, who—once the real figure of seduction, the enigmatic Sphinx, has been destroyed and immolated—will be reincarnated, but for the worse, so to speak, in a universe corrupted by the Oedipal complex, vengeance and the backfire of seduction. But it is no longer the same figure; that of the Sphinx is dual and enigmatic; the other, that of Jocasta, is maternal and incestuous, archaic and fusional.

Seduction is quite a different thing from this devouring mother that Freud had such good reasons to fear. If psychoanalysis (the Law, the Father, etc.) is what tears you from the Mother's desire for fusion and returns you to the sovereignty of your own desire, seduction is what tears you from your own desire to return you to the sovereignty of the world. It's what tears beings from the psychological sphere of fantasy, repression, the primal scene, to return them to the vertiginous and superficial play of appearances. It's what tears beings away from the reign of metaphor to return them to that of metamorphoses. It is what tears beings and things from the reign of interpretation to return them to divination. It has an initiatory form, and it restores to signs their power. It cannot therefore coexist with a discipline that can give signs only a meaning, and an unhappy one at that.

Dreams, however, are something other than mere "material." They charm, and are charmingly prophetic before they disappear into interpretation, where of course they take on the meaning they are supposed to. Then they are no longer seductive, nor fatal; they've become significant. Dreams used to have a secret; Freud gave them a sense. Dreams used to be closer to destiny; with Freud they approach desire. But they lose this enchantment (even a wicked one), giving way to the work of the unconscious. The play of the dream as appearance allowed us to find there not unconscious and metaphorical pathways, but effects of seduction, the trajectory of an order of events of which the dream is a part as in a story—not as a symptom, for then it is only a sign driven toward its sense. As a pure event the dream has a prophetic quality that analytical interpretation breaks down, by reducing the dream to an unconscious economy and topology.

The dream has become psychological, has fallen into the psychic order. It has lost its own seduction. Like neuroses, like

fantasies, parapraxes, madness, and sickness in general, which psychoanalysis has quarantined in the unconscious and consecrated to pathology; to all of these interpretation has assigned the vocation of symptom (and Freud only barely missed wrecking the same havoc with wit).

"I can stand dreams only when they're whole, intact and mysterious. They are so weird that we can understand them only very slowly... Unfortunate would be the madman who understood them too soon: he would lose them never to find them again.

We should not pile together dreams that have nothing in common with each other, either. Their importance is exactly commensurate with their dissemination in reality. The essential thing, in any case, is that dreams be realized (which they no longer are in psychoanalysis, any more than childhood, and many other things that are no longer called upon to exist as such). But dreams are realized otherwise than traditional interpreters imagine them to be. Dreams must animate reality by penetrating it in every possible way, by coming from all possible directions, and especially from where we least expect them. The intangible nevertheless has its form, fashioned by its insertion into reality, and we shouldn't impose one on it from the outside.

The harm done by the interpretation of dreams is immeasurable. The change is invisible, but a dream is so sensitive a thing! Only an infinistesimal minority of people realize what is so special about the dream. Why else would people dare to keep undressing it until they've made it nothing more than an ordinary truism?"

— Canetti

I think that there's an essence of the dream, as of all things, that is to say, an ideal figure whose illusive power has been stolen from us by psychoanalysis. I think there's a form of appearance, an ideal figure of appearance whose power of illusion has been ravished from us by interpretation.

Psychoanalysis is the bad conscience of the sign. It transforms every sign into symptom, every act into a slip, every discourse into hidden meaning, every representation into an hallucination of desire. This incredible near-sightedness of analytical interpretation! Against the seductive power of thought, psychoanalysis incarnates the omnipotence of hidden motives. Suspicion toward appearances, blackmail by symptom and hidden meaning, the solution of the enigma: psychoanalysis absolutely participates in the misfortune, in the bad conscience that Nietzsche identified as the source of all backward worlds...

But seduction has its way of evening the score. It ironically refashions the dream, appearing again in the well-known form of dreams of healing that attempt to seduce the analyst and divert the analysis. But this is nothing: the resolution of the enigma and the defeat of the Sphinx will allow all the hidden obscenity of Oedipal relations to burst out—murder, incest and the final blindness that always accompanies the unveiling of the *truth*. We should never touch upon the enigma, under pain of falling into obscenity, and Oedipus will have no other resort but to become blind in order to escape this obscenity. Yes, the Sphinx is avenged: it's she who by her death locks Oedipus up into this whole murderous history, and she who locks up Freud into this whole case history of castration.

The Fatal, or, Reversible Imminence

"Chance tires me."—God.

"In a remote Yugoslavian valley, it seems they've abolished chance, thanks to a certain throw of the dice." To which we answer: any throw of the dice ended chance long ago.

Two hypotheses about chance. First: all things are called to meet each other, it is only by chance that they don't. Second: all things are scattered and indifferent to each other; it is only by chance that they meet once in a while.

This last hypothesis is commonly held; the other one, paradoxically, is the more interesting.

At all events there remains, in the commonly held version, a profound ambiguity: is it chance that keeps things in a state of aleatory dispersion (this corresponds to its definition), or is it what causes them to meet up from time to time? We would be happy to have it both ways. Things happen by chance, and chance causes them to meet. This is purely illogical. Does chance reveal the sovereign indifference of things to each other, or does it betray a secret will, a kind of evil genie that would take pleasure in unusual conjugations?

The solution might be this latter: modern analysis long ago brought to light the flaws of a determinist explanation of the world and gave birth to an aleatory world at the expense of objective causality; it has therefore stimulated everywhere a vision in terms of chance, and at the same time it's awakened people to other connections, noncausal and more secret (psychoanalysis, for example, and its unconscious interpretation, have eliminated the element of chance in slips, failures, dreams, and madness). More enigmatic, another necessity has appeared, and nothing in principle can escape it: whether psychological or structural predestination, the deep

order of things is unconscious, but its decrees eliminate chance nonetheless. We have thus substituted, for the reign of intelligible causes, not really chance, but a mechanism of more mysterious linkages. Chance would then correspond not to a temporary incapacity of science to explain everything—in that case it would still have a palpable conceptual existence—but to the passing from a state of causal determination to another order, radically different, also of non-chance.

There's another problem, too. For there to be chance (in the second sense, at least) there must be coincidence: two series have to intersect, two events, two individuals, two particles must meet. Even if the probability of this occurrence is infinitesimal, there must be a possibility for this conjunction to take place, in the same sense that, for there to be causality, there must be some contiguity of cause and effect. Now, this postulate is never certain. *But it's not certain either that the encounter is impossible*—unless in a world given over to a pure power relationship, where things, bodies, individuals, events can touch each other, bump and run into each other because they've lost this "aura" that normally envelopes them and forbids all promiscuity. In a sacred, ceremonial universe, things do not touch each other, and they never meet. They link up without fail, but without contact. Tact in this matter is precisely avoiding contact. Remark how ceremonial gestures, dress, and bodies roll, intertwine, brush past each other, challenge one another, but without ever touching. No chance, that is, no slip that would hurl the bodies toward each other, no disorder that would suddenly allow things the liberty of confusion.

The same is true of our bodies and daily lives. We had to break up this aura that surrounds acts and bodies for them to be able to meet by chance in the street, concentrate in such great number in

cities or camps, draw close or melt into each other in love. A very powerful force was required to break this magnetic distance where each body moves, as well as to produce this indifferent space where chance is able to put them in contact. Something of this refractory power remains in each of us, even at the heart of the modern secularized spaces, even in the use we make of our emancipated, spatially liberated bodies. Something comparable in power to the taboo that averted all promiscuity, to the distinction that condemned all fortuitous meeting, all fusion or confusion due to chance. Chance is only the freedom that bodies have—like particles at the microscopic level—to move in any direction in an undifferentiated space. And this freedom implies that for every being an inviolable space, from a symbolic point of view, is unclean and obscene. (This has nothing to do with any kind of Puritanism, but really with the sovereign space necessary for the very movement of bodies.) Chance, therefore, along with the statistical probability that characterizes our modern world, are unclean and obscene modalities. Right now we must accomodate all of this in the name of freedom; but one day, this refusal—this untying that makes multiple meetings possible, accelerating the Brownian movement of our lives—will return with a deadly indetermination and indifference, and overwhelm us. Chance not only tires God, it tires us too.

Western materialism works on the hypothesis that the world is brute matter, subject to aleatory and disorganized movements. Our world's "primitive scene" is that which would remain lifeless if some God did not come along to breathe soul, or sense, or energy into it. This is a disorder that God alone can cure, by imposing order, tearing the world away from a state of original chaos.

"Chance contained order, and when order came it allowed a place in creation for chance." (A. Verdet)

The problem has always been to create order out of supposed disorder, to produce and support movement, to sustain and produce meaning. This is what haunts us; it is our ideal, as well as the profile of our catastrophe (entropy).

The idea that we achieve a few rational moments in this world of ours only at the price of perpetual effort, that we have to be constantly on guard against a lapse into nothingness—this hypothesis is functionally pessimist and desperate. Even God has had enough of it. "Chance tires God", says a theologian on the subject of making gambling illegal. God himself is fed up with fighting against chance (recently, moreover, he's lowered his flags, allowing an openly random vision of the world to dominate). There is no other end for something that's begun this way. If you suppose that an energy is necessary to fill the universe, to create meaningful connections, fragile islands of antichance, then sooner or later this energy will fail. Even God won't be strong enough to resist the ultimate annihilation of meaning. Anyone would have given up on this; He himself has stopped fighting it, effacing himself before the irruption of a meaningless universe. God is not scandalized, ulcerated or threatened by chance; He's tired of it. Marvellous!

But you might adopt the opposite hypothesis. God has not grown tired of struggling against chance; rather, he is fatigued with *having to reproduce it*. It's God himself who's trapped in this eternal task, for the truth is that *there is no chance*. If chance had to be created, only a god could do it, for it's a superhuman job.

Creating chance, so that everything doesn't always connect necessarily and without discontinuity: whether lucky or unlucky, this would be intolerable for man. Creating chance, so that people

can play and believe in fortune and misfortune, which lessens their guilt.

The vital importance of this belief in the possibility of the purely accidental occurrence, which would therefore be insignificant, indifferent, and irresponsible! For example: the death of a friend, a reversal in fortune, a natural catastrophe. What if these things—outside of the fact that "they never happen just by themelves"—should be moreover attributable to a will, to an objective or subjective malignity, even God's? What a weight, what a burden, what an increase in responsibility and fault! And where would there be room for an innocent expectation of the future?

Primitives believed in a world of this kind, a world of the omnipotent thought and will, without the shadow of a chance. But they lived really in magic and cruelty. Chance lets us breathe: no one wanted it to happen, what a consolation! So it is God, in his immense pity, who has granted us chance. We often say, of an event that we want to be rid of, "God willed it." (That is to say, no one.) But God has grown tired, in the end, from having willed it, and it is quite possible that once in a while he withdraws his will and leaves the world prey to the law of things, that is, to total predestination.

Chance is attributable to a God even more extraordinary than the one who manages everything with his will, than the one of universal predestination or the providential and fateful linking of everything. Nothing is easier for things than to connect, to metamorphose one into the other. To prevent that—to obtain a purely accidental world—we need to suppose an infinite will and energy. God himself would never get through with this fantastic labor of isolating every particle, of abolishing all sequence, all scattered seductions, to maintain the absolute reign of chance. What artifice is involved in chance, and how small was the

probability that it could ever come to exist (as unlikely as the probability of God's existence)!

God—our old rational and rationalist God—is evidently incapable of managing the course of things. His *raison d'être* is to guarantee, to bless certain causal connections, allowing him to make a last judgement on the world, piercing through, at certain places, the fog that obscures his luminous gaze upon chaos, so that some kind of minimal distinction can be made between Good and Evil. And the Devil is constantly threatening to confuse these tedious labors. Seduction is operating ceaselessly to blur this separation of Good from Evil. It's no surprise that God has died, leaving behind a perfecty free and random world, and leaving the task of organizing things to a blind divinity named Chance.

God scarcely held up his side of the bargain. He—who was supposed to be there in order to be the cause of everything—ended up arranging things so that what happens without reason, what arrives through an extremely rare and unlikely probability, is more meaningful than what happens as a result of a cause. What happens accidentally takes on a meaning and intensity that we no longer assign to rational occurrence. In an overdetermined world, chance is the creator of special effects.

Chance itself is a special effect; it assumes in imagination the perfection of the accident (as, in a series of objects, only the missing one is especially precious). We live in a paradoxical world, where the accidental thing is more meaningful, more charming, than intelligible connections. It is possible that this situation is itself a matter of conjuncture: the superior charm and meaning that we find in accident, the ironic and diabolical joy we take in accidental events, is doubtless equalled only by the pleasure of the first mind capable of inventing, though in a chaotic world, the

first causal relation. That individual, in his time, was certainly considered to be the Devil; he must have been burned at the stake for his trouble.

But all of this is based on the flawed hypothesis of a chaotic world, one we have to fight against by rational connections. Whereas the inverse hypothesis is much richer and infinitely more plausible: that this is a world where there is no such thing as chance. Nothing is dead, nothing is inert, nothing is disconnected, uncorrelated or aleatory. Everything, on the contrary, is fatally, admirably connected—not at all according to rational relations (which are neither fatal nor admirable), but according to an incessant cycle of metamorphoses, according to the seductive rapports of form and appearance. Seen as substance in need of energy, the world lives in the inert terror of the random, it is shattered by chance. Seen as the order of appearances and their senseless unraveling, seen as pure event, the world is, on the contrary, ruled by absolute necessity. From this angle, everything bursts with connection, seduction; nothing is isolated, nothing happens by chance—there is total correlation. The problem would be rather to brake, to arrest at certain points this total correlation of events, to stop this vertigo of seduction, of the linking of forms one by the other, this magic order (for some, disorder) that we see spontaneously arise in the form of linked sequences or coincidences (lucky or unlucky), or in the form of destiny, or ineluctable connection, when everything falls into order as if by miracle.

We're all familiar with this experience; it includes writing and speech. Words have this same tendency, when we allow them their free play, to assume the order of destiny. All of language can be engulfed in a single phrase, by an effect of seduction that precipitates the floating signs toward a central series. We know this chain

reaction, we know how undeniably it occurs. We know the strange familiarity that belongs to things when their course is unimpeded, when they relate in the pure contiguity of an event. When we don't struggle against them with our rational systems and our logical, goal-oriented constructions, or see in them only the secondary consequences of a history that's already taken place.

All of this is close to what Lévi-Strauss called, in linguistic terms, the excess of the signifier—the idea that the signifier is there from the beginning, spread everywhere, in a profusion that happily the signified never exhausts. This overabundant order of the signifier is that of magic (and poetry). It is not an order of chance or indetermination; far from that, it is rather an arranged order, a necessity superior to the one which joins the signifier and the signified (which itself is highly arbitrary). The long work of joining signifier and signified, the work of reason, somehow brakes and absorbs this fatal profusion. The magical seduction of the world must be reduced, annuled. And it will be so the day when all signifiers receive their signifieds, when all has become meaning and reality.

This would be, quite obviously, the world's end. The world will end—literally—when all seductive rapports yield to rational ones. This is precisely the catastrophic enterprise on which we are engaged: resolving all fatality into causality or probability. That is true entropy. We may wonder if it could ever succeed, but what we should not doubt is that it is fate, not chance, which is the "natural" course of things. And that it is destiny—that is to say, the flashing seduction of forms—that reason seeks to destroy, and not chance, which reason can very well live with. Remember, chance contained order, and when order came it left place in creation for chance.

The work of reason is not at all to invent connections, relations, meaning. There's too much of that already. On the contrary, reason seeks to manufacture the neutered, to create the indifferent, to demagnetize inseparable constellations and configurations, to make them erratic elements sworn finally to finding their cause or to wandering at random. Reason seeks to break the incessant cycle of appearances. Chance—the possibility of indeterminate elements, their respective indifference, and, in a word, their freedom—results from this dismantling.

In short, the only chance there is is the one we've artificially produced by the liquidation of forms. Chance never existed, especially not from the beginning, the way we like to think about it. Originally, all forms can be explained one by the other, or rather they necessarily imply one another. *There is no void*, and for there to be chance there must be a void: points at which all substance and form melt together, intervals when there is literally nothing. And this, for a way of thinking other than our own modern one, would be unthinkable.

It's not by chance (!) that chance and the void were discovered at the same time, in the seventeenth century, with Pascal and Toricelli.[7] Modern man literally invented these neutral concepts, these simulations of absence: chance; emptiness; a world without bond, form, destiny; a space without content. Two formal abstractions, bases for a modernity from which fatality and grace began then to withdraw, leaving the field open for experimental demiurgy and statistical extermination.

Games of chance paradoxically illustrate this absence of chance, its radical denial in the very spirit of the player. What the

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7. Jacques Brosse, *Traverses* #23.

gambler wants is certainly not to be tuned into the "law" of probabilities and great numbers. This would hardly be exciting, no more than any objective sequence. The gambler is rather looking for chance, but not chance as random effect, punctual and contingent. He wants chance as a sign of election, as a process of general seduction, which it is the rule of the game to capture (this has nothing to do with the laws of probability). The gambler is looking for chain reaction, charming catastrophe.

All strategy in the sphere of the game is aimed at provoking a deescalation of rational causes and an inverse escalation of magical linkage. Not one lucky occasion, then another, throw by throw (the famous equiprobability of chance at every throw), but on the contrary a fatal sequence of lucky throws (or unlucky throws: what is essential is not to win but to be fatal, to trap fate in its own game, where nothing can any longer arrest the production of a world given up to the pure solicitation of mind). Chance, we know, is only chance if it snowballs, just like catastrophe; chance has nothing to do with an objective probability that stops and allows for calculation. Chance must be *forced*, duly solicited, duly seduced. God can only respond; he can only give you *everything*. He can only let things happen according to their destiny, which is to link all forms (including numbers) together without exception, without accident, without fail. This is the basic rule of the game, and God himself is subject to it. This is the basic rule of the world's secret organization, of all the wondrous conjugation of forms according to destiny. This allows the arbitrary modality of the game (concrete rules) for ceremonial purposes (and not for contractual purposes, as in exchanges regulated by law), as a perfectly conventional ritual where there is reflected—not without a glimmer of irony—the absolute necessity that underlies hope.

We are all gamblers. What we desire most intensely is that the inexorable procession of rational connections cease for a while. That there be installed, even for a short time, an unheard-of unravelling of another kind, a marvellous escalation of events, an extraordinary succession, as if predestined, of the smallest details, to the point where we think that things—until now maintained artificially at a distance through a contract of succession and causality—suddenly find themselves, not delivered over to chance, but converging spontaneously, concurring through their very connection in this selfsame intensity

That gives us pleasure. Those are our real events. This obvious fact that nothing is neutral or indifferent—that all things converge if only we can eliminate their "objective" causal contract—this is the very evidence of seduction. To circumvent the circuits of causality, arbitrary signs must be projected, some kind of arbitrary codes, which is what the rules of a game are. These are the temptations that are going to upset the causal system and the objective way things proceed and *reengage their fatal linkage*. These are the real challenges that we commonly throw down, just like the player in the game.

Writing itself does that. Whether poetry or theory, it's nothing but the projection of an arbitrary code, an arbitrary system (an invention of the rules of a game) where things come to be taken in their fatal development. Those little catastrophes like the collapse of meaning, those effects of the turbulence of events, we may interpret them, as does David Ruelle,[8] as part of a rational logic of the unexpected, according to what he calls "the sensitive dependency of initial conditions" of systems. Such a system is affected

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8. David Ruelle, *Traverses* #23.

from the beginning with a minimal disturbance that is amplified existentially (especially in proximity to strange attractors) with incalculable consequences within a relatively short time. "A sneeze can cause a cyclone months later in another part of the world." A fascinating connection, by the very exaggeration of the effect, but one which remains objective and determinist right up to its very unpredictability.

I think, though, that something else is at work in these sudden escalations that surprise the course of things. What happens here is a logical mutation, and not simply a matter of exponential logic. A little as in the dream according to Freud, where words, emptied of their meaning, begin to function as things, and are all brought back to the same primordial, brute material state, to link together in their material imminence, senseless (but not random) beyond all syntax and all principle of coherence. Where words *take themselves* for things and are suddenly caught in the play of things. Similarly, sometimes events are caught in a game beyond all psychology and objective causality, trapped in the game and doubling their bets, paying no attention to what history has to say in the matter. Situations themselves can escape from their meanings and, in a suprasensual linking, they also want to become events. The connections so created seem catastrophic, telescoped, like the unexpected turbulence of events, but which, like the "free" coupling of words in dreams, preserve the character of an extraordinary necessity. Little accelerated gravitations, little "cyclones" are thus born in events themselves, near the subject, but outside of it—pure events, where the subject himself is no longer a word but a thing, and functions at the mercy of things.

In a dream, I have just emerged from a terrible but enigmatic period of mourning. Someone tells me that the mourning actually

passed quite quickly. I reply that it's always like that, and everyone around me bursts into manic laughter. I've unleashed a kind of laughing catastrophe. And through this coincidence between the little I've said and its exaggerated effect, I feel mysteriously swept aside, erased. What was it I unleashed without knowing it? Or rather, into what prodigious relation have I entered without wanting to? A connection that can only depend on *exactly what I've said*, not on what I am, nor even on the dream situation—it must depend precisely upon the insignificance of my words and their very banality.

What more is there to say? Nothing is closer to this delicious, vertiginous, insoluble sensation of being the decisive element in some situation without willing it, than pleasing someone with a single glance. A tiny cause, an extraordinary effect: it's the only proof we have of the existence of God. Incalculable connections are the stuff of our dreams, but also of our daily bread. We like nothing more than this crazy imbalance of cause and effect—it opens fabulous horizons on our origins and on our potential power. They say that seduction is a strategy. Nothing could be more wrong. Seduction is a matter of these unexpected connections that any strategy can at best only attempt to reproduce.

The cause *produces* the effect. Causes therefore always have a meaning and an end. They never lead to catastrophe (they know only crisis). Catastrophe is the abolition of causes. It submerges cause beneath the effect. It hurls causal connection into the abyss, restoring for things their pure appearance or disappearance (as in the apparition of the purely social and its simultaneous disappearance in panic). This is not, however, a matter of chance or indeterminacy; rather it is a kind of spontaneous connection of

appearances, or of the spontaneous escalation of wills, as in the challenge. Or it can come across as a sudden commutation of forms, as in metamorphosis.

It is never causes but rather appearances that, when they link themselves up, lead to catastrophe. Unlike the crisis, which is only the disorder of causes, catastrophe is the delirium of forms and appearances. Just as delusion is the pure, nonreferential linkage of language, just as ceremony is the pure, nonreferential linkage of gestures, rites, and costumes, so catastrophe is the pure, nonreferential connection of things and events. There is no chance at work in all of this. It is rather a formal linkage of the highest necessity. (This necessity is found in the absurd escalation of negative and grotesque events that can sometimes happen to us: instead of accumulating in sadness and collapsing into ridicule—as would be the case if chance alone were the reason for their juxtaposition—things fall apart, cancelling each other out in a kind of spontaneous natural catastrophe, which can only end in the spasm and seduction of their formal succession and the beauty of their enlacement.)

The only real pleasure in the world is to watch things "turn" into catastrophe, to emerge finally from determinacy and indeterminacy, from chance and necessity, and enter the realm of vertiginous connections, for better or worse, where things reach their end without passing through their means, where events attain their effects without passing through causes. Like wit, like seduction—where things proceed not by the detours of sense but via the speedways of appearance.

There is no chance, then. Chance characterized the absolutely unlikely possibility that things—deprived of their determinations and their causes—would be left to themselves, truly free in effect,

floating in an aleatory hyperspace, with a few vague propects of encounters of the third kind. This is, approximately, the fate which is reserved for us at the end of all of our liberations, in the molecular nightmare that is being prepared for us. But on another level, much more radical than the real, this is a complete impossibility. Chance, the concept of chance, supposes that no other connection but causal connection is possible. Chance, therefore, is firmly on the side of necessity: if things no longer have causes (or if they can no longer "produce" them), then they are no longer of any order, except insofar as they revert to the forced equation of probabilities. They wander like dead souls in the purgatory of the aleatory. Chance is the purgatory of causality, where souls are waiting to be given back their bodies, where effects are waiting for their cause. Just before the nuclear hell where, decidedly, they will be forever annihilated.

But things are linked in other ways than through their causes. Take fatality (which we mostly confuse with chance in its mortal effects), for example. I remember a time when, miraculously saved from going over a cliff in a car, some Spaniards stopped on the side of the road to touch us religiously, repeating: "*Suerte, suerte.*"*

In fatality or destiny, the linkage, far from being causal, is rather this: the sign of the apparition of things is also the sign of their disappearance. The sign of their birth will be the sign of their death. Meanwhile you can try to upset the order of reason, to change the course of things, to run along under other skies or undergo psychoanalysis. Nothing doing—the same sign, the same constellation, the same character trait, the same little event that was there at birth reappears there at the moment of death. The emblem of elevation is the same as at the fall, the emblem of appearance is that of disappearance.

That's destiny. You can always go at it with your interpretations, but it's useless. No code, no cipher. The efficacy of a single sign. This doesn't necessarily concern an entire life, nor a whole dynasty, as in clasical tragedy. It may be only a brief sequence. But with a fatal connection, there is neither the rational nor the accidental. Nothing is less accidental than the same sign presiding over the beginning and the end. Compared to that, everything else is accidental; everything else is chance—but that, that is the fatum. The fatal is absolutely opposed to the accidental (as well as to the rational, of course). We have already long preferred the accidental version of the world (when the rational version fails us) to the fatal version. Our preferred version of the apparent disorder of the world is one of chance and accident. Now—contrary to what people think—it is likely that the accidental is extremely rare. Chance is improbable, and fatality quite frequent. Most of the time we lose everything on the number that won everything for us before, and not only at the gambling table. You could say it is hardly remarkable that people always play the same number—but that's the point: *it's no accident* they play the same number.

Contrary to our whole virtuous morality, things have a predestined linkage. Instead of deploying according to a genesis and an evolution, they inscribe themselves in advance in their disappearance. It is prophecy that distinguishes them, not foresight. If you are aware of the sign of an appearance, then the hypothesis of fatality—which is that the course of things or the vicissitudes of the game will ineluctably lead back to the same point, to the fatal intersection of the same sign—allows us to predict the event, the event coming with a sure sign. We may then follow the course of events as we would the progress of a ceremony, the ceremony of the world, which it celebrates in changeless character. Not everything is destiny,

not everything is ceremony, but there are certainly, in each existence and in the disorder of its causes and effects, little immutable sequences of the very highest interest.

Two events, ten years apart. No connection between them. Two disappearances the equivalent of symbolic murder. Something—how to say it—spiritually inexpiable. The first time I was the one who disappeared in this way; the second time I was the one abandoned, and without the shadow of a reason. This doesn't at all reestablish a zero-sum equilibrium, and nothing was redeemed (what could there have been to redeem?). But the story demands that a reversibility be subtly established between two events that are secret from each other, between which, furthermore, I have never made any connection (I should have; these were the only two persons I dreamt about for years). Then one day the two episodes appeared to me under the same sign, and were suddenly resolved in the beauty of this conjunction. This sign was a name. Both persons bore the same first name. No one can say what infinitesimal trace things will pick for their denouement, but we can be sure that it is not by chance. In this case the illumination was accomplished on the basis of the coincidence of names. Suddenly these two events that had remained unexpiated, since they were without history—(there had been nothing to tell, neither fable nor alibi, neither good nor bad reasons, nothing; the disappearances were innocent and definitive, even though we ordinarily resolve things only through fiction or psychology)—entered into another, much more extraordinary mode of resolution. They united in a kind of witticism; through a certain predestination they found each other, these two phantom events, and both were released and unbound from what made them separately unintelligible. Their duplication, their twin

imagination, their conjunction made them suddenly understandable, without the secret of either one ever having been lifted. What could have happened, psychologically, on both sides, in the two cases? It was unimportant to me; whatever it was that had been meaningless was resolved in another kind of linkage.

I saved on psychoanalysis (the futility of the unconscious).

The power of events that happen to you without your having willed them, without your having anything to do with it. But not by chance. They happen, and this coincidence touches you, it's destined for you. Even if you didn't want it, *because* you didn't want it, you're seduced by it. That's the whole difference between destiny and chance. For pure chance, even supposing that it exists, is entirely indifferent to us; pure occurrence has nothing seductive about it for us—it's objective, period. It is this strategy of chance we adopt to neutralize an event or attenuate its effect: "It happened by chance" (not my doing). The accidental death of a friend, of someone close, cannot fail to arouse some guilty fantasy. Or else the unbearable idea that the other person abandoned you, dying by whim. Anything is better than this mental cruelty of a world entirely ruled by the omnipotence of thought. And here chance is quite helpful: it's enough to think (difficult as that is) that things happen without reason, or for a maximum of objective reasons (technical, material, statistical) that remove the responsibility from us, and which, in fact, absolve us from whatever the event could contain of a profoundly *seductive* nature, whose cause we might have wanted to be. For we would like to be the reason for anyone's death (as for anyone's life or good fortune). And there is nothing revolting about this; it does not mean we want anyone to die. But we prefer to have wanted it than to have it happen by accident. Desiring the death of another may be

terrible from a moral point of view, but for death to be a pure function of chance is unbearable from a symbolic point of view, which is an even more fundamental one. Thus, from a moral point of view, we may want to protect ourselves by all sorts of alibis (including chance), from the fatal interconnections of events, but from a symbolic perspective it is deeply repugnant to have a neutral world, ruled by chance and thus innocuous and meaningless, and similarly for a world ruled by objective causes; neither one, although easier to live, can resist the fascinating imagination of a universe entirely ruled by a divine or diabolical chain of *willed* coincidences, that is, a universe where we seduce events, where we induce them and make them happen by the omnipotence of thought—a cruel universe where no one is innocent, and especially not us, a universe where our subjectivity has dissolved (and we joyously accept it) because it has been absorbed into the automatism of events, into their objective unfolding. It has in some way become a world. Let us not forget that if we want to lay claim to the minimal wisdom which says that *it is fundamentally necessary to have willed this world*, in one way or another to have loved it, one way or another to have invented it, it is then also necessary that neither your friend's death, nor any other incidence or catastrophe, escape your thought and will.

We *would like* there to be chance, senselessness, and therefore innocence, and for the gods to continue their game of dice with the universe, but we *prefer* sovereignty, cruelty, fatal interconnection to be all-pervasive, we prefer events to be the radical consequences of thought. We like this, but we prefer that. Likewise we like events to link up according to their causes, but we prefer chance and pure coincidence to pervade the world. Above all I believe that we prefer the fatal connection. Determinism will never abolish chance. But no chance will ever abolish fate.

"What happens is so far ahead of our thoughts, our intentions, that we can never catch up to it or ever really come to know it."

— Rainer Maria Rilke

This is the definition of fate: the precession of the effects over their very causes. So all things happen before having happened. Reasons come after. Sometimes things even disappear before happening, before having occurred. What, then, do we know of them?

The fact that things are in advance of the unfolding of their causes, their precession in time—that is their secret. It is the secret of their seduction, and also that which prevents the real from ever occurring, for the real is only the coincidence in time of an event and a causal sequence.

When things go faster than their causes, they have the time to *appear*, to occur as appearances before even becoming real. It's then that they keep their power of seduction.

Speed itself is doubtless only this: throughout and beyond all technology, the temptation for things and people to go faster than their cause, to thereby catch up to their beginning and annul it. As such, it is a vertiginous mode of disappearance (Paul Virilio). But writing is another: going faster than the conceptual connections—this is the secret of writing.

In comparison to this catastrophic occurrence—catastrophe is always ahead of the normal schedule; it's always a telescoping, a sudden instantaneity of time, a seism that pulls together the separated edges of time—meaning is always too late. It is like Kafka's Messiah, who will come only when he is no longer needed, not on the Day of Last Judgement, but the day after.

This is the eternal delay to which things are condemned by meaning. Forever to invent causes in order to dispell the prestige of their apparition, forever to invent meaning to dispel appearances, to delay their too-rapid linkage.

This reversibility of causal order—the reversion of cause on effect, the precession and triumph of effect over cause—is fundamental. You might call it primordial, fatal and original. It is the reversibility of destiny. It somehow represents a mortal danger, precisely because it leaves no place for chance (chance can only be deduced, *a contrario*, on an order of causality). This is why our system, essentially Western, has replaced it with another precession, that of the cause to the effect, and more recently with the precession of models, the precession of simulacra to things themselves, whose apparition they conjure up in a different mode. Precession against precession—we need to see the challenge that opposes the two orders. There is no place for chance here, that is, for a neutral and indeterminate substance. The world is Manichean; in it two orders are absolutely opposed. Nothing is determined, but everything is antagonistic.

This is why we have to go much farther than a simple crisis of causality. Things can be in crisis only in a "normal" order of succession. Crisis is the management of causality: liberate the causes and find a rational connection of effects and causes; while in this sudden precession, in this reversibility of the event that devours its own cause, things no longer even have the time to see themselves contested in their principle and corrected as they proceed. Pure contingency, accidentality, the brutal upending of the real and its representation—as Clement Rosset would say—leaves a critical temporality of meaning no chance. This is the order of apparition and pure appearance. Everything is staked on this somersault of meaning.

This is what science catches a glimpse of when, not happy with calling into question the determinist principle of causality (the first revolution), it intuits—beyond even the uncertainty principle, which still functions like hyperrationality—that chance is the floating of all laws. This is already quite extraordinary. But what science senses now, at the physical and biological limits of its exercise, is that there is not only this floating, this uncertainty, but a possible *reversibility* of physical laws. That would be the *absolute enigma*, not some ultraformula or metaequation of the universe (which the theory of relativity was), but the idea that any law can be reversed (not only particles into antiparticles, matter into antimatter, but the laws themselves). The hypothesis of this reversibility has always been affirmed by the great metaphysical systems. It is the fundamental rule of the game of appearance, of the metamorphosis of appearances, against the irreversible order of time, of law and meaning. But it's fascinating to see science arrive at the same hypotheses, contrary to its own logic and evolution.

Consequently, neither causality nor determinism—nor even flotating causality, probability, uncertainty or relativity, which would be the last word in this matter—but rather reversion and reversibility.

Things would then neither be linked according to law, nor free and indeterminate according to chance, but reversible according to the rule. The problem this poses is, therefore: how is it that from a reversible order there could have been established an irreversible one—that of time, causality, history, and chance itself? But perhaps all of that only lends our world an *effect* of irreversibility, and perhaps this is in the process of changing. What if even physical laws, the surest guarantee of the effect of irreversible causality in the universe, are slipping so gently into the reversible?

In any case it is from this reversibility, and not from causality, that we should expect unheard-of effects. It is from there, and not from chance and its ridiculous statistical objectivity, we must expect a surprise—the art of escaping both chance and necessity, the art of a certain turning, fatal and enigmatic, that rules over the order of the apparition and the disappearance of things.

The Illusionist and the Rose of Paracelsus

The illusionist, master of his art, dreams of accomplishing the great transmutation: to make a woman disappear before your very eyes, right on stage. There's nothing easier than getting rid of the rabbit, the scarf, the hat—nothing to it; but making a woman disappear is something he's never managed to do, and he dreams of it. Now, one night, during the performance, he brings the house down: the lady has vanished. He did it, but how? The whole problem is finding out by what secret paths, by what unexpected detour he succeeded (maybe it was enough just to think about it, to imagine her having disappeared—which isn't so easy). But perhaps it was not some power that made her disappear, but chance, which he had nothing to do with, of which he was only a conductor.

The other story: that of Paracelsus. A student comes to visit; he wants Paracelsus to become his teacher and teach him his powers. But he wants immediate proof of them. Paracelsus is reluctant. The student insists, throwing the rose he is holding into the fireplace and defying Paracelsus to resurrect it. Paracelsus declines, saying he can't. The student, disappointed and angry, leaves. Then Paracelsus leans over the fireplace, pronounces a single word, and the rose is fully revived.

Borges's tale is impenetrable in that, outside of a rather conventional story of teacher and student, it is almost impossible in the end to know if Paracelsus is really able to revive the rose with a word, or if he simply tries to do it, and by miracle or chance, it "works," the most surprised of all being Paracelsus himself. He actually wasn't lying when he told the disciple he didn't have the power to do it; the power came to him unexpectedly; perhaps it was not a power at all, but chance, accident, an occurrence remaining forever a mystery.

By what effect, which would be neither chance (too improbable) nor a power (too easy), would the woman disappear and the rose reappear? We have to think. (Why search for plausibility in imaginary stories? But these, and never the true stories, are precisely the ones that require a secret solution; they are like witticisms that demand a witty kind of analysis.) And this hypothesis, as we are well aware, has a lot that is unreal about it, as much unreality as the evidence that is missing and will always be missing—we have to think that everything turns on a reversible imminence of things that it is enough simply to grasp. When it comes down to it, there is really no good reason why the lady shouldn't vanish, and that is the magician's secret: everything real is ready, indeed, immediately inclined to disappear—simply waiting for it, you could say. It is enough to dispel the will to reality, the will to persist and to exist that makes things last beyond their apparition. Or perhaps we need to grasp the rule according to which, as soon as something appears, it can only disappear. In this manner things ask only to seduce; it's enough to dispel their will to meaning. Both go together, in fact. To make the lady vanish you have to seduce her (detour her from her real, all too-real existence). To revive the rose, it is enough to seduce it (detour it from its ashen inexistence). For to seduce things

is to put them back into their cycle of appearance and disappearance, of incessant metamorphoses, and to put yourself back in the cycle, where there is neither chance nor power, but where appearance and disappearance are linked according to the ineluctable rule (this is destiny). According to a linear and willed order, the lady can never vanish, the rose can never reappear. They can only do this in a reversible order, where all the art lies in positioning oneself.

The Ceremony of the World

In the order of highly conventional and perfectly arranged connections, in the order of connections devoid of the greatest necessity, ceremony is the equivalent of fatality.

An ecstatic connection like that of the game: ceremony has no meaning, it has only esoteric rule. It has no end, since it is initiatory.

In it we find the definitively factitious and conventional order of the world exalted, the occult objectivity that shines behind the subjectivity of appearances.

They say that savage thinking (*la pensée sauvage*) subjectivizes everything, without taking into account the objectivity of the world. But it is we who, behind our alibi of objective reason, subjectivize, psychologize, and impose everywhere an occult subjectivity.

The ceremony puts an end to this occultism of subjectivity.

Let him (the Brahmin) never look at the sun rising or setting, or during an eclipse, or when it is reflected in water, or in the middle of its course.

Let him never step over a rope to which a cow is attached, nor run while it is raining, nor look at his image in water; such

is the established rule. Let him, when he passes, always keep to the right of a hillock, a cow, an idol, a Brahmin, a bowl of clarified butter or honey, a place where four roads meet, and the great well-known frees.

However strong his desire let him not approach his wife once her period has started, nor lie in the same bed with her. Let him not eat out of the same plate as his wife, nor look at her while she eats, sneezes, yawns—nor when she is sitting nonchalantly. Nor when she puts makeup on her eyes, or perfumes herself, nor when her breast is exposed, nor when she is giving birth.

Let him never leave his urine or his excrement on the road, nor on the ashes of a fire, nor on pasture land, nor on plowed land, nor in water, nor on a funeral pyre, nor on a mountain, nor in the ruins of a temple, nor on the nest of white ants.

Nor in holes inhabited by living creatures, nor while walking, nor standing, nor on a riverbank, nor on a mountaintop. Likewise, he should never evacuate his urine or his excrement-while looking at objects shaking in the wind, nor looking at a fire, nor a Brahman, nor water, nor cows.

During the day let him evacuate facing north; at night, facing south; at dawn and at twilight, in the same way as during the day.

— The Laws of Manu, Book IV

Every detail of existence, in the code of Manu, is minutely ritualized: a theatre of cruelty, every moment marked with a necessary sign, a discrimination, a secret distinction (not at all a sociological distinction; this would be characteristic of a weaker, more banal order, a disorder of the rule and the ceremonial which yields to any

subjective evaluations—but this order, the *sociological* one, is fundamentally not very interesting) in the slightest action, the most insignificant word, the minutest bodily secretion, the least remarkable of natural events. Everything is initiatory, in the sense that nothing happens except by way of the necessary, ineluctable sign of its apparition—nothing changes except by the necessary, ineluctable signs of its metamorphoses.

That is the ceremony of the world, its perfect ordering, which is the opposite of subjective desire and objective chance. Desire and chance are stricken from the ceremony. It is no longer even a metaphor. There is no rhetoric, no allegory, no metaphysics in the text of the *Laws of Manu*. No mystery either: but the pure unfolding, the pure cipher of the ceremonial of days and nights with their obligations. Language is immanent, as is rite: it sets forth rules, and does not get involved with dialectics or psychology. It has no recourse either to justificatory or allusive myths. It tells us what to do, period. Not a system of values or interpretation: a system of rules.

Now this is where signs take on their greatest intensity: when they require only pure observance. When, like the rules of a game, they push the abitrary, the discriminatory, to the limit. Not *difference*, which is always meaningful, but *discrimination*, which is the truly rigorous form of labeling, and the equivalent to predestination in time—that which is always already there before it has happened (thus perfectly miraculous), which takes on the power of a sign before being meaningful (thus perfectly arbitrary), which is imposed as goal before being justified (thus perfectly unjust). All of this might seem to us, in the moral, sentimental and democratic order in which we live, perfectly immoral and unjustifiable; in fact, we have long directed all our fulminations at predestination and

discrimination, while we cultivate lovingly, on the contrary, finality and difference—however, it is in predestination and discrimination that things and signs attain the highest level of intensity, fascination and *jouissance*.

The process that regulates events in the world on the basis of the occurrence of a pure sign, or in the event of a ceremonial sign, even if it were a catastrophic process, will always be more grandiose and more fascinating than that of causal development. The former, which steals our liberty and involves us in a cycle of predestination (even if it were the most banal form of "chance") is more likely to seduce us than a process that involves a liberty and responsibility which are, in any case, equally groundless: instead of consigning ourselves to the comic sight of a liberty grappling with the problem of its own foundation, let us turn rather to the tragedy of the purely arbitrary. Each of us secretly prefers an arbitrary and cruel order, one that leaves us no choice, to the horrors of a liberal one where we don't even know what we want, where we are forced to recognize that we don't know what we want; for in the former case we are consigned to maximal determination, and in the second to indifference. Everyone secretly prefers an order so rigorous, an unfolding of events so arbitrary (or so illogical, as with fate or ceremony) that the slightest disturbance can make the whole thing collapse—everyone prefers this to the dialectical workings of reason, where a finalizing logic dominates all accidents of language. Without a doubt, we have a deep desire to subvert destiny, to disturb the ceremony, as well as to violate any and all orders: but this violence itself is then predestined. It takes on greater relief from the ceremonial order. It is not an informal violence; it creates a dramaturgic peripety. I'm thinking of that very beautiful scene in *Gate of Hell* where, during the long

sequence of the tea ceremony that goes on in silence, one of the knights suddenly gets up and turns over a cup: all the secret conflicts come to the surface in this single sign, whose violence is not really external to the rule—it seems to be the very tension connected with the ceremony that produces the sudden infraction as its necessary effect. Ceremonial violence appears not as a transgression, but as an exacerbation of the rule, where the whole world is suspended in the interruption of the game. The same effect is obtained in Chinese opera when all the moving warriors suddenly become still, at the high point of their dual attack, in a mute paroxysm where immobility itself does violence to movement.

All ceremonies are in this manner violent in their unfolding, but this violence is that of the reversibility of the rule, not that of the transgression of the law. The sign drags its opposite along with it through the very power of signs as such. In itself, the connection of signs in ceremony, the fact that they can succeed and engender one another solely according to the rule of the ritual, already constitutes a violence done to the real. And the fact that every ceremony is linked according to a cycle is a violence done to time. And the fact that it is organized solely on the basis of signs—thousands of pure signs whose suprasensual relation it recovers—is a violence against meaning and the logic of meaning. The entire seduction of the ceremony lies in this idolatrous, demiurgic, and barbarous violence that is opposed to the culture of meaning.

If ceremony is synonymous with slowness, it is because it is of the order of predestination and of regulated unfolding. Hurrying, as with sacrifice, would be sacrilege. The rule must be given a chance to function and gestures must have the time to be completed. Time must have the time to disappear.

The ceremony contains the presentiment of its development and its end. It has no spectators. Wherever there is spectacle, ceremony ceases, for it is also violence against representation. The space where it moves is not a stage, a scene, a space of scenic illusion: it is a locus of immanence and of the unfolding of the rule. Let's consider again the way the game works (cards, chess, chance): there is nothing less theatrical than a passion for gambling—all intensity is withdrawn into the interior, towards the internal operation of the rule, toward the difference of stage and spectacle that is open to view. The slightest dramatic intrusion of the gaze plunges ceremony into aesthetics, which thereby becomes the source of a pleasure; but ceremony is not of the order of pleasure, it is of the order of power, which it possesses by virtue of the immanence, in each of its signs and actors, of its development, and not by virtue of some kind of transcendence of aesthetic judgement.

Ceremony has the racial and ritual beauty of Japanese faces, in contrast to the reflexive and idealized aesthetics of our Western faces. Our Western beauty is related either to characteristics of nature and expression (character beauty) or to characteristics of fashion (the dominance of successive ideals and models, idealization of such a trait at such a time, etc.). Naturalized and idealized, it presupposes a distinction between beautiful and ugly (more recently, even, a rather ferocious blackmail by beauty). Oriental traits, on the contrary—without considering that they emphasize the face less and imply more of a gestural ceremony of the whole body—are racial, therefore arbitrary and conventional, in opposition to our naturalist and expressionist aesthetic; but they suddenly acquire a much more extraordinary beauty, that of a ritual morphology that is the same for all. No distinction: the same beauty plays on the faces of men and women, and somehow no one is ugly, because they all

receive their outline from the same destiny. Compared to this, Western beauty, with its individuation according to hybrid models, seems extremely vulgar. The play of morphological signifiers of race comes out far ahead of the signified aesthetic values of our culture.

Ceremonial beauty is not that of the subject, just as the intensity of the game is not that of affect or desire. The ceremonial game is broken up as well by moral law or by desire.

Today we place the moral law above signs. The play of conventional forms is deemed hypocritical and immoral: we oppose it with "the politeness of the heart" or even the radical impoliteness of desire. We believe in exchange and in the sincerity of exchange, and in a natural truth of feelings and affects. We believe in a hidden truth of rapports of force whose expressive superstructure would be signs, always suspected of subverting reality and mystifying consciousness. We believe in a hidden sexual truth of the body, this body being nothing more than a surface for decipherment. We believe in the primacy of an informal energy, or of a depth of meaning (the law inscribed deep in people's hearts) whose purpose is to make its way through the surface confusion of signs. And we're ready to transgress established codes to make the Law and Truth shine forth in their splendor.

It's true that etiquette and politeness (and ceremony in general) are no longer what they once were. But it's because we want to give etiquette meaning that we give it affectation. It's because we want to substitute the necessity of the Law for the arbitrariness of the rule that the signs of etiquette become arbitrary conventions. We could—we might as well—saddle the rules of chess with moral reprobation. Now etiquette and politeness—what there was of them in a ceremonial order that is no longer our own—do not even

have as a purpose, any more than rituals do, to temper the initial violence of rapports, to dispel threats and aggressiveness (holding out one's hand to show that one is not armed, etc.). As if there were some finality in the civility of mores: this is our hypocrisy, imputing everywhere and always a moralizing function for exchanges. But *the law inscribed in heaven is not at all one of exchange*. It's rather the pact of alliance and seductive connections.

A seductive connection is one that avoids the promiscuity of cause and effect. Signs don't draw up a contract of exchange with each other, but a pact of alliance. Now, here does there reign a law of meaning, but only the interconnection of appearances. The heavens too, with their turning signs, are really arcs of alliance where the constellations are linked and arrayed as for a ceremonial destiny. Being born under a sign is not at all to interpret it or to make it signify according to its meaning: it is affiliating with it, forming an alliance with it, recognizing its power of predestination. It's not a matter of believing or disbelieving, any more than with the signs of politeness and etiquette: the mistake is always in giving meaning to what has none. Destiny—an ineluctable and recurrent unfolding of signs and appearances—has become for us a strange and unacceptable form. We no longer want a destiny. We want a history. But ceremony was the image of destiny.

There is no way to rehabilitate etiquette as a social function. When it is no more than that, it is in effect ridiculous and absurd, as with the resurrection of yoga as psychodietetic discipline or the recycling of martial arts in Bejart's choreography. The rights of the individual, his or her drives, free expression, and the liberation of speech have put an end to this futile ceremonial and to the hypocrisy of signs. Bravo!

However, this unleashing of truth, this triumph of sincerity in all its forms, also consecrates the end of illusion, of the power of illusion. Illusion in the literal sense of an initiation to the rule, to a superior agreement and convention in which something other than the real is at stake. The game is based on this possibility for every system to overflow its own reality principle and to be refracted in another logic. This is the secret of illusion, and what is at stake is always to rescue this vital dimension. Just like the eighteenth-century magician who had invented an automaton that could imitate human actions so perfectly that he was obliged on stage to "automatize" himself, to imitate mechanical imperfection precisely in order to save the game, to preserve the infinitessimal difference that made the form of illusion possible: if the two of them had been equally perfect, all seduction would have vanished.

What we call art, theatre, language have worked for centuries to save illusion in this sense, that is, to maintain the tiny distance that makes the real play with its own reality, that plays with the disappearance of the real while exalting its appearance, and to rescue this ironic rule of the game. In this sense they have kept something of ceremony and ritual in the violence they do to the real. It is in art (and certainly not in what we today call ceremony: monuments to the dead, giving out prizes, Olympic Games, etc.) that something of this ceremonial and initiatory power has been preserved, even though considerably weakened. It is there that a strategy of appearances has been conserved, that is, a mastery of apparitions and disappearances, and, in particular, the sacrificial mastery of the eclipse of the real.

Certainly our current interpretation of the game goes in the opposite direction. Our ideal vision of the game is that of the child; *paideia*, free spontaneity and wild creativity, the expression of a

pure nature, before the time of Law and repression. The animal game as opposed to the ceremonial game. But we know that the bird does not sing for its own pleasure, nor does the child play this way. Even in the most "frenzied" games, the charm of recurrence, of ritual, of meticulous unfolding, the invention of rules and complicity in observance, are what makes for the intensity and simplicity of child's play. The scansion of the *fort-da*, for example, could easily mean the conjuration of the mother's absence, but it's also first of all a kind of ceremony, a control and mastery of appearance and disappearance. The supposition of fantasy puts an end to the originality of this form, since it gives it a meaning—it likewise ends the seduction proper to play, which is precisely only a matter of appearances.

The secret is made up of the annihilation of causes and the burial of ends in the organized order of appearances alone: the Rule of Appearances and Disappearances.

Now, ceremonies were established in order to regulate appearance and disappearance. What has always fascinated people is the double miracle of the apparition of things and of their disappearance. What people have always wanted to conserve is control over them and over their rule: that of birth and death, but also of the eclipse of the stars, the rapture of passion, and the revolving of the natural cycle. It is only our modern culture that has capitulated to this form of obligation and entrusted everything to that informed and formless form of freedom called chance, or to that inductive/deductive form of connection called necessity.

Today, after having staked everything on the mode of production and having exhausted its illusion, we are faced with a mode of appearance and disappearance while no longer possessing any ceremonial mastery. Our time refuses the charm of appearance and

disappearance, just as it rejects the artifice and sacrifice which alone can guarantee their sovereignty. The entire order of production was established to make an order of the apparition of things impossible, to prevent them from coming into existence too suddenly, even before they have the right to exist or to have a meaning.

Already here, even before arriving—this, however, is how things really happen to us: under the visage (or mask) of pure appearance. Banality itself can take on this face of pure appearance, and it can then become a destiny once more, that is, a mode of simultaneous appearance and disappearance.

Today, in order to justify the apparition of things, we are reduced to invoking a productive energy, an energy of drives—for death itself, we are reduced to invoking the death drive. But the search for control over the mode of disappearance is the opposite of the death drive, and has, in fact, nothing to do with it.

Our fundamental destiny is not to exist and survive, as we think: it is to appear and disappear. That alone seduces and fascinates us. That alone is scene and ceremony. We mustn't believe that it is up to chance to make things appear and disappear, our own task being to make them last or to give them meaning. Nothing is less likely than chance to bring about the scene where things have the luxury of disappearing: chance can only lead to statistical extermination. Nothing is less capable than chance of making something appear: for something really to appear, surging up to the reign of appearances, there must be seduction. For something to really disappear, to resolve into its appearance, there must be a ceremony of metamorphosis.

The Peking Opera: all Chinese theatre, whether it is in battles, or in love, or in the game of signs and flags, is a staging of the dual

felinity of bodies, actions, voices and movements, a perpetual enlacement at the minimal distance of doubling. Bodies are mobile and acrobatic mirrors of each other. Clothes, jewelry, fans brush against each other in a spiral dance; the weapons do not touch, but brush against each other violently, describing an empty space into which one cannot cross (that of the darkness of the dueling episode, of battle or seduction in the episodes of war and love, of water in the story of the boatman and the girl, where the entire space of the river is made physically manifest in the twin undulation of their two bodies—as far from each other as the length of the invisible boat, voices and bodies alternating in a duel where, in nothing more than the ceremonial space of their arrangement, the whole danger of the crossing is evoked). Nor is there anything more beautiful than this nocturnal duel where bodies search for but cannot find each other, describing with precision and violence the empty space of shadow, rendering palpable the darkness that separates them and the complicity, made of this reversibility of each of their movements, that unites them.

Everything is arranged: felinity, avoidance, advance, retreat, confrontation, the whirling frenzy of the bodies, their sudden immobility; nothing is left to a letting-go, to improvisation: everything is linked and connected, but never with a connection of meaning—always a connection of appearances. Perfection is attained in the theater when it finds this marvellous mobility, this aerial readiness, this felinity of appearances where they link up so effortlessly. Felinity, in the animal also, in the animal above all, is the sovereign interconnection of body and movement. Here, in this theater, felinity delivers signs from the weight of meaning—they can then play in a limitless mobility, and even culminate in

absolute immobility where space becomes frozen in adversity, in the enlacement at the summit of two dual forces.

Combats are never confrontations, rapports of force, but strategems, that is to say the agonistic illustration of a ruse, of a non-frontal violence, of a parallel and mobile strategy. Every body duplicates the movement of the other, draws itself as a lure where the other, petrified, finds only the void. Each one triumphs by appearance, by sending back to the other the appearance of his strength. But each one knows that triumph is not definitive, *for no one will ever occupy* the blind spot around which the battle is arrayed. Wanting to occupy it, wanting to take the empty space of strategem (like wanting to annex the empty heart of truth), is madness and an absolute misunderstanding of the world as play and ceremony.

This is, however, what our Western theatre does when it substitutes the speculative mirror of psychology for the dual reversibility of bodies and gestures. Bodies and signs collide because they have lost their ceremonial *aura* (Benjamin). The difference can be felt even in the movements of crowds and masses: while in the Western space of the subway, the city, the market, people bump against each other, fighting for space, or at best avoid each other's trajectories, in an aggressive promiscuity, the crowds in the Orient, or in an Arab casbah, know how to move differently, glide with presentiment (or consideration), care, even in a tight space, the interstitial spaces the meat-cutter of the *Chuang-Tzu* was talking about, through which his blade passes effortlessly. And this is not a question of boundaries between bodies that we make an effort to demarcate by "free" spaces or individual territories; it is the consequence of a ceremonial space, of a sacred space of arrangement that also controls the way bodies appear to each other. Ceremony is a tactile universe, made to maintain bodies at the right distance, which is that of regulated gestures

and appearance, and to make this distance felt. Two bodies that bump and collide are obscene and impure. Two things that enter into direct contact, whatever they are, be it two words or two signs, two things that couple with no formal process involved, are impure. Their promiscuity is like that of cadavers on the ground, with only excrement between them. There must be discrimination; otherwise the world becomes impoverished, wretched and violent in a perfectly futile way: in confusion.

Dress serves this purpose—not fashion in its *differential* system, but dress in its power of *discrimination* from "nature." Fashion is a form of liberation of bodies and clothes in a play of combinations which becomes ever more random. Dress involves, on the other hand, an immovable ceremonial constraint. It is part of the tactile, immanent, initiatory universe of the ceremony. (With animals, plumage, for example, is even a part of the genetic patrimony, the reason why animals have been man's model for the ceremonial order and not at all of the "natural" order.)

Fashion relates to the transcendent, modern, mobile, exoteric universe of looking and representation. It arises from a caprice of the desire for forms, from an aesthetic and political desire for distinction—the signs of fashion are also distinctive, and operate according to a code which is the *universal* code of fashion, thus entering into the concert of modern subjectivity, opposing the archaic, timeless, discriminatory rigor of ornament. (Fashion can certainly assume the form of a collective incantation, but it is never the sacrificial act of a group, as is ceremony. Even infinitely varied, it results fundamentally from a process of confusion and promiscuity of all possible forms.) These same forms that were ceremonial have fallen into the system of fashion; we mustn't, however, confuse them.

No confusion, no promiscuity. Theory is just like ceremony. The role of the latter—or of all rituals, whatever kind they may be—is certainly not to conjure away some "original violence"—liturgy is not a catharsis! That is the misunderstanding, as old as functionalism, of all the idealists of original violence, of all the bleeding hearts of anthropology. Nor is it the purpose of theory to render concepts dialectical and universal: on the contrary, it is both ceremony and theory that are violent; both are produced to prevent things and concepts from touching indiscriminately, to create discrimination, and remake emptiness, to redistinguish what has been confused. Struggling against the viviparous obscenity of the confusion of ideas, struggling against the promiscuity of concepts—that is theory (when it is radical), and ceremony too has never done anything else, when it separates the initiated from the uninitiated (for ceremony is always initiatory), when it distinguishes between what connects according to the rule and what doesn't (for ceremony is always organizing), between what is exalted and destroyed according to its very appearance and that which is produced only as meaning. Ceremony is always sacrificial.

When signs no longer represent a destiny, but a history, then they are no longer ceremonial. When behind them lurk sociology, semiology, psychoanalysis, they are no longer rituals. They have lost that power of metamorphosis immanent to the act of ceremony. They are closer to the truth, but they have lost the power of illusion. They are closer to the real, to our scene of the real, but they have lost their theatre of cruelty.

5

For a Principle of Evil

THESE FATAL STRATEGIES, do they exist? I don't even feel that I've described them, or even come close, nor that the hypothesis is anything but a dream—so great is the sway of the real over the imagination. Where do you get what you say about the object? Objectivity is the opposite of fatality. The object is real, and the real is subject to law, period.

And so: faced with a delirious world, there is only the ultimatum of realism. This means that if you want to get away from the madness of the world you have to sacrifice all of its charm as well.

The world, in augmenting its delirium, has only raised the ante on sacrifice. Blackmail by the real. Today, illusion no longer counts; in order to survive, we need to approach ever closer to the nullity of the real.

There is perhaps but one fatal strategy and only one: theory. And doubtless the only difference between a banal theory and a fatal theory is that in one strategy the subject still believes himself to be more cunning than the object, whereas in the other the object is considered more cunning, cynical, talented than the subject, for which it lies in wait. The metamorphoses, the ruses, the strategies of the object surpass the subject's understanding. The object is

neither the double nor the repressed of the subject, neither its fantasy nor its hallucination, neither its mirror nor its reflection—it has its own strategy and holds the key to the rules of a game, impenetrable to the subject, not because they are deeply mysterious, but because they are infinitely ironic.

It is objective irony that lies in wait for us, the irony of the fulfillment of the object without regard for the subject or its alienation. In the phase of alienation, it is subjective irony that triumphs; it is the subject that constitutes an insoluble challenge to the blind world that surrounds him. Subjective irony, ironic subjectivity, is the essence of a world of interdiction, Law and desire. The power of the subject lies in its promise of fulfillment, whereas the sphere of the object is the order of what *has been* fulfilled, and from which, for this very reason, it is impossible to escape.

We confuse the fatal with the return of the repressed (what is inescapable is desire), but the order of fatality is antithetical to that of repression. What is inescapable is not desire, but the ironic presence of the object, its indifference and indifferent connections, its challenge, its seduction, and its disobediance to the symbolic order (and therefore also of the subject's unconscious, if he had one). What is inescapable, in a word, is the principle of Evil.

The subject obeys our metaphysics, which has always tried to distill Good and Evil. The object, however, is translucent to evil. This is why it shows—mischievously, diabolically—its voluntary servitude; bends willingly, like nature, to any law we impose upon it; and disobeys all legislation. And when I speak of the object and its profound duplicity, I speak of all of us and our political and social order. The whole problem of voluntary servitude should be reexamined in this light, not to resolve it but to sound out the

enigma: obedience, in effect, is a banal strategy, which doesn't need to be explained, for it secretly contains—all obedience secretly contains—a fatal disobedience to the symbolic order.

This is how a principle of Evil exists, not as a mystical process and transcendence, but as a hide-out for the symbolic order—as the theft, the rape, the receiving of stolen goods and the ironic embezzlement of the symbolic order. This is how the object is transparent to the principle of Evil. Unlike the subject, it is a poor conductor of the symbolic order, but a good conductor of the fatal—that is to say of a pure objectivity, sovereign and incorrigible, immanent and enigmatic.

Furthermore, it is not Evil that is interesting, it's the spiral of worsening. For the subject clearly reflects, to its dismay, the Evil principle in its mirror; but the object wants to be worse, and demands the worst. It is proof of a more radical negativity, namely, that if everything finally disobeys the symbolic order, it's because everything was subverted from the very beginning.

Even before being produced, the world was seduced. A strange precession which today still weighs on all of reality. The world has been refuted at its source—so it is impossible for it ever to be verified. Negativity, whether historical or subjective, is nothing: the truly diabolical, even in thought, is original subversion.

Opposed to the utopia of The Last Judgement, complimentary to that of the original baptism, we find the vertigo of simulation, the Luciferian rapture of the eccentricity of the beginning and the end.

This is why the gods can only live and hide in the inhuman, in objects and animals, in the sphere of silence and objective brutishness, and not in the sphere of man, which is that of language and subjective brutishness. The God-Man is an absurdity. A god who

rejects the ironic mask of the inhuman, who emerges from the bestial metaphor, from the objective metamorphosis where he incarnated in silence the principle of Evil, in order to don a soul and a face, assumes at the same time the hypocritical psychology of the human.

We need to be respectful of the inhuman. This is the way of certain cultures, which we call fatalist, as a way of condeming them without trial, because they found their commandments on the side of the inhuman, on the side of the stars, or of an animal god, of constellations or faceless divinities. A grand choice, that of a faceless divinity. Nothing is less like our own modern and technical iconolatry.

Metaphysics only allows good rays to filter in, and wants to make the world into the mirror of the subject (who has already passed through a mirror phase). Metaphysics wants a world of forms distinct from their doubles, their shadows, their images: this is the principle of Good. But the object is always the fetish, the false, the *feiticho*, the factitious, the lure, everything that incarnates the abominable confusion of the thing with its magical and artificial double; and that no religion of transparency and the mirror will ever be able to resolve: that is the principle of Evil.

When I speak of the object and its fatal strategies, I'm speaking also of people and their inhuman strategies. For example, a human being can find in a vacation a greater boredom than in everyday life—a redoubled boredom, because it is made up of all the elements of happiness and distraction. The important point is the predestination of vacations to boredom, the bitter and triumphal foreboding that there's no escaping this. How could we suppose that people were going to disavow their daily life and look for an alternative to it? On the contrary, they'll make a destiny out of it:

intensify it while seeming to do the opposite, plunge into it to the point of ecstasy, seal the monotony of it with an even greater monotony. This hyperbanality is the equivalent of fatality.

If one doesn't understand this, then one understands nothing of this collective brutishness, which is a grand act of self-surpassing. I'm not joking: people are not looking for amusement; instead they want to find a fatal distraction. Boredom is not the problem—the essential point is the increase of boredom; increase is salvation and ecstasy. It could mean the ecstatic deepening of anything, even the increase of oppression and abjection that works like the liberating ecstasy of abjection—just as the absolute commodity works like the liberating form of the commodity. This is the only solution to the problem of "voluntary servitude." Furthermore there is no liberation but this one: in the deepening of negative conditions. All forms that tend to project a dazzling and miraculous liberty are only revolutionary homilies. Liberating logic is basically understood only by a few; essentially it is fatal logic that wins out.

Another form of fundamental cynicism: this will to spectacle and illusion, opposed to all will for knowledge and power: tenacious, deep in man's heart, it haunts nonetheless the process of events. There is, as it were, a drive for pure event, objective information, the most secret facts and thoughts, to be commuted into spectacle, to attain ecstasy in a scene instead of being produced as something really happening. To occur is necessary, to be in ecstasy is absolutely vital.

Things can only happen in this excessive manner, that is to say, not in the hold of representation, but in the magic of their effect—there only they appear great and do themselves the luxury of existing. We think of nature as indifferent, and it certainly is to the passions and enterprises of man; but it isn't perhaps indifferent to

the fact of making a spectacle of itself in natural disasters. This is something of a parable, but it's here only to signify this passion of passions, simulating passion, seductive passion, subversive passion, that means that things are meaningless unless transfigured by this illusion, this derision, this production which is not at all a representation, but their prodigious and eccentric form, the will to disdain their causes and to lose ourselves in their effects, and particularly in the effects of their disappearance. Prodigious form that moralists have always condemned, for here is where things cynically subvert themselves from their beginnings and their ends, in a distant echo of original sin.

Furthermore, it is this eccentricity that protects us from the real and its disastrous consequences. That things exhaust themselves in their spectacle—in a magic and artificial fetishism—is the distortion that serious minds will always oppose, in their utopian expurgation of the world in order to deliver it exact, intact, and authentic for the day of Last Judgement. But this spectacle that the moralists disapprove of is possibly the lesser evil. For God knows where unleashed meaning would lead to when it refuses to produce itself as appearance.

Even Revolution can happen only if its spectacle is possible: what the "beautiful souls" deplore is that the media are putting an end to the real event. But if we consider the problem of nuclear annihilation, we may realize the possibility that it is its distillation in simulated everyday panic, in the haunting and spectacular thrills that the media treat our fears to, that protects us from the nuclear clash, and not the balance of terror (there is no strategic guarantee in deterrence, nor, furthermore, any survival instinct of the species). What protects us is that, for nuclear

holocaust, the event threatens dangerously to deny us all hope of spectacle. *That is why it won't happen.* Humanity can accept its own physical disappearance, but it cannot accept to sacrifice its spectacle (unless it succeeds in finding a spectator in another world). The drive to spectacle is more powerful than the survival instinct, we can count on that.[9]

If the morality of things lies in their sacrosanct use-value, then long live the immorality of the atom and of nuclear arms, which cause even them to be submitted to the ultimate and cynical event of the spectacle. Long live the secret rule of the game that causes everything to disobey the symbolic law! What will save us is neither the rational principle nor use-value. Rather, it's the immoral principle of the spectacle, the ironic principle of Evil.

Absorption in this secondary effect is a kind of passion and a kind of fatal will. Likewise, no life can be conceived of outside the framework of a second chance. The design of a life cannot be given except by the vibrant certainty of a necessary return, sooner or later—a little like the resurrection of the body, but without the Last Judgement—the reappearance of certain moments or faces that have once been. These will come back, for they can only disappear on the horizon of your life, whose trajectory, subverted precisely by events, takes the unconscious curve necessary to give them the chance of a second life, or of a definitive return. Then only will they really have taken place. Then only they'll have been lost or won.

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9. Of course, this is not the spectacle that the Situationists denounced as the acme of alienation and the ultimate limit of capitalism. Neither would it be instead the opposite, since here it is a matter of the victorious strategy of the object, its own mode of subversion, and not a way in which it is subverted. We would be much closer, in fact, with the charm of the commodity in Baudelaire.

From a certain moment on, these second comings comprise the very design of existence, where consequently nothing happens by chance; it's the first coming—which is not meaningful in itself and loses itself in the banal obscurity of living—that happens by chance. Only by redoubling can it make of itself a true event, attaining the character of a fatal happening. It's like an astrological sign that is meaningful only when accompanied by its ascendant: the sign itself is nothing; accompanied, it becomes ineluctable.

Once certain events of a life have thus had their second chance, once the cycle has brought them back once and once only, that life is completed. When a life knows no second coming of this kind, it ends before having begun.

The fatal is there somewhere, in that direction. In this sense, the old heresies were right. Everyone has the right to a second birth: the true one. Everyone is predestined: not by astral decree, but by internal immanence in our own life, to the necessary return of such events. This is why, chance having been abolished, the Last Judgement is useless.

This is why the theory of predestination is infinitely superior to that of freedom of the soul. Predestination eliminates from life all that is only destined—all that, having happened only once, is only accidental, while what happens a second time becomes fatal; but it also gives to life the intensity of these secondary events, which have, as it were, the depth of a previous existence.

There is neither form nor meaning to a first encounter, still stained with misunderstanding and banality. Fatality only comes afterwards, by the current effect of this previous life. And there is a sort of will and energy in this occurrence, which no one knows anything about, and which isn't the resurgence of a hidden order.

Not at all. It's in the full light of day that certain things come to their assigned existence.

If the stars rose and set in just any order, heaven itself would be meaningless. It's the recurrence of their trajectory that makes for the heavenly event. And it's the recurrence of certain fatal peripeties that makes for the event of a life.

At the end of all that, if the object is ingenious, if the object is fatal, what can we do about it?

After the art of survival, the ironic art of disappearance? The subject has always dreamed of this, a dream inverse to its dream of totalization, and the one has never been able to erase the other. Quite the contrary. Its failure today awakens passions that are much more subtle.

At the heart of banal strategies is the fiery desire of fatal strategies.

Nothing can guarantee us a fatality, even less a strategy. What is more, the conjunction of these two terms is paradoxical: how could there be fatality if there is strategy? That's just the point: the enigma is that fatality is at the heart of every strategy. It's what peeks through the heart of more banal strategies. It's the object, whose fatality would be a strategy something like the rule of another game. Basically, the object mocks the laws we attach to it; it would rather figure in our calculations as a sarcastic variable, and leave it to the equations to verify themselves. But the rules of its game, the conditions according to which it accepts playing? No one knows them, and they can change without notice.

No one knows what a strategy is. There are not enough means in the world for us to be able to dispose of ends. And, therefore, no one is capable of articulating a final process. God himself is forced to employ a trial-and-error method. The interesting thing about

this is the inexorable logical process that is visible here, by which the object is taken in the very game that we wanted to make it play—doubling the ante somehow, escalating the bidding on the strategic limits it will tolerate, installing thereby a strategy that doesn't have its own ends: a "playful" strategy that stills the play of the subject, a fatal strategy in that the subject thereby succumbs to the surpassing of its own objectives.

We are accomplices in this excess of finality that is there in the object (this can be the excess of meaning, and therefore the impossibility of deciphering a word that plays the game of meaning all too well). We invent all these strategies in the hope of having them result in the unexpected event. The real we invent wholly in the hope of seeing it result in a prodigious artifice. From any object we hope for a blind response that hampers our projects. From strategy we expect control. From seduction we look for surprise.

Seduction is fatal. It's the effect of a sovereign object that recreates in you an original confusion and seeks to surprise you. Fatality, in turn, is seductive, like the discovery of a hidden rule. The discovery of a hidden rule of the game is dazzling, and compensates us in advance for the cruelest losses.

Likewise with the joke. If I look for a fatal connection in language, I fall on the joke, which is itself the *dénouement* of language immanent to language (that is the fatal: the same sign presiding over a life's crystallization and its resolution, at the knotting of the intrigue and its *dénouement*). In language become pure object, irony (of the *Witz**) is the objective form of this *dénouement.* Everywhere, as in the *Witz*, redoubling and escalating the stakes are spirited forms of denouement.

Everything must unfold in a fatal and ingenious way, just as everything was caught from the start in an original subversion.

Even predestination is a form of ironic subversion of fatality. Chance is also one. What's the use of trying to establish chance as an objective process, if it is an ironic one? Of course it exists, but against all science, in the irony of the aleatory, and even at the molecular level. And of course fatality exists too, simultaneously—there's no paradox involved in this. The difference is that the irony of fatality is greater than the irony of chance, which just makes it more tragic and more seductive.

It's true that this is a difficult and obscure route: to side with the object, to take up the cause of the object. To find another rule, another axiom: nothing mystical in this, nothing of the other-worldly delirium of a subjectivity trapped and escaping headlong into a paroxysmal inventory. But simply to delineate this other logic, unravel those other strategies, leave the field open to objective irony. That also is a challenge—eventually it threatens absurdity, and runs the risk of what it describes—but the risk is to be taken. The hypothesis of a fatal strategy must itself be fatal, too.

If there be a morality, it too must be engaged in the eccentric cycle of its effects, must itself be hypermoral, like the real is hyperreal, must be no longer a moral stasis, but a moral ecstasy, must itself be a special effect.

Lévi-Strauss claimed that the symbolic order had left us, yielding to history. Today, says Canetti, history itself has withdrawn. What remains but to pass on the side of the object, and on the side of its eccentric and precious effects, of its fatal effects (fatality is only the absolute liberty of effects)? Semiorrhage.

Today, now that all critical radicality has become useless, now that all negativity seems resolved in a world that pretends to realize itself, and now that the critical spirit has found its summer home

in socialism, and the effects of desire are largely depleted—what remains but to bring things back to their enigmatic ground zero? Now the enigma is inverted: once it was the Sphinx that posed men the question of man, the question Oedipus thought he answered, that we all thought we answered. Today it's man that poses to the Sphinx—the inhuman—the question of the inhuman, of the fatal, of the indifference of the world toward our affairs, of its fickleness toward objective laws. The object (the Sphinx), subtler than man, hardly answers. But it's certain nevertheless that in disobeying laws, in unravelling desire, it answers secretly to some enigma. What remains but to side with this enigma?

Everything can be summed up in this: let's believe for a single instant the hypothesis that there is a fatal and enigmatic bias in the order of things.

In any case, there is something stupid about our current situation. There's something stupid in the raw event, to which destiny, if it exists, could not be insensible. There's something stupid in the current forms of truth and objectivity that a superior irony could spare us. Everything is expiated in one way or another. Everything is headed somewhere. Truth only complicates things.

And if the Last Judgement consists, as everyone knows, for each of us, in saving and eternalizing a moment of our lives, and one only, with whom do we share this ironic end?

Fatal Strategies

Jean Baudrillard

Philippe Beitchman & W.G.J. Niesluchowski

Dominic Pettman

Two alternatives, equally possible: nothing has happened yet, our unhappiness comes from the fact that nothing has really begun (liberation, revolution, progress)—finalist utopia. The other eventuality is that everything has already happened. We are already beyond the end. All that was metaphor has already materialized, collapsed into reality. This is our destiny: the end of the end. We are in a transfinite universe.

Fatal Strategies was first published in France in 1983, two years after Baudrillard's groundbreaking *Simulations,* with its dizzying descriptions of a world in which original and copy, real and false have become indistinguishable. *Fatal Strategies* takes us one step further with a paradoxical question: if plans of action have become ineffective, can the hyperreal world we live in be challenged by another kind of logic that would come with the inevitability of fate?

Outwardly geared to progress and production, ruled by linearity, cause and effect, and accumulation, contemporary societies remain unaware that they have already outgrown their *raison d'être* and finalities. In *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard is looking for a rule immanent to the system, a fatal game (more final than final) capable of dismantling, challenging, and reversing the world of simulation. Bypassing subjectivity in favor of an "objective irony," Baudrillard is here reinventing theory as narration, a playful, provocative proposition, and all the more implacable for that.

Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) was a philosopher, sociologist, cultural critic, and theorist of postmodernity who challenged all existing theories of contemporary society with wit and rigor. An outsider to the French intellectual establishment, he is internationally renowned as a twenty-first century visionary, reporter, and provocateur. His *Simulations* instantly became a cult classic and made him a controversial voice in the world of politics, philosophy, and art.

SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS
distributed by **The MIT Press**
ISBN-13: 978-1-58435-061-3

Simulations

Jean Baudrillard

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Semiotext[e]

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Printed in the United States of America

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The Precession of Simulacra

> The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none.
> The simulacrum is true.
>
> *Ecclesiastes*

If we were able to take as the finest allegory of simulation the Borges tale where the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory (but where the decline of the Empire sees this map become frayed and finally ruined, a few shreds still discernible in the deserts—the metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction, bearing witness to an Imperial pride and rotting like a carcass, returning to the substance of the soil, rather as an aging double ends up being confused with the real thing)—then this fable has come full circle for us, and now has nothing but the discrete charm of second-order simulacra. [1]

Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory — **PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA**—it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. *The desert of the real itself.*

In fact, even inverted, the fable is useless. Perhaps only the allegory of the Empire remains. For it is with the same Imperialism that present-day simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models. But it is no longer a question of either maps or territory. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between them that was the abstraction's charm. For it is the difference

which forms the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real. This representational imaginary, which both culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographer's mad project of an ideal coextensivity between the map and the territory, disappears with simulation — whose operation is nuclear and genetic, and no longer specular and discursive. With it goes all of metaphysics. No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. No more imaginary coextensivity: rather, genetic miniaturisation is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks and command models—and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.

In this passage to a space whose

curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials—worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, a more ductile material than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced—this is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection which no longer leaves any chance even in the event of death. A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference.

The Divine Irreference of Images

To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign: "Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and make believe he is ill. Some who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms." (Littre) Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary". Since the simulator produces. "true" symptoms, is he ill or not? He cannot be treated objectively either as ill, or as not-ill. Psychology and medicine stop at this point, before a thereafter undiscoverable truth of the illness. For if any symptom can be "produced", and can no longer be accepted as a fact of nature, then every illness may be considered as simulatable and simulated, and medicine loses its meaning since it only knows how to treat "true" illnesses by their

objective causes. Psychosomatics evolves in a dubious way on the edge of the illness principle. As for psychoanalysis, it transfers the symptom from the organic to the unconscious order: once again, the latter is held to be true, more true than the former—but why should simulation stop at the portals of the unconscious? Why couldn't the "work" of the unconscious be "produced" in the same way as any other symptom in classical medicine? Dreams already are.

The alienist, of course, claims that "for each form of the mental alienation there is a particular order in the succession of symptoms, of which the simulator is unaware and in the absence of which the alienist is unlikely to be deceived." This (which dates from 1865) in order to save at all cost the truth principle, and to escape the spectre raised by simulation—namely that truth, reference and objective causes have ceased to exist. What can medicine do with something which floats on either side of illness, on either side of health, or with the reduplication of illness in a discourse that is no longer true or false? What can psychoanalysis do with the reduplication of the discourse of the

unconscious in a discourse of simulation that can never be unmasked, since it isn't false either? [2]

What can the army do with simulators? Traditionally, following a direct principle of identification, it unmasks and punishes them. Today, it can reform an excellent simulator as though he were equivalent to a "real" homosexual, heart-case or lunatic. Even military psychology retreats from the Cartesian clarities and hesitates to draw the distinction between true and false, between the "produced" symptom and the authentic symptom. "If he acts crazy so well, then he must be mad." Nor is it mistaken: in the sense that all lunatics are simulators, and this lack of distinction is the worst form of subversion. Against it classical reason armed itself with all its categories. But it is this today which again outflanks them, submerging the truth principle.

Outside of medicine and the army, favored terrains of simulation, the affair goes back to religion and the simulacrum of divinity: "I forbad any simulacrum in the temples because the divinity that breathes life into nature cannot be represented."

Indeed it can. But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme authority, simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or is it volatilized into simulacra which alone deploy their pomp and power of fascination—the visible machinery of icons being substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? This is precisely what was feared by the Iconoclasts, whose millenial quarrel is still with us today. [3] Their rage to destroy images rose precisely because they sensed this omnipotence of simulacra, this facility they have of effacing God from the consciousness of men, and the overwhelming, destructive truth which they suggest: that ultimately there has never been any God, that only the simulacrum exists, indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum. Had they been able to believe that images only occulted or masked the Platonic Idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of a distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the images concealed nothing at all, and that

in fact they were not images, such as the original model would have made them, but actually perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination. But this death of the divine referential has to be exorcised at all cost.

It can be seen that the iconoclasts, who are often accused of despising and denying images, were in fact the ones who accorded them their actual worth, unlike the iconolaters, who saw in them only reflections and were content to venerate God at one remove. But the converse can also be said, namely that the iconolaters were the most modern and adventurous minds, since underneath the idea of the apparition of God in the mirror of images, they already enacted his death and his disappearance in the epiphany of his representations (which they perhaps knew no longer represented anything, and that they were purely a game, but that this was precisely the greatest game—knowing also that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them).

This was the approach of the Jesuits, who based their politics on the virtual disappearance of God and on the worldly and spectacular manipulation of consciences—the evanescence of God in the epiphany of power—the end of transcendence, which no longer serves as alibi for a strategy completely free of influences and signs. Behind the baroque of images hides the grey eminence of politics.

Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images, muderers of the real, murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the Real. All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could *exchange* for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything

but a gigantic simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.

So it is with simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. The latter starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Conversely, simulation starts from the *utopia* of this principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum.

This would be the successive phases of the image:

—it is the reflection of a basic reality

—it masks and perverts a basic reality

—it masks the *absence* of a basic reality

—it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

In the first case, the image is a *good*

appearance—the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an *evil* appearance—of the order of malefice. In the third, it *plays at being* an appearance—it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation.

The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing, marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy (to which the notion of ideology still belongs). The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and stimulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognise his own, nor any last judgement to separate true from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance.

When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And

there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us—a strategy of the real, neo-real and hypperral whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence.

Rameses, or Rose-Coloured Resurrection

Ethnology almost met a paradoxical death that day in 1971 when the Phillipino government decided to return the few dozen Tasaday discovered deep in the jungle, where they had lived for eight centuries undisturbed by the rest of mankind, to their primitive state, out of reach of colonists, tourists and ethnologists. This was at the initiative of the anthropologists themselves, who saw the natives decompose immediately on contact, like a mummy in the open air.

For ethnology to live, its object must die. But the latter revenges itself by dying for having been "discovered", and defies by its death the science that wants to take hold of it.

Doesn't every science live on this

paradoxical slope to which it is doomed by the evanescence of its object in the very process of its apprehension, and by the pitiless reversal this dead object exerts on it? Like Orpheus it always turns around too soon, and its object, like Eurydice, falls back into Hades.

It was against this hades of paradox that the ethnologists wanted to protect themselves by cordoning off the Tasaday with virgin forest. Nobody now will touch it: the vein is closed down, like a mine. Science loses a precious capital, but the object will be safe—lost to science, but intact in its "virginity". It isn't a question of sacrifice (science never sacrifices itself: it is always murderous), but of the simulated sacrifice of its object in order to save its reality principle. The Tasaday, frozen in their natural element, provide a perfect alibi, an eternal guarantee. At this point begins a persistent anti-ethnology to which Jaulin, Castaneda and Clastres variously belong. In any case, the logical evolution of a science is to distance itself ever further from its object until it dispenses with it entirely: its autonomy evermore fantastical in reaching its pure

form.

The Indian thereby driven back into the ghetto, into the glass coffin of virgin forest, becomes the simulation model for all conceivable Indians *before ethnology*. The latter thus allows itself the luxury of being incarnate beyond itself, in the "brute" reality of these Indians it has entirely reinvented—Savages who are indebted to ethnology for still being Savages: what a turn of events, what a triumph for this science which seemed dedicated to their destruction!

Of course, these particular Savages are posthumous: frozen, cryogenised, sterilised, protected *to death*, they have become referential simulacra, and the science itself a pure simulation. Same thing at Creusot where, in the form of an "open" museum exhibition, they have "museumised" on the spot, as historical witnesses to their period, entire working class quartiers, living metallurgical zones, a complete culture including men, women and children and their gestures, languages and habits—living beings fossilised as in a snap shot. The museum, instead of being curcumscribed in a geometrical location, is now everywhere, like a dimen-

sion of life itself. Thus ethnology, now freed from its object, will no longer be circumscribed as an objective science but is applied to all living things and becomes invisible, like an omnipresent fourth dimension, that of the simulacrum. *We are all Tasaday.* or Indians who have once more become "what they used to be", or at least that which ethnology has made them—simulacra Indians who proclaim at last the universal truth of ethnology.

We all become living specimens under the spectral light of ethnology, or of anti-ethnology which is only the pure form of triumphal ethnology, under the sign of dead differences, and of the resurrection of differences. It is thus extremely naive to look for ethnology among the Savages or in some Third World—it is here, everywhere, in the metropolis, among the whites, in a world completely catalogued and analysed and then *artificially revived as though real,* in a world of simulation: of the hallucination of truth, of blackmail by the real, of the murder and historical (hysterical) retrospection of every symbolic form—a murder whose first

victims were, noblesse oblige, the Savages, but which for a long time now has been extended to all Western societies.

But at the same moment ethnology gives up its final and only lesson, the secret which kills it (and which the savages understood much better): the vengeance of the dead.

The confinement of the scientific object is the same as that of the insane and the dead. And just as the whole of society is hopelessly contaminated by that mirror of madness it has held out for itself, so science can only die contaminated by the death of the object which is its inverse mirror. It is science which ostensibly masters the object, but it is the latter which deeply invests the former, following an unconscious reversion, giving only dead and circular replies to a dead and circular interrogation.

Nothing changes when society breaks the mirror of madness (abolishes asylums, gives speech back to the mad, etc.) nor when science seems to break the mirror of its objectivity (effacing itself before its object, as Castaneda does, etc.) and to bow down before "differences". Confinement is suc-

ceeded by an apparatus which assumes a countless and endlessly diffractable, multipliable form. As fast as ethnology in its classical institution collapses, it survives in an anti-ethnology whose task is to reinject fictional difference and Savagery everywhere, in order to conceal the fact that it is this world, our own, which in its way has become savage again, that is to say devastated by difference and death.

It is in this way, under the pretext of saving the original, that the caves of Lascaux have been forbidden to visitors and an exact replica constructed 500 metres away, so that everyone can see them (you glance through a peephole at the real grotto and then visit the reconstituted whole). It is possible that the very memory of the original caves will fade in the mind of future generations, but from now on there is no longer any difference: the duplication is sufficient to render both artificial.

In the same way the whole of science and technology were recently mobilised to save the mummy of Rameses II, after it had been left to deteriorate in the basement of a

museum. The West was panic-stricken at the thought of not being able to save what the symbolic order had been able to preserve for 40 centuries, but away from the light and gaze of onlookers. Rameses means nothing to us: only the mummy is of inestimable worth since it is what guarantees that accumulation means something. Out entire linear and accumulative culture would collapse if we could not stockpile the past in plain view. To this end the pharaohs must be brought out of their tombs, and the mummies out of their silence. To this end they must be exhumed and given military honors. They are prey to both science and the worms. Only absolute secrecy ensured their potency throughout the millenia—their mastery over putrefaction, which signified a mastery over the total cycle of exchange with death. *We* know better than to use our science for the *reparation* of the mummy, that is, to restore a *visible* order, whereas embalming was a mythical labor aimed at immortalising a *hidden* dimension.

We need a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin to reassure us as to our ends, since ultimately

we have never believed in them. Whence that historic scene of the mummy's reception at Orly airport. All because Rameses was a great despot and military figure? Certainly: but above all because the order which our culture dreams of, behind that defunct power it seeks to annex, could have had nothing to do with it, and it dreams thus because it has exterminated this order by exhuming it *as if it were our own past*.

We are fascinated by Rameses as Renaissance Christians were by the American Indians: those (human?) beings who had never known the word of Christ. Thus, at the beginning of colonisation, there was a moment of stupor and amazement before the very possibility of escaping the universal law of the Gospel. There were two possible responses: either to admit that this law was not universal, or to exterminate the Indians so as to remove the evidence. In general, it was enough to convert them, or even simply to discover them, to ensure their slow extermination.

Thus it would have been enough to exhume Rameses to ensure his extermina-

tion by museumification. For mummies do not decay because of worms: they die from being transplanted from a prolonged symbolic order, which is master over death and putrescence, on to an order of history, science and museums—our own, which is no longer master over anything, since it only knows how to condemn its predecessors to death and putrescence and their subsequent resuscitation by science. An irreparable violence towards all secrets, the violence of a civilisation without secrets. The hatred by an entire civilisation for its own foundations.

And just as with ethnology playing at surrendering its object the better to establish itself in its pure form, so museumification is only one more turn in the spiral of artificiality. Witness the cloister of St-Michel de Cuxa, which is going to be repatriated at great expense from the Cloisters in New York to be reinstalled on "its original site". And everyone is supposed to applaud this restitution (as with the "experimental campaign to win back the sidewalks" on the Champs-Elysees!). However, if the exportation of the cornices was in effect an arbitrary act, and if the Cloisters of New

York are really an artificial mosaic of all cultures (according to a logic of the capitalist centralisation of value), then reimportation to the original location is even more artificial: it is a total simulacrum that links up with "reality" by a complete circumvolution.

The cloister should have stayed in New York in its simulated environment, which at least would have fooled no one. Repatriation is only a supplementary subterfuge, in order to make out as though nothing had happened and to indulge in a retrospective hallucination.

In the same way Americans flatter themselves they brought the number of Indians back to what it was before their conquest. Everything is obliterated only to begin again. They even flatter themselves they went one better, by surpassing the original figure. This is presented as proof of the superiority of civilisation: it produces more Indians than they were capable of themselves. By a sinister mockery, this overproduction is yet again a way of destroying them: for Indian culture, like all tribal culture, rests on the limitation of the group and prohibiting any of its "unrestrict-

ed" growth, as can be seen in the case of Ishi. Demographic "promotion", threfore, is just one more step towards symbolic extermination.

We too live in a universe everywhere strangely similar to the original—here things are duplicated by their own scenario. But this double does not mean, as in folklore, the imminence of death—they are already purged of death, and are even better than in life; more smiling, more authentic, in light of their model, like the faces in funeral parlors.

Hyperreal and Imaginary

Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation. To begin with it is a play of illusions and phantasms: Pirates, the Frontier, Future World, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to be what makes the operation successful. But what draws the crowds is undoubtedly much more the social microcosm, the miniaturised and *religious* revelling in real America, in its delights and drawbacks. You park outside, queue up inside, and are totally abandoned at the exit. In this imaginary world the only phantasmagoria is in the inherent warmth

and affection of the crowd, and in that sufficiently excessive number of gadgets used there to specifically maintain the multitudinous affect. The contrast with the absolute solitude of the parking lot—a veritable concentration camp—is total. Or rather: inside, a whole range of gadgets magnetise the crowd into direct flows—outside, solitude is directed onto a single gadget: the automobile. By an extraordinary coincidence (one that undoubtedly belongs to the peculiar enchantment of this universe), this deep-frozen infantile world happens to have been conceived and realised by a man who is himself now cryogenised: Walt Disney, who awaits his resurrection at minus 180 degrees centigrade.

The objective profile of America, then, may be traced throughout Disneyland, even down to the morphology of individuals and the crowd. All its values are exalted here, in miniature and comic strip form. Embalmed and pacified. Whence the possibility of an ideological analysis of Disneyland (L. Marin does it well in *Utopies, jeux d'espaces*): digest of the American way of life, panegyric to American values, idealised transposition of a

contradictory reality. To be sure. But this conceals something else, and that "ideological" blanket exactly serves to cover over a *third-order simulation*: Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, which *is* Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.

The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false; it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary. It is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere,

particularly amongst those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness.

Moreover, Disneyland is not the only one. Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World: Los Angeles is encircled by these "imaginary stations" which feed reality, reality-energy, to a town whose mystery is precisely that it is nothing more than a network of endless, unreal circulation—a town of fabulous proportions, but without space or dimensions. As much as electrical and nuclear power stations, as much as film studios, this town, which is nothing more than an immense script and a perpetual motion picture, needs this old imaginary made up of childhood signals and faked phantasms for its sympathetic nervous system.

Political Incantation

Watergate. Same scenario as Disneyland (an imaginary effect concealing that reality no more exists outside than inside the bounds of the artificial perimeter): though here it is a scandal effect concealing that there is no difference between the facts and

their denunciation (identical methods are employed by the CIA and the *Washington Post* journalists). Same operation, though this time tending towards scandal as a means to regenerate a moral and political principle, towards the imaginary as a means to regenerate a reality principle in distress.

The denunciation of scandal always pays homage to the law. And Watergate above all succeeded in imposing the idea that Watergate *was* a scandal—in this sense it was an extraordinary operation of intoxication. The reinjection of a large dose of political morality on a global scale. It could be said along with Bourdieu that: "The specific character of every relation of force is to dissimulate itself as such, and to acquire all its force only because it is so dissimulated", understood as follows: capital, which is immoral and unscrupulous, can only function behind a moral superstructure, and whoever regenerates this public morality (by indignation, denunciation, etc.) spontaneously furthers the order of capital, as did the *Washington Post* journalists.

But this is still only the formula of ideology, and when Bourdieu enunciates it,

he takes "relation of force" to mean the *truth* of capitalist domination, and he *denounces* this relation of force as itself a *scandal*—he therefore occupies the same deterministic and moralistic position as the *Washington Post* jounalists. He does the same job of purging and reviving moral order, an order of truth wherein the genuine symbolic violence of the social order is engendered, well beyond all relations of force, which are only its indifferent and shifting configuration in the moral and political consciousness of men.

All that capital asks of us is to receive it as rational or to combat it in the name of rationality, to receive it as moral or to combat it in the name of morality. For they are *identical*, meaning *they can be read another way*: before, the task was to dissimulate scandal; today, the task is to conceal the fact that there is none.

Watergate is not a scandal: this is what must be said at all cost, for this is what everyone is concerned to conceal, this dissimulation masking a strengthening of morality, a moral panic as we approach the primal (mise en) scene of capital: its instantaneous cruelty, its incomprehensible ferocity, its fundamental

immorality—this is what is scandalous, unaccountable for in that system of moral and economic equivalence which remains the axiom of leftist thought, from Enlightenment theory to communism. Capital doesn't give a damn about the idea of the contract which is imputed to it—it is a monstrous unprincipled undertaking, nothing more. Rather, it is "enlightened" thought which seeks to control capital by imposing rules on it. And all that recrimination which replaced revolutionary thought today comes down to reproaching capital for not following the rules of the game. "Power is unjust, its justice is a class justice, capital exploits us, etc."—as if capital were linked by a contract to the society it rules. It is the left which holds out the mirror of equivalence, hoping that capital will fall for this phantasmagoria of the social contract and fulfull its obligation towards the whole of society (at the same time, no need for revolution: it is enough that capital accept the rational formula of exchange).

Capital in fact has never beeen linked by a contract to the society it dominates. It is a sorcery of the social relation, it is a *challenge to*

society and should be responded to as such. It is not a scandal to be denounced according to moral and economic rationality, but a challenge to take up according to symbolic law.

Moebius-Spiralling Negativity

Hence Watergate was only a trap set by the system to catch its adversaries—a simulation of scandal to regenerative ends. This is embodied by the character called "Deep Throat", who was said to be a Republican grey eminence manipulating the leftist journalists in order to get rid of Nixon—and why not? All hypotheses are possible, although this one is superfluous: the work of the Right is done very well, and spontaneously, by the Left on its own. Besides, it would be naive to see an embittered good conscience at work here. For the Right itself also spontaneously does the work of the Left. All the hypotheses of manipulation are reversible in an endless whirligig. For manipulation is a floating causality where positivity and negativity engender and overlap with one another, where there is no longer any active or

passive. It is by putting an *arbitrary* stop to this revolving causality that a principle of political reality can be saved. It is by the *simulation* of a conventional, restricted perspective field, where the premises and consequences of any act or event are calculable, that a political credibility can be maintained (including, of course, "objective" analysis, struggle, etc.). But if the entire cycle of any act or event is envisaged in a system where linear continuity and dialectical polarity no longer exist, in a field *unhinged by simulation*, then all determination evaporates, every act terminates at the end of the cycle having benefited everyone and been scattered in all directions.

Is any given bombing in Italy the work of leftist extremists, or of extreme right-wing provocation, or staged by centrists to bring every terrorist extreme into disrepute and to shore up its own failing power, or again, is it a police-inspired scenario in order to appeal to public security? All this is equally true, and the search for proof, indeed the objectivity of the fact does not check this vertigo of interpretation. We are in a logic of simulation which has nothing to do with a logic of facts

and an order of reasons. Simulation is characterised by a *precession of the model*, of all models around the merest fact—the models come first, and their orbital (like the bomb) circulation constitutes the genuine magnetic field of events. Facts no longer have any trajectory of their own, they arise at the intersection of the models; a single fact may even be engendered by all the models at once. This anticipation, this precession, this short-circuit, this confusion of the fact with its model (no more divergence of meaning, no more dialectical polarity, no more negative electricity or implosion of poles) is what each time allows for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory—all are true, in the sense that their truth is exchangeable, in the image of the models from which they proceed, in a generalised cycle.

The communists attack the socialist party as though they wanted to shatter the Union of the Left. They sanction the idea that their reticence stems from a more radical political exigency. In fact, it is because they don't want power. But do they not want it at this conjuncture because it is unfavor-

able for the Left in general, or because it is unfavorable for them within the Union of the Left—or do they not want it by definition? When Berlinguer declares: "We musn't be frightened of seeing the communists seize power in Italy", this means simultaneously:

—that there is nothing to fear, since the communists, if they come to power, will change nothing in its fundamental capitalist mechanism,

—that there isn't any risk of their ever coming to power (for the reason that they don't want to)—and even if they did take it up, they will only ever wield it by proxy,

—that in fact power, genuine power, no longer exists, and hence there is no risk of anybody seizing it or taking it over,

—but more: I, Berlinguer, am not frightened of seeing the communists seize power in Italy—which might appear evident, but not that much, since

—this can also mean the contrary (no need of psychoanalysis here): *I am frightened* of seeing the communists seize power (and with good reason, even for a communist).

All the above is simultaneously true.

This is the secret of a discourse that is no longer only ambiguous, as political discourses can be, but that conveys the impossibility of a determinate position of power, the impossibility of a determinate position of discourse. And this logic belongs to neither party. It traverses all discourses without their wanting it.

Who will unravel this imbroglio? The Gordian knot can at least be cut. As for the Moebius strip, if it is split in two, it results in an additional spiral without there being any possibility of resolving its surfaces (here the reversible continuity of hypotheses). Hades of simulation, which is no longer one of torture, but of the subtle, maleficent, elusive twisting of meaning [4]—where even those condemned at Burgos are still a gift from Franco to Western democracy, which finds in them the occasion to regenerate its own flagging humanism, and whose indignant protestation consolidates in return Franco's regime by uniting the Spanish masses against foreign intervention? Where is the truth in all that, when such collusions admirably knit together without their authors even knowing it?

The conjunction of the system and its extreme alternative like two ends of a curved mirror, the "vicious" curvature of a political space henceforth magnetised, circularised, reversibilised from right ot left, a torsion that is like the evil demon of commutation, the whole system, the infinity of capital folded back over its own surface: transfinite? And isn't it the same with desire and libidinal space? The conjunction of desire and value, of desire and capital. The conjunction of desire and the law—the ultimate joy and metamorphosis of the law (which is why it is so well received at the moment): only capital takes pleasure, Lyotard said, before coming to think that *we* take pleasure in capital. Overwhelming versatility of desire in Deleuze, an enigmatic reversal which brings this desire that is "revolutionary by itself, and as if involuntarily, in wanting what it wants", to want its own repression and to invest paranoid and fascist systems? A malign torsion which reduces this revolution of desire to the same fundamental ambiguity as the other, historical revolution.

All the referentials intermingle their discourses in a circular, Moebian compulsion.

Not so long ago sex and work were savagely opposed terms: today both are dissolved into the same type of demand. Formerly the discourse on history took its force from opposing itself to the one on nature, the discourse on desire to the one on power—today they exchange their signifiers and their scenarios.

It would take too long to run through the whole range of operational negativity, of all those scenarios of deterrence which, like Watergate, try to regenerate a moribund principle by simulated scandal, phantasm, murder—a sort of hormonal treatment by negativity and crisis. It is always a question of proving the real by the imaginary, proving truth by scandal, proving the law by transgression, proving work by the strike, proving the system by crisis and capital by revolution, as for that matter proving ethnology by the dispossession of its object (the Tasaday)—without counting:

—proving theatre by anti-theatre
—proving art by anti-art
—proving pedagogy by anti-pedagogy
—proving psychiatry by anti-psychiatry, etc., etc.

Everything is metamorphosed into its inverse in order to be perpetuated in its purged form. Every form of power, every situation speaks of itself by denial, in order to attempt to escape, by simulation of death, its real agony. Power can stage its own murder to rediscover a glimmer of existence and legitimacy. Thus with the American presidents: the Kennedys are murdered because they still have a political dimension. Others—Johnson, Nixon, Ford—only had a right to puppet attempts, to simulated murders. But they nevertheless needed that aura of an artificial menace to conceal thay they were nothing other than mannequins of power. In olden days the king (also the god) had to die—that was his strength. Today he does his miserable utmost to pretend to die, so as to preserve the *blessing* of power. But even this is gone.

To seek new blood in its own death, to renew the cycle by the mirror of crisis, negativity and anti-power: this is the only alibi of every power, of every institution attempting to break the vicious circle of its irresponsibility and its fundamental non-existence, of its deja-vu and its deja-mort.

Strategy of the Real

Of the same order as the impossibility of rediscovering an absolute level of the real, is the impossibility of staging an illusion. Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible. It is the whole *political* problem of the parody, of hypersimulation or offensive simulation, which is posed here.

For example: it would be interesting to see whether the repressive apparatus would not react more violently to a simulated hold-up than to a real one? For the latter only upsets the order of things, the right of property, whereas the other interferes with the very principle of reality. Transgression and violence are less serious, for they only contest the *distribution* of the real. Simulation is infinitely more dangerous, however, since it always suggests, over and above its object, that *law and order themselves might really be nothing more than a simulation.*

But the difficulty is in proportion to the peril. How to feign a violation and put it to the test? Go and simulate a theft in a large department store: how do you convince the security guards that it is a simulated theft? There is no "objective" difference: the same

gestures and the same signs exist as for a real theft; in fact the signs incline neither to one side nor the other. As far as the established order is concerned, they are always of the order of the real.

Go and organise a fake hold-up. Be sure to check that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage, so that no life is in danger (otherwise you risk committing an offence). Demand ransom, and arrange it so that the operation creates the greatest commotion possible—in brief, stay close to the "truth", so as to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulation. But you won't succeed: the web of artificial signs will be inextricably mixed up with real elements (a police officer will really shoot on sight; a bank customer will faint and die of a heart attack; they will really turn the phoney ransom over to you)—in brief, you will unwittingly find yourself immediately in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour every attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to some reality—that's exactly how the established order is, well before institutions and justice come into play.

In this impossibility of isolating the process of simulation must be seen the whole thrust of an order that can only see and understand in terms of some reality, because it can function nowhere else. The simulation of an offence, if it is patent, will either be punished more lightly (because it has no "consequences") or be punished as an offence to public office (for example, if one triggered off a police operation "for nothing")—but *never as simulation*, since it is precisely as such that no equivalence with the real is possible, and hence no repression either. The challenge of simulation is irreceivable by power. How can you punish the simulation of virtue? Yet as such it is as serious as the simulation of crime. Parody makes obedience and transgression equivalent, and that is the most serious crime, since it *cancels out the difference upon which the law is based.* The established order can do nothing against it, for the law is a second-order simulacrum whereas simulation is third-order, beyond true and false, beyond equivalences, beyond the rational distinctions upon which function all power and the entire social. Hence, *failing the real*, it is here that we must aim at order.

This is why order always opts for the real. In a state of uncertainty, it always prefers this assumption (thus in the army they would rather take the simulator as a true madman). But this becomes more and more difficult, for it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation, through the force of inertia of the real which surrounds us, the inverse is also true (and this very reversibility forms part of the apparatus of simulation and of power's impotency): namely, *it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real,* or to prove the real.

Thus all hold-ups, hijacks and the like are now as it were simulation hold-ups, in the sense that they are inscribed in advance in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their mode of presentation and possible consequences. In brief, where they function as a set of signs dedicated exclusively to their recurrence as signs, and no longer to their "real" goal at all. But this does not make them inoffensive. On the contrary, it is as hyperreal events, no longer having any particular contents or aims, but indefinitely refracted by each other (for that matter like so-called historical

events: strikes, demonstrations, crises, etc. [5]), that they are precisely unverifiable by an order which can only exert itself on the real and the rational, on ends and means: a referential order which can only dominate referentials, a determinate power which can only dominate a determined world, but which can do nothing about that indefinite recurrence of simulation, about that weightless nebula no longer obeying the law of gravitation of the real—power itself eventually breaking apart in this space and becoming a simulation of power (disconnected from its aims and objectives, and dedicated to *power effects* and mass simulation).

The only weapon of power, its only strategy against this defection, is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production. For that purpose it prefers the discourse of crisis, but also—why not?—the discourse of desire. "Take your desires for reality!" can be understood as the ultimate slogan of power, for in a non-referential world even the confusion of the reality principle with the desire principle is

less dangerous than contagious hyperreality. One remains among principles, and there power is always right.

Hyperreality and simulation are deterrents of every principle and of every objective; they turn against power this deterrence which is so well utilised for a long time itself. For, finally, it was capital which was the first to feed throughout its history on the destruction of every referential, of every human goal, which shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish a radical law of equivalence and exchange, the iron law of its power. It was the first to practice deterrence, abstraction, disconnection, deterritorialisation, etc.; and if it was capital which fostered reality, the reality principle, it was also the first to liquidate it in the extermination of every use value, of every real equivalence, of production and wealth, in the very sensation we have of the unreality of the stakes and the omnipotence of manipulation. Now, it is this very logic which is today hardened even more *against* it. And when it wants to fight this catastrophic spiral by secreting one last glimmer of reality, on which to found one

last glimmer of power, it only multiplies the *signs* and accelerates the play of simulation.

As long as it was historically threatened by the real, power risked deterrence and simulation, disintegrating every contradiction by means of the production of equivalent signs. When it is threatened today by simulation (the threat of vanishing in the play of signs), power risks the real, risks crisis, it gambles on remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, political stakes. This is a question of life or death for it. But it is too late.

Whence the characteristic hysteria of our time: the hysteria of production and reproduction of the real. The other production, that of goods and commodities, that of *la belle epoque* of political economy, no longer makes any sense of its own, and has not for some time. What society seeks through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real which escapes it. That is why *contemporary "material" production is itself hyperreal*. It retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production, but it is nothing more than its scaled-down refraction (thus the hyperrealists fasten in a striking

resemblance a real from which has fled all meaning and charm, all the profundity and energy of representation). Thus the hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real's striking resemblance to itself.

Power, too, for some time now produces nothing but signs of its resemblance. And at the same time, another figure of power comes into play: that of a collective demand for *signs* of power—a holy union which forms around the disappearance of power. Everybody belongs to it more or less in fear of the collapse of the political. And in the end the game of power comes down to nothing more than the *critical* obsession with power—an obsession with its death, an obsession with its survival, the greater the more it disappears. When it has totally disappeared, logically we will be under the total spell of power—a haunting memory already foreshadowed everywhere, manifesting at one and the same time the compulsion to get rid of it (nobody wants it any more, everbody unloads it on others) and the apprehensive pining over its loss. Melancholy for societies without power: this has already given rise to

facism, that overdose of a powerful referential in a society which cannot terminate its mourning.

But we are still in the same boat: none of our societies knows how to manage its mourning for the real, for power, for the *social itself*, which is implicated in this same breakdown. And it is by an artificial revitalisation of all this that we try to escape it. *Undoubtedly this will even end up in socialism.* By an unforeseen twist of events and an irony which no longer belongs to history, it is through the death of the social that socialism will emerge—as it is through the death of God that religions emerge. A twisted coming, a perverse event, an unintelligible reversion to the logic of reason. As is the fact that power is no longer present except to conceal that there is none. A simulation which can go on indefinitely, since—unlike "true" power which is, or was, a structure, a strategy, a relation of force, a stake—this is nothing but the object of a social *demand*, and hence subject to the law of supply and demand, rather than to violence and death. Completely expunged from the *political* dimension, it is dependent, like any other

commodity, on production and mass consumption. Its spark has disappeared—only the fiction of a political universe is saved.

Likewise with work. The spark of production, the violence of its stake no longer exists. Everybody still produces, and more and more, but work has subtly become something else: a need (as Marx ideally envisaged it, but not at all in the same sense), the object of a social "demand," like leisure, to which it is equivalent in the general run of life's options. A demand exactly proportional to the loss of stake in the work process. [6] The same change in fortune as for power: the *scenario* of work is there to conceal the fact that the work-real, the production-real, has disappeared. And for that matter so has the strike-real too, which is no longer a stoppage of work, but its alternative pole in the ritual scansion of the social calendar. It is as if everyone has "occupied" their work place or work post, after declaring the strike, and resumed production, as is the custom in a "self-managed" job, in exactly the same terms as before, by declaring themselves (and virtually being) in a state of permanent strike.

This isn't a science-fiction dream: everywhere it is a question of a doubling of the work process. And of a double or locum for the strike process—strikes which are incorporated like obsolescence in objects, like crisis in production. Then there is no longer any strikes or work, but both simultaneously, that is to say something else entirely: a *wizardry of work*, a *trompe l'oeil*, a scenodrama (not to say melodrama) of production, collective dramaturgy upon the empty stage of the social.

It is no longer a question of the *ideology* of work—of the traditional ethic that obscures the "real" labour process and the "objective" process of exploitation—but of the scenario of work. Likewise, it is no longer a question of the ideology of power, but of the *scenario* of power. Ideology only corresponds to a betrayal of reality by signs; simulation corresponds to a short-circuit of reality and to its reduplication by signs. It is always the aim of ideological analysis to restore the objective process; it is always a false problem to want to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum.

This is ultimately why power is so in

accord with ideological discourses and discourses on ideology, for these are all discourses of *truth*—always good, even and especially if they are revolutionary, to counter the mortal blows of simulation.

The End of the Panopticon

It is again to this ideology of the lived experience, of exhumation, of the real in its fundamental banality, in its radical authenticity, that the American TV-verite experiment on the Loud family in 1971 refers: 7 months of uninterrupted shooting. 300 hours of direct non-stop broadcasting, without script or scenario, the odyssey of a family, its dramas, its joys, ups and downs—in brief, a "raw" historical document, and the "best thing ever on television, comparable, at the level of our daily existence, to the film of the lunar landing." Things are complicated by the fact that this family came apart during the shooting: a crisis flared up, the Louds went their separate ways, etc. Whence that insoluble controversy: was TV responsible? What would have happened *if TV hadn't been there.*

More interesting is the phantasm of filming the Louds *as if TV wasn't there*. The producer's trump card was to say: "They lived as if we weren't there". An absurd, paradoxical formula—neither true, nor false: but utopian. The "as if *we* weren't there" is equivalent to "as if *you* were there". It is this utopia, this paradox that fascinated 20 million viewers, much more than the "perverse" pleasure of prying. In this "truth" experiment, it is neither a question of secrecy nor of perversion, but of a kind of thrill of the real, or of an aesthetics of the hyperreal, a thrill of vertiginous and phony exactitude, a thrill of alienation and of magnification, of distortion in scale, of excessive transparency all at the same time. The joy in an excess of meaning, when the bar of the sign slips below the regular water line of meaning: the non-signifier is elevated by the camera angle. Here the real can be seen to have never existed (but "as if you were there"), without the distance which produces perspective space and our depth vision (but "more true than nature"). Joy in the microscopic simulation which transforms the real into the hyperreal. (This is also a little like what

happens in porno, where fascination is more metaphysical than sexual.)

This family was in any case already somewhat hyperreal by its very selection: a typical, California-housed, 3-garage, 5-children, well-to-do professional upper middle class ideal American family with an ornamental housewife. In a way, it is this statistical perfection which dooms it to death. This ideal heroine of the American way of life is chosen, as in sacrificial rites, to be glorified and to die under the fiery glare of the studio lights, a modern fatum. For the heavenly fire no longer strikes depraved cities, it is rather the lens which cuts through ordinary reality like a laser, putting it to death. "The Louds: simply a family who agreed to deliver themselves into the hands of television, and to die from it", said the producer. So it is really a question of a sacrificial process, of a sacrificial spectacle offered to 20 million Americans. The liturgical drama of a mass society.

TV-verite. Admirable ambivalent terms: does it refer to the truth of this family, or to the truth of TV? In fact, it is TV which is the Loud's truth, it is it which is true, it is it

which renders true. A truth which is no longer the reflexive truth of the mirror, nor the perspective truth of the panoptic system and of the gaze, but the manipulative truth of the test which probes and interrogates, of the laser which touches and then pierces, of computer cards which retain your punched-out sequences, of the genetic code which regulates your combinations, of cells which inform your sensory universe. It is to this kind of truth that the Loud family is subjected by the TV medium, and in this sense it really amounts to a death sentence (but is it still a question of truth?).

The end of the panoptic system. The eye of TV is no longer the source of an absolute gaze, and the ideal of control is no longer that of transparency. The latter still presupposes an objective space (that of the Renaissance) and the omnipotence of a despotic gaze. This is still, if not a system of confinement, at least a system of scrutiny. No longer subtle, but always in a position of exteriority, playing on the opposition between seeing and being seen, even if the focal point of the panopticon may be blind.

It is entirely different when with the

Louds "You no longer watch TV, TV watches you (live)," or again: "You no longer listen to *Pas de Panique, Pas de Panique* listens to you"—switching over from the panoptic apparatus of surveillance (of *Discipline and Punish*) to a system of deterrence, where the distinction between active and passive is abolished. No longer is there any imperative to submit to the model, or to the gaze. "YOU are the model!" "YOU are the majority!" Such is the slope of a hyperrealist sociality, where the real is confused with the model, as in the statistic operation, or with the medium, as in the Loud's operation. Such is the later stage of development of the social relation, our own, which is no longer one of persuasion (the classical age of propaganda, ideology, publicity, etc.) but one of dissuasion or deterrence: "YOU are news, you are the social, the event is you, you are involved, you can use your voice, etc." A turnabout of affairs by which it becomes impossible to locate an instance of the model, of power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, since *you* are always already on the other side. No more subject, focal point, center or periphery: but pure flexion or circular

inflection. No more violence or surveillance: only "information," secret virulence, chain reaction, slow implosion and simulacra of spaces where the real-effect again comes into play.

We are witnessing the end of perspective and panoptic space (which remains a moral hypothesis bound up with every classical analysis of the "objective" essence of power), and hence the *very abolition of the spectacular*. Television, in the case of the Louds for example, is no longer a spectacular medium. We are no longer in the society of spectacle which the situationists talked about, nor in the specific types of alienation and repression which this implied. The medium itself is no longer identifiable as such, and the merging of the medium and the message (McLuhan[7]) is the first great formula of this new age. There is no longer any medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffuse and diffracted in the real, and it can no longer even be said that the latter is distorted by it.

Such immixture, such a viral, endemic, chronic, alarming presence of the medium, without our being able to isolate its effects—

spectralised, like those publicity holograms sculptured in empty space with laser beams, the event filtered by the medium—the dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV—an indiscernible chemical solution: we are all Louds, doomed not to invasion, to pressure, to violence and to blackmail by the media and the models, but to their induction, to their infiltration, to their illegible violence.

But we must be careful of the negative twist discourse gives this: it is a question neither of an illness nor of a viral complaint. Rather, we must think of the media as if they were, in outer orbit, a sort of genetic code which controls the mutation of the real into the hyperreal, just as the other, micromolecular code controls the passage of the signal from a representative sphere of meaning to the genetic sphere of the programmed signal.

The whole traditional mode of causality is brought into question: the perspective, deterministic mode, the "active," critical mode, the analytical mode—the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between ends and means. It is in this mode

that it can be said: TV watches us, TV alienates us, TV manipulates us, TV informs us . . . Throughout all this one is dependent on the analytical conception whose vanishing point is the horizon between reality and meaning.

On the contrary, we must imagine TV on the DNA model, as an effect in which the opposing poles of determination vanish according to a nuclear contraction or retraction of the old polar schema which has always maintained a minimal distance between a cause and an effect, between the subject and an object: precisely, the meaning gap, the discrepancy, the difference, the smallest possible margin of error, irreductible under penalty of reabsorption in an aleatory and indeterminable process which discourse can no longer even account for, since it is itself a determinable order.

It is this gap which vanishes in the genetic coding process, where indeterminacy is less a product of molecular randomness than a product of the abolition, pure and simple, of the *relation*. In the process of molecular control, which "goes" from the DNA nucleus to the "substance" it "informs,"

there is no more traversing of an effect, of an energy, of a determination, of any message. "Order, signal, impulse, message": all these attempt to render the matter intelligible to us, but by analogy, retranscribing in terms of inscription, vector, decoding, a dimension of which we know nothing—it is no longer even a "dimension," or perhaps it is the fourth (that which is defined, however, in Einsteinian relativity, by the absorption of the distinct poles of space and time). In fact, this whole process only makes sense to us in the negative form. But nothing separates one pole from the other, the initial from the terminal: there is just a sort of contraction into each other, a fantastic telescoping, a collapsing of the two traditional poles into one another: an IMPLOSION—an absorption of the radiating model of causality, of the differential mode of determination, with its positive and negative electricity—an implosion of meaning. *This is where simulation begins.*

Everywhere, in whatever political, biological, psychological, media domain, where the distinction between poles can no longer be maintained, one enters into simulation, and hence into absolute manipulation—not

passivity, but the *non-distinction of active and passive*. DNA realises this aleatory reduction at the level of the living substance. Television itself, in the example of the Louds, also attains this *indefinite* limit where the family *vis-a-vis* TV are no more or less active or passive than is a living substance *vis-a-vis* its molecular code. In both there is only a nebula indecipherable into its simple elements, indecipherable as to its truth.

Orbital and Nuclear

The nuclear is the apotheosis of simulation. Yet the balance of terror is nothing more than the spectacular slope of a system of deterrence that has crept from the *inside* into all the cracks of daily life. The nuclear cliff-hanger only seals the trivialised system of deterrence at the heart of the media, of the inconsequential violence that reigns throughout the world, of the aleatory contrivance of every choice which is made for us. The slightest details of our behaviour are ruled by neutralised, indifferent, equivalent signs, by zero-sum signs like those which regulate "game strategy" (but the genuine equation is elsewhere, and the

unknown is precisely that variable of simulation which makes the atomic arsenal itself a hyperreal form, a simulacrum which dominates us all and reduces all "ground-level" events to mere ephemeral scenarios, transforming the only life left to us into survival, into a wager without takers—not even into a death policy: but into a policy devaluated in advance).

It isn't that the direct menace of atomic destruction paralyses our lives. It is rather that deterrence leukemises us. And this deterrence come from the very situation which *excludes the real atomic clash*—excludes it beforehand like the eventuality of the real in a system of signs. Everybody pretends to believe in the reality of this menace (one understands it from the military point of view, the whole seriousness of their exercise, and the discourse of their "strategy," is at stake): but there are precisely no strategic stakes at this level, and the whole originality of the situation lies in the improbability of destruction.

Deterrence excludes war—the antiquated violence of expanding systems. Deterrence is the neutral, implosive violence

of metastable or involving systems. There is no subject of deterrence any more, nor adversary, nor strategy—it is a planetary structure of the annihilation of stakes. Atomic war, like that of Troy, will not take place. The risk of nuclear atomisation only serves as a pretext, through the sophistication of arms—but this sophistication exceeds any possible objective to such an extent that it is itself a symptom of nonexistence—to the installation of a universal system of security, linkup, and control whose deterrent effect does not aim for atomic clash at all (the latter has never been a real possibility, except no doubt right at the beginning of the cold war, when the nuclear posture was confused with conventional war) but really the much larger probability of any real event, of anything which could disturb the general system and upset the balance. The balance of terror is the terror of balance.

Deterrence is not a strategy. It circulates and is exchanged between the nuclear protagonists exactly like international capital in that orbital zone of monetary speculation, whose flow is sufficient to control all global finance. Thus *kill money* (not referring to *real*

killing, any more than floating capital refers to real production) circulating in nuclear orbit is sufficient to control all violence and potential conflict on the globe.

What stirs in the shadow of this posture, under the pretext of a maximal "objective" menace, and thanks to that nuclear sword of Damocles, is the perfection of the best system of control which has never existed. And the progressive satellisation of the whole planet by that hypermodel of security.

The same goes for *peaceful* nuclear installations. Pacification doesn't distinguish between the civil and the military: wherever irreversible apparatuses of control are elaborated, wherever the notion of security becomes absolute, wherever the *norm* of security replaces the former arsenal of laws and violence (including war), the system of deterrence grows, and around it grows an historical, social and political desert. A huge involution makes every conflict, every opposition, every act of defiance contract in proportion to this blackmail which interrupts, neutralises and freezes them. No mutiny, no history can unfurl any more according to its own logic since it risks

annihilation. No strategy is even possible any more, and escalation is only a puerile game left to the military. The political stake is dead. Only simulacra of conflict and carefully circumscribed stakes remain.

The "space race" played exactly the same role as the nuclear race. This is why it was so easily able to take over from it in the '60's (Kennedy/Khrushchev), or to develop concurrently in a mode of "peaceful coexistence." For what is the ultimate function of the space race, of lunar conquest, of satellite launchings, if not the institution of a model of universal gravitation, of satellisation, whose perfect embryo is the lunar module: a programmed microcosm, where *nothing can be left to chance*? Trajectory, energy, computation, physiology, psychology, the environment—nothing can be left to contingency, this is the total universe of the norm—the Law no longer exists, it is the operational immanence of every detail which is law. A universe purged of every threat to the senses, in a state of asepsis and weightlessness—it is this very perfection which is fascinating. For the exaltation of the masses was not in response to the lunar landing or the voyage of man in

space (this is rather the fulfillment of an earlier dream)—no, we are dumbfounded by the perfection of their planning and technical manipulation, by the immanent wonder of programmed development. Fascinated by the maximisation of norms and by the mastery of probability. Unbalanced by the model, as we are by death, but without fear or impulse. For if the law, with its aura of transgression, if order, with its aura of violence, still taps a perverse imaginary, then the norm fixes, hypnotises, dumbfounds, causing every imaginary to involve. We no longer fantasise about every minutia of a program. Its observance alone unbalances. The vertigo of a flawless world.

The same model of planned infallibility, of maximal security and deterrence, now governs the spread of the social. That is the true nuclear fallout: the meticulous operation of technology serves as a model for the meticulous operation of the social. Here, too, *nothing will be left to chance*; moreover, this is the essence of socialisation, which has been going on for some centuries but which has now entered into its accelerated phase, towards a limit people imagined would be

explosive (revolution), but which currently results in an inverse, irreversible, *implosive* process: a generalised deterrence of every chance, of every accident, of every transversality, of every finality, of every contradiction, rupture or complexity in a sociality illuminated by the norm and doomed to the transparency of detail radiated by data-collecting mechanisms. In fact, the spatial and nuclear models do not even have their own ends: neither has lunar exploration, nor military and strategic superiority. Their truth lies in their being models of simulation, vector models of a system of planetary control (where even the super-powers of this scenario are not free—the whole world is satellised). [8]

Reject the evidence: with satellistation, the one who is satellised is not whom you might think. By the orbital inscription of a space object, the planet earth becomes a satellite, the terrestrial principle of reality becomes excentric, hyperreal and insignificant. By the orbital establishment of a system of control like peaceful coexistence, all terrestrial microsystems are satellised and lose their autonomy. All energy, all

events are absorbed by this excentric gravitation, everything condenses and implodes on the micro-model of control alone (the orbital satellite), as conversely, in the other, biological dimension everything converges and implodes on the molecular micro-model of the genetic code. Between the two, caught between the nuclear and the genetic, in the simultaneous assumption of the two fundamental codes of deterrence, every principle of meaning is absorbed, every deployment of the real is impossible.

The simultaneity of two events in July 1975 illustrates this in a striking way: the linkup in space of the two American and Soviet super-satellites, apotheosis of peaceful existence—and the suppression by the Chinese of character writing and conversion to the Roman alphabet. This latter signifies the "orbital" establishment of an abstract and model system of signs, into whose orbit will be reabsorbed all those once remarkable and singular forms of style and writing. The satellisation of their tongue: this is the way the Chinese enter the system of peaceful coexistence, which is inscribed in their sky at

the very same time by the docking of the two satellites. The orbital flight of the Big Two, the neutralisation and homogenisation of everybody else on earth.

Yet, despite this deterrence by the orbital authority—the nuclear code or molecular—events continue at ground level, mishaps are increasingly more numerous, despite the global process of contiguity and simultaneity of data. But, subtly, these events no longer make any sense; they are nothing more than a duplex effect of simulation at the summit. The best example must be the Vietnam war, since it was at the crossroads of a maximal historical or "revolutionary" stake and the installation of this deterrent authority. What sense did that war make, if not that its unfolding sealed the end of history in the culminating and decisive event of our age?

Why did such a difficult, long and arduous war vanish overnight as if by magic?

Why didn't the American defeat (the greatest reversal in its history) have any internal repercussions? If it had truly signified a setback in the planetary strategy

of the USA, it should have necessarily disturbed the internal balance of the American political system. But no such thing happened.

Hence something else took place. Ultimately this war was only a crucial episode in a peaceful coexistence. It marked the advent of China to peaceful coexistence. The long sought-after securing and concretising of China's non-intervention, China's apprenticeship in a global *modus vivendi*, the passing from a strategy of world revolution to one of a sharing of forces and empires, the transition from a radical alternative to political alternation in a now almost settled system (normalisation of Peking-Washington relations): all this was the stake of the Vietnam war, and in that sense, the USA pulled out of Vietnam but they won the war.

And the war "spontaneously" came to an end when the objective had been attained. This is why it was de-escalated, demobilised so easily.

The effects of this same remolding are legible in the field. The war lasted as long as there remained unliquidated elements irreducible to a healthy politics and a discipline

of power, even a communist one. When finally the war passed from the rersistance to the hands of regular Northern troops, it could stop: it had attained its objective. Thus the stake was a political relay. When the Vietnamese proved they were no longer bearers of an unpredictable subversion, it could be handed over to them. That this was communist order wasn't fundamentally serious: it had proved itself, it could be trusted. They are even more effective than capitalists in liquidating "primitive" pre-capitalist and antiquated structures.

Same scenario as in the Algerian war.

The other aspect of this war and of all wars since: behind the armed violence, the murderous antagonism between adversaries—which seems a matter of life and death, and which is played as such (otherwise you could never send out people to get smashed up in this kind of trouble), behind this simulacrum of a struggle to death and of ruthless global stakes, the two adversaries are fundamentally as one against that other, unnamed, never mentioned thing, whose objective outcome in war, with equal complicity between the two adversaries, is total liquidation. It is

tribal, communal, pre-capitalist structures, every form of exchange, language and symbolic organisation which must be abolished. Their murder is the object of war—and in its immense spectacular contrivance of death, war is only the medium of this process of terrorist rationalisation by the social—the murder through which sociality can be founded, no matter what allegiance, communist or capitalist. The total complicity or division of labour between two adversaries (who can even make huge sacrifices to reach that) for the very purpose of remolding and domesticating social relations.

"The North Vietnamese were advised to countenance a scenario of the liquidation of the American presence through which, of course, honour must be preserved."

The scenario: the extremely heavy bombardment of Hanoi. The intolerable nature of this bombing should not conceal the fact that it was only a simulacrum to allow the Vietnamese to seem to countenance a compromise and Nixon to make the Americans swallow the retreat of their forces. The game was already won, nothing was objectively at stake but the credibility of

the final montage.

Moralists about war, champions of war's exalted values should not be greatly upset: a war is not any the less heinous for being a mere simulacrum—the flesh suffers just the same, and the dead ex-combatants count as much there as in other wars. That objective is always amply accomplished, like that of the partitioning of territories and of disciplinary sociality. What no longer exists is the adversity of adversaries, the reality of antagonistic causes, the ideological seriousness of war—also the reality of defeat or victory, war being a process whose triumph lies quite beyond these appearances.

In any case, the pacification (or deterrence) dominating us today is beyond war and peace, the simultaneous equivalence of peace and war. "War is peace," said Orwell. Here, also, the two differential poles implode into each other, or recycle one another—a simultaneity of contradictions that is both the parody and the end of all dialectic. Thus it is possible to miss the truth of a war: namely, that it was well over before reaching a conclusion, that at its very core, war was

brought to an end, and that perhaps it never ever began. Many other such events (the oil crisis, etc.) *never began*, never existed, except that artificial mishaps—abstracts, ersatzes of troubles, catastrophes and crises intended to maintain a historical and psychological investment under hypnosis. All media and the official news service only exist to maintain the illusion of actuality—of the reality of the stakes, of the objectivity of the facts. All events are to be read in reverse, where one perceives (as with the communists "in power" in Italy, the posthumous, "nostalgic" rediscovery of gulags and Soviet dissidents like the almost contemporary rediscovery, by a moribund ethnology, of the lost "difference" of Savages) that all these things arrive too late, with an overdue history, a lagging spiral, that they have exhausted their meaning long in advance and only survive on an artificial effervescence of signs, that all these events follow on illogically from one another, with a total equanimity towards the greatest inconsistencies, with a profound indifference to their consequences (but this is because there are none any more: they burn out in their

spectacular promotion)—thus the whole newsreel of "the present" gives the sinister impression of kitsch, retro and porno all at the same time—doubtless everyone knows this, and nobody really accepts it. The reality of simulation is unendurable—more cruel than Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, which was still an attempt at a dramaturgy of life, the last flickering of an ideal of the body, blood and violence in a system already sweeping towards a reabsorption of all the stakes without a trace of blood. For us the trick has been played. All dramaturgy, and even all real writing of cruelty has disappeared. Simulation is master, and nostalgia, the phantasmal parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials, alone remain. Everything still unfolds before us, in the cold light of deterrence (including Artaud, who is entitled like all the rest to his revival, to a second existence as the *referential* of cruelty).

This is why nuclear proliferation increases neither the chance of atomic clash nor of accident—save in the interval where "young" powers could be tempted to use them for non-deterrent or "real" purposes (like the Americans did on Hiroshima—but

precisely they alone were entitled to this "use value" of the bomb, while all those who have since acquired it are deterred from using it by the very fact of its possession). Entry into the atomic club, so amusingly named, very rapidly removes (like syndicalisation for the working world) any inclination towards violent intervention. Responsibility, control, censorship, self-deterrence always increases faster than the forces or weapons at our disposal: this is the secret of the social order. Thus the very possibility of paralysing a whole country with the flick of a switch *makes* it impossible that electrical engineers will ever utilise this weapon: the entire myth of the revolutionary and total strike collapses at the very moment when the means to so are available—but alas, *exactly because* the means to do so are available. This is deterrence in a nutshell.

Therefore it is altogether likely that one day we shall see the nuclear powers exporting atomic reactors, weapons and bombs to every latitude. After control by threat will succeed the much more effective strategy of pacification by the bomb and by its possession. "Small" powers, hoping to buy

their independent strike force, will only buy the virus of deterrence, of their own deterrence. The same goes for the atomic reactors we have already sent them: so many neutron bombs knocking out all historical virulence, all risk of explosion. In this sense, the nuclear system institutes a universally accelerated process of *implosion*, it conceals everything around it, it absorbs all living energy.

The nuclear system is both the culminating point of available energy and the maximisation of systems controlling all energy. Lockdown and control grow as fast as (and undoubtedly even faster than) liberating potentialities. This was already the aporia of modern revolutions. It is still the absolute paradox of the nuclear system. Energies freeze by their own fire power, they deter themselves. One can't really see what project, what power, what strategy, what subject could possibly be behind this enclosure, this vast saturation of a system by its own hereafter neutralised, unusable, unintelligible, non-explosive forces—except the possibility of *an explosion towards the center*, or an *implosion* where all these energies are

abolished in a catastrophic process (in the literal sense, that is to say in the sense of a reversion of the whole cycle towards a minimal point, of a reversion of energies towards a minimal threshold).

Translated by Paul Foss
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Notes

1. Cf. J. Baudrillard, *L'echange symbolique et la mort*, ("L'ordre des simulacres"), Paris, Gallimard, 1975.

2. And which is not susceptible to resolution in transference. It is the entanglement of these two discourses which makes psychoanalysis interminable.

3. Cf. M. Perniola, "Icones, Visions, Simulacres," *Traverses/10*, p. 39.

4. This does not necessarily result in a despair of meaning, but just as much in an improvisation of meaning, of nonsense, or of several simultaneous senses which cancel each other out.

5. The energy crisis, the ecological setting, by and large, are themselves a *disaster film*, in the same style (and of the same value) as those which currently do so well for Hollywood. It is pointless to laboriously interpret these films by their relationship with an

"objective" social crisis, or even with an "objective" phantasm of disaster. It is in the other direction that we must say it is *the social itself which*, in contemporary discourse, *is organised according to a script for a disaster film*. (Cf. Makarius, "La strategie de la catastrophe," *Traverses/10*, p. 15.

6. To this flagging investment in work corresponds a parallel declining investment in consumption. Goodbye to use value or prestige of the automobile, goodbye to the amorous discourse which made a clear-cut distinction between the object of enjoyment and the object of work. Another discourse takes over, which is a *discourse of work on the object of consumption* aiming at an active, compelling, puritan reinvestment (use less gas, look to your security, speed is obsolete, etc.), to which automobile specifications pretend to be adapted: rediscovering a stake by transposition of the poles. Thus work becomes the object of a need, the car becomes the object of work—no better proof of the inability to distinguish the stakes. It is by the very swing of voting "rights" to electoral "duties" that the disinvestment of the political sphere is signaled.

7. The medium/message confusion, of course, is a correlative of the confusion between sender and receiver, thus sealing the disappearance of all the dual, polar structures which formed the discursive organisation of language, referring to the celebrated grid of functions in Jacobson, the organisation of all determinate articulation of meaning. "Circular" discourse must be taken literally: that is, it no longer goes from one point to the other but describes a circle

that *indistinctly* incorporates the positions of transmitter and receiver, henceforth unlocatable as such. Thus there is no longer any instance of power, any transmitting authority—power is something that circulates and whose source can no longer be located, a cycle in which the positions of dominator and the dominated interchange in an endless reversion which is also the end of power in its classical definition. The circularisation of power, knowledge and discourse brings every localisation of instances and poles to an end. Even in psychoanalytic interpretation, the "power" of the interpreter does not come from any external authority, but from the interpreted themselves. This changes everything, for we can always ask the traditional holders of power where they get their power from. Who made you Duke? The King. And who made the King? God. God alone does not reply. But to the question: who made the psychoanalyst? the analyst quite easily replies: You. Thus is expressed, by an inverse simulation, the passage from the "analysed" to the "analysand," from active to passive, which only goes to describe the swirling, mobile effect of the poles, its effect of circularity in which power is lost, is dissolved, is resolved into complete manipulation (this is no longer of the order of the directive authority and the gaze, but of the order of personal contact and commutation). See, also, the State/family circularity secured by the floating and metastatic regulation of images of the social and the private. (J. Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*)

From now on, it is impossible to ask the famous

question:

"From what position do you speak?"—

"How do you know?"—

"From where do you get the power?", without immediately getting the reply: "But it is *of* (from) you that I speak"—meaning, it is you who speaks, is is you who knows, power is you. A gigantic circonvolution, circumlocution of the spoken word, which amounts to irredeemable blackmail and irremovable deterrence of the subject supposed to speak, but left without a word to say, responseless, since to questions asked can come the inevitable reply: but *you are* the reply, or: your question is already an answer, etc.—the whole sophistical stranglehold of word-tapping, forced confession disguised as free expression, trapping the subject in his own questioning, the precession of the reply about the question (the whole violence of interpretation is there, and the violence of the conscious or unconscious self-management of "speech).

This simulacrum of inversion or involution of poles, this clever subterfuge which is the secret of the whole discourse of manipulation and hence, today, in every domain, the secret of all those new powers sweeping clean the stage of power, forging the assumption of all speech from which comes that fantastic silent majority characteristic of our times—all this undoubtedly began in the political sphere with the democratic simulacrum, that is to say with the substitution of the instance of the people for the instance of God as source of power, and the substitution of power as *representation* for power as

emanation. An anti-Copernican revolution: no longer any transcendent instance nor any sun nor any luminous source of power and knowledge—everything comes from and returns to the people. It is this magnificent *recycling* that the universal simulacrum of manipulation, from the scenario of mass suffrage to present-day and ilusory opinion polls, begins to be installed.

8. Paradox: all bombs are clean—their only pollution is the system of control and security they radiate *when they are not detonated*.

The Orders of Simulacra

Three orders of appearance, parallel to the mutations of the law of value, have followed one another since the Renaissance:

—*Counterfeit* is the dominant scheme of the "classical" period, from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution;

—*Production* is the dominant scheme of the industrial era;

—*Simulation* is the reigning scheme of the current phase that is controlled by the code.

The first order of simulacrum is based on the natural law of value, that of the second order on the commercial law of value, that of the third order on the structural law of value.

The Stucco Angel

Counterfeit (and fashion at the same time) is born with the Renaissance, with the

destructuring of the feudal order by the bourgeois order and the emergence of open competition on the level of the distinctive signs. There is no such thing as fashion in a society of cast and rank, since one is assigned a place irrevocably, and so class mobility is non-existent. An interdiction protects the signs and assures them a total clarity; each each sign then refers unequivocally to a status. Likewise no counterfeit is possible with the ceremony—unless as black magic and sacrilege, and it is thus that any confusion of signs is punished: as grave infraction of the order of things. If we are starting to dream again, today especially, of a world of sure signs, of a strong "symbolic order," make no mistake about it: this order has existed and it was that of a ferocious hierarchy, since transparency and cruelty for signs go together. In caste societies, feudal or archaic, *cruel* societies, the signs are limited in number, and are not widely diffused, each one functions with its full value as interdiction, each is a reciprocal obligation between castes, clans or persons. The signs therefore are anything but arbitrary. The arbitrary sign begins when, instead of linking two

persons in an unbreakable reciprocity, the signifier starts referring back to the disenchanted universe of the signified, common denominator of the real world toward which no one has any obligation.

End of the *obliged* sign, reign of the emancipated sign, that all classes will partake equally of. Competitive democracy succeeds the endogomy of signs proper to statutory order. At the same time we pass, with the transfer of values/signs of prestige from one class to another, necessarily into *counterfeit*. For we have passed from a limited order of signs, which prohibits "free production," to a proliferation of signs according to demand. But the sign multiplied no longer resembles in the slightest the obliged sign of limited diffusion: it is its counterfeit, not by corruption of an "original", but by extension of a material whose very clarity depended on the restriction by which it was bound. No longer discriminating (it is no more than competitive), unburdened of all restraint, universally available, the modern sign still simulates necessity in taking itself as tied somehow to the world. The modern sign dreams of the signs of the past and would

well appreciate finding again, in its reference to the real, an *obligation*: but what it finds again is only a *reason*: this referential reason, this real, this "natural" off which it is going to live. But this bond of designation is only the simulacrum of symbolic obligation: it produces neutral values only, that can be exchanged in an objective world. The sign here suffers the same destiny as work. The "free" worker is free only to produce equivalents—the "free and emancipated" sign is free only to produce the signs of equivalence.

It is therefore in the simulacrum of a "nature" that the modern sign finds its value. Problematic of the "natural," metaphysics of reality and appearance: that is the history of the bourgeoisie since the Renaissance, mirror of the bourgeois sign, mirror of the classical sign. And still today the nostalgia for a natural referent of the sign is still alive, in spite of the revolutions that have come to break up this configuration, including one in production, where the signs refer no longer to any nature, but only to the law of exchange, and come under the commercial law of value.

It is in the Renaissance that the false is born along with the natural. From the fake shirt in front to the use of the fork as artificial prosthesis, to the stucco interiors and the great baroque theatrical machinery. The entire classical era belongs *par excellence* to the theatre. Theatre is the form which takes over social life and all of architecture from the Renaissance on. It's there, in the prowesses of stucco and baroque art, that you read the methapysic of the counterfeit and the new ambitions of Renaissance man—those of a *worldly demiurge*, a transubstantiation of all of nature into a unique substance, theatrical like social life unified under the sign of bourgeois values, beyond all differences in blood, rank, or of caste. Stucco means democracy triumphant over all artificial signs, the apotheosis of theatre and fashion, and it betrays the new classes' infinite capabilities, its power to do anything once it has been able to break through the exclusiveness of signs. The way lies open to unheard-of combinations, to all the games, all the counterfeits—the Promethean verve of the bourgeoisie first plunged into the *imitation of nature* before throwing itself into

production. In the churches and palaces stucco is wed to all forms, imitates everything—velvet curtains, wooden corniches, charnel swelling of the flesh. Stucco exorcizes the unlikely confusion of matter into a single new substance, a sort of general equivalent of all the others, and is prestigious theatrical ly because is itself a representative substance, a mirror of all the others.

But simulacra are not only a game played with signs; they imply social rapports and social power. Stucco can come off as the exhaltation of a rising science and technology; it is also connected to the baroque—which in turn is tied to the enterprise of the Counter Reformation and the hegemony over the political and mental world that the Jesuits—who were the first to act according to modern conceptions of power—attempted to establish.

There is a strict correlation between the mental obedience of the Jesuits (*"perinde ac cadaver"*) and the demiurgic ambition to exorcize the natural substance of a thing in order to substitute a synthetic one. Just like a man submitting his will to his organization, things take on the ideal functionality of the

cadaver. All technology, all technocracy are incipiently there: the presumption of an ideal counterfeit of the world, expressed in the invention of a universal substance and of a universal amalgam of substances. Reunify the scattered world (after the Reformation) under the aegis of a homogenous doctrine, universalize the world under a single word (from New Spain to Japan: the Missions), constitute a political elite *of the state*, with an identically centralized strategy: these are the objectives of the Jesuits. In order to accomplish this, you need to create effective simulacra: the apparatus of the organization is one, but also is clerkly magnificence and the theatre (the great theatre of the cardinals and grey eminences). And training and education are other simulacra that aimed, for the first time ever in a systematic manner, at remodeling an ideal nature from a child. That architectural sauce of stucco and baroque is a great apparatus of the same kind. All of the above precedes the productivist rationality of capital, but everything testifies already—not in production, but in counterfeit to the same project of control and universal hegemony—to a social scheme

where the internal coherence of a system is already at work.

Once there lived in the Ardennes an old cook, to whom the molding of buildings out of cakes and the science of plastic patisserie had given the ambition to take up the creation of the world where God had left it, in its natural phase, so as to eliminate its organic spontaneity and substitute for it a single, unique and polymorphous matter: Reinforced Concrete: concrete furniture, chairs, drawers, concrete sewing machines, and outside in the courtyard, an entire orchestra, including violins, of concrete—all concrete! Concrete trees with real leaves printed into them, a hog made out of reinforced concrete, but with a real hog's skull inside, concrete sheep covered with real wool. Camille Renault had finally found the original substance, the paste from which different things can only be distinguished by "realistic" nuance: the hog's skull, leaves of the tree—but this was doubtless only a concession of the demiurge to his visitors . . . for it was with an adorable smile that this 80-year-old god received visitors to his creation: He sought no argument with divine creation;

he was remaking it only to render it more intelligible. Nothing here of a Luciferan revolt, or a will-to-parody, or of a desire to espouse the cause of naive art. The Ardennes cook reigned simply over a unified mental substance (for concrete is a *mental* substance; it allows, just like a concept, phenomena to be organized and divided up at will). His project was not so far from that of the builders in stucco of baroque art, nor very different from the projection on the terrain of an urban community in the current great ensembles. The counterfeit is working, so far, only on substance and form, not yet on relations and structures. But it is aiming already, on this level, at the control of a pacified society, ground up into a synthetic, deathless substance: an indestructible artifact that will guarantee an eternity of power. Is it not man's miracle to have invented, with plastic, a non-degradable material, interrupting thus the cycle which, by corruption and death, turns all the earth's substances ceaselessly one into another? A substance out-of-the-cycle; even fire leaves an indestructible residue. There is something incredible about it, this simulacrum where you

can see in a condensed form the ambition of a universal semiotic. This has nothing to do with the "progress" of technology or with a rational goal for science. It is a project of political and cultural hegemony, the fantasy of a closed mental substance—like those angels of baroque stucco whose extremities meet in a curved mirror.

The Automation of the Robot

A whole world separates these two artificial beings. One is a theatrical counterfeit, a mechanical and clock-like man; technique submits entirely to *analogy* and to the effect of semblance. The other is dominated by the technical principle; the machine overrides all, and with the machine *equivalence* comes too. The automaton plays the part of courtier and good company; it participates in the pre-Revolutionary French theatrical and social games. The robot, on the other hand, as his name indicates, is a worker: the theatre is over and done with, the reign of mechanical man commences. The automaton is the *analogy* of man and

remains his interlocutor (they play chess together!). The machine is man's *equivalent* and annexes him to itself in the unity of its operational process. This is the difference between a simulacrum of the first order and one of the second.

We shouldn't make any mistakes on this matter for reasons of "figurative" resemblance between robot and automaton. The latter is an interrogation upon nature, the mystery of the existence or non-existence of the soul, the dilemma of appearance and being. It is like God: what's underneath it all, what's inside, what's in the back of it? Only the counterfeit men allow these problems to be posed. The entire metaphysics of man as protagonist of the *natural theatre* of the creation is incarnated in the automaton, before disappearing with the Revolution. And the automaton has no other destiny than to be ceaselessly compared to living man—so as to be more natural than him, of which he is the ideal figure. A perfect double for man, right up to the suppleness of his movements, the functioning of his organs and intelligence—right up to touching upon the anguish there would be in becoming

aware that there is no difference, that the soul is over with and now it is an ideally naturalized body which absorbs its energy. Sacrilege. This difference is then always maintained, as in the case of that perfect automaton that the impersonator's jerky movements on stage imitate; so that at least, even if the roles were reversed, no confusion would be possible. In this way the interrogation of the automaton remains an open one, which makes it out to be a kind of mechanical optimist, even if the counterfeit always connotes something diabolical. [1]

No such thing with the robot. The robot no longer interrogates appearance; its only truth is in its mechanical efficacy. It is no longer turned towards a resemblance with man, to whom furthermore it no longer bears comparison. That infinitesimal metaphysical difference, which made all the charm and mystery of the automaton, no longer exists; the robot has absorbed it for its own benefit. Being and appearance are melted into a common substance of production and work. The first-order simulacrum never abolished difference. It supposes an always detectable alteration between sem-

blance and reality (a particularly subtle game with trompe-l'oeil painting, but art lives entirely off of this gap). The second-order simulacrum simplifies the problem by the absorption of the appearances, or by the liquidation of the real, whichever. It establishes in any case a reality, image, echo, appearance; such is certainly work, the machine, the system of industrial production in its entirety, in that it is radically opposed to the principle of theatrical illusion. No more resemblance or lack of resemblance, of God, or human being, but an imminent logic of the operational principle.

From then on, men and machines can proliferate. It is even their law to do so—which the automatons never have done, being instead sublime and singular mechanisms. Men themselves only started their own proliferation when they achieved the status of machines, with the industrial revolution. Freed from all resemblance, freed even from their own double, they expand like the system of production, of which they are only the miniaturized equivalent. The revenge of the simulacrum that feeds the myth of the sorcerer's

apprentice doesn't happen with the automaton. It is, on the other hand, the very law of the second type; and from that law proceeds still the hegemony of the robot, of the machine, and of dead work over living labor. This hegemony is necessary for the cycle of production and reproduction. It is with this reversal that we leave behind the counterfeit to enter (re)production. We leave natural law and the play of its forms to enter the realm of the mercantile law of value and its calculations of force.

The Industrial Simulacrum

It is a new generation of signs and objects which comes with the industrial revolution. Signs without the tradition of caste, ones that will never have known any binding restrictions. They will no longer have to be *counterfeited*, since they are going to be produced all at once on a gigantic scale. The problem of their uniqueness, or their origin, is no longer a matter of concern; their origin is technique, and the only sense they possess is in the dimension of the industrial simulacrum.

Which is to say the series, and even the possibility of two or of *n* identical objects. The relation between them is no longer that of an original to its counterfeit—neither analogy nor reflection—but equivalence, indifference. In a series, objects become undefined simulacra one of the other. And so, along with the objects, do the men that produce them. Only the obliteration of the original reference allows for the generalized law of equivalence, that is to say the *very possibility of production.*

The entire analysis of production changes according to whether you no longer see in it an original process, or even one that is at the core of all the others, but on the contrary a process of absorption of all original being and of introduction to a series of identical beings. Until now we have considered production and work as potential, as force, as historical process, as generic activity; the energetic-economic myth proper to modernity. We must now ask if production does not interfere *in the order of signs,* as a *particular* phase—if it is not basically only an episode in the line of simulacra: that precisely when, thanks to technique, potentially identical

beings are produced in an indefinite series.

The immense energies that are at work in technique, industry, and the economy should not hide the fact that it is basically only a matter of attaining to that indefinite reproductibility. That is the challenge certainly to the "natural" order, but finally is only a second-order simulacrum, and rather inadequate as an imaginary solution to the problem of mastering the world. By comparison to the era of the counterfeit (the time of the double and the mirror, of theatre and the games of mask and appearance), the serial and technical era of reproduction is all-in-all a time of lesser scope (the era that follows—that of models of simulation and of third-order simulacra—is of more considerable dimension).

It is Walter Benjamin who, in *The Work of Art in the Era of its Technical Reproductibility*, first elicited the implications essential in this principle of reproduction. He shows that reproduction absorbs the process of production, changing its finalities and altering the status of product and producer. He demonstrates this mutation on the terrain of art, cinema and photography, because it is there

that open up, in the 20th century, new territories without a tradition of classical productivity, and that are placed immediately under the sign of reproduction. But we know that today all material production enters into this sphere. We know that now it is on the level of reproduction (fashion, media, publicity, information and communication networks), on the level of what Marx negligently called the nonessential sectors of capital (we can hereby take stock of the irony of history), that is to say in the sphere of simulacra and of the code, that the global process of capital is founded. Benjamin first (and later McLuhan) understood technique not as a "productive force" (wherein marxist analysis is locked) but as medium, as form and principle of a whole new generation of sense. The fact alone that anything might be simply reproduced, as such, in two copies, is already a revolution; you only have to consider the shock of the African native seeing, for the very first time, two identical books. That these two products of technique should be *equivalent* under the sign of socially necessary work is less important in the long run than the *serial* repetition of the same object (which

is also that of individuals as force-of-work). Technique as medium dominates not only the "message" of the product (it's use-value) but also the force-of-work that Marx wished to make the revolutionary message of production. Benjamin and McLuhan saw this matter more clearly than Marx; they saw the true message: *the true ultimatum was in reproduction itself.* And that production no longer has any sense; its social finality is lost in the series. The simulacra win out over history.

Furthermore, this stage of serial reproduction (that of the industrial mechanism, of the factory belt, of expanded reproduction) is ephemeral. As soon as dead work wins out over living work—that is, as soon as the era of primitive accumulation is over—serial production yields to generation by means of models. And here it is a question of a reversal of origin and finality, for all the forms change once they are not so much mechanically reproduced but even *conceived from the point-of-view of their very reproductibility,* diffracted from a generating nucleus we call the model. Here we are in the third-order simulacra; no longer that of the counterfeit of an original as in the first-order, nor that of the pure series as in

the second. Here are the models from which proceed all forms according to the modulation of their differences. Only affiliation to the model makes sense, and nothing flows any longer according to its end, but proceeds from the model, the "signifier of reference," which is a kind of anterior finality and the only resemblance there is. We are in simulation in the modern sense of the word, of which industrialization is but the final manifestation. Finally, it is not serial reproductibility which is fundamental, but the modulation. Not quantitative equivalences, but distinctive oppositions. No longer the law of capital, but the structural law of value. And not only shouldn't we look to technique or the economy for the secrets of the code; it is, on the contrary, the very possibility of industrial production that we should look for in the genesis of the code and the simulacra. Each order submits to the order following. Just like the order of the counterfeit was abolished by that of serial production (we can see how art has passed entirely into the realm of the "mechanical"), so in the same way the entire order of production is in the process of tumbling into operational simulation.

The analyses of Benjamin and McLuhan are situated on these limits of reproduction and simulation, at the point where referential reason disappears, and where production is no longer sure of itself. In this sense they mark a decisive progress compared to the analyses of Veblen and Goblot. These latter, describing for example the signs of fashion, still refer to the classical configuration: the signs constitute a distinct material, have a finality and use for prestige, status, social differentiation. They manifest a strategy contemporaneous to that of profit and merchandise with Marx, at a time when you could still talk about the use-value of a sign or of force-of-work, when purely and simply, one could still talk about an economy because there was still a Reason of the sign, and a Reason of production.

The Metaphysic of the Code

> "Leibniz, that mathematical spirit, saw in the mystic elegance of the binary system that counts only the zero and the one, the very image of creation. The unity of the supreme Being, operating by binary function in nothingness, would have sufficed to bring out of it all the beings."
>
> ——McLuhan

The great simulacra constructed by man pass from a universe of natural laws to a universe of force and tensions of force, today to a universe of structures and binary oppositions. After the metaphysic of being and appearance, after that of energy and determination, comes that of indeterminacy and the code. Cybernetic control, generation from model, differential modulation, feed-back, question/answer, etc.: such is the new *operational* configuration (industrial simulacra are only *operational*). Digitality is its metaphysical principle (the God of Leibniz), and DNA its prophet. It is in effect in the genetic code that the "genesis of simulacra"

today finds its most accomplished form. At the limit of an always more extensive abolition of references and finalities, of the loss of resemblance and designation, we find the digital program-sign, whose value is purely tactical, at the intersection of the other signals (corpuscles of information/test) and whose structure is that of a macro-molecular code of command and control.

At this level the question of signs, of their rational destination, their real or imaginary, their repression, their deviation, the illusion they create or that which they conceal, or their parallel meanings—all of that is erased. We have already seen signs of the first order, complex signs and rich in illusion, change, with the machines, into crude signs, dull, industrial, repetitive, echoless, operational and efficacious. What a mutation, even more radical still, with signals of the code, illegible, with no gloss possible, buried like programmatic matrices light-years away in the depths of the "biological" body—black boxes where all the commandments, all the answers ferment! End of the theatre of representation, the space of signs, their conflict, their silence; only the black box of the code, the molecular

emitter of signals from which we have been irradiated, crossed by answers/questions like signifying radiations, tested continuously by our own program inscribed in the cells. Jail cells, electronic cells, party cells, microbiological cells: always the search for the smallest indivisible element, whose organic synthesis would be made according to the givens of the code. But the code itself is but a genetic cell, a generator where myriads of intersections produce all the questions and possible solutions, so that choices (by whom?) can be made. No finality involved with these "questions" (informational and signifying impulsions) but the answer, genetically unchangeable or inflected by minute and aleatory differences. Space is no longer even linear or one-dimensional: *cellular* space, indefinite generation of the same signals, like the tics of a prisoner gone crazy with solitude and repetition. Such is the genetic code: an erased record, unchangeable, of which we are no more than cells-for-reading. All aura of sign, of significance itself is resolved in this determination; all is resolved in the inscription and decodage.

Such is the third-order simulacrum, our

own. Such is the "mystic elegance of the binary system, of the zero and the one", from which all being proceeds. Such is the status of the sign that is also the end of signification: DNA or operational simulation.

All of this is perfectly well summed up by Sebeok ("Genetics and Semiotics", in *Versus*):

> Numerous observations confirm the hypothesis that the internal organic world descends in a straight line from the primordial forms of life. The most remarkable fact is the omnipresence of the DNA molecule. The genetic material of all organisms known on earth is in great measure made up of the nucleonic acids DNA and RNA that contain in their information structure, transmitted by reproduction from one generation to another and furthermore gifted with the capacity of self-reproduction and imitation. Briefly, the genetic code is universal, or almost. Its deciphering was an immense discovery, in the sense that it showed that "the two languages of the great polymers, the language of nucleonic acid and that of protein, are tightly correlated" (Crick, 1966; Clarck/Narcker, 1968); The Soviet mathematician Liapounov demonstrated in 1963 that all living systems transmit by prescribed canals with precision a small

quantity of energy or of matter containing a great volume of information, which is responsible for the ulterior control of a great quantity of energy and matter. In this perspective numerous phenomena, biological as well as cultural (stockage, feed-back, canalization of messages and others) can be seen as aspects of the treatment of information. In the last analysis information appears in great part as the repetition of information, or even as another sort of information, a sort of control that seems to be a universal property of terrestrial life, independent of form or substance.

Five years ago I drew attention to the convergence of genetics and linguistics—autonomous disciplines, but parallel in the larger field of communication science (of which animal semiotics alsi is a part). The terminology of genetics is full of expressions taken from linguistics and communication theory (Jacobson, 1968), which also underlined either the major resemblances or the important differences of structure and of function between genetic and verbal codes. ..It is obvious today that the genetic code must be considered the most fundamental of all the semiotic networks, and therefore a prototype of all the other systems of signaling that animals use, man

> included. From this point of view, molecules which are systems of quanta and behave like stable vehicles of physical information, systems of animal semiotics and cultural systems, including language, constitute a continuous chain of stages, with always more complex energy levels, in the framework of a universal unique evolution. It is therefore possible to describe either language or living systems from a unified cybernetic point-of-view. For the present, this is only a useful analogy or a prediction. A reciprocal rapprochement between animal communication and linguistics can lead to a complete knowledge of the dynamics of semiotics, and such a knowledge can be revealed, in the last analysis, to be nothing less than the very definition of life.

And so the current strategic model is designed that everywhere is replacing the great ideological model which constituted political economy in its time.

You will find it under the rigorour sign of "science" in the *Chance and Necessity* of Jacques Monod. The end of dialectical evolution, it is the discontinuous indeterminism of the genetic code that now controls life—the teleological principle. Finality no longer belongs to the term; there is no longer

a term, nor a determination. Finality is there beforehand, inscribed in the code. We see that nothing has changed—simply the order of ends yields to the play of molecules, and the order of signifieds to the play of infinitesimal signifiers, reduced to their aleatory commutation. All the transcendant finalities reduced to a dashboard full of instruments. There is still, however, recourse to a nature, to an inscription in "biological" nature—in actuality, a nature distorted by fantasy like she always was, metaphysical sanctuary no longer of origin and substance, but this time of the code; the code must have an "objective" basis. What could be better for that purpose than the molecule and genetics? Monod is the strict theologian of this molecular transcendance, Edgar Morin the rapt disciple (A.D.N.* + Adonai!). But for one as well as the other, the fantasy of the code, which is equivalent to the reality of power, is merged with molecular idealism.

Thus we find once more in history that delirious illusion of unting the world under

*D.N.A.

the aegis of a single principle—that of a homogenous substance with the Jesuits of the Counter Reformation; that of the genetic code with the technocrats of biological science (but also linguistics as well), with Leibniz and his binary divinity as precursor. For the program here aimed at has nothing genetic about it, it is a social and historical program. That which is hypostatized in biochemistry is the ideal of a social order ruled by a sort of genetic code of macromolecular calculation, of P.P.B.S. (Planned Programming Budgeting System), irradiating the social body with its operational circuits. The technical cybernetic finds its "natural philosophy" here, as Monod says. The fascination of the biological, of the biomedical dates from the very beginnings of science. It was at work in Spencerian organicism (sociobiology) on the level of second- and third-order structures (Jacob's classification in *The Logic of Life*, it is active today in modern biochemistry, on the level of structures of the fourth-order).

Coded similarities and dissimilarities: that is certainly the image of cyberniticized social exchange. You only have to add

"stereospecific complex" in order to re-inject intracellular communication; that Morin will come to transfigure into molecular Eros.

Practically and historically, this signified the substitution of social control by the *end* (and by a more or less dialectical *providence* which surveys the accomplishment of this *end*) for social control by anticipation, simulation and programming, and indeterminate mutation directed by the code. Instead of a process which is finalized according to its ideal development, we generalize from a *model*. Instead of a right to a prophecy, we have the right of *registration*. There is no really radical difference between the two, only the schemes of control have become fantastically perfected. From a capitalist-productivist society to a neo-capitalist cybernetic order that aims now at total control. This is the mutation for which the biological theorization of the code prepares the ground. There is nothing of an accident in this mutation. It is the end of a history in which, successively, God, Man, Progress, and History itself die to profit the code, in which transcendance dies to profit immanence, the latter corresponding to a

much more advanced phase in the vertiginous manipulation of social rapports.

In its indefinite reproduction, the system puts an end to the myth of its origin and to all the referential values it has itself secreted along the way. Putting an end to its myth of beginning, it ends its internal contradictions (no more real or referential to be confronted with), and it puts an end also to the myth of its own end: the revolution itself. What was profiled with revolution was the victory of human and generic reference, of the original potential of man. But if capital erases from the map generic man himself (for the sake of genetic man?) the Golden Age of the revolution was that of capital, where the myths of origin and end still circulated. Once short-circuited the myths (and the only danger capital confronted historically came to it from this *mythical* exigency of rationality that accompanied it from the very beginning) in an operationality of fact and without discourse, once capital itself has become its own myth, or rather an interminable machine, aleatory, something like a *social genetic code*, it no longer leaves any room for a planned reversal; and this is its true violence. It remains to be seen if this

operationality is not itself a myth, if DNA is not also a *myth*.

Once and for all there is posed, in effect, the problem of science as discourse. A good occasion to pose it here, where this discourse is absolutized with such candor. "Plato, Heraclitus, Hegel, Marx: these ideological edifices, presented as *a priori*, were really *a posteriori* constructions, destined to justify a preconceived ethico-political theory . . . The only *a priori* for science is the postulate of objectivity, that forbids itself any part in this debate." (Monod). But this postulate results itself from a never innocent decision for objectification of the world and of the "real." In fact it is the coherence of a certain *discourse*, and all scientific movement is nothing but the space of this discourse, never revealing itself as such, and the "objective" simulacrum of which hides the political, strategic word. A little farther on, furthermore, Monod very well expresses the arbitrary nature of this phenomenon: "We might wonder if all the invariance, conservations and symmetries that constitute the scheme of scientific discourse are only fictions substituted for reality so as to offer an operational image. . . A logic founded on a

purely abstract principle of identity possibly conventional. Convention, however, that human reason seems incapable of doing without." You couldn't say it better: that science has selected itself as generating formula, a model discourse, upon the faith of a conventional order (not just any, however; that of total reduction). But Monod slides rapidly into this dangerous hypothesis of a "conventional" identity principle. It would be better to base science, more crudely, upon an "objective" reality. Physics is there to witness that identity is only a postulate—it is *within things*, since there is "absolute identity of two atoms in the same quantitative state." Well then? Convention, or objective reality? The truth is that science is organized, like any other discourse, on the basis of a conventional logic, but it demands for its justification, like any other ideological discourse, a real "objective" reference, in a process of substance. If the principle of identity is somehow "true," even at the infinitesimal level of two atoms, then the entire conventional edifice of science that derives its inspiration from that level is also "true." The hypothesis of the genetic code, DNA, is also true and unsurpassable. So it goes with metaphysics.

Science accounts for things previously encircled and formalized so as to be sure to obey it. "Objectivity" is nothing else than that, and the ethic which comes to sanction this objective knowlegde is nothing less than a system of defense and imposed ignorance, whose goal is to preserve this vicious circle intact. [2]

"Down with all hypotheses that have allowed the belief in a true world," said Nietzsche.

The Tactile and the Digital

This regulation on the model of the genetic code is not at all limited to laboratory effects or to the exalted visions of theoreticians. Banal, everyday life is invested by these models. Digitality is with us. It is that which haunts all the messages, all the signs of our societies. The most concrete form you see it in is that of the test, of the question/answer, of the stimulus/response. All content is neutralized by a continual procedure of directed interrogation, of verdicts and ultimatums to decode, which no longer arise this time from the depths of the genetic code but that have the same tactical indeterminacy—the cycle of sense

being infinitely shortened into that of question/answer, of bit or minute quantity of energy/information coming back to its beginning, the cycle only describing the perpetual reactualization of the same models. The equivalent of the total neutralization of the signified by the code is the instantaneousness of the verdict of fashion, or of any advertising or media message. Any place where the offer swallows up the demand, where the question assimilates the answer, or absorbs and regurgitates it in a decodable form, or invents and anticipates it in a predictible form. Everywhere the same "scenario," the scenario of "trial and error" (guinea pigs in laboratory experiments), the scenario of the breadth of choice offered everywhere ("the personality test")—everywhere the test functions as a fundamental form of control, by means of the infinite divisibility of practices and responses.

We live by the mode of *referendum* precisely because there is no longer any *referential*. Every sign, every message (objects of "functional" use as well as any item of fashion or televised news, poll or electoral consultation) is presented to us as question/answer. The entire system of communication has passed from that of a

syntactically complex language structure to a binary sign system of question/answer—of perpetual *test*. Now tests and referenda are, we know, perfect forms of simulation: the answer is called forth by the question, it is design-ated in advance. *The referendum is always an ultimatum*: the unilateral nature of the question, that is no longer exactly an interrogation, but the immediate imposition of a sense whereby the cycle is suddenly completed. Every message is a verdict, just like the one that comes from polling statistics. The simulacrum of distance (or even of contradiction between the two poles) is only—like the effect of the real the sign seems to emit—a tactical hallucination.

Benjamin analyzes concretely, on the level of the technical instrument, this operation of the test:

> The performance of the movie actor is transmitted to the public by means of an array of technical instruments, with a twofold consequence. The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the

editor composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film. . . Hence, the performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical tests. This is the first consequence of the fact that the actor's performance is presented by means of the camera. Also, the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during the performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of the critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the actor. The audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing.

Note: The expansion of the field of the testable which mechanical equipment brings about for the actor corresponds to the extraordinary expansion of the field of the testable brought about for the individual through economic conditions. Thus, vocational aptitude tests become constantly more important. What matters in these tests are segmental performances of the individual. The film shot and the vocational aptitude test are taken before a committee of experts. The camera director in the studio occupies a place identical with that of the examiner during

aptitude tests. (Translated by H. Zohn in *Illuminations*, from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.")

"The work of art with the dadaists becomes a projectile. It plunges in on the spectator, it takes on a tactile quality. The diverging element in film is also first-and-foremost a tactile element, based effectually on the constant change of place and camera angles that stimulate the spectator."

No contemplation is possible. The images fragment perception into successive sequences, into stimuli toward which there can be only instantaneous response, yes or no—the limit of an abbreviated reaction. Film no longer allows you to question. It questions you, and directly. It is in this sense that the modern media call for, according to McLuhan, [3] a greater degree of immediate participation, an incessant response, a total plasticity (Benjamin compares the work of the cameraman to that of the surgeon: tactility and manipulation). The role of the message is no longer information, but testing and polling, and finally control ("contra-role," in the sense that all your answers are already inscribed in the "role," on the anticipated registers of the code). Montage and codification

demand, in effect, that the receiver construe and decode by observing the same procedure whereby the work was assembled. The reading of the message is then only a perpetual examination of the code.

Every image, every media message, but also any functional environmental object, is a test—that is to say, in the full rigor of the term, liberating response mechanisms according to stereotypes and analytic models. Today, the object is no longer "functional" in the traditional meaning of the word; it no longer serves you, it *tests* you. It has nothing to do with the object of yesteryear, no more than does media news with a "reality" of facts. Both objects and information result already from a selection, a montage, from a point-of-view. They have already tested "reality," and have asked only questions that "answered back" to them. They have broken down reality into simple elements that they have reassembled into scenarios of regulated oppositions, exactly in the same way that the photographer imposes his contrasts, lights, angles on his subject (any photographer will tell you: you can do anything, all you have to do is approach the original from the right angle, at that right moment or mood

that will render it the *correct answer* to the instantaneous test of the instrument and its code). It is exactly like the test or the referendum when they translate a conflict or problem into a game of question/answer. And reality, thus tested, tests you according to the same grill; you decode it according to the same code, inscribed within each message and object like a miniaturized genetic code.

All is presented today in a spread-out series, or as part of a line of products, and this fact alone tests you already, because you are obliged to make decisions. This approximates our general attitude toward the world around us to that of a *reading*, and to a selective deciphering. We live less like users than readers and selectors, reading cells. But nevertheless: by the same token you also are constantly selected and tested by the medium itself. Just like cutting out a sample for the ends of the survey, the media frame and excise their message bundles, which are in fact bundles of selected questions, samples of their audience. By a circular operation of experimental modification, of incessant interference, like a nervous input, tactile and retractile, that explores an object by means of brief perceptive sequences,

until it has been localized and controlled. What the media thereby localize and control are no real and autonomous groups, but samples, samples modelled socially and mentally by a barrage of messages. "Public opinion" is evidently the prettiest of these samples—not an unreal political substance, but one that is hyperreal—a fantastic hyperreality that lives only off of montage and test-manipulation.

The eruption of the binary scheme question/answer is of an incalculable importance. It renders inarticulate every discourse. It short-circuits all that was, in a golden age come again, the dialectic of signifier and signified, of a representing and a represented. It is the end of objects whose meaning would be function, and of opinions that "representative" representatives would be able to vote for. It is the end of the real interrogation to which it was possible to answer (the end especially to unanswerable questions). This process has been entirely overthrown. The contradictory process of true and false, of real and the imaginary, is abolished in this hyperreal logic of montage. Michel Tort, in his book *Intelligence Quotient*, analyzes this quite well: "What is going to determine the answer to the question is not the question as such in the form

in which it was posed, it is also the idea that the interrogated subject forms about the most appropriate tactic to adopt in function of the concept he has formed about the expectations of the interrogator." And further: "The artifact is something else entirely than a controlled transformation of the object for the ends of knowledge: it is a rude interference with reality, at the end of which it is impossible to say what in reality can be objectively known and what is the result of technical intervention (medium). The I.Q. is an artifact." No more true or false, because no more distinguishable hiatus between question and response. In the light of the tests, intelligence, like opinion—and more generally the entire process of meaning—is reduced to the "ability to produce contrasting reactions to a growing series of adequate stimuli."

This entire analysis sends us back to McLuhan's formula: "The Medium is the Message." It is in effect the medium—the very style of montage, of decoupage, of interpellation, solicitation, summation, by the medium—which controls the process of meaning. And you understand why McLuhan saw in the era of the great electronic media an era of *tactile* communication. We are closer here in effect to

the tactile than to the visual universe, where the distancing is greater and reflection is always possible. At the same time as touch loses its sensorial, sensual value for us ("touching is an interaction of the senses rather than a simple contact of an object with the skin"), it is possible that it returns as the strategy of a universe of communication—but as the field of *tactile* and *tactical* simulation, where the message becomes "massage," tentacular solicitation, test. Everywhere you're tested, palpated, the method is "tactical," the sphere of communication is "tactile." Without even speaking of the ideology of "contact," that is being pushed in all its forms as a substitute for social rapport, there is an entire social configuration that orbits around the test (the question/answer cell) as around the commandments of the molecular code.

The political sphere entirely loses its specificity when it enters into the game of the media and public opinion polls, that is to say into the sphere of the integrated circuit of question/answer. The electoral sphere is in any case the first great institution where social exchange is reduced to obtaining an answer. It is due to this sign-simplification that it is the first one to become universal. Universal suffrage is the first

of the mass-media. All through the 19th and 20th centuries political and economic practice merge increasingly into the same type of discourse. Propaganda and advertising fuse in the same marketing and merchandising of objects and ideologies. This convergence of language between the economic and the political is furthermore what marks a society such as ours, where "political economy" is fully realized. It is also by the same token its end, since the two spheres are abolished in an entirely separate reality, or hyperreality, which is that of the media. There, too, there is an elevation of each term to a greater power, that of the third-order simulacra.

"That many regret the 'corruption' of politics by the media, deploring that TV and public opinion polls have replaced so quickly the formation of opinion, shows only that they understand nothing about politics."

What is characteristic of this phase of political hyperrealism is the necessary conjunction between the bipartite system and the entry into the play of the polls as mirror of this alternating equivalence of the political game.

The polls are located in a dimension beyond all social *production*. They refer only to a

simulacrum of public opinion. A mirror of opinion analogous in its way to that of the Gross National Product: imaginary mirror of the productive forces, without regard to their social ends or lack thereof. What is essential is only that "it" reproduces itself. The same as for public opinion: what is essential is that it shadow itself incessantly in its own image. Therein lies the secret of mass representation. It is no longer necessary that anyone *produce* an opinion, all that is needed is that all *reproduce* public opinion, in the sense that all opinions get caught up in this kind of general equivalent, and once more proceed from it (reproduce it, whatever they make of it, on the level of individual choice). For opinions as for material goods: production is dead, long live reproduction.

If McLuhan's formula makes any sense it is certainly in this connection. [4] Public opinion is *par excellence* at the same time medium and message. And the polls that inform it are the incessant imposition of the medium as message. In this sense they are of the same nature as TV and the electronic media, which we have seen are also only a perpetual game of question/answer, an instrument of perpetual polling.

The polls manipulate *that which cannot be*

decided. Do they really affect the vote? True, false? Do they give an exact picture of reality, or simple tendencies, or the refraction of this reality in a hyperspace of simulation whose curve even is unknown? True, false, undecidable. Their most sophisticated analyses leave room always for the reversibility of the hypotheses. Statistics is only casuistry. This undecidable quality is proper to any process of simulation (see above, the crisis of indecision). The internal logic of these procedures (statistics, probability, operational cybernetics) is certainly rigorous and "scientific"; somehow though it does not stick, it is a fabulous fiction whose index of refraction in any reality (true or false) is nil. This is even what gives these *models* their forcefulness. But also it is this which only leaves them, as truth, the paranoid projection tests of a case, or of a group which dreams of a miraculous correspondance of the real to their models, and therefore of an absolute manipulation.

What is true of the statistics scenario is also true of the regulated partition of the political sphere: the alternation of the forces in power, majority/minority, substitutive, etc. On this limit of pure representation, "that" no longer

represents anything. Politics die of the too-well-regulated game of distinctive oppositions. The political sphere (and that of power in general) becomes empty. This is somehow the payment for the accomplishing of the political class' desire: that of a perfect manipulation of social representation. Surreptitiously and silently, all social substance has left this machine in the very moment of its perfect reproduction.

The same thing holds true for the polls. The only ones who believe in them finally are the members of the political class, just as the only ones who really believe in advertising and market studies are the marketeers and advertisers. This is not because they are particularly stupid (though that we can't exclude either) but because the polls are homogenous with the current functioning of politics. They take on a "real" tactical value, they come into play as a factor in the regulation of the political class according to its own rules of the game. It therefore has reason to believe in them, and it believes. But who else does, really? It is the political class' burlesque spectacle, hyper-representative of nothing at all, that people taste by way of the polls and media. There is a jubilation proper to spectacular nullity, and the

last form it takes is that of *statistical contemplation*. This is accompanied always, we know, by a profound disappointment—the kind of disillusion that the polls provoke in absorbing so utterly the public's voice, in short-circuiting all process of expression. The fascination they exercise is in accordance with this neutralization by emptiness, with this trance they create by anticipation of the image over all possible reality.

The problem of the polls is not at all that of their objective influence. Just as for propaganda or publicity, their influence is negated by individual or collective inertia or resistance. The problem is the operational simulation that they institute over the entire spectrum of social practices: that of the progressive *leucemiazation* of all social substance, that is the substitution for blood of the white lymph of media.

The question/answer cycle finds extension in all domains. You slowly find that the entire realm of inquiries, polls, and statistics needs to be looked at again in relation to this radical suspicion which falls upon their methods. But the selfsame suspicion falls on ethnology. Unless you admit that the natives are perfect naturals, incapable of simulation, the problem is the same as here: the impossibility of obtaining for a *directed* question

any answer other than *simulated* (other than reproducing the question). It isn't even certain that you can interrogate plants, animals, nor even inert matter in the exact sciences with any chance of "objective" response. As to the response of the polled to the poll-takers, the natives to the ethnologist, the analyzed to the analyst, you can be sure that the circularity is total: the ones questioned always pretend to be as the question imagines and solicits them to be. Even psychoanalytic transference and counter-transference fall today under the sway of this stimulated, simulated-anticipated response, which is none other than the very model of the self-fulfilling prophecy. [5] We come then upon a strange paradox: the word of the polled, the analyzed, the natives, is irremediably short-circuited and lost, and it is on the basis of this foreclosure that these respective disciplines—ethnology, psychoanalysis, sociology—are going to be able to experience such marvelous growth. But they become puffed-up on mere wind, for it is in that respect that the circular response of the polled, the analyzed, the natives is all the same a challenge and a triumphant revenge. It is that they place the spotlight back on the question itself, isolate it in offering it the

mirror of the answer it was awaiting, and show it helpless to ever quit the vicious circle which in fact is that of power. Just as in the electoral system, in which the representatives no longer represent anything because they control so well the responses of the electoral body. But everything has, somehow, eluded the ruling class' grasp. This is why the dominated answer of the natives is all the same a real response, a desperate vengeance: that of letting power bury power.

The "advanced democratic" systems are stabilized on the formula of bipartite alternation. The monopoly in fact remains that of a homogenous political class, from left to right, but it must not be exercised as such. The one-party totalitarian regime is an unstable form—it defuses the political scene, it no longer assures the feed-back of public opinion, the minimal flux in the integrated circuit which constitutes the transistorized poitical machine. Alternation, on the other hand, is the end of the end of representation, so solicitation is maximal, by dint of simple formal constraint, when you are approaching most nearly a perfect competitive equation between the two parties. This is logical. Democracy realizes the law of equi-

valence in the political order. This law is accomplished in the back-and-forth movement of the two terms which reactivates their equivalence but allows, by the minute difference, a public consensus to be formed and the cycle of representation to be closed. Operational theatre, where the only play staged anymore is the fulginous reflection of political Reason. The "free choice" of individuals, which is the credo of democracy, leads in fact precisely to the opposite: the vote becomes functionally *obligatory*: if it is not legally, it is by statistical constraint, the structure of alternation, reinforced by the polls. [6] The vote becomes functionally *aleatory*: when democracy attains an advanced formal stage, it distributes itself around equal quotients (50/50). The vote comes to resemble a Brownian movement of particles or the calculation of probabilities. It is as if everyone voted by chance, or monkeys voted.

At this point it makes no difference at all what the parties in power are expressing historically and socially. It is *necessary* even that they represent nothing; the fascination of the game, the polls, the formal and statistical compulsion of the game is all the greater.

"Classical" universal suffrage already im-

plies a certain neutralization of the political field, if only by the consensus on the rules of the game. But you can still distinguish therein the representatives from the represented, on the basis of a real social antagonism of opinion. It is the neutralization of this contradictory referent, under the sign of a public opinion from now on equal unto itself, mediated and homogenized by anticipation (the polls) that will make alternation possible "at the top": simulation of opposition between two parties, absorption of their respective objectives, reversibility of the entire discourse one into the other. It is, beyond the representing and the represented, the pure form of representation—just as simulation characterizes, beyond the signifier and the signified, the pure form of the political economy of the sign—exactly as the floating of currency and its countable relations characterizes, beyond use and exchange value, beyond all substance of production, the pure form of value.

It might appear that the historical movement of capital carries it from one open competition towards oligopoly, then towards monopoly—that the democratic movement goes from multiple parties toward bipartism, then toward the single party. Nothing of the

sort: oligopoly, or the current duopoly results from a *tactical doubling of monopoly*. In all domains duopoly is the final stage of monopoly. It is not the public will (state intervention, anti-trust laws, etc.) which breaks up the monopoly of the market—it is the fact that any unitary system, if it wishes to survive, must acquire a *binary regulation*. This changes nothing as far as monopoly is concerned. On the contrary, power is absolute only if it is capable of diffraction into various equivalents, if it knows how to take off so as to put more on. This goes for brands of soap-suds as well as peaceful co-existence. You need two superpowers to keep the universe under control: a single empire would crumble of itself. And the equilibrium of terror alone can allow a regulated opposition to be established, for the strategy is structural, never atomic. This regulated opposition can furthermore be ramified into a more complex scenario. The matrix remains binary. It will never again be a matter of a duel or open competitive struggle, but of couples of simultaneous opposition.

From the smallest disjunctive unity (question/answer particle) up to the great alternating systems that control the economy, politics,

world co-existence, the matrix does not change: it is always the 0/1, the binary scansion that is affirmed as the metastable or homeostatic form of the current systems. This is the nucleus of the simulation processes which dominate us. It can be organized as a play of unstable variations, from polyvalence to tautology, without threatening the strategic bipolar form: it is the divine form of simulation.

Why are there *two* towers at New York's World Trade Center? All of Manhattan's great buildings were always happy enough to affront each other in a competitive verticality, the result of which is an architectural panorama in the image of the capitalist system: a pyramidal jungle, all the buildings attacking each other. The system profiled itself in a celebrated image that you had of New York when you arrived there by boat. This image has completely changed in the last few years. The effigy of the capitalist system has passed from the pyramid to the perforated card. Buildings are no longer obelisks, but lean one upon the other, no longer suspicious one of the other, like columns in a statistical graph. This new architecture incarnates a system that is no longer competitive, but compatible, and where competition has disap-

peared for the benefit of the correlations. (New York is the world's only city therefore that retraces all along its history, and with a prodigious fidelity and in all its scope, the actual form of the capitalistic system—it changes instantly in function of the latter. No European city does so.) This architectural graphism is that of the monopoly; the two W.T.C. towers, perfect parallelepipeds a ¼-mile high on a square base, perfectly balanced and blind communicating vessels. The fact that there are two of them *signifies* the end of all competition, the end of all original reference. Paradoxically, if there were only one, the monopoly would not be incarnated, because we have seen how it stabilizes on a dual form. For the sign to be pure, it has to duplicate itself: it is the duplication of the sign which destroys its meaning. This is what Andy Warhol demonstrates also: the multiple replicas of Marilyn's face are there to show at the same time the death of the original and the end of representation. The two towers of the W.T.C. are the visible sign of the closure of the system in a vertigo of duplication, while the other skyscrapers are each of them the original moment of a system constantly transcending itself in a perpetual crisis and self-

challenge.

There is a particular fascination in this reduplication. As high as they are, higher than all the others, the two towers signify nevertheless the end of verticality. They ignore the other buildings, they are not of the same race, they no longer challenge them, nor compare themselves to them, they look one into the other as into a mirror and culminate in this prestige of similitude. What they project is the idea of the model that they are one for the other, and their twin altitude presents no longer any value of transcendence. They signify only that the strategy of models and commutations wins out in the very heart of the system itself—and New York is really the heart of it—over the traditional strategy of competition. The buildings of Rockefeller Center still direct their gaze one at the other into their glass or steel facades, in the city's infinite specularity. The towers, on the other hand, are blind, and no longer have a facade. All referential of habitat, of the facade as face, of interior and exterior, that you still find in the Chase Manhattan or in the boldest mirror-buildings of the 60's, is erased. At the same time as the rhetoric of verticality, the rhetoric of the mirror has disappeared. There

remains only a series closed on the number two, just as if architecture, in the image of the system, proceeded only from an unchangeable genetic code, a definitive model.

The Hyperrealism of Simulation

All of this defines a digital space, a magnetic field for the code, with polarizations, diffractions, gravitations of the models and always, always, the flux of the smallest disjunctive unities (the question/answer cell, that is like the cybernetic atom of meaning). We should compare this kind of control with the traditional repressive space, the police-space that still corresponded to a *signifying* violence. Space of reactionary conditioning that took its inspiration from the total Pavlovian disposition of programmed, repetitive aggressions, and which you find again multiplied in scale in "hard sell" advertising and in the political propaganda of the 1930's. Raw industrial violence, aiming to induce behaviors of terror and of animal obeisance. All of that no longer has any meaning. The totalitarian, bureaucratic concentration is a scheme which dates from the era of the mercantile law of value. The system of

equivalences imposes in effect the form of a general equivalent, and therefore the centralization of a global process. Archaic rationality compared to that of simulation; there is no longer a single general equivalent, but a diffraction of models that plays a regulatory role. No longer the form of the general equivalent, but that of distinctive opposition. From injunction you pass to disjunction by the code, from the ultimatum you pass to the solicitation, from the required passivity to models constructed all at once on the basis of the "active response" of the subject, on its implication, its "ludic" participation, etc., towards a total environmental model made out of incessant spontaneous responses of joyous feed-back and irradiating contact. This is the "concretization of the general atmosphere," according to Nicolas Schöffer, the great festival of Participation, made out of myriads of stimuli, miniaturized tests, infinitely divisible question/answers, all magnetized by a few great models in the luminous field of the code.

Here comes the time of the great Culture of tactile communication, under the sign of the technico-luminous cinematic space of total spatio-dynamic theatre.

This is a completely imaginary contact-world of sensorial mimetics and tactile mysticism; it is essentially an entire ecology that is grafted on this universe of operational simulation, multistimulation and multiresponse. We naturalize this incessant test of successful adaptation in assimilating it into animal mimesis. "The adaptation of animals to the colors and forms of their milieu is a valid phenomenon for man" (Nicolas Schöffer), and the same for Indians, with their "innate sense of ecology"! Tropisms, mimetics, empathy: the complete ecological Evangel of open systems, with positive or negative feedback, is going to rush into this breech, with an ideology of regulation by information which is only the avatar, according to a more flexible rationality, of Pavlov's reflex. So it is that we graduate from electro-shock therapy to bodily expression as a means of conditioning mental health. Everywhere the disposition of force and forcing yield to dispositions of ambiance, with operationalization of the notions of need, perception, desire, etc. Generalized ecology, mystique of the "niche" and of the context, milieu-simulation right up to "Centers of Esthetic and Cultural Re-Animation" foreseen in the VIIth Plan (why

not?) and Center of Sexual Leisure, constructed in the form of a breast, that will offer a "superior euphoria due to a pulsating ambiance. . . . The workers from all classes will be able to penetrate into these stimulating centers." Spatiodynamic fascination, like this "total theatre" established "according to a hyperbolic circular disposition turning around a cylindrical cone": no more scene, cut-off point, or "regard": end of the spectacle as well as of the spectacular, towards the total environmental, fused together, tactile, esthesia and no longer esthetics, etc. We can think of the total theatre of Artaud only with black humor, his Theatre of Cruelty, of which this spatiodynamic simulaton is only an abject caricature. Here cruelty is replaced by "minimal and maximal stimulus thresholds," by the invention of "perceptive codes calculated on the basis of saturation thresholds." Even the good old "catharsis" of the classical theatre of the passions has become today homeopathy by simulation. So goes creativity.

This also means the collapse of reality into hyperrealism, in the minute duplication of the real, preferably on the basis of another reproductive medium—advertising, photo, etc. From medium to medium the real is volatilized;

it becomes an allegory of death, but it is reinforced by its very destruction; it becomes the real for the real, fetish of the lost object—no longer object of representation, but ecstasy of denegation and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal.

Realism had already begun this tendency. The rhetoric of the real already meant that the status of the latter had been gravely menaced (the golden age is that of language's innocence, where it doesn't have to add an "effect of reality" to what is said). Surrealism is still solidary with the realism it contests, but augments its intensity by setting it off against the imaginary. The hyperreal represents a much more advanced phase, in the sense that even this contradiction between the real and the imaginary is effaced. The unreal is no longer that of dream or of fantasy, of a beyond or a within, it is that of a *hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself.* To exist from the crisis of representation, you have to lock the real up in pure repetition. Before emerging in pop art and pictorial neo-realism, this tendency is at work already in the new novel. The project is already there to empty out the real, extirpate all psychology, all subjectivity, to move the real

back to pure objectivity. In fact this objectivity is only that of the pure look—objectivity at last liberated from the object, that is nothing more than the blind relay station of the look which sweeps over it. Circular seduction where you can detect easily the unconscious desire of no longer being visible at all.

This is certainly the impression that the new novel leaves: this rage for eliding sense in a minute and blind reality. Syntax and semantics have disappeared—there is no longer apparition, but instead subpoena of the object, severe interrogation of its scattered fragments—neither metaphor nor metonymy: successive immanence under the policing structure of the look. This "objective" minuteness arouses a vertigo of reality, a vertigo of death on the limits of representation-for-the-sake-of-representation. End of the old illusions of relief, perspective and depth (spatial and psychological) bound to the perception of the object: it is the entire optic, the view become operational on the surface of things, it is the look become molecular code of the object.

Several modalities of this vertigo of realistic simulation are possible:

I. The deconstruction of the real into details—closed paradigmatic declension of the object—flattening, linearity and seriality of the partial objects.

II. The endlessly reflected vision: all the games of duplication and reduplication of the object in detail. This multiplication is presented as a deepening, that is for a critial metalanguage, and it was doubtless true in a reflexive configuration of the sign, in a dialectic of the mirror. From now on, though, this indefinite refraction is only another type of seriality. The real is no longer reflected, instead it feeds off itself till the point of emaciation.

III. The properly serial form (Andy Warhol). Here not only the syntagmatic dimension is abolished, but the paradigmatic as well. Since there no longer is any formal flection or even internal reflection, but contiguity of the same—flection and reflection zero. Like those two twin sisters in a dirty picture: the charnel reality of their bodies is erased by the resemblance. How to invest your energies in one, when her beauty is immediately duplicated by the other? The regard can go only from one to the other, all vision is locked into this coming-and-going. Subtle way of murdering the original, but also

singular seduction, where all attention to the object is intercepted by its infinite diffraction into itself (inverted scenario of the Platonic myth of the reunion of the separated halves of the symbol—here the sign multiplies like protozoans). This seduction is possibly that of death, in the sense that for sexual beings, death is possibly not nothingness, but simply the mode of reproduction anterior to the sexual. This generation by model along an endless chain that in effect recalls the protozoans and is opposed to a sexual mode that we tend, inaccurately, to confuse with life itself.

IV. But this pure mechanization is doubtless only a paradoxical limit: the true generating formula, that which englobes all the others, and which is somehow the stabilized form of the code, is that of binarity, of digitality. Not pure repetition, but the minimal separation, the least amount of inflection between the two terms, that is to say the "very smallest common paradigm" that the fiction of sense could possibly support. Combination of differentiation internal to the pictorial object and to the object of consummation, this simulation retreats in contemporary art to be no more than the

minute difference that still separates the hyperreal from hyperpainting. The latter pretends to extend right up to a sacrificial effacement before the real, but you know how all these prestigious elements in painting resuscitate in this minute difference: all of painting takes refuge in the border that separates the painted surface and the wall. And in the signature: metaphysical sign of painting and of the whole metaphysic of representation, at the limit where it takes itself for model (the "pure look") and turns back upon itself in the compulsive repetition of the code.

The very definition of the real becomes: *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction.* This is contemporaneous with a science that postulates that a process can be perfectly reproduced in a set of given conditions, and also with the industrial rationality that postulates a universal system of equivalency (classical representation is not equivalence, it is transcription, interpretation, commentary). At the limit of this process of reproductibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced.* The hyperreal.

And so: end of the real, and end of art, by total absorption one into the other? No:

hyperrealism is the limit of art, and of the real, by respective exchange, on the level of the simulacrum, of the privileges and the prejudices which are their basis. The hyperreal transcends representation (cf. J.F. Lyotard, *L'Art Vivant*, number on hyperrealism) only because it is entirely in simulation. The tourniquet of representation tightens madly, but of an implosive madness, that, far from eccentric (marginal) inclines towards the center to its own infinite repetition. Analogous to the distancing characteristic of the dream, that makes us say that we are only dreaming; but this is only the game of censure and of perpetuation of the dream. Hyperrealism is made an integral part of a coded reality that it perpetuates, and for which it changes nothing.

In fact, we should turn our definition of hyperrealism inside out: *It is reality itself today that is hyperrealist.* Surrealism's secret already was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only in certain privileged moments that nevertheless are still connected with art and the imaginary. Today it is quotidian reality in its entirety—political, social, historical and economic—that from now on incorporates the simulatory dimension of hyperrealism. We live

everywhere already in an "esthetic" hallucination of reality. The old slogan "truth is stranger than fiction," that still corresponded to the surrealist phase of this estheticization of life, is obsolete. There is no more fiction that life could possibly confront, even victoriously—it is reality itself that disappears utterly in the game of reality—radical disenchantment, the cool and cybernetic phase following the hot stage of fantasy.

It is thus that for guilt, anguish and death there can be substituted the total joy of the signs of guilt, despair, violence and death. It is the very euphoria of simulation, that sees itself as the abolition of cause and effect, the beginning and the end, for all of which it substitutes reduplication. In this manner all closed systems protect themselves at the same time from the referential—as well as from all metalanguage that the system forestalls in playing at its own metalanguage; that is to say in duplicating itself in its own critique of itself. In simulation, the metalinguistic illusion duplicates and completes the referential illusion (pathetic hallucination of the sign and pathetic hallucination of the real).

"It's a circus," "It's theatre," "It's a movie," old adages, old naturalistic denunciation. These sayings are now obsolete. The problem now is

that of the *satellization of the real,* the putting into orbit of an indefinable reality without common measure to the fantasies that once used to ornament it. This satellization we find further naturalized in the two-rooms-kitchen shower that they have launched into orbit—to the powers of space, you could say—with the last lunar module. The banality of the earthly habitat lifted to the rank of cosmic value, of absolute decor—hypostatized in space—this is the end of metaphysics, the era of hyperreality that begins. [8] But the spatial transcendence of the banality of the two-rooms, like its cool and mechanical figuration of hyperrealism, [9] says only one thing: that this module, such as it is, participates in a hyperspace of representation—where each is already technically in possession of the instantaneous reproduction of his own life, where the pilots of the Tupolev that crashed at Bourget could see themselves die live on their own camera. This is nothing else that the short-circuit of the response by the question in the test, instantaneous process of re-conduction whereby reality is immediately contaminated by its simulacrum.

There used to be, before, a specific class of allegorical and slightly diabolical objects: mir-

rors, images, works of art (concepts?)—simulacra, but transparent and manifest (you didn't confuse the counterfeit with the original), that had their characteristic style and savoir-faire. And pleasure consisted then rather in discovering the "natural" in what was artificial and counterfeit. Today, when the real and the imaginary are confused in the same operational totality, the esthetic fascination is everywhere. It is a subliminal perception (a sort of sixth sense) of deception, montage, scenaria—of the overexposed reality in the light of the models—no longer a production space, but a reading strip, strip of coding and decoding, magnetized by the signs—esthetic reality—no longer by the premeditation and the distance of art, but by its elevation to the second level, to the second power, by the anticipation and the immanence of the code. A kind of non-intentional parody hovers over everything, of technical simulation, of indefinable fame to which is attached an esthetic pleasure, that very one of reading and of the rules of the game. Travelling of signs, the media, of fashion and the models, of the blind and brilliant ambiance of the simulacra.

A long time ago art prefigured this turning which is that today of daily life. Very quickly the

work turns back on itself as the manipulation of the signs of art: over-signification of art, "academism of the signifier," as Levi-Strauss would say, who interprets it really as the form-sign. It is then that art enters into its indefinite *reproduction*: all that reduplicates itself, even if it be the everyday and banal reality, falls by the token under the sign of art, and becomes esthetic. It's the same thing for production, which you could say is entering today this esthetic reduplication, this phase when, expelling all content and finality, it becomes somehow abstract and non-figurative. It expresses then the pure form of production, it takes upon itself, as art, the value of a finality without purpose. Art and industry can then exchange their signs. Art can become a reproducing machine (Andy Warhol), without ceasing to be art, since the machine is only a sign. And production can lose all social finality so as to be verified and exalted finally in the prestigious, hyperbolic signs that are the great industrial combines, the ¼-mile-high towers or the number mysteries of the GNP.

And so art is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality. And so art is dead, not only because its critical transcendence is gone,

but because reality itself, entirely impregnated by an aesthetic which is inseparable from its own structure, has been confused with its own image. Reality no longer has the time to take on the appearance of reality. It no longer even surpasses fiction: it captures every dream even before it takes on the appearance of a dream. Schizophrenic vertigo of these serial signs, for which no counterfeit, no sublimation is possible, immanent in their repetition—who could say what the reality is that these signs simulate? They no longer even repress anything (which is why, if you will, simulation pushes us close to the sphere of psychosis). Even the primary processes are abolished in them. The cool universe of digitality has absorbed the world of metaphor and metonymy. The principle of simulation wins out over the reality principle just as over the principle of pleasure.

Translated by Philip Beitchman

Notes

1. Counterfeit and reproduction imply always an anguish, a disquieting foreignness: the uneasiness before the photograph, considered like a witches trick—and more generally before any technical apparatus, which is always an apparatus of reproduction, is related by Benjamin to the uneasiness before the mirror-image. There is already sorcery at work in the mirror. But how much more so when this image can be detached from the mirror and be transported, stocked, reproduced at will (cf. *The Student of Prague*, where the devil detaches the image of the student from the mirror and harrasses him to death by the intermediary of this image). All reproduction implies therefore a kind of black magic, from the fact of being seduced by one's own image in the water, like Narcissus, to being haunted by the double and, who knows, to the mortal turning back of this vast technical apparatus secreted today by man as his own image (the narcissistic mirage of technique, McLuhan) and that returns to him, cancelled and distorted—endless reproduction of himself and his power to the limits of the world. Reproduction is diabolical in its very essence; it makes something fundamental vacillate. This has hardly changed for us: simulation (that we describe here as the operation of the code) is still and always the place of a gigantic enterprise of manipulation, of control and of death, just like the imitative object (primitive statuette, image of photo) always had as objective an operation of black image.

2. There is furthermore in Monod's book a flagrant contradiction, which reflects the ambiguity of all current science. His discourse concerns the code, that is the third-order simulacra, but it does so still according to "scientific" schemes of the second-order—objectiveness, "scientific" ethic of knowledge, science's principle of truth and transcendence. All things incompatible with the indeterminable models of the third-order.

3. "It's the feeble 'definition' of TV which condemns its spectator to rearranging the few points retained into a kind of *abstract work*. He participates suddenly in the creation of a reality that was only just presented to him in dots: the television watcher is in the position of an individual who is asked to project his own fantasies on inkblots that are not supposed to represent anything." TV as perpetual Rorshach test. And furthermore: "The TV image requires each instant that we 'close' the spaces in the mesh by a convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile."

4. "The Medium is the Message" is the very slogan of the poitical economy of the sign, when it enters into the third-order simulation—the distinction between the medium and the message characterizes instead signification of the second-order.

5. The entire current "psychological" situation is characterized by this short-circuit.

Doesn't emancipation of children and teenagers, once the initial phase of revolt is passed and once there has been established the *principle* of the *right* to emancipation, seem like the *real* emancipation of parents. And the young (students, high-schoolers, adolescents) seem to sense it in

their always more insistent demand (though still as paradoxical) for the presence and advice of parents or of teachers. Alone at last, free and responsible, it seemed to them suddenly that other people possibly have absconded with their true liberty. Therefore, there is no question of "leaving them be." They're going to hassle them, not with any emotional or material spontaneous demand, but with an exigency that has been premeditated and corrected by an implicit oedipal knowledge. Hyperdependence (much greater than before) distorted by irony and refusal, *parody of libidinous original mechanisms*. Demand without content, without referent, unjustified, but for all that all the more severe—naked demand with no possible answer. The contents of knowledge (teaching) or of affective relations, the pedagogical or familial referent having been eliminated in the act of emancipation, there remains only a demand linked to the empty form of the institution—perverse demand, and for that reason all the more obstinate. "Transferable" desire (that is to say non-referential, un-referential), desire that has been fed by lack, by the place left vacant, "liberated," desire captured in its own vertiginous image, desire of desire, as pure form, hyperreal. Deprived of symbolic substance, it doubles back upon itself, draws its energy from its own reflection and its disappointment with itself. This is literally today the "demand," and it is obvious that unlike the "classical" objective or transferable relations this one here is insoluble and interminable.

Simulated Oedipus.

Francois Richard: "Students asked to be seduced either bodily or verbally. But also they are aware of this

and they play the game, ironically. 'Give us your knowledge, your presence, you have the word, speak, you are there for that.' Contestation certainly, but not only: the more authority is contested, vilified, the greater the need for authority as such. They play at Oedipus also, to deny it all the more vehemently. The 'teach', he's Daddy, they say; it's fun, you play at incest, malaise, the untouchable, at being a tease—in order to de-sexualize finally." Like one under analysis who asks for Oedipus back again, who tells the "oedipal" stories, who has the "analytical" dreams to satisfy the supposed request of the analyst, or to resist him? In the same way the student goes through his oedipal number, his seduction number, gets chummy, close, approaches, dominates—but this isn't desire, it's simulation. Oedipal psychodrama of simulation (neither less real nor less dramatic for all that). Very different from the real libidinal stakes of knowledge and power or even of a real mourning for the absence of same (as could have happened after '68 in the universities) Now we've reached the phase of desperate reproduction, and where the stakes are nil, the simulacrum is maximal—exacerbated and parodied simulation at one and the same time—as interminable as psychoanalysis and for the same reasons.

The interminable psychoanalysis.

There is a whole chapter to add to the history of transference and countertransference: that of their liquidation by simulation, of the impossible psychoanalysis because it is itself, from now on, that produces and reproduces the unconscious as its institutional substance. Psychoanalysis dies also of the exchange of the

signs of the unconscious. Just as revolution dies of the exchange of the critical signs of political economy. This short-circuit was well known to Freud in the form of the gift of the analytic dream, or with the "uninformed" patients, in the form of the gift of their analytic knowledge. But this was still interpreted as resistance, as detour, and did not put fundamentally into question either the process of analysis or the principle of transference. It is another thing entirely when the unconscious itself, the discourse of the unconscious becomes unfindable—according to the same scenario of simulative anticipation that we have seen at work on all levels with the machines of the third order. The analysis then can no longer end, it becomes logically and historically interminable, since it stabilizes on a puppet-substance of reproduction, an unconscious programmed on demand—an impossible-to-break-through point around which the whole analysis is rearranged. The messages of the unconscious have been short-circuited by the psycho-analysis "medium." This is libidinal hyperrealism. To the famous categories of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, it is going to be necessary to add the hyperreal, which captures and obstructs the functioning of the three orders.

6. Athenian democracy, much more advanced than our own, had reached the point where the vote was considered as payment for a service, after all other repressive solutions had been tried and found wanting in order to insure a quorum.

7. In this sense we should radically criticize the projection that Levi-Strauss makes of binary structures

as "anthropological" mental structures and of dual organization as the basic structure of primitive society. The dualist form that Levi-Srauss would so love to apply to primitive society is never anything less than *our* own structural logic. Our very own code, that selfsame one that we use to dominate the "archaic" societies. Levi-Strauss has the kindness to slip this to them under the guise of mental structures that are common to the whole human race. They will thereby be better prepared to receive the baptism of the Occident.

8. The coefficient of reality is proportional to the imaginary in reverse which gives it is specific density. This is true of geographical and spatial exploration also. When there is no more territory virgin and therefore available for the imaginary, when the map covers the whole territory, then something like a principle of reality disappears. The conquest of space constitutes in this sense an irreversible threshold in the direction of the loss of the eartly referential. This is precisely the hemorrhage of reality as internal coherence of a limited universe when its limits retreat infinitely. The conquest of space follows that of the planet as the same fantastic enterprise of extending the jurisdiction of the real—to carry for example the flag, the technique, and the two-rooms-and-kitchen to the moon—same tentative to substantiate the concepts or to territorialize the unconscious—the latter equals making the human race unreal, or to reversing it into a hyperreality of simulation.

9. Or that of the metal-plated caravan or super-market dear to hyperrealists, or Campbell's Soup dear to Andy Warhol, or the Mona Lisa, since she too has been

satellized around the planet, as absolute model of earthly art, no longer a work of art but a planetary simulacrum where everyone comes to witness himself (really his own death) in the gaze of the future.

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VANISHING POINT

Caution: Objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear!

Nostalgia born of the immensity of the Texan hills and the sierras of New Mexico: gliding down the freeway, smash hits on the Chrysler stereo, heat wave. Snapshots aren't enough. We'd need the whole film of the trip in real time, including the unbearable heat and the music. We'd have to replay it all from end to end at home in a darkened room, rediscover the magic of the freeways and the distance and the ice-cold alcohol in the desert and the speed and live it all again on the video at home in real time, not simply for the pleasure of remembering but because the fascination of senseless repetition is already present in the abstraction of the journey. The unfolding of the desert is infinitely close to the timelessness of film...

SAN ANTONIO

The Mexicans, become Chicanos, act as guides on the visit to El Alamo to laud the heroes of the American nation so valiantly massacred by their ownancestors.

But hard as those ancestors fought, the division of labour won out in the end. Today it is their grandchildren and great-grandchildren who are there, on the same battlefield, to hymn the Americans who stole their lands. History is full of ruse and cunning. But so are the Mexicans who have crossed the border clandestinely to come and work here.

SALT LAKE CITY

Pompous Mormon symmetry. Everywhere marble: flawless, funereal (the Capitol, the organ in the Visitor Center). Yet a Los-Angelic modernity, too -all the requisite gadgetry for a minimalist, extraterrestrial comfort. The Christ-topped dome (all the Christs here are copied from Thorwaldsen's and look like Bjorn Borg) straight out of *Close Encounters:* religion as special effects. In fact the whole city has the transparency and supernatural, otherworldly cleanness of a thing from outer space. A symmetrical, luminous, overpowering abstraction. At every intersection in the Tabernacle area - all marble and roses, and evangelical marketing - an electronic cuckoo-clock sings out: such Puritan obsessiveness is astonishing in this heat, in the heart of the desert, alongside this leaden lake, its waters also hyperreal from sheer density of salt. And, beyond the lake, the Great Salt Lake Desert, where they had to invent the speed of prototype cars to cope with the absolute horizontality... But the city itself is like a jewel, with its purity of air and its plunging urban vistas more breathtaking even than those of Los Angeles. What stunning brilliance, what modern veracity these Mormons show, these rich bankers, musicians, international genealogists, polygamists (the Empire State in New York has something of this same funereal Puritanism raised to the nth power). It is the capitalist, transsexual
pride of a people of mutants that gives the city its magic, equal and opposite to that of Las Vegas, that great whore on the other side of the desert.

MONUMENT VALLEY DEAD
HORSE POINT GRAND
CANYON

Geological - and hence metaphysical - monumentality, by contrast with the physical altitude of ordinary landscapes. Upturned relief patterns, sculpted out by wind, water, and ice, dragging you down into the whirlpool of time, into the remorseless eternity of a slow-motion catastrophe. The very idea of the millions and hundreds of millions of years that were needed peacefully to ravage the surface of the earth here is a perverse one, since it brings with it an awareness of signs originating, long before man appeared, in a sort of pact of wear and erosion struck between the elements. Among this gigantic heap of signs - purely geological in essence - man will have had no significance. The Indians alone perhaps interpreted them - a few of them. And yet they *are* signs. For the desert only *appears* uncultivated. This entire Navajo country, the long plateau which leads to the Grand Canyon, the cliffs overlooking Monument Valley, the abysses of Green River are all alive with a magical presence, which has nothing to do with nature (the secret of this whole stretch of country is perhaps that it was once an underwater relief and has retained the surrealist qualities of an ocean bed in the open air). You can understand why it took great magic on the Indians' part, and a terribly cruel religion, to exorcize such a theoretical grandeur as the desert's geological and celestial occurrence, to live up to such a backdrop. What is man if the signs that predate him have such power? A human race has to invent sacrifices equal to the natural cataclysmic order that surrounds it. It is perhaps these reliefs, because they are no longer natural, which givethe best idea of what a culture is. Monument Valley: blocks of language suddenly rising high, then subjected to a pitiless erosion, ancient sedimentations that owe their depth to wear (meaning is born out of the erosion of words, significations are born out of the erosion of signs), and that are today destined to become, like all that is cultivated - like all culture -natural parks.

SALT LAKE CITY: the world genealogical archives, presided over in the depths of the desert caves by those rich-living, puritanical conquistadors, the Mormons, and, alongside, the Bonneville track on the immaculate surface of the Great Salt Lake Desert, where prototype cars achieve the highest speeds in the world. Patronymic genesis as the depth of time, and the speed of sound as pure superficiality.

ALAMOGORDO: the first atomic-bomb test against the backdrop of White Sands, the pale blue backcloth of the mountains and hundreds of miles of white sand - the blinding artificial light of the bomb against the blinding light of the ground.

TORREY CANYON: the Salk Institute, sanctuary of DNA and all the Nobel prizewinners for biology. There all the future biological commandments are being devised, within that architecture copied from the palace of Minos, its white marble staring out over the immensity of the Pacific. . .

Extraordinary sites, capitals of fiction become reality. Sublime, trans-political sites of extraterritoriality, combining as they do the earth's undamaged geological grandeur with a sophisticated, nuclear, orbital, computer technology.

I went in search of *astral* America*, not social and cultural America, but the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways, not the deep America of mores and mentalities, but the America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces. I looked for it in the speed of the screenplay, in the indifferent reflex of television, in the film of days and nights projected across an empty space, in the marvellously affectless succession of signs, images, faces, and ritual acts on the road; looked for what was nearest to the nuclear and enucleated universe, a universe which is virtually our own, right down to its European cottages.

I sought the finished form of the future catastrophe of the social in geology, in that upturning of depth that can be seen in the striated spaces, the reliefs of salt and stone, the canyons where the fossil river flows down, the immemorial abyss of slowness that shows itself in erosion and geology. I even looked for it in the verticality of the great cities.

I knew all about this nuclear form, this future catastrophe when I was still in Paris, of course. But to understand it, you have to take to the road, to that travelling which achieves what Virilio calls the aesthetics of disappearance.

For the mental desert form expands before your very eyes, and this is the purified form of social desertification. Disaffection finds its pure form in the barrenness of speed. All that is cold and dead in desertification or social enucleation rediscovers its contemplative form here in the heat of the desert. Here in the transversality of the desert and the irony of geology, the transpolitical finds its generic, mental space.

The inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial, superficial world immediately finds its aesthetic form here, its ecstatic form. For the desert is simply that: an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance.

* 'L'Amerique siderale': this term and its variant forms have been rendered throughout by 'astral' or the less familiar 'sidereal', according to context. [Tr.]

The grandeur of deserts derives from their being, in their aridity, the negative of the earth's surface and of our civilized humours. They are places where humours and fluids become rarefied, where the air is so pure that the influence of the stars descends direct from the constellations. And, with the extermination of the desert Indians, an even earlier stage than that of anthropology became visible: a mineralogy, a geology, a sidereality, an inhuman facticity, an aridity that drives out the artificial scruples of culture, a silence that exists nowhere else.

The silence of the desert is a visual thing, too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it. There can be no silence up in the mountains, since their very contours roar. And for there to be silence, time itself has to attain a sort of horizontality; there has to be no echo of time in the future, but simply a sliding of geological strata one upon the other giving out nothing more than a fossil murmur.

Desert: luminous, fossilized network of an inhuman intelligence, of a radical indifference - the indifference not merely of the sky, but of the geological undulations, where the metaphysical passions of space and time alone crystallize. Here the terms of desire are turned upside down each day, and night annihilates them. But wait for the dawn to rise, with the awakening of the fossil sounds, the animal silence.

Speed creates pure objects. It is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself, since it moves more quickly than its own cause and obliterates that cause by outstripping it. Speed is the triumph of effect over cause, the triumph of instantaneity over time as depth, the triumph of the surface arid pure objectality over the profundity of desire. Speed creates a space of initiation, which may be lethal; its only rule is to leave no trace behind. Triumph of forgetting over memory, an uncultivated, amnesic intoxi-cation. The superficiality and reversibility of a pure object in the pure geometry of the desert. Driving like this produces a kind of invisibility, transparency, or transversality in things, simply by emptying them out. It is a sort of slow-motion suicide, death by an extenuation of forms - the delectable form of their disappearance. Speed is not a vegetal thing. It is nearer to the mineral, to refraction through a crystal, and it is already the site of a catastrophe, of a squandering of time. Perhaps, though, its fascination is simply that of the void. There is no seduction here, for seduction requires a secret. Speed is simply the rite that initiates us into emptiness: a nostalgic desire for forms to revert to immobility, concealed beneath the very intensification of their mobility. Akin to the nostalgia for living forms that haunts geometry.

Still, there is a violent contrast here, in this country, between the growing abstractness of a nuclear universe and a primary, visceral, unbounded* vitality, springing not from rootedness, but from the lack of roots, a metabolic vitality, in sex and bodies, as well as in work and in buying and selling. Deep down, the US, with its space, its technological refinement, its bluff good conscience, even in those spaces which it opens up for simulation, is the *only remaining primitive society.* The fascinating thing is to travel through it as though it were the primitive society of the future, a society of complexity, hybridity, and the greatest intermingling, of a ritualism that is ferocious but whose superficial diversity lends it beauty, a society inhabited by a total

metasocial fact with unforeseeable consequences, whose immanence is breathtaking, yet lacking a past through which to reflect on this, and therefore fundamentally primitive. . . Its primitivism has passed into the hyperbolic, inhuman character of a universe that is beyond us, that far outstrips its own moral, social, or ecological rationale. Only Puritans could have invented and developed this ecological andbiological morality based on preservation - and therefore on discrimination -which is profoundly racial in nature. Everything becomes an overprotected nature reserve, so protected indeed that there is talk today of denaturalizing Yosemite to give it back to Nature, as has happened with the Tasaday in the Philippines. A Puritan obsession with origins in the very place where the ground itself has already gone. An obsession with finding a niche, a contact, precisely at the point where everything unfolds in an astral indifference.

There is a sort of miracle in the insipidity of *artificial paradises,* so long as they achieve the greatness of an entire (un)culture. In America, space lends a sense of grandeur even to the insipidity of the suburbs and 'funky towns'. The desert is everywhere, preserving insignificance. A desert where the miracle of the car, of ice and whisky is daily re-enacted: a marvel of easy living mixed with the fatality of the desert. A miracle of obscenity that is genuinely American: a miracle of total availability, of the transparency of all functions in space, though this latter nonetheless remains unfathomable in its vastness and can only be exorcised by speed.

The Italian miracle: that of stage and scene.

The American miracle: that of the obscene.

The profusion of sense, as against the deserts of meaninglessness.

It is metamorphic forms that are magical. Not the sylvan, vegetal forest, but the petrified, mineralized forest. The salt desert, whiter than snow, flatter than the

sea. The effect of monumentality, geometry, and architecture where nothing has been designed or planned. Canyonsland, Split Mountain. Or the opposite: the amorphous reliefless relief of Mud Hills, the voluptuous, fossilized, monotonously undulating lunar relief of ancient lake beds. The white swell of White Sands. . . It takes this surreality of the elements toeliminate nature's picturesque qualities, just as it takes the metaphysics of speed to eliminate the natural picturesqueness of travel.

In fact the conception of a trip without any objective and which is, as a result, endless, only develops gradually for me. I reject the picturesque tourist round, the sights, even the landscapes (only their abstraction remains, in the prism of the scorching heat). Nothing is further from pure travelling than tourism or holiday travel. That is why it is best done in the extensive banality of deserts, or in the equally desert-like banality of a metropolis - not at any stage regarded as places of pleasure or culture, but seen televisually as scenery, as scenarios. That is why it is best done in extreme heat, the orgasmic form of bodily deterritorialization. The acceleration of molecules in the heat contributes to a barely perceptible evaporation of meaning.

It is not the discovery of local customs that counts, but discovering the immorality of the space you have to travel through, and this is on a quite different plane. It is this, together with the sheer distance, and the deliverance from the social, that count. Here in the most moral society there is, space is truly immoral. Here in the most conformist society, the dimensions are immoral. It is this immorality that makes distance light and the journey infinite, that cleanses the muscles of their tiredness.

Driving is a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated. Admittedly, there is the primal shock of the deserts and the *dazzle* of California, but when this is gone, the secondary brilliance of the journey begins, that of the excessive, pitiless distance, the infinity of anonymous faces and distances, or of certain miraculous

geological formations, which ultimately testify to no human will, while keeping intact an image of upheaval. This form of travel admits of no exceptions: when it runs up against a known face, a familiar landscape, or

some decipherable message, the spell is broken: the amnesic, ascetic, asymptotic charm of disappearance succumbs to affect and worldly semiology. This sort of travel creates its own peculiar type of event and innervation, so it also has its own special form of fatigue. Like a fibrillation of muscles, striated by the excess of heat and speed, by the excess of things seen or read, of places passed through and forgotten. The defibrillation of the body overloaded with empty signs, functional gestures, the blinding brilliance of the sky, and somnabulistic [sic!] distances, is a very slow process. Things suddenly become lighter, as culture, our culture, becomes more rarefied. And this spectral form of civilization which the Americans have invented, an ephemeral form so close to vanishing point, suddenly seems the best adapted to the probability - the probability only - of the life that lies in store for us. The form that dominates the American West, and doubtless all of American culture, is a seismic form: a fractal, interstitial culture, born of a rift with the Old World, a tactile, fragile, mobile, superficial culture - you have to follow its own rules to grasp how it works: seismic shifting, soft technologies.

The only question in this journey is: how far can we go in the extermination of meaning, how far can we go in the non-referential desert form without cracking up and, of course, still keep alive the esoteric charm of disappearance? A theoretical question here materialized in the objective conditions of a journey which is no longer a journey and therefore carries with it a fundamental rule: aim for the point of no return. This is the key. And the crucial moment is that brutal instant which reveals that the journey has no end, that there is no longer any reason for it to come to an end. Beyond a certain point, it is movement itself that changes. Movement which moves through space of its own volition changes into an absorption by space itself - end of resistance, end of the scene of the journey as such (exactly asthe jet engine is no longer an energy of space-penetration, but propels itself by creating a vacuum in front of it that sucks it forward, instead of supporting itself, as in the traditional model, upon the air’s

resistance). In this way, the centrifugal, eccentric point is reached where movement produces the vacuum that sucks you in. This moment of vertigo is also the moment of potential collapse. Not so much from the tiredness generated by the distance and the heat, as from the irreversible advance into the desert of time.

Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life.

NEW YORK

Aeronautic missionary of the silent majorities, I jump with cat-like tread from one airport to the other. Now it's the blazing woods of New Hampshire, casting a fleeting reflection in the mirror of New England. Yesterday, it was the steepling gentleness of skyscrapers. Tomorrow it will be Minneapolis with its sweet-sounding name, its gossamer string of vowels, half-Greek, half-Cheyenne, evoking a radiating geometric pattern, at the edge of the ice-sheets, at the horizon of the inhabited world... Speaking of the silence of the masses and the end of history, and casting an eye over the immensity and radiance of the lake. A biting wind blows over it, away to the east where night is falling. Planes pass overhead, silent as the wind, behind the windowpanes of the hotel, and the first neon signs begin to roll slowly, above the city. What an amazing place America is! All around is Indian summer, its mildness presaging snow. But where are the ten thousand lakes, the Utopian dream of a hellenistic city on the edge of the Rockies? Minneapolis, Minneapolis! After the patrician elegance and feminine gentleness of the Indian summer in Wisconsin, Minneapolis is merely a rural agglomeration, simply waiting in darkness amid its silos and hunting grounds for the winter and the cold on which it prides itself. But in the depths of this real America, there is the Commodore bar, with the finest art deco in the world, where Fitzgerald, they say, drank every evening. I drink there too.

Tomorrow I shall be carried directly by plane to the opposite extreme, opposite in terms of light, surface area, racial mix, aesthetics, and power - to the city that is heir to all other cities at once. Heir to Athens, Alexandria, Persepolis: New York.

NEW YORK

More sirens here, day and night. The cars are faster, the advertisements more aggressive. This is wall-to-wall prostitutiion [sic!]. And total electric light too. And the game - all games - gets more intense. It's always like this when you're getting near the centre of the world. But the people smile. Actually they smile more and more, though never to other people, always to themselves.

The terrifying diversity of faces, their strangeness, strained as they all are into unbelievable expressions. The masks old age or death conferred in archaic cultures are worn here by youngsters of twenty or twelve. But this reflects the city as a whole. The beauty other cities only acquired over centuries has been achieved by New York in fifty years.

Plumes of smoke, reminiscent of girls wringing out their hair after bathing. Afro or pre-Raphaelite hairstyles. Run-of-the-mill, multiracial. City of Pharoahs [sic!], all obelisks and needles. The blocks around Central Park are like flying buttresses, lending the huge park the appearance of a hanging garden.It isn't clouds that are fleecy here, but brains. Clouds float over the city like cerebral hemispheres driven by the wind. The people have cirrus clouds in their heads or coming out of their eyes, like the spongy vapours that rise from earth cracked by hot rains. Sexual solitude of clouds in the sky; linguistic solitude of men on the earth.

The number of people here who think alone, sing alone, and eat and talk alone in the streets is mind-boggling. And yet they don't add up. Quite the reverse. They subtract from each other and their resemblance to one another is uncertain.

Yet there is a certain solitude like no other - that of the man preparing his meal in

public on a wall, or on the hood of his car, or along a fence, alone. You see that all the time here. It is the saddest sight in the world. Sadder than destitution, sadder than the beggar is the man who eats alone in public. Nothing more contradicts the laws of man or beast, for animals always do each other the honour of sharing or disputing each other's food. He who eats alone is dead (but not he who drinks alone. Why is this?).

Why do people live in New York? There is no relationship between them. Except for an inner electricity which results from the simple fact of their being crowded together. A magical sensation of contiguity and attraction for an artificial centrality. This is what makes it a self-attracting universe, which there is no reason to leave. There is no human reason to be here, except for the sheer ecstasy of being crowded together.

The beauty of the Black and Puerto Rican women of New York. Apart from the sexual stimulation produced by the crowding together of so many races, it must be said that black, the pigmentation of the dark races, is like anatural make-up that is set off by the artificial kind to produce a beauty which is not sexual, but sublime and animal - a beauty which the pale faces so desperately lack. Whiteness seems an extenuation of physical adornment, a neutrality which, perhaps by that very token, claims all the exoteric powers of the Word, but ultimately will never possess the esoteric and ritual potency of artifice.

In New York there is this double miracle: each of the great buildings and each of the ethnic groups dominates or has dominated the city - after its own fashion. Here crowdedness lends sparkle to each of the ingredients in the mix whereas elsewhere it tends to cancel out differences. In Montreal, all the same elements are present - ethnic groups, buildings, and space on the grand

American scale - but the sparkle and violence of American cities are missing.

Clouds spoil our European skies. Compared with the immense skies of America and their thick clouds, our little fleecy skies and little fleecy clouds resemble our fleecy thoughts, which are never thoughts of wide open spaces. . . In Paris, the sky never takes off. It doesn't soar above us. It remains caught up in the backdrop of sickly buildings, all living in each other's shade, as though it were a little piece of private property. It is not, as here in the great capital New York, the vertiginous glass facade reflecting each building to the others. Europe has never been a continent. You can see that by its skies. As soon as you set foot in America, you feel the presence of an entire continent - space there is the very form of thought.

By contrast with the American 'downtown areas' and their blocks of skyscrapers, la Defense has forfeited the architectural benefits of verticality and excess by squeezing its high-rise blocks into an Italian-style setting, intoa dosed theatre bounded by a ring-road. It is very much a garden *à la française:* a bunch of buildings with a ribbon around it. All this has closed off the possibility that these monsters might engender others to infinity, that they might battle it out within a space rendered dramatic by their very competition (New York, Chicago, Houston, Seattle, Toronto). It is in such a space that the pure architectural object is born, an object beyond the control of architects, which roundly repudiates the city and its uses, repudiates the interests of the collectivity and individuals and persists in its own madness. That object has no equivalent, except perhaps the arrogance of the cities of the Renaissance.

No, architecture should not be humanized. Anti-architecture, the true sort (not the kind you find in Arcosanti, Arizona, which gathers together all the 'soft' technologies in the heart of the desert), the wild, inhuman type that is beyond the measure of man was made here - made itself here - in New York, without

considerations of setting, well-being, or ideal ecology. It opted for hard technologies, exaggerated all dimensions, gambled on heaven and hell. . . Eco-architecture, eco-society . . . this is the gentle hell of the Roman Empire in its decline.

Modern demolition is truly wonderful. As a spectacle it is the opposite of a rocket launch. The twenty-storey block remains perfectly vertical as it slides towards the centre of the earth. It falls straight, with no loss of its upright bearing, like a tailor's dummy falling through a trap-door, and its own surface area absorbs the rubble. What a marvellous modern art form this is, a match for the firework displays of our childhood.

They say the streets are alive in Europe, but dead in America. They are wrong. Nothing could be more intense, electrifying, turbulent, and vital than the streets of New York. They are filled with crowds, bustle, and advertisements, each by turns aggressive or casual. There are millions of people in the streets, wandering, carefree, violent, as if they had nothing better to do - and doubtless they have nothing else to do - than produce the permanent scenario of the city. There is music everywhere; the activity is intense, relatively violent, and silent (it is not the agitated, theatrical activity you find in Italy). The streets and avenues never empty, but the neat, spacious geometry of the city is far removed from the thronging intimacy of the narrow streets of Europe.

In Europe, the street only lives in sudden surges, in historic moments of revolution and barricades. At other times people move along briskly, no one really hangs around (no one wanders any more). It is the same with European cars. No one actually lives in them; there isn't enough space. The cities, too, do not have enough space, or rather that space is deemed public and bears all the marks of the public arena, which forbids you to cross it or wander around it as though it were a desert or some indifferent area.

The American street has not, perhaps, known these historic moments, but it is always turbulent, lively, kinetic, and cinematic, like the country itself, where the specifically historical and political stage counts for little, but where change,

whether spurred by technology, racial differences, or the media, assumes virulent forms: its violence is the very violence of the way of life.

Such is the whirl of the city, so great its centrifugal force, that it would take superhuman strength to envisage living as a couple and sharing someone else's life in New York. Only tribes, gangs, mafia families, secret societies, and perverse communities can survive, not couples. This is the anti-Ark. Inthe first Ark, the animals came in two by two to save the species from the great flood. Here in this fabulous Ark, each one comes in alone - it's up to him or her each evening to find the last survivors for the last party.

In New York, the mad have been set free. Let out into the city, they are difficult to tell apart from the rest of the punks, junkies, addicts, winoes, or down-and-outs who inhabit it. It is difficult to see why a city as crazy as this one would keep its mad in the shadows, why it would withdraw from circulation specimens of a madness which has in fact, in its various forms, taken hold of the whole city.

'Breakdancing' is a feat of acrobatic gymnastics. Only at the end do you realize it actually was dancing, when the dancer freezes into a lazy, languid pose (elbow on the ground, head nonchalantly resting in the palm of the hand, the pose you see on Etruscan tombs). The way they suddenly come to rest like this is reminiscent of Chinese opera. But the Chinese warrior comes to a halt at the height of the action in a heroic gesture, whereas the breakdancer stops at the slack point in his movements and the gesture is derisive. You might say that in curling up and spiralling around on the ground like this, they seem to be digging a hole for themselves within their own bodies, from which to stare out in the ironic, indolent pose of the dead.

I would never have believed that the New York marathon could move you to tears. It really is the end-of-the-world show. Can we speak of suffering freely entered into as we might speak of a state of servitude freely entered into? In driving rain, with helicopters circling overhead and the crowd cheering, wearing aluminium foil capes and squinting at their stop-watches, orbare-chested, their eyes rolling skywards, they are all seeking death, that death by exhaustion that was the fate of the first Marathon man some two thousand years ago. And he, let us not forget, was carrying a message of victory to Athens. They also dream no doubt of bringing a victory message, but there are too many of them and their message has lost all meaning: it is merely the message of their arrival, at the end of their exertions, the twilight message of a futile, superhuman effort. Collectively, they might rather seem to be bringing the message of a catastrophe for the human race, which you can see becoming more and more decrepit by the hour as the runners come in, from the competitive, athletic types who arrive first to the wrecks who are literally carried to the finishing line by their friends, or the handicapped who do the race in their wheelchairs. There are 17,000 runners and you can't help thinking back to the Battle of Marathon, where there weren't even 17,000 soldiers in the field. There are 17,000 of them and each one runs alone, without even a thought for victory, but simply in order to feel alive. 'We won', gasped the man from Marathon as he expired. 1 did it!', sighs the exhausted marathon runner of New York as he collapses on the grass in Central Park.

I DID IT!

The slogan of a new form of advertising activity, of autistic performance, a pure and empty form, a challenge to one's own self that has replaced the Promethean ecstasy of competition, effort, and success.

The New York marathon has become a sort of international symbol of such fetishistic performance, of the mania for an empty victory, the joy engendered

by a feat that is of no consequence.

I ran the New York marathon: I did it!'

I conquered Annapurna: 'I did it!'The moon landing is the same kind of thing: 'We did it!' The event was ultimately not really so surprising; it was an event pre-programmed into the course of science and progress. We did it. But it has not revived the millenarian dream of conquering space. In a sense, it has exhausted it.

Carrying out any kind of programme produces the same sense of futility that comes from doing anything merely to prove to yourself that you can do it: having a child, climbing a mountain, making some sexual conquest, committing suicide.

The marathon is a form of demonstrative suicide, suicide as advertising: it is running to show you are capable of getting every last drop of energy out of yourself, to prove it . . . to prove what? That you are capable of finishing. Graffiti carry the same message. They simply say: I'm so-and-so and I exist! They are free publicity for existence.

Do we continually have to prove to ourselves that we exist? A strange sign of weakness, harbinger of a new fanaticism for a faceless performance, endlessly self-evident.

MYSTIC TRANSPORTATION INCORPORATED

A blue-green lorry with gleaming chromework is going down Seventh Avenue in the early morning sun, just after a snowfall. It bears on its sides, in gold metallic lettering, the words 'Mystic Transportation'.

It sums up the whole of New York and its mystical view of decadence. Every special effect can be found here, from sublime verticality to decay on the ground, all the special effects of the mixing of races and empires. This is the fourth dimension of the city.

In years to come cities will stretch out horizontally and will be non-urban (Los

Angeles). After that, they will bury themselves in the ground and will no longer even have names. Everything will become infrastructure bathed inartificial light and energy. The brilliant superstructure, the crazy verticality will have disappeared. New York is the final fling of this baroque verticality, this centrifugal excentricity, before the horizontal dismantling arrives, and the subterranean implosion that will follow.

With the marvellous complicity of its entire population, New York acts out its own catastrophe as a stage play. And this is not an effect of its decadence, but of its own power, to which there is, of course, no threat. In fact, this absence of threat is its power. Its density, its surface electricity rule out any thought of war. That life begins again each morning is a kind of miracle, considering how much energy was expended the day before. Its voltage protects it, like a galvanic dome, from all external threats - though not from internal accidents like the black-out of '76. Yet the scale of these makes them world events and simply adds further to the city's glory. This centrality and eccentricity can only create a crazed sense of its own end, which the New York 'scene' aesthetically transcribes in its follies and its violent expressionism, and which the whole city collectively cultivates in its technical frenzy for the vertical, its constant acceleration of the banal, the liveliness of its faces, whether happy or wretched, and the insolence of its sacrifice of humans to pure circulation.

No one looks at you, caught up as they all are in their passionate efforts to carry off their own impersonal roles. There are no cops in New York -elsewhere they are there to give a modern, urban look to cities that are still semi-rural (Paris is a good example). Here, urbanization has reached such a pitch that there is no longer any need to express it or give it a political character. Anyway, New York is no longer a political city and demonstrations by its various ideological groups are rare and invariably derisory (the ethnic groups express themselves through festivals and the racial demonstration of their presence). New York's violence is not a violence of social

relations, but of *all relations,* and it is exponential. Sexuality itself has to some extent been left behind as a form of expression. Even though it is everywhere on display, it no longer has the time to realize itself in human love-relationships. It evaporates into the promiscuity of each passing moment, into a multiplicity of more ephemeral forms of contact. You rediscover a feeling of glory in New York, in the sense that you feel wreathed in the general energy of the place - what you are part of here is not the lugubrious spectacle of change, as you find it in Europe, but the aesthetic form of a mutation.

We in Europe possess the art of thinking, of analysing things and reflecting on them. No one disputes our historical subtlety and conceptual imagination. Even the great minds across the Atlantic envy us in this regard. But the resounding truths, the realities of genuinely great moment today are to be found along the Pacific seaboard or in Manhattan. It has to be said that New York and Los Angeles are at the centre of the world, even if we find the idea somehow both exciting and disenchanting. We are a desperately long way behind the stupidity and the mutational character, the naive extravagance and the social, racial, moral, morphological, and architectural excentricity of their society. No one is capable of analysing it, least of all the American intellectuals shut away on their campuses, dramatically cut off from the fabulous concrete mythology developing all around them.

It is a world completely rotten with wealth, power, senility, indifference, puritanism and mental hygiene, poverty and waste, technological futility and aimless violence, and yet I cannot help but feel it has about it something of the dawning of the universe. Perhaps because the entire world continues to dream of New York, even as New York dominates and exploits it.At 30,000 feet and 600 miles per hour, I have beneath me the ice-floes of Greenland, the *Indes Galantes*

in my earphones, Catherine Deneuve on the screen, and an old man - a Jew or an Armenian - asleep on my lap. ‘Yes, I feel all the violence of love. . .’ sings the sublime voice, from one time zone to the next. The people in the plane are asleep. Speed knows nothing of the violence of love. Between one night and the next, the one we came from and the one we shall land in, there will have been only four hours daylight. But the sublime voice, the voice of insomnia travels even more quickly. It moves through the freezing, trans-oceanic atmosphere, runs along the long lashes of the actress, along the horizon, violet where the sun is rising, as we fly along in our warm coffin of a jet, and finally fades away somewhere off the coast of Iceland.

The journey is over.

ASTRAL AMERICA

Astral America. The lyrical nature of pure circulation. As against the melancholy of European analyses. The direct star-blast from vectors and signals, from the vertical and the spatial. As against the fevered distance of the cultural gaze.

Joy in the collapse of metaphor, which here in Europe we merely grieve over. The exhilaration of obscenity, the obscenity of obviousness, the obviousness of power, the power of simulation. As against our disappointed virginity, our chasms of affectation.

Sideration. Star-blasted, horizontally by the car, altitudinally by the plane, electronically by television, geologically by deserts, stereolithically by the megalopoloi, transpolitically by the power game, the power museum that America has become for the whole world.

For me there is no truth of America. I ask of the Americans only that they be Americans. I do not ask them to be intelligent, sensible, original. I ask themonly to populate a space incommensurate with my own, to be for me the highest astral point, the finest orbital space. Why should I go and decentralize myself in

France, in the ethnic and the local, which are merely the shreds and vestiges of centrality? I want to excentre myself, to become eccentric, but I want to do so in a place that is the centre of the world. And, in this sense, the latest fast-food outlet, the most banal suburb, the blandest of giant American cars or the most insignificant cartoon-strip majorette is more at the centre of the world than any of the cultural manifestations of old Europe. This is the only country which gives you the opportunity to be so brutally naive: things, faces, skies, and deserts are expected to be simply what they are. This is the land of the 'just as it is'.

America always gives me a feeling of real asceticism. Culture, politics - and sexuality too - are seen exclusively in terms of the desert, which here assumes the status of a primal scene. Everything disappears before that desert vision. Even the body, by an ensuing effect of undernourishment, takes on a transparent form, a lightness near to complete disappearance. Everything around me suffers this same desertification. But this radical experimentation is the only thing that enables me to get through and produces that astral quality I have not found anywhere else.

America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality It is a hyperreality because it is a Utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too. It may be that the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum - that of the immanence and material transcription of all values. The Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves
simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model. As a result, they are the ideal material for an analysis of all the possible variants of the modern world. No more and no less in fact than were primitive societies in their day. The same mythical and analytic excitement that made us look towards those earlier societies today impels

us to look in the direction of America. With the same passion and the same prejudices.

In reality, you do not, as I had hoped, get any distance on Europe from here. You do not acquire a fresh angle on it. When you turn around, it has quite simply disappeared. The point is that there is really no need to adopt a critical stance on Europe from here. That is something you can do in Europe. And what is there to criticize which has not been criticized a thousand times before? What you have to do is enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction. It is, indeed, on this fictive basis that it dominates the world. Even if every detail of America were insignificant, America is something that is beyond us all. . .

America is a giant hologram, in the sense that information concerning the whole is contained in each of its elements. Take the tiniest little place in the desert, any old street in a Mid-West town, a parking lot, a Californian house, a BurgerKing [sic!] or a Studebaker, and you have the whole of the US - South, North, East, or West. Holographic also in that it has the coherent light of the laser, the homogeneity of the single elements scanned by the same beams. From the visual and plastic viewpoints too: things seem to be made of a more unreal substance; they seem to turn and move in a void as if by a special lighting effect, a fine membrane you pass through without noticing
it. This is obviously true of the desert. It is also the case with Las Vegas and advertising, and even the activities of the people, public relations, and everyday electronics all stand out with the plasticity and simplicity of a beam of light. The hologram is akin to the world of phantasy. It is a three-dimensional dream and you can enter it as you would a dream. Everything depends on the existence of the ray of light bearing the objects. If it is interrupted, all the effects are dispersed, and reality along with it. You do indeed get the impression that America is made up of a

fantastic switching between similar elements, and that everything is only held together by a thread of light, a laser beam, scanning out American reality before our eyes. In America the spectral does not refer to phantoms or to dancing ghosts, but to the spectrum into which light disperses.

On the aromatic hillsides of Santa Barbara, the villas are all like funeral homes. Between the gardenias and the eucalyptus trees, among the profusion of plant genuses and the monotony of the human species, lies the tragedy of a Utopian dream made reality. In the very heartland of wealth and liberation, you always hear the same question: 'What are you doing after the orgy?' What do you do when everything is available - sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death? This is America's problem and, through America, it has become the whole world's problem.

All dwellings have something of the grave about them, but here the fake serenity is complete. The unspeakable house plants, lurking everywhere like the obsessive fear of death, the picture windows looking like Snow White's glass coffin, the clumps of pale, dwarf flowers stretched out in patches like sclerosis, the proliferation of technical gadgetry inside the house, beneath it, around it, like drips in an intensive care ward, the TV, stereo, and video which provide communication with the beyond, the car (or cars) that connect one up to that great shoppers' funeral parlour, the super-
market, and, lastly, the wife and children, as glowing symptoms of success . . . everything here testifies to death having found its ideal home.

The microwave, the waste disposal, the orgasmic elasticity of the carpets: this soft, resort-style civilization irresistibly evokes the end of the world. All their activities here have a surreptitious end-of-the-world feel to them: these Californian scholars with monomaniacal passions for things French or

Marxist, the various sects obsessively concerned with chastity or crime, these joggers sleepwalking in the mist like shadows that have escaped from Plato's cave, the very real mental defectives or mongols let out of the psychiatric hospitals (this letting loose of the mad into the city seems a sure sign of the end of the world, the loosing of the seals of the Apocalypse), these obese individuals who have escaped from the hormone laboratories of their own bodies, and these drilling platforms - 'oil sanctuaries' - keeping watch in the night, like grand casinos, or extraterrestrial spacecraft.

Ravishing hyperrealism

Ecstatic asceticism

Multi-process tracking shot
Interactive multi-dimensionality
Mind-blowing

Western Digitals Body
Building Incorporated

Mileage unlimited

Channel Zero
Seedy bar in Santa Barbara. The billiard player's red braces. Foucault, Sartre, and Orson Welles all standing together at the counter, talking to each other, strangely convincing, strikingly like the originals. 'Cocktail scenery.' The smell of

violence, the stale odour of beer. ‘Hustling is prohibited.’

Sex, beach, and mountains. Sex and beach, beach and mountains. Mountains and sex. A few concepts. Sex and concepts. ‘Just a life.’

Everything is destined to reappear as simulation. Landscapes as photography, women as the sexual scenario, thoughts as writing, terrorism as fashion and the media, events as television. Things seem only to exist by virtue of this strange destiny. You wonder whether the world itself isn’t just here to serve as advertising copy in some other world.

When the only physical beauty is created by plastic surgery, the only urban beauty by landscape surgery, the only opinion by opinion poll surgery. . . and now, with genetic engineering, along comes plastic surgery for the whole human species.

This is a culture which sets up specialized institutes so that people’s bodies can come together and touch, and, at the same time, invents pans in which the water *does not touch* the bottom of the pan, which is made of a substance so homogeneous, dry, and artificial that not a single drop sticks to it, just like those bodies intertwined in ‘feeling’ and therapeutic love, which do not touch - not even for a moment. This is called interface or interaction. It has replaced face-to-face contact and action. It is also called communication, because these things really do communicate: the miracle is that the pan bottom communicates its heat to the water without touching it, in a sort of remote boiling process, in the same way as one body communicates its fluid, its erotic potential, to another without that other ever being seduced or evendisturbed, by a sort of molecular capillary action. The code of separation has worked so well that they have even managed to separate the water from the pan and to make the pan transmit its heat *as a message,* or to make one body transmit its desire to the other as a message, as a fluid to be decoded. This is called information and it has wormed its way

into everything, like a phobic, maniacal leitmotiv, which affects sexual relations as well as kitchen implements.

Other examples of this mania for asepsis:

The Getty museum where old paintings look new, bleached and gleaming, cleansed of all patina and *craquelure,* with an artificial lustre that echoes the fake Pompeian decor all around them.

In Philadelphia, a radical sect named 'MOVE', with a bizarre set of rules, including one forbidding both the practice of autopsy and the removal of rubbish, is cleared out by the police, who kill eleven people by fire and burn down thirty adjacent houses, including those (the irony of it!) of all the neighbours who had called for the sect to be removed.

This, too, is a clean-up operation. They are getting rid of rubbish and patina, getting back to an original state of cleanliness, restoring. 'Keep America clean.' And that smile everyone gives you as they pass, that friendly contraction of the jaws triggered by human warmth. It is the eternal smile of communication, the smile through which the child becomes aware of the presence of others, or struggles desperately with the problem of their presence. It is the equivalent of the primal scream of man alone in the world. Whether I am right in all this or not, they certainly do smile at you here, though neither from courtesy, nor from an effort to charm. This smile signifies only the need to smile. It is a bit like the Cheshire Cat's grin: it continues to float on faces long after all emotion has disappeared. A smile available at any moment, but half-scared to exist, to give itself away. Noulterior motive lurks behind it, but it keeps you at a distance. It is part of the general cryogenization of emotions. It is, indeed, the smile the dead man will wear in his funeral home, as he clings to a hope of maintaining contact even in the next world. The smile of immunity, the smile of advertising: 'This country is good. I am good. We are the best'. It is also Reagan's smile - the culmination of the self-satisfaction of the entire American nation - which is on the way to becoming the sole principle of

government. An autoprophetic smile, like all signs in advertising. Smile and others will smile back. Smile to show how transparent, how candid you are. Smile if you have nothing to say. Most of all, do not hide the fact you have nothing to say nor your total indifference to others. Let this emptiness, this profound indifference shine out spontaneously in your smile. *Give* your emptiness and indifference to others, light up your face with the zero degree of joy and pleasure, smile, smile, smile. . . Americans may have no identity, but they do have wonderful teeth.

And it works. With this smile Reagan obtains a much wider consensus than any that could be achieved by a Kennedy with mere reason or political intelligence. The recourse to a pure form of compliment, be it animal or infantile, is much more successful and the whole American population comes together in this toothpaste effect. No idea - not even the nation's moral values in their entirety - could ever have produced such a result. Reagan's credibility is exactly equal to his transparency and the nullity of his smile.

The skateboarder with his Walkman, the intellectual working on his word-processor, the Bronx breakdancer whirling frantically in the Roxy, the jogger and the body-builder: everywhere, whether in regard to the body or the mental faculties, you find the same blank solitude, the same narcissistic refraction.

This omnipresent cult of the body is extraordinary. It is the only object on which everyone is made to concentrate, not as a source of pleasure, but as an object of frantic concern, in the obsessive fear of failure or substandard performance, a sign and an anticipation of death, that death to which no one can any longer give a meaning, but which everyone knows has at all times to be prevented. The body is cherished in the perverse certainty of its uselessness, in the total certainty of its non-resurrection. Now, pleasure is an effect of the resurrection of the body, by which it exceeds that hormonal, vascular and dietetic equilibrium in which we seek to imprison it, that exorcism by

fitness and hygiene. So the body has to be made to forget pleasure as present grace, to forget its possible metamorphosis into other forms of appearance and become dedicated to the Utopian preservation of a youth that is, in any case, already lost. For the body which doubts its own existence is already half-dead, and the current semi-yogic, semi-ecstatic cult of the body is a morbid preoccupation. The care taken of the body while it is alive prefigures the way it will be made up in the funeral home, where it will be given a smile that is really 'into' death.

This 'into' is the key to everything. The point is not to be nor even to *have* a body, but to be into your own body. Into your sexuality, into your own desire. Into your own functions, as if they were energy differentials or video screens. The hedonism of the 'into': the body is a scenario and the curious hygienist threnody devoted to it runs through the innumerable fitness centres, body-building gyms, stimulation and simulation studios that stretch from Venice to Tupanga Canyon, bearing witness to a collective asexual obsession.

This is echoed by the other obsession: that of being 'into', hooked in to your own brain. What people are contemplating on their word-processor screens is the operation of their own brains. It is not entrails that we try to interpret these days, nor even hearts or facial expressions; it is, quite simply, the brain. We want to expose to view its billions of connections and watch itoperating like a video-game. All this cerebral, electronic snobbery is hugely affected - far from being the sign of a superior knowledge of humanity, it is merely the mark of a simplified theory, since the human being is here reduced to the terminal excrescence of his or her spinal chord. But we should not worry too much about this: it is all much less scientific, less functional than is ordinarily thought. All that fascinates us is the *spectacle* of the brain and its workings. What we are wanting here is to see our thoughts unfolding before us - and this itself is a superstition.

Hence, the academic grappling with his computer, ceaselessly correcting,

reworking, and complexifying, turning the exercise into a kind of interminable psychoanalysis, memorizing everything in an effort to escape the final outcome, to delay the day of reckoning of death, and that other -fatal - moment of reckoning that is writing, by forming an endless feed-back loop with the machine. This is a marvellous instrument of exoteric magic. In fact all these interactions come down in the end to endless exchanges with a machine. Just look at the child sitting in front of his computer at school; do you think he has been made interactive, opened up to the world? Child and machine have merely been joined together in an integrated circuit. As for the intellectual, he has at last found the equivalent of what the teenager gets from his stereo and his walkman: a spectacular desublimation of thought, his concepts as images on a screen.

In the Roxy, the sound-proofed bar dominates the dancefloor the way the screens dominate an air traffic control room or the technicians' gallery towers over a television studio. The club is a fluorescent milieu with spotlighting, strobe effects, dancers swept by beams of light . . . all of these the effects you find on screens. *And everyone is aware of this*. Today, no staging of bodies, no performance can be without its control screen. This is not there to see or reflect those taking part, with the distance and magic of the mirror. No, it is there as an instantaneous, depthless refraction. Video, everywhere, serves only this end: it is a screen of ecstatic refraction. As such, it has nothing of the traditional image or scene, or of traditional theatricality, and its purpose is not to present action or allow self-contemplation; its goal is *to be hooked up to itself*. Without this circular hookup, without this brief, instantaneous network that a brain, an object, an event, or a discourse create by being hooked up to themselves, without this perpetual video, nothing has any meaning today. The mirror phase has given way to the video phase.

This is not narcissism and it is wrong to abuse that term to describe the effect. What develops around the video or stereo culture is not a narcissistic imaginary, but an effect of frantic self-referentiality, a short-circuit which

immediately hooks up like with like, and, in so doing, emphasizes their surface intensity and deeper meaninglessness.

This is the special effect of our times. The ecstasy of the polaroid is of the same order: to hold the object and its image almost simultaneously as if the conception of light of ancient physics or metaphysics, in which each object was thought to secrete doubles or negatives of itself that we pick up with our eyes, has become a reality. It is a dream. It is the optical materialization of a magical process. The polaroid photo is a sort of ecstatic membrane that has come away from the real object.

You stop a horse that is bolting. You do not stop a jogger who is jogging. Foaming at the mouth, his mind riveted on the inner countdown to the moment when he will achieve a higher plane of consciousness, he is not to be stopped. If you stopped him to ask the time, he would bite your head off. He doesn't have a bit between his teeth, though he may perhaps be carryingdumb-bells or even weights in his belt (where are the days when girls used to wear bracelets on their ankles?). What the third-century Stylite sought in self-privation and proud stillness, he is seeking through the muscular exhaustion of his body. He is the brother in mortification of those who conscientiously exhaust themselves in the body-building studios on complicated machines with chrome pulleys and on terrifying medical contraptions. There is a direct line that runs from the medieval instruments of torture, via the industrial movements of production-line work, to the techniques of schooling the body by using mechanical apparatuses. Like dieting, bodybuilding, and so many other things, jogging is a new form of voluntary servitude (it is also a new form of adultery).

Decidedly, joggers are the true Latter Day Saints and the protagonists of an easy-does-it Apocalypse. Nothing evokes the end of the world more than a man running straight ahead on a beach, swathed in the sounds of his Walkman,

cocooned in the solitary sacrifice of his energy, indifferent even to catastrophes since he expects destruction to come only as the fruit of his own efforts, from exhausting the energy of a body that has in his own eyes become useless. Primitives, when in despair, would commit suicide by swimming out to sea until they could swim no longer. The jogger commits suicide by running up and down the beach. His eyes are wild, saliva drips from his mouth. Do not stop him. He will either hit you or simply carry on dancing around in front of you like a man possessed.

The only comparable distress is that of a man eating alone in the heart of the city. You see people doing that in New York, the human flotsam of conviviality, no longer even concealing themselves to eat leftovers in public. But this still belongs to the world of urban, industrial poverty. The thousands of lone men, each running on their own account, with no thought for others, with a stereophonic fluid in their heads that oozes through into
their eyes, that is the world of *Blade Runner,* the post-catastrophe world. Not to be aware of the natural light of California, nor even of a mountain fire that has been driven ten miles out to sea by the hot wind, and is enveloping the offshore oil platforms in its smoke, to see nothing of all this and obstinately to carry on running by a sort of lymphatic flagellation till sacrificial exhaustion is reached, that is truly a sign from the beyond. It is like the obese person who keeps on getting fatter, the record rotating endlessly in the same groove, the cells of a tumour proliferating, like everything that has lost the formula for stopping itself. This entire society, including its active, productive part - everyone - is running straight ahead, because they have lost the formula for stopping.

All these track-suits and jogging suits, these loose-fitting shorts and baggy cotton shirts, these ‘easy clothes’ are actually old bits of nightwear, and all these relaxed walkers and runners have not yet left the night behind. As a result of wearing these billowing clothes, their bodies have come to float in their clothes and they themselves float in their own bodies.

Anorexic culture: a culture of disgust, of expulsion, of anthropoemia, of rejection. Characteristic of a period of obesity, saturation, overabundance.

The anorexic prefigures this culture in rather a poetic fashion by trying to keep it at bay. He refuses lack. He says: I lack nothing, therefore I shall not eat. With the overweight person, it is the opposite: he refuses fullness, repletion. He says: I lack everything, so I will eat anything at all. The anorexic staves off lack by emptiness, the overweight person staves off fullness by excess. Both are homeopathic final solutions, solutions by extermination.

The jogger has yet another solution. In a sense, he spews himself out; he doesn't merely expend his energy in his running, he vomits it. He has to attain the ecstasy of fatigue, the 'high' of mechanical annihilation, just as the anorexic aims for the 'high' of organic annihilation, the ecstasy of the emptybody and the obese individual seeks the high of dimensional annihilation: the ecstasy of the full body.

The latest obsession of American public opinion: the sexual abuse of children. There is now a law that two people must be present when very young children are being handled for fear of unverifiable sexual abuse. At the same time, supermarket carrier bags are adorned with the portraits of missing children.

Protect everything, detect everything, contain everything - obsessional society.

Save time. Save energy. Save money. Save our souls - phobic society.

Low tar. Low energy. Low calories. Low sex. Low speed - anorexic society.

Curiously, in this world where everything is available in profusion, everything has to be saved and economized. The obsession of a young society, concerned to protect its future? The impression given is rather that of a sense of threat, all the more insidious for being groundless. It is profusion

which creates an hallucination of a sort of backfiring into shortage and penury, which has to be averted by homeopathic discipline. There are no other reasons for these starvation rations - collective dieting, ecological control, this mortification of bodies and pleasures. A whole society organized to ward off the vengeance of overfed divinities, suffocated by plenty. Of course our basic problem today is how to avoid becoming overweight.

Compiling inventories of everything, stocking everything, memorizing everything. Hence the elephants enveloped in liquid bitumen, whose bones become
fossilized in its black, mineral viscosity, together with the lions, mammoths, and wolves who roamed the plains of Los Angeles and were the first, prehistoric victims of the oil fields. Today they have all received *a* second embalming at Hancock Park in a museum devoted to the rote-learning of prehistory. And, in conformity with the prevailing moral code, all this is presented with conviction. Americans are people *of conviction,* convinced of everything and seeking to convince. One of the aspects of their good faith is this stubborn determination to reconstitute everything of a past and a history which were not their own and which they have largely destroyed or spirited away. Renaissance castles, fossilized elephants, Indians on reservations, sequoias as holograms, etc.

In storing details on their computers of all the known souls in the civilized (white) countries, the Mormons of Salt Lake City are behaving no differently from other Americans, who all share the same missionary spirit. It is never too late to revive your origins. It is their destiny: since they were not the first to be in on history, they will be the first to immortalize everything by reconstitution (by putting things in museums, they can match in an instant the fossilization process nature took millions of years to complete). But the conception Americans have of the museum is much wider than our own. To them, everything is worthy of protection, embalming, restoration. Everything can have a second birth, the

eternal birth of the simulacrum. Not only are the Americans missionaries, they are also Anabaptists: having missed out on the original baptism, they dream of baptizing everything *a* second time and only accord value to this later sacrament which is, as we know, a repeat performance of the first, but its repetition *as something more real.* And this indeed is the perfect definition of the simulacrum. All Anabaptists are sectarian, and sometimes violent. Americans are no exception to this rule. To reconstruct things in their exact form, so as to present them on the Day of Judgement, they are prepared to destroy and exterminate - Thomas Münzer was an Anabaptist.

It is not by chance that it is the Mormons who run the world's biggest computerization project: the recording of twenty generations of living souls throughout the world, a process which is seen as a rebaptizing of those souls, bringing them a new promise of salvation. Evangelization has become a mission of mutants, of extraterrestrials, and if it has progressed (?) in that direction, it is thanks to the latest memory-storage techniques. And these have been made possible by the deep puritanism of computer science, an intensely Calvinistic, Presbyterian discipline, which has inherited the universal and scientific rigidity of the techniques for achieving salvation by good works. The Counter-Reformation methods of the Catholic Church, with its naive sacramental practices, its cults, its more archaic and popular beliefs, could never compete with this modernity.

Executive Terminal

Basic Extermination
Metastatic Consumption

Everywhere survival has become a burning issue, perhaps by some obscure weariness of life or a collective desire for catastrophe (though we should not take all this too seriously: it is also a playing at catastrophe). Certainly, this whole panoply

of survival issues - dieting, ecology, saving the sequoias, seals or the human race - tends to prove that we are very much alive (just as all imaginary fairy-tales tend to prove that the real world is very real). But this is not so certain, for not only is the fact of living not really well-attested, but the paradox of this society is that you cannot even die in it any more since you are already dead. . . This is real suspense. And it is not simply an effect of living in the nuclear age, but derives from the ease with which we now live, which makes survivors of us all. If the bomb drops, we shall neither have the time to die nor any awareness of dying. But already in our hyper-protected society we no longer have any awareness of death, since we have subtly passed over into a state where life is excessively easy.

The holocaust created an anticipatory form of such a condition. What the inmates of the concentration camps were deprived of was the very possibility of having control of their own deaths, of playing, even gambling with their own deaths, making their deaths a sacrifice: they were robbed of power over their own deaths. And this is what is happening to all of us, in slow, homeopathic doses, by virtue of the very development of our systems. The explosions and the extermination (Auschwitz and Hiroshima) still go on, though they have simply taken on a purulent, endemic form. The chain reaction continues nonetheless, the contagion, the unfolding of the viral and bacteriological process. The end of history was precisely the inauguration of this chain reaction.

The obsessive desire for survival (and not for *life)* is a symptom of this state of affairs and doubtless also the most worrying sign of the degradation of the species. If you think about the forms that desire currently takes -antinuclear shelters, cryogenization, high-pressure therapy - you see that they are exactly the forms of extermination. To avoid dying, one chooses to withdraw into some protective bubble or other. In this light, we should take it as a reassuring sign that people lost interest in antinuclear protection so quickly (the shelter market has become a mere prestige market, like the market for artworks or luxury yachts). It seems that people have become tired of nuclear blackmail and

decided not to give in to it, leaving the threat of destruction hanging in mid-air over them, perhaps with an obscure sense of how unreal it is. A fine example of a vital reaction disguised as resignation. 'If we have to die, better to die in the open air than in an underground sarcophagus.' At a stroke an end is put to survival blackmail and life can go on.

Everyone is weary of these apocalyptic visions - the great scenario of the nuclear threat, the theatrical negotiations, 'Star Wars'. In the end, theydefend themselves with a lack of imagination. Even attempts to stimulate that imagination in films like *The Last Day* have not worked. Nothing has ever been able to make this nuclear scene - or obscenity - credible. With delicate matters like this (as with cancer), imagining death has the effect of bringing the fatal event closer. The masses' silent indifference to nuclear pathos (whether it comes from the nuclear powers or from antinuclear campaigners) is therefore a great sign of hope and a political fact of the utmost importance.

There is a science-fiction story in which a number of very rich people wake up one morning in their luxury villas in the mountains to find that they are encircled by a transparent and insuperable obstacle, a wall of glass that has appeared in the night. From the depths of their vitrified luxury, they can still just discern the outside world, the real universe from which they are cut off, which has suddenly become the ideal world. But it is too late. These rich people will die slowly in their aquarium like goldfish. Some of the university campuses here remind me of this.

Lost among the pine trees, the fields, and the rivers (it is an old ranch that was donated to the university), and made up of little blocks, each one out of sight of the others, like the people who live in them: this one is Santa Cruz. It's a bit like the Bermuda Triangle (or Santa Barbara). Everything vanishes. Everything gets sucked in. Total decentring, total community. After the ideal city of the future, the ideal cosy nook. Nothing converges on a single point, neither the traffic, nor the architecture, nor authority. But, by that very token, it also

becomes impossible to hold a demonstration: where could you assemble? Demonstrations can only go round and round in the forest, where the participants alone can see them. Of all the Californian campuses, famous for their spaciousness and charm, this is the most idealized, the most naturalized. It is the epitome of all that is beautiful.

Famous architects designed the buildings and the bays of Carmel and Monterey stretch out all around. If the conviviality of the future already exists somewhere, then this must be the place. And yet this freedom, protected both by the pleasantness of the vegetation and by academic openness, becomes its own prisoner once again, immured in a natural and social overprotectedness which ends up producing all the agonies of the carceral universe (precisely by virtue of its walls, the carceral system may in certain conditions evolve in the direction of Utopia more rapidly than open social systems). Society has become emancipated here as nowhere else on earth. The psychiatric hospitals have been opened up, public transport is free, and yet paradoxically this ideal has become closed in on itself as if behind a wall of glass.

A paradisiac and inward-looking illusion. We might understand what Lyotard calls the 'Pacific Wall' as the wall of crystal that imprisons California in its own beatitude. But whereas the demand for happiness used to be something oceanic and emancipatory, here it comes wrapped up in a foetal tranquillity. Are there still passions, murders, and acts of violence in this strange, padded, wooded, pacified, convivial republic? Yes, but the violence is autistic and reactional. There are no crimes of passion, but there are rapes, and a case where a dozen women were murdered in two years before the killer was discovered. This is foetal violence, as gratuitous as 'automatic writing'. It seems an expression not so much of real aggression as of nostalgia for the old prohibitions (why does the number of rapes increase with the degree of sexual liberation?).

How sentimental these mixed dormitories seem, opening out here on to the

forest, as if nature itself could be convivial and maternal, could herself stand as guarantor for the blossoming of sexuality and the ecology of manners, as if nature could look sympathetically upon any human society, as if one could have some relationship with her, outside the cruel universe of magic, which was not *stoical,* not the Stoics' relation between a blind,

pitiless necessity and the even greater defiance, the even greater freedom one has to counterpose to it. Here, every last vestige of a heroic sense of destiny has disappeared. The whole place exudes an air of sentimental reconciliation with nature, with sex, with madness and even with history (by way of a carefully corrected, revised Marxism).

Like many other aspects of contemporary America, Santa Cruz is part of *the post-orgy world,* the world left behind after the great social and sexual convulsions. The refugees from the orgy - the orgy of sex, political violence, the Vietnam War, the Woodstock Crusade, and the ethnic and anti-capitalist struggles too, together with the passion for money, the passion for success, hard technologies etc., in short, the whole orgy of modernity - are all there, jogging along in their tribalism, which is akin to the electronic tribalism of Silicon Valley. Reduced pace of work, decentralization, air-conditioning, soft technologies. Paradise. But a very slight modification, a change of just a few degrees, would suffice to make it seem like hell.

A new development in the field of sexuality. The orgy is over, liberation is over; it is not sex one is looking for but one's 'gender', i.e. both one's 'look' and its genetic formula. People no longer oscillate between desire and its fulfilment, but between their genetic formula and their sexual identity (to be discovered). This is a new erotic culture. After a culture based on prohibition ('What are your prerequisites for sex?' — The door has to be locked, the lights have to be out, and my mother has to be in another State'), this is a culture based on the questioning of one's own definition: 'Am I sexed? What sex am I? Ultimately, is sex necessary? What does sexual difference consist in?' Liberation has left everyone in an undefined state (it is always the same: once you are liberated, you are forced to ask who you are). After a triumphalist phase, the assertion of female sexuality has become as fragile as that of male sexuality. No one knows where they are. This is why there's somuch love-making, so many children produced: there at least you still have proof that two people are needed so

difference still exists. But not for long. Already, the 'muscle-woman', who, simply by using her vaginal muscles, manages to reproduce the effect of male penetration exactly, is a good example of self-referentiality and of getting along without difference - she at least has found her label.

The more general problem is one of an absence of difference, bound up with a decline in the display of sexual characteristics. The outer signs of masculinity are tending towards zero, but so are the signs of femininity. It is in this conjuncture that we have seen new idols emerging, idols who take up the challenge of undefinedness and who play at mixing genres/genders. 'Gender benders'. Neither masculine nor feminine, but not homosexual either. Boy George, Michael Jackson, David Bowie. . . Whereas the idols of the previous generation were explosive figures of sex and pleasure, these new idols pose for everyone the question of the *play* of difference and their own lack of definition. They are exceptional figures. For want of an identity, most of them have gone in search of a 'gender model', a generic formula. Some kind of differentiating feature has to be found, so why not look for it in fashion . . . or in genetics? A 'look' based on clothes, or a 'look' based on cells. Any old gimmick will do, any idiom. The question of difference is more crucial than that of pleasure. Are we seeing here a post-modern version of a sexual liberation that is now past and gone, that liberation as mere fashion, or is this a bio-sociological mutation in our own self-perception, based upon the sexual losing the priority it formerly enjoyed, a priority which characterized the whole modern period? 'Gender Research: a New Frontier?'

Pushed to its logical conclusions, this would leave neither masculine nor feminine, but a dissemination of individual sexes referring only to themselves, each one managed as an independent enterprise. The end of seduction, the end of difference, and a slide towards a different system ofvalues. An astonishing paradox emerges: sexuality might become once again a merely secondary problem, as it was in most earlier societies, and be eclipsed by other stronger symbolic systems (birth, hierarchy, asceticism, glory, death). This would prove that sexuality was after all only one possible model among many, and not the most crucial. But

what might those new models be today (for in the meantime all the others have disappeared)? The model that seems likely to emerge is that of an ideal of performance, of the genetic fulfilment of one's own formula. In business, in emotional life, in their projects and their pleasures, everyone will seek to develop their optimum programme. Everyone will have their code, their formula. But also their 'look', their image. So shall we perhaps get something like a genetic 'look'?

Irvine: a new Silicon Valley. Electronic factories with no openings to the outside world, like integrated circuits. A desert zone, given over to ions and electrons, a supra-human place, the product of inhuman decision-making. By a terrible twist of irony it just had to be here, in the hills of Irvine, that they shot *Planet of the Apes*. But, on the lawn, the American squirrels tell us all is well, and that America is kind to animals, to itself, and to the rest of the world, and that in everyone's heart there is a slumbering squirrel. The whole Walt Disney philosophy eats out of your hand with these pretty little sentimental creatures in grey fur coats. For my own part, I believe that behind these smiling eyes there lurks a cold, ferocious beast fearfully stalking us. . . On the same lawn with the squirrels stands a sign put there by some society or other of Jesus: 'Vietnam, Cambodia, Lebanon, Grenada - We are a violent society in a violent world!'

There is nothing funny about Halloween. This sarcastic festival reflects, rather, an infernal demand for revenge by children on the adult world. Thethreat from this evil force hangs over adults here, equal in intensity only to their devotion to children. There is nothing more unhealthy than this childish sorcery, behind all the dressing up and the presents - people turn out their lights and hide, for fear of harassment. And it is no accident that some of them stick needles or razor blades into the apples or cookies they hand out to the children.

Laughter on American television has taken the place of the chorus in Greek tragedy. It is unrelenting; the news, the stock-exchange reports, and the weather forecast are about the only things spared. But so obsessive is it that you go on hearing it behind the voice of Reagan or the Marines disaster in Beirut. Even behind the adverts. It is the monster from *Alien* prowling around in all the corridors of the spaceship. It is the sarcastic exhilaration of a puritan culture. In other countries, the business of laughing is left to the viewers. Here, their laughter is put on the screen, integrated into the show. It is the screen that is laughing and having a good time. You are simply left alone with your consternation.

Vietnam on television (a pleonasm, since it always was a television war). The Americans fight with two essential weapons: air power and information. That is, with the physical bombardment of the enemy and the electronic bombardment of the rest of the world. These are non-territorial weapons, whilst all the Vietnamese weapons and all their tactics were products of the people and its territory.

That is why the war was won by both sides: by the Vietnamese on the ground, by the Americans in the electronic mental space. And if the one side won an ideological and political victory, the other made *Apocalypse Now* and that has gone right around the world.

The obsessive fear of the Americans is that the lights might go out. Lights are left on all night in the houses. In the tower blocks the empty offices remain lit. On the freeways, in broad daylight, the cars keep all their headlights on. In Palms Ave., Venice, California, a little grocery store that sells beer in a part of town where no one is on the streets after 7 p.m. leaves its orange and green neon sign flashing all night, into the void. And this is not to mention the television, with its twenty-four-hour schedules, often to be seen functioning like an hallucination in the empty rooms of houses or vacant hotel rooms - as in the Porterville hotel where the curtains were torn, the water cut off, and the doors swinging in the wind, but on the fluorescent screen in each of the rooms a TV commentator was describing the take-off

of the space shuttle. There is nothing more mysterious than a TV set left on in an empty room. It is even stranger than a man talking to himself or a woman standing dreaming at her stove. It is as if another planet is communicating with you. Suddenly the TV reveals itself for what it really is: a video of another world, ultimately addressed to no one at all, delivering its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages (you can easily imagine it still functioning after humanity has disappeared). In short, in America the arrival of night-time or periods of rest cannot be accepted, nor can the Americans bear to see the technological process halted. Everything has to be working all the time, there has to be no let-up in man's artificial power, and the intermittent character of natural cycles (the seasons, day and night, heat and cold) has to be replaced by a functional continuum that is sometimes absurd (deep down, there is the same refusal of the intermittent nature of true and false: everything is true; and of good and evil: everything is good). You may seek to explain this in terms of fear, perhaps obsessional fear, or say that this unproductive expenditure is an act of mourning. But what is absurd is also admirable. The skylines lit up at dead of night, the air-conditioning systems cooling empty hotels in the desert and artificial light in the middle of the day all have something both demented and admirable about them. The mindlessluxury of a rich civilization, and yet of a civilization perhaps as scared to see the lights go out as was the hunter in his primitive night. There is some truth in all of this. But what is striking is the fascination with artifice, with energy and space. And not only natural space: space is spacious in their heads as well.

All great world powers have at some time or another created their monumental avenues which provided, as one looked down them, a miniature representation of the infinitude of empire. But the Aztecs at Teotihuacan, the Egyptians in the Valley of Kings, and Louis XIV at Versailles all created these syntheses in an architecture that was their own. Here in Washington, the vast panorama that stretches from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol is made up of a series of museums encapsulating our entire universe from Stone Age to Space Age.

This gives the whole thing a science-fiction feel, as if an attempt had been made to gather all the marks of earthly endeavour and culture together here for the benefit of a visitor from outer space. And the White House, standing just alongside, watching discreetly over the whole, itself comes to look like a museum, the

museum of world power, with an air of remoteness and prophylactic whiteness.

There is nothing to match flying over Los Angeles by night. A sort of luminous, geometric, incandescent immensity, stretching as far as the eye can see, bursting out from the cracks in the clouds. Only Hieronymus Bosch's hell can match this inferno effect. The muted fluorescence of all the diagonals: Willshire, Lincoln, Sunset, Santa Monica. Already, flying over San Fernando Valley, you come upon the horizontal infinite in every direction. But, once you are beyond the mountain, a city ten times larger hits you. You will never have encountered

anything that stretches as far as this
before. Even the sea cannot match it, since it is not divided up geometrically. The irregular, scattered flickering of European cities does not produce the same parallel lines, the same vanishing points, the same aerial perspectives either. They are medieval cities. This one condenses by night the entire future geometry of the networks of human relations, gleaming in their abstraction, luminous in their extension, astral in their reproduction to infinity. Mulholland Drive by night is an extraterrestrial's vantage-point on earth, or conversely, an earth-dweller's vantage-point on the Galactic metropolis.

Dawn in Los Angeles, coming up over the Hollywood hills. You get the distinct feeling that the sun only touched Europe lightly on its way to rising

properly here, above this plane geometry where its light is still that brand new light of the edge of the desert. Long-stemmed palm trees, swaying in front of the electronic billboard, the only vertical signs in this two-dimensional world.

At 6 a.m. a man is already telephoning from a public phonebox in Beverly Terrace. The neon signs of the night are going out as the daytime ones become visible. The light everywhere reveals and illuminates the absence of architecture. This is what gives the city its beauty, this city that is so intimate and warm, whatever anyone says of it: the fact is it is in love with its limitless horizontality, as New York may be with its verticality.

LOS ANGELES FREEWAYS

Gigantic, spontaneous spectacle of automotive traffic. A total collective act, staged by the entire population, twenty-four hours a day. By virtue of the sheer size of the layout and the kind of complicity that binds this network ofthoroughfares together, traffic rises here to the level of a dramatic attraction, acquires the status of symbolic organization. The machines themselves, with their fluidity and their automatic transmission, have created a milieu in their own image, a milieu into which you insert yourself gently, which you switch over to as you might switch over to a TV channel. Unlike our European motorways, which are unique, directional axes, and are therefore still places of expulsion (Virilio), the freeway system is a place of integration (they even say that there are families who drive round on these roads in their mobile homes without ever leaving). It creates a different state of mind, and the European driver very quickly gives up his aggressive, every-man-for-himself behaviour and his individual reactions, and adopts the rules of this collective game. There is something of the freedom of movement that you have in the desert here, and indeed Los Angeles, with its extensive structure, is merely an inhabited

fragment of the desert. Thus the freeways do not de-nature the city or the landscape; they simply pass through it and unravel it without altering the desert character of this particular metropolis. And they are ideally suited to the only truly profound pleasure, that of keeping on the move.

To the person who knows the American freeways, their signs read like a litany. 'Right lane must exit.' This 'must exit' has always struck me as a sign of destiny. I have got to go, to expel myself from this paradise, leave this providential highway which leads nowhere, but keeps me in touch with everyone. This is the only real society or warmth here, this collective propulsion, this compulsion - a compulsion of lemmings plunging suicidally together. Why should I tear myself away to revert to an individual trajectory, a vain sense of responsibility? 'Must exit': you are being sentenced. You are a player being exiled from the only - useless and glorious - form of collective existence. Through traffic merge left': they tell you everything, everything is announced. Merely reading the signs that are essential to your survival gives you an extraordinary feeling of instant lucidity, of reflex 'participation', immediate and smooth. Of a functional participation that is reflected in certain precise gestures. The lines of traffic diverging towards Ventura Freeway and San Diego Freeway do not leave one another, they just separate out. At every hour of the day approximately the same number split off towards Hollywood or towards Santa Monica. Pure, statistical energy, a ritual being acted out - the regularity of the flows cancels out individual destinations. What you have here is the charm of ceremonies: you have the whole of space before you, just as ceremonies have the whole of time before them.

The point is not to write the sociology or psychology of the car, the point is to drive. That way you learn more about this society than all academia could ever tell you.

The way American cars have of leaping into action, of taking off so smoothly, by virtue of their automatic transmission and power steering. Pulling away effortlessly, noiselessly eating up the road, gliding along without the slightest bump (the surfaces of the highways and freeways are remarkable, matched only by the fluidity of the cars' performance), braking smoothly but instantly, riding along as if you were on a cushion of air, leaving behind the old obsession with what is coming up ahead, or what is overtaking you (there is an unspoken agreement on collective driving here; in Europe we have only the highway code). All this creates a new experience of space, and, at the same time, a new experience of the whole social system. All you need to know about American society can be gleaned from an anthropology of its driving behaviour. That behaviour tells you much more than you could ever learn from its political ideas. Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together.

The city was here before the freeway system, no doubt, but it now looks as though the metropolis has actually been built around this arterial network: It is the same with American reality. It was there before the screen was invented, but everything about the way it is today suggests it was invented with the screen in mind, that it is the refraction of a giant screen. This is not like a Platonic shadowplay, but more as if everything were carried along by, and haloed in, the gleam of the screen. Along with flux and mobility, the screen and its refraction are fundamental determinants of everyday events. A fusion of the kinetic and the cinematic produces a different mental configuration and overall

perception from our own. You do not find mobility or the screen taking precedence over reality in the same way in Europe, where things most often remain within the static form of territory, the palpable form of substances.

In fact, the cinema here is not where you think it is. It is certainly not to be found in the studios the tourist crowds flock to - Universal, Paramount, etc., those subdivisions of Disneyland. If you believe that the whole of the Western world is hypostatized in America, the whole of America in California, and California in MGM and Disneyland, then this is the microcosm of the West.

In fact what you are presented with in the studios is the degeneration of the cinematographic illusion, its mockery, just as what is offered in Disneyland is a parody of the world of the imagination. The sumptuous age of stars and images is reduced to a few artificial tornado effects, pathetic fake buildings, and childish tricks which the crowd pretends to be taken in by to avoidfeeling too disappointed. Ghost towns, ghost people. The whole place has the same air of obsolescence about it as Sunset or Hollywood Boulevard. You come out feeling as though you have been put through some infantile simulation test. Where is the cinema? It is all around you outside, all over the city, that marvellous, continuous performance of films and scenarios. Everywhere but here.

It is not the least of America's charms that even outside the movie theatres the whole country is cinematic. The desert you pass through is like the set of a Western, the city a screen of signs and formulas. It is the same feeling you get when you step out of an Italian or a Dutch gallery into a city that seems the very reflection of the paintings you have just seen, as if the city had come out of the

paintings and not the other way about. The American city seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards to the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards to the city. It is there that cinema does not assume an exceptional form, but simply invests the streets and the entire town with a mythical atmosphere. That is where it is truly gripping. This is why the cult of stars is not a secondary phenomenon, but the supreme form of cinema, its mythical transfiguration, the last great myth of our modernity. Precisely because the idol is merely a pure, contagious image, a violently realized ideal. They say that stars give you something to dream about, but there is a difference between dreaming and fascination by images. The screen idols are immanent in the unfolding of life as a series of images. They are a system of luxury prefabrication, brilliant syntheses of the stereotypes of life and love. *They embody one single passion only: the passion for images,* and the immanence of desire in the image. They are not something to dream about; they are the dream. And they have all the characteristics of dreams: they produce a marked condensation (crystallization)

effect and an
effect of contiguity (they are immediately contagious), and, above all, they have that power of instantaneous visual materialization *(Anschaulichkeit)* of desire, which is also a feature of dreams. They do not, therefore, feed the romantic or sexual imagination; they are immediate visibility, immediate transcription, material collage, precipitation of desire. Fetishes, fetish objects, that have nothing to do with the world of the imagination, but everything to do with *the material fiction of the image.*

In 1989 the Revolutionary Olympic Games will be held in Los Angeles to mark the bicentenary of the French Revolution. The flame of history passes to the West Coast. This is normal. Everything that disappears in Europe is born again

in San Francisco. We may envisage a reconstruction of the great revolutionary scenes in giant holograms, the most extensive archives, a complete film library, the best actors, the best historians. A century from now you will not be able to tell the difference. It will be as if the Revolution had taken place here. If the Getty villa at Malibu were suddenly engulfed by lava, what difference would there be, a few centuries from now, between that building and the ruins of Pompeii?

What would the promoters of the bicentenary do if a new revolution broke out between now and 1989? But there is no way that can happen. And yet you cannot help but wish that the actual event might really occur and short-circuit the simulacrum, or that the simulacrum might itself end in catastrophe. In the same way, at Universal Studios, you hope constantly that the special effects will turn into some real drama. But this is a final nostalgia which has actually been exploited by the cinema itself *(Westworld, Future World).* The Olympic Games - total happening, collective participation in national self-celebration. 'We did it!' We are the best. Reagan style. It would have taken another Leni Riefenstahl to film this new Berlin '36. Totally sponsored, totally euphoric, totally clean, a 100 per cent advertising event.No accidents, no catastrophes, no terrorism, no traffic-jams on the freeways, no panic and . . . no Soviets. In short, an image of an ideal world, for the whole world to see. But after the national orgasm a sort of collective melancholy comes over the Angelinos, showing how provincial this metropolis still is.

If you get out of your car in this centrifugal metropolis, you immediately become a delinquent; as soon as you start walking, you are a threat to public order, like a dog wandering in the road. Only immigrants from the Third World are allowed to walk. It is, in a sense, their privilege, a privilege that goes along with that of occupying the empty hearts of the big cities. For other people,

walking, fatigue, or muscular activity have become rare commodities, ‘services’ costing a lot of money. Thus, ironically, the old state of affairs has been inverted. Similarly, the queues at high-class restaurants or fashionable nightclubs are often longer than those at soup kitchens. This is democracy. The signs of the most utter poverty always have at least a chance of becoming fashionable.

One of America’s specific problems is fame and glory, partly on account of its extreme rarity these days, but also because of its extreme vulgarization. ‘In the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes’ (Andy Warhol). And it is true. Take, for example, the man who got on the wrong plane and found himself carted off to Auckland, New Zealand, instead of Oakland, near San Francisco. This event made him the hero of the day. He was interviewed everywhere and they are making a film about him. In this country, it is not the highest virtue, nor the heroic act, that achieves fame, but the uncommon nature of the least significant destiny. There is plenty for everyone, then, since the more conformist the system as a whole becomes,the more millions of individuals there are who are set apart by some tiny peculiarity. The slightest vibration in a statistical model, the tiniest whim of a computer are enough to bathe some piece of abnormal behaviour, however banal, in a fleeting glow of fame.

Like this white Christ carrying a heavy cross down Main Street, Venice. It is a very hot day. You want to tell him it has already been done, two thousand years ago. But he is not trying to do anything new. He is just carrying his cross the same way as other people carry ‘Jesus Saves’ or ‘Know Jesus’ badges on their cars. You could point out that no one - not a single person - is watching, and that he is accorded only indifference and derision as he passes. But he would tell you that was exactly how it was two thousand years ago.

The top of the Bonaventure Hotel. Its metal structure and its plate-glass windows rotate slowly around the cocktail bar. The movement of the skyscrapers outside is almost imperceptible. Then you realize that it is the platform of the bar that is moving, while the rest of the building remains still. In the end I get to see the whole city revolve around the top of the hotel. A dizzy feeling, which continues inside the hotel as a result of its labyrinthine convolution. Is this still architecture, this pure illusionism, this mere box of spatio-temporal tricks? Ludic and

hallucinogenic, is this postmodern architecture?

No interior/exterior interface. The glass facades merely reflect the environment, sending back its own image. This makes them much more formidable than any wall of stone. It's just like people who wear dark glasses. Their eyes are hidden and others see only their own reflection. Everywhere the transparency of interfaces ends in internal refraction. Everything pretentiously termed 'communication' and 'interaction' - walk-man, dark glasses, automatic household appliances, hi-tech cars, even the

perpetual dialogue with the computer - ends up with each monad retreating into the shade of its own formula, into its self-regulating little corner and its artificial immunity. Blocks like the Bonaventure building claim to be perfect, self-sufficient miniature cities. But they cut themselves off from the city more than they interact with it. They stop seeing it. They refract it like a dark surface. And you cannot get out of the building itself. You cannot fathom out its internal space, but it has no mystery; it is just like those games where you have to join all the dots together without any line crossing another. Here too everything connects, without any two pairs of eyes ever meeting.

It is the same outside.

A camouflaged individual, with a long beak, feathers, and a yellow cagoule, a madman in fancy dress, wanders along the sidewalks downtown, and

nobody, but nobody, looks at him. They do not look at other people here. They are much too afraid they will throw themselves upon them with unbearable, sexual demands, requests for money or affection. Everything is charged with a somnambulic violence and you must avoid contact to escape its potential discharge. Now that the mad have been let out of the asylums everyone is seen as a potential madman. Everything is so informal, there is so little in the way of reserve or manners (except for that eternal film of a smile, which offers only a very flimsy protection), that you feel anything could blow up at any moment. By some chain reaction, all this latent hysteria could be released at a stroke. The same feeling in New York, where panic is almost the characteristic smell of the city streets. Sometimes it takes the form of a gigantic breakdown, as in 1976.

All around, the tinted glass facades of the buildings are like faces: frosted surfaces. It is as though there were no one inside the buildings, as if there were no one behind the faces. And there *really* is no one. This is what the ideal city is like.

First International Bank. Crocker Bank. Bank of America. Pentecostal Savings (or is that one a church?). All bunched together in the heart of the city, alongside the big airlines. Money is fluid. Like grace, it is never yours. Coming to claim it is an offence against the divinity. Have you deserved this favour? Who are you and what are you going to do with it? You are suspected of wanting to put it to some use, and an evil one no doubt, whereas money is so beautiful in the fluid and intemporal state it is in at the bank, when it is being invested rather than spent. Shame on you and kiss the hand that gives it to you.

It is true that ownership of money burns your fingers, like power. We need people to take this risk for us and we should be eternally grateful to them. This is why I hesitate to deposit money in a bank. I am afraid I shall never dare to take it out again. When you go to confession and entrust your sins to the safe-keeping of the priest, do you ever come back for them? And yet the atmosphere in a bank is that of the confessional (there is no more kafkaesque situation):

admit that you have money, confess that this is not normal. And it is true: having money is an awkward situation, from which the bank is only too happy to deliver you: 'Your money interests us' - the bank holds you to ransom, its greed knows no bounds. Its immodest gaze reveals your private parts to you, and you are forced to hand your money over to appease it. One day I tried to close my account, taking all the money out in cash. The teller would not let me go with such a sum on me: it was obscene, dangerous, immoral. Would I not at least take travellers' cheques? 'No, the whole lot in cash'. I was mad. In America, you are stark raving mad if, instead of believing in money and its marvellous fluidity, you want to carry it round on you in banknotes. Money is dirty; that you must admit. And we really do need all these concrete and metal sanctuaries to protect us from it. So banks fulfil a crucial social function, and it is quite logical that these buildings should form the monumental heart of every town and city.One of the finest things there is, at dawn: the Santa Monica pier, with the white waves rolling in, the sky grey over Venice, the pale green or turquoise hotel overlooking the sands, and the endless line of run-down motels with their grimy little lamps, their graffiti-covered walls. The first waves, already frequented by a few insomniac surfers, the oh-so-melancholy palm trees with their Roaring Twenties grace, and the merry-go-round. The bay that bends round towards Long Beach is as vast as the Bay of Ipanema in Rio, the only one of comparable size. But, unlike Rio with its proud, luxurious, and pretentious (though none the less beautiful) sea front, here the town ends almost in a piece of wasteground at the ocean, like a seaside suburb. And it has indeed the hazy charm of just such a suburb. Here at dawn, it is one of the most insignificant shorelines in the world, just a place to go fishing. The Western World ends on a shore devoid of all signification, like a journey that loses all meaning when it reaches its end. The immense metropolis of Los Angeles peters out here in the sea like a desert, with all the nonchalance of a desert.

'LIVE OR DIE': the graffiti message on the pier at Santa Monica is mysterious,

because we really have no choice between life and death. If you live, you live, if you die, you die. It is like saying ‘be yourself, or don’t be!’ It is stupid, and yet it is enigmatic. You could read it to mean that you should live intensely or else disappear, but that is banal. Following the model of ‘pay or die!’, ‘your money or your life!’, it would become ‘your life or your life!’. Stupid again, since you cannot exchange life for itself. And yet there is poetic force in this implacable tautology, as there always is when there is nothing to be understood. In the end, the lesson of this graffiti is perhaps: ‘if you get more stupid than me, you die!’Where the others spend their time in libraries, I spend mine in the deserts and on the roads. Where they draw their material from the history of ideas, I draw mine from what is happening now, from the life of the streets, the beauty of nature. This country is naive, so you have to be naive. Everything here still bears the marks of a primitive society: technologies, the media, total simulation (bio-, socio-, stereo-, video-) are developing in a wild state, in their original state. Insignificance exists on a grand scale and the desert remains the primal scene, even in the big cities. Inordinate space, a simplicity of language and character. . .

My hunting grounds are the deserts, the mountains, Los Angeles, the freeways, the Safeways, the ghost towns, or the downtowns, not lectures at the university. I know the deserts, their deserts, better than they do, since they turn their backs on their own space as the Greeks turned their backs on the sea, and I get to know more about the concrete, social life of America from the desert than I ever would from official or intellectual gatherings.

American culture is heir to the deserts, but the deserts here are not part of a Nature defined by contrast with the town. Rather they denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of that emptiness and the work of man as the continuity of the desert, culture as a mirage and as the perpetuity of the simulacrum.

The natural deserts tell me what I need to know about the deserts of the sign.

They teach me to read surface and movement and geology and immobility *at* the same time. They create a vision expurgated of all the rest: cities, relationships, events, media. They induce in me an exalting vision of the desertification of signs and men. They form the mental frontier where the projects of civilization run into the ground. They are outside the sphere and circumference of desire. We should always appeal to the deserts
against the excess of signification, of intention and pretention [sic!] in culture. They are our mythic operator.

ROMERO SADDLE - CAMINO CIELO - BLUE CANYON - QUICK SILVER MINE - SYCAMORE CANYON - SAN RAPHAEL WILDERNESS

As night is falling, after three hours driving, I am lost in the San Raphael Wilderness. Driving on and on towards the last of the sun's rays, then by the headlights reflecting in the sand of the river bed. Will I get through or won't I? Darkness is falling all around: the prospect of spending the night here looms, but the whisky creates a delicious sense of abandon. At last, after two hours driving and a descent into hell, I am resurrected in heaven, on the Camino Cielo ridge, with an aerial, night-time view of the lights of Santa Barbara.

PORTERVILLE

The journey here through forests of orange trees, their leaves a deep, geometric green, laid out neatly on wild hillsides that are carpeted with undulating grass like animal fur and resemble the hills of Tuscany. A driveway lined by fifty palm trees, all the same height and absolutely symmetrical, leads up to a planter's house that is minuscule by comparison. All its shutters are closed. It could be a colonial scene, but in fact these are the western slopes of the Rockies, at the foot of Sequoia National Park. The road

down into this town that is not really a town is as straight as the rows of orange trees and is peopled by Mexican slaves who have bought up their masters' old 1950s Chevrolets. You go down through an oleander-linedavenue. But the real revelation is the town itself, which is completely devoid - to a point unintelligible to us Europeans - of any centre. You drive up and down every street in the town without being able to find anything remotely like a central point. Without even a bank, an administrative building, or a town hall, the town has no coordinates; it is like a plantation. The only sign of life: an American flag, just alongside the dead centre of the town, the hotel. This is the only three-storey building and its torn curtains flap through the broken window-panes in the warm late-afternoon wind. The hotel rooms can't even be opened. The Mexican owner can't find the keys. The prices are ridiculously low. You can spend a week here for twenty dollars. And yet in every room, with its sagging mattress and its dusty mirror, the TV is constantly on, apparently not for any resident, since it is on in the rooms that are open to the winds and those that can't even be opened. You can see the televisions, or at least their reflections, from the street, through the curtains. All the corridors, with their worn-out carpets, display a single sign: EXIT. You can leave in any direction you like. You can rent three rooms here for a week for the price of a night in an ordinary motel. Forty years ago, no doubt, it was a hotel for Bakersfield's smart set when they escaped to the cool of the mountains. Today it is the heart of Porterville, and an irrevocable process of decay has set in. But it is too hot to worry about that.

Darkness falls slowly on Porterville, and Saturday night fever begins. 'American Graffiti 85.' All the cars drive up and down the main thorough-fare in slow or animated procession, a collective parade, drinking, eating ice-creams, calling out from one car to the next (whereas in the daytime they all drive round oblivious of anyone else). Music, PA systems, beer, ice-cream. It is the same ceremony, on a smaller scale, as the slow nocturnal cruising on the Strip in Las Vegas, or the procession of cars on the Los Angeles freeways simply transformed into a Saturday night provincial extravaganza. The only element of culture, the only mobile

element: the car. No cultural centre, no
centre of entertainment. A primitive society: the same motor identification, the same collective phantasy of an unfolding ritual - breakfast, movie, religious service, love and death - the whole of life as a drive-in. Truly magnificent. It is all in this parade of bulky capsules, luminous and silent (the whole thing passes off in relative silence with no gear changes and no overtaking; these are the same fluid monsters with their automatic transmissions, gliding along smoothly one behind the other). Nothing else will happen during the evening. Except that is for the madcap race between the 12-15-year-old girls - like cowgirls from a Western - which takes place in a corner of the town, under floodlights, in the dust kicked up by the horses, near the baseball park. And the next morning, Sunday morning, the deserted streets, streets hardly distinct from the desert, have a preternatural calm about them. The air is transparent, with the orange trees all around. After the night's automobile ceremony the town is abandoned now to the light of its over-wide avenues, the lifeless stores, the half-awake service stations. Natural, orphaned light, without headlights or advertising signs. Just a few Mexicans cruise around in their long cars, while the first Whites wash theirs in front of their open verandas. The luminous insignificance of Sunday morning. A holographic micro-model of all America.

Death Valley is as big and mysterious as ever. Fire, heat, light: all the elements of sacrifice are here. You always have to bring something into the desert to sacrifice, and offer it to the desert as a victim. A woman. If something has to disappear,

something matching the desert for beauty, why not a woman?

Nothing is more alien to American deserts than symbiosis (loose-fitting clothing, slow rhythms, oases) such as you find in native desert cultures. Here, everything human is artificial. Furnace Creek is a synthetic, air-conditioned oasis. But there is nothing more beautiful than artificial coolnessin the midst of heat, artificial speed in

the middle of a natural expanse, electric light under a blazing sun, or the artificial practice of gambling in lost casinos. Reyner Banham is right: Death Valley and Las Vegas are inseparable; you have to accept everything at once, an unchanging timelessness and the wildest instantaneity. There is a mysterious affinity between the sterility of wide open spaces and that of gambling, between the sterility of speed and that of expenditure. That is the originality of the deserts of the American West; it lies in that violent, electric juxtaposition. And the same applies to the whole country: you must accept everything at once, because it is this telescoping that gives the American way of life its illuminating, exhilarating side, just as, in the desert, everything contributes to the magic of the desert. If you approach this society with the nuances of moral, aesthetic, or critical judgement, you will miss its originality, which comes precisely from its defying judgement and pulling off a prodigious confusion of effects. To side-step that confusion and excess is simply to evade the challenge it throws down to you. The violence of its contrasts, the absence of discrimination between positive and negative effects, the telescoping of races, technologies, and models, the waltz of simulacra and images here is such that, as with dream elements, you must accept the way they follow one another, even if it seems unintelligible; you must come to see this whirl of things and events as an irresistible, fundamental datum.

The distinctions that are made elsewhere have little meaning here. It would be misguided to focus on aspects of an American civility that is often in fact far superior to our own (in our land of 'high culture') and then to point out that in other respects the Americans are barbarians. It would be wrong-headed to counterpose Death Valley, the sublime natural phenomenon, to Las Vegas, the abject cultural phenomenon. For the one is the hidden face of the other and they mirror each other across the desert, the one as acme of secrecy and silence, the other as acme of prostitution and theatricality.

Having said that, there is something mysterious about Death Valley *in itself.* However beautiful the deserts of Utah and California may be, this one is something else again - something sublime. The preternatural heat haze that enshrouds it, its inverse depth - below sea level - this landscape with its underwater features, its salt surfaces and mudhills, the high mountain chains surrounding it, making it a kind of inner sanctuary - a gentle, spectral place of initiation (which comes from its geological depth and the atmosphere of spiritual limbo). What has always struck me about Death Valley is its *mildness,* its pastel shades and its fossil veil, the misty fantasmagoria of its mineral opera. There is nothing funereal or morbid about it: a transverberation in which everything is palpable, the mineral softness of the air, the mineral substance of the light, the corpuscular fluid of the colours, the total extra version of one's body in the heat. A fragment of another planet (at least predating any form of human life), where another, deeper temporality reigns, on whose surface you float as you would on salt-laden waters. The senses, the mind, and even your sense of belonging to the human race are all numbed by the fact of having before you the pure, unadulterated sign of 180 million years, and therefore the implacable enigma of your own existence. It is the only place where it is possible to relive, alongside the physical spectrum of colours, the spectrum of the inhuman metamorphoses that preceded us, our successive historical forms: the mineral, the organic, salt desert, sand dunes, rock, ore, light, heat, everything the earth has been, all the inhuman forms it has been through, gathered together in a single anthologizing vision.

The desert is a natural extension of the inner silence of the body. If humanity's language, technology, and buildings are an extension of its constructive faculties, the desert alone is an extension of its capacity for absence, the ideal schema of humanity's disappearance. When you come out of the Mojave, writes Banham, it is difficult to focus less than fifteen miles ahead of you. Your eye can no longer rest on objects that are near. It can nolonger properly settle on things, and all the human or natural constructions that

intercept your gaze seem irksome obstacles which merely corrupt the perfect reach of your vision. When you emerge from the desert, your eyes go on trying to create emptiness all around; in every inhabited area, every landscape they see desert beneath, like a watermark. It takes a long time to get back to a normal vision of things and you never succeed completely. Take this substance from my sight! . . . But the desert is more than merely a space from which all substance has been removed. Just as silence is not what remains when all noise has been suppressed. There is no need to close your eyes to hear it. For it is also the silence of time.

And even the foreshortening effect of cinema is present in Death Valley, for all this mysterious geology is also a scenario. The American desert is an extraordinary piece of drama, though in no sense is it theatrical like an Alpine landscape, nor sentimental like the forest or the countryside. Nor eroded and monotonous like the sub-lunar Australian desert. Nor mystical like the deserts of Islam. It is purely, geologically dramatic, bringing together the sharpest, most ductile shapes with the gentlest, most lascivious underwater forms - the whole metamorphism of the earth's crust is present in synthesis, in a miraculous abridged version. All the intelligence of the earth and its elements gathered together here, in a matchless spectacle: a geological epic. Cinema is not alone in having given us a cinematic vision of the desert. Nature itself pulled off the finest of its special effects here, long before men came on the scene.

It is useless to seek to strip the desert of its cinematic aspects in order to restore its original essence; those features are thoroughly superimposed upon it and will not go away. The cinema has absorbed everything -Indians, *mesas,* canyons, skies. And yet it is the most striking spectacle in the world. Should we prefer 'authentic' deserts and deep oases? For usmoderns, and ultramoderns, as for Baudelaire, who knew that the secret of true modernity

was to be found in artifice, the only natural spectacle that is really gripping is the one which offers both the most moving profundity *and at the same time the total simulacrum of that profundity.* As here, where the depth of time is revealed through the (cinematic) depth of field. Monument Valley is the geology of the earth, the mausoleum of the Indians, and the camera of John Ford. It is erosion and it is extermination, but it is also the tracking shot, the movies. All three are mingled in the vision we have of it. And each phase subtly terminates the preceding one. The extermination of the Indians put an end to the natural cosmological rhythm of these landscapes, to which their magical existence was bound for millennia. With the arrival of pioneer civilization an extremely slow process gave way to a much quicker one. But this process itself was overtaken fifty years later by the tracking shots of the cinema which speeded up the process even more and, in a sense, put an end to the disappearance of the Indians by reviving them as extras. Thus this landscape has been witness to all the great events both of geology and anthropology, including some of the most recent. Hence the exceptional scenic qualities of the deserts of the West, combining as they do the most ancestral of hieroglyphs, the most vivid light, and the most total superficiality.

Colours there seem rarefied, detached from all substance, diffracted into the air, floating on the surface of things. Hence the spectral, ghostly, and at the same time veiled, translucent, calm, and subtle impression made by these landscapes. And the mirage effect - a temporal mirage too - which comes near to total illusion. The rocks, sands, crystals, and cacti are eternal, but they are also ephemeral, unreal, and detached from their substance. The vegetation is minimal, but indestructible, and each new spring sees a miracle of bloom. By contrast, light itself has substance here. Floating like a powderon the air, it gives all shades of colour that pastel nuance that seems the very image of disincarnation, of the separation of the body from the spirit. In this sense, one may speak of the abstraction of the desert, of a deliverance from the organic, a deliverance that is beyond the body's abject passage into carnal inexistence, into that dry, luminous phase of

death in which the corruption of the body reaches completion. The desert is beyond this accursed phase of decomposition, this humid phase of the body, this

organic phase of nature.

The desert is a sublime form that banishes all sociality, all sentimentality, all sexuality. Words, even when they speak of the desert, are always unwelcome. Caresses have no meaning, except from a woman who is herself of the desert, who has that instantaneous, superficial animality in which the fleshly is combined with dryness and disincarnation. And yet, in another sense, there is nothing to match night falling in its shroud of silence on Death Valley, seen from broken-down, worn-out motel chairs on the verandah, looking out over the dunes. The heat does not fall off here. Only night falls, its darkness pierced by a few car headlights. And the silence is something extraordinary, as though it were itself all ears. It is not the silence of cold, nor of barrenness, nor of an absence of life. It is the silence of the whole of this heat over the mineral expanses that stretch out before us for hundreds of miles, the silence of the gentle wind upon the salt mud of Badwater, caressing the ore deposits of Telegraph Peak. A silence internal to the Valley itself, the silence of underwater erosion, below the very waterline of time, as it is below the level of the sea. No animal movement. Nothing dreams here, nothing talks in its sleep. Each night the earth plunges into perfectly calm darkness, into the blackness of its alkaline

gestation, into the happy depression of its birth.
Long before I left, I could not get Santa Barbara out of my mind. Santa Barbara is simply a dream and it has in it all the processes of dreams: the wearisome fulfilment of all desires, condensation, displacement, facility of action.

All this very quickly becomes unreal. Happy days! This morning a bird came to my balcony to die. I photographed it. But no one is indifferent to his own life and the least event still has something moving about it. I was here in my imagination long before I actually came here. Suddenly this stay has become a sojourn in a previous existence. In the last weeks, time seemed multiplied by a feeling of no longer being there and of living Santa Barbara each day, with its fatal charm and its blandness, as the predestined site of an eternal return.

Things fade into the distance faster and faster in the rear-view mirror of memory. Two and a half months disappear in a few moments, even quicker than the jet lag when your mind readjusts to Europe. It's not easy keeping your sense of wonderment alive or the first flashes of surprise, or even recalling what it felt like when things were still unexpected. Things last no longer than the time it takes for them to happen. It used to be the agreeable custom that you went to see the same film more than once. We are losing that habit. I doubt now whether we really see our whole life flashing before us at the moment of our death. The very possibility of the Eternal Return is becoming precarious: that marvellous perspective presupposes that things unfold in a necessary, predestined order, the sense of which lies beyond them. There is nothing like that today; things merely follow on in a flabby order that leads nowhere. Today's Eternal Return is that of the infinitely small, the fractal, the obsessive repetition of things on a microscopic and inhuman scale. It is not the exaltation of a will, nor the sovereign affirmation of an event, nor its consecration by an immutable sign, such as Nietzsche sought, but the viral recurrence of microprocesses. This is, admittedly,inescapable, but no powerful sign presents it to the imagination as predestined (neither nuclear explosions nor viral implosions can be *named* by the imagination). Such are the events

which surround us: micro-processive and instantaneously obliterated.

Coming back from California means re-entering a world you have known and lived in, but doing so without feeling the charm you might expect at returning to a former life. You had left that world behind in the hope it might be thoroughly transformed in your absence, but nothing of the sort has occurred. It got along quite nicely without you and it adjusts quite smoothly to your return. People and things conspire to make it seem as if you had not been away. For my own part, I left it all without regrets and I come back to it again without any great emotion. People are a thousand times more preoccupied with their own little lives than with the strangeness of another world. You are best advised, then, to land discreetly, to come back politely into this world keeping anything you may have to say - along with the few sights still gleaming in your memory - strictly to yourself.

The confrontation between America and Europe reveals not so much a *rapprochement* as a distortion, an unbridgeable rift. There isn't just a gap between us, but a whole chasm of modernity. You are born modern, you do not become so. And we have never become so. What strikes you immediately in Paris is that you are in the nineteenth century. Coming from Los Angeles, you land back in the 1800s. Every country bears a sort of historical predestination, which almost definitively determines its characteristics. For us, it is the bourgeois model of 1789 - and the interminable decadence of that model - that shapes our landscape. There is nothing we can do about it: everything here revolves around the nineteenth-century, bourgeois dream.

UTOPIA ACHIEVED

For the European, even today, America represents something akin to exile, a phantasy of emigration and, therefore, a form of interiorization of his or her own culture. At the same time, it corresponds to a violent extra version and therefore to the zero degree of that same culture. No other country embodies to the same extent both this function of disincarnation and, at the same time, the functions of exacerbation and radicalization of the elements of our European cultures. . . It is by an act of force or *coup de theatre* - the geographical exile of the Founding Fathers of the seventeenth century adding itself to the voluntary exile of man within his own consciousness -that what in Europe had remained a critical and religious esotericism became transformed on the New Continent into a pragmatic exotericism. The whole foundation of America is a response to this dual operation of a deepening of the moral law in individual consciences, a radicalization of the Utopian demand which was always that of the sects, and the immediate materialization of that Utopia in work, custom, and way of life. To land in America is, even today, to land in that 'religion' of the way of life which Tocqueville
described. This material Utopia of the way of life, where success and action are seen as profound illustrations of the moral law, was crystallized by exile and

emigration and these have, in a sense, transformed it into a primal scene. For us, in Europe, it was the Revolution of 1789 that set its seal upon us, though it was a different seal, that of History, the State, and Ideology. Politics and history, not the Utopian, moral sphere, remain our primal scene. And if this 'transcendent' European-style revolution is far from confident today either of its means or its ends, the same cannot be said of the immanent revolution of the American way of life, of that moral and pragmatic assertiveness which constitutes now as ever the pathos of the New World.

America is the original version of modernity. We are the dubbed or subtitled version. America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth. Having known no primitive accumulation of time, it lives in a perpetual present. Having seen no slow, centuries-long accumulation of a principle of truth, it lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs. It has no ancestral territory. The Indians' territory is today marked off in reservations, the equivalent of the galleries in which America stocks its Rembrandts and Renoirs. But this is of no importance - America has no identity problem. In the future, power will belong to those peoples with no origins and no authenticity who know how to exploit that situation to the full. Look at Japan, which to a certain extent has pulled off this trick better than the US itself, managing, in what seems to us an unintelligible paradox, to transform the power of territoriality and feudalism into that of deterritoriality and weightlessness. Japan is already a satellite of the planet Earth. But America was already in its day a satellite of the planet Europe.

Whether we like it or not, the future has shifted towards artificial satellites.
The US is Utopia achieved.

We should not judge their crisis as we would judge our own, the crisis of the old European countries. Ours is a crisis of historical ideals facing up to the

impossibility of their realization. Theirs is the crisis of an achieved Utopia, confronted with the problem of its duration and permanence. The Americans are not wrong in their idyllic conviction that they are at the centre of the world, the supreme power, the absolute model for everyone. And this conviction is not so much founded on natural resources, technologies, and arms, as on the miraculous premiss of a Utopia made reality, of a society which, with a directness we might judge unbearable, is built on the idea that it is the realization of everything the others have dreamt of - justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, freedom: it knows this, it believes in it, and in the end, the others have come to believe in it too.

In the present crisis of values, everyone ends up turning towards the culture which dared to forge right ahead and, by a theatrical masterstroke, turn those values into reality, towards that society which, thanks to the geographical and mental break effected by emigration, allowed itself to imagine it could create an ideal world from nothing. We should also not forget the fantasy consecration of this process by the cinema. Whatever happens, and whatever one thinks of the arrogance of the dollar or the multinationals, it is this culture which, the world over, fascinates those very people who suffer most at its hands, and it does so through the deep, insane conviction that it has made all their dreams come true.

But this is really not so very crazy: all pioneer societies have been more or less ideal societies. Even the Jesuits of Paraguay. Even the Portuguese in Brazil founded what was in a sense an ideal patriarchal, slave-owning society, though unlike the American, Anglo-Saxon, Puritan model, the southern model had little chance of being universally adopted in the modern world. By exporting itself, by becoming hypostatized across the sea, the ideal purged itself of its history, took on concrete reality, developed withnew blood and experimental energy. The dynamism of the ‘new worlds’ still bears witness to their superiority over the ‘old countries’: the ideal the others only cultivated as an ultimate, and secretly impossible, goal, they put into operation.

Colonization was, in this sense, a world-scale *coup de theatre* which leaves deep, nostalgic traces everywhere, even when it is collapsing. For the Old World, it represents the unique experience of an idealized substitution of values, almost as you find in science-fiction novels (the tone of which it often reflects, as in the US), a substitution which at a stroke short-circuited the destiny of these values in their countries of origin. The emergence of these societies at the margins deprives the historical societies of their destinies. The brutal extrapolation of their essence across the seas means that they lose control of their development. They are eradicated by the ideal model they have themselves secreted. And development will never again take place in the form of progressive alignment. The moment at which those values, which up to then had been transcendent, are realized, are projected into reality, or collapse in the encounter with it (America), is an irreversible one. This is what separates us, come what may, from the Americans. We shall never catch them up, and we shall never have their candour. We merely imitate them, parody them with a fifty-year time lag, and we are not even successful at that. We do not have either the spirit or the audacity for what might be called the zero degree of culture, the power of unculture. It is no good our trying more or less to adapt, their vision of the world will always be beyond our grasp, just as the transcendental, historical *Weltanschauung* of Europe will always be beyond the Americans. Just as the countries of the Third World will never internalize the values of democracy and technological progress. There are some gaps that are definitive and cannot be bridged.

We shall remain nostalgic Utopians, agonizing over our ideals, but baulking, ultimately, at their realization, professing that everything ispossible, but never that everything has been achieved. Yet that is what America asserts. Our problem is that our old goals - revolution, progress, freedom - will have evaporated before they were achieved, before they became reality. Hence our melancholy. We shall never have had the good fortune to enjoy the *coup de theatre*.

We live in negativity and contradiction; they live in paradox (for a realized

Utopia is a paradoxical idea). And the quality of the American way of life resides for many in that pragmatic, paradoxical humour of theirs, whilst ours is (was?) characterized by the subtlety of our critical wit. Many American intellectuals envy us this and would like to fashion a set of ideal values and a history for themselves, and relive the philosophical or Marxist delights of old Europe. Yet this runs against the grain of everything that makes up their original situation, since the charm and power of American (un)culture derive precisely from the sudden and unprecedented materialization of models.

When I see Americans, particularly American intellectuals, casting a nostalgic eye towards Europe, its history, its metaphysics, its cuisine, and its past, I tell myself that this is just a case of unhappy transference. History and Marxism are like fine wines and haute cuisine: they do not really cross the ocean, in spite of the many impressive attempts that have been made to adapt them to new surroundings. This is a just revenge for the fact that we Europeans have never really been able to domesticate modernity, which also refuses to cross the ocean, though in the other direction. There are products which cannot be imported or exported. That is our loss - and theirs. If, for us, society is a carnivorous flower, history for them is an exotic one. Its fragrance is no more convincing than the bouquet of Californian wines (in spite of all the effort being expended to make us believe otherwise). Not only can history not be caught up, but it seems that in this 'capitalist'society capital can never actually be grasped in its present reality. It is not that our Marxist critics have not tried to run after it, but it always stays a length ahead of them. By the time one phase has been unmasked, capital has already passed on to another (Ernest Mandel and his third phase of world capital). Capital cheats. It doesn't play by the rules of critique, the true game of history. It eludes the dialectic, which only reconstitutes it after the event, a revolution behind. Even anti-capitalist revolutions only serve to give fresh impetus to its own: they are the equivalent of the 'exogenous events' Mandel speaks of, like wars, crises, or the discovery of goldmines, which

set capital off on a new developmental process on fresh bases. In the end, these theorists themselves reveal the inanity of their hopes. By reinventing capital in each successive phase on the basis of the primacy of political economy, they simply confirm the absolute initiative capital enjoys as historical event. They therefore fall straight into their own trap and give themselves no chance of getting ahead of it. And this at the same time ensures - as was perhaps their objective - the continuing validity of their retrospective analyses.

America has never been short of violence, nor of events, people, or ideas, but these things do not of themselves constitute a history. Octavio Paz is right when he argues that America was created in the hope of escaping from history, of building a Utopia sheltered from history, and that it has in part succeeded in that project, a project it is still pursuing today. The concept of history as the transcending of a social and political rationality, as a dialectical, conflictual vision of societies, is not theirs, just as modernity, conceived precisely as an original break with a certain history, will never be ours. We have lived long enough now in the unhappy consciousness of this modernity to be aware of that. Europe invented a certain kind of feudalism, aristocracy, bourgeoisie, ideology,

and revolution: all this had meaning for
us, but at bottom it had no meaning elsewhere. All who have tried to ape these things have either made themselves a laughing stock or have been dramatically driven off course (we ourselves are doing little more than merely imitating ourselves, outliving ourselves). America made a break with all that and found itself in a situation of radical modernity: it is, therefore, in America and nowhere else that modernity is original. We can only imitate it without being able to challenge it on its own home territory. Once an event has taken place, it has taken place, full stop. And when I see Europe casting longing eyes towards all-out modernity, I tell myself that that, too, is an unhappy transference.

We are still at the centre, but at the centre of the Old World. They who were a marginal transcendence of that Old World are today its new, eccentric centre. Eccentricity is stamped on their birth certificate. We shall never be able to take it from them. We shall never be able to excentre or decentre ourselves in the same way. We shall therefore never be modern in the proper sense of the term. And we shall never enjoy the same freedom -not the formal freedom we take for granted, but the concrete, flexible functional, active freedom we see at work in American institutions and in the head of each citizen. Our conception of freedom will never be able to rival their spatial, mobile conception, which derives from the fact that at a certain point they freed themselves from that historical centrality. ;

From the day when that eccentric modernity was born in all its glory on the other side of the Atlantic, Europe began to disappear. The myths migrated. Today, all the myths of modernity are American. It will do us no good to worry our poor heads over this. In Los Angeles, Europe has disappeared. As Isabelle Huppert says: They have everything. They don't need anything. Admittedly, they envy us our past and our culture and admire them, but deep down to them we are a sort of elegant Third World.'In the political sphere, there will always remain of this initial decentring a federalism, an absence of centralism and, at the level of mores and culture, a decentralization, an eccentricity which is that of the New World in relation to Europe. The US has no insoluble problem of federation (they have, of course, had their War of Secession, but we are speaking here of the current federal set-up), because they are from the outset, from the very dawn of their history, a culture of mixing, of national and racial mix, of rivalry and heterogeneity. This is clearly visible in New York where each successive skyscraper and, after its own fashion, each ethnic group has dominated the city, and where the whole none the less still gives the impression not of a heteroclite mish-mash, but of converging energies, not of unity or plurality, but of intensity born of rivalry, of antagonistic power, thus creating a complicity, a collective attraction,

beyond culture or politics, in the very violence or banality of the way of life.

If we stay with this line of thinking, we can see that there is a profound difference in racial, ethnic tone between America and France. In America the violent mixing of multiple European nationalities, then of exogenous races, produced an original situation. This multiracialism transformed the country and gave it its characteristic complexity. In France there was neither an initial mix, nor a real resolution, nor was there any real challenge between ethnic groups. All that happened was a transferring of the colonial situation back to the metropolis, out of its original context. All our immigrants are, at bottom, *harkis,** living under the social protection of their oppressors, to whom they can oppose only their poverty and their de facto sentence of transportation for life. Immigration is, admittedly, a hot issue, but the presence of several million immigrants has not made its mark on the French way of life nor changed the face of the country. That is why, when you return to France, the dominant impression is a clammy sense of petty racism, of everyone being in an awkward, shameful position. The sequel to a colonial situation, in which the bad faith of both colonizer and colonized persists, whereas in America, each ethnic group, each race develops a language, a culture in competition with and sometimes superior to that of the 'natives', and each group symbolically rises to the top. This is not a question of formal equality or freedom, but of a de facto freedom expressed in rivalry and competition and this gives a singular vivacity and an air of openness to the confrontation between the races.

* *Harkis* are Algerian Muslims who took French citizenship after Algerian Independence. [Tr.]

Our European culture is one that has staked its all on the universal and the danger menacing it is that of perishing by the universal. . . This includes not only the extension of the concepts of market, monetary exchange, or production goods, but also the imperialism of the idea of culture. We should be wary of this idea, which

has, like the concept of revolution, only become universal by being abstractly formalized, and which devours singularity just as rapidly as revolution devours its children.

One consequence of this claim to universality is that it makes both downward diversification and upward federation equally impossible. Once a nation and a culture have been centralized by a solid historical process, they experience insurmountable difficulties when they attempt either to create viable sub-units or to integrate themselves into some coherent larger entity. . . There is a sort of inevitability about the centralizing process. Hence the difficulties currently being encountered in the attempt to find a European spirit and culture, a European dynamism. Inability to produce a federal event (Europe), a local event (decentralization), a racial event (multiracialism). Too entangled by our history, we can only produce an apologetic centralism (a Clochemerle pluralism) and an apologetic mixing (our soft racism).

The principle of achieved Utopia explains the absence and, moreover, the lack of need for metaphysics and the imaginary in American life. It gives Americans a perception of reality different from our own. The real is not connected with the impossible and no failure can throw it into question. What is thought in Europe becomes reality in America - everything that disappears in Europe reappears in San Francisco!

And yet the idea of an achieved Utopia is a paradoxical one. If it is negativity, irony, and the sublime that govern European thinking, it is paradox which dominates that of America, the paradoxical humour of an achieved materiality, of an ever renewed self-evidence, of a bright new faith in the legality of the *fait accompli* which we always find amazing, the humour of a naive visibility of things, whilst we operate in the uncanny realm of the *déjà vu* and the glaucous transcendence of history.

We criticize Americans for not being able either to analyse or conceptualize. But this is a wrong-headed critique. It is we who imagine that everything culminates in transcendence, and that nothing exists which has not been conceptualized. Not only do they care little for such a view, but their perspective is the very

opposite: it is not conceptualizing reality, but realizing concepts and materializing ideas, that interests them. The ideas of the religion and enlightened morality of the eighteenth century certainly, but also dreams, scientific values, and sexual perversions. Materializing freedom, but also the unconscious. Our phantasies around space and fiction, but also our phantasies of sincerity and virtue, or our mad dreams of technicity. Everything that has been dreamt on this side of the Atlantic has a chance of being realized on the other. They build the real out of ideas. We transform the real into ideas, or into ideology. Here in America only what is produced or manifested has meaning; for us in Europe only what can be thought or concealed has meaning. Even materialism is only an idea in Europe. It is in America that it becomes concretely realized in the technical operation of things, in the transformation of a way of thinking into a way oflife, in the 'action' of life ('action' in the film-making sense, as what happens when the cameras begin to roll). For the materiality of things is, of course, their cinematography.

Americans believe in facts, but not in facticity. They do not know that facts are factitious, as their name suggests. It is in this belief in facts, in the total credibility of what is done or seen, in this pragmatic evidence of things and an accompanying contempt for what may be called appearances or the play of apperances [sic!] - a face does not deceive, behaviour does not deceive, a scientific process does not deceive, nothing deceives, nothing is ambivalent (and at bottom this is true: nothing deceives, there are no lies, *there is only simulation,* which is precisely the facticity of facts) - that the Americans are a true Utopian society, in their religion of the *fait accompli,* in the naivety of their deductions, in their ignorance of the evil genius of things. You have to be Utopian to think that in a human order, of whatever nature, things can be as plain and straightforward as that. All other societies contain within them some heresy or other, some dissidence, some kind of suspicion of reality, the superstitious belief in a force of evil and the possible control of that force by magic, a belief in the power of

appearances. Here, there is no dissidence, no suspicion. The emperor has no clothes; the facts are there before us. As is well known, the Americans are fascinated by the yellow-skinned peoples in whom they sense a superior form

of cunning, a higher form of that absence of truth which frightens them.

Admittedly, the irony of community is missing here, as is the playfulness of social life. The charm to be found in social graces and in the theatre of social relations is all transferred outwards into the advertising of life and lifestyles. This is a society that is endlessly concerned to vindicate itself, perpetuallyseeking to justify its own existence. Everything has to be made public: what you are worth, what you earn, how you live - there is no place here for interplay of a subtler nature. The society's 'look' is a self-publicizing one. The American flag itself bears witness to this by its omnipresence, in fields and built-up areas, at service stations, and on graves in the cemeteries, not as a heroic sign, but as the trademark of a good brand. It is simply the label of the finest successful international enterprise, the US. This explains why the hyperrealists were able to paint it naively, without either irony or protest (Jim Dine in the sixties), in much the same way as Pop Art gleefully transposed the amazing banality of consumer goods on to its canvases. There is nothing here of the fierce parodying of the American anthem by Jimi Hendrix, merely the light irony and neutral humour of things that have become banal, the humour of the mobile home and the giant hamburger on the sixteen-foot long billboard, the pop and hyper humour so characteristic of the atmosphere of America, where things almost seem endowed with a certain indulgence towards their own banality. But they are indulgent towards their own craziness too. Looked at more generally, they do not lay claim to being extraordinary; they simply are extraordinary. They have that extravagance which makes up odd, everyday America. This oddness is not surrealistic (surrealism is an extravagance that is still aesthetic in nature and as such very European in

inspiration); here, the extravagance has passed into things. Madness, which with us is subjective, has here become objective, and irony which is subjective with us has also turned into something objective. The fantasmagoria and excess which we locate in the mind and the mental faculties have passed into things themselves.

Whatever the boredom, the hellish tedium of the everyday in the US or anywhere else, American banality will always be a thousand times more interesting than the European - and especially the French - variety. Perhaps because banality here is born of extreme distances, of the monotony of wide-open spaces and the radical absence of culture. It is a native flower here, asis the opposite extreme, that of speed and verticality, of an excess that verges on abandon, and indifference to values bordering on immorality, whereas French banality is a hangover from bourgeois everyday life, born out of a dying aristocratic culture and transmuted into petty-bourgeois mannerism as the bourgeoisie shrank away throughout the nineteenth century. This is the crux: it is the corpse of the bourgeoisie that separates us. With us, it is that class that is the carrier of the chromosome of banality, whereas the Americans have succeeded in preserving some humour in the material signs of manifest reality and wealth.

This also explains why Europeans experience anything relating to statistics as tragic. They immediately read in them their individual failure and take refuge in a pained denunciation of the merely quantitative. The Americans, by contrast, see statistics as an optimistic stimulus, as representing the dimensions of their good fortune, their joyous membership of the majority. Theirs is the only country where quantity can be extolled without compunction.

This same indulgence and humour which things attest in their banality here, Americans also show towards themselves and other people. Their intellectual conduct is pleasant, a model of gentleness. They make no claim to what we call intelligence and they do not feel threatened by other people's. For them, this is merely a particular cast of mind in which one should not indulge unduly. They do not therefore move spontaneously to deny or contest; their natural inclination is

towards agreement. When we say 'I agree with you', we do so to contest what follows. When an American says he agrees, it is because, in all honesty, he can see no reason to demur. But quite often he will confirm your analysis by facts, statistics, or lived experience, thereby divesting it of all conceptual value.

This self-indulgence, which is not without humour, is evidence of a society secure in its wealth and power, a society which seems, to some extent, to have internalized Hannah Arendt's comment that the American revolution, unlike the European revolutions, was successful. But even a successful revolution has its victims and its sacrificial emblems. When all is said and done, it is on the murder of Kennedy that Reagan's current reign is founded. That murder has been neither avenged nor elucidated, and with good reason. And this is not to mention the murder of the Indians. It is the energy of Kennedy's murder which radiates out over present-day America. I say this to illustrate not only the indulgence, but the self-publicizing, self-justificatory violence of this society, that triumphalist violence which forms part of all successful revolutions.

Tocqueville describes the beneficial effects of democracy and the American constitution with considerable enthusiasm, praising the inherent freedom of the way of life, the regularity of mores (rather than the equality of status), the supremacy of a moral (rather than political) organization of society. He then describes with equal lucidity the extermination of the Indians and the condition of the Negroes, without ever bringing these two realities together. As if good and evil had developed separately. Is it possible that one can, while keenly feeling both these aspects, pass over the relation between them? Certainly it is, and the same paradox faces us today: *we shall never resolve the enigma of the relation between the negative foundations of greatness and that greatness itself.* America is powerful and original; America is violent and abominable. We should not seek to deny either of these aspects, nor reconcile them.

But what has become of this paradoxical grandeur, the New World's original situation as described by Tocqueville? What has become of this American revolution that consisted in the dynamic resolution of a clearly understood individual interest and a well-tempered collective morality? A problem that was not resolved in Europe and for that reason was to fuel a problematic of history, of the State, and the disappearance of the State,which America has not known. What has become of the challenge sketched out in Tocqueville: can a nation strike a pact of greatness on the basis of each individual's banal interest alone? Can there exist a pact of equality, and banality (of interests, rights, and wealth) which retains a heroic and original dimension? (for what is a society without a heroic dimension?). In short, has the New World fulfilled its promise? Has it reaped the benefits of freedom to the full, or has it merely garnered all the unhappy consequences of equality?

The glory of American power is most often described as an effect of freedom and its exercise. But freedom does not of itself generate power. Freedom understood as public action, as the collective discourse of a society on its own undertakings and values, has in fact disappeared in the individual liberation of mores and in agitation (agitation, as is well known, is one of the Americans' main activities). It is, therefore, equality and its consequences that have been more instrumental in the creation of power. This is the equality of which Tocqueville once said, in a fine phrase, T do not find fault with equality for drawing men into the pursuit of forbidden pleasures, but for absorbing them entirely in the search for the pleasures that are permitted.' It is this equality, the modern equalization of statuses and values, the uniformity of features and characters, which gives birth to power. It is around this equality that Tocqueville's paradox is recast: the American world tends both towards absolute insignificance (all things tending to become equal and therefore cancelling each other out in their power) and towards absolute originality - today even more than 150 years ago, the effects having been multiplied by geographical extension. *This is a world that has shown genius in its irrepressible development of equality, banality, and indifference.*

It is this overall dynamism, this dynamic of the abolition of differences which is so exciting and which poses, in Tocqueville's words, a new problem for the understanding of human societies. It is, moreover, extraordinary to see how little the Americans have changed in the last two centuries - much less than European societies. Whereas these were caught up in the revolutions of the nineteenth century, the Americans kept intact - preserved as it was by a breadth of ocean that created something akin to temporal insularity - the Utopian and moral perspective of the men of the eighteenth century, or even of the Puritan sects of the seventeenth, transplanted and kept alive, safely sheltered from the vicissitudes of history. This Puritan and moral hysteresis is that of exile, that of Utopia. We criticize them for this: why did the revolution not take place here, in this new country, this land of liberty and advanced bastion of capitalism? Why do the 'social' and the 'political', our favoured categories, have so little purchase here? The answer is that the social and philosophical nineteenth century did not cross the Atlantic and here the driving forces are Utopia and morality, the concrete idea of happiness and mores, all of which political ideology, with Marx at its head, liquidated in Europe in favour of an 'objective' conception of historical transformation. It is from this point of view that we tax Americans with historical naivety and moral hypocrisy. But the fact is simply that, in their collective consciousness, they are closer to the models of thought of the eighteenth century, which are Utopian and pragmatic, than to those that were to be imposed by the French revolution, which were ideological and revolutionary.

Why are the sects so powerful and dynamic? The mixing of races, institutions, and technologies should have swept them away long ago. Yet the fact is that they have preserved here the living form and practical illuminism of their origins, together with their moral obsession. In a sense, it is their micro-model which has been extended to the whole of America. From the beginning, the sects played the major role in the move towards an achieved Utopia, which is the equivalent of an 'acting out'. They it is who live on Utopia (the Church considers it a virtual heresy) and who strive to bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth, whereas

the Church restricts
itself to the hope of salvation and theological virtues.

It is as though America as a whole had espoused this sect-like destiny: the immediate concretization of all perspectives of salvation. The multiplication of individual sects should not fool us: the important point is that the whole of America is preoccupied with the sect as a moral institution, with its immediate demand for beatification, its material efficacity, its compulsion for justification, and doubtless also with its madness and frenzy.

If America were to lose this moral perspective on itself, it would collapse. This is not perhaps evident to Europeans, for whom America is a cynical power and its morality a hypocritical ideology. We remain unconvinced by the moral vision Americans have of themselves, but in this we are wrong. When they ask with such seriousness why other peoples detest them, we would be wrong to smile, for it is this same self-examination which makes possible both the various 'Watergates' and the unrelenting exposure of corruption and their own society's faults in the cinema and the media, a freedom we might envy them, we who are the truly hypocritical societies, keeping our individual and public affairs concealed beneath the bourgeois affectations of secrecy and respectability.

Tocqueville's central idea is that the spirit of America is to be found in its mode of life, in the revolution of mores, the moral revolution. This creates neither a new legality nor a new State, but it does create a practical legitimacy, a legitimacy grounded in the way of life. Salvation no longer has to do with the divine or the State, but with the ideal form of practical organization. Is this to be traced back to the secularization of conscience effected by Protestantism, to the introjection of divine jurisdiction into daily discipline? The fact is that religion has become part of everyday life, which means that it can no longer be challenged or questioned as to its bases, since it no longer has transcendent value. This is religion as way of life. Similarly,
politics has become part of everyday life - as pragmatic machine, as game, as

interaction, as spectacle - which means that it can no longer be judged from a specifically political point of view. There is no ideological or philosophical principle of government any more. Things are at once both more naive and more conjunctural. This does not mean there are no strategies, but they are modal, not final strategies. Sexuality itself has become part of life, which means that it, too, no longer has transcendent value, neither as prohibition, nor as principle of analysis, pleasure, or transgression. It has been 'ecologized', psychologized, secularized for domestic use. It has become part of the way of life.

The pre-eminent position accorded to mores, the hegemony enjoyed by the 'way of life' signifies that the abstract universal of law is subordinated to the concrete regulation of exchanges. Law is not consensual: you are supposed to know it and obey it. But there may be honour in disobeying it too, and history is made of the simultaneous extolling of the law and of those who have broken it. What strikes you, by contrast, in the American system, is that there is no honour in breaking laws, nor prestige in transgression or being exceptional. This is that notorious American conformism, which we see as a sign of social and political weakness. But the fact is that people are more united on concrete regulation than on abstract legislation here; they are more agreed on informal ways of doing things than on a formal authority. What could it mean to dissociate oneself from a rule, to challenge a mechanism? You have to understand this conventional, pragmatic solidarity of American customs, which is based not on a social contract but on a kind of moral pact, and which might be compared not so much to the highway code, which anyone may disobey, as to the consensus that governs driving on the freeways. This conformity makes American society close to primitive societies, in which it would be absurd to distinguish oneself morally by disobeying the collective ritual. American conformism is not therefore 'naive': it is the product of a pact at the level of custom, of a set of rules and procedures which presuppose quasi-spontaneous adherence. Whereas our lives, by contrast, are governed by an equally ritualized disobedience of our own value system.

This ‘conformism’ reflects a particular kind of freedom: the absence of prejudice and pretentiousness. One might suggest that Americans’ lack of prejudice has to do with their lack of judgement. This would be unfair, but all things considered why should we not prefer that lightfooted solution to our heavy, pretentious one? Just look at this girl who serves you in the guest-room: she does so *in total freedom,* with a smile, without prejudice or pretentiousness, as though she were sitting opposite you. The situation is not an equal one, but she does not pretend to equality. Equality is part of the way of life here. Precisely the opposite of Sartre’s waiter, who is completely alienated from his representation and who only resolves the situation by calling on a theatrical metalanguage, by affecting in his gestures a freedom and an equality he does not really enjoy. Hence the unhappy intellectualism of his behaviour, which is shared, in our part of the world, by almost all social classes. This question of equality in mores, of freedom in mores has neither been resolved nor even properly posed within our culture. Only the political or philosophical question of equality has been posed and that keeps us locked in our eternal pretentiousness. In America - and this is a commonplace - you are astonished by the almost natural way status is forgotten, by the ease and freedom of personal relations. This ease may seem banal or vulgar to us, but it is never ridiculous. It is *our* affectation which is ridiculous.

You only have to see a French family settling in on a Californian beach to feel the abominable weight of our culture. The American group remains open; the French unit immediately creates a closed space. The American child roams far and wide; the French one hovers around its parents. The Americans see to it that they stay well stocked with ice and beer; the French see to it that social niceties are observed, and that they keep up a theatricalshow of well-being. People move around a lot on American beaches; the Frenchman stays camped on his little sandy domain. The Frenchman makes quite a show on holiday, but the mediocrity of his petty-bourgeois space stays with him. Now, you can say anything you like about Americans, but they are neither mediocre nor petty-bourgeois. They certainly do not

have aristocratic grace, but they have an ease that comes from space, the ease of those who have always had lots of space, and this makes up for a lack of manners or noble breeding. The freedom of bodily movement which this possession of space gives them easily compensates for the blandness of their features and character. Vulgar but 'easy'. We are a culture of intimacy, which produces manners and affectation; they have a democratic culture of space. We are free in spirit, but they are free in their actions. The American moving around in the deserts or the national parks does not give the impression of being on holiday. Moving around is his natural occupation; nature is a frontier and a place for action. There is none of the flabby Romanticism and gallo-roman quietude that clutter up our free time. Nothing of the 'holiday' label, as it was invented in France by the Popular Front: the demoralizing atmosphere of free time snatched from the State, to be consumed in a plebeian spirit, with theatrical regard for one's hard-earned leisure. Freedom here has no static or negative definition. Its definition is spatial and mobile.

The great lesson of all this is that freedom and equality, like ease and grace, only exist where they are present from the outset. This is the surprise democracy had in store for us: equality is at the beginning, not at the end. That is the difference between egalitarianism and democracy: democracy presupposes equality at the outset, egalitarianism presupposes it at the end. 'Democracy demands that all of its citizens *begin* the race even. Egalitarianism insists that they *all finish* even.'

However, when the obsession with judging others or with social prejudices has been left behind, there is greater tolerance, but greaterindifference too. No longer wishing others to see them, Americans end up not seeing one another. So people pass in the street without looking at one another, which may seem a mark of discretion and civility, but which is also a sign of indifference. At least this is not affected. It is both a quality and the absence of a quality.

When I speak of the American 'way of life', I do so to emphasize its Utopian nature,

its *mythic* banality, its dream quality, and its grandeur. That philosophy which is immanent not only in technological development but also in the exceeding of technology in its own excessive play, not only in modernity, but in the extravagance of modern forms (whether it be the vertical network of New York or the horizontal one of Los Angeles), not only in banality, but in the apocalyptic forms of banality, not only in the reality of everyday life, but in the hyperreality of that life which, as it is, displays all the characteristics of fiction. It is this fictional character which is so exciting. Now, fiction is not imagination. It is what anticipates imagination by giving it the form of reality. This is quite opposite to our own natural tendency which is to anticipate reality by imagining it, or to flee from it by idealizing it. That is why we shall never inhabit true fiction; we are condemned to the imaginary and to nostalgia for the future. The American way of life is spontaneously fictional, since it is a transcending of the imaginary in reality. Fiction is not abstraction either, and if America suffers from a kind of infirmity when it comes to abstraction, that incapacity takes on a glory all its own in the sprawling reality of middle America, in the apotheosis of daily life, in that empirical genius which so amazes us. Perhaps this successful revolution is no longer successful in the way Tocqueville understood it, as a spontaneous movement of the public mind, a form of spontaneous, concrete ordering of mores to modern values. It is not so much in the operation of institutions as in the freeing of technologies and images that the

glorious
form of American reality is to be found: in the immoral dynamic of images, in the orgy of goods and services, an orgy of power and useless energy (yet who can say where useful energy ends?), in which the spirit of advertising is more to the fore than Tocqueville's public spirit. But these are, after all, the marks of its liberation, and the very obscenity of this society is the sign of its liberation. A liberation of *all effects,* some of them perfectly excessive and abject. But this is precisely the point: the high point of liberation, its logical outcome, is to be found in the spectacular orgy, speed, the instantaneity of change, generalized eccentricity. Politics *frees itself in* the spectacle,

in the all-out advertising effect; sexuality frees itself in all its anomalies and perversions (including the refusal of sexuality, the latest fad, which is itself only a supercooling effect of sexual liberation); mores, customs, the body, and language free themselves in the ever quickening round of fashion. The liberated man is not the one who is freed in his ideal reality, his inner truth, or his transparency; he is the man who changes spaces, who circulates, who changes sex, clothes, and habits according to fashion, *rather than morality,* and who changes opinions not as his conscience dictates but in response to opinion polls. This is practical liberation whether we like it or not, whether or not we deplore its wastefulness and its obscenity. Moreover, people in 'totalitarian' countries know very well that this is true freedom and dream of nothing but fashion, the latest styles, idols, the play of images, travel for its own sake, advertising, the deluge of advertising. In short, the orgy. Now, you have to admit that it is America which has concretely, technologically achieved this orgy of liberation, this orgy of indifference, disconnection, exhibition, and circulation. I do not know what remains of the successful revolution Tocqueville speaks of, the revolution of political freedom and of the quality of public spirit (in this regard America today has both the best and the worst to offer), but it has certainly achieved *this revolution,* whereas we, having failed in our historical revolutions, our abstract revolutions, are in the process of failing in this other revolution too. We absorb these logicalconsequences of modernity, of this lifestyle revolution with all its inevitable excesses, in spite of ourselves, in homeopathic doses, with a mixture of fascination and resentment. We in Europe are stuck in the old rut of worshipping difference; this leaves us with a great handicap when it comes to radical modernity, which is founded on the absence of difference. Only very reluctantly do we become modern and in-different. This is why our own modernity is so lacklustre. This is why our undertakings lack the modern spirit. We do not even have the *evil genius* of modernity, that genius which pushes innovation to the point of extravagance and in so doing rediscovers a kind of fantastical liberty.

Everything that has been heroically played out and destroyed in Europe in the name of Revolution and Terror has been realized in its simplest, most empirical form on the other side of the Atlantic (the Utopia of wealth, rights, freedom, the social contract, and representation). Similarly, everything we have dreamed in the radical name of anti-culture, the subversion of meaning, the destruction of reason and the end of representation, that whole anti-utopia which unleashed so many theoretical and political, aesthetic and social convulsions in Europe, without ever actually becoming a reality (May '68 is one of the last examples) has all been achieved here in America in the simplest, most radical way. *Utopia has been achieved here and anti-utopia is being achieved:* the anti-utopia of unreason, of deterritorialization, of the indeterminacy of language and the subject, of the neutralization of all values, of the death of culture. America is turning all this into reality and it is going about it in an uncontrolled, empirical way. All we do is dream and, occasionally, try and act out our dreams. America, by contrast, draws the logical, pragmatic consequences from everything that can possibly be thought. In this sense, it is naive and primitive; it knows nothing of the irony of concepts, nor the irony of seduction. It does not ironize upon thefuture or destiny: it gets on with turning things into material realities. To our Utopian radicalism it counterposes its empirical radicalism, to which it alone gives dramatically concrete form. We philosophize on the end of lots of things, but it is here that they actually come to an end. It is here, for example, that territory has ceased to exist (though there is indeed a vast amount of space), here that the real and the imaginary have come to an end (opening all spaces up to simulation). It is here, therefore, that we should look for the ideal type of the end of our culture. It is the American way of life, which we think naive or culturally worthless, which will provide us with a complete graphic representation of the end of our values - which has vainly been prophesied in our own countries - on the grand scale that the geographical and mental dimensions of Utopia can give to it.

But is this really what an achieved Utopia looks like? Is this a successful revolution? Yes indeed! What do you expect a 'successful' revolution to look like? It

is paradise. Santa Barbara is a paradise; Disneyland is a paradise; the US is a paradise. Paradise is just paradise. Mournful, monotonous, and superficial though it may be, it is paradise. There is no other. If you are prepared to accept the consequences of your dreams - not just the political and sentimental ones, but the theoretical and cultural ones as well - then you must still regard America today with the same naive enthusiasm as the generations that discovered the New World. That same enthusiasm which Americans themselves show for their own success, their own barbarism, their own power. If not, you have no understanding of the situation, and you will not be able to understand your own history - or the end of your history - either, because Europe can no longer be understood by starting out from Europe itself. The US is more mysterious: *the mystery of American reality* exceeds our fictions and our interpretations. The mystery of a society which seeks to give itself neither meaning nor an identity, which indulges neither in transcendence nor in aesthetics and which, *for precisely that reason,* invents the only great modern verticality in its buildings, which are the mostgrandiose manifestations within the vertical order and yet do not obey the rules of transcendence, which are the most prodigious pieces of architecture and yet do not obey the laws of aesthetics, which are ultra-modern and ultra-functional, but also have about them something non-speculative, primitive, and savage - a culture (or unculture) like this remains a mystery to us.

We are at home with introversion and reflexion and with different effects of meaning coexisting under the umbrella of a concept. But the object freed from its concept, free to deploy itself in extraverted form, in the equivalence of all its effects. . . To us this is a total enigma. Extra version is a mystery to us in exactly the same way as the commodity was to Marx: the commodity, hieroglyph of the modern world, mysterious precisely because it is extraverted, a form realizing itself in its pure operation and in pure circulation (hello Karl!).

In this sense, for us the whole of America is a desert. Culture exists there in a wild state: it sacrifices all intellect, all aesthetics in a process of literal transcription into the

real. Doubtless the original decentring into virgin territory gave it this wildness, though it certainly acquired it without the agreement of the Indians whom it destroyed. The dead Indian remains the mysterious guarantor of these primitive mechanisms, even into the modern age of images and technologies. Perhaps the Americans, who believed they had destroyed these Indians, merely disseminated their virulence. They have opened up the deserts, threaded and criss-crossed them with their freeways, but by some mysterious interaction their towns and cities have taken on the structure and colour of the desert. They have not destroyed space; they have simply rendered it infinite by the destruction of its centre (hence these infinitely extendable cities). In so doing, they have opened up a true fictional space. In the 'savage mind', too, there is no natural universe,no transcendence of either man or nature, or of history. Culture is

everything, or nothing, depending on how you look at it. You find this same

absence of distinction between the two in modern simulation. There is no

natural universe there either, and you cannot differentiate between a desert

and a metropolis. It is not that the Indians were infinitely close to nature,

nor that the Americans are infinitely distant from it: both belong to the

ideality of nature, as they do to the ideality of culture, and both are also

equally alien to nature and culture. ,

There is no culture here, no cultural discourse. No ministries, no commissions, no subsidies, no promotion. There is none of the sickly cultural pathos which the whole of France indulges in, that fetishism of the cultural heritage, nor of our sentimental - and today also statist and protectionist - invocation of culture. The Beaubourg would be impossible here, just as it would in Italy (for other reasons). Not only does centralization not exist, but the idea of a cultivated culture does not exist either, no more than that of a theological, sacred religion. No culture of culture, no religion of religion. One should speak rather of an 'anthropological' culture, which consists in the invention of mores and a way of life. That is the only interesting culture here, just as it is New York's streets and not its museums or galleries that are interesting. Even in dance, cinema, the novel, fiction, and architecture, there is something wild in everything specifically American, something that has not known the glossy, high-flown rhetoric and theatricality of our bourgeois cultures, that has not been kitted out in the gaudy finery of cultural distinction.

Here in the US, culture is not that delicious panacea which we Europeans consume in a sacramental mental space and which has its own special columns in the newspapers - and in people's minds. Culture is space, speed, cinema, technology. This culture is authentic, if anything can be said to be authentic. This is not cinema or speed or technology as optional extra (everywhere in Europe you get a sense of modernity as somethingtacked on, heterogeneous, anachronistic). In America cinema is true because it is the whole of space, the whole way of life that are cinematic. The break between the two, the abstraction which we deplore, does not exist: life is cinema.

That is why searching for works of art or sophisticated entertainment here has always seemed tiresome and out of place to me. A mark of cultural ethnocentrism. If it is the lack of culture that is original, then it is the lack of culture one should embrace. If the term taste has any meaning, then it commands us not to export our aesthetic demands to places where they do not belong. When the Americans transfer

Roman cloisters to the New York Cloysters, we find this unforgivably absurd. Let us not make the same mistake by transferring our cultural values to America. We have no right to such confusion. In a sense, they do because they have space, and their space is the refraction of all others. When Paul Getty gathers Rembrandts, Impressionists, and Greek statues together in a Pompeian villa on the Pacific coast, he is following American logic, the pure baroque logic of Disneyland. He is being original; it is a magnificent stroke of cynicism, naivety, kitsch, and unintended humour - something astonishing in its nonsensicality. Now the disappearance of aesthetics and higher values in kitsch and hyperreality is fascinating, as is the disappearance of history and the real in the televisual. It is in this unfettered pragmatics of values that we should find some pleasure. If you simply remain fixated on the familiar canon of high culture, you miss the essential point (which is, precisely, the inessential).

The advertisements which cut into the films on TV are admittedly an outrage, but they aptly emphasize that most television productions never even reach the 'aesthetic' level and are, basically, of the same order as advertisements. Most films - including many of the better ones - are made up from the same everyday romance: cars, telephones, psychology, make-up. They are purely and simply illustrations of the way of life. Advertising does just the same: it canonizes the way of life through images, making the whole

a genuinely integrated circuit. And if everything on television is, without exception, part of a low-calorie (or even no-calorie) diet, then what good is it complaining about the adverts? By their worthlessness, they at least help to make the programmes around them seem of a higher level.

Banality, lack of culture, and vulgarity do not have the same meaning here as they have in Europe. Or perhaps this is merely the crazy notion of a European, a fascination with an unreal America. Perhaps Americans are quite simply vulgar, and this meta-vulgarity is merely something I have dreamt up. Who knows? But I am inclined to suggest, in time-honoured fashion, that you have nothing to lose if I am wrong and everything to gain if I am right. The fact is that a certain banality, a

certain vulgarity which seem unacceptable to us in Europe seem more than acceptable - even fascinating - to us here. The fact is that all our analyses in terms of alienation, conformism, standardization, and dehumanization collapse of themselves: when we look at America it is the analyses which seem vulgar.

Why is a passage like the following (by G. Faye) both true and, at the same time, absolutely false? 'California shines out as the total myth of our times. . . . Multiracialism, hegemonic technology, shrink-culture narcissism, urban criminality and audiovisual saturation: as super-America, California stands out as the absolute antithesis of authentic Europe . . from Hollywood to disco-pap, from ET to *Star Wars,* from the pseudo-rebellious itchings on the campuses to the ravings of Carl Sagan, from the neo-gnostics of Silicon Valley to the wind-surfing mystics, from the neo-Indian gurus to aerobics, from jogging to psychoanalysis as a form of democracy, from criminality as a form of psychoanalysis to television as an instrument of despotism, California has set itself up as the world centre of the simulacrum and the inauthentic, as the absolute synthesis of "cool" Stalinism. An *hysterical* land; focus and meeting-place for the rootless, California is the land of non-history, of the non-event, but at the same time the site of the constant swirl, the uninterrupted rhythm of fashion, that is to say, the site of tremors going nowhere, those tremors which *so* obsess it, constantly threatened as it is by earthquakes.

'California has invented nothing: it has taken everything from Europe and served it up again in a disfigured, meaningless form, with an added Disneyland glitter. World centre of sweet madness, mirror of our dejecta and our decadence. Californitis, that hot variant of Americanism, is unleashing itself on the young of today and emerging as a mental form of AIDS. . . . To the revolutionary *angst* of the Europeans, California counterposes its long procession of fakes: the parody of science on the rite-less campus, the parody of cities and urbanism in the sprawl of Los Angeles, the parody of technology in Silicon Valley, the parody of oenology in its insipid Sacramento wines, the parody of religion in its gurus and sects, the parody of eroticism in its beach boys, the parody of drugs in its

acids [?], the parody of sociability in its "communities". . . . Even nature in California is a Hollywood parody of ancient Mediterranean landscapes: a sea that is too blue [!?], mountains that are too rugged, a climate that is too gentle or too arid, an uninhabited disenchanted nature, deserted by the gods: a sinister land beneath a sun that is too bright. The expressionless face of our death, since Europe will surely die sunburnt and smiling, with its skin lightly baking under a holiday sun.'

All this is true (if you like), since the text itself resembles the hysterical stereotype it confers upon California. And it is surely easy to detect in Faye's writing a degree of fascination with his subject. But if we could use precisely the same terms to say exactly the opposite of what he says, then this only emphasizes the point that, for his part, G. Faye was not able to effect this same reversal. He has not grasped how, at the edges of this meaningless world, this 'sweet madness' of meaninglessness, this soft, air-conditioned hell he describes, things turn into their opposites. He has not grasped the challenge of this 'marginal transcendence' in which precisely a whole universe is brought up against its margins, its 'hysterical' simulation -

and why not? Why should Los Angeles not be a parody of cities? Why should Silicon Valley not parody technology? Why should there not be a parody of sociability, eroticism, and drugs, or even indeed a parody of the (too blue!) sea and the (too bright!) sun. Not to mention museums and culture. Of course all this is parody! If none of these values can bear to be parodied, it must mean they no longer have any importance. Yes, California (and America with it) is the mirror of *our* decadence, but *it* is not decadent at all. It is hyperreal in its vitality, it has all the energy of the simulacrum. 'It is the world centre of the inauthentic.' Certainly it is: that is what gives it its originality and power. The irresistible rise of the simulacrum is something you can simply feel here without the slightest effort. But has he ever been here? If he had, he would know that the key to Europe is not to be found in its past history, but in this crazy, parodic anticipation that is the New World. He cannot see that even though every detail of America

may be abject or insignificant, it is the whole which passes our imagining - by the same token, every detail in his description may be accurate, but it is the whole which goes beyond the bounds of stupidity.

What is new in America is the clash of the first level (primitive and wild) and the 'third kind' (the absolute simulacrum). There is no second level. This is a situation we find hard to grasp, since this is the one we have always privileged: the self-reflexive, self-mirroring level, the level of unhappy consciousness. But no vision of America makes sense without this reversal of our values: it is Disneyland that is authentic here! The cinema and TV are America's reality! The freeways, the Safeways, the skylines, speed, and deserts - these are America, not the galleries, churches, and culture. . . Let us grant this country the admiration it deserves and open our eyes to the absurdity of some of our own customs. This is one of the advantages, one of the pleasures of travel. To see and feel America, you have to have had for atleast *one* moment in some downtown jungle, in the Painted Desert, or on some bend in a freeway, the feeling that Europe had disappeared. You have to have wondered, at least for a brief moment, 'How can anyone be European?'

THE END OF US POWER?

The fifties were the real high spot for the US ('when things were going on'), and you can still feel the nostalgia for those years, for the ecstasy of power, when power held power. In the seventies power was still there, but the spell was broken. That was orgy time (war, sex, Manson, Woodstock). Today the orgy is over. The US, like everyone else, now has to face up to a soft world order, a soft situation. Power has become impotent.

But if America is now no longer the monopolistic centre of world power, this is not because it has lost power, but simply because there is no centre any more. It has, rather, become the orbit of an imaginary power to which everyone now refers. From the point of view of competition, hegemony, and 'imperialism', it has certainly lost ground, but from the exponential point of view, it has gained some: take the unintelligible rise of the dollar, for example, which bears no relation to any economic supremacy, or the fabulous apotheosis of New York, or even - and why not? - the world-wide success of *Dallas.* America has retained power, both political and cultural, but it is now power as a special effect.In the image of Reagan, the whole of America has become Californian. Exactor and ex-governor of California

that he is, he has worked up his euphoric, cinematic, extraverted, advertising vision of the artificial paradises of the West to all-American dimensions. He has introduced a system where the easy life exerts a kind of blackmail, reviving the original American pact of an achieved Utopia. It seems in fact that the ideal combination described by Tocqueville has come apart: though Americans have maintained a keen sense of individual interest, they do not seem to have preserved a sense of a meaning that could be collectively given to their undertakings. Hence the current crisis, which is deep-seated and real, and whose likely outcome seems to be a shift towards the rehabilitation of a collective principle, a set of values that would orient behaviour in a virtually spontaneous way and could present itself as an ideal resultant of all the various forces in play. What we see here is the success of Reagan's illusionist effort to resurrect the American primal scene. 'America is back again.' Left brittle by the Vietnam War, which was as unintelligible to them as the irruption of little green men in a cartoon strip - and which, incidentally, they dealt with as though it were a cartoon, as something remote from them, a television war, with no understanding of the world's condemnation of their actions and only able to see their enemy, since they are the achieved Utopia of goodness, as the achieved utopia of Evil, Communism - they have taken refuge in the tranquillity of the easy life, in a triumphal illusionism. This too is entirely Californian, for in reality it is not always sunny in California. You often get fog with the sun, or smog in Los Angeles. And yet you retain a sun-filled memory of the place, a sunny screen memory. This is what the Reagan mirage is like.

Americans are no keener than anyone else today to think about whether they believe in the merits of their leaders, or even in the reality of power. That would take them on to much too tricky ground. They prefer to act asthough they believed in them, on condition that their belief is not taken too much for granted. Governing today means giving acceptable signs of credibility. It is like advertising and it is the same effect that is achieved -commitment to a scenario, whether it be a political or an advertising scenario. Reagan's is

both at once. It is also successful.

Everything is in the credits. Now that society has been definitively turned into an enterprise, everything is in the synopsis of performance and enterprise, and its leaders must produce all the signs of the advertising 'look'. The slightest failing becomes unpardonable, since the whole nation would be diminished by it. Even illness can become part of this 'look', as for example with Reagan's cancer. By contrast, political weaknesses or stupidity are of no importance. Image alone counts.

This consensus around simulation is much less fragile than is commonly thought, since it is far less exposed to any testing against political truth. All our modern governments owe a kind of political meta-stability to the regulation of public opinion by advertising. Mistakes, scandals, and failures no longer signal catastrophe. The crucial thing is that they be made credible, and that the public be made aware of the efforts being expended in that direction. The 'marketing' immunity of governments is similar to that of the major brands of washing powder.

No one keeps count of the mistakes made by the world's political leaders any more, mistakes which, in days gone by, would have brought about their downfall; no one much minds these now within our present system of simulation of government and of consensus through indifference. The people no longer take pride in their leaders and the leaders no longer pride themselves on their decisions. The tiniest bit of window-dressing is all that is needed to restore market confidence. Take, for example, the operation in Grenada, which followed the three hundred deaths in the Lebanon: risk-free scenario, calculated production, artificial event - success ensured. And the two events, Lebanon and Grenada, bore witness to the same politicalunreality: the one, a terrorist act, was completely beyond control; the other, a total fake, was too much under control. Neither had any meaning so far as the art of government is concerned. Both were equally vacuous, as empty as today's political arena.

There is this same self-advertisement, this same cult of the credit titles in the new Reagan generation. Dynamic and euphoric, or rather generating dynamism and spreading euphoria. They see neither happiness as a new idea, nor success as a compelling one, since they already have all these things. They are not the militants of happiness and success, but its sympathizers. The generation that has come from the sixties and seventies, but has rid itself of all nostalgia for, all bad conscience about, and even any subconscious memory of those wild years. The very last traces of marginality excised as if by plastic surgery: new faces, new fingernails, glossy brain-cells, the whole topped with a tousle of software. A generation neither fired by ambition nor fuelled by the energy of repression, but completely refocused upon themselves, in love with business not so much for profit or prestige as for its being a sort of performance, a technical feat. They hover around the media, advertising, and computing. They are not the ogres of business, but the footsloggers of showbiz, for business itself has become showbiz. 'Clean and perfect.' The Yuppies. Their joyous readaptation sings out in their very name. There has been no heart-rending reappraisal to separate them from the preceding generation, just an excision, an amnesia, an absolution - the mildly unreal process of forgetting that follows an event that is too intense to deal with. The Yuppies are not defectors from revolt, they are a new race, assured, amnestied, exculpated, moving with ease in the world of performance, mentally indifferent to any objective other than that of change and advertising (advertising everything: products, people, research, careers, lifestyle!). One might have expected the orgy of

the sixties
and seventies to throw up a mobile, disenchanted elite, but that has not been the case: the members of this elite, at least in their own publicity, see
themselves as mobile and enchanted. Their enchantment takes mild forms: they are motivated, but not impassioned; whether in business, politics, or data-processing, they present themselves as cosily effective. Their slogan might well be:

You can't have your money and spend it too!

You can't have your cake and eat it too!

You can't eat your wife and fuck it too!

You can't live and have your living too!*

But this easy life knows no pity. Its logic is a pitiless one. If Utopia has already been achieved, then unhappiness does not exist, the poor are no longer credible. If America is resuscitated, then the massacre of the Indians did not happen, Vietnam did not happen. While frequenting the rich ranchers or manufacturers of the West, Reagan has never had the faintest inkling of the poor and their existence, nor the slightest contact with them. He knows only the self-evidence of wealth, the tautology of power, which he magnifies to the dimensions of the nation, or indeed of the whole world. The have-nots will be condemned to oblivion, to abandonment, to disappearance pure and simple. This is 'must exit' logic: 'poor people must exit.' The ultimatum issued in the name of wealth and efficiency wipes them off the map. And rightly so, since they show such bad taste

as to deviate from the general consensus.

That poverty which was until recently being relieved, which was still

* In English in original. [Tr.]

within the orbit of subsidized socialization, has all now fallen within the scope of

providential (presidential) decree. It is as though the Last Judgment had already happened. The good have been found virtuous, the others have been cast out. No need for good will any more. No need to feel guilty. The Third World, which no one mourns, has been obliterated. After all, it only served to give the rich a bad conscience and all efforts to save it were certain to end in failure. That is all over. Long live the Fourth World, the world to which you can say, 'Right, Utopia has arrived. If you aren't part of it, get lost!', the world that no longer has the right to surface, the disenfranchised, who have no voice and are condemned to oblivion, thrown out to go off and die their second-class deaths.

Disenfranchising.

You lose your rights one by one, first your job, then your car. And when your driver's licence goes, so does your identity. This way entire swathes of the population are falling into oblivion, being totally abandoned. Enfranchisement was an historical event: it was the emancipation of the serfs and slaves, the decolonization of the Third World and, in our societies, the various social and political rights: workers' rights, the vote, sexual liberation and the rights of women, prisoners and homosexuals - things which today have been won everywhere. Human rights have been won everywhere. The world is almost entirely liberated; there is nothing left to fight for. And yet at the same time entire social groups are being laid waste from the inside (individuals too). Society has forgotten them and now they are forgetting themselves. They fall out of all reckoning, zombies condemned to obliteration, consigned to statistical graphs of endangered species. This is the Fourth World. Entire sectors of our modern societies, entire countries in the Third World now fall into this Fourth World desert zone. But whereas the Third World still had a political meaning (even if it was a resounding world-wide failure), the Fourth World has none. It is transpolitical. *This is a result of our societies withdrawing political interest, of our advanced societieswithdrawing social interest,* of that excommunication which affects precisely the communications-based societies. And it is true on a world scale. It can only be compared to the thousands of tons of coffee that were

burnt in railway engines to keep up the world price. Or to those members of primitive tribes considered surplus to requirements who were led off like lemmings by some prophet, towards the ocean where they disappeared. The policies of governments are themselves becoming negative. They are no longer designed to socialize, to integrate, or to create new rights. Behind the appearance of socialization and participation they are desocializing, disenfranchising, and ejecting. The social order is contracting to include only economic exchange, technology, the sophisticated and innovative; as it intensifies these sectors, entire zones are 'disintensified', becoming reservations, and sometimes not even that: dumping grounds, wastelands, new deserts for the new poor, like the deserts you see forming around nuclear power stations or motorways. Nothing will be done to save them and perhaps nothing can be done, since enfranchisement, emancipation, and expansion have already taken place. There are therefore none of the elements here for a future revolution; what we see here are merely the inescapable results of an orgy of power, and an irreversible concentration of the world that has followed upon its extension. The only remaining question is this: what situation will result from this progressive disenfranchisement (which is already taking a violent turn under Reagan and Thatcher)?

Reagan's popularity gives us all food for thought. But we should first establish what type of confidence he is accorded. It is almost too good to be true. How can it be that every defence has fallen before him? How can it be that no mistake or political reversal damages his standing and that, paradoxically, his failures even improve it (which infuriates our French leaders, for whom things are the other

way round: the more initiative and
goodwill they show, the less popular they become). But the point is precisely that the confidence placed in Reagan is a *paradoxical confidence*. Just as we distinguish between real and paradoxical sleep, we should also distinguish

between real and paradoxical confidence. The former is granted to a man or a leader on the basis of his qualities and his success. Paradoxical confidence is the confidence we place in someone *on the basis of their failure or their absence of qualities*. The prototype of this confidence is the failure of prophecy - a process that is well-known from the history of messianic and millenarian movements - following which the group, instead of denying its leader and dispersing, closes ranks around him and creates religious, sectarian, or ecclesiastical institutions to preserve the faith. Institutions all the more solid for deriving their energy from the failure of the prophecy. This 'supplemental' confidence never wavers, because it derives from the disavowal of failure. Such, making all due allowance, is the amazing aura that surrounds Reagan's credibility, and which necessarily makes one think that the American prophecy, the grand prospect of Utopia on earth combined with world power, has suffered a setback; that something of that imaginary feat that was to crown the history of two centuries has precisely not been realized, and that Reagan is the product of the failure of that prophecy. In Reagan, a system of values that was formerly effective turns into something ideal and imaginary. The image of America becomes imaginary for Americans themselves, at a point when it is without doubt profoundly compromised. This transformation of spontaneous confidence into paradoxical confidence and an achieved Utopia into an imaginary hyperbole seems to me to mark a decisive turning-point. But doubtless things are not this simple. For I am not saying that the image of America is deeply altered in the eyes of the Americans themselves. I am not saying that this change of direction in the Reagan era is anything other than an incidental development. Who knows? You have the same difficulty today distinguishing between a process and its simulation, for example between a flight and a
flight simulation. America, too, has entered this era of undecidability: is it still really powerful or merely simulating power?

Can Reagan be considered the symbol of present-day American society - a society which, having once possessed the original features of power, is now perhaps at the face-lift stage? Another hypothesis might be that America is no longer what it

was, but is continuing on its course; its power has entered a phase of hysteresis. Hysteresis: the process whereby something continues to develop by inertia, whereby an effect persists even when its cause has disappeared. We may speak, in this sense, of a hysteresis of history, a hysteresis of socialism, and so on. The whole thing continues to function like a body in motion by virtue of the speed it has already gathered or by inertia-steering, or like an unconscious man still remaining on his feet, by sheer force of equilibrium. Or, in more comic vein, like the cyclist in Jarry's *Supermale,* who has died of exhaustion on the incredible trip across Siberia, but who carries on pedalling and propelling the Great Machine, his rigor mortis transformed into motive power. A superb fiction, for the dead are perhaps even capable of going quicker, of keeping the machine going better than the living *since they no longer have any problems*. Might America not be like Jarry's five-man bicycle? But here again, though it seems quite clear the American machine has suffered something like a break in the current, or a breaking of the spell, who can say whether this is the product of a depression or of a supercooling of the machinery?

America is certainly suffering less than Europe from the phase of convalescence that grand ideas are going through or from the decline in historical passions, for these are not the motor of its development. It is, however, suffering from the disappearance of ideologies that might contest its power and from the weakening of all the forces that previously opposed it. It was more powerful in the two decades after the Second World War, but so too were the ideas and passions ranged against it. The American system could be violently attacked (even from within in the sixties and seventies).Today, America no longer has the same hegemony, no longer enjoys the same monopoly, but it is, in a sense, uncontested and uncontestable. It used to be a world power; it has now become a model (business, the market, free enterprise, performance) - and a universal one - even reaching as far as China. The international style is now American. There is no real opposition any more; the combative periphery has now been reabsorbed (China, Cuba, Vietnam); the great anti-capitalist ideology has

been emptied of its substance. All in all, the same consensus is forming around the US in the world at large as has developed around Reagan at home. A credibility effect, an advertising effect, the potential adversary losing its defences. This is the way things have gone for Reagan. Little by little, everything facing him, everything opposing him has faded away, without it being possible to credit him with any personal political genius. Consensus by effusion, by an elision of the oppositional elements and the margins. Political decline, but PR ascendancy. It's the same for the US on a planetary scale. American power does not seem inspired by any spirit or genius of its own (it works by inertia, in an ad hoc fashion, in the void, hampered by its own strength). Yet, on the other hand, the country indulges in a kind of promotional hype. America has a sort of mythical power throughout the world, a power based on the advertising image, which parallels the polarization of advertising images around Reagan. It is in this way, by this kind of added value, of exponential, self-referential, though ultimately unfounded credibility, that an entire society becomes stabilized beneath a perfusion of advertising. The flooding of the dollar on the world marketplace is the symbol and finest example of this.

Yet it is a fragile meta-stability, as much externally as on the domestic political stage. For, in the last resort, it is due to the evaporation of any real alternative, to the disappearance of resistances and antibodies. This is the real crisis of American power, that of a potential stabilization by inertia, of an assumption of power in a vacuum. In many respects it resembles the lossof immune defences in an overprotected organism. That is why I feel there is a poetic irony in Reagan contracting cancer. In its form, cancer is somewhat similar to that transparent credibility, that euphoria of a body no longer producing antibodies and threatened with destruction by an excess of functionality. The leader of the greatest world power struck down by cancer! Power in the grip of metastases! The two poles of our civilization meet here. The end of presidential immunity. It will be AIDS next! This should mark the beginning of a general implosion (in the Eastern bloc, political power has long been in the grip of necrosis).

But we are going a bit quickly; we should perhaps rather speak of a menopause. An abatement of the fever in the public mind, a general realignment after the convulsions of the seventies, no more 'new frontiers', a conservative image-conscious management of things, steady, unambitious performativity with no thought of the future, austerity and physical training, business and jogging, the end of the mad whirl and the orgy, the restoration of a sort of naturalist Utopia of the enterprise and a bio-sociological conservation of the race - does all this signify the end of the glories of potency, and the onset of the hysterical euphoria of the menopause? Or, once again, is the Reagan phase merely a temporary period of convalescence, a revival after a breakdown, but one presaging further developments. Yet no 'new frontier', no new 'Kennedy philosophy' seems thinkable today. Indeed, that is what has changed so profoundly in the atmosphere of America: the Reagan effect has sapped the nation's energy. Having said that, this menopause effect is not peculiar to America. It can be seen in all the Western democracies and it is wreaking its havoc everywhere, in culture as well as in politics, in individual emotions and in ideological passions. One can only hope that as we enter that third phase that is old age, we shall also see some close encounters of the third kind (wehave already known the debauched excess of middle age - fascism). As for American reality, even the face-lifted variety retains its vast scope, its tremendous scale, and, at the same time, an unspoilt rawness. All societies end up wearing masks. Why not the mask of Reagan? But what remains

intact is what was there at the beginning: space and the spirit of fiction.

DESERT FOR EVER

The sunsets are giant rainbows lasting for an hour. The seasons here make no sense: in the morning it is spring, at noon it is summer, and the desert nights are cold without it ever being winter. It is a kind of suspended eternity in which the year is renewed daily, with the guarantee that it will be like this each day, that every evening will be that rainbow of all the colours of the spectrum in which light, after having reigned all day long in its indivisible form, in the evening fragments into all the nuances of colour that make it up, before it finally disappears. Nuances which are already those of the instant rainbow catching fire in the wind on the crest of the Pacific waves.

This is the invulnerable grace of the climate, privilege of a nature that completes that insane richness that is man's.

This country is without hope. Even its garbage is clean, its trade lubricated, its traffic pacified. The latent, the lacteal, the lethal - life is so liquid, thesigns and messages are so liquid, the bodies and the cars so fluid, the hair so blond, and the soft technologies so luxuriant, that a European dreams of death and murder, of

suicide motels, of orgies and cannibalism to counteract the perfection of the ocean, of the light, of that insane ease of life, to counteract the hyperreality of everything here.

Hence the phantasy of a seismic fracture and a crumbling into the Pacific, which would be the end of California and of its criminal and scandalous beauty. For it is unbearable, while one is still alive, to pass beyond the difficulty of being, simply to pass into the fluidity of sky, cliffs, surf, and deserts, into the hypothesis of happiness alone.

But even the seismic challenge is still only a flirtation with death; it still forms part of the natural beauty, as do history or revolutionary theory, whose hyperrealist echoes come here to die with the discreet charm of something from a previous existence. All that remains of a violent and historical demand is this graffiti on the beach, facing out to sea, no longer calling upon the revolutionary masses, but speaking to the sky and the open space and the transparent deities of the Pacific:

PLEASE, REVOLUTION!

And yet is it irrelevant that the largest naval base, that of the Pacific 7th Fleet - the very incarnation of American world-wide domination and the greatest firepower in

the world - also contributes to this insolent beauty? In the very place where the beautiful magic of Santa Ana blows, the desert wind that crosses over the

mountains to stay for four or five days, before scattering the
Fog, scorching the earth, making the sea sparkle, and crushing those who are used to the mist - the most beautiful thing about the Santa Ana is spending the night on the beach, swimming there as if it were daytime, and tanning, like vampires, under the moonlight.

This country is without hope.

We fanatics of aesthetics and meaning, of culture, of flavour and seduction, we who see only what is profoundly moral as beautiful and for whom only the heroic distinction between nature and culture is exciting, we who are unfailingly attached to the wonders of critical sense and transcendence find it a mental shock and a unique release to discover the fascination of nonsense and of this vertiginous disconnection, as sovereign in the cities as in the deserts. To discover that one can

exult in the liquidation of all culture and rejoice in the consecration of in-difference.

I speak of the American deserts and of the cities which are not cities. No oases, no monuments; infinite panning shots over mineral landscapes and freeways.

Everywhere: Los Angeles or Twenty-Nine Palms, Las Vegas or Borrego Springs. . .

No desire: the desert. Desire is still something deeply natural, we live off its vestiges in Europe, and off the vestiges of a moribund critical culture. Here the cities are mobile deserts. No monuments and no history: the exaltation of mobile deserts and simulation. There is the same wildness in the endless, indifferent cities as in the intact silence of the Badlands. Why is LA, why are the deserts so fascinating? It is because you are delivered from all depth there - a brilliant, mobile, superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference-points.

No charm, no seduction in all this. Seduction is elsewhere, in Italy, in certain landscapes that have become paintings, as culturalized and refined in their design as the cities and museums that house them. Circumscribed, traced-out, highly seductive spaces where meaning, at these heights of luxury, has finally become adornment. It is exactly the reverse here: there is no seduction, but there is an absolute fascination - the fascination of the very disappearance of all aesthetic and critical forms of life in the irradiation of an objectless neutrality. Immanent and solar. The fascination of the desert: immobility without desire. Of Los Angeles: insane circulation without desire. The end of aesthetics.

It is not just the aesthetics of decor (of nature or architecture) that vanishes into thin air, but the aesthetics of bodies and language, of everything that forms the European's - especially the Latin European's - mental and social *habitus,* that continual *commedia dell'arte,* the pathos and rhetoric of social relations, the dramatization of speech, the subtle play of language, the aura of make-up and

artificial gesture. The whole aesthetic and rhetorical system of seduction, of taste, of charm, of theatre, but also of contradictions, of violence always reappropriated by speech, by play, by distance, by artifice. Our universe is never desert-like, always theatrical. Always ambiguous. Always cultural, and faintly

ridiculous in its hereditary culturally.

What is arresting here is the absence of all these things - both the absence ofarchitecture in the cities, which are nothing but long tracking shots of signals, and the dizzying absence of emotion and character in the faces and bodies. Handsome, fluid, supple, or cool, or grotesquely obese, probably less as a result of compulsive bulimia than a general incoherence, which results in a casualness about the body or language, food or the city: a loose network of individual,

successive functions, a hypertrophied cell tissue proliferating in all directions.

Thus the only tissue of the city is that of the freeways, a vehicular, or rather an incessant transurbanistic, tissue, the extraordinary spectacle of these thousands of cars moving at the same speed, in both directions, headlights full on in broad daylight, on the Ventura Freeway, coming from nowhere, going nowhere: an immense collective act, rolling along, ceaselessly unrolling, without aggression, without objectives - transferential sociality, doubtless the only kind in a hyperreal, technological, soft-mobile era, exhausting itself in surfaces, networks, and soft technologies. No elevator or subway in Los Angeles. No verticality or underground, no intimacy or collectivity, no streets or facades, no centre or monuments: a fantastic space, a spectral and discontinuous succession of all the various functions, of all signs with no hierarchical ordering - an extravaganza of indifference, extravaganza of undifferentiated surfaces - the power of pure open

space, the kind you find in the deserts. The power of the desert form: it is the erasure of traces in the desert, of the signified of signs in the cities, of any psychology in bodies. An animal and metaphysical fascination - the direct

fascination of space, the immanent fascination of dryness and sterility.

The mythical power of California consists in this mixture of extreme disconnection and vertiginous mobility captured in the setting, the hyperrealscenario of deserts, freeways, ocean, and sun. Nowhere else does there exist such a stunning fusion of a radical lack of culture and natural beauty, of the wonder of nature and the absolute simulacrum: *just in this mixture of extreme irreferentiality and deconnection overall, but embedded in most primeval and great-featured natural scenery of deserts and ocean and sun - nowhere else is this*

*antagonistic climax to be found.**

Elsewhere, sites of natural beauty are heavy with meaning, with nostalgia, and the culture itself is unbearable in its seriousness. The strong cultures (Mexico, Japan, Islam) reflect back to us the image of our degraded one, and the image of our profound guilt. The surplus of meaning in a strong, ritual, territorial culture turns us into gringos, zombies, tourists kept under house arrest in the country's natural

beauty spots.

No such thing in California, where there is total rigour, for culture itself is a desert

there, and culture has to be a desert so that everything can be equal and shine out in the same supernatural form.

This is why even the flight from London to Los Angeles, passing over the pole, is, in its stratospheric abstraction and its hyperreality, already part of California and the deserts. Deterritorialization begins with the disconnection of night and day. When their division is no longer a matter of time, but of space, altitude, and speed, and occurs cleanly, as if vertically, when you pass through the night as if it were a cloud, so fast that you can see it, as if it were a nearby object revolving around the earth, or, by contrast, when it is reduced to nothing, the sun remaining at the same point in the sky for all twelve hours of the flight, then this already marks the end of our space-time, that same enchanted reality which will be that of the West.

* Italicized section in English in original. [Tr.]

The wonder of the heat is metaphysical. The very colours - pastel blue, mauve, lilac - are the products of a slow, geological, timeless combustion. The mineral quality of the earth breaks through the surface in the crystalline flora. All the natural

elements here have known their ordeal by fire. The desert is no longer a landscape, it is a pure form produced by the abstraction of all others.

Its definition is absolute, its frontier initiatory, its ridges steep, its contours cruel. It is a place of signs of an imperious necessity, an ineluctable necessity - but void of all meaning, arbitrary and inhuman, and one crosses it without deciphering them. Irrevocable transparency. The towns of the desert also end abruptly; they have no surround. And they have about them something of the mirage, which may vanish at any instant. You have only to see Las Vegas, sublime Las Vegas, rise in its entirety from the desert at nightfall bathed in phosphorescent lights, and return to the desert when the sun rises, after exhausting its intense, superficial energy all night long, still more intense in the first light of dawn, to understand the secret of the desert and the signs to be found there: a spellbinding discontinuity, an all-enveloping, intermittent radiation.

The secret affinity between gambling and the desert: the intensity of gambling reinforced by the presence of the desert all around the town. Theair-conditioned freshness of the gaming rooms, as against the radiant heat outside. The challenge of all the artificial lights to the violence of the sun's rays. Night of gambling sunlit on all sides; the glittering darkness of these rooms in the middle of the desert. Gambling itself is a desert form, inhuman, uncultured, initiatory, a challenge to the natural economy of value, a crazed activity on the fringes of exchange. But it too has a strict limit and stops abruptly; its boundaries are exact, its passion knows no confusion. Neither the desert nor gambling are open areas; their spaces are finite and concentric, increasing in intensity

toward the interior, toward a central point, be it the spirit of gambling or the heart of the desert - a privileged, immemorial space, where things lose their shadow, where money loses its value, and where the extreme rarity of traces of

what signals to us there leads men to seek the instantaneity of wealth.

First published as *Amérique* by Bernard Grasset, Paris 1986
This edition first published by Verso 1988
Paperback edition published by Verso 1989
Ninth impression 1996
© Bernard Grasset 1986
© This translation Verso 1988

Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1V 3HR
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014-4606

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Baudrillard, Jean America
1. American civilization
I. Title II. Amérique. *English*
973. 927

ISBN 0-86091-978-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Baudrillard, Jean
[Amérique, English]
America / Jean Baudrillard: translated by Chris Turner.
p. cm.
Translation of: Amérique.
ISBN 0-86091-978-1
1. United States—Civilization—1970- 2. Baudrillard, Jean—Journeys—United States. 3. United States—Description and travel—1981- I. Title
[E169.12.B3313 1989]
973. 92—dc20

Typeset by Columns of Reading
Printed in Great Britain by The Bath Press

COOL Memories

Jean Baudrillard

Translated by Chris Turner

VERSO

London · New York

First published as *Cool Memories: 1980–1985* by Editions Galilée, Paris 1987
This edition published by Verso 1990
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Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1V 3HR
USA: 29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001–2291

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Baudrillard, Jean
Cool memories.
1. Western culture
I. Title II. Cool memories. *English*
909.098210828

ISBN 0-86091-283-3
ISBN 0-86091-500-X pbk

US Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Baudrillard, Jean.
[Cool memories, 1980–1985. English]
Cool memories / Jean Baudrillard : translated by Chris Turner.
p. cm.
Previously published as: Cool memories, 1980–1985, 1987.
ISBN 0-86091-283-3. — ISBN 0-86091-500-X (pbk.)
I. Title
PQ2662.A853483C6613 1990
848'.91403—dc20

Typeset by Leaper & Gard Ltd, Bristol, England
Printed in Great Britain by Courier International Ltd

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O C T O B E R 1 9 8 0

The first day of the rest of your life

The initial stunning impact of the deserts and California is gone, and yet, to be fair, is there anything more beautiful in the world? It seems unlikely. I have to assume, then, that I have come across – *once in my life** – the most beautiful place I shall ever see. It is just as reasonable to suppose I have also met the woman whose beauty stunned me most and whose loss wounded me most. A second eventuality of the same order is unlikely – in any case the freshness, the artlessness of the event would be lost. It is just as probable that I have also written the one – or two – best books I shall ever write. They are done with. That is how things go. And it is most unlikely that a second burst of inspiration will alter this irreversible fact.

This is where the rest of life begins.

But the rest is what is given to you as something extra, and there is a charm and a particular freedom about letting just anything come along, with the grace – or ennui – of a later destiny.

*In English in original. [Tr.]

It is always possible to tell yourself that it is not tomorrow but the day after which is the first day of the rest of your life, and that it is not this face or this landscape, but the one after. That is why the thirteenth is still the first – and always the only one.*

The order of the world is always right – such is the judgement of God. For God has departed, but he has left his judgement behind, the way the Cheshire Cat left his grin.

Melancholy is just as much an affectation as *joie de vivre* – who is happy to be alive? Beings, like things, are naturally prostrate and only manage to seem happy by a superhuman effort, which has a great deal of affectation in it, but this is more in line with the involution of things.

There is a nostalgia in dialectics, in the work of Benjamin and Adorno for example. The most subtle dialectics always end in nostalgia. By contrast, and more profoundly (in Benjamin and Adorno themselves), there is a *melancholy* of the system which is incurable and invulnerable to dialectics. It is this melancholy which is gaining the upper hand today, through ironically transparent forms.

With the truth, you need to get rid of it as soon as possible and pass it on to someone else. As with illness, this is the only way to be cured of it. The person who keeps truth in his hands has lost.

*This is a reference to Nerval's sonnet 'Artémis' in *Les Chimères*. [Tr.]

Anyway we are condemned to social coma, political coma, historical coma. We are condemned to an anaesthetized disappearance, to a fading away under anaesthesia. If that's the case, better to feel ourselves dying, even in the convulsions of terrorism, than to disappear like ectoplasms which no one, even desensitized, will want to conjure up later to give themselves a fright.

You never know what it is that seduces you. What you are sure of is that this was meant for you. There is no other feeling that brings with it such a sense of clear self-evidence. Something has your name on it, irrevocably and at a single stroke – you have the chance to dispense with the abominable psychological labour to which we are condemned even more surely than we are condemned to social labour, and to enter total absolution.

During the making of a porn film, one of the girls – blonde with a black velvet neckband – goes through all the various acts without a change of expression. Her indifference is seductive.

In the middle of the revelries, a man whispers into the woman's ear: '*What are you doing after the orgy?*'*

It is not the figure of seduction that is mysterious, but that of the subject tormented by his own desire or his own image.

Death too becomes conspicuous by its absence.

*In English in original. [Tr.]

Marvellous, enchanting mobility, aerial alertness: cats.

All seduction is feline. It is as though appearances had begun working on their own and were unfolding effortlessly.

Felinity of appearances. All unfolding smoothly, without disruption. For felinity is simply the sovereign unfolding of the body and movement.

Better than those women who climax are those who give the impression of climaxing, but maintain a sort of distance and virginity beneath the pretence of pleasure, for they oblige us with the offer of rape.

Depth isn't what it used to be. For if the nineteenth century witnessed the long process of the destruction of appearances and their supplanting by meaning, the twentieth, subsequently, saw an equally massive process of the destruction of meaning . . . and its replacement by what? We find pleasure neither in appearances nor in meaning.

Lacan is right: language does not convey meaning. It stands in place of meaning. But the results produced are not effects of structure, but seduction effects. Not a law which regulates the play of signifiers, but a rule which ordains the play of appearances. But perhaps all this means the same thing.

When things reach that apogee where they clarify and resolve themselves, they then with equal suddenness become unintelligible and ungraspable.

There are cultures which can only picture their origins and not their ends.

Some are obsessed by both.

Two other positions are possible: only picturing one's end – our own culture; picturing neither beginning nor end – the coming culture.

Revolution – including the revolution of desire – is even less kind to those who think it has already happened than to those who oppose it. Thus it is not the Revolution which will turn me into a woman. That will come about by my espousing here and now – passionately – the position of femininity itself. Now for feminists this is unpardonable. For this position is more feminine, with all the supreme femininity it implies, than that of women will ever be.

In the general sexual confusion that reigns among us, it is almost a miracle to belong to your own sex (Émile).

Women are like historical events: they happen once in our lives as events and they are then entitled to a second existence as farce. The event of seduction, the farce of psychology. The event of passion, the farce of the work of mourning.

Fortunately, it is the same the other way round. You very probably have the good fortune to enjoy a second existence in the minds of the women you have known, as melancholy farce.

By a single nuance, a single word charged with unconscious hatred, you know it's over. And yet you have to go right on to the end, with all the vicissitudes of love and their twisting psychological paths. None of that has any other meaning than to bring you back to the first moment, when you saw in a blinding flash that the break had come.

Such is the pathos of our psychology: everything is there right at the beginning, in a single feature, a single gesture, all of whose consequences will have to be played out to the finish. But the unfolding of these will change nothing. The only use of all this is to provide the gods with a spectacle of time. And psychology is merely a discursive convulsion, when things have really occurred long before in the cursive mode of the single stroke that effects them.

Philosophy and psychology died at the same moment as 'the other', and the desire for the other, died. Only the empty sign of their concept shines out now, in a sky devoted to the mental simulacrum and the pataphysical comfort of our great cities.

Urbino Gubbio Mantua.

The beauty of these low doors opening on to successive rooms, the slipping of these perfect rectangles one inside the other. A violent eroticism produced by the geometric and hierarchical regularity of the buildings. Moving from one room to another, changing spaces is erotic. Not sexual: but belonging to that ideality of seduction in which the difference between the sexes appears like a subtle and aesthetic clue to the duality of things, an innovation, a surprise, before the Manichean violence of sex irrupts.

The real is not threatened by its double today (Clément Rosset): it is threatened by its very idiocy.*

*This is a reference to Rosset's 'Le Réel et son double'. [Tr.]

The Gift (too moral, too Christian)
Expenditure (too Romantic, too transgressive, too aesthetic)
Desire (too energetic, too repressed, too liberating)
Debt (nothing can be redeemed – too religious)

All the analytico-revolutionary utopias revolve around these four 'concepts' which reverberate with one another.

Some heresies are more paradoxical. Sovereignty (Bataille), cruelty (Artaud), the simulacrum (Klossowski). Seduction.

The beauty of the Aztec myth: it is by their death that the gods, one by one, give birth to light, the stars, the sky, the earth and men.

Just as the migrations of the Guayaki carried off the surplus population, in a state of quasi-suicidal exaltation, to the edges of the ocean where they disappeared, analysis carries off concepts to the limit point of their absolute reversibility, to their resolution in the oceanic form of a vertiginous metaphor that absorbs them.

Warm and soft and subtle: the body before lovemaking.
Fresh, soft and ductile: the flesh of seduction.
Mobile and violent and metaphysical: the form of the face.
Gentle and weary and subtle: the body after lovemaking.

What was polar and axial has become orbital and nuclear
What was historical and genetic has become tactical and a media event
What was perspectival and relational has become tactile and involutive

What was final and causal has become aleatory.
etc., etc.

Analysis is part of the immense process of the glaciation of meaning. Competition between theories is quite secondary by comparison with their joint commitment to the operation of dissection and transparency. Whatever you analyse and however you do it, you are helping to give primacy to desert forms, indifferent forms.

Fortunately, stupidity remains the sanctuary of the referent, the indestructible refuge of meaning. Unfortunately, even that fundamental stupidity has become merely a fossilized monster. He who believes in meaning will perish by meaning, or will be buried beneath the irony of appearances.

A party to which everyone brings the most stupid person they know. The person who comes up with the most stupid one wins. A risky bet, as you can never be sure with stupidity. It is unlikely an intelligent man will not say something silly in the course of the evening, nor that a stupid person will not say something clever, or simply keep silent, which will turn things around and make the person who brought them seem ridiculous. The person who brought them is no longer the person you thought they were. Intelligence speculates upon stupidity; it forgets that any quality taken to its extreme gains the upper hand over any other. As in the game of 'scissors, stone, paper', the cycles always bring the superior powers back down to an inferior position. Raised to the power of x, stupidity holds intelligence in check. It really sorts it out. Called in to serve as a mirror, it becomes seductive in its own right, and intelligence comes to seem odious.

Leukaemia, the proliferation of white blood cells at the expense of red, is universal. As is whiteness, the neutralization of the spectrum of colours in white light, the neutralization of make-up, artifice and violent seduction in the anaemic exhaustion of our white culture. The universality of that culture is that of the colour of mourning. So beautiful when it is the colour of snow or salt, lethal when it is that of blood in leukaemia or of the blank, expressionless voice in aphonia or noise in sensory deprivation – the end of racial flesh-tints, the whiteness of the operational.

If we look closely at the ambiguity of technology, we observe the constellation, the stellar motion of the secret (Heidegger).

What is hanging over us now is not hysteria or schizophrenia or even paranoia (though this latter should logically become dominant in the near future), but, in the more or less long term, melancholia. With its precursor, hypochondria, that derisory signalling of overcathected, enervated bodies and organs, rendered sad by involution. All systems, especially political ones, are virtually hypochondriacal: they manage and ingest their own dead organs.

The opposite state to passion is convalescence. We are currently in a state of sexual convalescence – everyone is still quite willing to engage in seduction, but they are weary in advance of the sexual consequences. Seduction remains the only vital intensity; sex is simply tiring, it is merely a bonus of pleasure.

She has left for Frankfurt by a different flight. The modern forms of transit which create unprecedented opportunities immediately destroy them by the same means. The media inform us; airports separate us.

Trieste – European nihilism here takes on the charm of autumn vines plunging into the sea, beneath the south wind, the karst cliffs, where oil refineries gleam on the horizon like the final solution. A few concepts too fluid to inhabit the present for very long dip and wheel on the crests of the waves, above the ironic transparency of the sea.

The hands of women are affecting, feverish, fragile. They are symbolically more manifest and more diaphanous than their sexual organs. Their hands and hair. Would the woman who offered her eyes to him cut off her hands for someone who told her they were even more seductive than her gaze?

Inanimate, translucent hands, women's hands jealous of each other.

Appearance, like freshness, is a passion. There is an obsession with truth, but a passion for appearance. That is why appearance is a ceremonial act, in a way that the act of thinking never is. However, intelligence is the seductive form of thought, just as the secret is the seductive form of truth.

The passion that attaches to the mode of production is jealousy: a God jealous of reality, jealous of appearances, jealous of meaning, jealous of interpretation, a jealous guardian of wealth and exchange. But there are also ideas jealous of their meaning, women jealous of their beauty, victims jealous of the privilege of being so, concepts jealous of each other.

Nothing will ever equal the ceremonial obstinacy of trees in their adornment, of light in its daily ritual, of wind and death in their uninterrupted cycle. The meticulous passion of silence. Ideas are merely paradoxical pathways.

Two forms of breakup: the one the result of being too far apart, the other of being too close. A break in the current, a breaking of the spell. Such closeness, day after day, for thousands and thousands of desert miles, can become unbearable as a crime. And it was indeed something like that.

When the snow falls with that supernatural slowness it has, it seems that the reasons for dying are more subtle than the reasons for living. But perhaps these latter are more numerous.

The only women loved: those whose faces come infinitely close, whose features become increasingly distinct to the touch, inciting you to a boundless caress, like a mirage engulfing all sensual emotion, in the contemplation of a thousand or more pure signs, the whole of sex encapsulated in an effect of admiration.

The only seductive theory: the one in which concepts recede to infinity, lose themselves in features ever more extreme, lending themselves to indefinite paradox, to the point of inertia where conceptual emotion is engulfed in the discovery of a thousand pure signs, and the passion for their disappearance.

We ought to find *Doctor Strangelove* reassuring: the nuclear confrontation is so unimaginable it would take a madman to unleash it. This is a sign of the degree to which the imagination fails to measure up to the possibility of nuclear war. As does reality for that matter.

Everything that can be said on the nuclear threat has already been said. Nothing has ever happened. 'Our nuclear submarines cannot all be knocked out at once and our enemy knows it, etc.' Nothing will ever happen. It is a system of general terror. But we are as if turned to stone by this potential destruction.

Overwhelmed by the fact that it never will happen. This permanent suspense is our provisional eternity.

If, in days gone by, it was sound strategy to accumulate the effects of alienation, today it is safer to stockpile the effects of indifference. To create a pole of indifference so that powerful processes of attraction or repulsion are produced all around.

To create a gulf which will swallow up inverse energies at differential speeds, on the extraordinary lines of Edgar Allan Poe's maelstrom.

Or, yet again, to become nothing but a ghostly hologram, a laser outline – so that it may then be all the easier to disappear without being noticed, leaving others prey to reality.

Dying is nothing, you have to know how to disappear.

Seeing the features of a face in closeup gives you the same dizzy feeling as a low-angle shot of a skyscraper. The vertigo of anamorphosis. The beauty of cheeks and lips smooth as a desert, a beauty equalled only by that of the skyscraper seen from below like an upturned throat.

Democracy is the menopause of Western society, the Grand Climacteric of the body social. Fascism is its middle-aged lust.

When everything turns in on itself towards a trance-like state of imaginary latency, but one still dreaming of final solutions, when all the tensions within us dissolve into a subliminal state, then it still remains for us to find the point of inertia and normalize everything by a process of destruction.

The true artificial satellite is the mass of floating currencies orbiting the earth. Money has become an artifact pure and simple, with sidereal mobility and instant convertibility, and has at last found its true home, a place more extraordinary even than the Stock Exchange: an orbit where it rises and sets like an artificial sun.

Black is the derision of White. The amazing Idi Amin who has himself carried in triumph by four British diplomats and is received by the Pope. The amazing Emperor Bokassa eating up little black babies, lavishing diamonds upon the Western dignitary. Nowhere has the concept of power been ridiculed in such an Ubuesque fashion as in Africa. The West will be hard-pressed to rid itself of this generation of simiesque and prosaic despots born of the monstrous crossing of the jungle with the shining values of ideology.

Let us remember the *Maîtres-Fous** where the lumpen-employees of the bush go home at night to the forest to mime in epileptic, frothing trances the white clerk, the white chief of Abidjan and even locomotives! All of them Bokassas, all of them Amins. Fantastic! There is no hope for this continent. All the Peace Corps will get bogged down there. The power of derision. Africa's contempt for its own 'authenticity'.

Politicians – power itself – are abject because they merely embody the profound contempt people have for their own lives. Their abjection reflects the abjection of the governed, who thereby find some way of ridding themselves of their own sense of abjection. One should be grateful to the politicians for accepting the abjectness of power, and ridding others of its burden. This inevitably kills them but they get their revenge by passing on to others the corpse of power. This ancient hereditary function has never been repudiated.

*A reference to the film by Jean Rouch. [Tr.]

It is announced that the United States of Africa have built a reservation for ethnologists in the heart of Africa, where they are protected and maintained in ideal ecological survival conditions and fed at set times of day as is the custom in their countries of origin. The reservation is off-limits to Africans, whether their intentions be philanthropic, scientific or cannibalistic, for fear of damaging the natural equilibrium of the tribe or endangering its chances of breeding, though matters in this regard are already very precarious. The African states assure us that all possible measures will be taken to save this disappearing race: the crucial thing is that it should be completely isolated from the outside world. The first experiment along these lines had already been attempted years ago by the people of Chad, whom the French government had paid a great deal to carry on holding a certain Mme Claustre, an anthropologist, and whom they had thereby saved from the clutches of the Whites who wished to turn her over to scientific prostitution. This almost accidental event soon resulted in all the West's anthropologists rushing off to African reservations, where they could at last devote themselves to the observation of the only ethnic group worthy of the name – their own. By contrast, upon their approach, all the beasts of the savannahs ran off to take refuge in urban zoos, and the Africans themselves withdrew into their missions, for fear of being devoured by ethnologists who had very rapidly reverted to cannibalism.

The moving moment is the one when a woman takes off her shoes and suddenly becomes smaller before your eyes. She becomes marvellously tiny, and, at the same time, her face changes. She creates intimacy in its most seductive form.

Different levels of atrocity.

A DC–10 crashes in the forest of Ermenonville. Three hundred and fifty people are shredded into some twelve thousand pieces. Other societies have accomplished the same thing by other means. Less accidental, bloodier means.

Our atrocity, the one that distinguishes us from everyone else, is the fact of having gathered up all the pieces and run the data through a computer to establish the identity of the dead. To settle the wills and the insurance claims no doubt. But there is something else in play here – the obsessive desire for restoration.

This act – the use of the technology of synthesis to repair the damage wrought by the technologies of death – is what characterizes us. Reassembling the flayed bodies of Ermenonville is of the same order as reconstituting the mummy of Rameses II in a laboratory.

Our atrocity is exactly the reverse of that of earlier centuries. It consists in eradicating the blood and cruelty by use of objectivity. A colourless, programmatic, bloodless atrocity, like the white-noise torture of sensory deprivation cells.

The finest physical and mental exercise: wandering around an unknown town in a certain quality of light. Secret circulation, the virginity of the (nonetheless corrupt) signs of the metropolis, the surprise of the architecture, tiredness, all the senses on the alert, one's body buoyed up by walking, a trance-like state in which all the mechanisms of intuition function at great speed. Catching the town as it emerges, before it has come on stage, leaving the people in abeyance, and their language, which seems oddly familiar to the foreigner ... Then the landmarks awaken from their slumber, meaning is roused, here and there, in fragmentary fashion. But the phase of emergence itself is delicious. Yet, the end has already come. Weariness wins out over the trance.

Paranoiac with fire
Obsessional with the earth
Schizophrenic with water
Hysterical with the winds
All mental ceremonies have an indivisible form.

The passing impulse is now but a mere symptom of the will, all that remains of it in an enervated world.

We are no longer in the era of the will, but of the passing impulse
We are no longer in the era of anomie, but of anomaly
We are no longer in the era of the event, but of the eventuality
We are no longer in the era of virtue, but of virtuality
We are no longer in the era of power, but of potentiality
etc. etc.

The absolution of speed – that of the sleek, ultramodern express train, speeding across the sinister, sooty plains of the North. And there, in your heart, a suspended decision – vital, but impossible to make. Indeed all decisions are suspended, all impulses are accumulating in the firmament. Various different lives awaiting some resolution, the lives of contradictory women. All this is insoluble, but the feline movement of the train still gives it some kind of charm. Railway points are made in our image. Their hearts condense the tenderness of the ironic tracks of the railway.

In an ultravisible, ultrareal, transparent and operational world, one can rely only on silent efficiency.

There is nothing more beautiful than a woman separated from you by a mirror, the mirror of her own hysterical speculation on the world, the mirror of the caresses she spurns and which you overwhelm her with mentally, the mirror of the murder she is planning without realizing it. One must wait patiently for an

eternity in front of this mirror which envelops her, haloed as she is by the silvery light of danger. And one day the mirror gives way; it slides like a dress to your feet, leaving before you merely the ashes of hysteria, the vestiges of a woman who has mentally yielded.

There are eyes which make all the miseries to come worthwhile. There are futures which make all previous lives worthwhile, when the woman who has stayed all night also sends you across town.

To Freud: the man who turned pleasure into a principle.
To Lacan: the man who turned the mirror into a phase.

The writers of the Apocalypse were methodical people who preferred to send each other endless letters rather than question the Anti-Christ himself.

Palermo.

The way they drive there conforms to the cruel ceremonial of provocative, animal dancing. It is a challenge verging upon the lethal limit of suicide, but one in which eliding the act preserves the rules of the game. Animals confront each other in this way, to establish supremacy without actually inflicting harm. The violent rhetoric of *hard driving,** and indeed all the town's scenography are products of this continual dicing with death.

Watching for six centuries over this archaic ceremonial, which sends modern

*In English in original. [Tr.]

technology spinning in an endless whirl (at three o'clock in the morning the cars are still tearing around at crazy speeds through this monumental geometric space), there stand, like science-fiction ancestors, the giant, antediluvian fig trees, rhizome-like trees from the mangrove swamps, which are by turns reptilian, visceral, tentacularly mineral, whose sap goes round and round within their networks of stalactite-like branches which reach down to the earth and take root there. Trees without end, neither animal nor vegetable, worthy of some barbarian cult, and of the baroque rootedness of this city in a culture of death.

There is something stupid about raw events of which Destiny, if it exists, cannot be insensible. There is something stupid about self-evidence and truth from which a superior irony cannot but spare us. Thus everything is expiated one way or another. Forgetting or mourning are no more than the period of time required by reversibility.

Clothed woman: obligation to see, prohibition on touching.
Undressed woman: obligation to touch, prohibition on looking.
But this is doubtless something that is changing.

The striated space of life, the smooth space of melancholy. No more plans, neither for loving, nor for writing. That of living remains, like a superficial space in which disparate, fickle objects pass by – all fleeting shapes.

One can make beautiful things simply to get rid of them. Without pride, without vanity – simply by expulsion: I abjure my inertia by acts. These are no more than exorcisms by which I rid myself of the heavy matter of existence.

Nothing done like this could have useful or memorable results. It is simply a question of exhausting life, sex, energy and memory, before it is too late.

With any sort of pain or pleasure, there is the secret desire to get it over with as soon as possible, and the satisfaction of being absolved, for a moment, of existence. The sooner it is over, the longer the absolution.

Bombastic, petty-bourgeois worldview: 'I did what I had to do. Forgive me and get off my back.' Emotionally disturbed worldview: 'I am not responsible, your desire does not affect me, I can do without you.' Worldview of nostalgia: 'The ideal form of existence is an empty one, since that is the form in which some event may chance to cross it at any moment.'

Always lived with men and women of a younger generation. No sense of age difference. Now, all of a sudden, the people I know have started to be 35–40 years old. But instead of feeling they are closer to me, I feel a generation apart. Most people, I think, escape this sudden change in age difference by projecting on to their own children.

Still this naive idea that light, fire and dryness cannot but bring out the finest passions in men, and that the heavy and provincial passions should never have flourished anywhere but in the North and the cold, where they are bound up with some kind of self-preservation instinct. Alas! it is not so, and the whole world, as San Antonio says, is just a little market town.*

*San Antonio (real name Frédéric Dard) is the author and narrator–hero of a series of detective novels. [Tr.]

All life has two trajectories: the one linear and irreversible, the trajectory of ageing and dying, the other elliptical and reversible, a cycle of the same forms in a sequence which knows neither childhood, death nor the unconscious, and which leaves nothing behind. This sequence is constantly intersecting with the other, and occasionally erases all traces of it at a stroke.

Mindless, uncivilized, uncouth, irresponsible, peasant-like, self-centred, unaware, asocial – without reference, without acknowledgement, without allegiance to any form of culture, stranger to any affect, allergic to any kinship. This is the bestial material on which a theory of simulation is built! And on what ignorance of the play of signs and of love a theory of seduction is built! Fortunately, all this is the product of a double life which may have the pathological beauty of writing.

The sovereignty of the object, which has its basis in its lack of desire, coincides with the disappearance of affect in my existence. Eccentricity without affect, far from what we hash up out of a sense of mercy. Radicalism in its sabbatical form.

A new chimaera, born of a combination of a naenia and a fiddler crab, seen from an electric chair and working its way through dubious tear-off calendars.

Only the eyes, the lips and the spoken word cannot be prostituted since these are the organs of divination. It used to be possible to divine the body too, but nowadays it offers divination too simple a solution. It also used to be a diviner, but now it is no more than a carnal form of supply and demand.

All we may expect of time is its reversibility. Speed and acceleration are merely the dream of making time reversible. You hope that by speeding up time, it will start to whirl like a fluid. It is a fact that, as linear time and history have retreated, we have been left with the ephemerality of networks and fashion, which is unbearable. All that remain are the rudiments of a supratemporal peripeteia – a few short sequences, a few whirling moments, like the ones physicists observe in certain particles.

Only one way of looking at things produces a supreme sense of understanding and that is a completely controlled form of delirium or simulation.

Rubik cube: all our thoughts in the wrong order, like the squares on the cube, without ever managing to get all those of the same colour on one side. A devilish, futile game, a fine symbol of the patchwork of magnetic thoughts and the cross-overs between them which make up our world, a world in which we face only insoluble puzzles or useless problems of synchrony.

The imagination is scarcely any better equipped to appreciate reversibility than the person who has never slept would be to appreciate dreaming. And yet we experience it in that electrocution of time we call predestination. The signs exchanged in the process are instant conductors unaffected by the resistance of time. Certain linguistic fragments run back along the path of language and collide with others in the witticism, dazzling reversibility of the terms of language. In this they fulfil an unexpected destiny, their specific destiny as words, conforming to the predestination of language.

Every woman is unique, fragile, ineluctable, immoral, radiant, insatiable. But whether pretty or ugly, she is never any of these things entirely directly. The detour that has to be made runs precisely through the opposite appearance: we have to come to terms with this as we would with the everyday destiny of a fatal vanity.

The whole difference between the sexes resides perhaps not in the way we feel passion for an individual being, but in our feeling of passion for formal abstraction, and the possibility of dying for it, even if it be embodied in a woman.

We have dreamt of every woman there is, and dreamt too of the miracle that would bring us the pleasure of being a woman, for women have all the qualities – courage, passion, the capacity to love, cunning – whereas all our imagination can do is naively pile up the illusion of courage.

We are becoming like cats, slyly parasitic, enjoying an indifferent domesticity. Nice and snug in 'the social', our historic passions have withdrawn into the glow of an artificial cosiness, and our half-closed eyes now seek little other than the peaceful parade of television pictures.

Dying is nothing. You have to know how to disappear.

Dying comes down to biological chance and that is of no consequence. Disappearing is of a far higher order of necessity. You must not leave it to biology to decide when you will disappear. To disappear is to pass into an enigmatic state which is neither life nor death. Some animals know how to do this, as do savages, who withdraw, while still alive, from the sight of their own people.

The beauty of these Japanese tattoos on the thighs of the women: normally invisible, they appear only in the moment of rapture, of lovemaking. A woman is tattooed with the objective marks of her servitude (the tattoo consists of her lover's initials). But what servitude this represents for the lover in return – condemned as he is to arouse this woman, to give her pleasure. If not, she will deny him his initials. The game of passion becomes more difficult. And what a delight for the unknown but well-chosen lover who sees his name appear upon his beloved's body as he makes love to her!

When nothing moves you any more, you must find a sign to stand in for passion.

When nothing is at stake any more, you must find a rule to stand in for necessity.

I have played at passion, I have played at tenderness.

I have played at parting, I have played at sadness.

I have gone as far as I can in expressing sadness, as previously I had gone as far as I could in the appearance of seduction. Sometimes it even seems to me that I have never done anything but provide the semblance of ideas. But that is the one and only way out we have to take in a speculative world with no way out: to come up with the most successful signs of an idea.

Or in an emotional world with no way out: to come up with the most successful signs of a passion.

And I held beneath my eyelids the sweet hologram of her nakedness.

The curvature of things is their only memorable aspect, but you never see it. There are really two forms of speculation, one of which excludes all forms of memory and objective signification.

All the objects, places and faces that are so much a part of us that they intensify our loneliness and we are forced to love them because there will be no others after them. They have involuted into us and we into them; they have created around us the optical illusion of everyday life. At most they are capable, like a mirror, of inverting the symmetry of our lives.

It is quite some time now since all spectacles crashed through the stupefaction barrier. What could be funnier than these armies, which for thirty years have been training on the spot, in the empty space of war? This is the perfect example of simulation, the prototype of a species which has attained perfection in its pointless attributes and which dreams, at great expense, of its virtual destruction (which is, as it happens, thoroughly unlikely).

All individual strains of melody are drowned out by the bass continuo, in which a beat grows stronger, a heartbeat nearing the point of collapse. The inner squinting at one's feelings has now given way to an intent concern with inner sounds, the sounds of the body, like a perpetual tom–tom on tape.

Revenge? Revenge? Everything comes back by itself, very precisely; and revenge confuses it.' (Canetti)*

*Elias Canetti, *The Human Province.* [Tr.]

The same goes for passion: the attraction of beings and things, their violent and material inclination, is so inescapable that passion only confuses matters. And truth? Truth itself only complicates the workings of the mind.

The immateriality of signs is alien to me, as it is to a race of peasants with whom I share an obsessional morality, a sluggishness, a stupid, ancestral belief in the real. In reality, I am one of them.

The simulation hypothesis is merely a maximalist position. The seduction hypothesis is merely a formal abstraction. It is the phantom of seduction which obsesses me – as for the rest, I have never managed anything other than to let myself be seduced. And this is quite alright: all the rest is merely destructive, moral passion.

The seducing monk dreams of a manichean tension between the sign and the real as the most sublime form of morality. Only from time to time, the earth-shattering, hypothetical union of the two . . . Even then, the beauty of this violent resolution eludes him.

Faith and fury first attack the impossibility of believing; they attack signs. Annihilating the world as sign, in order to make it an object of belief.

The people vehement, the beasts silent, the sky grey and luminous. Land of bucolic deceit and wretchedness. The sea does not make the same sound here at night as it does in the West, and this land's festivals are dictated by the moon – that soft roe of a moon – which is like the virile, suffering ideality of Islam.

Animals maintain the nomadic way of life in the very heart of domesticity. Motionless, in their thousands, on the sandy slopes, the arid pasturelands. Yet, animals know no boundaries. The sterile, patriarchal expanses are their world. It is they who order the world of men.

A universe without animal space, without the servile regularity of beasts, is never the same again. It is a long time since we knew such a thing in Europe. It needs a semidesert space, without the marks of property, without demarcation lines. It was by marking out all spaces that we got rid of the desert and of hierarchical servility, which is respectful of the inhuman and takes its orders from the inhuman – from a distant planet or an animal god, the constellations or an imageless divinity. It is a marvellous conception this imageless divinity: nothing could be more opposed to our modern iconolatry.

The gods can only live and hide in animals, in the sphere of silence and objective brutishness, not in the sphere of men, which is that of subjective brutishness, language and psychology. The Man–God is an absurdity. A god who rejects the ironic mask of the inhuman, who steps out of the animal metaphor, in which he was the silent embodiment of the principle of evil, and affords himself the luxury of a soul and a face, at the same time takes on the hypocritical psychology of the human. The gods have to be able to move like animals from one pasture to another. The dividing up of the land was the only way of banishing them.

She had the heavy breath of insomniacs' mouths, the chapped lips of hysterical women, the confused sex of sterile women, and sadness, inexorable sadness. What wouldn't you have given her in her innocence? Neither God, nor pleasure – grace perhaps, the savage grace of felines on the defensive, the retractile grace of her claws and of a gooseflesh extraordinarily soft to the touch, the grace of a fragile and defenceless frame. Nobody can do anything for her. She is impossible to protect, but her whole vulnerability is a caress and her retractility is a weapon, whilst her body, the whole of her body, becomes all weak and sly in order to seduce you.

I call that woman a slut who is capable of shying away from you out of sheer perversity, without any amorous necessity, out of the pure temptation to slip through your fingers. Women are sluts more through this ability to be absorbed hysterically by absence, than by physical and mental prostitution. And I recognize and admire this skill at escaping which is given only to those who do not know the obstacle of value judgements.

For his part, the male is rendered fragile by the mechanisms of representation. He does not have the ability to retract himself so suddenly and absolutely – he has to cast off his image. A woman, on the other hand, may convert herself into an absence by pure reflex or stratagem and surprise a man in that way as cruelly as she may enchant him by her presence.

The story of the ship built with such a quantity of iron and steel that its compass-needle, instead of showing north, simply pointed towards its own mass. Turning endlessly back upon itself, it was eventually lost in the fossilized ice of the Quaternary.

The real joy of writing lies in the opportunity of being able to sacrifice a whole chapter for a single sentence, a complete sentence for a single word, to sacrifice everything for an artificial effect or an acceleration into the void.

The only revolutionary transformation in things today comes not from their dialectical transcendence, but from raising them to the power of x, whether it be the revolution of terrorism, irony or simulation. It is not dialectics that are happening today, but ecstasy. Thus terrorism is an ecstatic form of violence, the state an ecstatic form of society, pornography the ecstatic form of sex, the obscene the ecstatic form of the scenic and theatrical, etc. It seems things have lost their

finality and critical determination and can only repeat themselves in their exacerbated, transparent form. This is the case with Virilio's 'pure war': the ecstasy of unreal war, potential and omnipresent. Even space exploration is a *mise en abyme* of this world. Everywhere the virus of virtualization and self-reflexivity is on the upsurge, carrying us on towards an ecstasy which is also the ecstasy of indifference.

*Carnal silence**

Hunger a muted drum of the body devouring the fleshly silence of the Siberian night.

The thrill of existing anywhere vertically above the Urals. The night and its orbit: night itself is an object lost in space – a movement of circular lips and a round of fossilized sound.

This imaginary line running from North to South, where it only takes one step to pass from one day to the next at the same hour – why was it placed in the middle of the Pacific, where only fish, ships and storms are allowed to cross it?

Are there spiritual forms which pass through us in this same way and can we cross them mentally?

You would go mad if you could never forget that the simultaneity of all points on the globe is only a dream or even if you considered the night to be a local object in orbit, which you can cross in any direction.

Intercontinental flight is a mental Odyssey.

The real desert, and therefore real enchantment, is to be found at an altitude of 30,000 feet, where the earth shows in its blue, geological light, like an inhuman essence without any other distinguishing features than the meandering path of its rivers or its mineral undulations, and where time stands perfectly still if you are

*In English in original. [Tr.]

lucky enough to be flying in the same direction as the sun.

All their gestures imply that they regard you as precious. Since that is impossible, there isn't even any subterfuge involved. This is true courtesy.

They welcome you as if you were sent by the gods. In the West, you are welcomed as if you were sent by death. In the West, the Other always comes from amongst the dead and has to win the favour of the living. But this continual self-effacement is also a strategy: it leaves you in a horrible state of uncertainty as to whether you should simply succumb to the consideration shown to you or else give even more, i.e. assume the divine role of reciprocation.

It's a contest to see who will have the last smile, the last gesture, the ultimate refinement – a bidding contest, as in poker, and one which raises the same cruel doubt in your mind that you have never given enough or gone far enough. It is a confrontation that can end only in death. For this dual form of exchange is limited by no contract and, as it is not based on culpability, no psychology can help you escape it.

Long after what had to be said has been said and the question of meaning has disappeared, the Japanese know you still have to put an end to signs and exemplary appearances: this is what courtesy is for, that quality which is as artificial as the tormented bonsai trees, that are cared for as though they were thousand-year-old works of art.

Eroticism comes from the same exemplary finishing touches, the perfecting of features, including the features of the face, the vivacity of passion in the slightest gesture, holding out the promise of the same vivacity in sex and pleasure.

To be lively and docile at the same time is a gift possessed only by a painted face or the smooth sex of a doll. The whole race seems to be wearing make-up and smooth as a sex, while retaining its animal vivacity and its restrained violence. When an entire race presents the same distinguishing features, the same ritualism, the same artificial smile, then there is something *sexually* extraordinary in this.

The seductiveness of Japan is the seductiveness of a whole race. It is that of the final touch, the touch of perfection. Sex is no longer then the play of difference and its absorption in pleasure, but the last touch which sanctifies the racial beauty of the eyes, the vivacity of the limbs, the inevitable mirror of the smile.

The statue at Nara, the most beautiful one.

The one of the woman whose hand, attached to the jar which she is barely holding, falls delicately towards the ground, whilst the other is raised in offering to the sky. A double movement, echoed by the hermaphroditism of the statue: the right profile looks masculine, with the elbow raised, while the other is feminine, with the arm hanging down loosely, an aerial form of gravity. As for the body, it is perfectly upright, like the statues at Chartres, but nonetheless sensual thanks to the subtle inflection of forms beneath the silk. All this is inhumanly elongated and produces a strange impression. What is the secret of a statue like this in other than aesthetic terms?

She: a principle of equilibrium in her mental and affective aloofness – absent gentleness.

He: a form of hypochondriacal self-devouring – the recrimination of the body.

What is deeply ingrained within us is this possibility of expecting everything from someone at each new meeting. In our own minds, we are all virgins and hope, against all good sense, to find a destiny in any face that comes along.

The carnal urge to accomplish certain obsessional gestures or improper acts

at irregular intervals is only ever characteristic of a second-rate libertine. The true obsessional or libertine has to accomplish them at a set hour.

A carnal horizon has appeared, that of the sex of . . . Like every horizon, this one is an imaginary line where the sun sometimes sets in a blaze of colour and sometimes just gives off a hazy glow.

Innocence, which consists in not even having a glimmer of an idea of the law, is doubly impossible today, since even transgression is improbable.

Appearance, which consists in not even having a glimmer of an idea of meaning, is doubly absent today, since even meaning is dissolving into indifference.

On every level, we are doubly held in check. Our indifference is that of one abyss overlaying another. We have then to find not only a simple act of transcendence but a double inversion. We have to accomplish at a single stroke the two revolutions which can save us from this double disappearance.

Have you ever seen a fly buzzing around on a ceiling?

Why does it always choose to fly in the middle of the room, beneath an absent chandelier? And who dictates this tireless, spasmodic flight, the domestic version of molecular motion? Flies have no understanding of corners. What a mystery! They also have no notion of infinity. They always cover the same tiny space, following a haphazard, secretly depolarized trajectory. They seem also quite ignorant of the notion of equilibrium: they don't seem bothered by several hours of uninterrupted flight in which they amuse themselves with the game of passing through all the points in space: they always know where they have landed and are always ready to set off again. All these senseless movements and circumvolutions

seem to have nothing whatever to do with the problems of energy. Unless they draw their energy from repetition itself, from the scrupulous charting of empty insect space, the angular, Lilliputian, Brownian space of the insect from which man, with his inability to move through a right angle, must inevitably seem a monstrous, antediluvian presence.

By comparison with our ideas of liberation, emancipation and individual autonomy, which exhaust themselves chasing their own shadows, how much more subtle, and proud at the same time, is the idea, which still survives in oriental wisdom, that someone else has control over your life, is planning it, determining it, satisfying it, according to the terms of an electoral pact by which you agree to stand down, when things are going against you, from something which, in any case, does not belong to you and which it is much more pleasant to enjoy without constantly having to take responsibility for it at every waking moment. There is nothing to prevent you, in return, from looking after someone else's life – something people are often more skilled at than looking after their own – and so on, from one person to the next, with each of us being relieved of the burden of living, truly free and no longer exposed to their own madness, but only to the ritual or romantic intervention of the other in the process of their own life.

The ultimate achievement is to live beyond the end, by any means whatever.

The difference between things and words is that the real evolves whereas language mutates. Something in language does not function in continuity with things: things go their own way but, at a given moment, a particular word takes on a specific meaning, and it loses it just as unexpectedly. Certain things also appear or disappear without further ado, pass from one state to another sur-

prisingly, discontinuously, though this is not the discontinuity of chance, but that of another kind of necessity. Our lives thus have two wavelengths. On the one, plans and events follow logically. On the other – crazy – curve, the same events recur ceaselessly. The same crime can keep happening forever throughout an entire dynasty, the same tic may persist right through to your grandchildren. In one of your lives, you are going in a straight line; in the other, you are going round in circles. When the two lines cross, it is an absolutely critical moment. When they coincide, it is the solstice of happiness.

Technology evolves, language changes, the voice breaks, fate overtakes us.

Naming things is never innocent. It is to precipitate them beyond their own existence into the ecstasy of language which is already the ecstasy of their end.

We have no more reasons to exist than stones and if one part of our life is in the sun, then, necessarily, the other is in the cold of hell.

It is through animal sensations such as running your tongue over your lips or your hand over your eyes that you get a sense of the truth of sexual difference.

Who ordered the sexes to differ, and not to alternate like the seasons or to follow one another as night follows day? When the sexes are in opposition to one another in the same way as occurs with planets, i.e. when they are in perpetual ellipsis on each other's horizons, then the vanity of all sexual liberation will become glaringly obvious.

The individual, floating, but held on a leash like a dog, like an eye popping out of its socket, hanging on the end of its optic nerve, scanning the horizon through 180 degrees but not sending back any images – a disembodied panoptical terminal, runaway organ of a species of mutants.

The body ought to learn to develop the figures of slow motion, of suspense, stopping, fixity, slowness. We are experts in the figures of acceleration but inexpert at instantaneously arresting movement, as animals can, or as happens in ceremonies (in the Peking Opera, movement does not die away through inertia but always comes to a perfect stop, a perfect climax in immobility).

Look at the difficulty gymnasts have controlling their landings. Even the best of them get it wrong, but this is what it's really all about, because as a gymnast cannot come to a climax of weightlessness at the highest point of his movement through the air, he must be able to produce the equivalent of this on the ground, in the ecstasy of landing. The ground must absorb all his energy (that is the secret of cats). Either you can bounce back up completely or you can break your fall entirely, get rid of all your inertial energy and come to an immediate stop, like a noise absorbed without echo (what fascinates us in the colour black, in the black body is this idea of a total absorption of light, which is equivalent to the dizziness of immobility for the body).

This art of absorbing energy without giving it back, suspending a movement without falling back, escaping those prolongations which give our bodily processes a certain gracelessness is also the art of slow motion and its tragic effect. We have given up that slowness for the prestige of acceleration.

The only role that has fallen to women is that of a sacred prostitution. A radical devotion accompanied by a desperate absence. Just once a woman has to have materialized in your life as if from another world and said 'I love you', and

you have to have welcomed her without even knowing her name. Once in your life an idea or a phrase has to have come to you as if in a dream and have immediately taken possession of you. For, if language is to seduce or strike your imagination, words themselves also have to have indulged in a sacred form of prostitution. These are the only gestures of affection a blind destiny can show towards us.

Only ideology has prestige in the fashionable world, because it alone is combatted. And yet there are more serious ideas which have no visible enemy.

Indifference of the sky to the earth: it will not rain
Indifference of the soul to things: it will not mingle with them
Indifference of lips to words: they maintain their silence
Indifference of dreams to reality: they will not absolve it

The hysterical obsession with events is itself a result of the end of history. Since there is no longer any history, events should follow one another in endless succession. Since there are no longer any causes, effects must be produced without any break in continuity. Since there is no more meaning in anything, everything should function perfectly.

Against the whole controversy about chance.
Determinism, indeterminism?
What use is there in establishing that chance is an objective process when it is in fact an ironic process? Certainly it exists, but only as the pataphysics of causes and effects, and fate exists as well, at the same time. The difference is that the irony of fate is greater than the irony of chance, which makes it both haughtier and more seductive.

Here begins my delirious self-criticism (all self-criticism is delirious, the worst form of the critical spirit being that which claims to be directed against itself). Nonetheless, I accuse myself of:

- having surreptitiously mixed my phantasies in with reality and, more precisely, with the little amount of reality available at this most mediocre moment in history
- having systematically opposed the most obvious and well-founded notions, in the hope that they would fall into the trap of this radicalism, which has not occurred
- having dreamt of a different world which – whether women or concepts – would have been that of a sacred form of prostitution
- having subtly drawn my energy from the energy of others according to a mental law of derivation
- having cultivated a twilight zone of thought the more effectively to disguise the difference between night and day
- never having been tempted to throw everything away, but merely obsessed by a sense of frustration and of having sublimated all cowardice in theoretical radicalism
- having sinned by omission of references

AMEN

Of being profoundly carnal and melancholy

Of having withdrawn from things to the extent that any judgement I make is merely the word of a phantom

But where are the blinding insights of yesteryear? Around me I see nothing but groundless hysteria and unscrupulous vitality

AMEN

Two inalienable skins rigged out in opposing kinds of cynicism and considered as masks. Respect for the mask. Submission to unlimited reciprocal judgement. Total commitment and total egoism: distances are kept.

The final implied effusion is like a last judgement. Meanwhile, meticulous precautions are taken towards the mask, which is not a function of presence, since this is unceasing and haunts us like a slow-burning, indirectly fuelled flame. No longer any distinction between body and soul, but only between created things such as the colour of eyes. And yet, a painstaking and persistent hostility.

Proximity hostility tension distance.

The distance between soul and mask is maintained by a lengthy apprenticeship to work up their silences into a proper duel.

The atmosphere also involuntarily affected by what surrounds them and denying this to each other in a judgement long since silently adapted to the dissimulation of people and animals. In everything – distance, complicity, hostility, judgement – the same schema within one's self, within the other – and within all the rest, which is judged in terms of this.

Constantly lying in wait. Constant fear that the other may have switched allegiances one day and that their judgement of what is good and bad may have altered. Because their intervention is fundamental in the most important questions. Yet I resolve these by myself. And he is different and leaves me feeling lonely. This is the way a duel suzerainty of understanding comes about. When we clash, it is to train our two shadows to coincide. When we agree, it is because we have judged on our own. The two cynicisms must be properly differentiated.

The complicity in all this is so precious that it seems to creep around on tiptoe and to be ashamed of and superstitious about itself, recognizing that it represents the highest court of judgement in both our cases: he is judged and so am I; there can be no escape. That is why this complicity keeps such a watch on itself and avoids its own reflection, because it is aware of itself as an imaginary solution, and not the only one possible.

O C T O B E R 1 9 8 1

Bright, icy sunshine like moonlight on snow or the tragic cry of seagulls over the green sea of a February twilight.

The choice would be between a woman who would be happy to give you an assurance of uninterrupted sexual potency (and where does this sensual genius come from in a woman?) and a woman so mentally enigmatic as to frighten off the slightest caress.

Accumulation is a paralytic's dream. When you accelerate, everything starts swirling around.

There is a particular kind of provocative moodiness which has something of the daydream about it, something of the defiant gesture of loving without being

loved or of any kind of intense feeling so long as it is willing to take everything and to sacrifice itself, which can only be compared to a sort of ether, a mental elixir, a firing of the nerve-ends and the elation of an intelligence happy in its own duplicity. A woman in such a state is so beautiful you have to seduce her. The world in such a state is so beautiful you have to destroy it.

What one dreams of is a beautiful, formal style of thinking, which despairs of its object clearly and takes its revenge without hypocrisy, by pulling aside the veil of jealousy.

If you don't have to be missed by someone, it is no use slipping away
If you do not have to love her, it is no use being missed by her
If you do not have to destroy her, it is no use loving her

What else was it that charmed me if not that passionate affection, which I have only ever been able to absorb, without being able to reciprocate? I lacked passion when it mattered, but she too lacked originality when it mattered.

Jealousy gets the same results as passion, but it gets them cold, like in a dream. Might it be the basic passion of the age of psychology, that is, of a fate always deferred and indifferent? For psychology itself is only a belated perception of the obvious.

Every man has an intense fear that he will no longer be taken in charge by some woman or female image. No one can live without the absolution of a female image.

Brilliant little irruptions
Brilliant little connections
Brilliant little illusions
Brilliant little lips
Brilliant little altercations
Very brilliant little honeycombs
Brilliant little adversities
Very brilliant little ravages
Brilliant little cogs
Brilliant little circumvolutions
around a vertical axis

Why has the deficiency of the mentally deficient become a cultural fact, whereas the very much more terrible fact of ordinary stupidity strikes no one as very odd?

Moscow Airport. Bureaucratic stupidity knows no bounds once it has aestheticized itself in the performance, once it is raised to the aesthetic power of a cold-war rhetoric. A cold war waged by the state against each citizen, all the more odious for being artificially sustained. A simulacrum of stupidity which has become the only vehicle of social life. A whole society with its eyes popping out beneath the mask of military power, a whole civil society reduced to blandness beneath the mask of bureaucracy. A dead society, clinging on to the appearance of death, to a final performance which it cultivates as a bitter denial of its own reality.

The only historical advantage that comes from Soviet society is that certain characteristics, certain customs of the human race will be found saved and preserved there, as mammoths were saved by the ice age, when they will have disappeared everywhere else.

The workers, once the heroes of historical negativity, have become the transparent unemployed workforce of factories that are but simulacra. The intellectual, once the herald of historical negativity, has become the transparent clown of dissidence.

Bureaucracy had found the best way of exploiting cadaveric rigidity in the social world. We found something better: cadaveric flexibility which had already been adopted by the efficient Jesuits, supple as corpses, helping grace to flow in worldly circles. Today electronics has replaced grace; it circulates in the semi-tetanic, semifluid networks of the immense and flexible mortification system which serves as our driving force. And the same jesuitical strategy, indifference, works a treat there.

The insomniac dreams of a loss of consciousness, which would allow him to sleep; in the same way, the acrobat dreams of a failure of gravity, which would allow him never to fall again.

You can dream of a theory which would work like acupuncture, by the faintest touching, by an unexpected correlation of sensitive spots over a distance, using its gold needles to create short-circuits across them.

In any system there must be a nerve centre which, if you touch it in some way, causes the whole system to contract and implode, as with a crystalline solution, just as, when a particular spot in the brain is touched, it immediately plunges the body into sleep.

There must be a somnambulic lucidity which allows you to go right to the heart of things just as there must also be a particular position of the body which would put you to sleep instantly.

When the force of love is spent, there comes the serenity of the state of weakness. When the crime has been committed, there comes the serenity of expiation. In all things, one should only concern oneself with the effects and leave the causes to the Last Judgement.

Hegel: the injustice of society is that it is the subordinate who has to understand what power is.

Aristotle: all organic existence proceeds from two sources – on the one hand, from its natural causes and, on the other, from the necessary intervention of the sun.

I have the impression – more or less – that this abject and glorious mercenary has a dual nature, that she is torn between the two sides of the same character – Leo rising in Leo – time alone, or depressive illness being able to distinguish in her heart between the two rivals, who in reality are only one. In mythological terms, I see this creature of the sea undulating like a suicidal Aphrodite between two opposite poles, fleeing on an invisible wire as far as the luminous escarpment of the lower world, where lurks the touching brute who will kill her.

In astral terms, I see the pendulum in her heart hesitating like a metronome out of kilter – magnetic hesitation of the needle between two signs, femininity floating in the double helix of the will to power.

Sublime epigraph on seduction in Omar Khayyam:

'It is better for you to have reduced a single free man to slavery by gentleness than to have freed one thousand slaves.'

Organic and sepulchral mystery of concupiscence.
Crucial and imponderable universe of concomitance.
Alleluia!

Only cats leave the total imprint of their sleeping bodies on the sand or the bed. Man does not know how to abandon himself to the form of his body, so as to experience total abandon. He does not know the inertia from which the cat draws its felinity, its vivacity, its formal cruelty. He does not know that mystic elasticity, the dissolution of the body into its various members, which enables the cat to fall without being crushed as it lands. For in itself each part is light; it is the heaviness of the whole which is our perdition.

Why did we have to leave the perfect, silent indifference of the plant kingdom? Why did we have to abandon the immobility of the mineral kingdom, the swiftness of the animal kingdom? In man, the metamorphosis reaches its end. Yet the animals still speak to us of it: a cat, a horse, a bird, an octopus, what are these forms unintelligible to human understanding but the signs of a lineage whose powers of fabulation end with our species?

But perhaps women retain something of this enigma, something of the immobility and swiftness.

The mental dread of the tree with ice-laden branches
the paradoxical dread of the woman disrobed
the mental dread of the naked truth
the paradoxical dread of the waking dream

When the night is as long as the day, then the storms of the equinox begin to get up, when artificial light is as strong as the violence of the sun, then the passion for gambling is unleashed, when two women equal each other in your mind, then the equinox of pleasure begins.

For some, life is interminable, and what is interminable no longer makes sense. How are they to find time to live? For others, life is over right from the outset. It has ended before it has begun. It unfolds on a sort of abstract strip, without any temporal dimension. In this way, some lives sacrifice their own ends uselessly, and lose even the memory of their origins.

If there were a secret, no one, not even the person who knew it, would be able to divulge it.

We must keep watching, from the depths of a definitive silence, for the definitive event.

There is, on the one hand, a crazy world, and, standing over against it, nothing but the ultimatum of realism. This means that if you want to escape from the folly of the world, you must also sacrifice everything of its charm. By increasing its delirium, the world has raised the cost of the sacrifice. It's a blackmailing by reality. Today, to survive, illusions are no use any more; you must get closer and closer to the nullity of the real.

The repetition of days is interminable, that of nights less so. It is probable that the succession of nights has a meaning, whereas that of the days leads us

nowhere. The day should simply break, and then immediately come to an end. Things should just appear, and be immediately abolished.

The loss of virile mythologies, and also of feminine emblems, with the concomitant rise of a transsexual, narcissistic mirage common to both sexes, which only falsely assumes an air of homosexuality.

The seductive power of the feminine bends back on itself. As for men, they can only have recourse to the mirror of woman, but this is already occupied.

Pompeii: we are indebted to a catastrophe for having preserved the most extraordinary piece of our classical heritage. But for Vesuvius we would not have had this living hallucination of Antiquity. As we owe the preservation of mammoths to the sudden onset of the Ice Age. Today, it is all our artificial memory systems that play the museum-building role of natural disasters.

At male stripshows, it is still the women that we watch, the audience of women and their eager faces. They are more obscene than if they were dancing naked themselves. This is so because of the hysterical overflow from their sexes into their faces, but particularly because what they are looking for is a right of revenge over men. What is obscene more than anything else in all this is the egalitarian demand for the right to pleasure.

No one has any right to pleasure, any more than to water or to life. Let us leave this form of legality to the emancipated slaves. Enjoying life has already been rendered obscene by the right to leisure. This time it is sex that is being rendered obscene by the right to sexuality. Obscenity threatens everything that claims to be considered as a legal right.

The right to pleasure and the right to suffering usher in a civilization of

hysteria and gaudy vulgarity. The ecstasy of the female strip clients is akin to the ecstasy of the holy women of Lisieux. The same form of voracity is directed towards the masculine sex or the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The body on stage is never obscene. The only thing that is is the cannibalistic gaze of these women absorbed in their own symbolic revenge and the living derision of their sex. Man is a touching sight in his contemplative pornography (peep show, live show, etc.). He confusedly pays homage with his gaze to the perfection of a body which lacks nothing. For men do not believe in this business of the castrated woman. They know woman has a perfect body and that her body will never lack anything. And their gaze reflects this: if the feminine body can offer itself naked in this way, deliver itself up to the eyes without withholding anything, this is the sign of a great power. The power of prostitution which man will never know, any more than he will know that of parturition.

Whereas what women come to look at in a masculine striptease is precisely castration. Deep down, they are the only ones who really believe in it. That is why the gaze has no option but to turn back upon them, these women who are madly keen on castration and who have become the impure subjects of castration, instead of shining forth as pure objects, in their nudity, with their powers of illusion, on the pornographic stage of the body.

*Female mud wrestling**
The female in *Quest for Fire*. *Goldfinger*
Sweet Movie:* the woman in liquid chocolate
Natives in their masks of mud

*In English in original. [Tr.]

Blacks with glistening skins
Bodies greased with suntan oil on the beaches.

The lubricious is that which is lubricated. Which slides. Which looks like a sex emerging from a sex, or a child emerging from its mother. When the skin puts on show the inside of the body, with its mucous membranes turned inside out, the moistness of sexual arousal.

A sweating body already offers a show of erotic repulsion and attraction. The body's primordial temptation to cover itself with its secretions. A mere trickle of water flowing over a smooth stone is enough to make it erotic. Everything that slides evokes sexual pleasure, even the wind. Why not oil or mud?

The body in its liquid form is life itself. The opposite of *Goldfinger*, in which it dies transfixed within its film of gold.

But the fluid must not be too fluid. It is the viscosity of mud which gives pleasure, even one's gaze slides and becomes viscous. Sliding would thus seem to be the source of all pleasure, and perhaps of meaning.

In just one week, winter, spring and summer following one after the other. Hence the dreamy mists of the St Lawrence, caused by the tepid rain falling on the ice. On the other side of the lake, the Indian village takes on the dramatic form of the Great North, of exile and snow. But here, in the city, everything takes on the dramatic form of ennui. There are two forms of energy in Montreal, the electric energy of the Great Lakes and the psychological energy of monotony.

There is a vigorous and a languid way to conduct politics. The same applies to lovemaking. The conjunction of the two styles produces the best effects and the best-looking children.

That face. Even in ten years' time, I shall still not know the colour of its eyes. But I see it in the street, in my dreams and just beneath the surface of a great number of other faces which suddenly start to resemble it.

The panic of coming upon a transvestite in the Bois de Boulogne. It is not the spectre of homosexuality, but the distortion of signs that spreads terror. Not the fact of mistaking one sex for another, which is close to vaudeville, but the game of signifying woman out of nothing, the signs of woman without woman.

Only the feminine can surrealize its effects in this way without bringing upon itself that ridicule which immediately threatens masculine values when they attempt the same. Besides, the masculine version of the transvestite has become passé; it was merely an appendage of homosexuality.

It is obvious that a woman will always know better how to caress another woman than any man will. This is true, no doubt, of the other sex too. Each sex would thus be like a particular species and the caress a kind of basic language peculiar to the species.

There is no point in building. There is no more real estate, no more life annuities. There are no more concessions in perpetuity in any cultural cemeteries. Isn't it better that way? When a meteorite breaks up in space, it is the dazzling trace of its end which stands out. With a celestial body in orbit, it is the ellipse that is the most precious. No ancestors, no heritage, no heirs, no capital. For centuries we have had to accumulate. It is equally obvious that we have to squander everything in a single generation.

The future belongs to those who have accumulated everything, then unburdened themselves of it in a single lifetime. You have to move quickly. Ten years to soak up a culture, twenty years to expel it, spew it out (this part always takes longer). Nothing is interesting unless it passes through the entire cycle of the symbolic murder of culture.

The ultimate bomb, the one no one talks about, would be the one which, not content simply to disperse things in space, would disperse them in time. The temporal, palinodic, anachronistic bomb. When it explodes everything is thrown back into the past and, the more powerful the bomb, the further back it is thrown. Or better still, when it explodes some fragments are thrown into the past, others into the future.

But just take a look around: this explosion *has already occurred*. There is no bomb which hasn't already exploded before being technologically invented: the real is always ahead of technology and war. In a world without memory like ours, everything is already projected live into the past; it is as if things had been precipitated into a dimension where they have no meaning other than when they are fixed by a definitive revolution of time.

That, in fact, is the real bomb, the one which immobilizes things in a spectral recurrence. All you can hope for is that some fragments – aeroliths or meteorites – may have passed into the dimension of the future where we will run into them one day with a sense of déjà-vu.

The nuclear is like revolution. Nothing is gained from hoping for the one or fearing the other, since both *have already happened*. Everything is already liberated, changed, subverted. What more do you want? There's no use hoping: the things are there, born or stillborn, already in the past – it's exasperating, but what can you do about it? No future. No cause for panic either: everything's already

nuclearized, enucleated, vaporized. The explosion has already happened, the bomb is only a metaphor. What more do you want: everything is already *wiped off the map*. It's no good dreaming: the confrontation has already happened, quietly, everywhere. Yet it isn't enough for things to have happened: we also want to see them happen as spectacle. As we know, the revolution had already taken place within things, before it broke out as spectacle. The people wanted the *spectacle* of the revolution. Things themselves also want to experience the rapture of a spectacular metaphor. This is the revenge of the objectivity in which we have confined them.

What will become of the nuclear? Will we insist on having the grand spectacle of the atomic confrontation for the beauty of it? If that happens, it will not be for the reasons currently advanced – the fatal dynamic of the *use-value* of weapons or the species becoming resigned to its own destruction – but from the irresistibility of the *spectacle* of destruction and the necessity, for us, of deriving some enjoyment from it.

The only response to the missiles: decoys and simulation. An aircraft carrier, a nuclear power station, a simulated metropolis with the same mass, the same potential energy and the same temperature profiles – ultimately every target could surround itself with an infinite number of decoys serving as a protective halo. This was Numa's idea, when, as king of Rome, he had twelve identical shields made in order to prevent the original sacred one sent by the gods from being stolen.

The fact is that the universe was like this in the beginning: undecided as to the authenticity of things. Out of the twelve shields were born the twelve kingdoms and no one knows which is the real one, nor – subtle perfidy of Numa – if there ever was a real one.

If war did break out, it still isn't clear why the missile would choose to hit the decoy rather than the target? Only a man, a conscious being who has passed through the mirror phase, would almost unfailingly choose the decoy (the power

seduction always consists in awakening slumbering appearances. And you can guess that a woman will be – or wants to be – seduced by the fact that, as in a lover's snare, she gives herself the appearance of sleep.

She can jettison her existence, her plans and her passions at a single stroke. She is only committed to reality through a secret electoral pact, by which she will stand down if she is losing. She never assumes responsibility for her existence, which allows her to wipe out at a stroke and to slide, like a good hysteric, towards another life. A strange life, spun out entirely towards a goal of transaction. Let a man ask her to give it up, to sacrifice the whole of it, and it all ceases to exist.

The Epeda Multispire mattress. Everyone can have their own night, their own sleep thanks to the 3,600 spiral springs which guarantee everyone complete autonomy. The ideal mattress. You can make love to someone on it without them even noticing. As the automaton of his own pleasure, each person's experience of their sexuality is like their experience of a night on a Multispire mattress. It isn't even loneliness, since there is someone else there. It's more something of the order of the independent lunar module. Tristan and Isolde each dreaming to themselves, on either side of their sexual console.

That seduction is the seduction of the uterine Mother and that all attraction merely masks the attraction of the primal abyss are platonic ideas. The cavity of the womb has taken over from the Cave in the Realm of Ideas. Once again, the real woman, her anatomy, serves as a sacred referent for a platonic ideology. The vertigo of seduction is here vulgarly phantasized into the hollow of a woman's womb. This is to move from the most subtle game to the most profound – and hence the most stupid – phantasm.

Everyday experience falls like snow. Immaterial, crystalline and microscopic, it enshrouds all the features of the landscape. It absorbs sounds, the resonance of thoughts and events; the wind sweeps across it sometimes with unexpected violence and it gives off an inner light, a malign fluorescence which bathes all forms in a crepuscular indistinctness. Watching time snow down, ideas snow down, watching the silence of some aurora borealis light up, giving in to the vertigo of enshrouding and whiteness.

Little catastrophe scenario

I. Losing one's identity papers – your whole being refuses to believe in this, just as it refuses to believe in the death of a loved one. You search for hours before reconciling yourself to the idea, and even then you keep alive a hope of seeing them reappear miraculously, like a woman who has left you. The fact is that they have become your shadow in the sunny world of capital. You are an orphan – and indeed the people who hang around in lost property offices look like shadows themselves. There is a logic in this: the loss of your papers is never innocent, it is a sign of ruination. It is an alarm signal. Many will have been saved in this way from much more serious trouble.

II. Lost passport dream. It turns out to have been true: when I wake up, I can't find it (what would happen if I dreamt I was dead?). The day before, in the search for my identity (papers), I'm told that a passport isn't a true certification of existence, but merely an international transit document. I lost it a quarter of an hour later, and I lost it in the police station, where it remained, like the purloined letter, in full view of everyone.

III. The stolen/non-stolen car. I learn that my own car has been stolen for four years. So they can't give me a vehicle registration document. So I'm driving round in my own stolen car and I have no identity papers. Who am I? The disconnected computer cannot recognize the existence of a real object in the absence of a Search Termination Procedure. But all the documents have disappeared. The unfathomability

of machines, the expectancy of men. On the other hand, for the last four years, all traffic offences have been cancelled by the computer because my car was stolen. Moral of the story: it is the art of disappearing that brings total impunity.

IV. In the end, everything turns up again. *Happy end.** I even find myself – reverse catastrophe – with a double identity: two vehicle registration documents, two driving licences, two identity cards, etc.

Ethical hummingbird
Surrealist mercenary
the automaton of one's own pleasure
a subject without other
without Other
without otherness
without Unconscious
Metamorphosis: only other, then Subject/Other: metaphysics
then only the subject without other: Metastasis
A past, recycled, narcissistic, refreshed subject
without transcendence
paralysed self-fascinated metastatized metastabilized
ecstatic
No Otherness no alternative
Autarkic nebulosity of subsystems: politics ethnic groups
psychic language
No one talks here anymore
No one exists – me included
Ab-solute centripetal involuted writing

*In English in original. [Tr.]

Then return of the absolute
Other of seduction of
Surprise and of Rapture

Pure event pure object
putting an end to this
introverted and ultimately melancholy fascination
Autorepetition of a subjectivity without desire

Brazil 1982
Equinoctial France. South of the equinox, no more sin.
The little girl from Recife – Salomé.
The sensuality of the plant life, the fruit, the bodies, the poverty – this languorous filth of the Tropics. This slowness of gestures, of thoughts. This Creole unconscious, anthropological and anthropophagic (out of love). How good it must be to eat a bishop on the beach, after mass, after seeing him shipwrecked!

Cannibalistic, amorous, seductive culture. Evil fruits, whose flesh is like the product of a noxious imagination, dull and hairy, obscenely turgescent, having a melancholy freshness.

The favelas that stretch down like glaciers to the edges of the rich quarters. Hanging on the hills, they are waiting to slide, like the earth which will bury the Sheraton beneath the rubble of poverty. But this event itself remains hanging and that is where the beauty of the town lies: for if overcrowding is poverty, the crowding together of poverty and of luxury is the mark of another kind of wealth. Like the intertwining of the mountains and the urbanized zones along the capricious fringes of the sea. Insularity has its role here in the town, as it does out at sea, in the archipelagos.

No discrimination, but no equivalence either, nor equality in difference. The alternative is neither equality of rights nor a fusing together of the races, it is antagonistic seduction, a little like the cannibalistic devouring of a loved one.

Sexual and cultural attraction of the races for one another.

There is nothing more beautiful than a blonde half-caste with blue eyes: the surprise of an illogical conjunction and a purer model.

Seduction plunges us into discrimination as it plunges us into predestination. Day and night do not have to be equals, nor must one race equal another: they must seduce one another.

Brazil is still the land of a baroque mix. Racial puritanism never did get a hold there, but this tropical solution is, perhaps, fragile.

The only austerity here: that of rites, not that of morality, that of observance, not that of repression. A cannibalistic society has no unconscious. It is no more sadistic than the luxuriant vegetation: it devours out of love. Northern sexuality is a form of ostracizing of the world by the body. Equinoctial sexuality is a form of absorption of the world by the body, vegetation, music and dance.

Samba, capoeira.

Neither an explosion of desire, nor a political insurrection. Sympathetic magic. A form of cultural magic which absorbs the other culture, metabolizes it, swallows it up. A stratagem of allegiance and fragility; the European tonal system is destabilized by syncopation; European rationality is absorbed into the fetish, *feiticho*: the fake, the factitious, the decoy, everything that embodies the abominable mixedness of the object and its magical and artificial double. The truth, the purity of the race also suffer syncope, to which is added the indolence of tired bodies. Everything in the term fetish, from the Whites' standpoint, designates the other culture as seduction, a seduction which, in spite of all their material and political power, they find it impossible to resist.

The phantasy these notes cultivate is that they will be read afterwards, elsewhere, after I am gone for good. They may indeed be read as such right now, as a short treatise on the rest of my life. Each thought is the last, each note the final touch, each idea merely appears and disappears, like that planet which is a

continuous succession of sunrises and sunsets. They are multiple fragments of a nonexistent hypothetical continuity which can only be rediscovered beneath these notes like a watermark, after death.

The only passion today: the passion for a multiplicity of simultaneous lives, for the metamorphosis and anamorphosis of modes of life, of places, of ways of loving. Every object is unique and should be all that our imaginations require. But there's nothing we can do about it: we have to move on from one to the other. Every landscape is sublime, but there's nothing we can do about it: we have to swap them one for another continually and the sublime today lies in the inter-continental flight which connects them all together. The capacity to pass from one life to another, and not to die in only one life – that beats everything.

Perhaps our eyes are merely a blank film which is taken from us after our deaths to be developed elsewhere and screened as our life story in some infernal cinema or dispatched as microfilm into the sidereal void.

'We prefer the storms of freedom to the silence of servitude.'

A sublime statement, but freedom is no longer stormy today, and servitude no longer silent.

Today, we have the silence of freedom.

In fact, neither freedom nor servitude have any importance these days; the rhetoric of values is dead. Only the storm remains, the storm that lights up real clouds with its flashes of heat, and silence, real silence – the silence of the sky before the storm.

Thirst drives away the dark bile of organic melancholy. The torrid icebergs of

Vingrau, its limestone white as an icefloe in a heatwave, everywhere flowers, thirst: lions were running around here 500,000 years ago in the grasslands; our little regressions do not have this same savage dimension. The rocks, blue like the ice of la Caune de l'Arago, purple, abyssal coolness, mineral liquid melancholy, the purple liquid ecstasy of fatigue. Bestial, prehistoric site midway between sea and hills. Why have men not always lived beside water? For fear of wild beasts, they chose the slopes. For fear of the heat, they chose listlessness. For fear of melancholy, they chose grotesquerie and madness.

None of that has changed very much.

Tautavel, June 1982.

A spider so fragile, so spindly, so translucent that it runs like a watermark across the paper, just like the tiny blood vessels on your skin. It disturbs nothing, running around in the void, in a very great hurry to live and die. In fact, its tiny size, its microscopic structure is a challenge to the monstrous being that we are. Its fragility can only make us wish to crush it, and that would not even be a crime since our two universes are so entirely separate.

To lose the original, but find its double – to lose face, but recover one's image, to lose innocence, but recover one's shadow – then to go through the sunlight to enter the warm night of women, their emotionless gazes, their caressed bodies, their skin made gentle by suffering.

Heat creates a kind of panic extraversion of our perceptions, a sort of social confusion. It discharges us of the burden of our sexuality: our bodies have too much to do to want to reproduce. Sexual pleasure is no longer something obvious, is almost ridiculous. Why add this additional excess? Work and ascesis are both

secretions too and sweat is a preferable substitute. It is the moist ecstasy of the body offering itself in reparation to such a sun. There is nothing so good as heat for fusing bodies in a single spasm, in the same archaic abandon. Everything copulates with heat. Irony increases in the sun and the shadow of the subject shrinks. The speed of molecules takes us beyond the point of will power, even the will power needed to cross the road. Heat even cancels out sleep: how can you sleep with this *spectacle* of heat going on? And why sleep anyway, since the heat already offers itself to you like a dream?

Nothing is more liberating than great heat, since when it is hot we give back to the sun all the energy it dispenses to us in a somnambulistic equivalence. We take nothing away for effort and enjoyment; we are merely the mirrors of a thermal equivalence without memory. And this state is more beautiful than that of desire. It is the state the Ancients finely distinguished as the swoon. And then, after all, heat is an alibi for indolence.

There is a perverse stubbornness in preserving a space of ill-will, of rejection of the world and the political order. But also justified aversion for the idea of our collective assumption into the firmament of the operational, of general, simulated reconciliation. We already have too few enemies. In this age of socialist synergy, do we also have to cultivate consensus?

Cowardice and courage are never without a measure of affectation. Nor is love. Feelings are never true. They play with their mirrors. Today it is events which are neither true nor false and which play with their screens. You can no more isolate an event from its screen than in the past you could isolate a passion from its mirror.

There is something archaic in tall buildings and tower blocks heroically defying gravity. It is easier to imagine tower blocks only starting at the fifteenth floor because that is the point where they become interesting. Or even a style of architecture which would begin on the surface of the sky and reach down towards the ground in unequal lunges, and no doubt would not end there. Theory should do the same and start out from the end of things, from their presumed altitude and move back down towards their 'reality', but not even stop there, for that is only an imaginary line.

If we want theory to run on to infinity on both sides of reality, we should knock down the first fifteen storeys right away . . .

Hypothetico-deductive females, the ones who catch fire on contact with the real and whose sterilized ashes trace strange arabesques in the sky, especially at dusk . . .

A woman may be so heavily made up that you can never be certain of her disappearance. Life can be so mystified that you can never be sure of its opposite.

Never resist a sentence you like, in which language takes its own pleasure and in which, after having abused it for so long, you are stupefied by its innocence. Suddenly, giving pleasure to language is like giving pleasure to a woman – as unexpected, as unconventional, as rare.

Soon spectacles will no longer be a prosthesis but the hereditary attribute of a species which no longer possesses the faculty of sight.

Deep down, no one really believes they have a right to live. But this death sentence generally stays cosily tucked away, hidden beneath the difficulty of living. If that difficulty is removed from time to time, death is suddenly there, unintelligibly.

A particular familiar object has been around for twenty-five years. How many centuries will it be before it disappears? *I* have changed. This just isn't normal. Objects should at least take their share of the responsibilities. That is all I have against the inanimate world.

Imagine a world of mobile, sexed objects, surrounded by a human world that was unsexed and immobile. Objects would have a name, humans would not. We wouldn't be able to stand it. What makes us think they can? Animals, stones, objects are constantly overturning the human order. And we ourselves are hardly out of hell yet.

The TV: every image is an ephemeral vanishing act. But art is the same. In its countless contemporary forms, its only magic is the magic of disappearance, and the pleasures it gives are bloodless ones.

The Oneiropause, worse than the menopause: the end of mental ovulation.

Language is so inarticulate that they had to invent a double articulation to make it inoffensive.

Neither frivolous nor subtle – serious and bestial.
A new form of intellectual bestiality.

Through looking in the mirror, the subject has become haemophilic: coagulation no longer occurs. Through transcendence, the blood no longer stops flowing, nothing heals over.

Dream femininity: it lives only in the heads and desires of men. Women can get together in their millions, but they will never produce that image which can only come from elsewhere. If women don't accept being dreamt of any more, including in the phantasm of violence, then they will lose even their sexual pleasure and their rights. Man has never claimed to free his mind from the spell of female seduction. It is the terrifying prerogative of the liberated sex to claim the monopoly over its own sex: 'I shall not even live on in your dreams.' Man must continue to decide what is the ideal woman.

On the High Plateaus: a tactile illusion of the sphericity of the earth, caused by the clouds – and their shadows on the ground – gliding by so quickly. As, on very bright nights, though somewhat differently, one feels the sphere of the heavens, aerial or starry, following the curvature of the earth's surface. The fact that our world is a sphere seems to have no direct impact on our way of life, on how we represent it, where we readjust everything into linear terms, but it is certainly not without effect on the curvature of our thoughts. There is even in this sphericality of the earth an ironic response to all human 'planning'. If the infrastructure is curved, that changes everything: you have to think curved to embrace the sphericity of the earth and the sky.

It has to be said that writing is an inhuman and unintelligible activity – one must always do it with a certain disdain, without illusions, and leave it to others to believe in one's own work.

Powdered water: just add water to get water.

Their equal panic – hers at the power of ideas and his at sensual frivolity – meant that they got on wonderfully together for many years.

Certain objects echo each other from one end of a culture to the other, and if there was a connection between the Soviets and electricity under the sign of Revolution, there is another between the Unconscious and the freezer under the sign of Involution. Just as food is frozen, so in the Unconscious a mental glaciation of drives and signs takes place. From time to time phantasms, fragments of drives, sequences of signifiers are taken out, which can in fact be defrosted by the intermediary stage, the subconscious, the equivalent of the refrigerator stage – with the psychoanalyst, the Grand Master of the Cold, carrying out the careful defrosting of delusions and dreams in his consulting room.

Freud thought he was bringing the plague to the USA, but the USA has victoriously resisted the psychoanalytical frost by real deep freezing, by mental and sexual refrigeration. They have countered the black magic of the Unconscious with the white magic of 'doing your own thing', air conditioning, sterilization, mental frigidity and the cold media of information.

Holidays are in no sense an alternative to the congestion and bustle of the cities and work. Quite the contrary. People look to escape into an intensification of the conditions of ordinary life, into a deliberate aggravation of those conditions: further from nature, nearer to artifice, to abstraction, to total pollution, to well above average levels of stress, pressure, concentration and monotony – this is the

ideal of popular entertainment. No one is interested in overcoming alienation; the point is to plunge into it to the point of ecstasy. That is what holidays are for. And getting a suntan serves as a supernatural proof of this acceptance of the conditions of normal life.

Copying out these notes is indelicate in every respect, and I fear only bad will come of it. This is a sort of death sentence, a kind of violence, for why should I arrest them in their handwritten flow? If they can only be written out longhand, it is because they are neither a book nor a series of thoughts. They must be a secret text, then, but that too is a senseless idea. I have to give them over to chance, to whatever indeterminate fate may be in store for them, or rather, to the happy chance of being caught with their defences down, without the defence literature provides. But this phobia for the literary annoys me too. The diagnosis is simple: there is strictly no reason to hide a mirror in your drawer.

She does everything. She sings in opera, makes films, even produces them. She swims like a god, is as beautiful as a goddess. She was born in Mexico, has a diaphanous skin, deep blue but lively eyes (which is rare). She looks like a liana or a convulvulus in her tight white lamé dress. She speaks five languages – too much, too much. At its height, perfection becomes like virginity. You have to lose it.

Culture contradicts all genetic capital. It is the touch of magic, the special touch which contradicts biology, heredity, etc. and condenses a whole dynasty into one generation.

What cannot be obtained in a single generation is ease and courage. Mutants are cowards.

What comes out of a conflict like the Falklands is an unequal scale of passions between North and South and a parallel escalation of rage. Rage (it's the same with Israel and the Arab countries) at always seeing the weak imbued with contempt for themselves by a sort of capillary action from the superior race, so frightened are they by the revenge that needs to be taken and so much do they prefer to indulge in all their own suicidal fantasies. In the order of passions (which is the true order of power), the same countries and peoples are eternally doomed to resentment, to the hysteria of impotence in the face of the arrogant efficiency of the Whites' strategies. That is what is unbearable and which would lead me to detest the Southern – and the Islamic – peoples for their feeble-mindedness, their suicidal rhetorics, if I did not already detest even more the little hardline Whites, who are so sure they will always have the upper hand.

It is this inequality in passions, in virtue, in courage (all they have left is their deaths) which means that the oppressed peoples will never actually measure up to their own power – and which leads one, paradoxically, to dream of a universe of true relations of force where crushing defeat would at least be justified in terms of the world order.

O C T O B E R 1 9 8 2

The unemployed girls with eyes of jade

A generation has disappeared or changed direction. A backfire against theoretical radicalism – and one in which socialism has played its part. The symbolic murder of the intellectual class, not at all unlike the symbolic murder of the political class by the silent majorities.

Basically there are the two opposite attitudes: nothing has been achieved, there is nothing to hope for, God is against us; everything has been accomplished, the promises have been fulfilled, God is with us.

Both attitudes produce societies without hope, the one because the hopes are already fulfilled, the other because they are unfulfillable. But it is not hope which gives a society its strength, but the belief it has fully realized itself in the present. Iran and the USA, strangely brought together in that failed commando operation in the desert, are two diametrically opposite examples of achieved societies.

Religion functions as a sanction for the ritual operation of society in Iran and for advanced technology in the States.

In Japan, there are twenty-seven terms for translating 'sign' and none for translating 'social'. Rare are the societies that conceive themselves as such.

Japanese 'society' has no use for social, historical and political ideals – and the same is even truer of Brazil or the Islamic world; or even, no doubt, of American society. In the end, we are but a few rare and exceptional collectivities to have developed that delicate bloom, the social contract.

And today it is already disappearing.

Transsexuality is not seductive, it is simply disturbing.

Mere ambiguity between the sexes has nothing in common with the spiritual thrill of seduction.

There is something physically disturbing about the ambiguity of bodies, but there is a metaphysical charm in the duality of the sexes.

Men escape from female sexual demands into androgyny or transvestism – women hide from male demands in modesty or sorcery.

In Italy, the men are affectionate, but the women never are. You feel they have a harsh revenge to wreak, their sensuality is full of bitterness and they are only happy in their lives when surrounded by broken men, swapping them as they swap their hysterical jealousies.

The Italian law on rape punishes 'inducement' (*indurre*), that is to say all form of forced solicitation, of abduction of . . . what? A glance, a gesture, turning the lights down low – all is rape since all is sign. The slightest gesture is a premiss of abduction.* The same is true of the feminist imaginary, which sees no difference between rape and seduction, every advance by the other is an unacceptable infringement of one's space [*une promiscuité inacceptable*].

But what is an inviolable and inalienable body? A dream of castration. The feminist dream is also the dream of the law (habeas corpus).

Not only can there be no seduction, but there can be no rape either without a minimal signal. A being capable of truly extinguishing all signals and emitting no anticipated response would be protected even from violence. This is indeed the attitude we instinctively take when faced with physical aggression or aggressive demands – suppression of the signals of fear or desire.

It is a delicious moment when she comes to bed beside me around five, after dancing the night away. I pretend to be asleep and she knows it. There is an echo of a night of partying in her body, which is now silent next to mine, but the music still rings out in it. Hot meets cold between the sheets: her tired body, overstimulated by light and movement, and mine, dark and motionless, attracting her in its coolness. This odd juxtaposition is reinforced by a certain jealousy: the one has been dancing, the other sleeping. But the superficial electricity of the one dissipates into the other's dreamy depths. The opposite situation has its beauty too, when I come home and lie down beside her sleeping form. The effervescence of the fun one has had dies away in the other's warmth, in their complicitous silence,

*Behind Baudrillard's *prémisse* lies the echo of its homonym, *prémice*, the beginning or first fruits. [Tr.]

like that of beaches at the end of summer when the sun is still hot and there is no one left to enjoy it.

You can't theorize something as the 'accursed share' [*part maudite*] without yourself being part of that curse.

There is, in any case, something ridiculous about explaining things. But the worst thing is to give meaning to something that hasn't got any. *We are all pretenders.**

Fresh and fragrant nudity in the dark, ultraviolet and tranquil nudity beneath the infrared gaze of the voyeur.

You can only distinguish the sublime from the pleasant by the fact that the memory of it grips your heart.

Her head is so light that she leaves no mark upon the pillow. The bed from which she rises is not unmade, the sheets have hardly moved, they have barely assumed her shape. She is so discreet, so light. It is like Chuang Tzu's knife, whose blade is never blunted. Her body just twitches with a few spasms before she falls asleep, the echo of the spasms of pleasure.

*In English in original. [Tr.]

A stone whose energy was not dissipated as heat on contact with the ground would bounce back eternally with undiminished elasticity. Without that friction, without that contact, without that energy loss, we would have perpetual motion.

Might what is unthinkable in the physical world nonetheless be the law of the mental world? Could it not be that a thought which lost none of its energy in being used, or in evaporation or in secondary effects, a thought which could remain free of all consequences, influence, or reference, would bounce back indefinitely and maintain this potential springiness, the sovereignty of moving bodies in empty space?

Victor/Victoria

In the disguising of this woman as a man, it is femininity which multiplies its seduction by ambiguity. This woman is much more beautiful in a dinner jacket and, because she remains a woman, with all the seductiveness of the opposite signs. It is no good seducing men, you also have to seduce *the signs* of the masculine.

It isn't homosexual charm that seduces the gangster, it is the divination of femininity through its metamorphosis, it is the presentiment of that femininity in the play of its disappearance.

This sublime form of ambiguity is properly feminine. The other form, the disguising of the masculine as feminine is merely grotesque.

The ending of the film shows this: there is no way that the masculine can play on the signs of the other to bask in its masculinity. This was Nico's magnificent idea years ago, to play the false cross-dresser. The true cross-dresser is monstrous, the false one marvellous.

The fact is that only the feminine retains a power of revelation – for its part, the masculine is no longer any secret, and that is the sad thing about it.

Femininity belongs to the realm of the secret, the masculine to the realm of the obscene. Which makes repressed femininity unbearable (it can no longer be divined), but femininity displayed is odious (it becomes masculine and takes on

the characteristics of the transvestite).

The masculine is not made for ambiguity, it only exists in erection and thus always constitutes a mildly comic spectacle (the feminine in disguise is, rather, ironic).

'How can you live with a woman who is playing at being a man?'

'But you, aren't you a gangster pretending not to be?'

'Where is the real person? Where is the pretend person?'

'We are all pretenders. Don't we all live double lives?'

'Aren't we all caught up in the vaudeville of ambiguity?'

Everything ambiguous is feminine. Everything that is no longer ambiguous is masculine in kind. That is the nature of the real sexual difference, which lies neither in sex nor in biology.

The greater the tendency to integrate man into mechanical and systemic effects, the more you have to swim against the tide, towards the hypothesis of the illogical sovereignty and material intelligence of things. This is not a mystical hypothesis. It is the only *funny* one.

A rule remains no less secret for being stated. A secret can be revealed or hidden from view, it becomes no less secret for that. It is even perfectly visible in its essence, but that visibility does not remove its wholly elusive character.

One of life's primal situations: the game of hide and seek. Oh, the thrill of hiding while the others come looking for you, the delicious terror of being discovered, but what panic when, after a long search, the others abandon you! You mustn't hide too well. You mustn't be too good at the game. The player must never be bigger than the game itself.

It's like making a joke which is so subtle that it goes unnoticed and you are reduced to explaining it.

Can we draw some other lesson from this?

There exists, between people in love, a kind of capital held by each. This is not just a stock of affects or pleasure, but also the possibility of playing double or quits with the share you hold in the other's heart. One of the strategies can be to sacrifice it at just the right moment and be the first to say: 'I'm not playing any more', since you then collect all the stakes.

Only therapy makes madness obscene, just as it is the care given to them which makes the handicapped obscene (*handicapped is beautiful*).* It is what drowns the cruelty of evil in the sentimentality of the gaze that is obscene. What is supremely obscene is pity, indecent condescension.

One day at Nanterre, in a course on seduction regularly attended by a speech-impaired and motor-handicapped student who nonetheless insists on speaking all the time – and precisely about seduction – sending a chill shudder through the audience with each of his failed contributions, along comes a beautiful feminist, here to combat seduction as sexist ideology. She sits by the handicapped man and throughout his contribution to the discussion leans tenderly towards him to slip a lighted cigarette into his mouth and make him smoke. Just as if she were sucking him off, she makes this wreck of a man suck on his butt like a mother giving him the breast, using him as both candlestick and alibi, all the while vituperating against males who have nothing in their heads but thoughts of seduction. Beautiful, provocative girl, quietly cooking up her revenge through the poor

*In English in original. [Tr.]

impotent, polio victim, who is himself glowing painfully with pleasure at this unexpected rape. Yes, the roles should have been reversed, but which way? She was making me fume too by the malicious pleasure she was taking in this performance and which I also detected in the contained joy of the pallid, perverse disabled man who had hated me from the start and from whom I had never been able to hide the horror he aroused in me – but what he aroused in me now was much worse, for I identified myself with him under the girl's symbolic caresses. She was enticing me by virtually masturbating him under my very eyes; she was saying to me: 'Look, if you were a mongol or impotent, you would be entitled to my favours, I am raping you through him and you are powerless to stop me.' (Later, when I met her by chance at a party, she started to flirt with me unscrupulously – but I would rather have been that handicapped student, for the space of a seminar, when she put the cigarette between his lips.)

She did not know him from Adam. It was a stroke of genius to place herself next to him and use him as a foil. It was odious, but it had a touch of genius. But for him, she would merely have been a ridiculous feminist.

I love this clearcut, cruel way of settling accounts, as I love those shafts of wit which mean that the end of the story never gets told. I love that woman shamefully exploiting a handicapped man to promote her shitty feminism, as I love this other woman who, in response to a compliment about her eyes, offers her lover the gift of one of them.

Where does the stereo effect begin, the point where the hi-fi becomes so uselessly sophisticated that the music is lost in the obsession for its fidelity? Where is the point where the social becomes so uselessly sophisticated that it itself goes into stereo and loses itself in the obsession for security? Today, the obsession with this technicity, this veracity, takes us away from music completely. It creates

a false destiny for music as it creates a false destiny for the social – to see its fulfilment simply as a matter of perfect execution.

We shall one day have dreams in walkman or video form, dreams to which we can add sound effects, which we can slow down or speed up, like television pictures, or play over a second time if we like them. Perhaps we'll even be able to tune in to other people's dreams on FM and converse by cable in our dreams? Dreams would at last have become a means of communication.

Conversely, the music of the walkman penetrates your body like a dream. Neither inside nor outside, it passes behind your eyes like a cenesthesic tape. But we manipulate it. We no longer accept images or sensations unless we can manipulate them. We don't have any great expectations of the substance of images any more, but we expect everything of their tactile and digital manipulation.

One thing protects us from change: exile. In unreality or at the other end of the world, in melancholy or the South, exile is a marvellous and comfortable structure.

Only the exiled have a land. I know some people who are only close to their country when they are 10,000 kilometres away, driven out by their own brothers. The others are nomads chasing their shadows in the deserts of culture.

There are two sorts of silence. The silence of words and the silence of the voice. This latter touches us more deeply.

John grows up normally, but doesn't talk, and this drives his parents to distraction. When he is about 16, at last, one teatime, he says: 'I'd like a little

sugar.' His mother is staggered and asks, 'But John, why have you never said anything up to now?' 'Up to now, everything was perfect.'

If everything is perfect, language is useless. This is true for animals. If animals don't speak, it's because everything's perfect for them. If one day they start to speak, it will be because the world has lost a certain sort of perfection.

'I desire you' is obscene.

'You make me feel very good' is more subtle – the other is here the subject of pleasure, not the object of desire.

Desire wants only orgasm; pleasure seeks to please.

There can't be any desire to please – 'pleasing' is implacable.

In days gone by, pleasing occupied the place of desire – today, desire discharges us from the need to please.

Even age may function as a 'natural' perversion. Women are not so much in search of their fathers as of the simple mystery of another generation, closer to death, but also to a previous life.

B.B.

– My understudy has had an operation for appendicitis.
– You're not going to sleep with the whole world. That's impossible, it's rape.
– I have a real understanding for wild animals who are hunted, by camera lenses, by machine-guns.
– A white Rolls and a black chauffeur.

Woman to the power of woman.

Coming home from a long journey.

How do human beings manage to exist so far from one another and to go about their business with such indifference? How do they manage to pretend to be so timeless in your absence? Amazement at the collusive banality of their lives so many thousands of miles apart, while your experience is of distances reduced to nothing by the surrealistic effect of speed. Amazement at the simultaneity of cities linked by jet in a single diagonal drawn across the night.

In fact, the cities of the world are concentric, isomorphic, synchronic. Only one exists and you are always in the same one. It's the effect of their permanent revolution, their intense circulation, their instantaneous magnetism – so different from the rural universe where a sense of the global simultaneity of exchanges does not exist. Through the short-circuit of the time difference, catching cities red-handed in the act of existing.

The only strategy is to be totally indifferent to either of the two opposing solutions. It is at this point that everything comes effortlessly to you since you don't know what fate you're precipitating yourself into. It's as if ideas appeared from both directions at the same time, since you are equally open to the other's strategy. And if he is defeated, it won't have been by the relation of forces, but because you could just as easily have taken his side. This suggests stratagems and solutions to you before which he can only yield.

If parapsychological or extraterrestrial phenomena were genuine, or even merely plausible, one ought to devote oneself to them entirely, wasting not a single moment. I cannot understand how one could waste even a second on other matters. But this also holds for science. If science is what it is, and truth is what it claims to be, they are worthy of a radical passion. Now, nothing like this actually happens. Not only the masses, but scientists themselves only devote themselves

to it half-heartedly. We only feel a relative passion, a casual commitment for truth, the same as we feel for irrational phenomena. Only the *suspense* of science can rouse a sudden interest, but that is the passion for suspense. It is aroused today by the fact that even scientists acknowledge there are no final answers in science.

Today the minute researches of science no longer produce anything but an artificial stereophony, stereonomic and holographic effects (the DNA double helix is one of these), and this mere shadow-play is all one needs to manipulate appearances. But the real that is caught in that way is eversive, if not indeed reversible. Under the subtle torture of science, all it ever confesses is its nonexistence.

The more profound things become, the more they slip away, as they do in a concave mirror. The escape into transcendence, the assumption of the world into some upper realm (the Law, the Idea, God, the Truth) has been replaced by a process of evanescence toward the lower reaches, the narrow escape into immanence.

Where the feminine resuscitates, without ideology, and without sexual hysteria either, in a joyous provocation, in a lascivious form of gratuitous self-exhibition, of ironic scenography of a sex without desire. Light, transparent perversion. New allegory of the body.

Indifferent little further researches
Historical little illuminations
Lascivious little intentions
Artificial little fiddles

Very matutinal little crystal
Very sensual little grey sky
Very private little random possibilities

We the living are never naked. Our gazes, our voices are themselves an adornment. Only in shame do we stand naked, when language is found wanting. And in death, of course, which is the worst of offences. But the dead themselves never left naked for the big sleep. And a woman never sleeps naked either – she always has a jewel or some makeup, a cream or a thought to serve her as protection against the abyss of sleep.

Electrolyzing gazes.
Feminizing lips.
Androgynizing eyes.
Vaporizing dreams.

The indifference of trees to the historical moment. The indifference of dreams to interpretation. The indifference of the people to its own triumph. The indifference of the body to the revolution. The dazzling metaphysical spectacle of the sameness of faces the morning after the revolution. Their features haven't changed. You expect a violent illumination and yet it's just like sleeping with your sister. It doesn't change your life.

There is an equal violence in taking the defence of the victims of violence, for commiseration is obscene.

Physical violence does not wound its victim in his sovereignty. Pity or

solidarity strike him precisely there, in his pride, in what is inhuman in man, what is cruel and haughty in him towards himself.

Cruelty has as its target man capable of being more than he is; pity has as its target man guilty of being just as he is.

If solidarity merely means sharing a wretched fate, as it does most of the time these days, then it is itself nothing but a form of abjection.

To devour someone with your eyes, to break through the cloudcover of their eyelashes, to violate these eyes streaming with tears, till you reach the hypocritical sun lit up by the idea of seduction, to enjoy others through their tears: this is a modern cannibalism of the emotions.

The tangled web of hatreds, of complicities, of rivalries between different schools of thought and of changes in mood causes each atom in the intellectual world, which lives in a state of overexposure to itself and its own bad conscience, to prefer itself, while all the atoms detest each other. There is in all this an unfathomable animosity, a thousand poisonous snakes entangled in communicating vessels. This microsociety has a mutual laceration as its adornment and the initiatory ordeal demanded at the entry to the intellectual sanctuary is this bond of hatred and exclusiveness. This is all a provincial passion, exacerbated by the sophistication of the means of expression available. The fact that certain disconcerting effects of beauty and truth may spring forth from time to time from this dungheap of human relations remains a miraculous paradox to be counted among the oddities of existence or ascribed to the ruses of virtue.

It is a long time now since the credits started going further than the films

themselves in audacity, humour and the elliptical art of handling images. And if the difference is not so great as it was, that's because the films themselves have taken a lead from the credits.

Behind the pile of information, we can hardly see what is going on in the firmament of current affairs. But what is happening in the firmament of the not-so-current? There is no critical distance any more, there is only pure distance. And this is not engendered by any objection to means or ends, but by an effect of the destruction of causes. Pure distance results from a withdrawal of the object into radical objectivity. New passions are emerging, and those which shine out brightest are humour, objective chance, astronomical complexity, fascination, allegory, ellipsis, indifference and impatience.

The work of the negative. Having ended in history, this has also come to an end in the video or digital image: no more negative, no more depth, less definition (only close-ups work well). Immediate positive synthesis of the image. Tactile and digital: the image no longer made present by the sense of sight, but by the digital sense, which is a sense designed for processing and control.

Vélizy. All those shepherds in the Pyrenees who are being fitted out with fibre optics, radio relay stations and cable TV. Obviously the stakes are pretty high! And not just in social terms. Did these people think they were already living in society, with their neighbours, their animals, their stories? What a scandalously underdeveloped condition they were in, what a monstrous deprivation of all the blessings of information, what barbaric solitude they were kept in, with no possibility of expressing themselves, or anything.

We used to leave them in peace. If they were called on, it was to get them to come and die in the towns, in the factories or in a war. Why have we suddenly developed a need for them, when they have no need of anything? What do we want them to serve as witnesses of? Because we'll force them to if we have to: the new terror has arrived, not the terror of 1984, but that of the twenty-first century. The new negritude has arrived, the new servitude. There is already a roll-call of the martyrs of information. The Bretons whose TV pictures are restored as soon as possible after the relay stations have been blown up . . . Vélizy . . . in the Pyrenees. The new guinea pigs. The new hostages. Crucified on the altar of information, pilloried at their consoles. Buried alive under information. All this to make them admit the inexpressible service that is being done to them, to extort from them a confession of their sociality, of their 'normal' condition as associated anthropoids.

Socialism is destroying the position of the intellectual.

Unlearn what they say. Either they don't believe in it themselves or the violent effort they make to believe in it is disagreeable.

We are in a period in which the mental and intellectual structures are burying themselves, becoming interred in memories, archives, far from the sun, in search of silent efficiency or an improbable resurrection. All thoughts are burying themselves in prudent preparation for the Year 2000. They can already sense the coming terror of the Year 2000. They are instinctively adopting the solution of those cryogenized individuals who are immersed in liquid nitrogen until a technique can be found to ensure their survival. They are like those funereal commodities locked away in the underground sarcophagus of the *Forum des Halles* as a potential museum, an excavation site for the post-catastrophe generations. They

will never awake again, but they don't know that. The Year 2000 will not happen, but they don't know that.

Playing dead. This runs from paralysis to animal mimicry or to the messianic convulsion of the first Christians who, weary of awaiting the promised Heaven, sought to hasten the parousia by their own deaths.

The same promise lies behind any kind of suicide or form of disappearance: so many snares to seduce God by anticipating the end. What is needed is a trap to deflect God from history. The Cathars had invented perfection for that purpose, to deflect God from his waiting and bring him up directly against his immediate responsibility.

It is the same promise which terrorism makes: it attempts to entrap the authorities by an immediate act, without waiting for the end of history. It places itself in the ecstatic position of the end, hoping to bring about the conditions of the Last Judgement. Nothing of the sort occurs of course, but the challenge is an admirable one.

Isn't there a hint of such a demand in the global phantasm of catastrophe hovering over the world today? The demand for a violent resolution of things rather than letting them slip away into hyperreality. If the half-glimpsed ends escape us, if it is clear that the message will never have had time to reach the end of history, since that end will have occurred in between (still the story of Kafka's Messiah: too late, always too late), then we might as well play dead, play at bringing the end forward, shortcircuit the coming of the Messiah, fake the occurrence of events, speed up the passage of time, impatient for fulfilment, but secretly harbouring the intuition that the promise too is, in any case, false and diabolic.

When you succeed not in destroying something but in obliterating its origins and its end, it disappears (the solution to the problem of the illusionist?). It is

not, however, physically dead. It remains resplendent in *a sort of state of grace which is that of disappearance.* It inaugurates a second, pure and empty form of the event or person, *which is the form of fate.*

What has disappeared has every chance of reappearing. For what dies is annihilated in linear time, but what disappears passes into the state of constellation. It becomes an event in a cycle which may bring it back many times (is this the secret of the Rose of Paracelsus?).

My beloved has flown off to Seville
she is certainly not alone
yet I dream of her
and of last night

Haiku

Poetry reeks too much of poetry and philosophy too much of philosophy. Each suffers from an abominable redundancy, the one an affectation of diction, the other an affectation of profundity. We find both equally tiresome.

This man (the hero of the *Suite Vénétienne*)* will have had a complete destiny. Not only will he have been followed and photographed – sublime destiny – but, since he slipped away and all the photographs had to be retaken without him, his place will also have been taken by a stand-in – a derisory destiny.

*Sophie Calle, *Suite Vénétienne.* [Tr.]

Terrorism is an intolerant reaction to the hypertolerance of our societies, just as rape may be an intolerance of our boundless sexual tolerance (paradoxically, the number of rapes increases with the degree of sexual liberation). It is second-generation violence – a reaction to the absence of violence. The same is true of the second-generation illnesses (cancer): they are a reaction to the hyperprotection of our bodies.

When a woman turns off all signals of pleasure in your arms and leaves you no other solution but a disenchanted rape, no phantasy is any use. But the same applies when her sexual demand is so great as to leave no room even for the illusion of rape.

The real is obese, cannibalistic, nostalgic and sentimental. God preserves us from it as from the excesses of the world. Irony preserves what little reality the world has and its rates of uncertain fatality.

I was very frightened on the plane back from Barcelona. There was a group of old age pensioners on board, returning from the Balearics. For many of these old ladies it was the first trip they'd ever taken, a bit like a pilgrimage to Lourdes, and we all know those are the planes that crash.

Their twittering, tittle-tattle, trifling quarrels and deep disappointment created a sense of impending doom, as proximity to stupidity always does.

That horror of horrors, the cheery group always offends against the sublime nature of the backdrop, especially the backdrop to a flight. Their lack of respect for this glide through the stratosphere, which, being both slow and supersonic, is without doubt the most beautiful metaphor for the speed of our exchanges, the supernatural *mise en scène* of our analyses (for our ancestors, it was up in the mountains that transcendence was to be found. For us, it is in this continuous

culmination of a flight, verticality running horizontally, altitude in motion). Their stupid indifference to all this in some way merited divine punishment, and I began to gaze intently out of the porthole in order to deflect God from wreaking his vengeance.

The mystery of absolute zero. Whereas there are no bounds to how high heat can rise, there is a limit to the depths of cold. What goes on around this −270 degree point, that makes it impossible to cross? The absolute motionlessness of molecules, the halting of Brownian motion itself – and hence *the end of uncertainty*?

Death is merely a relative phase. When you think about it, the corpse continues to swarm with the frantic movement of electrons. For our ancestors, this swarming only went as far as the crawling of worms in the decaying carcass, for us it goes right down to that of particles in the primal soup.

It's the other way round with speed: there is no speed beyond the speed of light, the absolute limit of acceleration, whilst slowness can descend to an infinitesimal point. There is no absolute stillness.

Wild speculations these, which are in fact connected with superstitions about numbers: it is linearity which gives rise to this idea of a limit point. Qualities, for their part, have no limits: beyond red, there is violet, and beyond violet, another potential sensation. This is the field of metamorphoses.

While you are speaking, she looks only at your hands. She seems fascinated by their movement and isn't listening any more. A strange gesture, it's affecting, it's so out of place, like a sign of gentle madness . . . these are the same women who, in love, say, 'Look at me, don't abandon me, don't leave me alone' . . .

Moist, lively, clear lips. Fresh and bantering lips, like their laughter in the

night air of the Côte des Neiges. Neither Latin sensuality, nor American disembodiment, but an ironic liberty that is the product of a winter civilization, a hyperboreal form of tenderness and sexual insolence, a new form of femininity perhaps . . .

There is more to fashion than a sociology of distinction can express. It is a collective passion. Culture in general is more than a differential mechanism, it is the form of prestige which a whole society without distinction confers upon itself, by an impassioned concatenation of forms, of language, of signs, which is a challenge to the grammatical order of differences, though at the same time rooted within it. It seems we have lost this demiurgic version of culture and lapsed into the semio- and sociological version.

You are consumed by passion, but [in French] you feed on obsessions. Obsession is the alimentary form of passion.

When a woman is naked, the weather clouds over
When the weather clouds over, her eyes are clear
When her eyes cloud over, her belly is warm

We are in shifting circumstances in which nothing is hidden and everything is mobile – a world of a quite new kind of innocence, but a world no longer illuminated by the utopian constellation of secrecy.

The individual is less alienated by the fact that everything is known about him than by the fact that he is called upon to know everything about himself. In this demand lies the principle of a new and irreversible servitude.

There is much more to be hoped for in an excess of information or of weapons than in the restriction of information or arms control.

*Da, wo die Gefahr wächst, wächst das Rettende auch.**

In Quebec, during a strike, the students occupied the computer room. Not because they wanted to knock out a nerve centre of imperialism, but simply because it was winter and it was the only place where they could keep warm, since the authorities could not run the risk of turning off the current, for fear of corrupting the computer memories.

Beauty is not negotiable since its radiance simply emerges irrespective of any efforts made to deserve it, and no one can offer it its equivalent. Its annihilation it must also perform *itself*. That was what drugs were to her: a calculated abjection, a denial of her own radiant beauty, suicide.

You only need to talk about one woman to another to awaken in the one the idea of replacing the other. A woman only has to talk to you about another woman for you to want to transfer your affections from her to the other. It is madness to deny the existence of this transferential infidelity.

If it were confronted with its ideological objectives and its stated aims, Soviet society would immediately collapse. But – and the reason for this is both a disappointment and a mystery – it remains intact. You can easily forget that it

*'But where there is danger, there grows/Also what saves.' (Hölderlin). In German in original. [Tr.]

does so only on account of a collective collusion in the *comedy* of ideology, the *comedy* of bureaucracy. As a general rule, any society only continues to exist by collusion in the *deriding* of its own model.

This truth is also strikingly evident in Italy. In this case, however, the situation is reversed, for there the state is weak, its institutions in confusion and its principles corrupted. This is, however, immaterial, because derision recreates a mysterious social consensus and a cunning solidarity which prevents the whole system from collapsing.

Peep-show, striptease:* the indifference of the body to the gaze directed at it. Bodies tactile in their presence, and yet intact in their essence, when their undulations forbid the onlooker's gaze to rest on them. Invulnerable transcendence of woman and her body. Bodies haloed by their sexual attributes which are like the finery of some animal – what sex is deep down and why we marvel at it. It is, therefore, a wholly spiritual passion for theatrical production which guides this spectacle, as it guided nature in the magnificent staging of the species and their differences.

Idle, archaic, indifferent mentality. I am beginning to feel I might give all this up, as if the challenge were not worth the trouble, might give up all judgement. This state of mind has been with me from childhood, from adolescence – a lacklustre, slipshod, idle, irresponsible, uncultivated, undesiring state.

These books, did they ever interest me? These women, did I ever feel any emotion for them? All these different countries, did I want to discover them?

Only the inhumanity of things has affected me, and I have in fact been

*In English in original. [Tr.]

unable to bring this into my own life. I read this verdict in the graph of the tonality of events, of the melancholy of faces, of the vanity and futility of our undertakings. I am still astonished by the mirror we can offer to others, by the loving or ironic image which we still are sometimes in each others' mirrors.

Increasingly, it is machines, not people, who get nervous. People only become nervous if they force themselves to look like machines.

All situations where you have to make a choice come down to this: do you prefer a woman with a very ordinary body but an attractive face, or one whose body is attractive, but whose face is nothing special? The problem is a false one. It is always preferable to be in a situation where there is no choice to be made either because the woman is perfect, or because she is the only one available.

The Dream: a heavy lorry carrying a block of hewn marble collides with the columns of a building which looks like Versailles or St Peter's, Rome. The lorry overturns and the driver gets out, cursing. In the meantime, the whole façade of the building sways and slowly collapses. And, at that point, like rats leaving a sinking ship, all the statues, which up till then had remained motionless in their various positions, upright, stooping, or leaning back, slowly begin to wake, to stir, to open their eyes and run off to escape the disaster. Were they human beings who had been playing this role for centuries? They had been waiting for the end to break free.

This extraordinary capacity of women for survival (even in love and breakup) which comes easy to them, since, after all, they were on the scene nine months

before you, and so will be there nine months after you too. Measured time begins at birth; but the other kind of time began before that. Woman, who holds sway over this antenatal time, is logically also in control of time after death.

Dallas. The scriptwriters have each of the actresses in the soap opera play the death scene in the swimming pool: they do not know which of them is to die, and hence disappear from the series.

The 'soap' becomes their destiny. If they should die in reality, a way is devised for writing them out of the script. If they are sacrificed in the script, their stardom inevitably comes to an end in real life too, since they are identified with the characters they play.

It is the same as in a ceremony: outside the ritual, you count for nothing, but the ritual is flexible enough to make use of all the chance happenings of life. *Dallas*'s secret lies in its closeness to tribal and initiatory stereotypes. That is why there is never any laughter in it: no wit, no humour, no comic episodes, no happy coincidences. It is a closed world in which everything leads inevitably to fatality, perfidy, sentimental incest or magical cannibalism. Such is the tribal law, of which J.R. is the emblem, which gives rise to the desperate efforts on the part of the women to escape from this archaic trap.

In its artless cruelty, *Dallas* is superior to any 'intelligent' critique that can be made of it. That is why intellectual snobbery meets its match here.

In a dream I saw the face of servitude. It is the face of a woman with heavy-lidded, blue, expressionless eyes. The crescent shapes of her breasts are asymmetrical. She always has a smile for the poorest as she crawls off daintily towards infinity.

Boredom is like a pitiless zooming in on the epidermis of time. Every instant is dilated and magnified like the pores of the face.

Luxury in trains or planes today consists in being spoken to. You are kept in a state of information about the journey, a state of alert about your own body (a good metabolism, relax) of cultural stimulation (music, films), and even in a subliminal question-and-answer state (the tactile language of the woman announcer, the air hostess's 'voiceover'). Whether you are travelling at 180 m.p.h. or in the sky at 600 m.p.h., you do not leave the semiosphere. That's the luxury of 'business class'.

Everyone else is carted around like cattle.

The mystic dream of every iceberg is to travel as far south as possible, perhaps – who knows? – till it meets its end in equatorial waters. Poor iceberg laden with the despair of the poles at being so far from the equator, and so distant from each other. So far, not a single one of them has succeeded in this senseless venture.

Dying away like the wind at the day's end
Ending like an idol lit up on all sides
Smiling at this diffuse light which envelops the objects of denial
Saluting the point of no return
Zarathustra. Twilight ethics

The scandal of the end of the world will not occur, for the very good reason that existence has already been judged and declared unjustifiable. This world must

thus be considered the only one there'll ever be, the verdict immanent, injustice irremediable. This has nothing to do with the natural tendency of things but rather with the bestial ethic smouldering in the labyrinthine entrails of human beings, which requires that the just be separated from the unjust, the good from the bad, so that the truest, stupidest and most sentimental order may triumph.

In fact there is no need to wait. Let the stupidest things triumph, that is the Last Judgement.

When you have lumbago, you have to move like a reptile. You have to get through your movement before the muscle has had time to feel pain. It is the same with ideas and language. You have to have got to the end of the sentence, before language has had time to feel pain.

The omega point of a system is the point of a pure circulation of energies destined, by the very fact of that circulation, to indifference and death. In such a system exchange becomes impossible owing to an immanent equivalence – every particle is in suspense before the only possible event: the meeting with the antiparticle which will cancel it out. It is at this point that the entire system nears the alpha point of another mechanism. Beyond a certain phase the whole system tends towards this fatal point.

Radical objectivity is the exact opposite of the objectivity of science. The one addresses the rationality of partial processes, the other the irony of the overall process.

Women constitute a secret society. They are all involved together in secret

discussions. Those I have known – none of whom have known the others except by accident – nonetheless weave amongst themselves a collusive web of seduction. They signal to each other, as the events in a lifetime signal to each other in their apparently indifferent spiral. Moreover, each one, with an unacknowledged fervour, envelops all her rivals, past and future, in the same field of jealousy, fascination and complicity – and in turn she is all the others together, those whom you have kept apart in life, finally united in the only real secret society – the dream society, the society of women.

Reversibility, like that of day and night, of all the concepts at the equatorial heart of the system: this paradoxical, derisory, indefensible and therefore impregnable position is the bitter privilege of phantom rhetorics.

As for freedom, it will soon cease to exist in any shape or form. Living will depend upon absolute obedience to a strict set of arrangements, which it will no longer be possible to transgress. The air traveller is not free. In the future, life's passengers will be even less so: they will travel through their lives fastened to their (corporate) seats.

Theory must not only be cut off from its reference, but also from any commentary: it's not normal to carry out an autopsy on a newborn child.

Is not the world itself, once it is removed from the nightmare of objectivity perpetrated by science – the intention of which was to pay it impartial homage – an effect without a cause? And thus also without consequence. There is no sense, then, in musing on its failure.

All these poor old people, these guinea-pigs of retirement who, freed at last from sex and work, hoped to find rest in a sort of indifference to life and an anticipated pleasure of death, by far the best way of growing old – no one will be able to say we have left them a place in the sun at the end of the road. No, they have to be persecuted to the bitter end, retrained, libidinalized (have fun! get into something! it's never too late), culturalized (theatre, cinema, discussion groups, yoga, sixteenth-century music) – no efforts will be spared to enable them to die stupid.

Gradual cessation of activity, visual handicap, impairment of speech and hearing, etc.: all euphemisms. Words themselves have fallen victim to a shameful illness. A cat is no longer a cat, it is an associated feline. Language is defenceless.

There was, in Aztec thinking, the idea that the sun only shines to fulfil a symbolic obligation, and that men must know how to pay the price for this. This is the universe of cruelty. We, by contrast, believe the *function* of the sun is to shine for everyone by virtue of the rights of man and equality of opportunity. A sorry challenge which the sun rejects. We seem to have been having far less sunshine of late.

Language can no longer allow itself to be caught up with the philosophical theatricality of its object. It must also itself become an attack by fascination.

Instead of making a note of a particular appointment at a certain time, I note down the time alongside the time. Next to Tuesday evening, I write 'Tuesday evening' – completely unable to make this juxtaposition coincide with any point in

time. It's rather like the sign which is signalling to itself and orders you not to see it. '*Ignore this sign*.'*

The way the bumble-bee holds itself motionless in mid-air, its energy derived from the fact that it makes no sound. The flowers are moved by this silent conjugality.

Silent little dirty tricks
Felonious little anomalies
Interstitial little offences
Pulpy little transgressions
The medusas of the exception
are the solution petrified
by the ruse of broken lines.

Beaubourg: the sacred rubbish-heap of stockpiled values (the fifth floor) – the desacralized rubbish-heap of free expression (the piazza). Added to which today is a heap of real rubbish caused by a strike among the maintenance staff. A logical strike this, since its demand is that the management of refuse disposal be included in culture (there is at this very moment an exhibition of refuse at Beaubourg) and that the staff should be directly employed by the institution. Yet the latter, for all its devotion to mobility, versatility and the absorption of the heteroclite, seems incapable of mastering this situation. It will die, therefore, of its own waste, and in so doing serve as a model to postmodern civilization. Beaubourg is destined to

*In English in original. [Tr.]

exercise the fascination of dead centres, to suffer pestilence and pillage. It is an object that is wrecked before it even begins, a monument to continual absorption and evacuation, an involutive, voracious, fractal zone, where parasitisms are pushed to the limit and lines of demarcation vanish, giving way simply to the incestuous virulence of the multitude fallen prey to itself. Let us leave it this spectral quality of putrid object, condemned to rapid degradation – the only modern object we have produced, unintentionally.

What sense would there be in blending in these urban monsters (Beaubourg, La Villette, La Défense, Opéra, Bastille, etc.) with the city or the surrounding area? They are not monuments; they are monsters. They testify not to the integrity of the city but to its disintegration, not to its organic nature but to its disorganization. They do not provide a rhythm for the city and its exchanges; they are projected on to it like extraterrestrial objects, like spacecraft falling to earth from some dark catastrophe. Neither centre nor periphery, they mark out a false centrality and around them lies a false sphere of influence; in reality they reflect the satellization of urban existence. Their attraction serves only to impress the tourists, and their function, like that of airports and places of interchange in general, is that of a place of expulsion, extradition, and urban ecstasy. Moreover, this is what all the alternative groups and the subculture that congregate there are primarily looking for: an empty ecstasy, an icefloe in outer space, a cosmopolitan strand, a parasitic site . . . We must take them as they are – monsters they are; monsters we must leave them.

Blindly: that is the only elegant way to love. What reproach could there be for someone who discreetly and totally devotes himself to another; what reproach could there be for someone who is the object of such devotion? Blind destination: that is the direction dreams go, in ideas and love.

All this soft, rich little world wakes up every morning reflected off its gardens and the nearby sea. Fine, lean horses graze between the tulip fields and heavy girls with bright eyes pedal furiously around the streets of Amsterdam. Despite the obvious signs of *savoir-vivre,* including alternative social and sexual forms, history has left no trace here of a genuine culture or, in other words, of a charm, a distinction, a superfluity, a stylized violence, as it has in Italy.

They seem to carry in their bodies these long diphthongs, the vowels of a dialect language, *niederdeutsch* which seems not to have achieved the agility and decantation of true language. These bourgeois folk have cultivated a provincial worldwideness which is fat, solid and guttural. There is a hazy, dappled sky over Roosendaal. When, oh when was this land at the centre of the world, with Spinoza's ravings about substance and Vermeer's light?

In this town where everyone kept running into everyone else, whom they knew, I just kept running into my own face and name on the walls.

And I placed my fingers on her eyes as though I were touching the silent controls of a TV set. Those places which one only touches lightly – the eyes of course, certain soft parts of the body, impervious to sexuality, which wish neither to be penetrated nor violently caressed – where the blood courses lightly beneath the surface of the skin, where meaning courses lightly beneath the surface of words.

The ferocity of women towards one another. No sooner has one 'got' her man, than not only does she look pityingly upon the other, but sees to it that she feels all her misery too.

There is no more of a dialectic between subject and object than there is between light and darkness. The one is simply the absence of the other. That is all there is to it, though it is, in itself, quite extraordinary.

Three hours of enforced drifting in the circuits of the city; tailbacks, a breakdown, police stupidity and then a road accident. Numbed by the heat, caught up in the general impatience and the inability to escape from one network without falling into another – and all this in a memorable attempt to reach my place of work, the place of my alienation. I was able here fully to gauge how the post-modern urban individual mutant is henceforth separated from his alienated being by an even more powerful system, in which he is required to become not even a thing, but simply a blind, furious particle. This type of particularity was not anticipated by Hegel. A little later I had the same experience, this time trying to reach my place of freedom – my house in the country. The motorway was blocked, the road too; the car was tired of all these comings and goings, and so was I. It is obvious it is as crazy to try to reach your place of leisure as it is to reach your place of work. There is no longer any sense in wanting to go anywhere at all. I dream of driving around in the desert with a thousand miles of empty space on every side. That is the only freedom there is.

In certain countries it was the custom to hang people from dead trees. Because it was for the dead to regenerate the dead.

This is more or less the way socialism has died, hanged with its own rope. Defunct, necrophagous history requires victims to feed its end and it is upon socialism – which is already deeply rooted in our contemporary history like a dead tree – that this role has devolved. There is, therefore, a link between the sterility of the media events of our age and socialism as 'strange fruit', swaying in the hyperreal wind of the end of history – and, moreover, innocent of any specific crime.

This heat in the belly which remains after the evisceration and freezing of bodies can be nothing other than the jealousy of the living for the dead. Our jealousy for the object is that of miserable subjects for what has passed living into a perfection which is beyond us. Man's jealousy of woman, that more than sexual heat, that heat of passion, is born of a desire for what has been torn from him and reincarnated elsewhere in the other sex – and is it not indeed diabolical? – and which sneers at him from there like the hypostasis of the best of himself.

Consoling signs. After the fear of victory, which causes the sportsman to fail at the last gasp, after the fear of power – the fear of wielding power – which even the political class shows many signs of, falling in this way into the loneliness of the long-distance runner, we now see science beset by weakness. Reaching the end of the course, this flat-footed idol is also frightened of its shadow.

One of the objectives of Satellite X is to study the social behaviour of ants in a state of weightlessness. This is less absurd than you might think – not for the result, but for what it tells us about ourselves: are we not ourselves in a state of weightlessness? Isn't it our sociality which is already weightless? Though we are unable to master this phase of the evolution of the species, we still have the power to exorcize it in the form of experimentation in space. The solution to all our problems seems to be to put them into orbit.

Dogs and roses.

All these suburban houses bespangled with roses and bristling with dogs. A dog behind every rose bush. For people and their hellish imaginaries, dogs are as ornamental as roses. In reality, the roses are just as vicious as the dogs or an electrified fence. There are too many of them, they are too red, their carnivorous

petals close on a forbidden space. The pleasantness of the residential suburbs, the pleasantness of the sarcophagi of greenery where the television aerials gleam. The pleasantness of aphanisis in the death-laden detached houses, set in a bower of lilacs and hollyhocks. The only sign of the frenzied urge to bite and fight, the only sign of the vitrified and howling passions beneath the film of plastic is the beast of the Apocalypse, barking on the horizon beyond the flower beds.

Wind and heat are sterile effects – they stimulate the mind by the mobility of fluids and their complicit enthusiasm.

But it is best when they fight one another. High in the sky, the clouds form and break up quickly, like animals at play. Often there is a double wind, a furtive southern breeze moves northwards through the vines and high above a stratospheric wind blows the clouds from north to south. The sky is constantly changing.

The disappearance of light, its slipping away towards other skies, is more enigmatic each day. As the moon climbs higher, another wind rises and plays all these events over in reverse.

The course of time, like that of a river, follows the line between the geological faults, from the blue one in the west where the mountain range lies to that of the sea, where the heat comes dripping slow. But space itself is delivered up to the passion of the wind. Everything depends upon an aerial and mineral passion.

To come here each year is an absolute reward.

He illuminates the landscape of society with an intense, ultrasensitive light and brings out a strange, hyperreal relief – a coherent reading, precisely like the light of a laser.

The local is a shabby thing. There's nothing worse than bringing us back down to our own little corner, our own territory, the radiant promiscuity of the face to face. A culture which has taken the risk of the universal, must perish by the universal.

Exile always offers a marvellous – pathetic or dramatic – distance, a distance which aids judgement, a serenity orphaned by its own world. Deterritorialization, on the other hand, is a demented deprivation. It is like a lobotomy. It has in it something of agony, of the inconstancy and disconnection of circuits.

You need an infinite stretch of time ahead of you to start to think, infinite energy to make the smallest decision. The world is getting denser. The immense number of useless projects is bewildering. Too many things have to be put in to balance up an uncertain scale. You can't disappear any more. You die in a state of total indecision.

A frenzy of indifference in these times of 'speed'. In the same way as you can counter the acceleration of your molecules with an iced drink, you have to head off artificial euphoria by pulling on the brake of melancholy.

Science and technologies could have become extensions of our human faculties, as MacLuhan wanted. Instead, they have devoured them. They have become sarcastic, like the laugh of the same name which devours flesh or like the creatures on the banks of the Styx which destroy the substance of the mental faculties.

A handicapped person is, by force of circumstance, a potential expert, a

mutant in the motor and sensory domain. It is no accident that the social is increasingly being organized around him: the blind person and the spastic constitute testing grounds, interesting mechanisms which it seems proper to cerebralize, whilst at the same time socializing them for form's sake. They have it in them to become wonderful instruments, precisely because they are immobilized and therefore marked down for automatism and remote control. The normal man will never make such a good automaton as someone who is disabled or spastic. There is nothing new in all this. It was eunuchs who provided the most beautiful voices in the choirs of the Renaissance.

In summer you hear dogs howling in the evening, you see insomniacs tending their plants in the middle of the night, you can read in lifeless, blazing eyes that anguished euphoria characteristic of the longer days, of the relentless sun, of that extraversion of heat which forces you into a pure and objectless physical pleasure and which for many amounts to a situation verging upon suicide. Those who stay in the towns seem to be walking a tightrope. They know that while the others are away they are keeping sociality going. In much the same way as they water the neighbour's geraniums while he is away – yet both groups are taking on a historic and dramatic role: the one that of abandoning the city for who knows what exodus of pleasure, the other that of keeping an eye on the set. In fact, it is a wholesale catastrophe. The town is playing out its exodus, it is emptying without having been bombed; it is delivering itself up to its slaves (the immigrants) in a fleeting Saturnalia.

Several girls, naked and virginal, are playing around in a bathtub. I ask them what they are playing at. They say they are playing the social elephants game.

Temperatures, petrol prices, the price of the dollar: the golden triangle of our summer. These are facts beyond our control and all we hope now is to see them all rising indefinitely. Sometimes the figures are mixed up in a prophetic confusion, as in 1980 in the US deserts. There, the price per gallon: $1.18, $1.20, $1.25, varied from one place to another as an exact reflection of the temperature graphs: 100, 110 and 120 degrees Fahrenheit. With the question of confidence always lurking just beneath the surface: what price would you accept petrol rising to? What point do you think the dollar could go up to (with the implication: before causing a crash in world economies)? What record level can the heat reach (before causing a volatilization of energy and the beginnings of a worldwide insomnia)? Our artificial destiny is written in these asymptotic curves.

The social year stops when summer starts. For eight months of the year, the cold, the social, democracy and political necessities prevail. When summer arrives, another atmosphere takes over: the heat, terrorism, accidents, olympic records, the 'silly season', folk culture and the silence of the intellectuals. It is the same each year. Even the return from the holidays isn't what it used to be. There are no more great social tides at the equinoxes. Only a pendular movement from one solstice to another.

The immorality of those families whose children are burnt alive on motorways. They have money heaped on them by social welfare institutions and they go and spend it on consumer goods, which the right-thinking regard as sordid. But they have never had to see their kids die before they could buy a car and, hence, have never felt the need to send them off for inexpensive holidays on those coaches which, as if by chance, always have fatal accidents.

The immorality of those who eat their children in hard cash merely corresponds to the immorality of the social institution which recompenses their death.

Everything in this vicious circle is abject: chance, which kills the poorest children, social charity which turns their deaths into a source of income, the parents who benefit from it to enjoy a short spell of wealth and decent society which stigmatizes them, for rumour does not condemn them at all for their indiscreet behaviour but for not handling the money rationally by putting it in the bank, for example, but instead spending it unscrupulously, thus verifying that they were indeed the victims of a divine justice.

The whole of the social is there in its logical abjection. It is the poor who die and it is they who deserved to. It is this mediocre truth, this mediocre fatality which we know as 'the social'.

Which amounts to saying that it only exists for its victims. Wretched in its essence, it only affects the wretched. It is itself a disinherited concept and it can only serve to render destitution complete. Nietzsche is right: the social is a concept, a value made by slaves for their own use, beneath the scornful gaze of their masters who have never believed in it.

This can be clearly seen in all the so-called social reforms which inescapably turn against the intended beneficiaries. The reforms strike those whom they should save. This is not a perverse effect. Nature herself conforms to this willingly and catastrophes have a preference for the poor. Has a catastrophe ever been seen which directly strikes the rich – apart perhaps from the burial of Pompeii and the sinking of the *Titanic*?

Male eroticism in advertising is always ridiculous. Those who argue for it as the equivalent of the 'erotic prostitution' of the female body on the public stage have no understanding of the mental play of images. The success of the erotic hallucination of the feminine (even for women) comes from the translucidity of those arses, their perfection as objects of idolatry. Only the feminine lends itself to this hallucination. The masculine is never transparent, it cannot be hallucinated. Once it appears, with its ponderousness, its affectation, the magic of the object is

gone. The masculine performs poorly on the stage of illusion: whatever thinks it is a subject is always exposed to ridicule by the play of appearances.

All it can do is disappear.

If we consider the superiority of the human species, the size of its brain, its powers of thinking, language and organization, we can say this: were there the slightest possibility that another rival or superior species might appear, on earth or elsewhere, man would use every means at his disposal to destroy it. Humans won't tolerate any other species – not even a superhuman one: they see themselves as the climax and culmination of the earthly entreprise, and they keep a vigorous check on any new intrusion in the cosmological process. Now there is no reason why this process should come to a halt with the human species, but, by universalizing itself (though only over a few thousand years) that species has more or less fixed it that an end be put to the occurrence of the world, assuming for itself all the possibilities of further evolution, reserving for itself a monopoly of natural and artificial species.

This is not the ferocity of wild and predatory animal species, for these are part of cycles, and are located within constantly reversible hierarchies: neither their appearance nor their disappearance ever puts an end to the process. Only man invents a hierarchy against which there is no possible appeal, in which he is the keystone. This is a sort of ferocity raised to the second power, a disastrous pretension.

The ferocity of man as a species is reflected in the ferocity of humanism as a way of thinking: his claim to universal transcendence and his intolerance of other types of thought is the very model of a superior racism.

Whilst they are hardly to be seen in real life these days, the most intense passions continue to figure in our dreams. Are these then a reserve of fresh and

timeless energy, running beneath the stages of life (and perhaps reaching beyond the mishap that is death)? Or is this freshness not merely the hallucination of a jaded desire? In other words: are there two lines to our lives, the one of a non-biological, immemorial youth, which we experience in dreams, and the other an organic line of life and death, of duration and of remembrance, with which we identify our pale and mortal existence? Could there be two fundamental sequences and no relation between them? Or is the first simply the projection of the second, its hallucinatory discourse, as, deep down, psychoanalysis argues?

I am for the first hypothesis: we have two existences, each of which is wholly original and independent of the other (it is not a case of a psychological splitting). Neither existence can be used to interpret the other – which is why psychoanalysis is futile.

There is certainly some interplay between body and mind. The weaker the body, the more apparent the organic wretchedness or obsolescence of that machine, the freer and the more adventurous one's thinking becomes. It too partakes of that sort of timeless youth which has nothing whatever to do with being in the prime of life. Thinking lives on neither health nor vitality, but on lucidity and pride, and the decaying of the body stimulates that lucidity and that pride.

There is nothing worse than this obligation to research, to seek out references and documentation that has taken up residence in the realm of thought and which is the mental and obsessional equivalent of hygiene. In the 'intellectual field', as it is so aptly called, one has to plough the furrow of the concept. It is true that we no longer have a culture of leisure, in which thought and writing were violent and pleasurable. And our leisure now is no more than the charnel-house where dead time is born.

The anxiety specific to leisure and the Coast. Too many forms of natural beauty artificially brought together. Too many villas, too many flowers. Villegiatura, nomenklatura: the same struggle. The same artificial privilege, whether it be that of the political bureaucracy or the luxuriance of lifestyle. Nature putrefied by leisure, purged of all barbarity, sickeningly comfortable – one day perhaps this dream climate, this heatwave of luxury will explode into one last forest fire.

The book must break up so as to resemble the ever increasing number of extreme situations. It must break up to resemble the flashes of holograms. It must roll around on itself like the snake on the mountains of the heavens. It must turn all the figures of style on their head. It must fade away as it is being read. It must laugh in its sleep. It must turn in its grave.

If there is a species which is more maltreated than children, then it must be their toys, which they handle in an incredibly off-hand manner (how long will it be before someone starts a society for the protection of battered and maltreated objects?). Toys are thus the end point in that long chain in which all the conditions of despotic high-handedness are in play which enchain beings one to another, from one species to another – from cruel divinities to their sacrificial victims, from masters to slaves, from adults to children, and from children to their objects. This is actually the only strong symbolic chain, the one through which a victim of the whim of a superior power passes it on to an inferior species, the whole process ending with someone taking it out on a powerless simulacrum, like a toy – and beginning no doubt with an all-powerful simulacrum, like the masked divinities which men themselves invent to justify this wretched chain.

The mind's real power (what else can we call it?) is its ability to distinguish a particular nerve, fibre or infinitesimal articulation of the body and invest or disinvest it at will (a sudden thought produces pain in an unknown muscle, or makes a particular line of the face smile, but not some other). The mind can exert itself upon a particular fraction of the body which cannot be located anatomically, as it can on a particular particle of language which cannot be located linguistically, or a particular fraction of time which cannot be located chronologically.

We end up doing everything for reasons of mental hygiene. Thinking out of mental hygiene, to keep in good shape intellectually. Screwing out of mental hygiene, to keep in good shape sexually. Socializing out of mental hygiene to keep in good shape operationally. All our activities are attuned to this hygienic objective. The modern person, condemned to obsolescence like a piece of military hardware, must nonetheless remain in a functioning state. Why? For no reason. For his mental health. Isn't the production system just a vast apparatus that we keep going for the sake of the workers' mental health?

Beautiful as the sensual panorama of discrimination
Beautiful as the sensual illusion of the orifices of the body
Beautiful as the aesthetic division of the work of households
Beautiful as the succession of phases of the light of day

The proximity of bodies in the dark, the tactile promiscuity of objects, the confusion of desires in dreams – these are the fundamental qualities, and they are qualities of the night.

A study of the differential resistance of the skin of the buttocks of the two sexes to blood pressure – there's a fine subject for research in a sterile and functional future.

On the truth of things, three hypotheses:
- That things are as they are makes them true (this is the empirical version).
- That they cannot be other than as they are does not prevent them from being true (though it is not really clear why: this is the confused and paradoxical version).
- That they cannot but be as they are is what prevents them from being true. The necessity of being such takes from them the ring of truth (this is the negative and subtle version).

The seal of secrecy is a fine metaphor. The secret is in fact that which is sealed, that which circulates beneath the seal of appearances and not beneath the sign of communication (not even beneath the opposite sign of the unsaid and silence). The secret is what has no need of being said and is therefore the most obvious of things and shines forth in full daylight, needing no other form of expression.

One way of dying is to make your death alter the state of things in such a way that you no longer have any reason to be a part of it. Thus death can have the effect of a prophetic disappearance. Such were the deaths of Barthes and Lacan, I believe: the world has taken another direction since, in which these subtle figures would no longer have had any meaning. The death of Sartre, by contrast, left the world unchanged and seems an ineluctable, but insignificant event. Before dying, he was already to live in a world that was no longer his own.

So far as existence is concerned, as Ajar* would say, it needs to be taken in charge by someone. No one can be expected to bear the responsibility for their own life. This Christian and modern idea is a vain and arrogant proposition. Moreover, it is a groundless utopian notion. The individual would have to be able to transform himself into the vestal, or the slave, of his identity, control all his circuits and all the circuits of the world which meet in his genes, nerves and thoughts. An unprecedented state of servitude. Who would wish to have salvation at such a price?

It is so much more human to put one's fate, one's desire, one's will into the hands of another. Circulation of responsibilities, declension of wills, perpetual transfer of forms. Apart from this subtle path, which is attested to by a great many cultures, there is only the totalitarian path of a collective assumption.

The old form of voluntary servitude was that of free men using that freedom paradoxically to turn themselves into serfs. The new voluntary servitude is that of men obeying the demand that they be free.

What you look for in travel is neither discovery nor exchange, but a gentle deterritorialization, being taken in charge by the journey itself, and therefore by absence. In the metallic vectors which transcend the meridians, the oceans and the poles, absence takes on a carnal quality. The secrecy of hiding away in one's private life gives way to annihilation by latitude and longitude. But in the end the body wearies of not knowing where it is, whilst the mind is excited by that absence, as if by a lively, subtle quality that is its own. The body is woven of too many ties of blood and flesh. It resists this disfiguring of familiar space in the anamorphosis of travel.

*The novelist Romain Gary's alter-ego. [Tr.]

All things considered, what we look for in other people is perhaps the same gentle deterritorialization we look for in travel. The temptation of exile in the desire of another and of journey across that desire come to be substituted for one's own desire and for discovery. Often looks and amorous gestures already have the distance of exile, language expatriates itself into words which are afraid to mean, the body is like a hologram, gentle on the eyes and soft to the touch, and can thus easily be striated in all directions by desire like an aerial space. We move circumspectly within our emotions, passing from one to another, on a mental planet made up of convolutions. And we bring back the same transparent memories from our excesses and passions as we do from our travels.

The more advanced life-simulation technology becomes, the more the question of the soul intervenes, perversely, as an accident. Everything becomes transformed into a pure, incessant production of accidents. From the moment we leave the world of substance and come to live in that of accident, perversion becomes normal and constitutive.

She disliked the fact that men would always want to take a woman there-and-then, without delay . . . One day, she gets her own back. She does not take the lift, but goes up the stairs instead and undresses floor by floor – her sweater, her skirt, her shoes, her watch, finally, just outside the door, her knickers; then she rings the bell. When I open the door she is standing there completely naked, like a dream, with her raincoat over her arm. The most beautiful present she could give me (but also, what artifice there is in immodesty!).

What she did not say was that she wanted to be undressed slowly with all the ceremonial that should go into unveiling a perfect body, which would only finally be penetrated with extreme politeness, almost out of consideration for the difference between the sexes, a delicate seduction which women dream of as intensely as men dream of the opposite.

Right from the start our relationship had gone astray over this divergence. Sometimes she had imposed her dream of sensual attentiveness. This time, she was giving herself to me – far beyond my own wildest dreams. At least she was pretending to. For, renouncing the game of femininity, she it was once again who was overturning the rules.

They say other species have stopped short, and that only the human species, the humanoid branch, has made its definitive breakthrough. In fact while all the others persevered in their specific forms and ended up disappearing genetically, thus leaving evolution to run its course, only the human species succeeded in surpassing itself in the simulacrum of itself – in disappearing genetically to resuscitate artificially. By perpetuating itself in a world of clones and electronic prostheses (perfect in so far as they will have eliminated every potential species, including humanity), man will thus, in a definitive act, have wiped out the natural genesis of things.

Contact with the men who wield power and authority still leaves an intangible sense of repulsion. It's very like being in close proximity to faecal matter, the faecal embodiment of something unmentionable and you wonder what it is made of and where it acquired its historically sacred character. Why this feeling of loathing for the politician? Is it the impression of being artificially subjected to a will that is even more stupid than your own and which, by its very function, has to be crude? How can the decision-making function be performed without simplifying the mechanisms of thought?

Political charisma is precisely not that gracious charisma which emanates from the irresistible power of a pure object, such as the power of a woman, but an ungracious will which derives its power and its glory from voluntary servitude. This is true of all institutions, the military, the clerical, the medical, and more

recently the psychoanalytic, but it is particularly so in politics which remains the most striking hallucination of all the weaknesses of the will.

One may justify the existence of men in power in many different ways. Yet power remains a pernicious thing for what justifies it is inexpiable.

Fragility, which belongs to the realm of appearances, is to be preferred to the fractal which is merely the quality of a mathematical object.

It is exciting to hear one of your fondest ideas formulated in one fell swoop, better than you could have done it yourself. You feel no intellectual jealousy at seeing yourself outstripped in this way. You only feel jealous when you are overtaken by your shadow.

Two bodies side by side, which are not asleep and know it: a strange kind of communication sets in between them, formed of respect for simulated sleep, and yet it needs to betray itself by some furtive sign – a breathing pattern which is not that of real sleep or movements which are not those of a dreaming body. Neither, however, wants to break the spell. It is a conspiracy in the dark, an emotional conspiracy filled with delicious tension.

There has been much discussion of the uninterpretable answer to the question: 'are you lying?' But ask someone next to you, very softly so as not to wake him: 'are you asleep?' If he replies that he is, then that makes him a liar. But he can reply by pretending to be asleep, which is not actually lying, but pretending to lie. There is a big difference, since this is a lovers' game. The question itself is a lovers' game because it assumes the partner is not asleep while making every

effort not to wake him. Besides, these are the same questions: do you love me? are you lying to me? are you asleep? And the reply – yes, I love you, yes, I'm lying, yes, I'm asleep – is equally paradoxical. But it is not untruthful. It simply comes from another world which is not the truth of the first. 'Yes, I'm asleep. Yes, I'm lying. Yes, I love you': all these answers reflect a marvellous somnambulism and, all in all, a very clear grasp of the relations we establish with reality when we are sleeping, lying or in love.

O C T O B E R 1 9 8 3

The long lightning flashes of the first flood

The price we pay for the complexity of life is too high. When you think of all the effort you have to put in – telephonic, telepathic, technological and relational – to alter even the slightest bit of behaviour in this strange world we call social life, you are left pining for the straightforwardedness of primitive peoples and their physical work. This is particularly true of unnecessary mental complexities. One should always prefer pure physical effort and, for preference, keep mental energy for sensual pleasures alone.

The sad thing about artificial intelligence is that it lacks artifice and therefore intelligence.

In the early morning and the semiconsciousness of awakening, in this quiet street, which affluence lends a provincial charm even though it is in the very heart of Paris, there is suddenly a solitary sound, which appears to rise up from the

depths of your dreams: the shrill clatter of the high heels of a woman whom the daily coming of the light sends scurrying toward her work. The sound begins at the end of the street, grows as she passes beneath the window, in a great hurry, merciless in the morning light (nobody would ever walk like this at night) then dies away towards the other end. She took an eternity to walk the length of this street, though it is not long, so harshly did the indomitable metallic reverberation seem to condemn the noiseless, sleepy world all around. I am sure that the woman was well aware of this, and that it was the only pleasure of her day.

Childish despair: this woman I meet in my dream, fall passionately in love with and give my address to – I immediately realize that the address is wrong and she has no chance of ever finding me, either in the dream or in real life, to which I can already sense I am returning. But why, why did I give her that wrong address? Even after waking, I agonize over this all day.

He gives all sorts of people the impression that he has got exactly what they are looking for. Subtlety for the subtle. Warm-heartedness for the warm-hearted. For the brutal, brutality. For crooks, sharp practice. Atrocity for the atrocious. Whatever you want. Emotional plasma which can circulate in any system.

A lot of women, feeling that their profiles were too perfect, have had them spoiled in order to give character to their faces. In a world already surreptitiously dominated by women, great beauty could only be a serious handicap.

When water freezes, all the excrement rises to the surface. In the same way, when the dialectic was frozen, we saw all the sacred excrement of the dialectic

float to the top. When the future is frozen, or even the present – as it now is – we see all the excrement of the past rising.

The moving plight of the Armenians, who put all their energies into securing recognition of the fact they were massacred in 1915. Their identity is bound up with that massacre, so they have to prove it took place. Which may mean going so far as to risk their lives in terrorist acts to force the world to admit that it happened.

Yet there is something rather tiresome about all this. Identity is useless; deep down it is merely a dream, and making claims on the grounds that you are 'such and such' – and, in particular, that you are dead – is absurd. In the Armenian case, it is tragic, since they are not even fighting for the right to life, but for the right to have been massacred. Anyway, how can they avenge the fact that the whole world has blotted the massacre out of its memory for the last seventy years? What response can there be to universal indifference? Terrorism. A surrealistic vengeance which will itself soon be forgotten.

In days gone by, we were afraid of dying in dishonour or a state of sin. Nowadays, we are afraid of dying fools. Now the fact is that there is no Extreme Unction to absolve us of foolishness. We endure it here on earth as subjective eternity.

The most seductive women of all – those anaemic country women in white Mercedes, with their Hermès scarves, now only to be seen occasionally, at the seaside.

For Kepler, the universe was eternal – there was no original Big Bang, indeed no origin at all except by some impenetrable decree (the question why there is something rather than nothing did not occur to the religious mind; it only becomes a question for the nonbeliever). In its stars, planets and ellipses, the universe is fixed and unchanging. In fact, the universe is a ceremony: its unfolding serves as the model for the microscopic unfolding of our lives and thoughts. Such at least was Kepler's view.

Today, we don't believe this. For us, the universe is no longer eternal, it was born with the Big Bang, and is continually expanding (or in potential recession depending on its mass). This is the picture the facts give, and they invalidate Kepler's view. Retrospectively, we can see that Kepler could not possibly have conceived of the world as anything but fixed and eternal, like the religious world in which he lived. This very constraint inevitably meant his perception was distorted.

But what of ours? Our vision is true because it corresponds to the facts, and facts are our religion. But we can no more conceive the world differently from the way we do – i.e. as continually expanding – than Kepler could think of it in any other way than fixed and eternal. Given this equal compulsion, what is there to say that we are not simply conceiving the world with the same degree of veracity and sincerity as Kepler, but not with any more truth?

We like to think that the world is expanding, but when it comes down to it, perhaps it only has been . . . *since the death of Kepler.*

Whether the universe is endlessly expanding or shrinking back down to an original, infinitely dense core depends on its critical mass (and speculation on this has become never-ending, as new particles are constantly being 'invented'). By analogy, whether our own human history is a process of evolution or involution perhaps depends on humanity's critical mass. Has the species reached the escape velocity it needs to overcome the inertia of the mass? Are we set like the galaxies

on an unalterable course which propels us further and further apart at a phenomenal speed or is this scattering into infinity destined to come to an end, and are human molecules destined instead to reverse the laws of gravity and draw closer together? Could the human mass, which grows greater every day, control a pulsation of this type?

Not only have the Eastern bloc countries become the sanctuary of civil society, but they have also become the last refuge of the papacy. The Rome papacy is squandering its energies on intercontinental tours and showbiz; Lech Walesa, by contrast, refuses to leave Poland to collect the Nobel Prize. He is the true Pope, the one who does not leave his Vatican and who is adored at home.

His wife goes to collect his Nobel Prize for him and he goes to place it at the feet of the Black Virgin of Częstochowa. This is the act of Walesa I, the Sovereign Trade Union Pontiff, the man of the Gdansk shipyards, whom the West abjectly worships; we find atonement for all our sins, exaltation and absolution of our privileges in this lowly trade unionist, beatified in the shadow of the Grand Inquisitor. Hence also our homage to dissidence. We feel like the first Christians – how comforting! God has sent us his messenger and we have heard him! (unlike the first time, when Christ was sent). God bless dissidence! Our Pope, the post-modern Imposter, has lost all spirituality and hawks the divinity around the tropics at knockdown prices. He makes peace with his assassin. Just think of it! Rome, the millennial monument to hypocrisy, is dead. All the hypocrisy has passed to the East and the spirituality has gone with it. The old theological power, that of the Black Virgin and the Jesuits, regenerated by communism, has re-discovered all its force in Walesa and Solidarity, in dissidence and pro-dissidence. Let us leave the West, as Kant said, to digest its crisis, this hypochondriacal wind passing through its intestines.

1983: the two events of the year – Walesa wins the Nobel Prize, the Pope pardons his assassin. Hypocritical events. Hypocrisy raised to the power of an event.

A woman spent all Christmas Day in a telephone box without ringing anyone. If someone comes to phone, she leaves the box, then resumes her place afterwards. No one calls her either, but from a window in the street, someone watched her all day, no doubt since they had nothing better to do. The Christmas syndrome.

Entire films – *La Femme d'à côté, Finally Sunday* – have become advertising objects. A whole class, that of a culture crossbred with technological or psychological gadgets – a desire-shaped culture as one might speak of a pear-shaped melody – the class of executives promoted to the expression of their own brains because they have been told their brains are like computers, promoted to being in charge of their own desires because they have been told they each have an unconscious structured like a language. It's all this – this advertising sheen of a whole subculture moved to tears by its own conviviality, fired by the thrill of business, enriched like uranium, embellished with the vestiges of self-management and the stereotypes of communication – which is expressed in Fanny Ardant's pretty face and Truffaut's modernist, self-publicizing style.

Anamnesis, exegesis, diegesis, catachresis – a load of meaningless Greek!

The wise man who wishes to know the state of his soul looks at the half-moon of his fingernails.

Life in itself is not to be despaired of; it is only mildly melancholic. Something diffuse in the daylight, something impalpable as language, gives things an air of melancholy which comes from much further back than our unconsciouses or our personal histories.

The tendency of the whole of contemporary culture to become healthy and virtuous again, to recover its intellectual morality, to revive a pedagogic approach to science, history and democracy. The breach opened up by the years 1960–80 is closing; everyone is gearing up for a high-efficiency perspective which is merely an abreactive defence against the imminence of the year 2000. The long period of blackmail by threat of crisis has begun – intellectually too. Back, back to the middle ground, an end to centrifugal passions. What we had dismantled and destroyed in joy, we are rebuilding in sorrow.

Buto: the theatre of revulsion. These twisted bodies, half simiesque, half reptilian. Perpetually at ground level, tensed with a fierce energy, lithe, inhuman and cannibalistic. There is never the naturalistic plasticity of Western bodies; these are bodies that are masked, sinuous, braced. Their eyes are white and they have the tragic obscenity of monkeys, but the pearly whiteness of naked bodies (only the human body is naked, animals never are and they can only, therefore, serve as masks or metaphors for the human body). These larval, twisted, electric, immobile bodies, but, even then, always in a state of mental electrocution, as Artaud would say; these bodies whose limbs seek each other out, their wily forms glistening between pillars of salt. It is the trick of this contorted, shrivelled, monstrous nudity to striate space, to attract it, to make it laugh and tremble much better than the bodies extended in Western dance know how. Silence too is a sort of nudity, a white, pearly form which draws the ear toward it, in the same way as the smooth, pearly, convulsive bodies attract space to them instead of spreading themselves

out elegantly in it. This is the whole secret of cruelty: signs which knot together instead of unravelling and which rivet your eyes to the ground. Instead of occupying an abstract space as Western choreography does, the whole of space has to be repatriated into the body, and the cost of this is an insensate, tortured, but never voluptuous nudity, and hence a nudity that is cruel to our sensual imaginations. And then space too must feel revulsion. That is why the bodies have the whiteness of eyes rolling in revulsion. They are like cocoons, wasps' nests, knots of snakes, wild cats with the beauty perhaps of anatomical models – in fact human nudity becomes once more the expression of a foetal, animal world, or becomes like an eternally open, but sightless, eye. Hands are constantly moving up to the face, as though to tear at it; space is never free, the body is an outer shell, death precedes birth, the blood does not circulate, it rains salt, the whiteness is supernatural. Beside all this, Béjart's work looks like a farandole performed by innocent maidens along the town walls – allegories, phantasias and capering. This, by contrast, is a pure hallucination of bodies, a wild frenzy of feline spirits, the mask and forceps, the spectre of birth.

Water, which in itself is silent, is just waiting to make a noise. In itself completely motionless, it is just waiting to move. Perfectly cold and harsh in itself, it nonetheless has the tepidness of salt and the mineral softness of fabric.

Total abhorrence of dominant ideologies. And anti-gulagism is the dominant ideology today. The anti-gulag priests are every bit as bad as the gulag torturers. The sheep have taken over from the beasts of the Apocalypse.

Berlin.

All of a sudden, I'm right there in front of it, without having realized. A long line of graffiti runs right across it, like the graffiti in the New York subway, like the West's mania for stickers. Suddenly, I have no historical imagination to cope with

this wall, with this city cut in two like a brain severed by an artificial scalpel. The buildings which border upon it bear the charred traces of a hot history – cold history, for its part, feeds on cold signs, which reduce the imagination to despair (even graffiti are cold signs; the only funny signs are the rabbits hopping about in the barbed-wire friezes of *no-man's land**).

Impossible to feel the old thrill of terror. Everything is meaningless. Here at the summit of history, dismantled by its very violence, all is calm and spectral like a piece of waste ground in November. Any old abandoned inner-city area would offer the same spectacle. What is striking is the museification of history as waste ground. The men who fought the battles remember them like a nightmare or, in other words, like something which is at least the realization of a desire, but now signs are the real battlefield. It is they that are the conductors of lethal energy, they that electrocute. Today, it is circuits which burn – the circuits in the brain, the circuits in the sensory, loving machines that we are. It is no longer buildings which burn or cities which are laid waste; it is the radio relays of our memories you can hear crackling.

I gaze in stupefaction at this wall and cannot summon anything from my memory. I am as helpless to find anything as those who will look at it in two thousand years' time no doubt will be to make any historical sense of it. Mentally closing my eyes, I see Christo's wall, the huge veil of fabric strung across the hills of California . . . Where does this passion to unfurl bands and walls come from – here this strip of concrete, elsewhere magnetic tapes or the unravellings scientists dream of – of strings of chromosomes or the spirals of DNA? In their very hearts, their inner convolutions, things are wound around upon themselves: we should not try to sort out the imbroglio. Here the labyrinth of a city, and, at the same time, the Gordian knot of history, have been destroyed at a stroke by a lethal incision. None of this heals over – but the pain itself is forgotten.

*In English in original. [Tr.]

It is the same with that film *The Day After*, which is supposed to inspire a salutary terror. Deterrence against deterrence. The bomb deters; the bomb must be deterred. Well, I am unable either to see anything or imagine anything. The immense *trompe-l'oeil* slides of the Natural History Museum in New York affect me much more deeply. You can feel the chill of the Ice Age in them. Here I feel neither the chill nor the charm of the nuclear, nor suspense, nor the final blinding flash.

Is it not the case that all this is unimaginable? Isn't it a fact that in our imaginations, the dropping of the bomb is a total event, after which there can be nothing, whereas in this film it simply ushers in an ecological regression of the human race? But that is something we already know well. It is not all that long since we came out of it. What we dream of is an event which would no longer be on a human scale: what would the earth look like if we weren't here any more? We dream of seeing the world in its inhuman purity (which is not at all a state of nature), in the state of its formal cruelty. In a word, we dream of our disappearance.

The nuclear starblast is of the same order. It must turn the human into pure glaze and put an end to our crazed, sentimental view of the world. It must bring us back to a pure geology of elements and events.

Can this be rendered metaphorically in images? It is not certain that it is possible to evoke it, any more than we can evoke the biomolecular, that other dimension of the nuclear. This does not trouble us, or no longer troubles us, which proves that we are already irradiated. Mentally for us, all this has already happened a thousand times, and the catastrophe is nothing now but a kind of cartoon strip. To project it crudely into a film is merely a diversion from the nuclearization of daily life – or rather: the film itself *is* our catastrophe. It does not represent it, it does not make us dream of it, but says: the catastrophe is already there, it is already with us, *since it is impossible to imagine it*.

The Berlin wall is a physical embodiment of the fact that the Cold War is

over. The graffiti covering it merely render it homage by aestheticizing it, in the same way as a slave might weave flowers about the whip that beats him. It is not by chance that Moretti can contemplate making a life-size reproduction of the wall in the area around La Défense with the assistance of the inhabitants of Kreuzberg. The graffiti have decked it out in the colours of dissidence, that voluptuous mental scenario of a Cold War which is no longer what it once was. One day, we shall have to denounce this mystification of dissidence, in which Western intellectuals jerk off against the cerebral wall of shame and refashion for themselves a cheap *aesthetics* of the rights of man, a sentimental aesthetics of the gulag. In its own way, the wall expresses the end of this clear division of good and evil; it has become the nostalgic sign of that end, in the same way that many a monument and event now merely express nostalgia for history, as many an outburst of anger merely expresses nostalgia for anger. If things have changed, then so be it – we aren't going to go on eternally weeping over an anorexic history, over anorexic ruins.

And all crusades are abject.

'The masks will drop down automatically in the event of the cabin being depressurized. If this occurs, put out your cigarettes.'

Must we really prepare to die in a mask, remaining unrecognizable to ourselves even into the next world?

I think there are thousands of dead people still hanging around on flights because they haven't been accepted on the other side on account of their masks. They go on travelling around in the most awful conditions and we brush up against them without knowing it.

I could never travel in an aeroplane with God, nor with anyone who thought he was God (Verdiglione). It is too dangerous. It's not so much that you might crash as that you might never come down again.

The equivalent of the impossibility of getting to sleep is the impossibility of getting out of it again without the horrors of returning to consciousness. Hence the lustral necessity for some ablutionary rite to rid oneself of that cold morning sweat – which is not so much, perhaps, a secretion as a sudden condensation on the surface of one's body – like vapour on a chilled glass – of ambient anxiety, uncertain reality and the first glimmerings of day.

Depressive moods lead, almost invariably, to accidents. But, when they occur, our mood changes again, since the accident shows we can draw the world in our wake, and that we still retain some degree of power even when our spirits are low. A series of accidents creates a positively light-hearted state, out of consideration for this strange power.

San Antonio: two extraordinary events happening at just a few hours' interval in the apparently peaceful life of an ordinary individual . . . would they not be even more extraordinary if there were no connection between them?

When happy events coincide, that is a happy coincidence. But the coincidence of baneful events is a happy coincidence too. Every coincidence is happy, for it gives the mind a spiritual pleasure. And, no doubt, the very greatest happiness is afforded by the pleasure which coincidences bring. If not, would it really be a pleasure to be happy?

The infinitesimal play of the laws of physics at the bottom of a lake, in the rotting of leaves and in the gossamer forms of frozen ruts . . . Thus the surface of the pool in the forest reflects the pattern of submerged branches. These go on

refracting the meagre warmth of the wintry sun even after the pool has iced over, and thus leave a sunken trace of their subaquatic presence. Who could imagine effects so subtle? And under the pressure of the water imprisoned beneath it, because the sound has no way out, the vibration of the ice runs right over to the opposite bank in a long, wailing cry. It rends the air with an almost animal howl. The wounded ice sends out the waves of its suffering. All around the trees have been cut to ribbons by the hurricane. They too seem to be howling: suffering brings the torments of the animal kingdom to the kingdom of plants. But the snow covers them with its silence. All lying in the same direction, they look as if they are floating down a river. The forest has been devastated by a demented whirlwind just before dawn. No one was there to hear the sound of the trees crashing down, in their thousands, on top of one another. A meteoric disaster . . . like the slaughter of a herd of animals. It is as if the forest had committed suicide by exposing itself to the wind.

The futility of everything that comes to us from the media is the inescapable consequence of the absolute inability of that particular stage to remain silent. Music, commercial breaks, newsflashes, adverts, news broadcasts, movies, presenters – there is no alternative but to fill the screen; otherwise there would be an irremediable void. We are back in the Byzantine situation, where idolatry calls on a plethora of images to conceal from itself the fact that God no longer exists. That's why the slightest technical hitch, the slightest slip on the part of a presenter becomes so exciting, for it reveals the depth of the emptiness squinting out at us through this little window.

Dead periods have to be left to take their chances. This goes for the present too, which we should not try to disturb in its melancholy deliquescence. Even in politics – indeed especially in politics – relentless therapy is the worst of things.

This is exactly what socialists practise on the social, ecologists on nature and all of us on a host of defunct ideologies: a relentless therapy. Living on because we refuse to see technology give in to death. Anticipating everything, hoarding everything, because we refuse to see events slipping beyond our grasp. We cultivate the coma of yesteryear. We adore artificial transplants. We go crazy over prostheses. Everywhere this relentless clinging to life corresponds to the emaciation of the original figures of life, to the disincarnation of bodies, to the therapeutic reincarnation of a dead world, a bygone age.

A society which allows an abominable event to burgeon from its dungheap and grow on its surface is like a man who lets a fly crawl unheeded across his face or saliva dribble unstemmed from his mouth – either epileptic or dead.

You can spot those people who live inside their own image by the fact that they always expect to be recognized. It is very strange to move among such people. You end up recognizing them even when they are nobodies. And they end up recognizing you even when you are a nobody. This creates an idolatrous familiarity which is the characteristic atmosphere of intellectual circles. You can make yourself an easy reputation in such circles by affecting this air of anticipated recognition and furtive celebrity which raises you for a moment above the common herd. Without this nudge from fame, intellectuals would have no existence of their own. Without this figurative existence they would be reduced to going for each others' throats.

The great, lethal epidemics have disappeared. They have all been replaced by a single one: the proliferation of human beings themselves. Overpopulation constitutes a kind of slow and irresistible epidemic, the opposite of plague and cholera. We can only hope that it will bring itself to an end once it has been sated with the living as the plague did when sated with dead. Will the same regulatory

reflex operate against this excess of life as once did against the excess of death? Because the excess of life is even more lethal.

The intense life of clouds is one of the natural treasures of the earth. One of their more stupid characteristics is that they move in the direction of the wind. But you shouldn't rely on them to do that. Sometimes, as here on the coast, the wind battles against them, without managing either to halt their progress or to prevent them from casting their implacable shadows over the sea and the countryside.

They are not so much a surrounding layer of gas as a coating of flesh for the planet and its obscure palmipeds. From them we get storms, rain, shadows and remorse. Seen from an aircraft they have the whiteness of icefloes, they jostle each other like glaciers, they tear each other apart and have merely the destiny of meteors. But what is remarkable, apart from the prodigious electricity running through them, is the prodigious uselessness of these moving masses.

The shores run together, the waters are parallel. The waters run together, the shores are parallel. A single leaf rustles, the others are silent. Who knows how this dream ends?

He was so thin, so translucent, that he had to pass through the same place twice to leave a shadow.

Living out a destiny of convenience the way others sail under a flag of convenience.

Early morning around the *métro aérien.*

These multifarious bodies with their lazy gait. The opposite of the torment of work – the ecstasy of work. Languid bodies, wearied by a bad night, the night of the sleepless and dispossessed, who plunge back into the same dream for reasons of economy. The radiance of these niggardly lives, swirling around, without energy of their own, wherever the wind blows them, near the square. There's never any night, any winter, any sun, any summer – it is the eternal season of work which gives this immortal gleam to the young women with their tulle blouses and bloodshot eyes. They do not see me. They aren't looking at anything. They are going to their work and they are all the more beautiful for that. It would be so nice to tear them away from the blankness of the morning air and plunge them back into their beds, into their dreams, whose tepid forms their movements have retained. They are the erotic working girls of early morning.

During one night of drunken revelry, Soutine tattooed one of his compositions on to the back of one of his friends. This was before he became famous. Twenty years later, his friend, now a tramp, passed a left-bank gallery where Soutine was being exhibited as a major artist. He went in and stripped off. A rich art lover bought him on condition that he walk around half naked at his villa on the Coast. The man grew old and died. Or was he perhaps murdered? Later, a Soutine picture went on exhibition which had a strange grain to it (not at all like canvas) but which was certainly genuine.

No rain no rain no rain !
No rain !
No sense no sense non sense !
*Non sense !**

*In English in original. [Tr.]

April 1984.

What can you do with such a brilliant spring? What action could counterbalance this streaming of light and vital heat? Nothing is up to the task, not even erotic ecstasy (for eroticism, alas, is not natural and we no longer go in for rutting, the animal irruption of seasonal moods). Make love, go cycling, write? All these things are derisory when set against the explosion of spring. Only one thing could fit the bill: a total sacrifice, death, a yielding up of body and soul. Not the swoons of summer, but the offering of the first fruits, the heroism of a deflowering of life which will never again have its equivalent in the further unfolding of ages and seasons.

But what if the spring were only a mask? What if all this light, this indolence, this unaccustomed heat were merely a mask? Then the only answer would be to go forth masked* towards that masked nature, to cover our faces with animal finery, to respond with chastity and modesty to the sexual ecstasy of nature, to maintain some irony towards this suspect splendour and therefore some autonomy in our domain – for in fact we shall never equal the miracle of the light and anticipated heat of summer in these few spring days.

Nothing in man's nature can induce him into that irrational, excessive act of taking power or of making war except the mask, the figure of the mask, in whose shade he can take up the challenge of a world the truth of which we shall never know, and which is therefore fundamentally a thing of artifice. It is the mask which makes sacrifice possible, which allows us to make war, the mask alone which enables us to engage in politics.

*A reference to '*larvatus prodeo*'. [Tr.]

One is never simply the child of a father and a mother. I was born in 1929 just after Black Thursday, under the sign of Leo and the Crisis. These mythical powers never leave you. They manifest themselves in a certain mode of thought, a mode which smacks of the desert but is nonetheless vital, analytical and solitary – Solar Criticism. Born at the time of the first great crisis of modernity, I hope to live long enough to witness its catastrophic turn at the end of the century (if there is a logic of birth and death, as I believe). I have a friend born of the flight from Paris in 1939. That exodus had rekindled his father's extinguished passions. He is thus the product of an unexpected copulation with History.

The glorious anticipation of summer by springtime gives you the urge to anticipate everything in thought. But it is the anticipation which is the thought itself. It can thus come to us from natural phenomena, from sun and shade.

Snow is no longer a gift from on high. It falls precisely at those places designated as winter resorts.

This journal and photography are wonderfully matched in being snapshots and combinations of images. The same is true with women and travel. To such a degree in fact that the whole set of these minor activities (for none of them is part of any general project) ends up by taking on an air of singular coherence. But can this last? Can this be a substitute for the suppression of all projects?

We can no longer say things appear unintelligible because science does not know enough about them. It seems that the more we know about things, the more unintelligible they become.

It is like the expanding universe. The more our instruments penetrate it, the further the limits recede. We therefore have to assume that this expansion, this retreat, is directly proportional to the power of our instruments.

Why was it that the universe wasn't running away from Kepler?

Linguistic panic – *Witz*. Uncontrolled ramification of the corpuscles of language.

Cellular panic – cancer. The bestial inclination to disobey whatever order is in place.

Transparency – the simultaneity of all points in time, space and mankind under the sign of the instantaneity of light. Absolute, excessive crowdedness. That of the Soviets was already unbearable, the electrical kind is even more unbearable. No more surfaces (how beautiful surfaces were in the age of depth!), no more distances (how beautiful proximity was in the age of distance!), no more appearances, no more dimensions. We speak of the proxemics of human relations, but we should speak of the proxenetics of information, and indeed of the whole of electronics, for the two are creating an absolute promiscuity of all places and all human beings, of question and answer, of the problem and its solution. The scatology of information; the dream of absolute conductivity can only be both laxative and excremental.

Catholicism was founded on the symbolic obligation placed upon the Pope that he remain at the centre of the world – in the days when there was one. Today he jets off to its four corners, like a professional: apostolate by jet. He can thus afford the luxury of a failed assassination attempt. It adds nothing to the glory of God, but it authenticates him – as media idol, as a figure in the limelight. It

authenticates him as a target, and allows him to target the international community as his audience. He really has become the best special effect of the late twentieth century.

'You should see him at sunset, when the last oblique rays are striking Bernini's colonnades, as he emerges from the great door of the basilica, dressed in pale purple, surrounded by Swiss guards, each illuminated by twenty little spotlights hidden behind the statues. This is the way the Polish Pope hopes to carry the Gospel – in pictures – to the pagans of industrial civilization, who have deserted Christianity, but have also been starved of spectacles.'

You are reminded of the theologians' interrogation of Galileo when confronted with his discovery of the astronomical telescope: is a Mass still a Mass when viewed through this looking-glass? It is true that through our telescopic and microscopic devices we are squinting at another world. The theologians were right: a Mass is no longer a Mass when seen through a telescope, just as a particle is no longer a particle when seen through a microscope. But the Vatican couldn't give a damn. Today, it is the scientists who have scruples. As for the Pope, that Master of the Episcopate has now become Master of the Telescopate.

One day, we shall stand up and our backsides will remain attached to our seats.

'Signs don't come about by chance': the idea comes from an advertisement which has appeared on our streets. Does this mean that signs come about through the necessity that they be obeyed? That without them everything would be but a confused and arbitrary game? Is it the real, then, which comes about by chance? Are signs an inevitable consequence or a pure necessity of life in society? This cryptic little phrase thus raises, by way of a slogan, a whole host of questions. But must it really be questioned?

A sign of life: the moistness of the lips. That's what you do for the dying: you moisten their lips so that they don't feel they are already dead. The pleasure of water on the lips is greater than the pleasure of drinking. The lips, as the Koran says, are our fountainhead. Their tactile pleasure, their perpetual motion. The moistness of the lips is in itself a sign of love, their dryness a sign of indifference and death. An unblinking gaze too takes on the fixity of death. But the eyes must not blink too much, or the lips be too moist. These are the fragile signs of our equilibrium of love.

What goes out of fashion passes into everyday life. What disappears from everyday life is revived in fashion.

'Michael Jackson is a solitary mutant, precursor of a mixing of the races which will be perfect because universal, of the new post-racial race, so to speak. The children of today have no hangups about the idea of a mixed-race society: such a society is their world and Michael Jackson prefigures what they think of as an ideal future' (Alain Soral).

It must also be pointed out that Michael Jackson has had his face rebuilt, his hair straightened, his skin lightened – in short, that he has constructed himself in every tiny detail. It is this which makes him a pure, innocent child – the artificial androgyne of the fable, who, better than Christ, can reign over the world and bring reconciliation, because he is better than the child–god: he is a prosthesis–child, an embryo of all the forms of mutation we have imagined to deliver us from race and sex.

Like dreams, statistics are a form of wish fulfilment.

Manicheism is the irreconcilable antagonism between two forces. Morality is merely the opposition of two values. In the order of values, there is always a possibility of reconciliation. The disorder of forces is irreconcilable.

The preference of young women for older men. This stems from their finding in the men's eyes a reflection of their youthfulness, of their actual, tangible grace. They could not find this in the eyes of a young man, for there it would be shared.

For the man, his love for the younger woman is not in any way a form of incest: she represents nostalgia for an earlier life, the dream of a multifaceted object of purity, her sexual charm enhanced by the age difference. The man could not feel this with a woman his own age who would at once seem like his mother.

Today you have to be into biology or necrology. Into archives or protein. Otherwise there's no point either thinking or writing.

Where are the political transvestites? Where are the drag queens, the hermaphrodites of power? The feminoids of decision-making, the transsexuals of management?

The real drag queens, the ones capable of frittering away power in its theatrical extraversion, of parading it to excess, the present-day Heliogabaluses, dramatists of the mockery of power, just as transvestites are the dramatists of the mockery of sex – are the Idi Amins and the Bokassas. They are the true drag queens of arbitrary rule with no concern either for representation or legitimacy – Ubuesque idols, not pious choirboys like most politicians. Perhaps the Pope should be included here since his worldwide success is also that of a great transvestite . . .

The home micro: the first household appliance of modern times which has no apparent function. In this respect, it no doubt marks the real end of the consumer society.

Burgling your way out of yourself, quietly, subtly, slipping away from yourself as light slips away from a room when night falls (though night does not fall; objects secrete it at the end of the day when, in their tiredness, they exile themselves in their silence).

Grey, still day, like a perpetual dawn. The birds themselves were deceived by it. They went on singing all day, even though daybreak never came.

It is Sunday 13 May, 6 p.m. Is this a good or a bad thing?

As evening comes on, a cold silent wind gets up. All we need is a heat storm to put the finishing touch to the unreality of the season. And yet the birds are singing and men are thinking, on this Sunday, in secret. They are warding off the absence of sun and the monotony of Sunday. They are dreaming of the marriage of sun and sand. They are dreaming of fogging up the mirrors and each shining forth in his own madness. They are listening to a piece of baroque music: 'Whence comes, whence comes such a loneliness?'

We are merely epigones. The events, the discoveries, the visions are those from the period between 1910 and 1940. We live on like weary commentators on that frenzied period in which the whole invention of modernity (and the lucid presentiment of its end) occurred in a language which still bore the brilliance of style. The highest level of intensity lies behind us. The lowest level of passion and intellectual illumination lies ahead of us. There is something like a general entropic movement in the century, the initial energy dissipating slowly in the sophisticated

ramifications of the structural, pictural, ideological, linguistic and psychoanalytic revolutions – the final configuration, that of 'postmodernity' marking the most degraded, most factitious and most eclectic phase, the shattered fetishism of all the idols and the purer signs that have preceded it.

Even the great burst of light in the years 1960–80, seen with some critical distance, will merely have been an episode in the involutive course of the century, in terms of powerful new ideas. But a portent all the same.

Might a new event produce some surprise? We can say nothing of this, since archives and analysis are twilight tools.

Computer science only indicates the *retrospective* omnipotence of our technologies. In other words, an infinite capacity to process data (but only data – i.e. the *already given*) and in no sense a new vision. With that science, we are entering an era of exhaustivity, which is also an era of exhaustion. Of generalized interactivity abolishing particularized action. Of the interface which abolishes challenge, passion, and rivalry between peoples, ideas and individuals which was always the source of the finest energies.

It is difficult to find a remedy for our own sadness, because we are ourselves implicated in it. It is difficult to find a remedy for other people's sadness because we are prisoners of it.

My sink is blocked. I pour tons of caustic soda crystals down it, liberally dosed with boiling water. A fierce struggle begins in the pipes between the detergent or unblocking agent and the opaque lumps of organic detritus. A furious bubbling and sulphurous ejaculations bear witness to the resistance of the lumps of phlegm, hair, and excrement accumulated with the hygienic violence of the

masturbator. And suddenly the whole thing empties, the sulphurous water seems to be sucked down at supernatural speed into the bowels of the earth. Life can go on.

We recently saw parading through our streets a line of young women who, under other skies, might very well have been crowned with garlands of flowers in the Panathenaea. They were angry young starlets, demanding an end to the need to sleep with the producer to gain recognition. 'Talent, not tits and bums!' It is somewhat troubling to see such a problem carried out into the streets. It is well known that the publicity around such things repeatedly turns against the victims and merely compounds the initial violation with a further violation by the media. Here too, it will no doubt be said that these young women in search of theatre parts are already in a state of advanced prostitution. The fact that they come and offer themselves up to the lechery of the public eye, after having been offered up, against their wills, to the lechery of producers, at least bears witness to their candour, if not to their innocence.

The silence of metaphor accompanies the act of cruelty, as for example with the cannibalistic Japanese who moved directly from the metaphor of love to devouring that marvellous Dutch girl. Or the woman who made a present of her eye to the man who said he was so in love with her gaze.

The effacement of metaphor is characteristic of the object and its cruelty. Words are left with only a literal, material tenor. They are no longer signs in a language. This is the silence of pure objectality.

The body becomes heavier and denser every day. Imperceptibly, almost without changing weight or form, it becomes charged with a dead weight which

adds itself to the useful mass of living tissue. It is as though elasticity abandoned it to make way for gravitational force. It moves away from dance and towards heaviness. Away from the original movement and towards death.

Thought can no longer keep itself in a critical equilibrium. It has to be spread-eagled between violent nostalgia and violent anticipation.

Of course we should dream of all women. There isn't one of them who wouldn't be offended if a man didn't dream of all of them through her.

Having a child has become a prodigiously artificial thing. It no longer has anything of the passionately accidental event about it; it has become the partheno-genetic fruit of a calculation of biological, dietary and psychosocial data and you wonder to what extent dream, desire or fatality are still involved. But perhaps the race is losing its interest in sexuality, preferring instead a sort of protozoan transplantation. Leaving out of account that what has been conceived by artificial insemination is very likely to continue its life in artificial intelligence and to die of built-in obsolescence. After the mechanical bride, the mechanical widow. Now every human being is the product of a sexual act, a sexual pact or else we should not be the human race. It takes a sexual copulation successfully to produce a human being, just as, among the Hindus, it takes a copulation between the word and silence for a sacrifice to be successfully carried out.

In a sense the child is indeed the continuation of the species. But in another, he or she is a biological vestige of it. The further we go with change, genetic innovations and fashion, the more unreal it becomes, with each new generation, to

put our trust in the processes of childbirth and organic growth. The simplicity and slowness of those things are entirely outside the range of our contemporary experience.

How can we claim to exercise judgement if we have lost a sense of punishment? How can we claim to judge anything at all if we no longer accept being judged? And if we are no longer able either to judge or be judged, then we lose all hope of being absolved or condemned in the past or the future. Now, what can no longer be reflected in the past or the future takes place in a single instant with all its consequences. The Last Judgement becomes an immediate reality. We have right here before us the unchecked proliferation in epidemic proportions of all processes, the multiplication of all cancers on an epidemic scale.

No one recognizes their faults or their virtues when these are stated by another, any more than they recognize their own voices on a tape recorder. The world transmits back to us only the asymmetric form of our vices, as a mirror reflects back the asymmetric form of our faces.

There is a pact of pride in a couple's love, a pact of glory, which is at least as fundamental as sexual feelings. These latter peter out silently in the two bodies, but the pact can only be broken by the spoken word.

If you say, I love you, then you have already fallen in love with language, which is already a form of breakup and infidelity.

If it has been possible to suggest that no event could have a final meaning before history had come to an end one way or another, then any way of giving any kind of sense to an event is a way of putting an end to history.

If every day were a holiday, towns would be more mysterious.

The river of irises: instead of a river flowing along bordered by irises, it is the irises which flow between two banks of water.

Against all our historically-minded culture (out of compassion for our present state), the only excitement is to be found in anticipation (out of impertinence towards our future state).

Infinite spaces (Pascal would have nothing to fear today) have become advertising spaces. It is advertising which will fuel all the sidereal infrastructure of communication. No more silent stars or astrological signs. It is advertising which will fuel the no-osphere. The more we colonize virgin space, the more we enter the blackmail space of the fully developed advertising form.

Embryos frozen, unfrozen and then reimplanted in the mother's womb. What becomes of frozen embryos whose parents have died accidentally? Orphans of artificial insemination? Billionaire foetuses? Fortunately there is a committee for embryo-genetic control and a commission for the ethics of human reproduction. But the orphans of the concept? What becomes of a frozen concept whose parents have died accidentally?

It is grass that derives the greatest pleasure from the wind. It harnesses its frivolous, aerial energy, as the waves harness underwater energy. Grass bends infinitely: it is fickle and useless and hence immortal.

Scene from a dream. Always the same one. On a quiet beach, within a few seconds (with the same hurriedness with which the sun disappears), the signs of a fabulous storm. The sea, all at once agitated by a sudden light, snow-capped clouds, an immense wave which remains hanging at a tragic height, before plunging down upon the inhabited world. This time, it dies as it reaches the edge of the sand. But most times, it submerges the town in a total, silent swell.

One day, I shall sing the praises of the magical valley of Vingrau, the magical combe of Tautavel, the limpid waters of the Gorges du Verdouble, the paleolithic hills ranging high above the vines and the Cathar castles, Quéribus, Peyrepertuse, and the memory of the lions and wild oxen which hunted beneath these sun-drenched cliffs five hundred thousand years ago, and were themselves hunted by primitive man – a closed world – closed then upon its carnivorous finitude, now upon its solar quietude.

The dog going round and round in its cage on the luggage carousel at the airport. He goes round once, then twice, standing proud as a little god in the middle of the cases, unaware of the ridiculousness of the situation. Time passes and no one claims him. Cases disappear, but the dog stays there, erect in his cage, full of dignity (and perhaps crazed with anxiety?). Anybody would have died of shame at being abandoned in such a way in front of everyone. He remains as dignified and indifferent as the lions sitting on the high plateaus of an African reserve, their heads raised towards the setting sun, their regal profiles and lofty

unconcern in no way affected by their servile condition. The humans come to stare at the lions, but the lions stare only at the sun. The humans wait for their luggage, but the dog is waiting only for his master. He puts you in mind of Leika, the first dog sent into orbit by the Soviets. She too was put into orbit to await the appearance of scientific symptoms. Perhaps the dog is still going around there with all the passengers looking on, if his master has forgotten him. Perhaps it is simply his master who is there, before our eyes, reincarnated as his own dog?

In any case, the 'baggage claim' scene at airports has an eternal value: after that death which a flight always to some small extent represents, everyone comes to pick up what belonged to them in a previous life. It is like the distribution of what each person will have the right to take with him into the hereafter. And by what miracle do you find the same cases, the same bags you had before you left? By what miracle can this dog still belong to his master when they reach their destination? He alone knows, for he alone has never given a thought to death. Any more than the lions or the giraffes in the reserve ever give a thought to the sequestration or the mocking of their state, which is just as absurd as that which occurs on an airline flight. If they had, they would drop down dead on the spot.

After every flight, orphaned luggage continues to go round and round without anyone claiming it. Or the opposite happens, with some people waiting for their cases which will never come. The expressions of those who are beginning to lose hope are unforgettable.

Yet no one steals anyone else's luggage, for each person is intent solely upon connecting up again with his or her own existence. Who would want to be reborn in another's skin, another's case? Who would want to take someone else's dog? A kind of immunity protects those things that have survived the sacred promiscuity of flight and the taboo of death.

Right in the middle of a Stevie Wonder concert, right in the middle of this

musical trance, this electronic night with thousands in the stadium, a night worthy of *Metropolis* with the thousands of cerebro-motor slaves gyrating to the rhythm of synthesizers and all the lighter flames serving as a luminous ovation – a new ritual worthy of the catacombs – I feel a total coldness, complete indifference to this faked music, without the slightest melodic phrase, music of a pitiless technicity. Everything is both visceral and coded at the same time. A strictly regulated release, a cold ceremonial, very far in human terms from its own musical savagery, which is merely that of technology. Only the visual impact remains, the spectacle of the crowd and its physical idolatry, particularly as the idol is blind and directs the whole thing with his dead eyes, exiled from the world and its tumult, but absorbing it all like an animal. The same air of sacredness as with Borges. The same translucidity of the blind, who enjoy the benefits of the silence of light and therefore of blackmail by lucidity. But modern idolatry is not easily accepted; the bodies stay clenched. Technicity wins out over frenzy in the new metropolitan nights.

Growing old is not the approach of a biological term. It is the ever lengthening spiral which distances you from the physical and intellectual openness of your youth. Eventually, the spiral becomes so long that all chance of return is lost. The parabola becomes eccentric, and the peak of one's life-curve gets lost in space. Simultaneously the echo of pleasures in time becomes shorter. One ceases to find pleasure in pleasure. Things live on in nostalgia, and their echo becomes that of a previous life. This is the second mirror phase, and the beginning of the third age.*

Foucault's death. Loss of confidence in his own genius. It is fatal to be an

**Le troisième âge*: old age, retirement. [Tr.]

absolute reference. The loss of his immune systems, regardless of the sexual aspect, was merely the biological transcription of this other process. The same thing happened to Barthes when he 'allowed himself to die'.

Sartre was still able to die with great pomp. Barthes and Foucault disappeared discreetly, prematurely. The era of the great literary figures and rhetoricians who wore their glory lightly is past. The more subtle thinkers of the media era can no longer do this. Fulfilling the function of an idol – like the wielding of power – becomes harder in a democratic society, where thoughts are without consequence and events without memory. This state of affairs makes it even more urgent that there be a crystallization in the form of voluntary servitude around a figurehead chosen for his abstract and imperious character – this is what happened with Foucault. But fame applied to a pure intellectual condemns him to disappearance. For thought, the internal scandal produced by its simulated apotheosis is unbearable. Nonetheless, Sartre, who had long since analysed all forms of *mauvaise conscience* suffered less from this than Foucault, who paradoxically felt unloved and persecuted. He was certainly persecuted by those thousands of disciples and scruffy little flatterers whom he certainly despised in secret (at least one hopes he did), and who reduced him to a caricature of what he felt he was doing. To forget him was to render him a service; adulation was a disservice.

As it happened, his death coincided with the high point of the anticipatory, blind admiration for a book which had become problematical in the very fact of the suspense it had generated. Deep down, what did he himself expect of this book, after having toyed so long with it as though with his own death? The latter was a fairly elegant response to the excessive, pretentious fame, with which the mentally deficient burden their mentor – and a pretty stinging denial of that intellectual beatification. It is possible to live with prestige, because that comes from your peers and is returned. But there is no defence against the power others impose on you through their servitude. Even systematic disappointment, as practised by Foucault, does not discourage them. In the end, to escape the dogs, you have to

know how to run away – or how to treat them as dogs, and not everyone knows how to do that.

The more imperious, despotic and arbitrary Foucault became, the more his authority in the intellectual world increased. This surely tells us something about the impoverished nature of that world. Perhaps it is not very different from the popular world of rock music. Distortion between intellectual mastery and artificial infallibility, a cult that grows as the authority associated with the sovereignty of thought decreases.

The man this compulsive religion takes as its god is already losing his intellectual immunity. He disappears before his own eyes, like a gambler overwhelmed by good fortune, like idols and stars whose very names no longer belong to them. Any society needs these collective sacrifices, which used to be carried out ritually. Must we stigmatize as contemptible these adulators who are merely the officiants at the sacrifice? The whole process is inexorable. Communities come together to elevate one of their number to the rank of a glorious figurehead whom they will then set about systematically destroying by their very devotion. Only, in days gone by, this took place amid festivity; today it takes place amid boredom and regression. It is the work of despotism and voluntary servitude. It is just that it is more of a caricature when it takes place in the intellectual sphere which prides itself on its freedom of thought. You have to have watched a thousand cultivated minds waiting attentively for hours from deep in their seats on the aboulic silence of the ageing Lacan – the recital of silence performed before those who watched him die – to understand that something absurd has occurred to corrupt that admiration that was the finest of our passions.

Foucault: the obsession with an ever more precise genealogy, the ever more scientific elision of an effect in the present by the exhaustion of a preliminary objectivity. It is like a system of thought that has begun to spin on its axis when confronted with an obstacle it will never get over – it will never jump over its

shadow, the procedures that engender it, its retrospective sequential logic. This is the way you become an absolute reference, by connecting up with an inflexible heredity of knowledge, with an authority which necessarily seeks to ground itself further and further back in time. An austere line this, which allows itself neither anticipation nor even a breakthrough into the present, which allows itself no mental infringement of the law of its species, which is that you have to be sure of what you are asserting. This is illusory because no thinking can be sure of itself, nor conscious of its own mechanisms. It must take the risk of what it does not say, rather than simply being so careful about what it says. Even if there is a great objective modesty in Foucault's prudence, his tragedy lies in his never having managed to cross this defensive line, of having walled himself up in his own discriminations, always demanding another power. Foucault put all his strategic efforts into constructing that demand, all his energy, which was increasingly uncertain of its own state, and increasingly confused by the exaggeration of his reputation. He died of that infinite regression, disappeared, leaving us no hope, but leaving little for himself either, on the ambiguous fringes of the very Highest Scholarship.

And yet what are the writings of Barthes, Lacan, Foucault (and even Althusser) but a philosophy of disappearance? The obliteration of the human, of ideology. The absent structure, the death of the subject, lack, aphanisis. They have died of these things and their deaths bear the characteristics of this inhuman configuration. They bear the mark of a Great Withdrawal, of a defection, of a calculated failure of will, of a calculated weakening of desire. They all became shrouded in silence towards the end, in their various ways, and words fell away one by one. One can see no rosy future for their philosophies. They are even in danger, to the great despair of their disciples, of having no consequences at all. Because theirs are subtle modes of thought and ones therefore which subtilize their own traces and which have never, when all is said and done, produced

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constructive effects (at least that's not the best of what they have done). Those thinkers whose minds were rooted in a humanist configuration, whether liberal or libertine (Lévi-Strauss, Lefebvre, Aron – and Sartre too) survive better. Whether or not they are still alive, they have not 'disappeared' in the same way; they have not been infected with the virus; their works perpetuate them and they bear the glory of those works without weakening. A whole generation, by contrast, will have disappeared in a manner wholly coherent with what it described, what it sensed, of the inhuman. It is ironic signs they have left behind, and the whole labour that is left for those whom they have sumptuously disappointed will be to make positive monuments out of those signs, monuments worthy of memory, of a juicy, intellectual memory, with no regard for the elegance and style of their disappearance.

The atoms of time, which used to be organized into complex wholes, have now shrivelled to form dense nuclei, which it is impossible to cross. Their ever increasing pressure is sending us back to the molecular state. Under the pressure of empty time, we are once again turning into beings who are driven only by speed and aware only of hot and cold. Every being is becoming an infinitesimal corpuscle, but one animated by ever greater speed. Only acceleration gives us a sense of life; any deceleration is lethal.

Let us turn our gaze towards the Southern lands, where only the melancholy light of origins shines.

When you fly over twenty thousand kilometres or so of the earth, you see that it is made up, from Arctic to Antarctic, of a harmonious set of deserts — including the oceans — punctuated by a few strange conurbations and some zones

of furious vegetation. Distance is swept away by the sleepless night of the time zones, or by its mapping out as a geometric function, in terms of the multiple coordinates of longitude and latitude, altitude and speed. The bizarre situation of being caught in a storm above the Indian Ocean in a comfortable little pod where the only interesting thing about life is its fragile and involuntary character. There is no sense keeping up any social relations at this altitude. It is enough just to consume your meals while keeping one eye on the ordinariness of these faces with which there is a very small chance death will unite you.

The shadow of the clouds is as fine as a Rorschach blot on the flatness of the desert. The outlines of the dried-up mountain streams seen from a bird's eye view are as clear-edged and jagged; the profiles of the trees submerged by the waters held back by the hydroelectric dam are as exact and dreamy; the racial beauty of the Arctic women and their artificial smiles as they serve you tea in the Southern skies are as light; and the desire never to arrive and to go on revolving indefinitely around the earth is as crazy.

The dream of a matriarchal utopia that is tender and feminine, lethargic and insular – the utopia of Antarctica and the Southern hemisphere. The dream of a drifting continent, where the rules of the game of species and the form of the human and the inhuman would be overturned. Once you have crossed the Equator, the Conscious and the Unconscious should switch over like the poles, all the human constellations should change places like the Pole Star and the Southern Cross. There are traces of this – a whole philosophy of involution and marsupiality. For one thing, the Aboriginals have no sense of paternity (a good sign in a period when paternity, causality and sexuality in general are becoming farcical). The little marsupials are never really born: they climb back into their mothers' pouches and grow up in the open womb. And here even the rivers disappear into

the interior of the earth. Even words lose themselves in the interior of language. There is the same foetal tranquillity in the plane, the peaceful sense of being taken in charge by speed, which becomes like a maternal warmth.

The delicious stiffness of jetlag, of the body lost in another temporal hemisphere. A slight science-fiction dizziness, an unshakeable torpor, a weakness in one's limbs – on account of the lack of paradoxical* sleep, the whole of reality is suffused with a paradoxical torpor. For having flown against time, or been quicker than time, the body is struck down by lethargy. For transgressing its space and its territory, it is struck down with amnesia and an absence of dreams. And yet it is a poetic state, a kind of trance, and the effect is like that induced by drugs.

Koala Kangaroo Wombat Lizard Dingo – all lazy, somnolent, maternal or infantile creatures (like furry or mechanical toys). No wild beasts. A foetal, marsupial, herbivorous, idyllic and cuddly state – there is even the shadowy, and lethal, figure of the serpent and a few Aboriginal survivors from the original sin. WOOLLOOMOOLLOO!

Bereft of wild animals and history, but not of myths and wind, the whole bathes in a prenatal lethargy, a sweetness and melancholy which are also present in social life.

Is this our original condition? And supposing it is, what caused things to slough off their lazy, maternal skins, to emerge into the real? You get the impression that a lot of things here have not yet received their septentrional baptism of reality.

*More commonly called REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. [Tr.]

*Dreamtime?** The austral Unconscious? Omnipotence of thought over the vast reaches of the desert: the Aboriginal is the only man capable of communicating over such fabulous distances. May there be a connection between this cosmic fable, between this oneiric past whose primitiveness is that of another world and a hypermodern, hyperreal future, between the telepathic ecosystem of the Aboriginals and our White telecommunications system, which also has, in its way, the omnipotence of thought as its objective?

By its remoteness, insularity and ancestrality, Australia is already a kind of spaceship, a kind of continent adrift on another geographic and temporal orbit.

The absolute contrast between the diurnal brilliance of light on the Gold Coast and the Great Barrier Reef, the wintry and subtropical glare of an atmosphere purified by the nearby desert, and the 'faint', the crepuscular glimmering of the aboriginal undergrowth, of the nocturnal mammals, the animals which hunt by night, of the intellectuals cowering in their nocturnal consciousness and the obscurity of their research. Against exposure to the outside world: the pink night of the kangaroo's pouch or of the underwater coral. Everything learns to go underground or underwater, be it into the Unconscious or into the shadowy reaches of books or the dark recesses of the earth; everything moves with a nocturnal slowness and agility, in an effort to survive.

The coexistence – both geographical and mental – of insularity and a fabulous space, of an involutive and an extensive utopia. A nostalgic indecision which affects minds too, caught as they are between a sort of foetal tranquillity and proud modernity. Different from the USA, where this insular form of original reverie is unknown.

*In English in original. [Tr.]

The airiest forest is a forest of eucalyptus trees, which do not give much shade, since the leaves lie side-on to the sun. The eucalyptus sheds its skin as though it were slipping out of a dress and, beneath, it is soft to the touch, like skin. It is a tree that is feminine in its pallor and has great natural elegance. Its leaves make the sky seem deep and light, and there is nothing more beautiful than their outlines against the light.

The more the Aboriginals are exterminated, the more nostalgia for them will grow within Western consciousness, which was already stupefied by them once when they first made their appearance in the seventeeth and eighteenth centuries (the most astonishing moment in our history: just when the West was inventing universal reason for itself, it discovered in the Antipodes a humanity refractory both to history and to progress, pre-adamic and fabulous, which it could only destroy by annexing it to that universal reason – and that left history booby-trapped by murder). It is as if an evil genius had reserved this stinging contradiction made up of primitivism and negritude for civilized arrogance (perhaps it was even, as was said of the neolithic painters, a diabolical invention by eighteenth-century libertines?). However this may be, philosophical and moral consciousness, which was already stupefied by their appearance, will remain paralysed by their extermination. And it will be increasingly paralysed, to the point where it grants them an ill-fated right of veto over its own values.

It is the same with science. For what do we find at the end, what do we bring to light by hunting it down whether it be in the Southern seas or in the field of biology? Always a black object, maleficent little tribes, who would have done better to remain secret, for the greater good of the Enlightenment. It is always the worst that is dug up, and it always ends up taking its revenge.

Lord X, navigator and missionary, setting sail for Australia at the end of the

eighteenth century with two thousand volumes, together with hundreds of sacks of wheat which he hopes the natives will sow on the land – they who have never even thought of scraping at the soil to get anything whatever from it, who have preferred to burn it and roam around it for centuries, to the point where they have reduced it to desert.

Of all inhabited lands, Australia and the Pacific Islands are closest to the eighteenth century, because they still bear the marks of their discovery. The Aboriginals are, even today, less near to their origins than to the moment when they were seen and resuscitated by our gaze. They are therefore, with their costumes, their mysterious drawings and their cannibal faces, the bearers of a poetry of the Enlightenment and of all that prerevolutionary period, a role they fulfil better than our châteaux or paintings or the Encyclopaedia (which, indeed, bathes in the glory of their very recent discovery). Deep down, the most original thing the eighteenth century invented wasn't the Enlightenment but the Southern hemisphere, the soft, lunar, maternal hemisphere.

The conjunction of the 'straightest', most austere product of the Northern hemisphere – the presbyterian, the Anglo-Saxon, the quintessential hyperborean, in his pride and his theology – and the most primitive, regressive, impotent and also the most unselfconscious element that the Antipodes concealed under the sun: the Aboriginals. The clash resulted in the quasi-total extermination of the Antipodean, but the Southern hemisphere has not perhaps pronounced its last word yet.

The Aboriginals were certainly had. They were led to claim for themselves stretches of land which in the days when they had been left alone they had

roamed through as nomads with never a thought of ownership. Their claim was directed towards an object they had never possessed and which they would have thought it contemptible and sacrilegious to possess. Typical Western cunning. In return they have palmed off an even deadlier virus on to us – the virus of origins.

Ayer's Rock, that gleaming monolith in the middle of the desert, has been given back to the Aboriginals. But with so many tribes – which one was it to be given to? To prove their rightful claim, the Umburu tribe set about dancing, i.e. jumping up and down for an hour, an aesthetically impoverished and unattractive exercise, but it provided the required proof: it was they who were the sacred inheritors of ULURU. And everyone yielded to their claim. Perhaps some day the Aboriginals will give the Sydney Opera House back to the Whites, provided, of course, that they (the Whites) are able to perform the 'right dance'!

These old Australians or Californians who spend all their days staring at the ocean without leaving their limousines, which they have turned into their panoramic childhood sites and their coffins, and who dream there, while awaiting the last wave, the one that will come from the depths of the ocean to engulf them.

In the grey, heavy Bangkok dawn, a dream of the Antarctic, of gleaming white snow, or of that island surrounded by coral, crystalline thought, transparent brain, a lethargic path through the dark vegetation, the beginning of the world, the epitome of life in a single stretch of land jutting out of the sea, in the palm of your hand, in a perfect oval, in the vividness of its detail, in the perfection of its insularity . . . Heron Island.

Asia so degraded, so corrupted by the colonial era and by its own crowdedness that it can only choose between depravity and the puritan orgy of communism.

The women of Thailand are so beautiful that they have become the hostesses of the Western world, sought after and desired everywhere for their grace, which is that of a submissive and affectionate femininity of nubile slaves – now dressed by Dior – an astounding sexual come-on in a gaze which looks you straight in the eye and a potential acquiescence to your every whim. In short, the fulfilment of Western man's dreams. Thai women seem spontaneously to embody the sexuality of the Arabian Nights, like the Nubian slaves in ancient Rome. Thai men, on the other hand, seem sad and forlorn; their physiques are not in tune with world chic, while their women's are privileged to be the currently fashionable form of ethnic beauty. What is left for these men but to assist in the universal promotion of their women for high-class prostitution?

Having gone as far as you can does in a way put an end to the journey. The only further stage is never to go back again – to discover the 'distance of liberation'. The further you travel the more clearly you realize that the journey (destiny) is all that matters. It has to describe an arc across the earth, espouse the curvature of the earth and attain sufficient velocity to be tempted to escape from it. Thought too must espouse the curvature of things, their inflexion, their reversibility and be tempted at any moment to escape to starry heights, for to discover at a particular moment the curvature of life is no less moving than to sense, at great altitude, the curvature of the earth.

You have to travel, keep on the move. You have to cross oceans, cities,

continents, latitudes. Not to acquire a more informed vision of the world – there is no universality any more, no possible synthesis of experience, nor even, strictly speaking, is there any pleasure of an 'aesthetic' or 'picturesque' variety to be had from travel – but in order to get as near as possible to the worldwide sphere of exchange, to enjoy ubiquity, cosmopolitan extraversion, to escape the illusion of intimacy. Travel as a line of flight, the orbital voyaging of the age of Aquarius.

Philosophy has never been anything but a disavowal of the reality principle. Up until now, it has been the business of philosophers. Today this unreality has entered into things. This then is the end of philosophy and the beginning of something else in which reality merges with its ironic refraction.

Television knows no night. It is perpetual day. TV embodies our fear of the dark, of night, of the other side of things. It is the incessant light, the incessant lighting, which puts an end to the alternating round of day and night (hence the absurdity of a TV service like the French which closes down at 11 p.m.).

There is something of both childishness and sorcery in a woman making up. The event keeps the world in suspense by the simple interaction between a mirror and a face. It is the reconciliation of technique and guile. It has no equivalent in the universe of thought except perhaps when suffering is dressed up in ascetic garb. It is, moreover, each day (and several times a day) the sacrificial moment of a woman's life.

You can only go into mourning by transfiguration or disfigurement. There is no rational form of the absorption of death.

One regresses so far on a flight that it must be easy to die. The infantility carries you straight off to paradise.

The range of compromises
the inanity of discourse
the abomination of the concept
unidentified sexual objects
the stasis of baldness

Just as an excess of pain causes you to fall into a faint or unconsciousness, and just as extreme danger plunges us into a state of physical and mental indifference which corresponds to the brutal indifference of the world towards ourselves, isn't this disintensification of affects (or of 'movements of the spirit') in an artificially animated world a ruse of the species while awaiting a better world?

'Every ecstasy in the end prefers the path of renunciation to sinning against its own concept by realizing itself' (Adorno). Isn't the same true of the social too – a general all-out collusion to prevent the realization of the social for fear of damaging the concept and forever destroying the hopes that surround it?

The pharaonic era of the country-house technocrats. The dream of an electronic control of things runs up against the traditional stupidity of the masses. Collective demand has never been so elicited, forced or violated as it has in the field of computing.

The clash between a philosophical and metaphysical exigency and a present which is no longer in the least philosophical and metaphysical.

The clash between a system of representation and a system of simulation.
The clash between a thinking of difference and a thinking of indifference.
What is the power of indifference? What would an analytics of indifference be like?
Torn between a radical indifference and a radical seduction.

Postmodernity is the simultaneity of the destruction of earlier values and their reconstruction. It is renovation within ruination. In terms of periods, it is the end of final evaluations and the movement of transcendence, which are replaced by 'teleonomic' evaluation, in terms of retroaction. Everything is always retroactive, including – and, indeed, particularly including – information. The rest is left to the acceleration of values by technology (sex, body, freedom, knowledge).

Waiting is an anticipated expiation. Every pleasure is surrounded by a waiting area which expresses the fact that millions of people desire the same thing at the same time. Waiting is the neutralization of the respective desires which bear upon the same object. Even perhaps upon suffering and death. If death were a public service, there would be waiting lists. Impatience finds its justification as a refusal of this void, this abeyance of time which has no justification in any other world and which is produced by the overcrowding, the overpopulation of all desires.

Certain women dream only of winning a man. Others, though they are rarer, dream only of losing men. They have expiated their femininity in advance and the pleasure it can give them. If they have some sensual disposition, this disappears to be replaced by a more subtle game-plan. Just as thought reserves itself a sort of mental domination, with no concern to change the world, but the sole aim of

abolishing it, certain women devote themselves to a sort of mental prostitution in which men, weary of tame pleasures, may play at their own ruin.

The Pentagon accuses Texas Instruments of providing it with unreliable electronic equipment. T.I. retorts that testing already eats up one-third of the budget and that it is impossible to test such equipment without sacrificing years to do it, at the end of which the equipment would be outdated (however, it is built to fulfil essential tasks: military defence, nuclear ballistics, scientific calculations). This is wonderful. High technology here connects up once again with the social system, which also can no longer insure against the random consequences of its own functioning. It too puts individuals, laws and products into circulation without having tested, analysed and identified them properly (on-the-job training is a failure). Or else you are tested so minutely that you are, in the end, no use at all, like Michelin tyres after endurance trials. Citizens are polled so often that they now have no opinions left. Like the Dogons who were subjected to so much research by ethnologists that they were forced to invent dreams and rites to keep them happy. Everywhere, the (medical, scientific, military or social) machine goes beyond the possibilities of its object; it is therefore forced to turn back against itself, to lose itself in endless adjustments, indefinite corrections. The countdown gets lost in the ignition checks. The launch of the rocket is postponed indefinitely (in the meantime the cosmonauts have aged, if they have not indeed died of radiation poisoning from the checks). The only advantage: war itself is indefinitely postponed: it has to be tested first in all its possible consequences.

The population, who are, ultimately, indifferent to public affairs and even to their own interests, negotiate this indifference with an equally spectral partner and one that is similarly indifferent to its own will: the government [*le pouvoir*]. This game between zombies may stabilize in the long term. The Year 2000 will not take

place in that an era of indifference to time itself – and therefore to the symbolic term of the millennium – will be ushered in by negotiation.

Nowadays, you have to go straight from money to money, telegraphically so to speak, by direct transfer (that is the viral side of the matter). A viral revolution, then, more akin to the Glass Bead Game than to the steam engine, and admirably personified in Bernard Tapie's playboy face. For the look of money is reflected in faces. Gone are the hideous old capitalists, the old-style industrial barons wearing the masks of the suffering they have inflicted. Now there are only dashing playboys, sporty and sexual, true knights of industry, wearing the mask of the happiness they spread all around themselves.

The world put on a show of despair after 1968. It's been putting on a big show of hope since 1980. No more tears, alright? Reaganite optimism, the pumping up of the dollar. Fabius's glossy new look. Patriotic conviviality. Reluctance prohibited. The old pessimism was produced by the idea that things were getting worse and worse. The new pessimism is produced by the fact that everything is getting better and better. Supercooled euphoria. Controlled anaesthesia.

I should like to see the equivalent of Bernard Tapie in the world of business emerge in the world of concepts. Buying up failing concepts, swallowing them up, dusting them off (firing all the deadbeats who are in the way), putting them back into circulation with a dynamic virginity, sending them shooting up on the Stock Exchange and then abandoning them afterwards like dogs. Some people do this very well.

It is perhaps better to save tired concepts by maintaining them in a supercooled state like unemployed labour, or locking them away in interactive databanks kept alive on a respirator.

Everywhere power has to be seen in order to give the impression that it sees. But this is not the case. It doesn't see anything. It is like a woman walled up in a 'peepshow'. It is separated from society by a two-way mirror. And it turns slowly, undresses slowly, adopting the lewdest poses, little suspecting that the other is watching and masturbating in secret.

The metro. A man gets on – by his glances, gestures and movements, he carves out a space for himself and protects it. From that space, he sets his actions to those of the neighbouring, approximate molecules. He becomes the centre of a physical pressure, sniffs out hostile vibrations and emanations, or friendly ones, on the verge of panic. He joins up with others out of fear. He innervates his whole body with a calculated indifference, wraps himself in a superficial reverie, created only to keep others at a distance. He deciphers nothing, protects himself from the crossfire of everyone's gazes and sets his own as a backhand down the line, staring at a particular face at the back of the carriage until the very lightness of his stare stirs the other in his sleep. When the train accelerates or brakes, all the bodies are thrown in the same direction, like the shoals of fish which change direction simultaneously. The marvellous underwater lethargy of the metro, the self-defence of the capillary systems, the cruel play of vague thoughts – all while waiting for the stop at Faidherbe–Chaligny.

The crucial thing is not to have sweeping views of the future, but to know where to plant your primal scene. The danger for us is that we'll keep running up against the wall of the Revolution. For this is the source of our misery: our phobias, our prohibitions, our phantasies, our utopias are imbedded in the nineteenth century, where their foundations were laid down. We have to put an end to this historical coagulation. Beyond it, all is permitted. It will perhaps be the adventure of the end of the century to dissolve the wall of the Revolution and to plunge on beyond it, towards the marvels of form and spirit.

Our leader hasn't got the right kind of smile. It is bringing us a rainy autumn. See how Reagan's smile brings down all the Lord's blessings upon America. There's a good leader for you – one they would have appreciated in a primitive society. Mitterrand's strained smile brings us nothing but water. Even on the night of 10 May there was a fantastic storm. We are still awaiting the Indian summer of socialism.

Neither optimism nor pessimism: they are moral qualities which have nothing to do with the immorality of theory.

For whole generations, a certain pessimism is associated with the historical failure of revolutions. That pessimism is a thing of pathos. The other less sentimental, fiercer type comes from recognizing how ideal things are, the perfection and exactitude of our freedom and the absolute availability of the simplest solutions. For example, the resolution of the famine problem in Ireland by killing off the young children. You could not do better; there is no more elegant solution. It is a stroke of wit. The stroke of wit also despairs of language, but from that despair it always derives a brilliant solution, drawing a line between two diametrically opposed poles. A diabolical simplification; everything is in the ellipsis. There is no crueller trick you can play on reality than to idealize it just as it is. It never recovers from that (whereas it can easily cope with being denounced). Deify power right where it is and it can't believe its eyes. Take the people who marched through Red Square with placards reading 'We are happy in the Soviet Union! The Soviet Union is the land of happiness.'

If you set five men pulling on a rope, you multiply the strength of each individual by five. With death, it's the other way round. If you kill a thousand men,

the death of each is a thousand times less important than if he had died alone (Gombrowicz). A specious logic, since it is a matter of quantity in the one case and of quality in the other (the one is multiplied, the other divided, so deep down there is no paradox). But it is a superb proposition all the same!

Certain regimes reserve for themselves a monopoly on physical violence. As for the socialists, they reserve a monopoly on moral comedy. That is why it is quite difficult to make fun of them. But this is not something they should be proud of, because when something no longer makes you laugh, it probably means what is ridiculous about it is already deeply buried away, immune from further harm, irreparable. It is against all the rules for power to appropriate a function – ridicule – which commonly belongs to the sphere of manners and which is normally the province of the public mind.

The United States has a fantastic capacity for absorbing violence. Italy has an equal capacity for absorbing derision. It is a quality inherited from its history. The Mafia: a blood-stained mockery of official power, the ritual staging of its liquidation: popular opera. Will the authorities which have been derided in this way collapse? Not at all. They continue to swing from right to left, on the end of their thread, as if on a piece of old elastic. They survive by the pity they inspire. No one (except the Red Brigades) wants to put them to death. What marvellous wisdom! For the truth of our societies is that they can no longer cut away evil: they have to absorb it. Madness can no longer be locked away; it has to be assimilated. It is enzymes, not counterirritants that must be put to work. Dissolve, dissolve, dissuade. In Italy authority dissolves of itself in scandals, debauchery and historical compromises, but it does so with a certain urbanity, offering the spectacle of its fall and its periodic resurgence. There are very few societies so advanced.

Our societies are changing. It is no longer an atmosphere of repression that weighs upon us, that haunts our streets and our minds. It is the glossy, efficiency-minded atmosphere which is knocking the wind out of us. Literally, euphoria, dumping and acceleration are absorbing all the oxygen from the atmosphere and leaving us like washed-up fish. It is no longer light we are short of, nor cash, but air. The oppression weighs not upon our persons, but upon our chests. Is it the approach of the end of the century which is producing this effect of pumping off, sucking out our air? Are we not just rushing around merely to escape that? In fact we are beginning to mime what we believe the twenty-first century should be, in order to save ourselves the trouble of a lethal transition. We get high on futurology to divert attention from our lack of perspective. We are accelerating in a desire to get past the millennium in fine shape, in an impeccable 'dissolve', unconcerned by that magic date. There are no fatidical numbers or stars any more. The coming years have already been sacrificed. They no longer count. They have already fallen into the umbra of the space ship that is the next century, been obliterated in the penumbra of speed. We shall have trouble hearing the grass grow, the wind whistle and fate being accomplished. For everything is already going under in the wake of this sort of olympian performance humanity is collectively imposing upon itself.

O C T O B E R 1 9 8 4

For difference is beautiful,
but indifference is sublime

The insane hope of being proved wrong: if reality exists it cannot but rise to this challenge, even to the point of systematically destroying its images, as the iconoclasts did with the images of God. Unfortunately, they were defeated, God never rose to their challenge. He's no fool, the Deity: He sided with the iconolaters, with those who did not believe in Him and revered only His likeness. After all the strivings of the iconoclasts, we shall doubtless have to give in to that way of thinking ourselves, and give up questioning a reality which has preferred to disappear, as God did long ago, behind the perfect alibi of images.

There is somewhere a worm teamed up with a symbiotic alga which helps it with its digestive process. This all works very well except when the worm digests the alga and dies because without the alga it cannot digest its food.

The finest witticisms are found in nature.

According to Zinoviev, the consequence of the Third World War will be universal communism as the mode of organizing further life on the planet. From this point of view, the Communist countries appear as Third World War mutants, models from beyond the catastrophe, marked with the ghostly character of extermination. Which is true politically: these states have performed the annihilation of their own societies, destroyed their peoples and reorganized them on this 'transpolitical' basis. We are not far from having done the same ourselves, though by a quite different route. Which means, in consequence, that *the Third World War has already happened,* that it is no use either hoping for it or fearing it, since it is going on here and now around us. This is why Zinoviev's idea of communism is well in advance of all the politico-'imperialist' analyses produced in the West. His communism has nothing of the ideological and the historical about it: it is already a post-nuclear-fusion supercooling; it rules not over life, but over survival. It is of the order of – and has the power of – objectality (as, ironically, does Zinoviev's thought).

Entirely in agreement with Salieri when he rails against God for having given humanity the gift of Mozart's divine music, for the sole purpose of making us look ridiculous and plunging us into despair. Salieri sets himself up as Man's champion against divine injustice. It is the same problem as that of the Grand Inquisitor in the Brothers Karamazov. When Christ returns to earth he says to him: 'We manage humanity for its greatest happiness. It has paid for this with its mediocrity. Don't come disturbing this fragile balance with insane promises.' And he condemns Christ to death once again.

Salieri is not mean-spirited: it took pride, not to become jealous of Mozart, but to challenge God and ask: 'Tell it to me plainly, why am I not Mozart?' For God mocked us by throwing Mozart among us in the guise of a vulgar being, who did not even bear the exceptional marks of grace. God is toying with us, and that is unbearable. Mozart must be destroyed. All that challenges God is noble in spirit and superior to gaping, unconditional admiration of His works.

We will not have the same problem with Changeux's Neuronal Man, emerging on the horizon like Nietzsche's Last Man, with his cortical and synaptic flatness. Farewell Mozart, farewell Salieri, no more grace, but no more challenges either, such is the solution offered by modern science to the insoluble despair of the difference between men.

Signs, signs? Is that all you have to say? People act and people dream, they speak or they don't – none of that is unreal. Shut up and watch. See the philosophical beauty of these closing years of the century, the stars in the sky falling lower as the fateful date approaches, and the interactive horizon of couples in love – all this is beyond doubt, and it moves me to tears . . . The age, the coming age is like a metropolis deserted by its population, cut off from its sources of energy. Are you going to say that, are you going to go on with these twilight rantings? Every century throws the reality principle into question as it closes, but it's over today, finished, done. Everybody works these days.

Narrative and moral passions, the philosophical animal spirits, are literally blocking the electronic animal spirits, a thousand times more lively and insignificant. Videos and advertisements, credits, news reports and sports flashes, *Dallas,* that's television, all that transfers easily, with the minimum of energy, on ephemeral film. But pure television, like pure painting or pure speed, is hard to bear.

The most beautiful woman would be the one I would trace a fractal object for on the misted-up surface of the car window. I would see a fractal love light up in her eyes, a fractal kiss form on her lips and we would leave for those empty Alps, those fractal lunar landscapes which smack so much of mathematics.

Rio.

Not only are the Blacks and the Indians slaves to the technology of the Whites, but they also have to be slaves of their nostalgia for origins. They have to fill the role of ancestor to the human race and bear witness to its mysterious and ritualistic origins. A division of labour: some exploit them physically, while others exploit them culturally, feeding on their music, their dance and their description within anthropology. There is no contradiction in this. Indeed it is quite the reverse: the slaves collude in all this themselves. In hunting, the whole animal is put to use: meat, horns, hair, blood and fur – even the entrails will serve to read the future and the mask will serve as emblem of the deity.

There are of course happier things you can say about Brazil. In particular, that a part of the happiness and the sensuality, the vital languor and the maternal seduction of everything here – in spite of the objective misery – derives precisely from that coupling of master and slave, which extends as far as the abduction of women and vital energy and as far as the absorption by all of the ritual signs of servitude. This is the revenge of the cultural order on the political, something which no longer occurs within Western societies, perhaps for want of sufficiently subtle slaves. Here time maintains a unity, is a time that lends itself to living, in its monotonous, languorous unfolding, the bodies all mingling together, both the master's and the slave's, even though the master tortures the slave and the slave devours the master. But perhaps all this is merely due to the heat.

The heat is like an objective sleep. There is no need for sleep here because it already envelops you like a dream, like a veiled form of the unconscious. Nothing is repressed. Everything is in the insane agitation of molecules. This is the way it is in the Tropics: violence itself is lazy and the subconscious takes on the form of dance. Hence the absurdity of psychoanalysis in these latitudes. It is a parody

connected with European privilege, part of the colonial heritage. But in fact, what is the state of the unconscious for us, in Europe itself?

What is fantastic in the baroque churches overloaded with gold and spiral scrolls, with ecstatic figures and stucco flames, is that the artists deliberately confused Heaven and Hell, the flames of ecstasy and the flames of agony. This grotesque confusion is pleasing to our eclectic, or rather libertine, minds, believing as we do neither in Heaven nor Hell, whereas the people of the Baroque age believed very strongly in both and, no doubt more in Hell than Heaven, following a very popular heresy.

A country where shadows do not move round, but merely lengthen and shorten since the sun rises straight up into the equatorial sky.

Amid the luxurious freshness of Ipanema each building has its own secret police.

Brazil plays a sort of giant chlorophyll role for the whole of humanity. It is the planetary accumulator of joy, elation, languor, physical animality and seduction coupled with vital exuberance and political derision. If ever the human race should fall into depression it is there that it would regain its vitality, just as, if it should ever be near to suffocation, it is beside the Amazon that it would get its breath back.

There is no aphrodisiac like innocence.

The speed of things which escape you, suddenly shooting away from you at an incredible rate as if possessed of a force of repulsion, like the bar of soap slipping out of your fingers in the bath.

Nietzsche grappled with the *death* of God, but all we have to deal with is the *disappearance* of politics and history. This disappearance may take on a degree of pathos (as in May '68) but that will no doubt be the last time. May '68 marked the onset of a long eventless process. That is why those who did not live through it can never understand what is happening today in a diluted form, just as those who never lived through the death of God can understand nothing of the convalescence of values.

They are building an opera house at the Bastille. The people will no longer have to storm it, they will go there to feast on regal music. Actually the people will not go, any more than they do now – cultivated people will go, and in so doing will provide a stunning confirmation of the rule that the privileged are always ready to sanctify through art or pleasure the sites where others have fought. The Right is quite wrong to oppose this project: there could not be a finer memorial to commemorate the death of the Revolution.

The night of 'the look' on the avenue de New York. People drift along not seeing each other. It is like a vernissage without paintings. It could be the Exterminating Angel or 'Pure Festival' – pure in the sense of Virilio's 'pure war' – on screen. The only hot spot is the trap-door through which the champagne arrives. Peculiar feverish, power-mad tribe, dissolute yet oversensitive, metaphysics with infrared lighting. Nothing in their gaze, everything in the way they look, nothing in their eyes, everything in the decibel level.

The gentle air of the Piazza Navona in December, with the acetylene lamps and the reflections of the turquoise water on the Bernini horses. A beauty that is purely Roman. In the Campo dei Fiori someone has laid fresh flowers at the foot of the statue of Giordano Bruno, burned for heresy on this very spot four centuries ago. The touching loyalty of the Roman people; where else would you see such a thing? The hot December multitudes spill out into the street: Christmas is almost as mild here as in Brazil. The city is only beautiful when the crowd invades it. So many people on the streets always gives the impression of a silent uprising. Everyone walks along in the luminous muted buzz of voices and the narrow streets. Everything is transformed into a silent opera, a theatrical geometry. Everything sings in this part of the city.

Soirée in Rome. The women are more attractive than the men – they always are. My first impression is that all the men are ugly (they are producers and film directors) and that all the women are beautiful (they are actresses). On a second view: the men are ugly, but they have character; all the women have something erotic about them, but nothing remarkable – a purely macho society, the world of showbiz. The big scene with the male lead is played out in all its grandeur, from one palazzo to the next in the Roman night. The most beautiful actress I know is marrying a rich director, author of 97 screenplays. This is the rule among the showbiz crowd. As usual I feel alienation from all the men there and solidarity with all the women, whom the men pretend to scorn in order to please them, but to whom they are basically indifferent. It must be nice to live in bodies so beautiful, so ingenuous, and allow the men to dominate you with all their ugliness, wealth and pretensions. It must be marvellous to be a woman. Ultimately, it is this which is fascinating: woman is unimaginable. The more beautiful she is, the more unimaginable.

The periwinkle blue eyes of the woman selling jewellery, by the turquoise blue water of the fountain. Tre Scalini icecreams at the end of the day. The bambini with their silver balloons. Mammas with their fulsome familial desire and low necklines. Brothers and sisters embrace beneath the mask of love. Incestuous city, with its domes and obelisks. The very forms of the architecture are incestuous, with their intertwining columns spiralling up towards the orgasm of the sky and the gardens.

A., the victim of her own excessive beauty. Reduced to a state of stupor by the need to let this quite extraordinary beauty shine forth. She seems sad, but is not really so: she simply lets herself be admired, showing no sign of her feelings. Her very laugh says quite clearly: I am nothing, I shall simply be beautiful. In these conditions, can she be an actress? It is true that men love this mixture of hysteria and passivity, of masochistic adornment, when so many other women today use their intelligence as a sadistic adornment. And yet I feel that A. goes too far in her ecstatic submissiveness: she conforms too well to the rule of admiring only herself. How, in these conditions, can she be a psychologist?

Nothing happens with Italian women because everything has been decided in advance, in an incestuous coaxing, an affected vivacity in which sentiment has no part. Games of seduction, courtly manners, libertinism and underlying cruelty. They come to you as though on stage, but they don't know how to weaken. It is they who have driven men into machismo, and who have created all the Mastroiannis of this world. Feminism doesn't play much part in this, even if they claim it does. It is jealousy which excites them, far more than love, the jealousy they arouse, the jealousy they feel continually, with a cultivated excessiveness and obstinacy. They live out their lives as widows, daughters, sisters and mothers, as the whole clan – but never as women. As widows for preference: men they love

dead, defunct, suffocating, petrified, stifled by their femininity. By the theatre of their femininity. At five in the morning, all their energies are still being exhausted in trying to give an orgasmic intensity to words.

With women there is neither disappointment nor exception: they are all exceptional, from the moment you ask them merely to be women, that is, to compete with all the others. A lover's misapprehension: the charm of one woman is the jealous absence of all the others – the uniqueness of one woman is the marvellous strangeness of them all.

A society like the Italian, the very disorder of which renders the action of the State useless and ridiculous, is not without its charm and helps us to grasp this political truth: the principal task of the State today is to justify its own existence. To do so, it has to annihilate society's capacity to survive by itself. Surreptitiously undermining all forms of spontaneous regulation, deregulating, desocializing, breaking down the traditional mechanisms of bodies and antibodies, in order to substitute its artificial mechanisms – such is the strategy of a State locked in a subtle struggle with society – exactly like medicine, which lives off the destruction of natural defences and their replacement by artificial ones.

In Rome, Niccolini manages to counter the obsessive fear of terrorism with a cultural revival. To the Romans who no longer dare go out in the evenings he offers festivals, performances, poetry galas. He brings culture down into the street. He combats the terrorist festival with the cultural, advertising festival. He will be criticized for wasteful expenditure, but the only way to fight terrorism is not to create 'solid' institutions, but to put upon the stage a culture that is as sacrificial, eccentric, and ephemeral as the terrorist acts themselves. One festival against the

other. If terrorism is a sort of murderous advertising campaign which keeps our imagination on tenterhooks, it can be countered only by a piece of even more effective advertising.

It used to be the Right that was pessimistic while the Left was unfailingly optimistic. Today on the Right it's 'sunrise' neoliberalism and, on the Left, the Tristes Tropiques.

If it is Italian terrorism's ambition to destabilize the state, then it is absurd: the state is already so nonexistent that it would be a joke to try and kill it off any more. Or else it is fuelled by the perverse desire to do *too much* – which might lead to law and order and the state becoming more stable, or at least being perpetually reestablished, fragile as they are. Perhaps that is the terrorists' dream. They long for an immortal enemy. Since if it no longer exists, it is much more difficult to destroy it. Tautologies like these really are the genuine article. But terrorism is tautological. And its ultimate lesson is of the order of the syllogism: if the State really existed, terrorism would make political sense. Since it manifestly does not, that proves the State doesn't exist.

Is it possible to conceive of disenchanted social movements? Yet ones which are still powerful and irrepressible? What would a fundamentally pessimistic political strategy be like, one without illusions, cynical but energetic, one which would transform the fatal state of public affairs into an open challenge, instead of exhausting itself in trying to mask it – unsuccessfully as it happens – though not without making its contribution to turning us into political morons?

We are condemned to a half-hearted, wearisome defeat, simply out of our inability to envisage things without pity, without that sentimental prejudice which

can only produce a sentimental politics. What we need to do, rather, is break out of the psychological poverty which forms part of today's crisis culture, in which everyone conspires in condemning pessimism as immoral. In fact, this immorality is our last chance. But, deep down, why should this situation be resolved?

Perhaps it is better that the political sphere should rot away altogether. We are no longer in a primitive society where the rotting of the body was consciously hastened in order to help it achieve the dignity of death more quickly. We, by contrast, savour the decay, enervation and disgrace of our energies, the fact that they are beyond recall.

The abjection of our political situation is the only true challenge today. Only facing up to this situation in all its desperation can help us get out of it. We should use the energy of catastrophe as we should use tidal or solar energy or that produced by earthquakes. When fossil fuel deposits, stable energies are exhausted, we should turn to the energies of breakdown, to the seismic and the fractal. Perhaps one day, we shall even draw some energy from the night itself? It is the same for mental energies: when the positive energies run out, one must seek an outcome to an event from its taking a diabolic twist, from its maximum disequilibrium, its precipitation. A fatal strategy, but one that is of our time. Isn't energy itself a form of catastrophe?

The automatic carriage-return on the typewriter, electronic central locking of cars: these are the things that count. The rest is just theory and literature.

Space is what prevents everything from being in the same place. Language is what prevents everything from meaning the same thing.

My hand, separated from me, dreams it is holding a breast. Nothing fills a hand better than a breast. Stereotype of a sadistic tenderness.

This journal develops, as its title indicates, over the course of time. However it is haunted by something which preceded it, the secret underlying event.

If the festivities at Christmas and the New Year take the form of an increasingly conventional hullabaloo – since we no longer have the winter solstice as our excuse in the electronic age, nor, in the age of Jesus Christ Superstar, that of the Nativity, nor even that of the snow and ice isolating each person in their own inner space and numbing the blood in the veins – if the end-of-year revels make people so anxious, it is because they are taking the measure of the twelve months that are to come, which they will slowly have to plough through one by one. It is the same with time today as it is with having a child: it is too long in the carrying, too long agrowing. We would like to have the chance to enjoy it right away, to have the fast-forwarded projection of the next century. Think how impatient we are for the year 2000, this whole millennium to get through, while we are already madly curious about the year 2020 and, no doubt, perfectly disenchanted as to what awaits us in '86. The celebrations of the millennium really are going to have to be brilliant to overcome the boredom we feel when we think of the next century.

If only we could at least know that there were merely one or two hundred years to go, that would make things more interesting. There is nothing like a catastrophe to usher in a millennium. They regenerate time in the same way as a cloudburst regenerates low water reserves. Yet it is time, real time, we are going to be short of. If the year 2000 does not happen, it will be because time will simply have disappeared, as winter has in some latitudes.

But this is a dream. I fear that we won't have sufficient reserves to get to this point, and that the year 2000 will disappoint us as the year 1000 did by not bringing with it the end of the world.

One must be simultaneously bursting with life and totally unreal.

Every acceleration produces an equivalent or even greater mass. Every mobilization gives rise to an equal or greater immobility. Every differentiation gives rise to an equal or greater indifference. All speed produces an equal or greater inertia. There is no need to brake. No need for a braking machine. Besides, such a machine has never existed. Only accelerating machines exist. Or ones for decelerating, which amounts to the same thing. But not for slowing down, because no machinery can produce that. Only language, music and the body can do that.

Looking at the material inscription of memory traces from a neuronal perspective, how and where, in which convolutions or in which set of cells and synapses, by what intersection of light and cerebral energy are we to explain the pale afterglow which remains of a dream, this entirely affective mental reverberation of which nothing remains in the memory? How are we to explain that we have in our heads the echo of haunting, precise music, and yet are unable to recall the slightest note or word of it? Or even the timbre of a voice, *but not the voice*? What microwaves carry the traces of a face or of a look which you can *feel* without even closing your eyes, a purely mental image, an image without shape – what reaction or abreaction of molecular biochemistry can account for this purely poetic duplication?

Winter is an emotive event. You want the temperature to fall to −20°C, or −30°C, to freeze the world to the quick and cryogenize it. We no longer dream of the flames of hell; they seem all too naive now. We no longer dream of purification by fire, but of catharsis by (paradoxical) cold. In this age of the tropicalization of manners, we dream of crystalline and deep-frozen forms. As in *Quintet,* that

marvellous film made among the remains of the Universal Exposition in Montreal, where the human beings were like stalactites and played chess in the clear frosty light.

Berlin Zoo. The beauty of the animals exiled in the snow, prowling around the artificial rocks as though in the jungle, with a dreamlike slowness, even if this is merely the slowness of resignation. The Australian Aboriginals have this same slowness, this dreamy stillness which they get from the Dreamtime. They are untouched by the frenzy of the human race.

The snow raises the natural darkness of animality to new heights. Whiteness suits wild animals. The morphology of animals is so strange (an elephant, who could have imagined that?) that we have to think that, as Canetti suggested, behind this mask someone is getting fun out of shocking us, is hiding in there in order to hide the truth from us. Such are animals: nearer than we are to the mask or the metamorphosis. More natural and more perfectly disguised. Man has fewer possibilities, either for servitude or for stratagems. He will never have the beauty of a wild beast in the snow, nor the light melancholy of the grey elephant, nor the perspicacity of green ants.

Steigenberger Hof 502. Abflug fünf. Zweimal hoch. Seltsam genug warnt sie mich nach dem Abschluss. Sekt. Wunderweiße Laken. Wundersamer Eindruck: sie bleibt im Hotelbett leigen (wo sie doch in der Stadt wohnt), ich fliege. Da, wo ich schlafen sollte, wird sie schlafen (da wo es war, soll ich werden). Sie wartet doch vielleicht noch. Sie hat dunkle, große Augen, die aber im Dunkeln und in der Liebe blau werden und sich chinesisch verschmälern. Keine Initiale leuchten an ihrem Schenkel – sollte sie mir nicht unterworfen sein? Oder wurde sie nicht erregt? Sie war es, ihre Lippen wurden üppig feucht. Was sie an mir erregt: Befremdung, Simulacrum, Immaterialität. Was mich an ihr erregt: milchige Haut, anschauliche Karnalität. Ich kam mir vor wie Arthur Miller in den Armen Marilyn

*Monroes. Süße Tänzerin, süße Performanzerin, süße weiße Hündin. Im Grunde hat sie mich verführt. Als sie im Loft ihr Arm zärtlich von hinten mir um die Schulter legte, wußte ich von vornherein, nach drei Jahren, daß sie da war. Wortlose Vertrautheit. Es lief alles schnell, wie in einem Polaroïd, besser nicht fragen. Ihre Haut war wie zarte Filmhaut, und ich zerriß ihre Wangen wie ein zartes Stundennetz.**

With certain women, we do not love them as we would wish or as they would wish. We prefer to violate them and lose them.

The surprises of thought are like those of love: they wear out. But here too you can carry on for a long time doing your conjugal duty.

Rome, Berlin, Sydney, New York, Rio. My secretarial staff is expanding. My rainbow too. The night which would fall simultaneously on all the cities of the

*'Steigenberger Hof 502. Flight departure five. Two floors up. Oddly enough she warns me after settling up. Champagne. Miraculously white sheets. Miraculous impression: she remains lying on the hotel bed (even though she lives in the city), I fly. There, where I was to sleep, she will sleep (there, where Id was, Ego shall be). Perhaps she is waiting there still. She has large, dark eyes, but in the dark and in love they narrow, Chinese-like, and become blue. No initials gleam on her thigh – was she not to submit to me? Or was she not aroused? She was, her lips became sensually moist. In me she is aroused by: strangeness, simulacrum, immateriality. In her I am aroused by: milky skin, demonstrative carnality. I felt like I was Arthur Miller in the arms of Marilyn Monroe. Sweet dancer, sweet performer, sweet white bitch. In truth she seduced me. When she tenderly laid her arm around my shoulder from behind in the loft, I knew straight away, after three years, that she was there. Wordless intimacy. It all happened quickly, like in a polaroid, better not ask. Her skin was like a delicate film, and I tore up her cheeks like a delicate net of hours.' In German in original. [Tr.]

world has not yet occurred. The sun which would illuminate all the cities of the world at once has not yet risen.

Every woman is like a timezone. She is a nocturnal fragment of your journey. She brings you unflaggingly closer to the next night.

Some women have disguised themselves as Congolese dugouts or Aleutian pearls. Why shouldn't they disguise themselves as a timezone, or even as the ecstasy of the journey? Everywhere there is pleasure you will find a woman in disguise, her features lost or metamorphosed into the ecstacy of things. Everywhere there is a woman dying.

The oh so strange story of the two cars concertinaed into each other on the motorway at dead of night. The two drivers were killed outright – they were husband and wife. There is something of the stories of Alphonse Allais (*Un drame bien parisien*) in this odd coincidence: they rush to tear off each other's masks and yet neither turns out to be who the other thinks they are. What is astonishing in this unusual case is the extreme improbability of such a strange accident involving husband and wife and, at the same time, the very high probability of such an encounter (husband and wife are just the people to rush to meet one another). It is like an episode one has already experienced, something totally obvious for the imagination. It's like when zero comes up thirty times in a row at roulette. What we find most compelling in a sequence of such beauty is the sight of the order of the world laid out in all its rigour, and not just in feeble probabilities. Any road accident is the product of a vague series of coincidences, and yet those others are mere accidents. This one is a crime, though not exactly a crime of passion. No one will ever know whether the woman, knowing her husband was having an affair in the nearby town, set out to catch up with him and, by mistake, in her highly emotional state, took the wrong motorway slip road or, again, whether, knowing that he was himself coming home, took the wrong turn with the intention of crashing head-on into his car – but how would she have known that one was his

(on the other hand, on that deserted road at two in the morning, and knowing the time of his departure, it was likely that it would be) – or, lastly, whether she deliberately committed suicide, simply choosing any old car that happened to be coming along.

It is forbidden to unplug yourself, and not only in active, interactive social life, but also on your deathbed: it is forbidden to tear out the tubes, even if you want to. And this is not criminal because it is an attempt on your own life – who cares about that? – but because it is an attempt on the life of medicine, and of high technology, which must ensure their own salvation first. The network principle carries with it the absolute moral obligation to remain plugged in.

Terror is as much a part of the concept of truth as runniness is of the concept of jam. We wouldn't like jam if it didn't, by its very nature, ooze. We wouldn't like truth if it wasn't sticky, if, from time to time, it didn't ooze blood.

Verifying to the point of dizziness the useless objectivity of things: science.
Verifying to the point of dizziness the useless subjectivity of desire: sexual liberation.
An object in which there is nothing to see.
A body in which there is nothing to desire.

There is a particular grace in indifference to one's own life and the admission of that indifference is touching, just so long as you are told with tenderness: I am incapable of loving you, rather than being told 'I love you', with all the affectation appropriate to such a statement. There are indeed certain women who can only

love in proportion to the degree of boredom they feel with themselves: with them, above all you must not bring them out of their boredom. There is, however, a great difference between real and affected indifference: only the former touches us. But it is very rare, almost as rare as beauty or madness.

There is no sense in refusing honours. That is in fact to do them too much honour. The only strategy is to act so that they never weigh upon you.

Your delicious (and malicious) certainty that you are a beautiful woman only subjugates yourself. How is one to approach her to be subjugated oneself?

It seems difficult to meet the woman of your life when you have several (lives). In fact, as soon as you have a double life . . .

Popular fame is what we should aspire to. Nothing will ever match the distracted gaze of the woman serving in the butcher's who has seen you on television.

With their feet caught in the ice like the pink flamingos, they still thought they were God's gift to mankind.

Humanism pretends to regard the savage and the primitive races as fully fledged beings and even as superior beings (by their authenticity). But the first humanists, the real ones, those we are all descended from, regarded the Kanakas as macaques, grounding the definition of humanism upon rigorous discrimination. It

was not a matter of racism, but of discernment. And the macaques returned the compliment, referring to themselves as the only 'men'. The current version, which is moving towards the recreation of a conviviality of the human race on a basis that is both biological and sentimental, is certainly the poorest yet.

We are always distant in some way, in some particular, from our sorrow. Only hysteria can create total sorrow, but even this, once it is articulated, is no longer so bad as it was before. For the same reason, absolute happiness is impossible and those who speak of it must be regarded as hypocrites. In the wretchedness of his New Delhi room, weeping hot tears (no doubt more for the personal offence he had suffered than for the lost object), S. still finds the strength to photograph his telephone.

Since it is the main virtue of the sexual act to raise the body to that exceptional state which is nudity, it is superfluous if that nudity has now become something obvious. That is why love is only beautiful with a shy body, a sex which makes a play of its shyness. That is why it is only really beautiful the first time.

A negative judgement gives you more satisfaction than praise, provided it smacks of jealousy.

They had taken out such a good insurance policy that when their house in the country burnt down, they were able to build another one older than the first.

The unconscious is very serious today – even a little bit sad – because we repress serious things into it: sex, death, libido, desire. But if it were irony and offhandedness which were repressed, what form would the new unconscious take then? It would become ironic; we would have ironic, breezy drives and fantasies, which would surface in our dreams and our slips, in our neuroses and madness. But isn't it already that way, in a sense?

Television will perhaps only have been invented in order, by a delectable detour, to give back its force to the silence of the image.

We certainly have to accept an authority, but one more stupid than ourselves. That is the great law of the political world. This is wonderfully apparent in the USSR (Zinoviev tells of the pharaonic stupidity of the Soviet leaders, equalled only by the pharaonic servitude of the Soviets themselves), but you can see it in France just as clearly. Why prefer Marchais, Le Pen, Chirac and other such hollow figures to more sophisticated people? Why have they not long ago sunk beneath their own idiocy? The fact is that these figures are the surest remedy against the anxiety we all feel at the reign and the primacy of intelligence. They reassure us about our own stupidity, and this is their vital function as it was that of the shaman. And how can you ward off stupidity, if not by a greater stupidity?

I notice that on windows which have been left untouched, which have not, in other words, seen the faintest shadow of a duster for ten years, there is not more than a fraction of a millimetre of dirt and dust. No more, in the end, than the wind and rain scratch from the surface of a rock in the same period. There is a dreamlike slowness to both erosion and sedimentation.

He didn't like his nose: so he gave it to the plastic surgeon for treatment. He didn't like his soul: so he entrusted it to the psychoanalyst for treatment. But the worst was that he didn't like his zodiac sign. He would have so much liked to be Scorpio, Virgo or Cancer. Any sign but his own, since he is always in a negative conjunction with those he loves.

Sign, oh voracious sign, what can I do with my sign?

Fortunately, there is the World Clinic of Zodiacal Face-Lifting, where you can be given a new horoscope and a new hour of birth (though don't ask how it's done). They give you a brand new sign; this is the clinic of destiny.

Sign, oh fatal sign, it is you who change and I am nothing.

But with a brand new destiny you have to be extremely careful. With a new sign, the transplant is delicate. You have to be very careful of your ascendant and not change it too often. Above all, you must never walk about naked beneath your sign.

Sign, oh voracious sign, you are devouring carnivorous society.

They say that stupidity is a crime, but it seems to me that explanation is the real crime. I understand very well when things are explained to me, but deep down, I am at one with those who will never understand. A brute slumbers within me who sneers at such understanding and doesn't give a damn for intelligence. With those who understand, I make a contract of intelligence, but with the others, at the very same instant, I secretly make a pact of stupidity. The intellectual or the person who claims that title (there are no others) is the one who has broken that pact of stupidity, and feels released from it. In so doing, he plumbs the very depths of stupidity.

You can talk of things so much that they end up materializing in your life: simulation, seduction, reversibility, indifference. Gradually, life comes to resemble

a montage of all these things, in a floating circulation of women, concepts, dreams and journeys.

In this way, writing ends up preceding life, determining it. And life ends up conforming to a sign which was initially quite cavalier. This is no doubt why so many are afraid to write.

An anomaly in the genetic code of slipper animalcules is announced. A hard blow for the champions of the code. But if the code is no longer universal, isn't this because it is no longer fashionable today to aspire to universality? The idea of genetic code is also going through its agonizing phase of revision, adjusting itself to a new scientific 'look'. The only winner now is the code of fashion, which lays no claim to universality.

A more vertiginous hypothesis: DNA *was* a universal and an invariant, but, once unmasked, so to speak, it has begun to change in order to throw the researchers off its track; it is deuniversalizing itself to muddy the waters. Out of spite or malice, or simply by adaptation, in the way bacteria adapt to antibiotics. We mustn't underestimate this capacity 'objective' processes have for playing hide-and-seek with science. You understand nothing of science, nor of its failures, if you don't take into account this ultimately quite natural evil genius. If all human and animal species change their behaviour under observation, why shouldn't the same thing happen at the level of molecular species?

In its way, science will have achieved the utopian goal of reason, which was to transform the world into a subject. It has become a subject, though not in the way intended: science, by its unyielding pursuit of the world, has awakened in it a malign subjectivity. It has roused it from its slumber just as Egyptology roused the pharaohs from millennia of lethargy. Since then, they have repeatedly wrought their vengeance. It is quite possible that we are unleashing similarly unforeseeable

processes (and our new illnesses are the new forms of these) by forcing the object to flee and metamorphose in all directions, adopting previously unknown viral strategies, by having wrenched it away from its strategy of shade and slumber.

Here, more or less, is the present philosophy: a cop beats up an immigrant in a police station – an incidental news item. But this cop had psychological problems – that is a social fact. How can society delegate the exercise of legitimate violence to individuals who are human, all too human, and whose psychology we have recently discovered – cops? This is a real problem (for journalists). The immigrant is beaten up and forgotten – he is not part of the social. The social begins with social psychology and that is always the psychology of the cop.

We see the same conversion in the Greenpeace affair: the fact that French agents went off to blow up and sink a troublesome ship is something to be hushed up. But that there were members of these same secret services willing to betray the operation and give information to the press, that is the real problem, and we shall have to act.

How nice it would be to see the sun in profile.

A ten-metre-high underwater wave breaks over us, and another one comes to meet it. The two waves converge and carry us off. We come out alive though, landing up on a hillside among the undergrowth. This nocturnal wave is familiar to me, in one form or another. It comes back to engulf me at regular intervals, though I hadn't seen it for a while (but since there's no sense of time between dreams, it is always as though I had seen it the night before). No wave, no swell is so fine as that black, liquid oceanic wall coming to enshroud me. Its crest is often luminous and meaning has it none. I don't care what I'm told about its meaning, it's the fact of its occurrence which is marvellous.

Simulating enzymes. They create false biological events. They simulate a virus, a viral attack, thus triggering a reaction from antibodies, though since these have no target, there being no virus to destroy, they turn back against their own source. Let us celebrate this irruption of simulation within biology and wait to see where it will lead.

Have you noticed that flies and wasps die off less and less in winter? It is snowing outside, but the fly still goes to warm itself against the window, out of habit, since it only knows the summer. Even the youngest, born in autumn, still come and place themselves against it. In the same way, they still persist, in modern flats, in circling around for hours on the ceiling, around an imaginary light-fitting. They thus forget to die and this is worrying, for if flies lose the sense of winter, what is going to happen? The absence of cold in winter has already been threatening cypress trees with a disease akin to leukaemia. The black flame of the cypresses was getting lost in the sameness of the seasons. Fortunately, this year, a glacial winter, which followed a scorching summer, saved them from the disease.

The body seems forever a place for subcontracting out psychological problems. My back hurts, I've got toothache, I've got an ulcer, I've got cancer . . . what am I subcontracting out in all this? The only justification for the body now is to transcribe changing psychological states. It is merely a pathological indicator light. Only its illnesses have any meaning. It is left to do all the dirty work.

The very term sexuality is a kind of surgical operation (François George). A castration of the body by its operational designation. The very term communication . . . etc. A bachelor machine capable of absolute parthogenesis (state of the art).

After an era of lunar mortification, we are entering an era of solar mystification.

Every great thought is of the order of the lapsus. When Benjamin pronounces this terrifying sentence: 'Fascism is made up of two things: fascism properly so-called and anti-fascism', is this not thought sliding, letting itself slide beyond truth, into the fundamental ambiguity of discourse, an ambiguity far greater than any political or ideological explanation, and which alone explains why there has never been any plausible explanation of fascism, whilst anti-fascism is self-explanatory?

Whatever hypothesis you propose about it, fascism poses more problems than anti-fascism. From the very start, it is more interesting than – and itself encompasses – anti-fascism. This is what Benjamin's statement is saying. And it should not be made to say what it is not saying. Though it surely will be.

I no longer even need a window to follow the journey. I can narrate it to myself hour by hour, live it from memory, all of it – canyons, towns, the reflection of the clouds in the rivers. Memory has taken on wings and speed has become an inner quality. A pity.

No doubt it was better that this purely fornicatory and imaginary relationship, with her sexual voracity and her ankle bracelets, which we carried on all over the place – in the Badlands, in the Chelsea Hotel, in motels, in the sand, between the sheets – and which always meant immediate lovemaking in the minutes that followed, never satisfied, but just as sweet, and flexible and blonde, her eyes raised like a slavegirl's and her hand outstretched towards her sex, she free and servile, feminine and muscled, laughing and admiring, animal blood and

metallic eyes – it was natural that this relationship should finish with a pathetic fellatio on a motel balcony, in the morning mist and a hypothetical child which no doubt was not mine and which I shall never see. I have even forgotten her name, but I have not forgotten the straw scent of her sex, nor the twenty-dollar bet on salt or snow, nor the sudden menstrual nosebleed I had one morning when I saw her arriving at my place in all her Californian splendour.

*Winchester Story.** The daughter of the famous Winchester, heiress to 15,000 dollars a day, heard a prediction that she would die when her house was completed – just revenge for the thousands of victims which the only too famous carbine had created in the West over a century. Then, like Penelope, she began to build a house without end, interminably adding bedrooms, staircases, annexes. She died in the end, in the 1930s, leaving behind this monstrous 150-bedroom house as a memorial to the holocaust of the nineteenth century.

Before me a scholarly man, of European culture, head of a literary department in one of the great universities of the West. He speaks of it with bitterness, as do almost all his colleagues. Culture is not what it was and he has not the slightest regard for mass culture. He comes from New York and, deep down, he despises California, his colleagues and the decline of standards. He gets 60–80,000 dollars a year and does not have many students or friends. He has lots of ideas, is sincere, proud and awkward. His secret is his python. I see him plunge his gloved hand into its glass case and stroke the reptile's head, which shoots out a voracious tongue and uncoils itself, still famished though it has just devoured a rat. We discuss the diet of snakes. A tortoise slumbers by the fireside in the glow of an

*In English in original. [Tr.]

artificial wood fire. It is Sunday in Santa Monica. Towards four, the sun drives away the mists of the Pacific. But the snake knows neither night nor day; he is immortal and poisonous and, in the words of the poet, he dreams on the hills of the sky. Which is something his master does not do, he whose reptilian brain identifies with the snake's, and who stares long and hard into his face, even though ordinarily he is incapable of looking people straight in the eye. A perverse couple, the somnambulism of the intellectual mingling with the inner night of the reptile.

Melrose Avenue, Santa Monica – Dialogue on a terrace.

SHE: *You are jealous? Are you jealous? You are fucking jealous! . . . Let me say . . . You're twenty and I am forty-two, and I'll give my fucking ass to fucking anybody . . . Do you know that?**

He gets up, crosses Melrose for no reason, comes back, kneels down in front of her (younger, but as theatrical).

HE: *Do you love me? Do you love me?*

SHE: *Yes . . . Yes, I love you . . .*

The Italian kneads his meatballs. An Indian is playing a video game and its shrill soundtrack provides a backing to the conversation. The woman herself speaks in a shrill, hysterical voice. It is pleasant in Los Angeles in November, on the Melrose terrace, around the middle of the night. Everyone is smiling somewhere. No passion. A scene American-style.

The waiter takes the car keys and drags off the woman, who shows off her black-stockinged legs and pretends to be mad.

A black man gets up and, as he passes, says to me: '*Too much love!*'

*Italicized parts of this paragraph in English in original. [Tr.]

Gliding along the road that runs beside the coast in a black Porsche is like penetrating slowly into the inside of your own body.

How can one regret the absence of the other while at the same time feeling a sense of deliverance from their presence? But language itself tells us how: *Regretter la présence de quelqu'un* means both to feel regret that they are there and to be sorry they are not. *Regretter son absence* means to feel regret that he is not there and for the time when he was not there. The melancholy of parting brings on this emotional confusion.

It is true that presence is less delicate in its effects than absence. It is true that it is rare to be able to dream of someone in their presence. To touch them and dream you are touching them. To talk to them and dream you are talking to them. To look at them and dream you are looking at them. Now, the presence of the other has to be like a dream. Otherwise it becomes unbearable. Pure presence is unbearable.

Borges – his blind face like an Aztec woman's, that old shyster of metaphor, across whose open eyes pass flashes of magnesium without affecting him. The blind always seem to be holding their heads out of water. Yet they are gifted in unreality and cunning. I am sure he knows down to ten people how many are there to hear him, simply by listening, by sensing. The lecture is hopeless, but it is a sacrificial ceremony. The listeners are overwhelmed by the intelligence of this man whose cunning ploy is to make it seem as though he were speaking from beyond the grave, as if he were already dead. His muffled, syncopated, barely audible voice condemns the others to silence in the same way as he is condemned to the night. All the metaphors he uses are those of the night, including the thousand and first night, the finest since it is one added to eternity. He is without doubt also in his eighty-four-and-first year – i.e. he has one foot in eternity. There reigns all

about him an ironic and cruel affectation. I don't know what animal he resembles. He has a soft spot for the tiger. Put a tiger in your library and take away its sight: that's Borges. In this vegetation of Californian academics' soft encephalons, his silences carve lethal spirals. Since he can no longer see the world, he quotes it. His speech is one long quotation. '*Life itself is a quotation*',* he says.

The girls, their feet in the cold water, utter cries like a seagull's. Moreover, they are immediately transformed into seagulls, and these in turn into the obscure object of desire, swaying and waddling like the ostrich at the end of Buñuel's film. The summer has arrived.

I was very anxious she might be disappointed and I could never have forgiven her for that. I shall never forgive anyone who passes a condescending or contemptuous judgement on America.

They are at the centre of the world and they don't know it. What they prefer is to be at the centre of books and the earth.

Only sequoias have the heroic, fabulous, antediluvian stature of the first days of the world, being contemporary with the great prehistoric animals. And indeed their scaley bark resembles a carapace. They are the only trees on a par with the geological and mineral scenario of the deserts. After them it is the little species that have triumphed.

*In English in original. [Tr.]

Even in a very large bed she sleeps on the outer edge and her light body leaves no trace. I cannot succeed in taming this fragile, distant body.

I am entitled only to brief embraces with very long gaps between them, and then her legs still remain tightly closed. She does not kiss me, nor does she caress me. And yet there is something tender about her, something animal, rascally.

She often speaks in a very great hurry, as if to finish her sentence before she becomes afraid. She doesn't know how to show she is in love, and indeed she isn't. She likes to be seductive, laughs a lot in company and at those times I no longer exist for her. She plays at emphasizing distances. I don't know how to violate her, and I no longer have the courage to. There is no solution to this situation.

From time to time, I no longer feel she is near. Literally, I turn around with the feeling that she's gone and she has indeed disappeared. It is a little bit like the story of the conjuror who, alerted by applause, turns round and notices that the woman who had been standing nearby has vanished. When I touch her, it is to make sure she exists. Then there will be a glance and then, if I am infinitely patient, a body and perhaps even some pleasure. But, instead of bringing us together, this quite unlikely eventuality immediately creates a gulf between us.

As soon as anyone else is there, she becomes hostile, contradicts me on every topic and wants nothing to do with me. She doesn't want to seem attached to me – which she isn't. She isn't attached to anything, not even to her body, supple and seductive as it is. Physically retractile, she is all the more provocative with it for that. She stammers sometimes, reflecting a timorous show of aggression and a sudden withdrawal into herself.

She is made to be hugged and cuddled, but she doesn't want to be. She wasn't able to bear a child for the man she wanted to give one to, but she did succeed by magic in causing the death of the child he had with another woman. At heart she is a virgin, but a woman's virginity remains an adorable asset.

She does everything with lightness and grace. I love this negative grace, but every sexual exploit is a desperate act with her (they say that of the sexual act in

general but I've never believed them).

She does everything grudgingly, defensively. Even the way she speaks. The sentence rushes out to escape you; it is punctuated with a light, high-pitched laugh to put it out of harm's way – the sad, rippling laugh of a nymph, a laugh of artificial and unhappy jollity.

She takes herself for Mary Stuart or Mary Shelley, and no doubt she is. She doubtless dreams of being beheaded in a low-cut red dress. It's that or nothing. Most of the time, it's nothing. She only accepts what can seduce her; she refuses what gives her pleasure. She wants neither to be made love to nor photographed. These are indiscreet acts; what she needs are passion and delicacy, and perhaps something else, which she will never ever say.

The only time I took photos of her, one wonderful day on the beach, quite inexplicably, when it was developed, the entire film came out blank. She didn't want to be photographed and she wasn't. It is an aspect of her sorcery. Her art is the art of disappearance. Or else she exists so little that she doesn't even leave an impression on the film.

Her face is still turned away; she is absent on the pillow as though she were being made to take her pleasure in spite of herself. A feline, contradictory dance to escape one another, particularly at night, a time when body movements end up responding. A foot which moves brings a change in the other's breathing, a negative electricity connects the two bodies even in their sleep. It is similar to what occurs in the Chinese version of shadow-boxing, in which the bodies are scrupulously careful not to touch one another, while at the same time moving as closely as possible to each other, so that they trace out, after all, a space of love, but one which no one dares to cross. Since I have sworn to myself I will not start anything without some sign of affection, some mark of weakness, we are now truly distant from each other, and I no longer touch her. An odd situation: the first one who breaks the silence is lost, the first one who breaks the ice loses face. The situation has something of impossible rape and silent challenge about it. In the absence of any violent scene (you don't travel ten thousand kilometres to spend your time

making scenes), we are undoing one by one all the ties that bound us, without breaking a single one. The hardest thing will be to carry this difficult ceremony through to the end and to bring it to a close without a row. For nothing is said (we are both very good at discretion). It is as if none of all this existed. Nothing, absolutely nothing, separates us. Behind this façade of indifference, I am perhaps a monster of tenderness and she a monster of sensuality? Or the other way round. Who knows? This will end perhaps in another world or in a previous life with an orgy or a delicious emotional chaos. But for the moment we are more like Tristan and Isolde. Between us God has placed his sword as a sign of chastity.

Since she left ten hours before, she is already on the other side of the night. I am just about entering the night, but she is already coming out of it, somewhere off Iceland. Thus, at this very moment, we are separated by the geographical space of a night. Many other nights have separated us, which had nothing geographical about them. This last nocturnal separation by timezones is, happily, a poetic one and redeems the others. At least we managed to carry off this night, this last night.

The ghostly movement of the Parisian tribes. Watch the crowd rushing out in the (cold and rainy) spring night towards the urban deserts of La Villette to attend the inaugural cult of the Biennale and then, when that is ended, flowing back in great waves towards the inauguration of the Book Fair at the Grand Palais, crossing Paris in a tide of two thousand people (always the same ones) who, after having communed in fairground thronging and bookish vanity will meet up again around midnight at the end of a third collective migration, in the small number of Montparnasse restaurants marked with the sign of the tribe. Preceded perhaps by some minister or other, followed as ever by a horde of journalists. You can mark out the trajectory of this *fauna culturalis* every evening in advance, working from the order of the invitations, as in days gone by you could follow popular gatherings from place to place with certainty.

The computer will take over everywhere from the operation of thinking, leaving the brain to lie fallow, as the mechanistic technologies of the nineteenth century have already done with the body. People are becoming increasingly zombie-like. It looks as though their brains have already been removed and they are merely functioning on their spinal chords.

Executives are like joggers. If you stop a jogger, he goes on running on the spot. If you drag an executive away from his business, he goes on running on the spot, pawing the ground, talking business. He never stops hurtling onwards, making decisions and executing them.

The fact that anything should be condemned to disappear feels unbearable to us. But such a feeling is even stronger if it is death which has just disappeared . . .

All the imaginaries of breakup are fading. Children finding it impossible to leave their families. It's the same with couples. They no longer split up. Why bother? Things are just the same everywhere else. You just negotiate your mutual indifference. It's the same with the political situation. Whatever the government, no one's keen to change it, since every alternative illusion is dead. Thus the political relationship has got itself into the same conjugal neurosis as the couple or the rising generation. The price to be paid is that of a low intensity, a scaled-down demand, an air-conditioned intelligence which allows us never to cross the threshold of breakup.

Don't I go on so many journeys merely to avoid moving to another flat? For want of a 'vertical' break, I find a horizontal *modus vivendi,* moving from one

horizon to the next without sorting out a very simple situation. All situations develop along the lines of psychoanalysis: they are interminable. Adjustable arrangements, minimal switches, little corrections of trajectory, that is what life is like today. That is the way that, at a deep level, biology and genetics are transforming it into soft psychology and horizontal pragmatics. The end of the vertical dimension, the end of transgressions and prohibitions, the end of revolutions, the end of the orgy.

Indifference to any potentially available solution.

Lunch with Fabius. How naive to seek enlightenment on the art of government from a motley collection of intellectuals and actresses! What do the population want? Why have they no enthusiasm for anything? Why do the efforts made on their behalf produce negative opinion-poll results? It is quite bewildering how this man, who certainly didn't get to be Prime Minister without employing some cunning and who must surely know how much sharp practice, ill will, deceit and pride goes into any successful political career, can be so ingenuous about the perverse mechanisms of popular indifference, deploring the apathy and perfidiousness of the masses, their lack of imagination and participation, the absence of a collective myth, etc. (when it is by virtue of this indifference that he and others like him are in power today), deploring the emptiness of the social world apparently without noticing the void which power itself occupies (which is why he fills that void so wonderfully well). You wonder how he can survive two days in this role and this setting. The people are bored? Then give them something to marvel at. Otherwise they will make their own entertainment at your expense. They will seek out something to astonish them in spectacle (the spectacle of the media or of terrorism) if they cannot find it on the political stage. Individuals and peoples want something to marvel at – that remains their great passion. And nothing you have done has amazed them. Shock them by telling them the truth? Rubbish! Truth is extremely dangerous, since the person who tells it is the first to

believe it. Now it only takes a politician believing in what he says for the others to stop believing him: that is the specific perversity of the political field. It's no use just telling the truth; you need the ring of truth too. It's no use lying. You need to have the ring of lying. This is what the socialists will have lacked to the end. They will have lied a lot and told the truth a lot, but they will never have known how to do something that had this ring about it. Now, admittedly, you can pull off quite a political stroke by using the truth – and indeed that was Fabius's intention. But you must never believe in the truth of truth. If you do, you lose all its effect. You have to use truth as a challenge, go beyond what needs to be said for it to be strictly true. The truth must astonish; otherwise, it becomes akin to stupidity. That's what produced all the political tribulations of the Greenpeace Affair. If a prime minister doesn't know that, then he has his head in the clouds. And this is the impression Fabius gives: sure of his ambitions and totally ignorant of the immoral ways of the world. I had before me the Divine Left in person.

Theory does not derive its legitimacy from established facts, but from future events. Its value is not in the past events it can illuminate, but in the shockwave of the events it prefigures. It does not act upon consciousness, but directly on the course of things from which it draws its energy. It therefore has to be distinguished from the academic practice of philosophy and from all that is written with an eye to the history of ideas.

Lusitanian gentilezza. The beauty of Lisbon. Capanica, the cliff of rape. Charnica, fireworks and the popular circus. The palaces beside the Tagus. Linda Lolita. Schubert at the Palácio Queluz. The thieves' market. The restaurant on the beach. The waiter comes back a thousand times to ask if everything is alright, if the wine is cool enough, the fish well grilled, if everyone is happy. When he comes back for the thousand and first time, M. announces clearly, looking him right in

the eye, 'Everything is perfect. We are *really happy!*' He is virtually paralysed totally taken aback. He disappears and never returns.

Dunkirk. The excited crowds, the champagne corks popping, the old workers weeping at the launch of the last ship from the dockyard. A mass celebration of the end of work. For nobody actually wants this enormous ship. It is a pure act. It does not even have a name. They did not even dare to baptise it since it is the fruit of the conjoint sterility of Land and Labour, as Marx would say – and I wouldn't mind seeing his face if he could view this bewildering product of the productive forces. It has been given the code number 331. It will merely have served as a pretext for the mania for production, the futile passion for production which still survives today to drive generations to despair. This fabulous object, a testament to the immense useless capacity of man, should immediately be put away in a museum, in a crypt of neon, together with all the workers who are now slaves not of capital, but merely of the legend of work, and who have, in their own lifetimes, become part of the legend of the factories.

Man has lost the basic skill of the ape, the ability to scratch its back. Which gave it extraordinary independence, and the liberty to associate for reasons other than the need for mutual back-scratching.

Trampling down the leaves like snow in the wild light of the dead citadel, whose prince in days gone by rebelled against his king, for which reason the walls were pulled down.

The 'performance' of the Magazini Criminali at Rimini: they transform the

slaughter of a horse and its cutting up into a sacrificial ritual for a hundred or so spectators. This stirred up a great flurry. Not unsurprisingly. But what is repugnant in this is not the spectacle of death in itself but that there is no collective sense whatever, either among the actors or among the spectators, among whom all sacrificial values disappeared long ago to be replaced by a worldly semiology of violence and blood.

The equilibrium of the system is always in crisis, but this produces no serious consequences. The needle merely oscillates around a hypothetical centre, a statistical median. The oscillations no longer lead to the system being overturned, since it no longer has a centre of gravity. The 1929 crisis could not recur today. It has been replaced by a perpetual crisis simulation. In the same way, it is possible for the heroic or intrinsic values of a society to collapse, whereas the same values in renovated, simulated, face-lifted form (take Reagan, for example) no longer run the risk of ending in catastrophe. They are no longer in danger of having their weight plunge them to a sticky end. They either float or, like currencies, follow the writhing course of the snake.

We do the same in our own lives: with a float on each side, we go forward oscillating around a hypothetical equilibrium path, keeping our distance from the fatal declinations.

Remembering with emotion the Pompeii of the sixties, still close at that date to the Pompeii of the 1800s, to the one Goethe and the eighteenth-century travellers might have seen, still almost the Pompeii of the excavations and of rural naivety, like an old print. Then going back in one's mind's eye to the beginnings, to the moment of the catastrophe, the absolute dream. Smiling at this incurable nostalgia, these perpetual regrets for what is lost (even the ruins were more beautiful in the past) and yet maintaining the freshness of those regrets.

We read the order or the disorder of the world in the 'major incidents' of world news. The Seveso catastrophe, the Air India Boeing, Beirut Airport, the Heysel tragedy are the only significant events – in contrast to 'political' events – since there is a secret correspondence between them and they thus contain, in a more or less poetic form, all the information in the world. What are we to call them indeed? Dramas, collective psychodramas, accidents, terrorism, plots, catastrophes? They are all these things at once and fascinating for being so indeterminate. They are like the 'black box' of the missing aircraft. Generally it does not tell us much, and in many cases it is not even retrieved. Yet the black box is like a miniature hologram of the whole event. The black boxes converse among themselves; it is up to us to connect in to their wavelength.

In the area around M., absolutely all the crossroads have been replaced by a repulsive form of gyroscopics even more dangerous than the traditional cross-roads. Nothing is finer than two roads crossing. And nothing is more ridiculous than two roads which wind themselves around so as not to touch each other, condemning the road-user to an excessive amount of pointless signalling in the process. The stupidity of currently fashionable technologies: the roads cross without touching – the philosophy of the interchange. Among humans this is called communication.

As soon as he arrives, everyone falls silent. It is like when you're walking in the country and the crickets mysteriously fall quiet. The zone of silence moves with him like an eye, and the shrill noise starts up again as soon as he has passed by. Destiny no longer penetrates into that zone, all is quiet, passions are extinguished, but it is the ideal zone from which to measure the stridency of the world.

The end of every cycle of activity, of suffering or pleasure, is marked by a

symbolic masturbation. A sort of mythological offering to seal the end of an event, a nod towards orgasm, the joy of an ending. For societies too, the end of a cycle is marked by a symbolic masturbation, which is followed not long after by real melancholy. This is what socialism was for us.

The famous gesture of tearing one's page from the typewriter, by which writers or journalists elevate themselves to the status of Wild West heroes drawing their six-shooters.

For *America,* only one method: given a certain number of fragments, notes and stories collected over a given time, there *must* be a solution which integrates them *all,* including the most banal, into a necessary whole, without adding or removing any: the very necessity which, beneath the surface, presided over their collection. Making the supposition that this is the only material and the best, because it is secretly ordered by the same thinking, and assuming that everything conceived as part of the same obsession has a meaning and that there must necessarily be a solution to the problem of reconstituting it. The work starts out from the certainty that everything is already there and it will be sufficient simply to find the key.

Information can tell us everything. It has all the answers. But they are answers to questions we have not asked, and which doubtless don't even arise.

In the same way as we need statesmen to spare us the abjection of exercising power, we need scholars to spare us the abjection of knowledge.

Cancer and terrorism both occupy fractal zones. They are born out of the desertified, disintensified, abandoned zones. Today the body and the social are desertified zones.

The driver of the train which crashed killing forty-two admits that he did indeed see the signal, that he even recorded it in the black box, but that he did not slow down. Reflex registration, but not followed by action. Automatic reaction to the sign, but not to the content. Closed circuit of brain and machine. Interaction with the black box, but not with the world. This is the deep logic of communications – being connected in to the sign and making a sign in return, responding to signs with signs rather than with acts. It is therefore the very logic of communication which produces accidents of this type, and not some human or organizational failing.

Cancer: the code breaks down, becomes disorganized, lets cells proliferate indiscriminately. A disease of information.

AIDS: the immune system (the secret defences of the body) is suppressed. Obsessive fear of contiguity, of flows (sperm, blood, saliva), of contact. A disease of communication.

What if all this reflected a brute, instinctive refusal of the flows of communication, of sperm, of sex, of words? If there were in all this an 'instinctive', vital resistance to the extension of flows and circuits – at the cost of a new mortal pathology, AIDS and cancer, which would ultimately be protecting us from something even more serious, or would at least be serving as an alarm signal? After all, neurosis is what man invents to protect him from madness.

Supposing it had been possible to predict the Mexico City earthquake to

within an hour, what would have been the most urgent task? To evacuate the population or to organize getting the pictures to the world's media? In the subconscious of every journalist, the idea lingers that one has, on this occasion, lost the best pictures of the catastrophe. If the earthquake had been predicted, who would have missed the satellite pictures? Nobody. In Italy too, in 1981, the media got there before the emergency services.

One might even wonder whether, had it been possible to arrange a rendezvous before the catastrophe, a crowd of sightseers wouldn't have converged on Mexico City. Whole charters of eager snobs would have arrived, to replace the Mexicans who would have run away.

Exalting the chorus, whipping up the cirrus, shaking off the virus, extolling the tonus, glorifying the habitus, mystifying the stratus, balancing the abscissus, terrifying the impetus.

We are entering a period of intense cadaverousness and our imaginations are simply not up to it. Here too we must choose and make our own personal obituaries. Is this a foretaste of the end of the century?

Everything today – the launching of a newspaper, a ship, a commercially ruinous aircraft, a road network, a new missile or a cultural programme – is justified in the last instance by the fact that it creates jobs. This argument, which is itself devoid of meaning, is our alibi, our last rites, our Extreme Unction.

Beyond a certain threshold of expenditure, energy reaches a stage of supercooling. Once lovemaking has been repeated often enough, it can go on in-

definitely. The hysteresis is total, energy expenditure reaches a high, the principle of economy is suspended. The five-man bicycle in Jarry's *Supermale* even used the energy of a dead man. The corpse kept on pedalling. He even pedalled better than he had when he was alive, since he no longer had any problems. It is the death drive which multiplies motor or erotic effects, by the inertia principle.

In an airliner, before landing: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, your Unconscious please!'*

Falling in love, for the space of an evening, with the harpist in the Paris Opera orchestra, with her low cut black dress and gold necklace. The fluttering of her eyelids and lashes, the movements of her hands and eyes, held my attention better than Berio's pretentious scenography. The musicians were, in any case, more attractive than the actors and their little pleasures, their secretive nods and winks, their dumb show in the orchestra pit all had much more truth about it than the ridiculous drama being played out above their heads.

Nothing can match the loneliness of a pianist in a large hotel. All around him is just a hum of cocktails and small talk; he is more alone with his melody than he would be on an island. Yet, at a particular moment, he stops and people applaud. You are doubly astonished: there was an end to this music then, and people were listening? He was playing something and he was not playing in vain? He seems stupefied himself. But he well knows, in the secret depths of his soul, that this applause only breaks out because his music has fallen silent, a silence these wild

*A play on the similar sounds, especially when spoken over a tannoy, of '*votre attention*' and '*votre inconscient*'. [Tr.]

things notice in much the same way they notice the sugar melting in their glasses. So, like the bald prima donna, he quickly starts up with a new tune.

The scapegoat is not what he once was. No longer is he hounded; now he is pitied (the rights of man, dissidents, the *'beurs'*,* etc.). But he is the scapegoat nonetheless and it is still the same.

When there is a solution, it is no longer a real problem.

When there is an answer, it is no longer a real question.

For at that point, the problem is part of the solution and the answer is part of the question.

And then nothing remains but solutions without problems and answers without questions.

O, happy days when we had only questions without answers and problems without solutions!

Human rights, dissidence, antiracism, SOS-this, SOS-that: these are soft, easy, *post coitum historicum* ideologies, 'after-the-orgy' ideologies for an easy-going generation which has known neither hard ideologies nor radical philosophies. The ideology of a generation which is neo-sentimental in its politics too, which has rediscovered altruism, conviviality, international charity and the individual bleeding heart. Emotional outpourings, solidarity, cosmopolitan emotiveness, multi-media pathos: all soft values harshly condemned by the Nietzschean, Marxo-Freudian age (but also the age of Rimbaud, Jarry and the Situationists). A

*Second-generation French citizens of North African origin. [Tr.]

new generation, that of the spoilt children of the crisis, whereas the preceding one was that of the accursed children of history.

These romantic, worldly young people, imperious and sentimental, are re-finding the poetic prose of the heart and, at the same time, the path of business. For they are the contemporaries of the new entrepreneurs and they are themselves wonderful media animals. Transcendental, P.R. idealism. With an eye for money, changing fashions, high-powered careers – all things scorned by the hard generations. A soft immorality, a low-grade sensuality. A soft ambition too: that of a generation which has already been successful in everything, which has everything going for it, which practises solidarity with ease, which no longer bears the stigmata of the curse of class. They are the European Yuppies.

Print-out of existence
Existential design
Death on a turnkey basis
Not the infinite: the exponential

As the end of the century approaches, all our culture is like the culture of flies at the beginning of winter. Having lost their agility, dreamy and demented, they turn slowly about the window in the first icy mists of morning. They give themselves a last wash and brush-up, their ocellated eyes roll, and they fall down the curtains.

In front of the lens, the temptation is to stand still, as a defensive reflex. But it is the same on the other side of the lens, when you take a photo: you stand still and empty yourself of your substance for a brief moment to take the object by surprise.

The softening of thought began with open-heart ideology: the New Philosophers. It continued with the New Romantics. Then the revival of philosophy in general. Then the euphoria of new enterprise and new business. The social 'naturalism' of neoliberalism. Everywhere face-lifted values have reinstalled themselves, a touching dynamism, a puerile religiosity, in which love resurfaces blithely. A way for the horde to close ranks at the time of the greatest dispersion of the species.

Zinoviev doesn't give a damn about the Western intelligentsia, with its subtlety and sophistication. He knows that the massive unintelligible reality on the other side of the iron curtain is more interesting than our dialectical, interactive processes. He draws the power of his irony from the power of stupidity. The gist of what he is saying is that if we have not conquered this stupidity, you are not going to overcome it. And he is only too damned right. Or he is saying this: you are behind us in absolute terms, because we have been through the worst, whereas you still have it to go through. You cannot argue with that. Dissidents? In the case of Sakharov, says Zinoviev, the Western world and the Eastern bloc *derive equal benefit* from this lamentable situation and are equally responsible for it. You have no hope of converting us for we are a more advanced form, the post-catastrophe social form, the form of survival. You are still in the realm of life, but we are already in the realm of afterlife – survival. In any case, your society is artificial: it goes to any lengths to sustain illusions from which we have already drawn all the possible consequences. Do not hope for communism to evolve, for it is you who quite peaceably will take the same path as we have. You are already a lot like us.

Does the West want the Soviet bloc to dissolve, to liberalize, to break up? Not at all, for it would lose what serves it as ideology in the process: the existence of the opposing bloc to which it is structurally bound. The liquefaction of that glacial

block would affect the whole defence system and profile of Western values for the worse, simply by disseminating them into infinity. Exactly as the melting of the ice-caps would change for the worse the level of the oceans, wiping out the inhabited continents, expunging their frontiers from our memories. If the entire Soviet bloc melted in the heat of human rights, it would represent a catastrophe for the West which would be equivalent to the sudden melting of the polar ice-caps, or even to the catastrophe which, in its day, the unleashing of the tidal wave of Soviet gold-reserves on the world market would have represented. What good would it be then to speak of the socialist hell? It has exactly those infernal qualities necessary to sustain the fiction of our paradisiacal universe. If it is not in itself just, it is completely justified by this role it plays in the structure of a world equilibrium and the survival of our own values. These values themselves have no absolute value in relation to any human purpose whatever (no objective divinity certifies the human superiority of the Western over the Eastern bloc), they only have a merely relative value in this well-ordered opposition between heaven and hell.

We are to some extent the equivalent of the nineteenth-century '*sublimes*': elective situation, distinctive character, virtue, the daemon of philosophy, the daemon of critical craftwork, a regal indifference to industrial development.

When the question of human rights has been swept away, we shall see emerge a relative preference for the absence of freedom, both in the East and in the West, in the South and the North. We shall then be down to the real problem. Zinoviev is the paradoxical thinker of this state of affairs. Of servitude linked with the realization of models, of a lack of distinction between heaven and hell.

Christo's art finds an erotic and aesthetic quality in dressing things, whereas

we have long been used to the vulgarity of an aesthetics of undressing. Bad advertising glorifies things by making them visible, all too visible. Christo ennobles a form by covering it up. He produces a kind of enigmatic advertising for it, and this is directly in line with a distinction made by Baudelaire: the true artists are those who give the commodity a heroic status, whereas the bourgeois are only capable of giving it, in advertising, a sentimental status.

To wrap up the ground – to clothe it – is to give back to the town, to the street, the charm of an inner space, of a maternal public space like the one you find in some Italian towns. Particularly when the hot, veiled sun of September is in harmony with the general effect of a veiled calligraphy.

Simulacra are today accepted everywhere in their realist version: simulacra exist, simulation exists. It is the intellectual and fashionable version of this vulgarization which is the worst: all is sign, signs have abolished reality, etc. Who would have thought ten years ago that the sign would so quickly have become part of this kind of stereotyped language? Like 'proletariat', 'dialectics' and 'the unconscious'. These terms won't even have made it to the year 2000.

The Tempest acted by mongols before an ultra-chic audience of ministers and stars. Kennedy Foundation. All the Shakespearian mongols will be received tomorrow by the Pope. A society's flirtation with its worst dregs. Who are the mongols right now?

The rich never give you anything (dixit A.). Wealth is unrelenting; it always screws you. Those who are rich in intelligence, power and beauty don't give much away either. They make you pay all the more for the fact that their capital is symbolic.

Comparing that unrelenting face of wealth with Countess Bathory who tortured young peasant girls. She at least was tortured herself, walled up in total darkness, in absolute silence and her own excrement, with a hole in the wall for food to be passed through. The bloodbaths she had taken gave her the savage energy to hold out for two years in the dark.

Thinking of those happy days while walking around in the backstreets of Rome. Here everything is deeply incestuous, though in a different way from Elisabeth Bathory for whom all those peasant girls were her daughters whose incest was to be sealed with blood. But that was a sadistic and violent incest, whereas the whole Roman culture practises a gentle, spiritual incest. Akin to fetishism: that of the mamma, the sister, the young adolescent, the Virgin and the Saints, all swirling about in the same incestuous spiral. The carnal perfection of the detail, the carnal softness of the marble, the lewd transparency of the fountains – little navels of the squares set deep in the backstreets – and the water which streams down from them. The miracle of a faultless urbanity, a total civility – even the ruins share in this. However far back you go in Italy, there has never been any nature. There has only ever been a baroque figuration.

The Ideal Woman is like the Città Ideale. A pure, deserted form, with a few blinds raised to reveal a cool and meaningless shade, with a few houseplants poking out, and sometimes an allegorical item of linen.

There have already been situations in which the sexes seemed to be distancing themselves from one another once and for all, by sublimation or chastity, or, as today, by oscillation of differences. At the end of the Roman Empire and the end of the Middle Ages. An end-of-the-world atmosphere – a millenarian atmosphere – either frantically throws the sexes together or irremediably moves them apart.

Seducing for a woman consists in sliding into an empty place, where her ideal form is already traced out by all those of her sex who have preceded her. For a woman, seducing is the act of an animal species, and all women are accomplices in the tiniest such venture undertaken by one of their number. There is a chain of feminine seduction. For his part, a man is faced with a mammoth task: braving, with each woman, the image and the collusive judgement of all the others. The game is an unequal one, and it is easy to see why he is less and less willing to risk it. In any case, woman has always kept the captivating part of seduction for herself (the temptress), whereas he has always ended up with the faintly ridiculous part (the seducer). Now it is difficult for a man to join in a game of being a sex object, and in a way simulate femininity. For there is no chain of masculine seduction. It is impossible for him to collude with other men in being a desirable object, as women do among themselves. There is no secret pact to protect a man in such an undertaking.

The day the world ends, no one will be there, just as no one was there when it began. This is a scandal. Such a scandal for the human race that it is indeed capable collectively, out of spite, of hastening the end of the world by all possible means just so it can enjoy the show.

Little tribal ceremony among intellectuals on Fifth Avenue to discuss the end of the world. It might seem a terrific idea to talk about this in New York of all places since this is the world's epicentre, but, on reflection, there is no sense in the idea, since New York already is the end of the world. There is no sense reflecting on this in miniature in a scenario which is necessarily inferior to its model. Except the very requirement that we should rescue the *idea* of the end of the world from its real occurrence – which is the habitual labour of intellectuals.

Challenger and Chernobyl: the only felicitous accidents, like a freeze-frame of the system. In the same way as a photo arrests movement and restores the unforgettable character that it had lost, the Challenger explosion has revived our imagination where space is concerned. The photos of Challenger were only so beautiful because they fixed in our minds the secret destination of the adventure of space travel, whereas its speed only gives us the apparent movement.

From the holocaust to the hologram: a fine programme.

You can only take good photographs in brilliant light, on perfectly clear days, or under a leaden grey sky. The colours stand out in both cases, either by their brilliance or their mutedness. Similarly, you only write well in states of total illumination or of deep melancholy.

I arrive, by a snow-covered path, at a kind of château. The room I enter by is covered all over with several inches of snow – even on the furniture and the ceiling. Shining in through the window are fierce, fluorescent advertisements in blue and red. I walk through the huge rooms secretively. I once lived here. Voices come near. I feel worried, since these are important men and I have no right to be here. But their voices change, their eyes change too, and suddenly they become mental defectives. The mansion is an asylum and indeed a nurse is stretched out on a long table in the peristyle. I wake up, retaining an exact impression of having once been mad myself in this very place, in a previous life.

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Laugh of the female
Spectre of the death-rattle laugh of the female
Intermittent laugh of an albino female onlooker
Transparent sex of a female onlooker
End of the world on Fifth Avenue
itch for collapse
collapse of the itch
Ontological fistulas Hare-brained notions
Impure lips expure lips
Ethics of agony.

It might be objected that we are going to be able to watch the origin of the world thanks to the prodigious telescopes which enable us to trace back, from nebulae to quasars, the course of the original Big Bang. The traces of the origin are still there in space; we simply have to go back through them. But the problem is that they are moving further and further away into the future. We shall never reach this horizon where the fragments of universes contemporaneous with the beginnings of the world are to be seen. Thus the origin will never take place for us. And there will consequently be no end either, since the only end lies in re-establishing contact with the origin.

Today, a Monday, having written all the articles, replied to all my mail (at last!), obtained my doctorate and finished off *America*; for the first time for perhaps ten or twenty years, I realize I have nothing else to do. No projects, no constraints. Everything that was pending has been finished, and whatever else comes from this point on will, in a sense, be part of a supplementary existence, separated from the other one by this moment of lightness, of emptiness, of astonishment and relief – a unique moment no doubt, which demands to be saluted as it passes. I observed a minute's silence in its honour.

The Cynecure. Looking for the Cynecure (in the palinody of my cenesthesias, as Segalen would say). The Sabbatical form.

What was the Stoic dream of our adolescence – detachment – suddenly materializes in maturity. I now find myself out on my own, within a rainbow-hued research structure.

Towns are never left alone; there are always works going on – digging, demolition, construction. Knocking down, building up again. Perhaps only certain places in California, completely anaesthetized by domestic luxury and suburban comfort, seem to have come to rest in a fixed and lasting ambience, beyond this perpetual deconstruction. Works are always going on in our bodies too. They are constantly being disturbed, tortured, renovated. Never at rest, never serene. Peace of mind – impossible to keep it more than a few hours. Impatience always gets the upper hand. Everyone aspires to peace and quiet, but they do so today in a thoroughly derisory manner, wherein we see the last moments of the contemplative soul. In the countryside there is always a dog howling. And sterility is hereditary.

There are things one can no longer talk about or cannot yet talk about again. Their ghosts have not yet been stabilized. Marxism?

There are others we cannot talk about yet, or can no longer talk about, because their ghosts are already running around the streets; they are already preceded by their shades. Information, communication?

One only speaks well of what is disappearing. The class struggle, the dialectic in Marx, power and sexuality in Foucault. Analysis itself contributes to hastening their end.

Sliding like a reptile along the mental moquette
zero mentality
Crawling like the paralytic dog
towards the agitated sea
Like the last squatters of the catacombs of the political
politically suave
metaphysically svelte
Dialogues of the Dead Jubilees Extreme Unction
Pure obituary of the end of the century
Luxurious Serenity
Spectrum Reality
*Inconditional Shit**

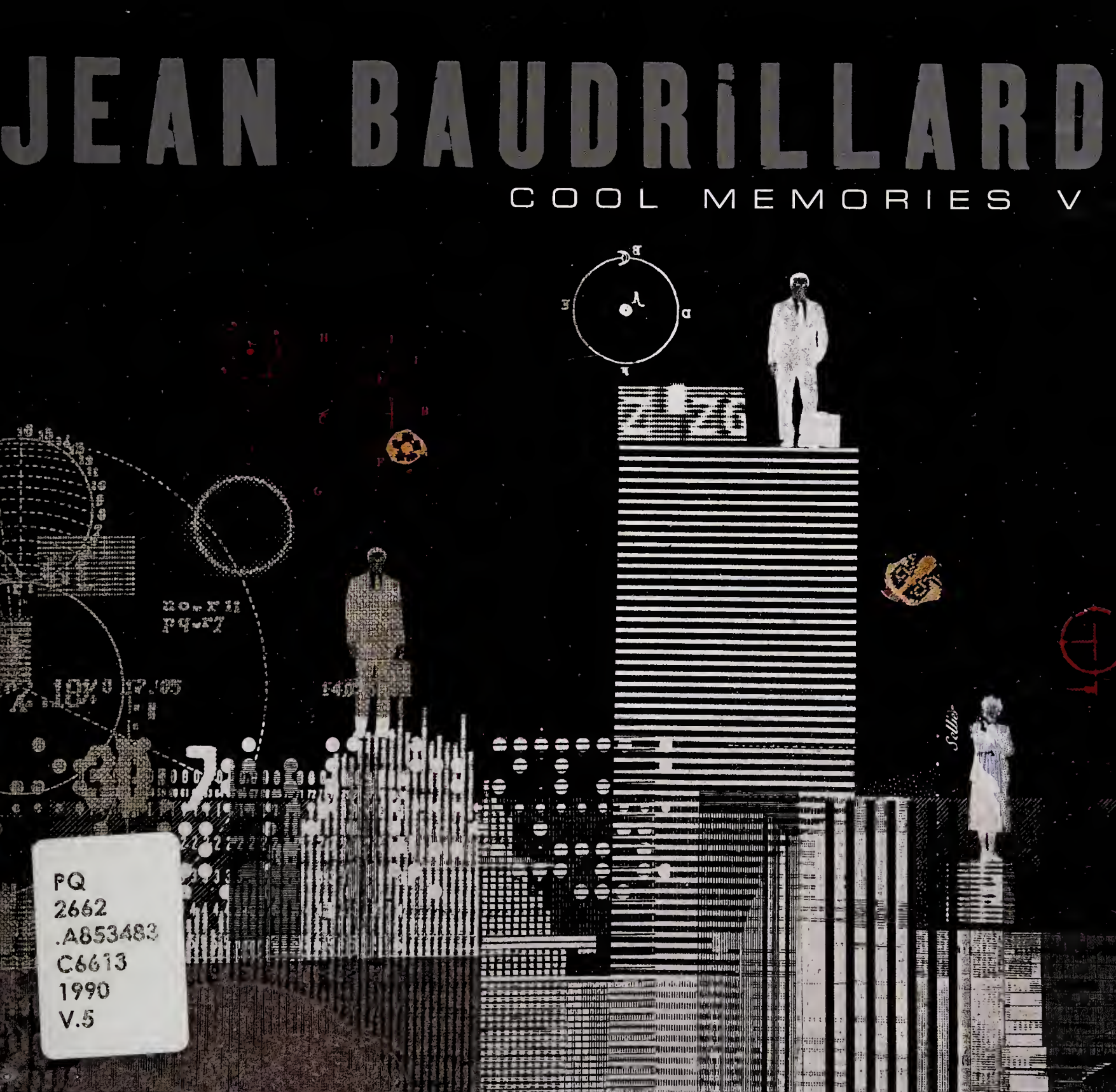
California is not what it was
Rome too is not what it was
No more imperial cities
No more crazy societies
Where is one to go?
Berlin Vancouver Samarkand?

*Last three lines in English in original. [Tr.]

This journal is a subtle matrix of idleness.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

COOL MEMORIES V



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COOL MEMORIES V

2000–2004

Jean Baudrillard

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER

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First published in French as *Cool Memories V* by Jean Baudrillard
© Éditions Galilée, 2005.

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Reprinted 2007

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN-13: 978-07456-3660-3

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Sabon
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Manchester
Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin

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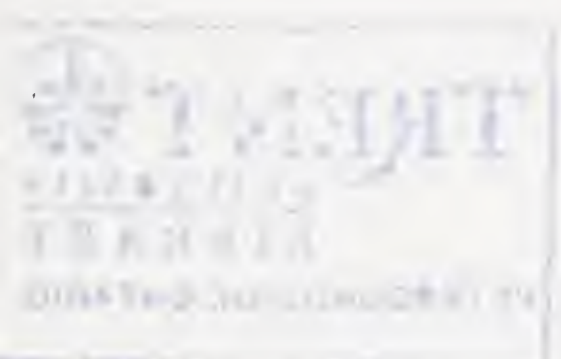

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And every god, similar in this to the God of gods Himself, is always bigger than the sphere of His action.

There is no point of equilibrium. Vibration alone produces the illusion of a steady balance, whereas everything runs to extremes on both sides.

Equilibrium exists only at the point of resolution of a zero-sum equation: death?

Never painted: I respect painting too much.
Never any politics: I respect power too much to take it.
Never any philosophy: I respect thought too much to traduce it.
Never made a claim to truth: I respect it too much to imperil it.
Never believed in reality: I respect it too much to believe in it.
Never had any imagining of death: it should remain a surprise.

There is an intoxication of all things, of good things and bad, of water and wine. But also a bingeing on all things – a bingeing on purity, on going one better, on sacrifice, all the more abject as it is the parody of intoxication.

The circumstances of your death set your conditions of existence in the afterlife forever. If you die unhappy, you will be so for eternity. If you die in an accident, you will relive it eternally.

If you die at the same time as your loved one, you will live eternally at their side. If you don't love them any more, what a dire fate.

In another mental constellation, can we imagine time becoming a sort of space in which you can move in all directions, return to the point of origin etc.? Conversely, could space become like time: irreversible, so that you can't retrace your steps or get back to the point you started from? Or having, like time, its absolute horizon: eternity?

What would be the equivalent of eternity where space is concerned? The negation of motion, stillness, or perpetual motion?

The woman juggling with cups and saucers.

All in all, it is such an acrobatic thing to do that you end up sensing the performance is rigged. But that doesn't detract in any way from the agility. It merely adds an ironic supplement to it.

I dream about a friend. Some time afterwards, I see him again in a dream and tell him I dreamt about him the other night. A dream memory recycled in a dream. Does this mean there's an alternative chain of circulation, from dream to dream and from one night to another?

Future generations of artificial beings will inevitably wipe out the human race, following the same impulse that led humans to wipe out animal species. They will see us retrospectively as apes and be ashamed of being descended from us. They will invent human zoos; protect us perhaps, like any endangered species, and make us the heroes of children's fictions.

The statistical rate of mortality means nothing. It is the rate of invisible mortality that counts. That is much higher, but incalculable, since death is here, growing everywhere and mounting up in the social body as a whole.

In the same way, there's no comparison between the index of visible corruption and that of invisible corruption (which it contributes to masking). The rate of political indifference is much higher than the abstention rate. As for the rate of invisible stupidity, it is far beyond the stupidity that actually shows up.

But perhaps the rate of secret intelligence and the rates of passion and imagination are also far higher than they appear?

The panic hole the Indians have: they dig holes, sit at the bottom and view the sky through the hole. An unrestricted view.

Our panic hole is the TV. Silence, blueness, clouds, birds, omens, weather – we have all that on the screen. We have the hole and the lid, the perfect niche.

When the hostage espouses the cause of the terrorist, the conqueror the cause of the vanquished, the torturer the cause of the victim, the master the cause of the slave – when contamination becomes universal in both directions, then another justice is active than the justice of the law, other scales

than the scales of justice: at work here is an inalienable reversibility of all relations, even the most violently unequal.

Everything is mobile – water is mobile – air is mobile – blood circulates in the veins – time is relentless. Man alone is immobile.

For a healthy distribution of energies, the best thing is to commit one's cowardice to the service of a good cause and one's courage to the service of the bad ones.

The *Triumph of Death* fresco in the Palermo art gallery. Gruesome war-horse or baroque spectre . . . In fact, imagining death is impossible. You would need to be able to remember it.

Leucate. Same parish priest, same church. The great local innovation is Communion under the two species. If the faithful are reluctant to drink from the same chalice, God will not hold it against them. They can always dip their host in the priest's wine. All this new ritual passes over the heads of the general run of worshippers.

Homily on the Covenant struck with Moses, then sealed in the blood of Christ, and then in the Eucharist. Only Christ washes away spiritual stains. Silence falls.

There then enters a person who could well be the village whore – a blonde creature in a pale green miniskirt and with a boldly plunging neck-line. She slips quietly into the Lady Chapel, lights a candle for the Virgin Mary, then prostrates herself in prayer in a dark side-chapel before leaving

again unseen. The Holy Covenant remains the one between the people of the village.

Any gloss on authors, their character traits or biographies, hides the fact that only bad writing has an author, good writing does not.

In the chapel at the seaside cemetery, all the votive offerings for the shipwrecked that were stolen one day have been reproduced *a fresca* with astonishing perfection. What would happen if the originals were found again? How would it be with the copy of the real world if they rediscovered the original?

We have at this millennium end produced the perfect specimen of the species in the form of mobile-phone man. But even he will disappear before the future digital prosthesis, who will leave room in turn only for telepathic ghosts.

The events of a thousand years ago have shot off a thousand light years into space. Hiroshima is already sixty light years off. The moment that has just passed is already a light-second away. There is, then, no presence. Even if the discrepancy is infinitesimal, nothing is ever present – neither the wall nor the person opposite. We are barely even contemporaneous with our own existences.

Seen from a distant star, the monotony of current events takes on fantastic proportions.

Presumptuousness of the artist (John Cage, Bob Wilson?).

'We dream for those people who have no dreams of their own to keep them alive.' Always the same condescension – even worse when it relates to dreams and mental faculties. We may doubt whether the energy for dreaming among 'artists' or the vitality of the unconscious among the upper classes are any different from what they are among the common herd. There, at least, a kind of democracy prevails.

That an obscure Filipino computer-user can spread confusion through the global computer networks by launching the 'I love you' virus is possible only because the computer loves us and, feeling abandoned, like Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, takes its revenge by suiciding the network.

Intelligence lies in deceleration. But you must first get ahead of things.

Doubtless science is, at bottom, merely a marvellous source of metaphors. The double arrow of time, the memory of water, apoptosis, black holes, anti-matter – where are we to find finer metaphors (let's give Sokal his due here)? And why not abuse them? They are the chrysalises of the concept.

One must believe in oneself, the world and reality only in homeopathic doses. A little superstition is all right, as is a little belief in reality – but only what is needed to cure evil with evil.

Fonda says to Nobody: 'Tell you what, first you get to be somebody and then you and me'll surround them'[1] (Which is a little bit like existence saying

to him: first take the trouble to be born and you'll have the right to live.) He also tells him that when he has become Somebody, they'll 'make life harder and harder' for him and one day he'll be 'put down in history' by nobody. Nobody always wins out over Somebody. And, in fact, Nobody was quicker than him.

(*My Name is Nobody*, Sergio Leone.)[2]

The cow fed on bone meal, who ends up as a mad cow carcase and as organic fuel in the cement-works, the dust from which we eventually inhale.

Fire remains an ungovernable power and it is from fire that the most redoubtable vengeance will come: from sidereal fire and cold. All the natural elements were the chosen terrain of the gods. They will be the instruments of their vengeance.

Never lose sight of the fact that writing is a strange, inhuman function, a reflection of the inhumanity of language itself. Through writing, language, which is a domestic species, becomes a wild one again.

To integrate the end into the process: the only way of escaping mourning. To enjoy the end as a mirror magnifying the pleasure. One may even, in this sense, envisage integrating death as a magical factor.

Man has no definition; only the idea of man has one. Man can, then, have only an ideal definition of himself. Otherwise, what is there to say about him?

At the origin of misfortune, there is always an accident.
At the origin of good fortune, there is always a coincidence.

Around noon, a gathering darkness, as though it had welled up from the earth itself, not come down from the sky. As though produced by a source of black light, its beam sweeping across the earth at 2,000 kilometres per hour. The wind of the eclipse gets up in the gloom. It's the same silent wind as comes with storms. And cold descends from the solar corona. Path of totality.

'It sometimes happens that, through his mouth, words say true and profound things' (Schnitzler, *Aphorismen und Betrachtungen*).

It is aphorisms that best do justice to that cerebral electricity, those myriad microscopic ideas that ascend from the nerves to the brain and are constantly passing across it. They bear witness to that Brownian, corpuscular activity 'beyond the lenses, beyond the frosted glass', as Lichtenberg would say.

We dream mindlessly of the facts of the day. I read the story of a woman who kills herself by jumping from a train window. That night I have the same dream, slightly transposed. It would have been so much more original to have the dream and find the self-same story reported in the next morning's papers.

It is because of alterity, otherness, that no one can make himself laugh by tickling himself.

Just as there is no 'objective' existence of the sky's blueness (blue is blue and that's all there is to it), so there is nothing objectively knowable about the movements of the soul. They can only be intuited: psychological azure.

Those women who electrify you mentally (not necessarily physically), to whom you cannot speak cool-headedly and who put you in a state of having to please them.

Do not take the side of those already in the right.

Barthes: language is fascistic, since it perpetually commands us to speak. Phatic function, fascist function. The fanaticism of the signifier (Ferlosio). The German language was destroyed at the same time as the German cities (Sloterdijk).

Our sense of existence is a plate photosensitive to black light. It is made up of self-hatred and its immediate reparation.

Instead of dreams being the place where desires from real life are fulfilled, it would be the real that was the place where desires born of dreams would be fulfilled.

Dreams would be a search engine. The Aborigines, for example, scorning biological paternity, give priority to begetting by dreams. Reality would gain by this in becoming much more mysterious and dreams would cease to be the dumping ground of the unconscious.

It is immoral to keep beauty in the register of the sublime alone and not to find an equivalent for it in a charitable undertaking.

In the same way as the mentally handicapped will be entitled to damages for the fact of being born, every citizen should be able to claim a natural right to intelligence and therefore, in the worst of cases, demand a stupidity support allowance. The most difficult thing will be to assemble the evidence.

Death orders matters well, since the very fact of your absence makes the world distinctly less worthy of being lived in.

Exactly like the shaft of wit, the character trait or facial features, the fragment is made up of contradictory lineaments of meaning and their happy coincidence. The aphorism is like the starry sky, the blanks in it being the intersidereal void.

We should invent days without afternoons, nights that stop before the dawn, seasons that overlap at a quicker and quicker pace, a year that ends before beginning, and an endless alternation of joy and adversity.

Thus, with the sardonic collusion of diverse, but often baleful constellations, the philosophical subject emerged into the ultraviolet spectrum.

What is exceptional hardly deserves to live. What is banal does not even deserve to die. He was so banal that he didn't even deserve to be called Bernard.

Behind its generous appearance, the famous Warhol 'fifteen minutes of fame' is in fact contemptuous – an assignment to promotional mediocrity. And moreover, as the stock of 'fame' is limited, just like the stock of eggs in the uterus, it is supremely anti-democratic. If you are famous for a whole hour, you thwart three other people, who were entitled to their fifteen minutes.

Everything is becoming functional. Irony is disappearing in the critical function, the word is disappearing in its phatic function. Worse: critique, ethics, aesthetics become functions of each other, as they wait to become useless functions.

The master-thinkers of the democratic cause would be very surprised to learn that the people themselves are driven, at the deepest level, by the aristocratic principle. Even if their 'real' demand is for equality, liberty and material well-being, the spiritual wellspring of popular aspirations, the obscure object of their desire, remains fame, fortune and sacrifice.

The best thing would perhaps be to remove consciousness surgically *in utero*, together with irony, criticism and intelligence – all those qualities that are so fragile and so dangerous to existence in general. One might take advantage of this (all in a specialized Psycho-Genetic Institute, akin to the Institute of Zodiacal Semiurgy, where the surgical removal of star signs is practised) to be rid of the Unconscious, the extraction of which, like the extraction of all the irregularities of the genome, would be a great relief for future generations.

Theory is never so fine as when it takes the form of a fiction or a fable.

The story (by Amélie Nothomb) of the young woman who lives as a recluse, in the belief she is disfigured. Every possible means of seeing herself has been taken from her – no mirror, no reflections, not even a reflection from mercury in thermometers. Twin sister to the Duchess of Palagonia whom the Duke had surrounded with distorting mirrors which made her look monstrous and dissuaded her from becoming proud. This sequestration of beauty, this violence done to the right to see oneself, *il sacrificio della bellezza* is not just the problem of the peril women represent for men, it is also the problem of the danger posed to women by their own appearance.

A statistic tells us that the danger of a fatal air accident is one in 1,600,000. If you travel by plane every day, you are not in danger of crashing until a thousand years from now. The figures are meant to be reassuring, but in fact they are a source of horror since, by underlining the fact that the risk is real, though infinitesimal, they cut across the imaginary gamble we each make, which is the gamble on zero risk – without which we wouldn't take the plane. The thousand years become a finite horizon, the horizon of death, which moves closer as soon as we leave pure chance behind to enter the realm of probability.

The answerphone that stops as soon as you stop speaking, or speak too slowly. Closedown for reasons of silence!

Recovering some secrecy, some silence, some distance . . .

Recovering some conflict, some prohibition, some spectacle and violence . . .

Recovering the joy of the fully fledged spectator.

Freedom, will, responsibility – to sweep away all these categories, as it was necessary to sweep away those of soul, sin, immortality and the concepts of heaven and hell to deliver ourselves from the religious and the feudal.

To speak of death, you have to be alive. The living person has more chance of having an idea of death than the one who is already dead. In the same way, one doubtless has to be a man to speak about women. A man has more chance of having an idea of woman than a woman, who already is one.

At any rate, men certainly retain a memory of the woman they were in another life. In this way, they can have a finer intuition of her, filtered by multiple states of consciousness.

Why fight endlessly for a cause? Has anyone ever fought for the effects?

Getting used to the idea that the world is an effect without a cause, or in which the effect precedes the cause. Our actions themselves precede us and, one thing leading to another, are governed by the same paradox. 'A person's actions . . . are commonly continuations of his own inner constitution . . . [in] the way the magnet bestows form and order on iron filings.' (G. C. Lichtenberg).[3]

There is reason to be jealous at being seen by others from the outside and having only that distorting mirror of oneself that is self-knowledge.

The world as singularity resists the global as idea. Woman resists the idea of woman. Any confusion with one's own concept produces a lethal haemorrhage.

It is almost normal to lead a double life when you are alone. It is much more difficult when there are two of you.

At last, a genuine madman in the street – someone who doesn't need a mobile phone to talk to himself.

Some encounters stay in the memory thanks to the tone of voice, which you remember on an infra-red scale, so to speak, without being able to pin-point it.

A woman's body and her face are quite distinct things. And one can, between the one and the other, descend from pure contemplation to pure concupiscence. Seen close up in love-making, the beauty or ugliness of the face disappears – carnal desire scorns distinctive features; it even overlooks differences of body and gesture to a very large extent. But desire is only rarely carnal, and sometimes it attaches to the facial features alone.

The worst thing is not so much being regarded as an impostor, but being regarded as a harmful object, a nuisance, by these high-flying vermin.

Beyond the end: the ideal non-place.

'In the very midst of the event, of the seduction, he was already at the memory of it – deep down, he was already finished with it' (Kierkegaard).

Beyond the end: the only unrestricted view.

Running after your shadow: the only way out from perpetual motion.

Dispersing the viewpoints: the only solution to the squaring of the circle.

His hypocritical air derived from the fact that he suffered simultaneously from an inferiority and a superiority complex towards himself.

The principle of insufficient reason: the only things that really take place are those which do not have sufficient reason to do so.

'Man is so sensitive to perfection that reason can make him an idiot.' (Lichtenberg).

The condemnation of sects is, like any witch-hunt, disgraceful: 'mental deficiency', 'cult of the guru', 'suicidal drive' etc. As though all these things were not standard in the normal sphere of conventions and the social order. This is reminiscent of the charge of 'cowardice' made against suicides.

Stalin's double. Since he wasn't a perfect likeness, they touched him up using plastic surgery, after which they eliminated all his relatives and all the witnesses to the operation. He played his role so well that in the end he came to think he was Stalin (as did Stalin himself!). At that point they sent him to the Gulag. But so well did he identify with his role that, on learning of Stalin's death, he died three days later.

The proof of how poorly grounded freedom is is that depriving someone of their freedom itself no longer means anything. Impossible to find an equivalence between the crime and the punishment or, therefore, any possible 'justice'. Given the extension of responsibility and its ramification into all networks, the irresponsibility is the same everywhere.

All these novels in which the authors try desperately to dramatize their own histories, their experiences, to recount their own psychological dramas – this is not literature. It is secretion, just like bile, sweat or tears – and, sometimes even, excretion. It is the literary transcription of 'reality television'. It is all the product of a vulgar unconscious not unlike a small intestine, around which roam the phantasms and affects of those who, now they've been persuaded they have an inner life, don't know what to do with it.

Paedophilia: the very term is disgusting. It is one of those words by which language takes its revenge, by which the thing denounced avenges itself on the denouncers.

The striptease artiste becomes seductive when she closes her eyes to her own body, blotting out those looking at her and being visible now to herself only from the inside. She comes closer at that point to her role as pure object, the secret of which she keeps to herself.

Whether you work by will or by chance, there are always as many fortunate and unfortunate coincidences.

Concordance between a 'real' situation and a discourse ought to be an indication of 'truth', but it is, for that very reason, philosophically unbearable.

The fragment is like a broken mirror – ideas don't have the time to reflect themselves in it or, as a result, to feel sorry for themselves. They run ahead of their shadows or their reflections.

To run ahead is to move towards an unforeseeable outcome, but one whose path is made for it in advance. Birds too run ahead of those who see them. The event also runs ahead of history. It is what opens up untimely perspectives in a world brought totally up to date.

To move in the space of deafness is like moving in an aquatic milieu. The same foetal, amniotic strangeness, the same cautiousness of gesture, the same mental lethargy – the same silence of the depths: it isn't you who are deaf, it's the world that's dumb. But the inner noise, the organic murmur is there. The body is all ears towards the inside.

Dart a very fine reed into the victim's heart. He will be left with a lethal stupefaction, but will not die of it. Dart a very fine glance into the eye of the torturer. He will be left with eternal remorse, without even remembering it.

'May he who speaks of himself never tell the whole truth, may he keep it secret and yield up only fragments of it.' This is the principle of 'scrupulous delicacy' according to Kierkegaard. Could one not also speak of a 'scrupulous violence' or an 'unscrupulous delicacy'? This rule of scrupulous fragmentation applies equally in analysis and writing.

Thought is that invisible blade that determines the separation of bodies.

The truth that sees itself as such becomes a lie and a deception, but language, which never lies, wins out over both.

The obsessive impression of having missed something – a (profound or insignificant) idea that has managed to pass unnoticed, a fundamental hypothesis that has slipped away, wound itself up like a curled snake in one's mental space and could only come out by unwinding itself the other way. Perhaps it is hidden deep in some previous life, perhaps it is part of a future life.

It is the secret continuation of the Nothing in the heart of things that creates the impression of having missed the crucial point.

The speed of transfusion that applies to effects liberated from their causes is viral. Any cell, any organ whatever, becomes viral as soon as it is no longer subject to the sovereign legislation of the whole body. Hence a new pathology beyond the organic, even beyond the psychosomatic, which is still linked to the individualization of the 'soul' and the body.

No mechanic now for modern cars, no doctor now for modern pathologies. The infinitesimal calculus of viral pathologies, unlocatable by traditional diagnostics, has entirely outstripped the mechanics of the body, just as the electronics of the modern car have outstripped the knowledge of its user. But one can imagine an electronic 'smartness' of the body (like 'smart' cars or houses) that would inform you of all its anomalies, or even, by a kind of GPS effect, of your position in the space of human relations.

All effects are perverse in so far as they run free of their causes: epilepsy of reality. The very possibility of effects without causes, or causes without effects, or effects producing their causes in a retrospective sequence, destabilizes any logical order and leads into a paradoxical one.

Admiration: a real sacred prostitution in which the most alienated is not the one you think. Thinking in these terms of a gentle violation, Lichtenberg spoke of a 'virginity of admiration'. And of those who remain virgins all their lives.

It is where there is the most violent contrast and where reconciliation seems impossible that seductiveness is at its most profound.

Illusion is the most obvious of things, the obviousness of the tangible appearance. Reality, for its part, is merely a flag of convenience.

The coalition of all those who find the mere hypothesis of a mystification or machination of any kind where reality is concerned unacceptable from the moral standpoint: the conspiracy of imbeciles.

A constant trumping of hypotheses in all disciplines, linked to the fierce rivalry between scientists. And, above and beyond their rivalry, to their solidarity on a single point: if truth were established definitively, that would put an end to science and the scientific community. Now, the survival of that community takes precedence over the survival of objective knowledge. And

this is a vital reaction. It means that rival passions will always win out over the establishment of a final truth. That 'truth' will always be shot through with some passion from elsewhere. Paradoxically, the scientists apply themselves to this by producing ever more hypotheses. But the world itself systematically sidesteps truth. In the end, there is after all collusion between the scientists and their object, but collusion of an unexpected kind: in the art of escaping truth.

In its excess, information merely adds to the sum of useless knowledge and thereby swallows up communication, which in turn, by its infinite ramifications and the sum of superfluous exchanges, swallows up information. Things are the same in the media space as they are in the physical space of molecules: the same progressive dilution – and even vanishing – of substance as in the memory of water.

The 'disocculted' pataphysicians seem as though they have been defrosted. They look as if they have aged artificially in an aquarium. Perhaps it would have been preferable to stay occult?[4]

Only one thing is more useless than the refined playing of the hotel pianist and that is the air hostess's demonstration of how to use a lifejacket.

The eighth wonder of the world is in New Zealand, but it is forever invisible. The translucent cataract of gypsum and crystals produced by the age-old, subterranean action of geysers, the opalescent extravaganza that swept down into the lake, was smashed to smithereens and buried when the

mountain split apart on 10 June 1886. Jealous nature has hidden it from our gaze, as though it wanted to save it from becoming a world heritage site.

Taking a plane which is so quick that you can see the sun rise in the west. Moving quicker than the daylight to lose yourself, from east to west, in the preceding night. But we are too slow and the darkness remains out of reach. When you see the sun rise from a plane, it is still darkest night on the ground. When it sets, night has already fallen on the ground – it is always lighter at altitude. You can never be in darkness at altitude and have daylight on the ground. Anyway, at 10,000 metres, neither night nor day rises or sets. You enter them like a projectile, with all the speed of the aeroplane.

Sublimation: the direct transition from the solid to the gaseous state (the ice evaporating on the Saint Lawrence). Sublimation of the phenomenal world: this subtle, volatile quality of substances, forms and colours.

Against Machiavelli's *Prince*, a treatise on the ploys of domination, we should set a treatise on the ruses of servitude. Its ploys are not those of the lion, but of the fox; not those of the eagle, but of the moray eel and the chameleon.

Arrogance is a head-on thing, but contempt is reptilian. And it paralyses its victims imperceptibly. This is what happened with Mitterrand in his relations with his followers and courtiers. And this is what brought him retrospective contempt, for one can respond to contempt only with equal contempt or death.

This blind constancy of trees and the plant world in producing leaves and flowers as the cycle ordains, out of pure vegetal instinct. In the animal kingdom too, faithfulness to the species is almost immutable. What would be the equivalent of this constancy in human beings? Might it be the blind determination to behave as a human being in the most inhuman conditions? Or the opposite: the determination to choose evil, including one's own misfortune, when all the conditions are ideal? Man's inexhaustible genius in reviving what is likely to annihilate him. There is no doubt that, as Mishima says, man turns the very difficulty of bearing his existence into a weapon.

As in the loose conglomeration of genes and molecules, where the proteins govern each other without it being possible to pinpoint the prime mover, so in the loose conglomeration of categories that govern our actions, everything is similarly interconnected: being able, willing, knowing, believing, having-to, etc. In order to be able, one has to wish to, and in order to wish to, one has to be able. And to know, one has to be able to know, and for that one has to wish to. And one further has to believe . . . etc. etc. To live simply, we have to break up this sequence: to split off willing from being able, to split off believing from knowing, to split off having-to from acting, to split off being from having-to-be.

The truth they defend is merely the astrological sign of their stupidity.

The satrap is a being who exercises no function, occupies no role, and acts by his mere presence – or by his absence, if he is transcendental.[5]

With the heat of summer comes the return of that hieroglyph more mysterious than the circulation of the blood or of commodities: the stochastic,

zigzag flight of the fly in the middle of the room, beneath the central light fitting or in the sun's rays.

As flat as the earth before they noticed it was round. As ambiguous as the truth before they noticed it was true. As real as reality before they noticed it didn't exist. As beautiful as a woman before they noticed she wasn't one.

And is the earth really round? It is when seen from another world. Just as the real is real only from our phenomenal point of view. Or, rather, from the viewpoint of the unverifiable hypothesis of its non-existence.

'If the people will not obey the watchwords of the Revolution, then we must change the people' (Brecht). If the real refuses to conform to objective knowledge, then we must liquidate the real . . . 'If the truth hurts, it is the truth's fault.'

The Turkish political prisoners let themselves die of hunger rather than be transferred from their collective cells into individual ones: isolation is worse than death.

The time when perfection was of the order of crime is over, when beneath perfect beauty something criminal lay hidden. With the cloning and recycling of the species in conformity with an ideal norm, it will no longer even be a crime to be perfect. The exactitude of the creature will shine in the genetic firmament. There will be a universal presumption of innocence and a total excommunication of evil. This technical redemption of all the taints

of the species will render any new divine intervention useless. There will no longer be any Last Judgement.

Reality for us is a little like the ground for trapeze artists, who work with a net without knowing that beneath it the ground has disappeared.

In this way, screens allowed the real to slip away. In this way, icons allowed God to slip quietly away.

He is writing the day-by-day account of his life, from the beginning. The first ten notebooks have brought him to the age of fifteen, during the war. At this rate it will take him twenty years to get to the current period. In the meanwhile, he will have grown old – the two parallel lines, that of the life and that of the narrative, will never meet. But it is also a wager, since in a way it wouldn't be right for the life to stop before the narrative catches up.

When God created man, He saw that he couldn't survive in that solitude and gave him a shadow. But since then man has never stopped selling it to the devil.

I knew him in all conditions. Moist in sacrifice, hostile or welcoming, voracious or retractile, excited or indifferent, impulsive and without qualms, dreamy on his best days.

That people who share the same genes should be separated by a moral

chasm helps us to reassess the values in the name of which they are killing each other.

What is one to do against an enemy whose weapons are conformism and stupidity? Should one make oneself more conformist and more stupid? If his strategy lies in cunning and achievement, should one make oneself more cunning, more of an achiever? Should one make oneself more mediatic than the media?

War is impossible, and yet it takes place. But the fact that it takes place in no way detracts from its impossibility. The system is absurd and yet it functions. But the fact that it functions in no way detracts from its absurdity. The fact that the real exists in no way detracts from its unreality.

Image indicates the venal value of the man who has lost his name, just as transparency is the quality of the man who has lost his shadow.

L. D., speaking of the faces he photographs incognito in the metro:
'They are anonymous, I make them exist.' Exist yes, but how?
One of them stated that the hardest thing was to realize, when faced with his own photo, that he was nothing, nobody. Nothing but a captive face for a hidden lens.
The photographer, by contrast, is not anonymous. He claims to eclipse himself in the operation, but what he manages to eclipse is his relation to the other, *l'autre* (which is, paradoxically, the title of the book and the exhibition).[6]
So, all this aesthetics is merely a subterfuge: the more the contemporary artist plays with the nothing, the more his signature is fetishized.

Today things travel faster from Paris to Rio than from the hand to the brain. You have only to think of a friend at the other end of the world to be connected to him in real time. There is something inhuman in this instantaneity. I didn't necessarily want to be immediately in contact with him. I just wanted, perhaps, to toy with the idea of seeing him.

Boredom is out of luck: it is itself being discussed in crashingly boring terms.

'In the daytime I don't see. So I don't want what I don't see. Night is the tricky time, since at night, when I'm asleep, I see. I see streets, lights, a person dear to me. All in all, when I'm asleep, I act as though I were awake, and when I wake up, I act as though I were asleep' (E. de Lucca).

Do the blind see in their dreams?

To dream without seeing is even stranger than a waking dream, since dreams, for us, are primarily images – almost a film. It seems to us that dreams can do without images even less than reality can.

The profoundly negationist character of information, the demand for which has no concern for any historical reality or any moral meaning. Shoah or no Shoah, if Hitler were alive he would be on all the screens.

Might Network Man be the model for the disabled person of the future? It is perhaps to him, rather than to the paralytic, that we shall have forcibly to restore the use of his body.

An illness that breaks out opportunely just before the departure date and ends exactly on the day the trip was scheduled to end.

Memento mori: Not: remember that you must die, but: don't forget to die, remember to die (before it's too late).

Their faces are close to each other in sleep, but their dreams are light years apart. Their breathing mingles, but their thoughts diverge far beyond their bodies.

One's closest friends are a bit like the bad conscience of what you have become, and in their eyes your life becomes a vaguely criminal matter, something of a slow-motion murder.

Just as dust is what is born out of the erosion of all landscapes, so the real is what remains from the wearing down of all systems.

Further and further towards perfect resemblance. The voice of the airport announcer and integral music. Tomorrow's Eve.

'History is speeding up? No: history has stopped, but it has left us with the acceleration' (Philippe Muray).

The Judgement of God? No: God is dead, but He has left us his (last) judgement.

The Cheshire Cat has vanished, but he has left behind his smile.

The reality principle has disappeared, but it has left us with reality, which keeps on running like a headless chicken.

Artificial intelligence? The intelligence has left it, but we are left with the artifice, which flourishes the better on the ruins of intelligence.

Rights, if not desires, are left to us by things that take their leave. Transparency, as it removes itself from the scene, leaves us the right to see it clearly. Life, in withdrawing, leaves us the right to live. Everything, as it distances itself, leaves us the possibility of conceiving it.

We shall never know whether thought is an imposture, and that is providential.

'The people is, in some cases, so enlightened that it is no longer indifferent to anything' (Montesquieu). That is indeed the end point: when there is no longer anything about which there is nothing to say.

Verdict of a Chinese writer on a monstrous tree that is at once a blackberry and a bamboo: 'any disorder appearing in nature is the sign of a hidden disorder in the administration of the Empire . . . Order restored in nature clearly indicates satisfaction in heaven.' Our current blossoming of monsters and clones, hybrids and chimeras, our systematic mixing of mores and cultures, sexes and genes, cannot but attest to an irremediable disorder in the highest spheres of the Empire.

For an architecture to have a reason to exist, that is to say, for it not to arouse, even in the imagination, the desire to destroy it, it has to know, itself,

how to convey a sense of the void, and a transparency other than that of glass.

First victim of the screen: silence. No living silence on television ever again, but minutes of artificial silence, of dead silence, stocked like spare parts or replacement organs, for the needs of the programme. The recording of the artificial silence is the ghostliest, most ludicrous operation I've ever witnessed.

Propitious or ill-fated, there is an exaltation in the fact of something happening to you. The fateful always wins out over the evaluation of good and bad.

Hugo describes perfectly the profile of the end of History: 'The twentieth century will be happy, there will be no more events.' And it is true, there are fewer and fewer. But historical experience has been replaced by an almost millenarian obsession with the Eventful, the Accidental and the Unforeseeable. We are almost back to the times when the hope was still alive of witnessing the coming of the Kingdom of God 'in real time'. Except that the expectation now is, rather, of the end in real time.

It seems that, after a long period of primitive accumulation, science has now lost any illusions as to its final ends, and is given over to the craziest hypotheses – free of any verification. It then sometimes recaptures the charm of the ancient cosmogonies.

The Stockholm Syndrome, the Theatre of Cruelty, voluntary servitude, living coin, the ready made, the accursed share, the total social fact,

dust-breeding, the perfect crime – we find all these figures in the reality-TV cocktail, in that potlatch of vacuousness. It even drags the judgement that condemns it into its vacuousness.

C. M. wishes to be done with the artificial mystery of seduction. She wishes to overcome desire by wearing out pleasure. But pleasure is not like freedom, which Lichtenberg said was best used by being abused. She herself says she wants to be like a spider in the centre of her web. She has forgotten that it is the web which, intangibly, imperceptibly, weaves its spider.

Time was when virtual creatures emerged from the Unconscious. Today they are the products of digital calculation. We are no longer the theatre of their imagining. The oneiric function disappears in the expurgated screen version, much as, with language, only the phatic function survives or, with the gaze, only the scopic function remains.

The sphere of ideas is a jungle, a nature red in tooth and claw in which the natives are condemned to hunting and self-reliance. No heritage, no references, no primitive accumulation: thought has luck alone on its side, and instinctive, animal defence. So far as our conditions of life are concerned, we have become stockbreeders and producers. But mentally and affectively we have remained hunters. At every moment, in thought and writing, there is a prey and a predator. And survival is a miracle.

The extreme of happiness leaves room for only one question: might we not already be dead?

In the gorges, there is no ideal viewpoint. From below you don't get the idea of depth. From above, you can merely contemplate them abstractly, having only an aerial view. Only the birds have a total, side-on perspective.

What they contemplate, what they prostrate themselves before all along the beaches is their own sunset. If their existences could be diffracted in this way into the volcanic dusts, if their heads could be set ablaze with a fine coral dust, if their bodies could cross the horizon, the limit of which retreats as life nears its end, like that of the silence or fury of events, if one could rise up vertically so that the line of the horizon becomes first a curve, then a sphere, then an immaterial point relieved of any surface and depth . . .

'*Aphorizein*' (from which we get the word 'aphorism') means to retreat to such a distance that a horizon of thought is formed which never again closes on itself.

The lizard is the sprightliest animal and at the same time the closest to absolute stillness, darting as it does between the stones like a shaft of wit. Close, too, on the wall, and equally still in an entirely different universe, the hairy spider in its hexagonal web.

Chance does not exist. Either the universe obeys objective laws or it is of the order of will. But not of a will like our own: an inhuman will, in which all beings, minerals, animals, stars and elements are endowed with effective determination. Where the effect is an added extra, regardless of the cause, where the event is an added extra, regardless of history – chance being merely

the intersection of all these wills. A universe consisting of antagonistic impulses, in which everything is lucky or ill-fated – isn't that more uplifting than the mere preoccupation with causes and consequences?

The downplaying of reality is a philosophical intuition and there is, therefore, nothing 'negationist' about it. The virtual, in its project of liquidating the real *technically*, is truly negationist.

Just as repressed sexuality has taken its revenge in the total hegemony of the sexual (which no longer has anything to do with sex), so repressed illusion takes its revenge on reality through the virtual (which no longer has anything to do with illusion).

Black faces are like basaltic lava emerging, against the sunlight, from the entrails of the earth, like black, light-absorbent mineral. The photographic film cannot capture them.

A woman may have all the marks of being a woman and yet not be one. The sex itself is not enough – it takes femininity to make a woman.

'It is not true that the unconscious goal in the evolution of every conscious being (animal, man, mankind, etc.) is its "highest happiness": the case, on the contrary, is that every stage of evolution possesses a special and incomparable happiness neither higher nor lower but simply its own' (Nietzsche).[7]

Language – any language – has a fine ring to it when it has no meaning (in magic, it is, in fact, this meaningless language that exerts its charm on material things). As soon as it means something, language merely peddles the banality of the common speech of all languages the world over.

In this country, the towns and villages are not a refuge from the desert, they give the desert sanctuary. They do not fortify themselves against it, they weave it into the houses or the inner courtyards, where the dusting of sand is the same, in the spaces of beaten earth where camels, donkeys, children and women mingle freely. Space is never under house arrest here. Shouldn't all architecture be inspired by the void and make it circulate in this way, instead of exiling it to a now captive urban space? We shouldn't have to travel through space, it ought to travel through us, the way Chuang Tzu's butcher's knife cuts through the interstices of the animal's body.

'Humanity will not be able to conceive itself as such until it encounters another conscious species . . .' There is a great presumptuousness in wishing to measure oneself against some other species only on the basis of consciousness. That is a distorting mirror which prevents us from seeing that the confrontation already exists outside of consciousness, in the infra-human, in the animal, in the unfolding of the world without us, outside of us. No need for an extra-terrestrial species for that: otherness is there, and it is everywhere a challenge to consciousness as it conceives itself hegemonically and as sole judge of the existence of the world.

It is possible that the human species hopes, by way of artificial intelligence, to invent another race, in which it can be reflected, as in an immense mirror. But, in reflecting itself, all it would be doing is verifying its existence. Now, consciousness is sufficient for knowing oneself, but it is not sufficient

for conceiving oneself. For that, we have to be challenged in our very consciousness by all that does not enjoy this 'higher' consciousness, but which nonetheless, in the order of the world, is the equal of consciousness. Consciousness is sovereign only in the terms of the representation of the world it imposes, and imposes on itself. In the symbolic order, it can only measure itself against something bigger.

Regarding Stockhausen's declaration on the destruction of the Twin Towers as the finest work of art of modern times, why does it have to be a 'work of art'? Why must the sanction for the sublime and the exceptional always come from art? It's a scandalous misconception to attach the same high-class label of 'art' and performance to September 11th and the Palais de Tokyo, for example. Let us retain for events the power of the event.

'There are too many Jews on the France Culture radio station,' says Renaud Camus, and he is accused of racism. But the problem lies elsewhere and goes far beyond the Jewish question. It is, more generally, that there is too much of everything everywhere. Too many people, too many places, too many images on television, 'too many notes in Mozart', too many ideas and too many words to express them – too many old people among the old, too many young people among the young. And, ultimately, the worst of it is that there's too much culture on France Culture.

Marxism, Christianity and psychoanalysis have found refuge in Latin America. God, the Unconscious and the proletariat are emigrating to subtropical latitudes. The great ideologies, like the big companies, are relocating to the Third World.

J. K., a psychoanalyst, speaks of 'a collective Unconscious in collusion with the terrorists'. Yet she should know something about this: namely, that it is ridiculous to condemn the 'collusion' of the Unconscious with any political act whatever, and hence to submit it to a moral judgement.

Does J. K. dream of a politically correct Unconscious?

September 11th revealed not only the fragility of global power, but also an intellectual caste at odds with itself, and desperately seeking to rescue its right of oversight. But it is increasingly difficult to rescue the order of discourse in this disorder of things. All the more so as terrorism has no more meaning or clear consequences than it has objective causes. As much as a violence in the realm of things, it is a disorder of reason. The acting-out to which it attests is something quite other than the current events that result from it (including war).

Humanity needs injustice, which it can savour through the bitterness, the self-directed *Schadenfreude* that is one of the variants on the spectrum of misfortune. This mortification is particularly noticeable among the most celebrated, who like to see themselves as betrayed and misunderstood.

It is the practice of evil, and hence, in a sense, the inhuman[8] that is the distinctive mark of the human in the animal kingdom.

The definition of man is narrowing to the point of merging with his mastication coefficient, his loadbearing polygon, his basic metabolism and his intelligence quotient.

Traditionally, it has been consciousness that has made the suffering and death of the human being more moving than that of other living creatures. But that consciousness is a privilege and suffering is its mirror. Animals and inanimate living things are not even granted one, which makes their annihilation the more unjust (the thousands of trees felled in the forest, lined up like corpses in a mass grave), their sacrifice the more poignant.

The destinies are equalling up today, for the suffering of human beings has become similar to that of beasts and trees: it too has nothing to exchange itself for; nothing redeems it any more in some other (even inner) world. The inhuman condition of the 'inferior' creatures has become our own. And this makes us more sensitive to the suffering they endure.

Thirty thousand years ago there lived 'another human species' – the Neanderthals. Tremendous.

If it is true, it is symbolically more important than the fact that man is descended from the apes. The shadow of this vanished human species weighs heavy on all our anthropology, since our entire concept of evolution privileges the exclusive universality of a single humanity: ours, the one that survived. And what if it were not the only one? Then that's the end of our privilege. If we had to eliminate this twin, this prehistoric double, to ensure our hegemony, if this other species had to disappear, then the rules of the game of being human are no longer the same.

And where does this passion for universality come from, this lust to eliminate every other race? (It is a good bet that if any other race emerged from space, our first aim would be to subjugate or destroy it.) Why is it that in twin forms there always has to be one that dies? Why do we always have to wipe out duality everywhere to establish the monopoly of a species, a race, a subject?

Having said this, it is not certain that we really did win out. What if we

were carrying that double within us like a dead twin? And perhaps many others, in a kind of Unconscious, the stubborn heir to all the previous murders. Having achieved the unity of the species, for the greater glory of *Homo sapiens*, are we not now duplicating ourselves for the worse – in that artificial twinness of the clone, in which the species, denying its origins once and for all, prolongs itself as spectre in an infinite repetition? Over the screen of our consciousness and our Unconscious hovers the shadow of this original crime, the traces of which we shall doubtless never recover.

A general tendency to invisibility as veil, to conformism as blindness. To see nothing so as not to be seen. Even architecture behind its glass façades is becoming blind and sightless. Everything shares in this phantasm of being eclipsed, of escaping the mirror stage, thanks to the screen of transparency.

In the exhibition at the Louvre on 'Painting and Crime', photos of Auschwitz are shown alongisde bloody videos by the Vienna Actionists. Isn't this a worse profaning of the Shoah than holocaust-denial?

Any value system transferred en bloc into the ritual space of discourse, like any object transferred into the ritual space of the museum, becomes a 'ready-made'.

The eternal question from the other: What am I to you? What are you to me? A veiled challenge, to which the only response is clearly: You are everything to me! I am everything to you!

Each would like to be everything to the other – each would like to be

everything to himself/herself (since, ultimately, the crucial question is: what am I to myself?).

The sad thing is that it's impossible as soon as you ask the question: there is a gulf separating the question from the response, as deep as the gulf that separates us from the other. The best thing, then, would be never to try to clarify the matter – as it was best for Orpheus never to turn around to Eurydice after emerging from the Underworld.

All around us – objects, places, towns, landscapes, faces – ask us this same metaphysical question: what am I to you?

Not only living creatures, but inanimate ones – everything makes this total demand. A kind of jealous reciprocity, to which we respond, most often, with a profound indifference. But objects too know – and know better than we do – to move off and remain silent.

Actual reality is no longer even actual enough to preserve the differential of the dream. This already tends to vanish on waking. Now, daytime consciousness exists only by this nocturnal transfusion of dreams. Their extinction is a prelude to the extinction of night in a future universe.

In fact, history is over for us, in the sense that it is unfolding on its own, on automatic pilot, and most often in a loop: we are through the looking glass of history, in a disembodied present. But the others, those who haven't experienced this stage, can only aspire to history or, possibly, destroy its symbols – including Western power, in which everything that has assumed the form of history culminates.

Those who have not entered it want history. And, to console them, we palm it off on them on a spare-part basis, like a second-hand vehicle or an assembly line.

The most idealistic, the most pre-Raphaelite form of terrorism is certainly that of the Secret Agent (Conrad), that anarchist who wanted to blow up the Greenwich meridian – to free the people from Time.

You can caress a dream, like a domestic cat. You cannot caress reality; it is like a wildcat.

The Red Cedar of Vancouver. It is six hundred years old and can expect to live until the twenty-seventh century. There is something disturbing about finding yourself in front of a living thing which you know will be there in six centuries' time. As though it had already survived you. You feel dead in advance, and yet so far removed (a spatial depth, measurable in light-years) that all anxiety is dispelled. You even feel a little immortal through this tree that has survived so many of its descendants. There is no equivalent in the human species; no one lives to be proportionately as old as the four-thousand-year-old spruces of deepest Arizona.

Just as the dying are cryogenized in the expectation that they will be resuscitated when we have acquired the key to curing their illness, we should preserve major criminals in liquid nitrogen and revive them when we have discovered the secret of justice.

In a conference on humanism: the Westerners contest universal values, against a background of colonization and historical guilt. Only the black participants speak up for the values in whose name they were enslaved.

Colonial reason is whitewashed by the blacks.

When some dream only of transforming the world, others, regarding it as having disappeared, dream only of obliterating its traces.

The real considered as infantile disorder of the virtual.
Thought considered as infantile disorder of artificial intelligence.
The image considered as infantile disorder of representation.

Seeing Nanterre and the university again twenty years on. It's like revisiting the haunts of one's childhood. Everything seems smaller. *Les événements* too have shrunk away to nothing. The inspiration that had expanded these walls, the words that had transfigured this place have vanished. But the memory of the event is intact.

Die äussersten Dinge mit der äussersten Gelassenheit sagen: to say extreme things with extreme composure.

There is as little reason to speak of corruption in the political order as of perversion in the psychical order. Our entire mental universe may be said to be perverse: there are in it only defences and evasions, phantasms and duplicity, not to mention obsession and cruelty, *ressentiment* and the many different nuances of character. Everything about it is immoral. That is how it is, end of story. Any attempt at mental regulation is as pointless as the endeavour of moralizing the social world. The balance is always, as Mandeville rightly said, that of evil by evil.

Ideas do not give forth light and their light source is elsewhere.
But they have a shadow and that shadow moves with the sun.

Our idea is that pleasure – and freedom – are positive values and that they are to be preferred, even if they are inflicted on you. That is doubtless true in terms of a vulgar economy of happiness, but it is not at all true at the symbolic level. When Afghan women are forced to remove their veils 'spontaneously', that is a violation.

Giving pleasure forcibly is worse than taking it forcibly. Forcing someone to be free is worse than enslaving them. Naturally, this is not grasped in the simplistic vision of human rights.

Satan and witches. If they admit they are in league with him, then they are disobeying him (since he forbids them to admit to being witches) and they are spared. Those who protest their innocence are burned.

A bus driver who falsely claims to have been assaulted is found guilty of wasting police time. A police spokesman declares: 'We already have so many problems with genuine violent crime. What are things coming to if we have to deal with the fake kind?' It is for this reason that a fake hold-up was in the past punished more severely than a real one, for faking evil is even more serious than evil. The hoax is evil raised to the second power.

And faking good? Isn't a fake 'good deed' worse than a bad one?

'Being out of luck'. In French, we say '*jouer de malheur*': the accumulation of setbacks ends up becoming a game and imparting a different twist to ill fortune. You cannot say the same of good fortune: there is never an ironic twist to the excess of good fortune. One always thinks one deserves it.

Nothing stranger and more pathos-laden than the Sunday morning *Marché de la Création* on this Paris boulevard. A fine selection of kitsch and daubs, without exception, from the most abstract to the most academic. But the mystery remains because it is just as difficult to say in what way these are daubs and so many other paintings, in the private and public galleries, are 'masterpieces'. The Sunday artists exchange remarks about art that are just as senseless, though less pretentious, as those heard at the top private viewings. Where are the differentiating criteria? There is none that is objective. They are all criteria of legitimacy. One has to know how to infiltrate the subtle networks that secrete this principle of legitimacy.

The demarcation line of Art is as fierce as the demarcation line of power.

That everything exceptional is doomed to be destroyed derives from the symbolic rule that no player must be bigger than the game itself.

'The slavery of death is the root of all slavery,' says Canetti, 'and if it were not irremediable who would desire it?' An enigmatic proposition. Either: if it were possible to avoid it, no one would wish for death. Or: it is because that slavery is irremediable that so many people desire it.

Innocence, that mild form of mental deficiency, has the same aphrodisiac effect as softness of skin.

The existence of an artificial world at the very heart of reality poses no more problems than the existence of the real at the heart of an artificial universe. This is what the game show host in *The Truman Show* is saying: 'There

is no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you.' So, finally, the fact that our destiny is televisual ('We can't let him die in front of a live audience'; ' – He was born in front of a live audience') changes nothing. Everyone tends to take their environment, whatever it may be, for reality. And the more artificial it is, the more it transforms the belief in reality into a natural tendency.

A certain mix of dreams and insomnia, which may last for hours and stand in for sleep, while leaving the impression of a sleepless night.

Most often we dream in black and white and wake up in colour. Dreams are closer to early cinema (or early cinema is closer to dreams). Both are closer to the primal scene, the scene of light and shadows.

The tactile recollection of dreams: we no longer remember them, but we sense them as an object we might finger in the dark or as a vague, luminous, incomprehensible surface.

Thinking takes on first a conceptual, metaphorical form. Then a subjective, affective form. Then an animal, instinctive form. Then a reflex, automatic form. At that point, it is simply a function equivalent to the circulation of the blood and artificial respiration.

Writing is the living alternative to the worst of what it says.
There was a dramaturgy of art and language: transfiguring the real into

lyricism and violence, giving history a heroic, bloodstained ending. It seems today that art and language have the opposite function of making everything conform to ordinariness: without end and without resolution.

If the truth of what you say is in your actions, then better to give up speaking right away.

If the truth of what you think is in what you say, then better to give up thinking immediately.

If the truth of what you say is in what you don't say, then you might as well remain silent.

Saas Fee.

To live in such a place, you need an inner flame, such as Nietzsche had, a gigantic voltage differential between sublime nature and cerebral convolution. Time here is prodigiously slowed. Every second takes a minute, every minute an hour, every hour a century.

At the Happy Bar, the staff are all miserable. Even the cows howl despairingly in the fog. The village is deserted. It is raining. A single interesting figure: the whiteness of face, the hair so pale, the blue of the eyes – this Nordic type of negative beauty in which you can see the sun setting over the lakes of Finland in the faint stellar light of the wintry sky.

You can take a profound delight in horrendous things (World Trade Center) and not be happy to be so delighted. Others prefer to deny it, and take their delight without being aware of it.

'What is really happening – what I can never really see, or I will go mad – is that I am not the spider who weaves the web, and I am not even a fly

caught in the web. I am the web itself, streaming off in all directions with no centre and no self that I can call my own' (James Elkins).

Cancer is the epitome of all our pathologies: the subdivision of cells to infinity provides a reflection of the proliferation of everything, and of the species itself in its transgenic frenzy.

The worm that devours the parasite that enables it to digest, and dies of it. The crustacean that wanders beneath the sea until it finds a fixed point. Once secured to that spot, it devours its own brain, which is now useless since it served it only to find this landing place.

In this same way, we devour the Nothing that enables us to digest the world, and without which we cannot survive. But we cannot prevent ourselves from doing so – just as the scorpion cannot prevent itself from killing the frog that gets it across the river.

Heavenly bodies are irresponsible – who would hold it against them? Ultimate responsibility is light years away.

Contemporary art summed up by a London taxi driver outside Tate Modern: 'When you go in, you understand why it's free.'

The powerful of this world are gathered in Rome to sign a treaty 'that puts a final end to the Cold War'. In fact they do not know they are starting a new war, of which they are the first victims: they remained parked on the

tarmac, surrounded by armoured cars, barbed wire and helicopters – the whole panoply of this new cold war, the cold war of armed security, of perpetual deterrence and faceless terrorism. For the G8 at Alberta they did even better: they locked themselves away deep in a northern forest 150 kilometres from any inhabited area, in order to decide the fate of the world in all equanimity. One day they will choose to put themselves into orbit for greater security. And, later still, they will be forgotten: global power will be so distant that it will have become allegorical, as sidereal as the void that surrounds it.

Hell will be the perpetual duty of conviviality and communication: endlessly greeting people who recognize you and whom you don't recognize. The hell of the signs you no longer decipher and which you are forced to manipulate as in a dream. The hell of the ghostly ideas that signal to you from a very great distance and which you are no longer able to formulate. The hell of the words, names and faces you can't recall.

Impossible to imagine dying anywhere else than in the silence of the desert. Of all things, not to pass away amid sound and fury. To recover the only freedom, which is that of space and emptiness.

'*Die Menschen schreiben viel über das Wesen der Materie – ich wünschte, dass die Materie einmal anfänge, über das menschliche Gemüt zu schreiben.*'

'Human beings write a great deal about the essence of matter. It would be nice for matter to begin to write about the human mind' (Lichtenberg).

But isn't it already matter that writes us and thinks us – through the coming-to-pass of the world in its literalness?

Of multiple unfathomable coincidences or complicities, we say: 'It's too good to be true.' And we invoke the Unconscious. But the Unconscious itself is too good to be true. Behind all that might there not be some cruel divinity or some external fate? But we prefer the id and the drives that are the psychical reappropriation of these things. We prefer our perverse desires, our masochism and our death drive to the ill-will of the gods. If it isn't I, ego, then it's the id. If it isn't the id, it's its brother. That is always better than an external demon.

A. J. declares, in a pathos-laden flight of oratory: 'I believe in man, he is capable of anything!' Involuntary witticism: he believes he is saying man is capable of the best of things, but is he not with this same phrase saying that man is capable of the worst (though that is also just as valid a reason to believe in him)? Language retains something of the inextricable confusion of good and evil.

All imputations of nihilism and imposture originate in the same conspiracy as that of the imbeciles in the political sphere. It is in this way that imbecility flows through enlightened minds and the most open of them become the best vehicles for a stupidity that does not truly reflect who they are, but passes through them to strike elsewhere.

In the end, every molecule of the American nation will have come from somewhere else, the way a body changes cells without ceasing to be the same body. In this way America will have become black, Indian, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, without ceasing to be America. It will even be the more mythically American for no longer being so fundamentally. And all the more

fundamentalist for no longer having any fundament (if indeed it ever had any, since the founding fathers themselves came from elsewhere). And all the more integrist for having become multi-racial and multicultural. And all the more imperialist for being led by the descendants of slaves.

The homily of the *curé* of Leucate on this 16 June 2002: television and the media speak constantly of evil and misfortune; they are endlessly demonizing reality. Fortunately, Pope John Paul II beatifies with abandon: 1,941 beatifications during his papacy alone – more than all the other popes put together. And, in particular, he proclaims that we are all potential apostles, like Germaine, that humble servant of Cubrac, who lived in the early seventeenth century and whose body, rediscovered intact forty years after her death, performed miracles (though a century later, the revolutionaries threw it into quicklime) and who, in the end, became Saint Germaine of Cubrac. Like that simple soul, any of us may find apostolic glory. The apostles' privileges are at an end: anyone can have his fifteen minutes of apostolic fame.

Everything here – the wind, the sun, the beach, the cliffs of Vingrau, the île Sainte-Lucie, Pla de Fitou (the white ghost of the windmills), the marvels-of-Peru, the Cathar citadels – is always sublime, but it has no echo now. It is a living memory that is brilliantly exceptional, but unreally so.

The tiredness induced by a long walk expresses itself first in a trance-like state, where insidious, aggressive thoughts bubble up without your realizing it, then in mild hallucinations, before ending in euphoric confusion.

The hypochondriacal obsession. Once all protection is secured, it is from the inside that the body is overexposed to all assaults and disruptions. Against the disorders that ensue there is only the character armour, which does not even allow the signals from the body to show through.

Wariness of one's nearest and dearest, as though they were potential witnesses for the prosecution in your existence, evidence of guilt in a trial that is permanently suspended.

The panda that is having trouble reproducing: they show him porn films to rouse his libido.

For the Japanese, the most commonplace individual and the most mundane object are both singular, even in their repetition. The problem is not to be different. For us, by contrast, that is an obligation. But there isn't difference for everyone, just as there isn't a meaning for every word (the characteristic of meaning is that not everything has it). This is how everyone ends up alone, dispossessed of both their singularity and their difference.

Intelligence is analysing things as they are.
Imagination is conceiving them as they could be.
Morality is conceiving them as they should be.
Magic is making them occur the way you conceive them.

There is no longer any interest in the mental hygiene of killers. Today we have only the mental hygiene of the victim, and the art of using one's own misfortune as a credit card.

Chirac (his puppet) interviewed on Canal Plus on *Les Guignols*,[9] then immediately afterwards on TF1 by the same presenter. In this way you can go from the false to the true simply by changing channel.

You can go from Good to Evil simply by changing scale.

You can go from the sublime to the banal by changing the lighting.

You can go from life to death without noticing.

The Meaning of Existence.

Two journalists set off to track down the Meaning of Existence throughout the world, wherever it has been sighted. Suddenly they see it loom up in the form of a very beautiful woman who boards the Orient Express and comes to sit at their table. Can you imagine that? Dining with the meaning of existence! A marvellous allegory: the meaning of existence there in flesh and blood! The ideal would clearly be to sleep with her, and they hope she is going to join them for the night. But the bitch prefers to take off with the guard. They meet up with her again at Delphi, this time in the guise of the Pythia, with the crowd of tourists who, fascinated by the Meaning of Existence and transfigured by Self-Knowledge, throw themselves off the rock into the abyss.

In the end, she simply vanishes: she was nothing but a ghost and seductress. But from time to time, here and there (for she is still at large), she signals her presence to a privileged few.

Fruttero (this fable is by Fruttero and Lucentini) recently put an end to his pursuit of the meaning of existence by throwing himself, like all the tourists dazzled by self-knowledge, down the lift shaft.

Paris-Plage: the operation would be perfect if an oil slick drifted in to pollute this pretty little beach. Then the illusion would be total: the beach

attendants would be transformed into ecological clean-up agents; they would have stopped sunbathing stupid.

WTC: no trace of the bodies of the 3,000 victims. It's as though they had been dropped into quicklime. All the images without the sound, silent, vitrified, pellicularized. The scrap metal and the rubble are auctioned off. The event has more or less vanished into thin air.

The pope has reached the state of 'martyr', that is to say, of witness: witness to the possibility that the human race can live beyond death. Living experience of brain-death, of spirituality on a life-support system, of automatic piloting of the vital functions in their death throes.

A great model for future generations.

Gregory of Nyssa: 'The audacious demand of the soul is to take its pleasure face-to-face. The voice of God grants what is requested by what it refuses. God would not have shown Himself if the sight of Him were such as to arrest the desire of the seer. Therein consists the true vision of God'.

The audacious demand of man is to take his pleasure body-to-body. Woman grants what is requested only by what she refuses. She would not give herself if man's enjoyment were to be such that she would have arrested his desire. Therein consists the 'true vision of woman.'

When he has cured the patient, it is the shaman who must give something in exchange. Having made good the body, he must make good the debt.

Or the Japanese story of the woman who lets the girl drown because,

she says, if she saves her life, the child will owe her such an obligation it will be unbearable.

Our entire psychology fails before these ancestral rules.

Already God existed only in the desperate attempt to prove his existence. It is the same today with human beings, whose existence we attempt desperately to verify by the very means that make it improbable.

Feminism, populism, humanism: all words with the suffix '-ism' are the caricature of their root. Of women, of the people, of the human. Including terrorism: the caricature of terror?

In the past, the British ensured their hold on the whole of East Africa by way of their 'crusade' to abolish slavery, breaking up traditional society by emancipating the slaves (*Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar*).[10] Everywhere today we see the same crusade against wrongdoers, infidels, renegades against the gospel of modernity. Emancipation from the veil, sexual emancipation and the emancipation of trade are the drip-feed of global domination.

The global power's domination of the rest of the world mirrors the hegemony of the human race over other living creatures. Now, it is not clear how this 'superiority' of the human species over all the others would be given up.

Indifference to politics is said to be due to the disintegration of the social bond. In fact, it is quite the opposite. It is the wide scope for action within

civil society and the intensification of communication networks – together with the promotion of a freedom whose perpetual benefits we enjoy, but of which we no longer have the concept – that create the absenteeism from oneself and from others of which political absenteeism is merely a symptom.

Lévi-Strauss used to talk about the '*signifiant flottant*', the 'floating signifier' of language. We might speak today of the '*insignifiant flottant*', the floating in-signifier of politics: mass political indifference – not even protest, but refractoriness. And what it refracts is the hidden side of politics, the side that eludes the artificial light of the electoral system.

He suddenly felt a pain that was as violent as if it were real.

Existence, similar to the stucco angel whose extremities meet in a curved mirror, comes back, almost by necessity, to a state of radicality and silence. The ideal existence is the one that lasts long enough to come back to this point of origin.

Those who forge straight ahead will never know where they have come from.

Strange disappearance of the idea of solitude, of the pathos of solitude. No one speaks of it any more, no one feels it any more. There is today only psychical isolation, mental, sensory insulation. Everyone is deterritorialized, or rather extra-territorialized from inside. The melancholy tone has disappeared.

Isolation and insularity are states of fact. Solitude was a state of mind.

The gripping narrative, minute by minute, of the people trapped in the upper storeys of the World Trade Center – thanks to the mobile phone, which became the means of communication with the dead. As gripping as the televisual collapse of the Twin Towers. If the images fulfilled the desire to enjoy the spectacle of the catastrophe live, from the outside, these real-life echoes of certain death correspond to a different phantasm: that of having lived that indescribable death from the inside – the illusion of experiencing the event to the end, from the inside, intensifying the sense of good fortune at having escaped it.

But this transfiguration is never perfect: one would have had to have died there oneself. Unlike Auschwitz, of which it has been said that the only true witnesses were those who did not return and hence have never spoken of it, in this case those who were stuck up there had the time to speak from the interior of death.

We ask computers to become intelligent or, in other words, conscious of their operation. Yet what is the consciousness of a machine but the pale allegory of the will of its programmers? (The same has been said of God and his creature: what is the consciousness of man but the pale reflection of the will of his creator?)

But haven't human beings had enough of their own consciousness anyway? Why deck machines out with it? Except to be rid of it? Passing consciousness and intelligence on to machines so as to be rid both of machines and intelligence.

'Shalmaneser', the supercomputer of *Stand on Zanzibar* doesn't need a consciousness as added extra.[11] It has its own form of jubilation and operates without thinking. To rig it out with a consciousness is to push it to suicide: it can no longer even see itself as a machine.

A mad idea is to manipulate apes genetically to the point where they conceive the idea of suicide, which was previously the prerogative of human beings. The ape is developed to the point where it prefers to kill itself because it can no longer even see itself as an ape.

This is what human beings are currently testing out on themselves by carrying themselves beyond their specific sphere, where they, like the ape, will be left with only the solution of suicide, and for the same reason: because they will no longer be able to see themselves as human beings.

Remove a single variable, to see the effect this change has on the interaction between all the variables. Remove a value, a single one, from the value system. Remove the words from language one by one: a mental technique, that of the Messianic International. Remove a tower block or two from the global landscape. To see.

The generations steeped in the virtual will never have known the Real. But that is not so serious if we accept that the Real is merely a referential illusion. More serious is the case of those who, steeped in sex and images of sex, will never have known pleasure. But this is nothing in relation to the possibility, for future generations, of never knowing death.

With so many spectacles, festivals, symposiums, art fairs and book fairs, the desire for a sudden cultural recession, or at least for a period of latency, for long enough to recover the savour of a book or the silence of images.

Zero (degree zero, zero risk, Ground Zero, zero deaths) is the current form of perfection, empty, sterile and faultless. It is the nil-sum equation,

defined by the elimination of all variables. In this sense, there is no longer any difference between the perfection of life and that of death.

That nothing as extraordinary as September 11th can happen for a very long time gives us a certain sense of immortality. It will stand in as a future for us – for a time.

'*Was daraus kommt, wie von Gottes Wink, das wissen wir nicht*' (Hölderlin).

'What will come of it, as if by a sign from God, we know not.'

You can't ask someone who has himself become an icon for a solution to the problem of the image.

Does the power of anti-matter come from its being able to annihilate matter while obeying the same laws, or does it not in fact obey the same laws at all?

Does any opposing power enter into the same game as the order it destabilizes or does it destabilize it by changing the rules of the game?

Relatively speaking, September 11th will have had the same impact as the asteroid 65 million years ago, following which a kind of nuclear winter spread over the planet, causing innumerable species to disappear, but also new ones to emerge. Unfortunately, the latter were most often smaller in scale and it can hardly be otherwise with the human race and social groups. What lies in wait for us, then, in this sort of anthropological winter, is the rarefaction of forms, favouring a proliferation of elementary organisms.

The little orange, trapezoidal, translucent sail on the river, the boatmen keeping their balance. Further on, the bride in her palanquin, and the husband on horseback ahead of her. A whole parade of luminous figures. In fact, what we have here is a fake traditional Korean wedding and a TV shoot. But whether or not the ritual is authentic, there is the same racial beauty in all the faces.

The Diagonal of the Madman,
The Parallax of Evil,
The Ecliptic of Sex,
The Hypotenuse of Death.

Given the low likelihood of a meeting in this life or a future existence, the only hope is for a meeting in a previous life.

The illusion of travel is that things seem more singular as they move away from their centre of gravity. But that illusion is precious.

Overflying the deserts of Siberia. Through the mist acting like frosted glass, the sun picks out the circumvolutions of countless rivers as though with a fine paintbrush. The snakelike lines of the tiniest streams, stretching over hundreds of miles. The smallest liquid surface is a transparency viewer.

The temptation to fulfil all desires was, in the past, that of evil; temptation by the devil. Today it is good which presides over that fulfilment, but it

is no longer the fulfilment of a desire or an impulse of our own. We no longer aspire to anything; we are aspirated, sucked up, by the void.

The logic of distinction is, ultimately, a precious vestige of the bygone time of signs and sign-value, the loss of which, though imperceptible in the equivalence of images, is even more serious than the loss of the real.

Prestige, challenge, rivalry, privileges – it was, at bottom, the golden age of symbolic violence, the only antidote to democratic erosion and the great game of equality of opportunity. It is doubtless as absurd to wish to eliminate that violence as any other.

Is it better to stop the haemorrhage and live in a state of perpetual transfusion?

Dreaming that he is awarded a literary prize and sells a hundred thousand copies of his book, Italo Svevo adds that naturally something which can be imagined with such exactness does not actually need to happen.

A crazy scene.

Glass-fronted terrace at pavement level, Montparnasse.

A homeless man turns up, balancing on his crutches, with one foot in plaster. Suddenly he throws one of his crutches down on the pavement. In full view, as though he had dropped it. And he waits. Not for long. Immediately a charitable person rushes to pick it up and give it back to him. It is then that he rejects it, sniggering, deriding the benefactor with an obscene gesture. Difficult to convey the violence of the scene, which lasts for half an hour. If they put the crutch next to him on the table, he knocks it off with the back of his hand and waits for the next fall-guy to come along.

The passers-by have varied reactions to the insult. They are stupefied – some mortified, others almost embarrassed by this act of conventional charity, all shocked by the merry cynicism with which he re-sets his trap, awaiting his next victim.

When he has had enough, he picks up his crutch and wanders off unconcerned. Where will he end the night? Was it a performance (a candid camera stunt)? But no: he really looked like a refugee from the *Threepenny Opera* and there was no air of modish provocation about him. His mockery was much too straightforward and fierce. Participation assured, total contempt.

A Buñuel-style act, an act of barbarous, calculated innocence. Calling to mind that story of Dostoevsky telling Turgenev that he once raped a little girl. 'Why are you telling me this?' asks Turgenev. 'Because I despise you . . .'

Once the analysis of causes is complete, everything is as it was: the pain, the disillusionment, the desire . . . In fact, causes are merely a diversion, effects have not the slightest interest in them.

A recent documentary supposing that the first pictures taken on the moon in 1969 were in reality filmed – by Stanley Kubrick – some time before in a studio near London.[12] Opprobrium rains down on the media: this is morally unacceptable! You have no right to toy with reality in this way, especially now that it has become part of world heritage. An offence against reality is worse than offending against public decency.

Yet that version, even if objectively false, is much closer to a truth than if it were authentic. It keeps us alert to the truthfulness of all the 'facts' we are presented with.

It is entirely as though God had abandoned all responsibility for the world he created, and which he is resolved now merely to watch as a disgusted spectator.

He is, ultimately, no longer anything but the expression of our resignation at this unacceptable world.

Borges: 'Nazism suffers from unreality, like Erigena's hells. It is uninhabitable; men can only die for it, lie for it, kill and wound for it. No one, in the intimate depths of his being, can wish it to triumph. I shall hazard this conjecture: Hitler wants to be defeated. Hitler is collaborating blindly with the inevitable armies that will annihilate him . . .'[13]

This applies word for word to global, comfortable, imperial civilization. In the central solitude of those very people who profit by it, it is unliveable. And all are secretly won over to the forces that will destroy it.

At the Commission of Special Dispensations and Silence.
At the Bureau of Protests and Desires.

Isabelle arrives on the TV set with a deep plunging neckline to condemn the prostitution of the female body in advertising and pornography. And why not? There is no contradiction in a *chienne de garde*[14] making herself seductive and sensual.

The hypocrisy is in the confusion of the iconic woman with the real one. Isabelle, the *chienne*, with her transparent *crêpe de velours* and her plunging neckline, is very real, though she advances behind a veil.[15] It is only in unveiling her ideology that she prostitutes herself.

Astrophysicists, microphysicists, stop harassing matter and making it confess to anything in the name of gratuitous hypotheses. Close your eyes to the cosmos, in the same way as the anthropologists, seized with remorse, have already done to the indigenous tribes lost for centuries in the depths of the jungle.

For people of a certain age in this country, culture comes free of charge. It is thought they are too old to misuse it.

The prostitution of the male body in fashion puts an end to the last heroic privilege of woman – that of being sacrificed to the gaze while concealing herself, precisely thereby, in a second nudity.

A fantastic advance by women on the path to total parity: no limits to sexual equality any longer. You can see this too in the picture of the young American woman turned torturer in the jails of Iraq, holding the naked or hooded Arab on a leash, as in some Western, women-only club.

Advancement is irresistible. It happens for better and for worse.

Parallax. *In astronomy*: the difference between the real position of a star and its apparent position, and the angle between the two. And hence also the incidence of the change of position of the observer on the observation of an object.

In photography: viewfinder parallax, the photographed image being offset from the object in the viewfinder. The discrepancy is not purely a technical one. It is, for the object, a product of the very fact of being photographed.

An object so uneven and unbalanced from inside that it cannot even stand up against a wall. It has no vertical to the ground or centre of gravity. So it thwarts all forms of stability.

I am speaking, of course, of a theoretical object.

Death is only ever that free future we dream of when we put off everything and consign all things to their future occurrence.

Objectively, the world is an illusion: it can only appear to us. Subjectively, it is the opposite: we regard it spontaneously as real.

But one may propose the opposite: subjectively, the world is an illusion of our senses. Objectively, it has force of reality.

Asymptote, clinamen, parallax, metalepsis – these are dance patterns, this is a whole non-linear geometry of theoretical space.

Patterns of near-contact and reversal, of approaching the truth without ever succumbing to it.

The cultural greenhouse effect: the toxic cloud caused by emissions from millions of museums, galleries, festivals, conferences and symposiums is much more catastrophic than the disappearance of the ozone layer. The asphyxia caused by the activity of thousands of creative brains damages the quality of life more certainly than all the world's industrial pollution.

And if no Tokyo Congress has yet managed to control technological pollution, what body could put a brake on cultural nuisance?

Language is expatriating itself into words that are afraid to mean anything.

We can bear ideas and events only when laundered by commentary, like the dirty money concealed by banking secrecy.

'In the heart and the belly it continues to sing its poisonous song – Better to kill a child than to harbour unsatisfied desires within oneself' (Kenzaburo Oe).

Ressentiment is an empty, useless passion only if it assumes a sentimental form.

What establishes the rule, and confirms it, is the exception. So we may conceive of a rule made up only of exceptions (that, says Lichtenberg, is the ideal rule).

But that is true only of moral and grammatical rules. There is no exception to the symbolic rule.

The tragedy of insomniacs is that they no longer even have the possibility of dreaming of reality – like S. J. Lec – or, therefore, of knowing the relief of escaping from it by waking.

Someone who had slipped entirely from my memory turns up fifty years later. It is like a line drawn between two lives, a shuttle movement of time's

arrow. Everything in-between seems to have happened in the twinkling of an eye.

According to a statistical study, fifty per cent of statistics are wrong. So, if this statistic is itself fifty per cent wrong, does this mean that only twenty-five per cent of statistics are wrong or that twenty-five per cent are correct? This is how it is with calculations embedded within others and, more generally, with calculations of probability, from which all logical distinction has disappeared.

There is something worse than being unmasked: not being unmasked.

Thus the crime will have kept on leaving clues, and illusion itself cannot bear to remain illusion. It is constantly prostituting itself to the world and actualizing itself in full view.

Thinking is as difficult as walking in the snow without leaving tracks. Or else you have to go back over your tracks step by step, like the child in *The Shining*, pursued by his father in the labyrinth of ice.

Political power exists only because we want absolutely none of it. And the political sphere is there only to mask this defection on our part by a *trompe-l'oeil* system of representation.

But life, such as it is, we want too. And force, potency. That too we want, irresistibly. But perhaps less deeply than we want its opposite.

Unconditional praise of life and happiness. *Existenz über alles!*

This fierce optimism, this idealism, which sees the worst catastrophes, the worst corruption as having a right to claim mitigating circumstances.

The critical spirit is not dead, contrary to the opinion of the Enlightenment nostalgics. It has simply metabolized into all the ironic procedures, all the sardonic artifices in which we play, smugly, on our own incredulity. 'The Last Man, talking to himself while shaking his head incredulously,' said Nietzsche.

Excess today, our contemporary '*hubris*', is the excess of universal hybridization – like the fluorescent rabbit that is a cross between a rabbit and an octopus – and of making everything copulate with itself like the *crepidula fornicata.*[16]

All this televisual conditioning: make-up, spotlights, image-feed, monitors . . . anguish. Never any silence, any slip-ups or sighs. You switch on your tele-prompter and set yourself to automatic pilot. The studio lights and the night in your head.

Exactly the opposite of the night hours when ideas are close to waking dreams.

War means destroying the enemy's quality of light.

Who would come and sit next to you in a near-empty cinema, except someone with criminal intent?

Transsexuality: what was a psychotic hallucination has become one of our human rights. Might it not rather be human rights that have become a psychotic hallucination?

Silicon breasts, which never subside, even when horizontal.
Silicon thought, the sort that never gets flabby and that stands up on its own in any context.

The lesson to be drawn from X's fatal fall after leaving a moronic show: only go to shows where you would not mind dying immediately after seeing them.

One cannot reasonably trust in the will, that 'rational' strategy that works only one time in ten. One has, rather, to clear the decks around a decision, leave it hanging, then let oneself slide into it, as though being sucked in, with no thought for causes and effects. To be willed by the decision itself; in a sense, to give in to it. The decision then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

They estimate that it cost 25 million dollars to prepare the World Trade Center attack. The budget for a future film of the same event is put at 250 million dollars.
Fiction is far more expensive than reality.

Choose: of all wars, the one that will not take place.
Of all possibilities, the least probable.

Of all concepts, the most inconceivable.
Of all meditations, the most untimely.
Of all possible enemies, the one beneath all suspicion.

The noise of the paint cracking, at night, along the walls.
The silence of the dust, rippling and slithering from one wall to the next.
The cry of the mirror when the impact of the image strikes.

The language of the weather forecast is as rigged as that of politics. Distilled panic, blackmailing with safety . . . 'The elements are raging' (no, it is the safety measures that are raging). 'The snow is late'!

Prevention, contraception, forceps, abortion, miscarriage, phantom pregnancy, cloning and twinning – the paradigm of obstetrics and gynaecology is present everywhere in current events.

Blanchot is dead and the homages are raining in.[17]

He will have lost his gamble of effacing effacement, and his proselytes and commentators will, in the very glorification of silence, have missed a fine opportunity to be silent. He could not have been unaware, himself, that his self-effacement made him an object of insatiable curiosity (of an ironic kind, of course!), a thwarted great game, the absolute snobbery of absence.

Ultimately, though, Blanchot (like Duchamp) is the original and all the rest is a joke. All this subtle, non-academic philosophy, imbued with his ideas, all this philosophically correct philosophy of the unsaid, the forbidden

and the inexpressible in the end merely reaps the dividends of an experience of thought that is not its own.

Moreover, there is no need whatever to be a philosopher to play that particular game (self-effacement). Everyone effaces himself but no one speaks about it. The entire history of ordinary life is one of an effacement much more radical than that of thought yearning to disappear.

Simple folk, the uneducated, the artless *are* the thought of Blanchot. *They* have succeeded in effacing effacement. The philosophical exigency is embodied in those who know nothing of it.

Being secondarily pessimistic – believing that the good always ends up going bad. And secondarily optimistic – believing that the system is best placed to put an end to itself.

After the three great revolutions – Galileo and the end of geocentrism, Darwin and the theory of evolution, Freud and the 'discovery' of the Unconscious – our contemporary revolution is that of the virtual and of information technology, and it distances man increasingly from sovereignty over the natural world, of which he was the centre in the days when the earth did not yet revolve around the sun, in the days when he was not yet descended from the apes. He is becoming increasingly eccentric today – a peripheral, artificial extension of his own model.

The modern form of negative theology: reality can be defined only by what it is not, and what it is not is precisely *the world as it is*, which is not in any sense the real world.

There are many ways of being witty and intelligent – almost as many as of not being. They are often the same.

Like free electrons on the planet of the apes, with a time window on to a parallel universe.

The only solution to the mechanization of man is *le devenir-machine*: becoming-machine. Warhol had seen this. He was the apotheosis of the machinic: total automatism, all trace of the human gone.

The dream of the virtual era, by contrast, is to wrest the machine from machinicity, to make it intelligent and soulful, 'interactive', to turn it into an associate 'anthropoid' with the same affective and intellectual, sexual and reproductive functions – and, lastly, the same viruses and melancholia.

Beyond a certain speed, a body no longer seems to be propelled, but rather sucked along by the void. A fine metaphor for desire and seduction: desire is a drive, seduction is a strange attraction.

The trout ascending the waterfall does not do so by sheer effort. It does not battle against the flow. The water hurtling down in free fall creates, at the heart of the swirling waters, a suction pulling in the opposite direction. The trout seeks out this ascending flow and lets itself be carried upwards.

Intertwined spiral of life and death – much more difficult to decipher than the spiral of DNA.

'In short, gentlemen, we are all hermaphrodites, divided animals, as much in our being as in our knowledge and our principles' (Siegfried Lenz).

In the cinema studios in Vancouver, it is specified contractually that no one must look the stars in the eyes, 'for fear of disturbing them or breaking their concentration'.

The most perfect synthesis of theory and practice is the vanishing of thought into the actual course of the world.

'These thoughtless men who love life and do not see that their mistress cheats on them every day with death' (Schnitzler).

All these dreams of helplessness, distress, of forking paths, of being locked up miles from anywhere, all these confused, indescribable episodes, are expressions of the fact that one is coming close to a secret zone, an impassable line – not at all, as the conventional interpretation has it, the bar of repression, but something more subtle of which *we* are the repressed.

Right across the species, everything must be stored away and put under seal – including the famous genome – doubtless for the use of a later race, who will exploit it as fossil material. We shall ourselves, by the combined pressure of the mass of computer data and the continental drift, be transformed into a metamorphic deposit (the Unconscious already seems like a psychical residue of the Carboniferous). Right now, one has the impression

the human race is merely turning in on itself and its origins, desperately gathering together its distress flares and dematerializing to transform itself into a message.

But a message to whom?

Everyone is looking for a safe area, some form of permanent plot that can eclipse existence as a primary abode and protect us from death.

The unfortunate thing is there aren't even any plots held in perpetuity in the cemeteries any more.

Double blindness: deluding oneself with the hope that Le Pen will disappear – in the illusory belief of recovering an elusive democracy – and not seeing that Le Pen is, in himself, of no importance.

Yet the problem he poses is all the more important for that. For, if it is true that he represents nothing (he is not alone in that!), he thereby personifies all those who no longer even have the idea of being represented, who can no longer even imagine any kind of political order whatever.

Now, there can no longer be any question of 'refounding politics' on those ruins, those vestiges of representation. We must go to the very end of politics, even in its most regrettable consequences for 'the social order'. The political class, both Left and Right, is incapable of doing this – incapable of managing the accursed share that is at the heart of the social.

The truth is that the only current political message comes from beyond the political sphere, whoever the messenger.

To be operational, you have to have put all useless complexity out of action. You have to have determinedly simplified your mental functioning. It

is in this way that you respond best to an environment that is itself simplified and operational, where the mirror has been turned into a phase, pleasure into a principle and death into a drive.

After centuries of veiled seduction and concealment of the body, the overexposure of sex and nudity merely gives the illusion there was a secret there and it has been unmasked.

It is like truth, which one deludes oneself one discovers, whereas it is thought itself that produces truth as its justificatory horizon.

He who has everything will keep what he has. From him who has nothing, even that will be taken away.

Philosophy leads to death, sociology leads to suicide.

Shrivelled anus, short-windedness, limp member, short-sightedness, angioplastied ventricle, urethral polyps – but a clear, hard head.

Best joke of the Iraq war: it wasn't Saddam's statue they knocked down, but his double's! It wasn't the war that was won either, but the ghost of a war. Saddam disappears behind his many doubles – the war disappears behind the signs of war.

The car transforms everyone into a potential delinquent, but at the same time into a potential cop. The car awakens in each of us the slumbering killer and the sleeping policeman.

The worst thing is when each citizen begins to be his own policeman. If there are vigilantes, surely it's to rid us of vigilance?

2001: A Species Odyssey

The absurdity of all these paleontological productions in which everything is directed towards man as the goal. A chimpanzee always looks as though it's an extra in an animal costume (it is, in fact, here a man dressed up as an anthropoid). As Napoleon showed through beneath Bonaparte, so *Homo sapiens* showed through beneath the coelacanth. And our successive ancestors have, ultimately, no other quality than having played their part in our definitive advent. Whilst, with Darwinian theory, man found himself annexed to animality, in this restitution, by contrast, the entire animal chain finds itself annexed to the human by a kind of reverse evolutionism. Reconquest of the origins of man in the light of his ultimate domination.

The illusion still holds for the most distant forms, for animals are increasingly fascinating as one plunges into the immemorial past: like the dinosaurs, they tip over into pure mythology. Things go wrong when, over time, the saga becomes a 'realist' animation, a soap opera in which the racism of the victors shines out retrospectively. As, for example, in the marvellous encounter in which the hairy Neanderthal primate is overwhelmed by the Cro-Magnon showgirls who, make-up and all, already have the Hollywoodian features of the higher race.

'But you're not free to prefer an inferior cultural stage. Every culture has to keep pace with the general trend,' says the Empire's emissary to the dissidents of Williamson's world (Philip K. Dick).[18] And he is indeed right to destroy this civilization, which has chosen to develop as a craft-based society rather than conform to the technical norms of the global order. For

the slightest exception, even inoffensive, is a heresy and a mortal threat to the whole. Once the system has applied that law to itself, it cannot but impose it on the others.

One exception: the tribe in the Philippines that the anthropologists decided not to study so as not to alter its structure. A relinquishment of the right to draw up the universal inventory, but one that in no way challenges the privilege of the dominant culture: the natives will live in a state of artificial survival from now on within the museum-like frame of universal culture. They will serve as living fossils.

Cloning must be sacrilege to the doctrines of metempsychosis, as it interrupts the sequence of reincarnations and the migration of souls. But it is also sacrilegious where the laws of evolution are concerned, since it is tantamount to an unlimited perpetuation of the species.

In the body, a will to help begins to form. It is the body that chooses, among the innumerable pathogenic elements at its disposal, the illness that will purify you by diet and fever.

The inaugural artwork on the square in front of the Basel Art Fair: a mirror cube, in the middle of which a man is defecating. It's a two-way mirror. He can see the people around him, but they can't see him. The opposite of the peep-show: the exhibitionist hides from view and it's the spectators who are watched. The perfect image of contemporary art.

You want to turn the situation around, as is always the case with looking. You want to look intensely from outside, and hence without seeing, at the centre of the cube, where the defecator is sitting. He would see you

watching him and, while knowing you can't see him, I'm sure he could not bear that gaze.

The same potential for turning things round in a peep-show. If the girl set about staring at the voyeur through the window, he is the one who would suddenly feel undressed.

In Arthur C. Clarke's short story, the stars go out one by one as soon as all the names of God are counted. Isn't this the same operation of digitization of the universe that the whole world's computers have undertaken, this time on their own account, with no regard for God? And must we not expect to see the same extinction of the world at the end of this integral calculus of reality?

Leucate. New homily on the Covenant.

First act: Moses sprinkles his people with the blood of three young bulls.

Then, at the Passover, Christ says to the Jews: 'Eat, this is my body. Drink, this is my blood'! (The Jews are taken aback by this: we are not cannibals!)

Lastly, to crown the triptych, it is Christ who sacrifices himself.

But, according to the good *curé*, we should not believe this sacrifice frees us from original sin (yet that is what the worshippers secretly believe).

Silent, rural horror of those same worshippers (who stand up, sing and cross themselves like mechanical birds) at the mention of the sacramental.

The idea that the Mass is a sacrament in which the Lord's sacrifice is renewed is like water off a duck's back to them. They come every Sunday to absolve themselves of their everyday existence, and that is the whole of their liturgy.

As for the *curé*, I've never seen him succumb to routine. He even seems

at one point to take himself for Moses, when lamenting that holy water has been substituted for bulls' blood.

The Christ of Lagrasse: lascivious death throes.

When you have spent a day in Weimar, you really can say you have spent a day in Weimar. And that isn't the case in any old town. Here time really unfolds, no one second being in any hurry to get ahead of another.

Moreover, you are protected by a chorus of tutelary divinities (Goethe, Luther, Nietzsche and the others), which lend each minute an eternal dimension.

You dream of Wolfgang sending Charlotte the lover's message of a lighted candle from across the town, and Friedrich sending that of the Eternal Return.

Here, becoming is itself stilled.

The obsessive dividing up of time: the infinitesimal splitting that enables Achilles never to reach the tortoise – and hence to dodge any final term, including that of death. The more imminent it is, the more the intervening period of time is subdivided. There is still one day, one hour, one minute, one second. Each second passes, but the next one is never certain. Time tightens and condenses to the point where it no longer lets time pass. A substance so intense, so dense, that the future will not be able to pass through it. A well-counted hour will go on being counted out forever. In the film of time, this is the insane hope of a freeze-frame. And our passion for artificial image techniques no doubt derives from the fact that we can suspend the image, reverse its course or speed it up. We dream of doing the same with time (and with dreams too).

It is the same with endings as it is with death – the dream is never to arrive at them, and simultaneously to pass beyond.

'Each of the moments separating me from the ordeal seemed infinitely divisible – the particle of time to come being always the one that would enable me at last to face reality and concentrate' (Updike).

Another miracle of division: given that life expectancy is constantly increasing, we gain time against the final reckoning as we go on. Thanks to the indefinite interval involved, and applying the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise, we shall never catch up with death.

We have become virtually immortal.

Every day we lose three minutes of sunshine, but at the same time a fraction of our existences and our responsibility. Yet each day characterized by a diminution of responsibility is a red-letter day.

How things change: the South African cactus used by the Bantu in their desert to fend off hunger and thirst has nowadays become a miracle obesity cure in the USA.

The man buried with his uranium battery digital watch.

This way he will know in death precisely what time it is to one-thousandth of a second.

In that labyrinth of signage that is an airport, modern man rediscovers the anxiety of prehistoric man in the jungle.

Not understanding out of impatience to understand, out of a rushing towards meaning – like stammerers with words. Out of a rushing towards the other, whose presence clouds the issue – it is the same turmoil as when one is photographing a living creature.

Being equal to the circumstances is difficult when the circumstances are at their lowest point.
But they are never up to the mark.

The two Siamese twin sisters, joined at the cranium, but with two separate brains and hence two distinct wills. For twenty-three years they were never able to look each other in the eye. They died after the operation.

For attempting to have sexual relations with an elephant, Tram Chung Song, who had said in his defence that the elephant had suddenly seemed to him like a reincarnation of his wife, was taken at his word by the judges and sentenced to seventeen years' imprisonment – the usual sentence for marital rape.

The subject who takes himself for what he is is mad. But if he senses that he is not really what he is, then he can use that identification as a mask. This is the way it is with truth too: if you claim to possess it, you are mad. But if you know it doesn't exist, then you can make use of all the signs of truth.

'*Versuchen wir den Spiegel zu betrachten, so entdecken wir endlich nichts als die Dinge auf ihn. Wollen wir die Dinge fassen, so kommen wir zuletzt wieder auf nichts als auf den Spiegel. Das ist die allgemeine Geschichte der Erkenntnis*' (Nietzsche, *Morgenröte*).

'When we try to examine the mirror in itself we discover in the end nothing but things upon it. If we want to grasp the things we finally get hold of nothing but the mirror. – This, in the most general terms, is the history of knowledge.'[19]

'Whoever has a will of their own to invest in things will not be mastered by things; in the end, even chance events arrange themselves to meet our most personal needs. I am often surprised to see how little power even what is seemingly the most unfavourable destiny has over a will! Or, rather, I say to myself: how necessary it is for the will itself to be a destiny for it always to get the better of destiny itself' (Nietzsche).

Only metaphysical passion can compete with seduction. The one fights against the illusion of an objective reality, the other against the subjective illusion of desire.

The worst thing being to turn desire into a reality.

To consider everything from its dead angle, its blind spot: the place accidents come from.

The cyclists you pass in the forest do not respond to your gestures of friendship. The reason is that, in addition to being a cyclist, you have to look

like one, you have to give off the signs of cycleity (O, Roland!): the helmet, the mask, the fluorescent cycling gear, the low-slung body position. Shame on those who give off only the signs of tiredness. But doubtless they don't even see you – being overtaken, as they ride, by *rigor mortis* and pedalling all the more stubbornly for it.

Exactly as the stars in the sky in Arthur C. Clarke's story, so the stars in one's brain go out one by one, once all the data have been stored. But perhaps this descent into the zone of silence and catalepsy is a defensive reaction against the excess of an artificial memory?

The Other should be a glorious, not a pitiful Other, an object of admiration not of commiseration, the object of a challenge, not that interactive, democratic Other which is not even really your equal.

The Other exists more intensely in the dual relation, in rivalry and challenge, than in interaction, conviviality and cosy multiculturalism.

Two lovers wish to give each other a present. But neither can afford to. She sacrifices her splendid head of brown hair to give him a platinum watch-strap. And he chooses to sell his watch to give her a box of tortoise-shell combs for her hair.

Isn't the heatwave a form of insurrection on the part of the climate itself? It can no longer bear being meteorologized, any more than the elements can bear being martyred or animals being industrialized or human life itself being programmed and normalized. Hence the revenge of bird 'flu, mad

cow disease, extreme climatic effects and of human existence pushed to its limits. The aged themselves are finding a way of taking their revenge by using their deaths as a politically destabilizing factor – the only event of an unspectacular summer.[20]

Fowl pest, mad cow disease, SARS, the New York blackout, the oil slick, the heatwave – so many abnormal events, so many 'terrorist' phenomena.

It is order itself that forces us to conceive terrorism as something unlimited, since any infringement of order is condemned as such. Even natural convulsions and catastrophes are 'terrorist' in nature. What was merely a physical phenomenon has become a violation of the global order.

Against the advice of doctors, the governor refuses to allow an incurably ill man to be put out of his misery. This is the other face of capital punishment. One day we shall have to fight for the abolition of the life penalty, as we did in the past for the abolition of the death penalty.

Shadows have always preceded us, and they will outlive us. We were dead before we were alive, and we shall be again.

Glory and Performance.

Seen from America and by American intellectuals (Susan Sontag), the denial of reality in European cultures, and particularly in French theory, is merely 'metaphysical' pique at no longer being master of that reality, and the – at once arrogant and ironic – manifestation of that powerlessness. And this is no doubt true. But the converse is also true: is not the bias towards reality among Americans, their 'affirmative thinking', the naïve and

ideological expression of the fact that they have, by their power, a monopoly of reality?

We do, admittedly, live with a ridiculous nostalgia for glory (the glory of history and culture), but they live with the ridiculous illusion of performance.

Intense interest in deepening the individual mystery of the other – any other, as it happens; in this sense, all are equally strange. *Our* secret is merely an open one.

At the bedside of dying reality, consciousness is merely the Extreme Unction, the last of the palliative sacraments.

If the whole world becomes Western, where will the sun rise?

The silence underfoot, on the soft earth, after yesterday's rain. The clouds scudding away with the north wind and, far above, the still sky, the long stratospheric clouds. A horizon of phantom windmills with white tentacles. The tiny black butterflies to the sides of the path have disappeared. Just the ants still there, in their prodigiously useless bustle. The wind strengthens, as though blowing from all directions at once. When it stops, here where it never stops, the stillness is preternatural.

Freed even from the obligation of having to go down to the sea. The whole day is spent at the same place. Evening falls, the hawkmoths settle on

the marvels-of-Peru. The full moon rises. Hypostatic light. The hills pale in the moonlight and the silence causes space to falter.

From Copernicus to Galileo – from intuition to objectivity. Today a new division is occurring: decline of objectivity, redistribution of truth. And we come back to the starting point: the pure light of the gaze. But it is no longer the light of a human consciousness, the natural light of knowledge, but the light of the screen and numerical calculation.

Rediscovery of the beauties of the provinces – Compiègne, for example, on the occasion of Prosper Mérimée's bicentenary ('its forest, its château, its theatre'). With, as ever, the very Parisian colonial ethnocentrism. How did those people manage to live before they were discovered? As it was with the Indians: could it be that they had a soul without having heard the word of Christ?

The champions of the digital adopt an absurd line of argument (absurd in the sense of Freud's story of the kettle): 1. It is a revolution, an absolute advance. 2. At any rate, we have no choice, the process is irreversible.

But it must be one or the other: if it is inevitable, there's no point representing it as an ideal dimension. And if it's destined to win out, there's no point claiming it is best.

Any form of irony or offhandedness about one's own ideas is wounding to one's interlocutor.

If one resolves to be what one is, origins, filiation and all traces in general seem an undesirable supplement.

Naïve, captive, subliminal duplicity. Whatever happens, the double – that internalized otherness – dissociates itself from one's official being. In the face of this internal division, how is it with the unity of the real world?

The distance of the child from those who see him as innocent, the wicked delight that takes root in the form of cunning, the innate sense of having his own preserve, which will never leave him, even if he becomes a civilized being. 'The point at which the intuition forms in the child that other people exist who think differently is the point at which he learns to lie.'

Later on, he will perfect that duplicity by learning to lie to himself.

Everything is competing to show its good will. Things tend irresistibly towards perfection, effusiveness, reconciliation. Fortunately, nothing is ever perfect, thanks to Dostoevsky's 'unspeakable little demon . . . that evil spirit that prompts to murder and scorn.'

Everything tends irresistibly towards transparency. However, there remains a glimmer of secrecy – a clandestine dust-breeding that is mostly useless, an umbilical mirage, insider trading, but secret all the same.

Where America is concerned, we more or less harbour the illusion that everything that is thought over here becomes a reality over there: not just the achieved utopia of technology and happiness, but the utopia of theory become reality.

All this is based on a massive misunderstanding: theory is not made to be realized. Its effectuation is also its death. But this accomplishment allows us to glimpse what might well be an obscure desire on the part of thought: that of losing itself in its effects, of abolishing itself in a reality that transfigures or disfigures it.

This is doubtless what has happened between America and European thought: a great two-handed game, a dual relationship without absolute primacy of one party or the other – the supremacy of French thought is a mirage, even if it has lasted for a whole generation.

All in all, we might be said to have witnessed a 'becoming-phenomenon' of ideas, but in a non-Hegelian sense: not by a sublation of Spirit, but in the sense of an irrevocable derision and degradation.

And yet this ordeal has to take place: thought has to be confronted with its actualization, for better and for worse. In this sense, we can say that this confrontation of thought with its own actualized object – with which, in the guise of the real, it cannot at all reconcile itself – has constituted an event.

Narcissism isn't what it was. It was at the mirror stage, the stage of seduction. Today it is at the screen stage, the stage of 'self-processing'.

It isn't enough now to be an object of desire for oneself. You have to be an object of manipulation and performance.

The despair of women, to whom men no longer offer even the opportunity of verifying their powers of seduction. Corresponding despair of men at the women who no longer even have the desire to be seduced and who now envisage only the sexual disposal of their bodies.

While the flesh-and-blood lecturer is speaking, his double looms up behind him on a giant screen, and his words spool out like a cartoon speech bubble.

Where do the concepts and figures of analysis come from? Are they not purely and simply the metaphysical expression of a set of character traits, of an unfitness for reality and a fitness only for illusion and disillusion? Denial of reality, duplicity and intelligence of evil, ellipsis of the will and fatal strategies – might these things not all be faked? But isn't it a success to be one more spiral in the simulation?

Womankind as irreparable accident of nature (Aristotle) or as the irony in the life of the community (Hegel).[21] Following out a counter-genealogy of man and woman, one might arrive at a negative destiny of man, forever loaded down with the curse of power, and at an opposite choice on the part of women to be nothing, a fleshly absence, a form of flesh and blood disappearance – a force far superior to the political, mental power of domination.

The power of women derives from the fact that they hold the gates of the void and cede entry to men only in accordance with certain rules and at their own risk. The woman who renounces this specific quality to become a 'true being', an authentic being, an '*être-pour-jouir*', at the same time loses the benefit of this suprasensual power.

All power is obsessed by that which denies it, by that which does not miss it and whose dreams it does not haunt. The male by the female, for

example. But if women were to begin to dream of a visible force, then men would cease to be obsessed with them and would in turn lose interest in femininity. If women began to dream of power, then femininity would revert to the men who knew how to lose interest in power.

Now, the whole of our current masquerade illustrates this trap set for the female by the male. Trapping women with the taste for power and authority, making them responsible, masculinizing them, in the same way as white people are forever whitening black people and decking them out in the whiteness of the universal.

In this historical to-ing and fro-ing between dominant and dominated, it is even to be feared that black people will become whiter than the white, and women more masculine than men.

Man is obsessed with woman (this does not seem to be mutual). Possession does not set him free from obsession. Above and beyond *jouissance*, his obsession with her remains. It is an obsession with something like an eternally feminine prior state, an idea or fleshly form which was there before you and will outlive you. All other obsessions refer back to this one.

It is fuelled by the secret desire to wrest from woman more than she gives you or has ever given you, to wrest from her her femininity itself. Woman-as-object is the purest expression of this obsession, since it is the object that is ungraspable. And it is in becoming-object that woman puts herself out of reach, and becomes the horizon of the obsessional desire.

Just as it would be necessary to remove many other veils to wrest from women the secret of their power, so it would take many other tortures to wrest from men the secret underlying their unafraidness of death.

As for knowledge, its source must lie in a stronger motive than that of the will, stronger even than inspiration or one's own particular genius – it must lie in some profound challenge to oneself. Knowledge is a matter of honour, like seduction. And it is astonishing that we so make it a point of honour to seduce and yet do not set anything like the same store by the demand for lucidity. For the two passions are inseparable.

Speech always begins with stammering. Acts and action always begin with trembling. There is no continuum of the will. It acts on the body by fits and starts (*stossweise*) and is the product of an interval, a rapid alternation, between tension and release: to act is to produce a difference – even a slight one – between you and yourself. If you eliminate the intervals, tetany ensues: you shake all over.

Dysphylaxia (Primo Levi): disappearance, under the effect of hyposterone, of all the immune barriers of race, species and sex. The grandmother fertilized by larch pollen whose hair falls out in autumn and grows back in spring. Exactly the phantasm of current technology: a monstrous transfusion, a universe of chimerical manipulations. The opposite of the play of metamorphosis.

Archimedes' viewpoint: 'give me but one firm spot on which to stand, and I will move the earth.' Today: 'give me one single piece of exact information, a single absolute, real fact and I will transform the world.' But in the virtual universe of information, as elsewhere in each of our random existences, that point of absolute gravity is nowhere to be found.

The less you manage to give names to the various faces, the more they come to resemble each other, the more they gesture to one another from afar in your memory.

Of the veil or unveiling, which is the most alienating, the most humiliating, the most insulting? The immense hypocrisy of all those who denounce the veil, but are quite at ease with universal pornography. In any event, the question goes far beyond the veil and the female condition. At issue is a culture of obscenity that cannot but tear away all veils – according to the imperative of transparency. At issue is the profound jealousy of a ragged culture at all the ceremonial cultures – those cultures whose signs enwrap them, whereas our culture is laid bare by its signs themselves.

This is merely the beginning of a general de-signification, in which all distinctive marks will become anathema, suspect of masking or even, quite simply, signifying something, and hence potentially terroristic. At the end of the process all that will be left will be lightweight, inoffensive signs – advertising signs or marks of the disembodied fanaticism of fashion.

That, no doubt, is where the story of the veil will end.

A mirror in which, when you look at yourself, you would see your face emerge only gradually, in ghostly fashion, as from the light-sensitive film of a Polaroid.

In nuclear reactions, in fission or fusion, it is the energy of the splitting of matter that is recovered in the form of heat. In the social and psychological spheres, it is the energy of unbinding, of the fracturing of the symbolic that is recovered in the form of 'conviviality', 'interaction' and 'human warmth'.

In the mirror of representation, as in the rear-view mirrors of cars, objects remain at a distance. If you pass through the mirror, they get dangerously close. 'Objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear.'[22]

The photographic lens captures objects beyond representation: 'what they look like as photographed', '*tels qu'en eux-mêmes la prise de vue les change.*'[23]

With digital photography, objects are no longer even wrested from representation – they are not photographed, they are pictographed.

In a Chinese film, a man is responsible for the death of a child, his friend's son. He attempts, first of all, to make amends for the death with money. The father is prepared to accept it, but the mother rejects it. She wants vengeance: the man owes her a life in exchange. He then sees no solution but to die. But the mother denies him that too easy solution, the suicide that would unbind him forever. He must, then, renounce dying. Only on these terms is the mother reconciled to him.

Those politicians who try to slip a bit of power to the 'intellectuals' (missions, commissions, etc.) – on the one hand, to prove to themselves that they have some, but, above all, so as to leave no one outside the field of power. 'If I knew that there still are on this earth some men *without any power* I would say that nothing is lost' (Canetti).

As Nerval says of hours, so it is with books: it is already the next one, it is still the last one, and it is always the only one.

I have mothballed my coat of lights, that of the desert casinos. From now on, I live in my crystal ball.

Analytic distance fades with use. Critical distance becomes the metastasis pure and simple of the reality it is analysing, which has itself become critical by capillary action and permeable to the worst of things. Positive and negative are in league like charity and cruelty, like violence and compassion.

Criticism then provides a balancing function for the system, or serves to regulate the transit, like those capsules you take to offset the side-effects. Or else, like consciousness in general, it fulfils the function of palliative care.

This comfortable, democratic, cultivated mode of life, the mode of welfare and affluence, is something we have shared for a long time innocently, without bad conscience, on the assumption that we were the search engine for the future happiness of the planet. This illusion is no longer possible today; discrimination and a global divide seem entrenched for good, and we can no longer live this lifestyle as part of a symbolic division. We now hold it only in usufruct and as annuity, and we live locked in a fortress whose only thought is to protect itself from the rest of the world.

However, the failure of this universal perspective is shared and the despair is the same on both sides of the global divide – among the richer than rich and the poorer than poor.

A poetic film: *Pleasantville*.

Passing through the TV screen and emerging into an entirely sanitized American small town, wholly in black and white, and seeing it turn to colour as passion progressively exerted its effect. Seeing fire, rain, sex and violence

resurface little by little – everything which, by its absence, characterized the translucent, achromatic hell of that ideal, virtual town.

One very fine scene is when the mother, who has secretly become involved in an adulterous love affair, illegally colours up and her son makes her up in black and white so that she can appear in public. One is reminded of the Japanese tattoo on the woman's thigh that is invisible ordinarily and shows up only with sexual excitement. One of the finest metaphors for the Unconscious.

The lack of distinction between the real and the virtual is the obsession of our age. Everything in our current affairs attests to this, not to mention the big cinematic productions: *The Truman Show*, *Total Recall*, *Existenz*, *Matrix*, etc.

This question has always been there behind literature and philosophy, but it has been present metaphorically, as it were, implicitly, through the filter of discourse. The 'encoding/decoding' of reality was done by discourse, that is to say, by a highly complex medium, never leaving room for a head-on truth.

The encoding/decoding of *our* reality is done by technology. Only what is produced by this technical effect acquires visible reality. And it does so at the cost of a simplification that no longer has anything to do with language or with the slightest ambivalence and which, therefore, puts an end to this subtle lack of distinction between the real and the virtual, as subtle as the lack of distinction between good and evil. Through special effects, everything acquires an operational self-evidence, a spectacular reality that is, properly speaking, the reign of simulation. What the directors of these films have not realized (any more than the simulationist artists of New York in the eighties) is that simulation is a hypothesis, a game that turns reality itself into one eventuality among others.

On Ballard: 'It is no longer to fabricate the unreal from the real, the imaginary from the givens of the real. The process will, rather, be the opposite: it will be to put decentred situations, models of simulation in place and to contrive to give them the feeling of the real . . . to reinvent the real as fiction.'[24]

Artificial intelligence is an asexual activity, in which the body is only there, as Turing says, to give the 'intelligence' something to occupy itself with.

The spiritual practice of evil – sin, destiny, punishment, death – is over.

The spiritual practice of crime is over. We are now in the political economy of misfortune.

If it turns out that the coming of global power and the frantic race to totalize the world have no more meaning than the economic sphere taken overall, and all this is more a mad whirl than a rational development, isn't that another novel form of disappearance?

From an aesthetic point of view, I would propose burying wind turbines underground, as they do with high-voltage power lines.

Deep in the Brazilian forest, Alexander von Humboldt encountered a parrot that alone knew a few words of the language of a tribe entirely destroyed by smallpox.

If the world is what it is, where does the illusion of appearances come from? Whence the obsession with truth? And whence transcendence?

God is still part of the illusion of the world. But that illusion is an illusion only for consciousness, that is to say, relative to a hypothetical, indecipherable entity. It's an endless whirligig. In these conditions, it's no use trying to think you are God. That is to wish, like Münchhausen, to wrest yourself from illusion by pulling yourself up by the hair.

Thought is augural, unfinished. When it can be verified absolutely, it moves to the reflex stage, the animal stage. This is more or less what Kojève was hinting at when he spoke of the involution of modern (American) civilization towards the animal stage, that of a functional response and an automatic extraversion of all behaviours.

This is akin to the hypothesis that the human being is merely a premature ape. If he evolved towards a finished state, he would become an ape. It is the same with thought: if it evolved to a finished stage, it would become simian, being no longer anything but a parody, an ornamental variant of reality instead of being its parabolic mirror.

The weakness of many novels and films can be seen in the fact that one is forced to interpret them ironically to find any depth in them (*mise en abyme* is an effect of the same kind).

One is everywhere trapped between a literal and an ironic reading. A more or less conscious calculation that aims to disorientate any value judgement. It is particularly flagrant in the field of art, where this studied vagueness as to how a work is to be read has supplanted illusion and aesthetic judgement.

Deep down, however, it is reality itself that has become so banal and

insignificant that it has induced us into an ironic reading. It has become so homogenized that it breaks off from itself into a parallel reality. It is out of nostalgia that we embed it in another order: in the face of this insignificance, we are forced to hypothesize a more subtle realm beyond, a dimension beyond our grasp. A critical masochism by which all the speculative arts have found success.

Tomorrow's Eve (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam). What invention, what richness of language! In those days they were not afraid of language. *We* are afraid of language since we have been told about the signifier and all that. The signifier has introduced terror into language. 'The Unconscious structured like a language' – nothing has wreaked such havoc as this kind of proposition.

There is a fantastic moment in *Tomorrow's Eve* (Villiers de l'Isle-Adam): the passage with Edison and his phonograph. Edison is complaining that this marvellous technique has been invented (by him) at a point when there is no longer anything worthwhile to record. 'If only I could have recorded Christ's sighs and the sound of the trumpets of Jericho!'[25] At bottom, however, he tells himself, those trumpets and the din they made were meaningful only to the actors in the drama, to those who heard them, and perhaps even just to the walls themselves, since they were the principal parties concerned.

Conclusion: if every sound has meaning only through the person affected by it, if every word exists only through the person to whom it speaks (we might add: if every image has meaning only through the person who sees it), everything that could have been stored and transferred by the phonograph since the dawn of time would merely be dead records, belonging as much to the past as the world they would have outlived.

This goes not just for the past, but for our project of storing all data. What value is there in this pile of cryogenized information? Doubtless, like the walls of Jericho, it is merely awaiting the trumpets that will bring it all down.

Can one envisage a femininity without women, in the same way as a finality without end?

It seems difficult for femininity to do without women.

Feminists, on the other hand, can very well do without femininity.

Who would be so strange under the sun as not to believe he is play-acting as long as he lives? Our sky itself, by the filter of clouds and atmosphere, play-acts light.

A British theatre company is recruiting a terminally ill patient. The prospective actors will have to guarantee they will be dead when the performances begin (in one or two months' time). One of the company's artistic directors explained that all the details of the role will be arranged in advance with the donor and his family. The presence of the corpse on stage 'is an important element of the show to help us dispel some of the mysteries surrounding death', he says.

In the face of extreme reality we are defenceless. But this is only a beginning. We are the aborigines, the anthropoids of the Virtual. In terms of world history, we are barely at the stage of the invention of fire and walking upright. Logically, it remains for us to be exploited and colonized by an even greater power.

The perfumes of the East were there to banish the miasmas of the corpse – the perfumes of the seventeenth century to banish the body's pestilences. Don't perfumes and make-up today still relate to this systematic cleansing of the corpse?

Waking out of a week-long coma, the first question was, Who is dead? Who is alive?

In this world, which is there without having asked my opinion, it ought rightly to be the case that death could do without me.

As with ignorance of the law, ignorance of desire is no excuse. But it is the same with desire as it is with power. Power has no need of me and I have no need of it. It doesn't miss me and I don't miss it.

I don't miss desire either, and it doesn't miss me. It is the era of wintry passions.

From the standpoint of misfortune there is every reason to transform the world. From the standpoint of Evil, there is no sense in wishing to do so. So every transformation of the world is done under the sign of misfortune.

Esoteric disaster.

Once there's no longer anything to exchange it for, suffering is valueless. It isn't even a punishment any longer; it's an accidental waste product, a pollution, and with it the same (insoluble) problem arises as with the elimination of waste and pollution.

What remains is to derive a moral advantage from suffering and misfortune.

'Where danger increases, there grows also that which saves,' says Hölderlin ('*Da, wo die Gefahr wächst, wächst das Rettende auch*').

It is the opposite today: '*Da, wo das Rettende wächst, wächst die Gefahr auch.*'

(In the excess of security lies extreme peril.)

Lichtenberg speaks somewhere of the 'freedom to think, without danger, for the truth'. By this he doubtless understands the right of speaking the truth without the danger of being thrown into prison by the monarch. But if, by removing a comma, we read, instead, the freedom to think 'without danger for the truth', things become much more interesting. For then it becomes a question of the capacity to think without imperilling truth (without risk of unveiling it). It is no longer the freedom of thought at odds with power, but the truth itself at odds with the freedom to think. The whole relationship between thought and truth is at issue. There is a profound difference between the thought that wants to make truth shine out and the thought that wants to keep it secret.

But you can also wish for both at the same time.

Eliminating all complications, all vexations. Without this protective obsession, no serenity. And without serenity, no lucidity.

To condemn torture as being in any case useless and unproductive is the most despicable of arguments. The implication is that if it were productive (in terms of information), it would be justified. The same with racism: to argue that there is no objective basis for racial differences is to imply that if there were such a basis, racism would be justified. Now, even if there were

one, not only would it still be unjustified, but it is then that it would be absolutely unjustifiable.

When you reread a text you have just written, it is like a phantom limb; you have only the virtual, painful presence of it, like Ahab with his wooden leg.

Sometimes even, it is one's whole existence one perceives as a phantom limb, the nervous tickle being what remains.

There are cases when the original outdoes the simulacrum. For example, the sequined illumination of the Eiffel Tower is kitschier than its Las Vegas copy.

Not knowing who she is, she pursues others' identities. Then, tormented by an obscure remorse, she bares herself, exhibits herself, to the point of enjoying being unmasked. Which enables her to slip in everywhere on the pretext that she has nothing to hide. The real story is that she does not like herself, and does not like other people either. Hence this coldness and arrogance in the face of the veiled charm and diaphanous sweetness of the other (female) guest.

Nothing distinguishes a natural intelligence from something that can give off all the outward signs of it, and this includes faltering before the test of truth.

So one can give off all the outward signs of power, and this includes faltering before the test of strength. A simulation which produces, with just the requisite degree of derision, the image of an illusory normality.

'I discovered with amazement that my senses registered external reality, but my impulses never reached to my feelings. My feelings lived in a closed room, and I used them only to order and always premeditatedly. My reality was so profoundly split that I was no longer aware of it.

I existed on memories of feelings. I knew quite well how feelings should be reproduced, but my expression of them was never spontaneous. There was always a microsecond between my intuitive experience and its emotional expression . . .' (Ingmar Bergman).

It isn't the racism of the little people that poses a problem for the 'enlightened' minds. That can easily be explained by their inferior condition. It is the symptoms of racism among the 'higher' minds that present an insoluble contradiction since, in the humanist dream, genius is supposed to be associated with moral grandeur and just causes, in the way that imagination is supposed to be associated with power.

Nietzsche, Céline, Kazan, Riefenstahl (Alexandre Adler: 'the death of Leni Riefenstahl has brightened up my whole day'), Heidegger, Saul Bellow: all condemned by universal consciousness on the grounds of intelligence with evil.

Right thinking does not believe for a minute that genius can be rooted there of all places – in the intelligence of evil, in a form other than that of universal reason, in a form compatible with both the worst and the best, in something that might be said to be thought itself and which has ultimately nothing to do with 'critical' intelligence or, indeed, with political reason or morality.

At the other end of the Enlightenment spectrum there would be the Jews themselves who, while having greatly contributed to conceptualizing the universal, are, by their singularity, their exclusive form of worship and their pro-

found incompatibility, the most striking denial of it. Which is entirely to their credit.

Has anyone ever shown an interest in how the dead live while they await the Last Judgement? In the contemplation of God, agreed. But they must surely have retained a memory of life and the living, a recollection of the world they have left behind. In that case, it must be hell not to be able to inform the living of this ultimate truth, the existence of the afterlife. By comparison, the silence from beyond the grave is much easier to bear for the living.

It is better to live eternally with a question than with an answer.

Every photographic image depends on the object's desire to be photographed. If it doesn't respond to the call, then let it sod off and take its chance elsewhere!

The rejection of domination is not limited to the rejection of being dominated, but implies also the rejection of dominating. If there were the same violence about that as about the refusal to be dominated, then even dreaming of revolution would have ended long ago.

Laziness is always accompanied by impatience, since it is out of laziness that we want to get to the end as quickly as possible. And haste is a form of premature ejaculation.

Hunting the wolf is an attempt to put an end to the idea that man is a wolf for other men. Already hunted for its natural ferocity, the wolf now

finds itself condemned once and for all by the idea man has of himself, by the idea of his own ferocity.

'The age in which modernity was being invented and had not yet degenerated into a caricature of itself' (Canetti). A fine example of that degeneracy: the clone, which may be considered a caricature of the human at its highest evolutionary stage. At the apex and end of its possibilities, evolution retraces its own steps.

New form of redemption: debt, companies, crimes, scandals – as in the past with slaves, everything must be redeemed. Everything must be transfigured and at the same time, as in the sales, everything must go. Everywhere the tiniest waste product, the slightest desire is being given its hour of glory. But the historic prototype of redemption is that of work, which was granted such moral and historical value only so as to enable the slave to accede to it as a free man. In this way the curse fulfils itself.

Hopper says, 'If it can be said, then there's no point painting it.'
The reciprocal: 'If it can be painted, then there's no point talking about it.'

Biosphere 2. It was the first 'reality show' (experimental microcosm). A closed-circuit simulacrum of survival, but on the scale of the planet and the entire species. Since then, all the variants have followed the same model.

Accidents fade from memory as suddenly as they occur – only the body retains an imaginative sense of them. It is like a dream – a few seconds' very

deep sleep on the motorway is enough to cause two absolutely different series to intersect: the universe in which you are present, but where nothing is happening, and the one in which the worst has happened, but in which you have no part.

Or the opposite: the universe in which you have no part or very little – that of existence – and the other in which you do have a part, but do so at the risk of your existence.

It is the critical intervention, by act or deed, that helps the system over the critical mass threshold – beyond which it would be in danger of entering the zone of extreme phenomena. The cunning of history, but a paradoxical cunning.

Of all activities, thinking is the one that requires the least energy. It is, then, the mental economy that best suits lymphatic or thwarted active types.

The most extraordinary thing in the Samarkand story is that it is said that death appeared 'surprised' by the behaviour of the soldier, who feels threatened when it signals to him. If death can be surprised, then it is human, endowed with human sensibility. It thereby becomes a partner, a collusive adversary. That is, doubtless, the only way to tame it: to make the human show through in what is the most inhuman of things.

So, when S. J. Lec says that it is not we who resist death, but it that resists us, and then ultimately gives in to us, he transforms the fateful event into a duel – death is not an end, it is a rival, a strange rival and one that has its weaknesses. This is what 'death throes' properly are: the rivalry between life and death.

The child that slumbers within us has become a confirmed insomniac. What is the point of growing up?

Some like to let their slips and parapraxes show through, to revel in their strange behaviour: they are absolutely set on having an Unconscious.

The spatio-temporal paradox according to Calvino: beyond a certain distance, there is no longer any possible response-time, especially when heavenly bodies are moving apart at the speed of light. The message then becomes absolute, definitive – it becomes *a truth*, irremediable, lost in the infinite, beyond reach.

This might be another version of the 'fateful': every act is irreversible, irrevocable; it cannot be corrected and is moving away from us luminously in the void. *Lost in translation.*

The problem is the same on the terrestrial scale. In a universe where individuals are moving apart irresistibly and things are, as it were, exceeding their escape velocity, messages have less and less time to come back. Or we are crushed like atoms in an irresistible contraction and, in that case, it is hyper-density that puts an end to any meaning or message. They can no longer escape.

Perhaps the two movements, the gravitational and the anti-gravitational, happen at the same time, and we are both further and further from each other, dispersed and disintegrated, and at the same time increasingly compacted, merged and forcibly integrated.

'The conscious decision to make a movement corresponds to an electrical event in the brain that happens 200 to 300 milliseconds after the beginning of the movement.'

'The experience of free determination of the will is nothing but an awareness of past events projected into the future' (Atlan).

This precession of the act over the will, of the movement over the deci-

sion is interesting. It is the very question of thought: is there, in thought itself, something that precedes thought? More broadly, it is the question of the world: is there, before the Big Bang, something that precedes the world?

This enquiry is essentially metaphysical. No point falling back on 'neuronal electricity'!

A three-dimensional shadow? A hologrammatic shadow? The Graz Tower: a building in the form of a shadow. This is, in itself, a misconception: what makes a shadow a shadow is the two dimensions (it is the same with the image).

Even the zebra's shadow has no stripes.

Ubu incarnate: we lag irreparably behind stupidity.

Where do you rate your pain on a sliding scale from 0 to 10?

0 = no pain, 10 = unbearable.

It's a bit like plucking daisy petals: he loves me, he loves me not . . . They are the petals of pain.

'I began to experience the pleasure of writing, and that pleasure has always been connected to some extent with the death of others, with death in general . . . This is the other side of the tapestry.

'I would say that writing, for me, is linked to death, perhaps essentially to the death of others. But this doesn't mean that writing might be said to be like murdering others and carrying out a definitively lethal act against them, against their existences, an act that would open up before me a free, sovereign

space. Not at all. For me, to write is to be faced with the death of others, but it is essentially to be faced with others inasmuch as they are already dead. I speak, in a sense, over other people's corpses. I have to admit it, I postulate their deaths to some degree. I am in the situation of the anatomist carrying out an autopsy . . . I move around the body, I make an incision, I try to discover the organs and, in bringing those organs into the light, to show up the source of the lesion, the seat of the evil,[26] that something that characterized their lives and thinking, and which, in its negativity, ultimately organized all that they were . . . That poisonous heart of people and things – deep down, that is what I've always tried to bring out.

'At the same time, the only homage my writing can make to them is to discover both the truth of their lives and of their deaths, the morbid secret that explains how their lives led to their deaths. That point in the lives of others, where their lives veered dramatically towards death. There, for me, lies the possibility of writing' (Michel Foucault, interviewed by Claude Bonnefoy, 1966).[27]

This diabolic confession is a dramatic revelation. Suddenly, the hidden side of Foucault shows through, his accursed share, the 'other side of the tapestry'. Suddenly, the potential cruelty of a writing that presupposes the elimination of the Other, his putting-to-death, is revealed, of a 'surgical', anatomistic form of thought, akin to autopsy, and which, by his own admission, is out to find the 'seat of the evil' and is, then, very far removed from the rigorous investigation of truth effects and closer to a mental operator on the fringes of death. The weft of the tapestry is the intelligence of death, which, through writing, lends its energy to an inexorable analysis, to a rationality that is implacable, but simultaneously entirely ambiguous. Is there not an intelligence of Evil at work here? And doesn't critical intelligence itself (once again through the diabolic filter of writing) draw its force from this radical ellipsis of the Other, of the Living, and of the ends of Man in general? A marvellous denial, a marvellous defiance of the rational edifice of

his *oeuvre*. A marvellous line of lucidity, of a secret lucidity that traces out a quite other intelligence, nearer to Evil than to an archaeology of knowledge.

This antagonistic truth, which has nothing to do with rational, epistemic, analytic construction, this lethal secret of writing is something the Foucauldians cannot cope with. They have already forgotten it, they never knew it. Erected by them into a discourse of truth, freighted with a force of objective elucidation, if not indeed a militant demand, Foucault cannot be suspected of this thinking with a scalpel that he speaks of, of this presumption of death (the death of others, which is worse). All this runs too violently counter to the idealist vision of thought that all the faithful, all the satellites and epigones have – all those who made the Great Analyst, the Grand Inquisitor, a tutelary (and feudal) reference. Which is why, no doubt, just as secretly, he despised them profoundly.

This Foucault is one we shall not forget in a hurry.

As a degree of stultification by medication set in, the idea came to me of a description of the present world that would have as a title that mysterious formula that was Canetti's mother's: the Phylogeny of Spinach, which she employed to stigmatize her son's useless metaphysical enquiry in an entirely corrupt, money-grubbing milieu. It would be a phenomenology of this world as though of a plant or proliferating legume, with simultaneous electrocution of all cultures (shock waves through all civilizations), etc.

The Lucidity Pact or the Intelligence of Evil could very well have been called – apophatically – *The Impact of Stupidity or the Unintelligence of Evil.*

Few world events are emblematic of a life, and form part of one's biography on the same footing as, and sometimes more profoundly than, personal

events. I pride myself on having cut a single swathe from the Wall Street Crash of 1929 to the collapse of the Twin Towers in September 2001. From the one event to the other, there is something like a meteoric short-cut through an advancing globalism, following out its fateful course with an inexorable logic, beyond wars and 'historical' events, beyond the visible progress of societies. Something that must be described as monstrous unfolds in another dimension than that of the human efforts to control its course.

The perfect crime supposes perfect guilt.

Always veered more towards heresies, peasant revolts and millenarian uprisings than history and revolutions.

Everyone today, at the steering wheel or sitting in front of his screen, seeing all the world's events pass by as he pleases, can imagine himself the epicentre of universal consciousness, and see the world spirit pass before him (no need now to be Hegel to see the *Weltgeist* pass by on horseback – Napoleon).

The banalized individual has only to look at himself to see the *Weltgeist* pass by. The world spirit is fully achieved, not now in the form of the state or at the end of history, but in every monad that is now the centre of the universe.

'How is it that the centre is nowhere any longer, and we live on the periphery of an entirely visible world' (Baudouin de Bodinat).

The burying of the placenta: the homage done to what has not assumed the form of life, but accompanies life like the soul of a dead twin. A shapeless, but guardian shadow. Perhaps in the field of thought too there is this nourishing relic watching over us, this substance from before birth.

Lucidity as the mental equivalent of light in Hopper.
'I have never painted anything but light on a wall.'

All progress in the knowledge of man makes his identification more problematical. It is not a problem of complexity, but quite simply we do not know what he is. It is more complicated than complexity (Morin); it is of the order of duplicity. The more we advance, the more we realize the object is playing a double game, that it is developing in both directions at once, in the direction of good and of evil, and there is no possible synthesis, no transcendent solution to this fundamental divergence. Complexity can always resolve itself in a more complex equation, whereas this irresolvable divergence increases with every attempt we make to resolve it. The more we plumb man's depths along digital pathways, the more we dissect him genetically, the more impossible it will be to establish an image of him.

Even cross-disciplinarity will not master his duplicity. For his knowledge about himself is as ambivalent as he is himself. We shall never manage to identify this creature, whom self-knowledge alters in his essence, nor, therefore, shall we arrive at any future programming of the species.

During the American elections, an editorialist concluded his article with the words that his greatest fear was that one of the two candidates would be elected.

It was the only witty remark of the campaign.

It is, in fact, the opposite fear that haunts the political Unconscious: that no one will be elected, that the final decision will be impossible, that everything will finish in a dead heat, which is the inevitable end of any probabilist system. The real drama lies here, in this state of balance, a reflection of the inertia of a society and its indifference to itself.

At this point, the situation becomes random again, as is attested by the case in which a single elector in a state where the two parties are level can swing the state and thereby, if there is only a tiny difference at the national level, swing the whole election. A form of total, accidental power, which defies all political reason but is not without its funny side.

We have lost our shadows, not simply for lack of a light source, but for lack of a ground on which to shine. So, the trapeze artist doesn't need a net now, given the absence of ground to crash down on.

The fine parable of the man who has lost his key in the dark and looks for it under the street light because that's the only place there's any chance of finding it. It is more or less the same as Nietzsche's parable about objects and mirrors (if you focus on the mirror, you lose sight of the objects; if you focus on the objects, you lose sight of the mirror). You can't have both at the same time. The difference is that, in the story of the mirrors, the objects are in the place where you are looking, but are simply substituted by the surface that necessarily reflects them, whereas in the story of the key, the object is being sought not where it is, but where it would be found if it were (though it isn't).

In the first case, knowledge finds its way around in the play of representation. In the other, there is a disjunction: on the one hand, an area of light; on the other, darkness at the place where the key was lost. Is it better to be under the street lamp and fully in the light or elsewhere with the unfindable key?

Deep sleep is when you are asleep but not dreaming. Paradoxical sleep is the sleep in which you dream. So, only paradoxical thought is the thought in which you think. Is there, by analogy, a paradoxical state of death – a deep death and a death with dreams?

It is evil that speaks evil: evil can ventriloquize.

True immortality is the immortality of childhood and adolescence, where you never think you will have to die one day. The phantasm of immortality is merely the price paid for the certainty of dying. And it is ready to pay any price, including that of annihilating itself to achieve immortality.

In the past, some were prepared to lose their souls (their hope of eternal life) in a pact with the Devil to enjoy the privileges of mortal existence. Today we are ready to sacrifice any idea of a future immortality for a present corporeal immortality, a perpetual renewal in cloning. Immortality is no longer a metaphor. We want a *real* immortality, we want a technical incarnation of it here and now. This is the new pact with the Devil, sealed and signed in blood by the human race, which prefers to be cryogenized alive rather than await some hypothetical resurrection of bodies.

To manage to read one's own book without presumption of authorship, as though it were written by an unknown, of whom, in fact, one knows nothing. What image would you form of him? Would you want to know more? Is there a coherence – even an allusive coherence – in this set of fragments, which is precisely not even a set? Could you guess the books that have gone before and, if not reconstitute them, at least identify the lines of force – and weakness – as though working from a fragment of a hologram?

'A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film' (Nabokov).[28]

Wine changes to water, and water itself takes on a strangely insipid taste. Repugnance and tastelessness affect not only food, but the whole environment, events and speech. You become flavourless yourself, colourless and odourless – translucent, but lucid all the same.

Everything becomes a symptom – you become nosomaniacal. Is it from being lymphatic that you become lymphomic?

Rarefaction of the globules, sensory isolation, de-intensified zone – the ideal niche, protected by the repulsion that affects all your sensitive extremities, but not the mind which, for its part, enjoys exceptional freedom.

All secretions stop. Sweating, secretions, excretions, various pilosities – nothing oozes from the laundered body, the purified body, the body become self-cleansing. The skin on your face acquires a feminine smoothness and gentleness.

Alveolar self-defence. The Lion retreats into his cave, into the shadows, licking his paws and dreaming.

With time, something vulgar reappears: health, the signs of health. And a certain nostalgia for the state of grace, translucency and powerlessness of the illness.

God scoffs at (smiles at) those he sees denouncing the evils of which they are the cause.

Translator's Notes

1 The reference is to 'the wild bunch'.
2 Directed by Tonino Valerii and Sergio Leone. Lamar Cinema Corporation, Italy, 1973.
3 Fragment E476. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–1799) was a philosopher and natural scientist. He is generally credited with having introduced the aphorism into German literature.
4 The Collège de 'Pataphysique, which had ceased to publish the names of its members or involve itself in public manifestations some twenty-five years before, 'disocculted' itself in AD 2000 (year 127 of the 'pataphysical calendar).
5 'Transcendental satrap' is one of the highest ranks of the 'pataphysical order.
6 Luc Delahaye and Jean Baudrillard, *L'Autre,* trans. by Chris Turner (London: Phaidon, 1999).
7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 63.
8 There is a paradoxical play on the terms *humain* and *inhumain* here that has greater force in French, where the distinction between the (biologically) 'inhuman' and the (ethically) 'inhumane' is not made.
9 An early evening TV programme which uses latex puppets of leading political and media figures in a manner not dissimilar to the British *Spitting Image*.
10 Emilie Ruete, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess from Zanzibar* (New York: M. Wiener, 1989). Originally published in German in 1886.
11 John Brunner, *Stand on Zanzibar* (London: Millennium, 1999; first published in 1968).
12 More precisely, at Borehamwood Studios in Hertfordshire where Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* was filmed. The documentary in question, *Opération Lune*, was directed by

William Karel for Point du Jour Production and Arte France. The English version bears the title *Dark Side of the Moon*.

13 Jorge Luis Borges, 'A Comment on August 23, 1944', in *Other Inquisitions* (London: Souvenir Press, 1973), pp. 135–6.

14 The Chiennes de Garde – 'watch bitches' rather than watch dogs – is a feminist group founded on 8 May 2000, concerned particularly to combat attacks on women in public life.

15 A reference to Descartes's phrase 'larvatus prodeo': 'I come forward masked (upon the stage of the world)'.

16 The fluorescent rabbit, known as Alba, was created at INRA in Paris. Each of its cells contained the gene for a fluorescent protein taken from the jellyfish *Aequorea victoria*. *Crepidula fornicata* is commonly known in English as the slipper limpet.

17 The reclusive, but extremely influential novelist and critic Maurice Blanchot (born 1927) died on 20 February 2003.

18 The emissary is Edward Rogers from Galactic Relay Center in the story 'Souvenir'. See Philip K. Dick, *Second Variety* (London: Millennium, 1999), p. 358.

19 Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p. 141.

20 As many as 10,000 extra deaths, largely among old people, may have been caused by the heatwave that struck France in August 2002.

21 'Womankind – the everlasting irony in the life of the community – changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into the work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the family' (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 288).

22 In English in the original. Baudrillard seems first to have encountered this phrase on the rear-view mirror of a hire car in the USA.

23 This phrase is an allusion to a line in Stéphane Mallarmé's 'Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe': 'Tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change.'

24 This passage first appears in Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 124. I have used the original translation by Sheila Faria Glaser here, though I have anglicized the spelling.

25 My translation from Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *L'Ève future* (Paris: José Corti, 1987).

26 The French phrase here is '*le foyer du mal*', which might reasonably be translated as 'the seat of the disease (or disorder, malady, ailment, etc.)', but Baudrillard's commentary requires that *le mal* be rendered in its very broadest sense.

27 For the full text of the interview, see *Arts et Loisirs*, no. 38 (1966), pp. 8–9.

28 V. Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (1972) in *Novels, 1969–74* (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 486.

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JEAN BAUDRILLARD

'Prophet of the apocalypse, hysterical lyric poet, obsessive recounter of the desolation of the postmodern scene . . . '
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New York Times

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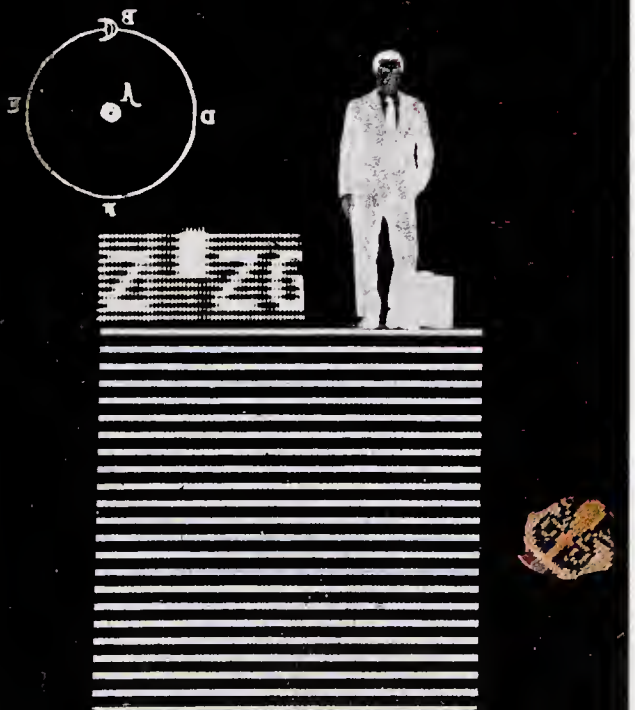

BAUDRILLARD

COOL MEMORIES V

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER

'Theory is never so fine as when it takes the form of a fiction or a fable,' writes Baudrillard in *Cool Memories V* – the latest in a series of aphoristic journals that covers the period 2000–4. During these years Baudrillard re-emerged strongly in the international arena with his trenchant and controversial essay *The Spirit of Terrorism*, developed his work as a photographer, and found he had cancer.

As his attack on the inanities of 'hyperreality' grew more radical, Baudrillard came to display an ever more marked penchant for the aphoristic style he had long admired in such writers as Canetti, Lichtenberg and Nietzsche. 'Aphorizein,' he writes, 'from which we get the word "aphorism", means to retreat to such a distance that a horizon of thought is formed which never again closes on itself.' Cool Memories are *carnets*, notebooks, but these are notes for keeping the horizon of thought open within a daunting sphere of ideas that is no less than 'a jungle, a nature red in tooth and claw'. 'Mentally and affectively', he writes, 'we have remained hunters. At every moment, in thought and writing, there is a prey and a predator. And survival is a miracle.'

Caustic, audacious and dazzlingly droll, *Cool Memories V* will be rewarding reading for anyone concerned with the debates about postmodernism and the current state of theory in the social sciences and humanities.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD taught sociology at the University of Paris X (Nanterre) from 1966 to1987. Among his works translated into English are *Simulations and Simulacra*, *Fatal Strategies*, *Seduction*, *America*, *Cool Memories* I–IV, *The Illusion of the End* and *The Spirit of Terrorism*.

ISBN 978-0-7456-3660-3

9 780745 636603

polity

www.polity.co.uk

Printed in Great Britain

COVER ILLUSTRATION: CORBIS COVER DESIGN BY ANDREW CORBETT

The Gulf War did not take place

Jean Baudrillard

Translated and with an introduction by

Paul Patton

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
BLOOMINGTON & INDIANAPOLIS

This book is a publication of

Indiana University Press
601 North Morton Street
Bloomington, IN 47404-3797 USA

http://www.indiana.edu/~iupress

Telephone orders 800-842-6796
Fax orders 812-855-7931
Orders by e-mail iuporder@indiana.edu

English translation and introduction © 1995,
Power Institute and Paul Patton

The Gulf War did not take place was originally published in French as *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu.*
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The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Baudrillard, Jean.
[Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu. English]
The Gulf War did not take place / Jean Baudrillard ; translated and with an introduction by Paul Patton.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.).
ISBN 0-253-32946-9 (alk. paper). —
ISBN 0-253-21003-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Persian Gulf War, 1991—Miscellanea. 2. Persian Gulf War, 1991—Press coverage—Miscellanea. I. Title.
DS79.72.B3813 1995
956.7044'2—dc20 95-19574

3 4 5 6 7 05 04 03 02 01 00

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Introduction

Jean Baudrillard's article, "The Gulf War will not take place," was published in *Libération* on 4 January 1991, a little over one month after the UN Security Council had voted to authorise the use of force if Iraq had not begun to remove its troops from Kuwait by January 15, and a little under two weeks before the American and British air attack on Baghdad and Iraqi positions in Kuwait. Far from being deterred by the unfolding situation, he wrote two more pieces along similar lines: "The Gulf War: is it really taking place?" which referred to the events during February 1991, and "The Gulf War did not take place," which was written after the end of hostilities on 28 February. Part of the second article appeared in *Libération* on 6 February while a fragment of the third article appeared in *Libération* on 29 March 1991. All three pieces first appeared in extended form in the book published in May 1991.[1]

The central thesis of Baudrillard's essays appears to be directly contradicted by the facts. What took place during January and February 1991 was a massive aerial bombardment of Iraq's military and civil infrastructure. According to some accounts, the amount of high explosive unleashed in the first month of the conflict exceeded that of the entire allied air offensive during

WW II.[2] This was followed by a systematic air and land assault on the Iraqi forces left in Kuwait, which culminated in the infamous "turkey shoot" carried out on the troops and others fleeing along the road to Basra. Official estimates of lives lost as direct casualties of these attacks are in the order of 100,000, but these do not take into account the subsequent loss of life due to hunger and disease. On the face of it, Baudrillard could not have been more wrong. So why did he pursue this line of argument which appears to deny the reality of the Gulf War?

At the time, the TV Gulf War must have seemed to many viewers a perfect Baudrillardian simulacrum, a hyperreal scenario in which events lose their identity and signifiers fade into one another. Fascination and horror at the reality which seemed to unfold before our very eyes mingled with a pervasive sense of unreality as we recognised the elements of Hollywood script which had preceded the real (the John Wayne language and bearing of the military spokesmen), and as the signifiers of past events faded into those of the present (the oil-soaked sea bird recycled from the *Exxon Valdez* to warn of impending eco-disaster in the Gulf). Occasionally, the absurdity of the media's self-representation as purveyor of reality and immediacy broke through, in moments such as those when the CNN cameras crossed live to a group of reporters assembled somewhere in the Gulf, only to have them confess that they were also sitting around watching CNN in order to find out what was happening. Television news coverage appeared to have finally caught up with the logic of simulation.

It was not the first time that images of war had appeared on TV screens, but it was the first time that they were relayed "live" from the battlefront. It was not the first occasion on which the military censored what could be reported, but it did involve a new level of military control of reportage and images. Military planners had clearly learnt a great deal since Vietnam: procedures for controlling the media were developed and tested in the Falklands, Grenada and Panama. As a result, what we saw was for the most part a "clean" war, with lots of pictures of weaponry, including the amazing footage from the nose-cameras of "smart bombs," and relatively few images of human casualties, none from the Allied forces. In the words of one commentator, for the first time, "the power to create a crisis merges with the power to direct the movie about it ... Desert Storm was the first major global media crisis orchestration that made instant history."[3] The Gulf War movie was instant history in the sense that the selected images which were broadcast worldwide provoked immediate responses and then became frozen into the accepted story of the war: high-tech weapons, ecological disaster, the liberation of Kuwait. In case anyone missed the first release, CNN produced its own edited documentary, "CNN: War in the Gulf" which was shown on TV around the world. Within weeks of the end of hostilities, Time Warner produced a CD-ROM disk on Desert Storm which included published text, unedited correspondents' reports, photos and maps in the form of a single hypertext document. In their publicity, they described this interactive multimedia disk as a "first draft of history."

In "The Precession of Simulacra" Baudrillard took as an

allegory of simulation the Borges story in which the cartographers of an empire draw up a map so detailed that it exactly covers the territory.[4] Thanks to the geographical data collected by the US Defense Mapping Agency, remote corners of the American Empire such as Kuwait already exist on hard disk. Just as it marked a new level of military control over the public representation of combat operations, so the Gulf War displayed a new level of military deployment of simulation technology. Technological simulacra neither displace nor deter the violent reality of war, they have become an integral part of its operational procedures. Virtual environments are now incorporated into operational warplanes, filtering the real scene and presenting aircrew with a more readable world.[5] The development of flight simulators provided an early example of the computer technology which allowed the boundaries between simulation and reality to become blurred: the images and information which furnish the material for exercises and war games become indistinguishable from what would be encountered in a real conflict. The same technology now allows the creation of simulated environments in which to train tank crews, and even the possibility of connected simulators in which virtual tank battles can be fought out. An article in the first issue of *Wired* recounts developments in the use of networked simulation machines as training devices. Current research aims to achieve what is called "seamless manipulation" in which "the seams between reality and virtuality will be deliberately blurred" and "real tanks can engage simulator crews on real terrain which is simultaneously virtual." Within months of the end of the war, army historians and simulation modelers had produced their

own multimedia, fully interactive, network capable digital simulation of one of the tank battles from the closing stages of the conflict: "armchair strategists can now fly over the virtual battlefield in the 'stealth vehicle,' the so-called 'SIMNET flying carpet,' viewing the 3-D virtual landscape from any angle during any moment of the battle. They can even change the parameters — give the Iraqis infrared targeting scopes, for instance, which they lacked at the time ... this is virtual reality as a new way of knowledge: a new and terrible kind of transcendent military power."[6]

Baudrillard at times portrays the Gulf conflict as one between a relentless and pre-programmed military machine and a hysterical trickster, a rug salesman whose essential weapons include the ruse and the decoy. (65–6) Quite apart from the orientalist overtones of this image, it underestimates the role played by dissimulation and deception operations within Allied military strategy. Electronic warfare involves new forms of deception by means of electronic interference and falsified signals. In the Gulf, such technological dissimulation was combined with old-fashioned tactical deception manoeuvres on the ground, with apparent success. American agents even succeeded in introducing a computer virus into Iraq's air defence command and control system.[7] Seen in this light, the use of the media to pass disinformation to the other side is simply another dimension of a consistent strategic embrace of the logic of simulation. The Gulf War thus witnessed the birth of a new kind of military apparatus which incorporates the power to control the production and circulation of images as well as the power to direct the actions of bodies and machines. It

involved a new kind of event and a new kind of power which is at once both real and simulacral.

Baudrillard's essays pursue a high-risk writing strategy, courting equally the dangers of contradiction by the facts and self-refutation. They occasionally force the facts to fit their own rhetorical oppositions: for example, in claiming that "no accidents occurred in this war, everything unfolding according to programmatic order." (73) They rail against the proliferation of useless commentaries, yet do not hesitate to offer commentary of their own: for example, suggesting that there are more tricks to the wily Arab opponent than the Pentagon strategists suspect. (81) This is Baudrillard as armchair strategist and expert in the stratagems of symbolic exchange. They denounce the emptiness of the media event but also seek to endow it with the status of being an exemplary non-event. But these are not scholarly analyses of the events themselves, nor even of their media representation. Baudrillard is reluctant to claim the status of philosophy, sociology or political analysis for his writing, but equally resistant to its dismissal as literature or poetry. In time and with a little imagination, he has since suggested, it will be possible to read *The Gulf War did not take place* as if it were a science fiction novel.[8] These are occasional essays by a writer who believes that writing should be less a representation of reality than its transfiguration and that it should pursue a "fatal strategy" of pushing things to extremes. They are also immediate responses to instant history TV and its first draft versions in the print media. As such, they belong in the series of

his essays which includes a discussion of the staged massacre at Timisoara, and the equally provocatively titled response to a television link-up with Sarajevo, "No Pity for Sarajevo."[9] The timing of their composition is important.

"The Gulf War will not take place" was written in December 1990 and January 1991, when the final act of the Gulf crisis was still to be played out. At one level, the response expressed in this article is a kind of *fuite en avant*, a sardonic challenge to the media hype surrounding the Gulf crisis. The point being made is that the events which were unfolding did not and would not correspond to what Baudrillard called the "archaic imaginary of media hysteria."(56) This imaginary object of media speculation was total war in the 1940s sense, including the use of chemical and perhaps even nuclear weapons. War in that sense did not take place, even though massive damage was inflicted by means of conventional weapons. Baudrillard's response to the subsequent events pursues the symbolic challenge to the manner in which these were portrayed. It is not irony so much as the kind of black humour which seeks to subvert what is being said by pursuing its implicit logic to extremes: so you want us to believe that this was a clean, minimalist war, with little collateral damage and few Allied casualties. Why stop there: war? what war?

Rhetoric aside, Baudrillard's first essay is also a response to the question which remained open at the time: will there or will there not be war? His answer points to an irony in events themselves which derives from the fact that war itself has become virtual. The hypothesis of "The Gulf War will not take place" is that the deterrence of war in the traditional sense has been

internalised and turned back upon the Western powers, producing a form of self-deterrence which renders them incapable of realising their own power in the form of relations of force. Under present conditions, Baudrillard argues, the virtual has overtaken the actual, it functions to deter the real event and leaves only the simulacrum of war which will never advance to the use of force: "we are no longer in a logic of the passage from virtual to actual but in a hyperrealist logic of the deterrence of the real by the virtual."(27)

The underlying argument of this initial essay is that the logic of deterrence has transformed the nature of war. Deterrence is a matter of the virtual exercise of power, action upon the action of the other by immaterial means. It is a means of waging war, but one in which the aim is precisely non-engagement or the avoidance of direct encounter between the parties involved. The Cold War was indeed a war, one that has been fought and won, but increasingly by economic, informational and electronic means. It was a war fought on the principle of deterrence, on the basis of an economic, R&D and informational effort to deter any use of material force by the other side. It was won when the Soviet economic and political system could no longer maintain the effort. In the process, Baudrillard suggests, war evolved in a manner parallel to the evolution of capital: "just as wealth is no longer measured by the ostentation of wealth but by the secret circulation of speculative capital, so war is not measured by being unleashed but by its speculative unfolding in an abstract, electronic and informational space, the same one in which capital moves."(56) This does not mean that it is unreal in the sense of

not having real effects, any more than a capital crisis is unreal because it takes place in the electronic and informational space of digitalised and networked financial markets. Rather, it means that state-of-the-art military power is now virtual in the sense that it is deployed in an abstract, electronic and informational space, and in the sense that its primary mechanism is no longer the use of force. Virtual war is therefore not simply the image or imaginary representation of real war, but a qualitatively different kind of war, the effects of which include the suppression of war in the old sense.

Shortly after the publication of "The Gulf War will not take place" the bombing began in earnest. At the end of that essay, Baudrillard offers a reason for undertaking what he calls the "stupid gamble" of attempting to demonstrate the impossibility of war in the Gulf just at the moment when all the signs were pointing in the direction of its occurrence, namely the stupidity of not doing so.(28) The stupidity in question is that of those critics who uncritically participate in the supposed realism of the information industry, or the stupidity of taking a position for or against the war without first interrogating the nature and type of reality proper to events such as those which unfolded in the Gulf and on our TV screens. For Baudrillard, in these essays, "it is not a question of being for or against the war. It is a question of being for or against *the reality of the war*. Analysis must not be sacrificed to the expression of anger. It must be entirely directed against reality, against the evidence; here, against the evidence of this war."[10]

Accordingly, a primary concern of the second essay, "The Gulf War: is it really taking place?", is to interrogate the nature of the Gulf War as a media event. This is not a war but a simulacrum of war, a virtual event which is less the representation of real war than a spectacle which serves a variety of political and strategic purposes on all sides. Here, the sense in which Baudrillard speaks of events as virtual is related to the idea that real events lose their identity when they attain the velocity of real time information, or to employ another metaphor, when they become encrusted with the information which represents them. In this sense, while televisual information claims to provide immediate access to real events, in fact what it does is produce informational events which stand in for the real, and which "inform" public opinion which in turn affects the course of subsequent events, both real and informational. As consumers of mass media, we never experience the bare material event but only the informational coating which renders it "sticky and unintelligible" like the oil-soaked sea bird.(32) Where was this image captured and what oil spill caused it? Who caused the oil spill to begin with? To the extent that real events are mediated and portrayed by such selected images, they become contaminated by what Baudrillard calls "the structural unreality of images."(46–7) The result is a new kind of entity, qualitatively different to "real" or "imaginary" events as these were understood prior to the advent of modern communications technology: virtual media events. These are informational entities and one of their defining characteristics is to be always open to interpretation. Informational events are thus the objects of endless speculation: because a range of interpre-

tations is always possible, the identity of such events becomes vague or undecidable. Baudrillard's Gulf War essays provide many examples of such aporia: for example, throughout much of its duration, the war is both a non-event, an empty war in the sense that there is a lack of real engagement between the combatants, and an excessive, superabundant war in terms of the quantity of personnel and material involved.(33–4) On the one hand, the American decision-makers are unable to perceive the Other in any terms but their own, and as a result they misrecognise the strategic aims of Saddam Hussein; on the other, Hussein is entirely a mercenary beholden to outside forces and it is the West which is in conflict with itself in Iraq.(37–8) Finally, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait may be represented as the outcome of the megalomaniac ambitions of a local dictator, or as the result of a deliberate ploy on the part of the American administration in order to legitimise its projection of force into the region.(71–2)

The images of war nonetheless have real effects and become enmeshed in the ensuing material and social reality. In this sense, Baudrillard argues, we live in a hyperreality which results from the fusion of the virtual and the real into a third order of reality. Much has been written since the Gulf crisis about the role of the media in promoting the military option, and about the practice of misinformation, lies and propaganda on both sides. There is no doubt that such things occurred. One of the more effective propaganda stories about Iraqi atrocities in Kuwait was the eye-witness account, before a Congressional Human Rights Caucus, of Iraqi soldiers removing babies from incubators and leaving them to die. It later emerged that the

witness was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the US, and that she had been coached by a public relations firm hired by the Kuwaiti Government.[11] On the other side, television footage of an outraged woman amid the rubble of an Iraqi neighbourhood was later shown to have featured an Assistant Deputy Foreign Minister and former ambassador to the US.[12] For some critics, such manipulation constitutes an abuse of the democratic right to information. However, the danger of a critical response which is confined to the denunciation of such abuses is that this also sustains what Baudrillard calls a "hypocritical vision of television and information."(46) It judges the media by reference to a moral ideal, namely that of a good or truthful use of images and signs. In fact, there is nothing inherently good about images or signs, and they can just as readily be employed to deceive as to tell the truth. As Baudrillard argues in his article on Timisoara, the indignant attempt to maintain a moral defence against the principle of simulation which governs all forms of representation misses the point: "the image and information are subject to no principle of truth or reality."[13] In this sense, it is cynics such as Saddam Hussein and the US military commanders who are less naive and hypocritical in their willingness to control information and images in whatever ways best serve their strategic ends: "We believe that they immorally pervert images. Not so. They alone are conscious of the profound immorality of images..."(47)

Informational events such as the Gulf crisis are endemic to postmodern public life. Since they are by definition always open to interpretation, they may be made to serve a variety of political ends. They are an important vector of power. What matters

is to control the production and meaning of information in a given context. In effect, at least two strategies are in play with regard to the control of information in contemporary public life. During the "live" phase of a significant event such as the Gulf conflict or an election campaign, the strictest control of information is necessary in order to influence future developments. Wherever public opinion can feed back into a political process which includes the event in question, image and interpretation or "spin" upon current developments is vital. That is why the Gulf War movie was also an influential part of history even as it unfolded. Reports before and during the conflict phase directly influenced public opinion in support of the war. Film coverage of the bombing of retreating Iraqi forces was fundamental to the decision to end the war, since it was feared that such images would adversely affect public sentiment. The images of destruction and death along the road to Basra did not fit the script of the world's first high-tech clean war. Where enemy forces are reliant upon TV news for information, as it is argued the Iraqis were during the Gulf conflict, it becomes possible to employ the media directly as a conduit for disinformation. During the preparations for the land offensive, media reports of US Marines along the Saudi border with Kuwait and on amphibious ships off the coast were part of a calculated and successful strategy to deceive Iraqi commanders about the likely direction of the assault.[14] Reports of such deliberate deception imply that the use of media reports as part of the Allied military's operational conduct of the war was more extensive than even Baudrillard suggests.

However, once the live phase of the event is passed, another

strategy takes over. The proliferation of archival information including taped audio-visual records allows the event to become utterly dispersed into a morass of conflicting interpretations and hypotheses about what really happened. Did Saddam Hussein undertake the invasion of Kuwait against all indications or was he lured into a trap by US policy makers? Who was really responsible for the assassination of JFK? And who killed Laura Palmer? It is this latter effect of the proliferation of information which sets limits to the effectiveness of the kind of critical media analysis which seeks to discover the truth of events. The author of *The Persian Gulf TV War*, Douglas Kellner, recounts his herculean efforts to obtain and cross-check information about the Gulf War. Despite this, his book opens with an admission of failure: he cannot decide conclusively for or against the conspiracy theory according to which the US enticed Iraq to invade Kuwait since "other accounts are also plausible."[15] It is the desire to avoid this kind of informational aporia which lies behind Baudrillard's injunction: "Resist the probability of any image or information whatever. Be more virtual than the events themselves, do not seek to re-establish the truth, we do not have the means, but do not be duped, and to that end re-immerse the war and all information in the virtuality from whence they came ... Be meteorologically sensitive to stupidity."(66–7) Not only does the real vanish into the virtual through an excess of information, it leaves an archival deposit such that "generations of video-zombies ... will never cease reconstituting the event."(47)

And even if we did possess the means to establish the truth, what difference would this make? For every book exposing the

lies and inhumanity of US policy in the Gulf there are two more which champion it as the defence of democracy and the New World Order.

Christopher Norris regards Baudrillard's Gulf War essays as a definitive exposure of the intellectual and political bankruptcy of postmodern thought and a demonstration of "the depth of ideological *complicity* that exists between such forms of extreme anti-realist or irrationalist doctrine and the crisis of moral and political nerve" which afflicts Western intellectuals. According to Norris, Baudrillard's "absurd theses" about the war readily accord with "a 'postmodern' mood of widespread cynical acquiescence" and represent a form of "theory" which is "ill-equipped to mount any kind of effective critical resistance."[16] Claims of ideological complicity are notoriously difficult to prove or disprove, but there is little in Baudrillard's essays to suggest acquiescence in either the political and military operations carried out in the Gulf or their portrayal by the media. Indeed, the tone and argument of Baudrillard's essays is entirely directed against the complicity which results from the failure to question the reality and the nature of these events. Norris' own rhetorical stance is one which suggests that alternative theoretical approaches offer the prospect of "effective critical resistance." Yet Baudrillard at least published polemical pieces which addressed the political and media reality at the time. Norris seized the occasion to renew his campaign against the whole "postmodern tendency" in contemporary theory.

His argument largely repeats that of his earlier article on

Baudrillard and the politics of postmodernism.[17] On the one hand, he concedes the descriptive value of Baudrillard's account, allowing that "this is indeed in some sense a 'post-modern' war, an exercise in mass-manipulative rhetoric and 'hyperreal' suasive techniques, which does undoubtedly confirm some of Baudrillard's more canny diagnostic observations."[18] On the other, he rejects the epistemological scepticism which he takes to lie behind this postmodern tendency, and questions the supposed connection between the diagnosis of the postmodern condition and this philosophical conclusion. The flaw which runs through all postmodernist thinking is a confused epistemological argument which begins by denying that we have any means of access to "what happens" other than what is provided by the media, and ends by concluding on this basis that there is no "operative difference between truth and falsehood, veridical knowledge and its semblance."[19]

Understood in this manner, the thesis that the Gulf War did not take place would indeed be ludicrous, and would hardly justify the effort of a lengthy essay in reply. But epistemological scepticism founded upon the logic of representation is not part of Baudrillard's argument: not only does he make truth-claims about what happened, his interrogation of the reality of the media Gulf War presupposes that this is a different kind of event from those which occurred in the desert, a simulacrum rather than a distorted or misleading representation. These essays advance no universal claims about the collapse of the real into its forms of representation, but rather make specific ontological claims about aspects of present social reality, such as the virtual war which results from the strategy of deterrence and the

virtual informational war which we experience through the media. At one point, it is true, Baudrillard reminds us that the direct transmission by CNN of information in real time does not prove that war is taking place.(61) However, his claim that the Gulf War did not take place does not depend upon the possibility of such technological fraud. Rather, it relies upon the two distinct notions of virtual war involved in deterrence and media simulation, and upon questioning whether the military operations undertaken by the Allies really constituted a war in the traditional sense. Useful criticism would engage with these notions rather than, as Norris does, attack a soft target of the critic's own invention.

Does the refusal of the critical strategy which seeks to re-establish the truth of what happened commit Baudrillard to the irrationalist denial that any military engagement took place? Alternatively, does the fact of military conflict constitute a refutation of the hypothesis that there was no Gulf War? It does only if we accept that what did take place out there in the desert beyond the reach of the TV cameras was in fact a war. Baudrillard's argument in "The Gulf War did not take place" is not that nothing took place, but rather that what took place was not a war. In the past, war has always involved an antagonistic and destructive confrontation between adversaries, a dual relation between warring parties. In several respects, this was not the case in the Gulf conflict. The disparity between US and Iraqi forces with regard to method and military technology was so great that direct engagement rarely took place, and

when it did the outcome was entirely predictable. Whereas Iraq was disposed to fight in the manner of its previous war with Iran, and prepared to tolerate the massive casualties which would result from a ground-based war of attrition, the US and its allies sought a rapid conflict based upon airpower, high-technology intelligence and weapons systems, and the extensive use of electronic warfare. The almost complete absence of any engagement by Iraqi planes, and the fate of their technologically inferior tanks, testify to the one-sided nature of the conflict: "it is as though the Iraqis were electrocuted, lobotomised, running towards the television journalists in order to surrender or immobilised beside their tanks ... can this be called a war?" (67–8)

In his defence of the rationalist outlook which rejects the postmodern reduction of truth to consensus belief, Norris points to the figure of Chomsky as someone who is both a defender of Enlightenment ideals in morality and the philosophy of language, and a staunch critic of US foreign policy, a model of the liberal and critical intellectual. Yet Chomsky has also questioned whether what took place in the Gulf in 1990-1 was a war. He writes: "As I understand the concept 'war', it involves two sides in combat, say, shooting at each other. That did not happen in the Gulf."[20] He goes on to describe the successive phases of the conflict as involving varieties of state terrorism practised on both sides, and a form of slaughter practised by US and UK air and ground forces upon Iraqi soldiers and civilians. Other commentators have argued that the disparity between the aims, methods and military technology of the two sides was so great that what occurred cannot be con-

sidered an adversarial encounter. The imbalance of military means was such that this was not a conflict in which the survival of both sides was in play, but an entirely asymmetrical operation, an exercise in domination rather than an act of war.

The claim that war itself has become virtual does not mean that military conflicts do not occur: they do and with increasing frequency and savagery in the New World Order. But these are secondary phenomena, like the persistence of sweatshops alongside fully automated production facilities. They are the consequences of a law of uneven development, located for the most part in a political and military third world. Where they do involve first world powers such as the US or UK, it is because they are in conflict with third world forces who do not recognise that the rules of the game have changed, or who, like Saddam Hussein, operate according to different rules. They are police operations rather than wars. In these cases, deterrence breaks down for lack of any common ground, and it is this failure of communication which leads to the use of force. However, the use of force remains carefully circumscribed, a lever of last resort employed only to the extent that is necessary to bring the recalcitrant party into line. The crucial stake in the Gulf affair, Baudrillard argues, was the subordination of Islam to the global order: "Our wars thus have less to do with the confrontation of warriors than with the domestication of the refractory forces on the planet ... All that is singular and irreducible must be reduced and absorbed. This is the law of democracy and the New World Order." (86)

This is not war, and even if it were, in the case of the Gulf conflict, it is as though it never happened. The final irony of the

whole episode is that, apart from the massive damage and suffering inflicted upon Iraq, and the short-lived political and economic benefits at home, very little changed as a result of the military conflict. The Iraqi regime was allowed to remain intact, and its army permitted to crush the Kurdish and Shiite rebellions. The rights of Kuwait may have been restored, but in exchange for the rights of minorities in Iraq. The image of a just war fought between the forces of freedom and those of tyranny dissolved in the moral ambiguities of the post-conflict period. The same Americans who had systematically destroyed Iraq's power grid and transport infrastructure now refused to enforce the law of democracy and the New World Order where this would entail intervening in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. From a political point of view, it was no longer clear what had been gained by the sacrifice of so many lives. A perfect semblance of victory for the Americans was exchanged for the perfect semblance of defeat for Iraq.(71) In short, the Gulf War did not take place.

Several people answered my queries, discussed the text and read drafts of this translation. In addition to Jean Baudrillard, I would like to thank Rex Butler, Alan Cholodenko, Michael McKinley and Larbi Sadiki for their valuable assistance. I am especially grateful to Julian Pefanis and José Borghino for their careful checking and editing of the translation.

Notes

1 Jean Baudrillard, *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1991. All subsequent references to this text in the Introduction refer to the translation which follows.
2 George Gerbner, "Persian Gulf War, the Movie" in *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf — A Global Perspective*, edited by H. Mowlana, G. Gerbner and H.I. Schiller, Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1992, p.252.
3 Gerbner, pp.244, 247.
4 Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed Mark Poster, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, p.166.
5 Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.113.
6 Bruce Sterling, "War is Virtual Hell", *Wired* (1), 1993, pp.95-6.
7 Lieutenant-Colonel Jeffrey D. McCausland, *Adelphi Paper 282*, London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1993, p.29.
8 *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, ed Mike Gane, London and New York, Routledge, pp.180-1, 203.
9 "Les charniers de Timisoara", in J. Baudrillard, *L'Illusion de la fin ou la grève des événements*, Paris: Editions Galllée, 1993; "Pas de pitié pour Sarajevo", *Libération*, 7 January 1994.
10 Baudrillard, *L'illusion de la fin*, p.95.
11 Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1992, pp.67–8.
12 McCausland, *Adelphi Paper 282*, p.32.
13 Baudrillard, *L'illusion de la fin*, p.90.
14 William J. Taylor Jr and James Blackwell, "The Ground War in the Gulf", *Survival*, vol. XXXIII, no.3, May/June 1991, p.234.
15 Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, pp.7, 13.
16 Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992, pp.27, 29.
17 Norris, "Lost in the Funhouse: Baudrillard and the politics of postmodernism", in *What's Wrong With Postmodernism*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990, pp.164-93.
18 Norris, *Uncritical Theory* pp.25-6.
19 Norris, *Uncritical Theory* p.12.
20 Noam Chomsky, "The Media and the War: What War?", in *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf — A Global Perspective*, edited by H. Mowlana, G. Gerbner and H.I. Schiller, p.51.

The Gulf War will not take place

From the beginning, we knew that this war would never happen. After the hot war (the violence of conflict), after the cold war (the balance of terror), here comes the dead war — the unfrozen cold war — which leaves us to grapple with the corpse of war and the necessity of dealing with this decomposing corpse which nobody from the Gulf has managed to revive. America, Saddam Hussein and the Gulf powers are fighting over the corpse of war.

War has entered into a definitive crisis. It is too late for the (hot) WW III: this has already taken place, distilled down the years into the Cold War. There will be no other. It might have been supposed that the defection of the Eastern Bloc would have opened up new spaces of freedom for war by unlocking deterrence. Nothing of the sort, since deterrence has not come to an end, on the contrary. In the past it functioned as reciprocal deterrence between the two blocs on the basis of a virtual excess of the means of destruction. Today it functions all the

more effectively as self-deterrence, total self-deterrence up to and including the self-dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, the profound self-deterrence of American power and of Western power in general, paralysed by its own strength and incapable of assuming it in the form of relations of force.

This is why the Gulf War will not take place. It is neither reassuring nor comforting that it has become bogged in interminable suspense. In this sense, the gravity of the non-event in the Gulf is even greater than the event of war: it corresponds to the highly toxic period which affects a rotting corpse and which can cause nausea and powerless stupor. Here again, our symbolic defences are weak: the mastery of the end of war escapes us and we live all this in a uniform shameful indifference, just like the hostages.

Non-war is characterised by that degenerate form of war which includes hostage manipulation and negotiation. Hostages and blackmail are the purest products of deterrence. The hostage has taken the place of the warrior. He has become the principal actor, the simulacral protagonist, or rather, in his pure inaction, the protagoniser of non-war. The warriors bury themselves in the desert leaving only hostages to occupy the stage, including all of us as information hostages on the world media stage. The hostage is the phantom actor, the extra who occupies the powerless stage of war. Today, it is the hostage at the strategic site, tomorrow the hostage as Christmas present, as exchange value and liquidity. Fantastic degradation of that which was the very figure of impossible exchange. With Saddam Hussein, even that strong value has weakened and become the symbol of weak war. Saddam has made himself the

capitalist of hostage value; after the market in slaves and proletarians, the vulgar merchant of the hostage market. Taking the place of the warrior's challenge, hostage value has become synonymous with the debility of war. We are all hostages of media intoxication, induced to believe in the war just as we were once led to believe in the revolution in Romania, and confined to the simulacrum of war as though confined to quarters. We are already all strategic hostages *in situ*; our site is the screen on which we are virtually bombarded day by day, even while serving as exchange value. In this sense, the grotesque vaudeville played by Saddam Hussein is a diversion, at once a diversion of both war and international terrorism. His soft terrorism will at least have put an end to the hard terrorism of Palestinians and others, thereby showing him to be in this as in many other respects the perfect accomplice of the West.

This impossibility of proceeding to the act, this absence of strategy, implies the triumph of blackmail as strategy (in the case of Iran, there was still a challenge; with Saddam there is only blackmail). Saddam Hussein's abjection lies in his having vulgarised everything: religious challenge has become fake holy war, the sacrificial hostage a commercial hostage, the violent refusal of the West a nationalistic scam and war an impossible comedy. But we have helped him to do this. By allowing him to believe that he had won the war against Iran, we drove him towards the mirage of a victory against the West — this mercenary's revolt is indeed the only ironic and pleasing trait of this whole story.

We are in neither a logic of war nor a logic of peace but in a logic of deterrence which has wound its way inexorably through forty years of cold war to a denouement in our current events; a logic of weak events, to which belong those in Eastern Europe as well as the Gulf War. Peripeteias of an anorexic history or an anorexic war which can no longer devour the enemy because it is incapable of conceiving the enemy as worthy of being challenged or annihilated — and God knows Saddam Hussein is worthy of neither challenge nor annihilation — and thus devours itself. It is the de-intensified state of war, that of the right to war under the green light of the UN and with an abundance of precautions and concessions. It is the bellicose equivalent of safe sex: make war like love with a condom! On the Richter scale, the Gulf War would not even reach two or three. The build-up is unreal, as though the fiction of an earthquake were created by manipulating the measuring instruments. It is neither the strong form nor the degree zero of war, but the weak or phthisical degree, the asymptotic form which allows a brush with war but no encounter, the transparent degree which allows war to be seen from the depths of the darkroom.

We should have been suspicious about the disappearance of the declaration of war, the disappearance of the symbolic passage to the act, which already presaged the disappearance of the end of hostilities, then of the distinction between winners and losers (the winner readily becomes the hostage of the loser: the Stockholm syndrome), then of operations themselves. Since it never began, this war is therefore interminable. By dint of dreaming of pure war, of an orbital war purged of all

local and political peripeteias, we have fallen into soft war, into the virtual impossibility of war which translates into the paltry fantasia where adversaries compete in de-escalation, as though the irruption or the event of war had become obscene and insupportable, no longer sustainable, like every real event moreover. Everything is therefore transposed into the virtual, and we are confronted with a virtual apocalypse, a hegemony ultimately much more dangerous than real apocalypse.

The most widespread belief is in a logical progression from virtual to actual, according to which no available weapon will not one day be used and such a concentration of force cannot but lead to conflict. However, this is an Aristotelian logic which is no longer our own. Our virtual has definitively overtaken the actual and we must be content with this extreme virtuality which, unlike the Aristotelian, deters any passage to action. We are no longer in a logic of the passage from virtual to actual but in a hyperrealist logic of the deterrence of the real by the virtual.

In this process, the hostages are once again revealing. Extracted like molecules in an experimental process, then distilled one by one in the exchange, it is their virtual death that is at issue, not their real death. Moreover, they never die: at best they disappear. There will never be a monument to the unknown hostage, everyone is too ashamed of him: the collective shame which attaches to the hostage reflects the absolute degradation of real hostility (war) into virtual hospitality (Saddam Hussein's "guests").

The passage to action suffers widespread infamy: it supposedly corresponds to a brutal lifting of repression, thus to a psy-

chotic process. It seems that this obsession with the passage to action today governs all our behaviour: obsession with every real, with every real event, with every real violence, with every pleasure which is too real. Against this obsession with the real we have created a gigantic apparatus of simulation which allows us to pass to the act "in vitro" (this is true even of procreation). We prefer the exile of the virtual, of which television is the universal mirror, to the catastrophe of the real.

War has not escaped this virtualisation which is like a surgical operation, the aim of which is to present a face-lifted war, the cosmetically treated spectre of its death, and its even more deceptive televisual subterfuge (as we saw at Timisoara). Even the military has lost the privilege of use value, the privilege of real war. Deterrence has passed by that way and it spares no-one. No more than the politicians, the military personnel do not know what to make of their real function, their function of death and destruction. They are pledged to the decoy of war as the others are to the decoy of power.

PS To demonstrate the impossibility of war just at the moment when it must take place, when the signs of its occurrence are accumulating, is a stupid gamble. But it would have been even more stupid not to seize the opportunity.

The Gulf War: is it really taking place?

We may well ask. On the available evidence (absence of images and profusion of commentary), we could suppose an immense promotional exercise like that one which once advertised a brand-name (GARAP) whose product never became known. Pure promotion which enjoyed an immense success because it belonged to pure speculation.

The war is also pure and speculative, to the extent that we do not see the real event that it could be or that it would signify. It reminds us of that recent suspense advertisement: today I take off the top, tomorrow I take off the bottom; today I unleash virtual war, tomorrow I unleash real war. In the background, a third advertisement in which an avaricious and lubricious banker says: your money appeals to me. This sadly celebrated advertisement is reincarnated by Saddam Hussein saying to the West: your power appeals to me (as they rushed to palm off a good share of it to him); then to the Arabs, with the same hypocrisy: your religious war appeals to me (as they rushed to

put all their money on him).

In this manner, the war makes its way by promotion and speculation, including the use of hostages transformed into marketing ploys, and in the absence of any clarification of plans, balance sheets, losses or operations. No enterprise would survive such uncertainty, except precisely speculative risk management, otherwise known as the strategy of turning a profit from the worst, in other words, war (= Highly Profitable Senseless Project or HPSP). War itself has taken this speculative turn: it is highly profitable but uncertain. It can collapse from one day to the next.

Nevertheless, from this point onwards the promotional advantages are fabulous. Defeated or not, Saddam is assured of an unforgettable and charismatic label. Victorious or not, American armaments will have acquired an unequalled technological label. And the sumptuary expenditure in material is already equivalent to that of a real war, even if it has not taken place.

We have still not left the virtual war, in other words a sophisticated although often laughable build-up against the backdrop of a global indeterminacy of will to make war, even in Saddam's case. Hence the absence of images — which is neither accidental nor due to censorship but to the impossibility of illustrating this indeterminacy of the war.

Promotional, speculative, virtual: this war no longer corresponds to Clausewitz's formula of politics pursued by other means, it rather amounts to *the absence of politics pursued by other means*. Non-war is a terrible test of the status and the uncertainty of politics, just as a stock market crash (the specu-

lative universe) is a crucial test of the economy and of the uncertainty of economic aims, just as any event whatever is a terrible test of the uncertainty and the aims of information. Thus "real time" information loses itself in a completely unreal space, finally furnishing the images of pure, useless, instantaneous television where its primordial function irrupts, namely that of filling a vacuum, blocking up the screen hole through which escapes the substance of events.

Nor is promotion the pursuit of the economy by other means. On the contrary, it is the pure product of uncertainty with regard to the rational aims of production. This is why it has become a relentless function, the emptiness of which fills our screens to the extent of the absence of any economic finality or rationality. This is why it competes victoriously with the war on our screens, both alternating in the same virtual credit of the image.

The media promote the war, the war promotes the media, and advertising competes with the war. Promotion is the most thick-skinned parasite in our culture. It would undoubtedly survive a nuclear conflict. It is our Last Judgement. But it is also like a biological function: it devours our substance, but it also allows us to metabolise what we absorb, like a parasitic plant or intestinal flora, it allows us to turn the world and the violence of the world into a consumable substance. So, war or promotion?

The war, along with the fake and presumptive warriors, generals, experts and television presenters we see speculating about it all through the day, watches itself in a mirror: am I pretty enough, am I operational enough, am I spectacular

enough, am I sophisticated enough to make an entry onto the historical stage? Of course, this anxious interrogation increases the uncertainty with respect to its possible irruption. And this uncertainty invades our screens like a real oil slick, in the image of that blind sea bird stranded on a beach in the Gulf, which will remain the symbol-image of what we all are in front of our screens, in front of that sticky and unintelligible event.

Unlike earlier wars, in which there were political aims either of conquest or domination, what is at stake in this one is war itself: its status, its meaning, its future. It is beholden not to have an objective but to prove its very existence (this crisis of identity affects the existence of us all). In effect, it has lost much of its credibility. Who, apart from the Arab masses, is still capable of believing in it and becoming inflamed by it? Nevertheless, the spectacular drive of war remains intact. In the absence of the (greatly diminished) will to power, and the (problematic) will to knowledge, there remains today the widespread will to spectacle, and with it the obstinate desire to preserve its spectre or fiction (this is the fate of religions: they are no longer believed, but the disincarnate practice remains). Can war still be saved?

Certainly, Iran and Iraq did as much as they could to save the fiction of murderous, fratricidal, sacrificial and interminable (1914 style) war. But they were savages and that war from another period proved nothing with regard to the status and

the possibility of a modern war. WW III did not take place and yet we are already beyond it, as though in the utopian space of a post-war-which-did-not-take-place, and it is in the suspense created by this non-place that the present confrontations unfold and the question is posed: can a war still take place?

This one is perhaps only a test, a desperate attempt to see whether war is still possible.

Empty war: it brings to mind those games in World Cup football which often had to be decided by penalties (sorry spectacle), because of the impossibility of forcing a decision. As though the players punished themselves by means of "penalties" for not having been able to play and take the match in full battle. We might as well have begun with the penalties and dispensed with the game and its sterile stand-off. So with the war: it could have begun at the end and spared us the forced spectacle of this unreal war where nothing is extreme and which, whatever the outcome, will leave behind the smell of undigested programming, and the entire world irritated as though after an unsuccessful copulation.

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It is a war of excesses (of means, of material, etc.), a war of shedding or purging stocks, of experimental deployment, of liquidation and firesale, along with the display of future ranges of weaponry. A war between excessive, superabundant and overequipped societies (Iraq included), committed both to waste (including human waste) and the necessity of getting rid of it.

Just as the waste of time nourishes the hell of leisure, so technological wastes nourish the hell of war. Wastes which incarnate the secret violence of this society, uncoerced and non-degradable defecation. The renowned American stocks of WW II surplus, which appeared to us as luxury, have become a suffocating global burden, and war functions well within its possibilities in this role of purgative and expenditure.

If the critical intellectual is in the process of disappearing, it seems by contrast that his phobia of the real and of action has been distilled throughout the sanguineous and cerebral network of our institutions. In this sense, the entire world including the military is caught up in a process of intellectualisation.

See them become confused in explanations, outdo themselves in justifications and lose themselves in technical details (war drifts slowly into technological mannerism) or in the deontology of a pure electronic war without hitches: these are aesthetes speaking, postponing settlement dates into the interminable and decisions into the undecidable. Their war-processors, their radars, their lasers and their screens render the passage to war as futile and impossible as the use of a word-processor renders futile and impossible the passage to the act of writing, because it removes from it in advance any dramatic uncertainty.

The generals also exhaust their artificial intelligence in correcting their scenario, polishing their war script so much that they sometimes make errors of manipulation and lose the plot. The famous philosophical épochè has become universal, on the

screens as much as on the field of battle.

Should we applaud the fact that all these techniques of war-processing culminate in the elision of the duration and the violence of war? Only eventually, for the indefinite delay of the war is itself heavy with deadly consequences in all domains.

By virtue of having been anticipated in all its details and exhausted by all the scenarios, this war ends up resembling the hero of *Italien des Roses* (Richard Bohringer in the film by Charles Matton), who hesitates to dive from the top of a building for an hour and a half, before a crowd at first hanging on his movements, then disappointed and overcome by the suspense, exactly as we are today by the media blackmail and the illusion of war. It is as though it had taken place ten times already: why would we want it to take place again? It is the same in *Italien des Roses* : we know that his imaginary credit is exhausted and that he will not jump, and in the end nobody gives a damn whether he jumps or not because the real event is already left behind.

This is the problem with anticipation. Is there still a chance that something which has been meticulously programmed will occur? Does a truth which has been meticulously demonstrated still have a chance of being true? When too many things point in the same direction, when the objective reasons pile up, the effect is reversed. Thus everything which points to war is ambiguous: the build-up of force, the play of tension, the concentration of weapons, even the green light from the UN. Far from reinforcing the probability of the conflict, these function

as a preventative accumulation, as a substitution for and diversion from the transition to war.

Virtual for five months, the war will shortly enter its terminal phase, according to the rule which says that what never began ends without having taken place. The profound indeterminacy of this war stems from the fact of its being both terminated in advance and interminable. The virtual succeeds itself — accidents aside, which could only be the irruption of the other in the field. But no-one wants to hear talk of the other. Ultimately, the undecidability of the war is grounded in the disappearance of alterity, of primitive hostility, and of the enemy. War has become a celibate machine.

Thanks to this war, the extraordinary confusion in the Arab world is in the process of infecting the West — just revenge. In return, we try desperately to unify and stabilise them in order to exercise better control. It is an historic arm-wrestle: who will stabilise the other before being destabilised themselves? Confronted by the virulent and ungraspable instability of the Arabs and of Islam, whose defence is that of the hysteric in all his versatility, the West is in the process of demonstrating that its values can no longer lay claim to any universality than that (extremely fragile) of the UN.

Faced with the Western logic of under-compensation (the West tends towards the euphemisation and even the inhibition of its power), the Oriental logic of Saddam responds with over-

compensation. Although far from having proved himself against Iran, he attacks the West. He operates beyond the reach of his own forces, there where only God can help him. He undertakes an act of magical provocation and it is left to God, or some other predestined connection, to do the rest (this will in principle the role allotted to the Arab masses).

By contrast, through a kind of egocentric generosity or stupidity, the Americans can only imagine and combat an enemy in their own image. They are at once both missionaries and converts of their own way of life, which they triumphally project onto the world. They cannot imagine the Other, nor therefore personally make war upon it. What they make war upon is the alterity of the other, and what they want is to reduce that alterity, to convert it or failing that to annihilate it if it proves irreducible (the Indians). They cannot imagine that conversion and repentance, borne by their own good will, should have no echo in the other, and they are literally disturbed when they see Saddam playing with them and refusing to accede to their reasons. This is perhaps why they have decided to annihilate him, not out of hatred or calculation, but for the crime of felony, treachery, malevolent will and trickery (exactly as with the Indians).

For their part, the Israelis have no such tenderness. They see the Other in all its bare adversity without illusions or scruples. The Other, the Arab, is unconvertible, his alterity is without appeal; it must not be changed, it must be beaten down and subjugated. In doing so, however, while they may not understand they at least recognise it. The Americans, for their part, understand nothing and do not even recognise this fact.

It is not an important match which is being played out in the Gulf, between Western hegemony and the challenge from the rest of the world. It is the West in conflict with itself, by means of an interposed mercenary, after having been in conflict with Islam (Iran), also by means of an interposed Saddam. Saddam remains the fake enemy. At first the champion of the West against Islam, then the champion of Islam against the West. In both cases he is a traitor to his own cause since, even more than the few thousand incidental Westerners, it is the Arab masses that he holds hostage, captures for his own profit and immobilises in their suicidal enthusiasm. It is moreover towards Christmas, at the very moment when he frees the hostages (thereby skilfully stroking the Westerners with the same demagogy that he strokes the children in front of the TV), that he launches his call to the Arab people on the holy war.

It is thus a mistake to think that he would contribute to the unification of the Arab world and to honour him for that. In fact, he only did it to hoodwink them, to make them work for him, to deceive them once again and to render them powerless. People like him are necessary from time to time in order to channel irruptive forces. They serve as a poultice or an artifical purgative. It is a form of deterrence, certainly a Western strategy, but one of which Saddam, in his pride and his stupidity, is a perfect executant. He who loves decoys so much is himself no more than a decoy and his elimination can only demystify this war by putting an end to that objective complicity which itself is no decoy.

But, for this very reason, is the West determined to eliminate him?

The exhibition of American prisoners on Iraqi TV. Once more the politics of blackmail, of hostages, the humiliation of the USA by the spectacle of those "repentants" forced to avow symbolically American dishonour. Our own as well, we whom the screens submit to the same violence, that of the battered, manipulated and powerless prisoner, that of forced voyeurism in response to the forced exhibitionism of the images. Along with the spectacle of these prisoners or these hostages, the screens offer us the spectacle of our powerlessness. In a case such as this, information exactly fulfills its role which is to convince us of our own abjection by the obscenity of what is seen. The forced perversion of the look amounts to the avowal of our own dishonour, and makes repentants of us as well.

That the Americans should have allowed themselves to be ridiculed without departing from their own program and war indicates a weakness in their symbolic detonator. Humiliation remains the worst kind of test, arrogance (Saddam's) the worst kind of conduct, blackmail the worst kind of relationship and the acceptance of blackmail the worst kind of dishonour. The fact that this symbolic violence, worse than any sexual violence, should finally have been withstood without flinching testifies to the depth or the unconscious character of Western masochism. This is the rule of the American way of life: *nothing personal*! And they make war in the same manner: pragmatically and not symbolically. They thereby expose themselves to deadly situations which they are unable to confront. But perhaps they accept this in expiation of their power, in an equivalence which is after all symbolic?

Two intense images, two or perhaps three scenes which all concern disfigured forms or costumes which correspond to the masquerade of this war: the CNN journalists with their gas masks in the Jerusalem studios; the drugged and beaten prisoners repenting on the screen of Iraqi TV; and perhaps that seabird covered in oil and pointing its blind eyes towards the Gulf sky. It is a masquerade of information: branded faces delivered over to the prostitution of the image, the image of an unintelligible distress. No images of the field of battle, but images of masks, of blind or defeated faces, images of falsification. It is not war taking place over there but the disfiguration of the world.

There is a profound scorn in the kind of "clean" war which renders the other powerless without destroying its flesh, which makes it a point of honour to disarm and neutralise but not to kill. In a sense, it is worse than the other kind of war because it spares life. It is like humiliation: by taking less than life it is worse than taking life. There is undoubtedly a political error here, in so far as it is acceptable to be defeated but not to be put out of action. In this manner, the Americans inflict a particular insult by not making war on the other but simply eliminating him, the same as one would by not bargaining over the price of an object and thereby refusing any personal relationship with the vendor. The one whose price you accept without discussion despises you. The one whom you disarm without seeing is insulted and must be avenged. There is perhaps something of this in the presentation of those humiliated captives on television. It is in a sense to say to America: you who do not wish to

see us, we will show you what you are like.

Just as the psychical or the screen of the psyche transforms every illness into a symptom (there is no organic illness which does not find its meaning elsewhere, in an interpretation of the ailment on another level: all the symptoms pass through a sort of black box in which the psychic images are jumbled and inverted, the illness becomes reversible, ungraspable, escaping any form of realistic medicine), so war, when it has been turned into information, ceases to be a realistic war and becomes a virtual war, in some way symptomatic. And just as everything psychical becomes the object of interminable speculation, so everything which is turned into information becomes the object of endless speculation, the site of total uncertainty. We are left with the symptomatic reading on our screens of the effects of the war, or the effects of discourse about the war, or completely speculative strategic evaluations which are analogous to those evaluations of opinion provided by polls. In this manner, we have gone in a week from 20% to 50% and then to 30% destruction of Iraqi military potential. The figure fluctuates exactly like the fortunes of the stock market. "The land offensive is anticipated today, tomorrow, in a few hours, in any case sometime this week ... the climatic conditions are ideal for a confrontation, etc." Whom to believe? There is nothing to believe. We must learn to read symptoms as symptoms, and television as the hysterical symptom of a war which has nothing to do with its critical mass. Moreover, it does not seem to have to reach its critical mass but remains in its inertial phase,

while the implosion of the apparatus of information along with the accompanying tendency of the rate of information to fall seems to reinforce the implosion of war itself, with its accompanying tendency of the rate of confrontation to fall.

Information is like an unintelligent missile which never finds its target (nor, unfortunately, its anti-missile!), and therefore crashes anywhere or gets lost in space on an unpredictable orbit in which it eternally revolves as junk.

Information is only ever an erratic missile with a fuzzy destination which seeks its target but is drawn to every decoy — it is itself a decoy, in fact it scatters all over the environs and the result is mostly nil. The utopia of a targetted promotion or targetted information is the same as that of the targetted missile: it knows not where it lands and perhaps its mission is not to land but, like the missile, essentially to have been launched (as its name indicates). In fact, the only impressive images of missiles, rockets or satellites are those of the launch. It is the same with promotions or five year plans: the campaign launch is what counts, the impact or the end results are so uncertain that one frequently hears no more about them. The entire effect is in the programming, the success is that of the virtual model. Consider the Scuds: their strategic effectiveness is nil and their only (psychological) effect lies in the fact that Saddam succeeded in launching them.

The fact that the production of decoys has become an important branch of the war industry, just as the production of placebos has become an important branch of the medical

industry and forgery a flourishing branch of the art industry — not to mention the fact that information has become a privileged branch of industry as such — all of this is a sign that we have entered a deceptive world in which an entire culture labours assiduously at its counterfeit. This also means that it no longer harbours any illusion about itself.

It all began with the leitmotif of precision, of surgical, mathematical and punctual efficacy, which is another way of not recognising the enemy as such, just as lobotomy is a way of not recognising madness as such. And then all that technical virtuosity finished up in the most ridiculous uncertainty. The isolation of the enemy by all kinds of electronic interference creates a sort of barricade behind which he becomes invisible. He also becomes "stealthy," and his capacity for resistance becomes indeterminable. In annihilating him at a distance and as it were by transparency, it becomes impossible to discern whether or not he is dead.

The idea of a clean war, like that of a clean bomb or an intelligent missile, this whole war conceived as a technological extrapolation of the brain is a sure sign of madness. It is like those characters in Hieronymus Bosch with a glass bell or a soap bubble around their head as a sign of their mental debility. A war enclosed in a glass coffin, like Snow White, purged of any carnal contamination or warrior's passion. A clean war which ends up in an oil slick.

The French supplied the planes and the nuclear power stations, the Russians the tanks, the English the underground bunkers and runways, the Germans the gas, the Dutch the gas masks, while the Italians supplied the decoy equivalents of everything — tanks, bunkers, inflatable bombers, missiles with artificial thermal emissions, etc. Before so many marvels, one is drawn to compete in diabolical imagination: why not false gas masks for the Palestinians? Why not put the hostages at decoy strategic sites, a fake chemical factory for example?

Has a French plane been downed? The question becomes burning, it is our honour which is at stake. That would constitute a proof of our involvement, and the Iraqis appear to take a malicious pleasure in denying it (perhaps they have a more accurate idea of our involvement?). Whatever the situation, it will be necessary here too to set up decoys, simulated losses and *trompe l'oeil* victims (as with the fake destruction of civic buildings in Timisoara or Baghdad).

A war of high technological concentration but poor definition. Perhaps it has gone beyond its critical mass by too strong a concentration?

Fine illustration of the communication schema in which emitter and receiver on opposite sides of the screen, never connect with each other. Instead of messages, it is missiles and bombs which fly from one side to the other, but any dual or personal relation is altogether absent. Thus an aerial attack on

Iraq may be read in terms of coding, decoding and feedback (in this case, very bad: we cannot even know what we have destroyed). This explains the tolerance of the Israelis: they have only been hit by abstract projectiles, namely missiles. The least live bombing attack on Israel would have provoked immediate retaliation.

Communication is also a clean relation: in principle, it excludes any violent or personal affect. It is strange to see this disaffection, this profound indifference to one another, played out at the very heart of violence and war.

The fact that the undetectable Stealth bombers should have begun the war by aiming at decoys and undoubtedly destroying fake objectives, that the Secret Services (also "furtive") should have been so mistaken in so many ways about the realities of Iraqi weaponry, and the strategists so wrong about the effects of the intensive electronic war, all testifies to the illusionism of force once it is no longer measured against an adversary but against its abstract operation alone. All the generals, admirals and other meretricious experts should be sent to an inflatable strategic site, to see whether these decoys wouldn't in fact attract a real bomb on their heads.

Conversely, the Americans' innocence in admitting their mistake (declaring five months later that the Iraqi forces are almost intact while they themselves are not ready to attack) and all that counter-propaganda which adds to the confusion would be moving if it did not testify to the same strategic idiocy as the triumphal declarations at the outset, and did not further

take us for complicit witnesses of this suspicious sincerity of the kind which says: you see, we tell you everything. We can always give credit to the Americans for knowing how to exploit their failures by means of a sort of *trompe l'oeil* candour.

A UN bedtime story: the UN awoke (or was awakened) from its glass coffin (the building in New York). As the coffin fell and was shattered (at the same time as the Eastern Bloc), she spat out the apple and revived, as fresh as a rose, only to find at once the waiting Prince Charming: the Gulf War, also fresh from the arms of the cold war after a long period of mourning. No doubt together they will give birth to a New World Order, or else end up like two ghosts locked in vampiric embrace.

Seeing how Saddam uses his cameras on the hostages, the caressed children, the (fake) strategic targets, on his own smiling face, on the ruins of the milk factory, one cannot help thinking that in the West we still have a hypocritical vision of television and information, to the extent that, despite all the evidence, we hope for their proper use. Saddam, for his part, knows what the media and information are: he makes a radical, unconditional, perfectly cynical and therefore perfectly instrumental use of them. The Romanians too were able to make a perfectly immoral and mystificatory use of them (from our point of view). We may regret this, but given the principle of simulation which governs all information, even the most pious and objective, and given the structural unreality of

images and their proud indifference to the truth, these cynics alone are right about information when they employ it as an unconditional simulacrum. We believe that they immorally pervert images. Not so. They alone are conscious of the profound immorality of images, just as the Bokassas and Amin Dadas reveal, through the parodic and Ubuesque use they make of them, the obscene truth of the Western political and democratic structures they borrowed. The secret of the underdeveloped is to parody their model and render it ridiculous by exaggeration. We alone retain the illusion of information and of a right to information. They are not so naive.

Never any acting out, or passage to action, but simply acting: roll cameras! But there is too much film, or none at all, or it was desensitised by remaining too long in the humidity of the cold war. In short, there is quite simply nothing to see. Later, there will be something to see for the viewers of archival cassettes and the generations of video-zombies who will never cease reconstituting the event, never having had the intuition of the non-event of this war.

The archive also belongs to virtual time; it is the complement of the event "in real time," of that instantaneity of the event and its diffusion. Moreover, rather than the "revolution" of real time of which Virilio speaks, we should speak of an involution in real time; of an involution of the event in the instantaneity of everything at once, and of its vanishing in information itself. If we take note of the speed of light and the temporal short-circuit of pure war (the nanosecond), we see that this

involution precipitates us precisely into the virtuality of war and not into its reality, it precipitates us into the absence of war. Must we denounce the speed of light?

Utopia of real time which renders the event simultaneous at all points on the globe. In fact, what we live in real time is not the event, but rather in larger than life (in other words, in the virtual size of the image) the spectacle of the degradation of the event and its spectral evocation (the "spiritualism of information": event, are you there? Gulf War, are you there?) in the commentary, gloss, and verbose *mise en scène* of talking heads which only underlines the impossibility of the image and the correlative unreality of the war. It is the same aporia as that of *cinéma vérité* which seeks to short-circuit the unreality of the image in order to present us the truth of the object. In this manner, CNN seeks to be a stethoscope attached to the hypothetical heart of the war, and to present us with its hypothetical pulse. But this auscultation only provides a confused ultrasound, undecidable symptoms, and an assortment of vague and contradictory diagnoses. All that we can hope for is to see them die live (metaphorically of course), in other words that some event or other should overwhelm the information instead of the information inventing the event and commenting artificially upon it. The only real information revolution would be this one, but it is not likely to occur in the near future: it would presuppose a reversal of the idea we have of information. In the meantime, we will continue with the involution and encrustation of the event in and by information, and the closer we approach the

live and real time, the further we will go in this direction.

The same illusion of progress occurred with the appearance of speech and then colour on screen: at each stage of this progress we moved further away from the imaginary intensity of the image. The closer we supposedly approach the real or the truth, the further we draw away from them both, since neither one nor the other exists. The closer we approach the real time of the event, the more we fall into the illusion of the virtual. God save us from the illusion of war.

At a certain speed, the speed of light, you lose even your shadow. At a certain speed, the speed of information, things lose their sense. There is a great risk of announcing (or denouncing) the Apocalypse of real time, when it is precisely at this point that the event volatilises and becomes a black hole from which light no longer escapes. War implodes in real time, history implodes in real time, all communication and all signification implode in real time. The Apocalypse itself, understood as the arrival of catastrophe, is unlikely. It falls prey to the prophetic illusion. The world is not sufficiently coherent to lead to the Apocalypse.

Nevertheless, in confronting our opinions on the war with the diametrically opposed opinions of Paul Virilio, one of us betting on apocalyptic escalation and the other on deterrence and the indefinite virtuality of war, we concluded that this decidedly strange war went in both directions at once. The war's programmed escalation is relentless and its non-occurrence no less inevitable: the war proceeds at once towards the two extremes of intensification and deterrence. The war and the non-war

take place at the same time, with the same period of deployment and suspense and the same possibilities of de-escalation or maximal increase.

What is most extraordinary is that the two hypotheses, the apocalypse of real time and pure war along with the triumph of the virtual over the real, are realised at the same time, in the same space-time, each in implacable pursuit of the other. It is a sign that the space of the event has become a hyperspace with multiple refractivity, and that *the space of war has become definitively non-Euclidean*. And that there will undoubtedly be no resolution of this situation: we will remain in the undecidability of war, which is the undecidability created by the unleashing of the two opposed principles.

Soft war and pure war go boating.

There is a degree of popular good will in the micro-panic distilled by the airwaves. The public ultimately consents to be frightened, and to be gently terrorised by the bacteriological scenarios, on the basis of a kind of affective patriotism, even while it preserves a fairly profound indifference to the war. But it censors this indifference, on the grounds that we must not cut ourselves off from the world scene, that we must be mobilised at least as extras in order to rescue war: we have no other passion with which to replace it. It is the same with political participation under normal circumstances: this is largely second hand, taking place against a backdrop of spontaneous indifference. It is the same with God: even when we no longer believe, we continue to believe that we believe. In this hysteri-

cal replacement function, we identify at once those who are superfluous and they are many. By contrast, the few who advance the hypothesis of this profound indifference will be received as traitors.

By the force of the media, this war liberates an exponential mass of stupidity, not the particular stupidity of war, which is considerable, but the professional and functional stupidity of those who pontificate in perpetual commentary on the event: all the Bouvards and Pécuchets for hire, the would-be raiders of the lost image, the CNN types and all the master singers of strategy and information who make us experience the emptiness of television as never before. This war, it must be said, constitutes a merciless test. Fortunately, no one will hold this expert or general or that intellectual for hire to account for the idiocies or absurdities proffered the day before, since these will be erased by those of the following day. In this manner, everyone is amnestied by the ultra-rapid succession of phony events and phony discourses. The laundering of stupidity by the escalation of stupidity which reconstitutes a sort of total innocence, namely the innocence of washed and bleached brains, stupefied not by the violence but by the sinister insignificance of the images.

Chevènement in the desert: *Morituri te salutant!* Ridiculous. France with its old Jaguars and its presidential slippers.

Capillon on television: the benefit of this war will have been

to recycle our military leaders on television. One shudders at the thought that in another time, in a real war, they were operational on the battlefield.

Imbroglio: that pacifist demonstration in Paris, thus indirectly for Saddam Hussein, who does want war, and against the French Government which does not want it, and which from the outset gives all the signs of refusing to take part, or of doing so reluctantly.

Deserted shops, suspended vacations, the slowdown of activity, the city turned over to the absent masses: it may well be that, behind the alibi of panic, this war should be the dreamed-for opportunity to soft-pedal, the opportunity to slow down, to ease off the pace. The crazed particles calm down, the war erases the guerrilla warfare of everyday life. Catharsis? No: renovation. Or perhaps, with everyone glued at home, TV plays out fully its role of social control by collective stupefaction: turning uselessly upon itself like a dervish, it affixes populations all the better for deceiving them, as with a bad detective novel which we cannot believe could be so pointless.

Iraq is being rebuilt even before it has been destroyed. After-sales service. Such anticipation reduces even further the credibility of the war, which did not need this to discourage those who wanted to believe in it.

Sometimes a glimmer of black humour: the twelve thousand coffins sent along with the arms and ammunition. Here too, the Americans demonstrate their presumption: their projections and their losses are without common measure. But Saddam challenged them with being incapable of sacrificing ten thousand men in a war: they replied by sending twelve thousand coffins.

The overestimation of losses is part of the same megalomaniac light show as the publicised deployment of "Desert Shield" and the orgy of bombardment. The pilots no longer even have any targets. The Iraqis no longer even have enough decoys to cater for the incessant raids. The same target must be bombed five times. Mockery.

The British artillery unleashed for twenty four hours. Long since there was nothing left to destroy. Why then? In order "to cover the noise of the armoured columns advancing towards the front by the noise of the bombardment." Of course, the effect of surprise must be maintained (it is February 21). The best part is that there was no longer anyone there, the Iraqis had already left. Absurdity.

Saddam is a mercenary, the Americans are missionaries. But once the mercenary is beaten, the missionaries become *de facto* the mercenaries of the entire world. But the price for becoming a perfect mercenary is to be stripped of all political intelligence and all will. The Americans cannot escape it: if they want to be the police of the world and the New World Order, they must lose all political authority in favour of their operational capacity alone. They will become pure executants and everyone else

pure extras in the consensual and policed New World Order.

Whoever the dictator to be destroyed, any punitive force sure of itself is even more frightening. Having assumed the Israeli style, the Americans will henceforth export it everywhere and, just as the Israelis did, lock themselves into the spiral of unconditional repression.

For the Americans, the enemy does not exist as such. *Nothing personal.* Your war is of no interest to me, your resistance is of no interest to me. I will destroy you when I am ready. Refusal to bargain, whereas Saddam Hussein, for his part, bargains his war by overbidding in order to fall back, attempting to force the hand by pressure and blackmail, like a hustler trying to sell his goods. The Americans understand nothing in this whole psychodrama of bargaining, they are had every time until, with the wounded pride of the Westerner, they stiffen and impose their conditions. They understand nothing of this floating duel, this passage of arms in which, for a brief moment, the honour and dishonour of each is in play. They know only their virtue, and they are proud of their virtue. If the other wants to play, to trick and to challenge, they will virtuously employ their force. They will oppose the other's traps with their character armour and their armoured tanks. For them, the time of exchange does not exist. But the other, even if he knows that he will concede, cannot do so without another form of procedure. He must be recognised as interlocutor: this is the goal of the exchange. He must be recognised as an enemy: this is the whole aim of the war. For the Americans, bargaining is cheap whereas for the others it is a

matter of honour, (mutual) personal recognition, linguistic strategy (language exists, it must be honoured) and respect for time (altercation demands a rhythm, it is the price of there being an Other). The Americans take no account of these primitive subtleties. They have much to learn about symbolic exchange.

By contrast, they are winners from an economic point of view. No time lost in discussion, no psychological risk in any duel with the other: it is a way of proving that time does not exist, that the other does not exist, and that all that matters is the model and mastery of the model.

From a military point of view, to allow this war to endure in the way they have (instead of applying an Israeli solution and immediately exploiting the imbalance of force while short-circuiting all retaliatory effects), is a clumsy solution lacking in glory and full of perverse effects (Saddam's aura among the Arab masses). Nevertheless, in doing this, they impose a suspense, a temporal vacuum in which they present to themselves and to the entire world the spectacle of their virtual power. They will have allowed the war to endure as long as it takes, not to win but to persuade the whole world of the infallibility of their machine.

The victory of the model is more important than victory on the ground. Military success consecrates the triumph of arms, but the programming success consecrates the defeat of time. War-processing, the transparency of the model in the unfolding of the war, the strategy of relentless execution of a program, the electrocution of all reaction and any live initiative, including their own: these are more important from the point of view of general deterrence (of friends and foes alike) than the final

result on the ground. Clean war, white war, programmed war: more lethal than the war which sacrifices human lives.

We are a long way from annihilation, holocaust and atomic apocalypse, the total war which functions as the archaic imaginary of media hysteria. On the contrary, this kind of preventative, deterrent and punitive war is a warning to everyone not to take extreme measures and inflict upon themselves what they inflict on others (the missionary complex): the rule of the game that says everyone must remain within the limits of their power and not make war by any means whatever. Power must remain virtual and exemplary, in other words, virtuous. The decisive test is the planetary apprenticeship in this regulation. Just as wealth is no longer measured by the ostentation of wealth but by the secret circulation of speculative capital, so war is not measured by being waged but by its speculative unfolding in an abstract, electronic and informational space, the same space in which capital moves.

While this conjuncture does not exclude all accident (disorder in the virtual), it is nevertheless true that the probability of the irruption of those extreme measures and mutual violence which we call war is increasingly low.

Saddam the hysteric. Interminable shit kicker. The hysteric cannot be crushed: he is reborn from his symptoms as though from his ashes. Confronted by a hysteric, the other becomes paranoid, he deploys a massive apparatus of protection and

mistrust. He suspects the hysteric of bad faith, of ruse and dissimulation. He wants to constrain him to the truth and to transparency. The hysteric is irreducible. His means are decoys and the overturning of alliances. Confronted with this lubricity, this duplicity, the paranoid can only become more rigid, more obsessional. The most violent reproach addressed to Saddam Hussein by Bush is that of being a liar, a traitor, a bad player, a trickster. *Lying son of a bitch!* Saddam, like a good hysteric, has never given birth to his own war: for him, it is only a phantom pregnancy. By contrast, he has until now succeeded in preventing Bush from giving birth to his. And, with the complicity of Gorbachev, he almost succeeded in fucking him up the ass. But the hysteric is not suicidal, this is the advantageous other side to Saddam. He is neither mad nor suicidal. perhaps he should be treated by hypnosis?

The Iraqis and the Americans have at least one thing in common, a heinous crime which they (and with them the West) share. Many things about this war are explained by this anterior crime from which both sides sought to profit with impunity. The secret expiation of this crime feeds the Gulf War in its confusion and its allure of the settling of accounts. Such is the shared agreement to forget it that little is spoken about this prior episode (even by the Iranians), namely the war against Iran. Saddam must avenge his failure to win, even though he was the aggressor and sure of his impunity. He must avenge himself against the West which trained him for it, while the Americans, for their part, must suppress him as the embarrass-

ing accomplice in that criminal act.

For any government official or despot, power over his own people takes precedence over everything else. In the case of the Gulf War, this provides the only chance of a solution or a de-escalation. Saddam will prefer to concede rather than destroy his internal hegemony or sacrifice his army, etc. In this sense, sheltering his planes in Iran is a good sign: rather than an offensive sign, it is the ploy of a burglar who stashes his haul in order to retrieve it when he comes out of prison, thus an argument against any heroic or suicidal intention.

While one fraction of the intellectuals and politicians, specialists in the reserve army of mental labour, are whole-heartedly in favour of the war, and another fraction are against it from the bottom of their hearts, but for reasons no less disturbing, all are agreed on one point: this war exists, we have seen it. There is no interrogation into the event itself or its reality; or into the fraudulence of this war, the programmed and always delayed illusion of battle; or into the machination of this war and its amplification by information, not to mention the improbable orgy of material, the systematic manipulation of data, the artificial dramatisation ... If we do not have practical intelligence about the war (and none among us has), at least let us have a sceptical intelligence towards it, without renouncing the pathetic feeling of its absurdity.

But there is more than one kind of absurdity: that of the massacre and that of being caught up in the illusion of massacre. It is just as in La Fontaine's fable: the day there is a real

war you will not even be able to tell the difference. The real victory of the simulators of war is to have drawn everyone into this rotten simulation.

The Gulf War did not take place

Since this war was won in advance, we will never know what it would have been like had it existed. We will never know what an Iraqi taking part with a chance of fighting would have been like. We will never know what an American taking part with a chance of being beaten would have been like. We have seen what an ultra-modern process of electrocution is like, a process of paralysis or lobotomy of an experimental enemy away from the field of battle with no possibility of reaction. But this is not a war, any more than 10,000 tonnes of bombs per day is sufficient to make it a war. Any more than the direct transmission by CNN of real time information is sufficient to authenticate a war. One is reminded of *Capricorn One* in which the flight of a manned rocket to Mars, which only took place in a desert studio, was relayed live to all the television stations in the world.

It has been called a surgical war, and it is true that there is something in common between this *in vitro* destruction and *in vitro* fertilisation — the latter also produces a living being but it

is not sufficient to produce a child. Except in the New Genetic Order, a child issues from sexual copulation. Except in the New World Order, war is born of an antagonistic, destructive but dual relation between two adversaries. This war is an asexual surgical war, a matter of war-processing in which the enemy only appears as a computerised target, just as sexual partners only appear as code-names on the screen of *Minitel Rose*. If we can speak of sex in the latter case then perhaps the Gulf War can pass for a war.

The Iraqis blow up civilian buildings in order to give the impression of a dirty war. The Americans disguise satellite information to give the impression of a clean war. Everything in *trompe l'oeil*! The final Iraqi ploy: to secretly evacuate Kuwait and thereby mock the great offensive. With hindsight, the Presidential Guard itself was perhaps only a mirage; in any case, it was exploited as such until the end. All this is no more than a stratagem and the war ended in general boredom, or worse in the feeling of having been duped. Iraqi boasting, American hypocrisy. It is as though there was a virus infecting this war from the beginning which emptied it of all credibility. It is perhaps because the two adversaries did not even confront each other face to face, the one lost in its virtual war won in advance, the other buried in its traditional war lost in advance. They never saw each other: when the Americans finally appeared behind their curtain of bombs the Iraqis had already disappeared behind their curtain of smoke ...

The general effect is of a farce which we will not even have

had time to applaud. The only escalation will have been in decoys, opening onto the final era of great confrontations which vanish in the mist. The events in Eastern Europe still gave the impression of a divine surprise. No such thing in the Gulf, where it is as though events were devoured in advance by the parasite virus, the retro-virus of history. This is why we could advance the hypothesis that this war would not take place. And now that it is over, we can realise at last that it did not take place.

It was buried for too long, whether in the concrete and sand Iraqi bunkers or in the Americans' electronic sky, or behind that other form of sepulchre, the chattering television screens. Today everything tends to go underground, including information in its informational bunkers. Even war has gone underground in order to survive. In this forum of war which is the Gulf, everything is hidden: the planes are hidden, the tanks are buried, Israel plays dead, the images are censored and all information is blockaded in the desert: only TV functions as a medium without a message, giving at last the image of pure television.

Like an animal, the war goes to ground. It hides in the sand, it hides in the sky. It is like the Iraqi planes: it knows that it has no chance if it surfaces. It awaits its hour ... which will never come.

The Americans themselves are the vectors of this catalepsy. There is no question that the war came from their plan and its programmed unfolding. No question that, in their war, the Iraqis went to war. No question that the Other came from their computers. All reaction, even on their part (as we saw in the episode of the prisoners, which should have produced a violent

reaction), all abreaction against the program, all improvisation is abolished (even the Israelis were muzzled). What is tested here in this foreclosure of the enemy, this experimental reclusion of war, is the future validity for the entire planet of this type of suffocating and machinic performance, virtual and relentless in its unfolding. In this perspective, war could not take place. There is no more room for war than for any form of living impulse.

War stripped of its passions, its phantasms, its finery, its veils, its violence, its images; war stripped bare by its technicians even, and then reclothed by them with all the artifices of electronics, as though with a second skin. But these too are a kind of decoy that technology sets up before itself. Saddam Hussein's decoys still aim to deceive the enemy, whereas the American technological decoy only aims to deceive itself. The first days of the lightning attack, dominated by this technological mystification, will remain one of the finest bluffs, one of the finest collective mirages of contemporary History (along with Timisoara). We are all accomplices in these fantasmagoria, it must be said, as we are in any publicity campaign. In the past, the unemployed constituted the reserve army of Capital; today, in our enslavement to information, we constitute the reserve army of all planetary mystifications.

Saddam constructed his entire war as a decoy (whether deliberately or not), including the decoy of defeat which even more

resembles a hysterical syncope of the type: peek-a-boo, I am no longer there! But the Americans also constructed their affair as a decoy, like a parabolic mirror of their own power, taking no account of what was before them, or hallucinating those opposite to be a threat of comparable size to themselves: otherwise they would not even have been able to believe in their own victory. Their victory itself in the form of a triumphal decoy echoes the Iraqi decoy of defeat. Ultimately, both were accomplices as thick as thieves, and we were collectively abused. This is why the war remains indefinable and ungraspable, all strategy having given way to stratagem.

One of the two adversaries is a rug salesman, the other an arms salesman: they have neither the same logic nor the same strategy, even though they are both crooks. There is not enough communication between them to enable them to make war upon each other. Saddam will never fight, while the Americans will fight against a fictive double on screen. They see Saddam as he should be, a modernist hero, worth defeating (the fourth biggest army in the world!). Saddam remains a rug salesman who takes the Americans for rug salesmen like himself, stronger than he but less gifted for the scam. He hears nothing of deterrence. For there to be deterrence, there must be communication. It is a game of rational strategy which presupposes real time communication between the two adversaries; whereas in this war there was never communication at any moment, but always dislocation in time, Saddam evolving in a long time, that of blackmail, of procrastination, false advance, of retreat: the recurrent time of *The Thousand and One Nights* — exactly the inverse of real time. Deterrence in fact presupposes

a virtual escalation between the two adversaries. By contrast, Saddam's entire strategy rests upon de-escalation (one sets a maximal price then descends from it in stages). And their respective denouements are not at all the same. The failure of the sales pitch is marked by evasive action: the salesman rolls up his rug and leaves. Thus, Saddam disappears without further ado. The failure of deterrence is marked by force: this is the case with the Americans. Once again, there is no relation between the two, each plays in his own space and misses the other. We cannot even say that the Americans defeated Saddam: he defaulted on them, he de-escalated and they were not able to escalate sufficiently to destroy him.

Finally, who could have rendered more service to everyone, in such a short time at such little cost, than Saddam Hussein? He reinforced the security of Israel (reflux of the Intifada, revival of world opinion for Israel), assured the glory of American arms, gave Gorbachev a political chance, opened the door to Iran and Shiism, relaunched the UN, etc., all for free since he alone paid the price of blood. Can we conceive of so admirable a man? And he did not even fall! He remains a hero for the Arab masses. It is as though he were an agent of the CIA disguised as Saladin.

Resist the probability of any image or information whatever. Be more virtual than events themselves, do not seek to re-establish the truth, we do not have the means, but do not be duped, and to that end re-immerse the war and all information in the

virtuality from whence they come. Turn deterrence back against itself. Be meteorologically sensitive to stupidity.

In the case of this war, it is a question of the living illustration of an implacable logic which renders us incapable of envisaging any hypothesis other than that of its real occurrence. The realist logic which lives on the illusion of the final result. The denial of the facts is never one of them. The final resolution of an equation as complex as a war is never immediately apparent in the war. It is a question of seizing the logic of its unfolding, in the absence of any prophetic illusion. To be for or against the war is idiotic if the question of the very probability of this war, its credibility or degree of reality has not been raised even for a moment. All political and ideological speculations fall under mental deterrence (stupidity). By virtue of their immediate consensus on the evidence they feed the unreality of this war, they reinforce its bluff by their unconscious dupery.

The real warmongers are those who live on the ideology of the veracity of this war, while the war itself wreaks its havoc at another level by trickery, hyperreality, simulacra, and by the entire mental strategy of deterrence which is played out in the facts and in the images, in the anticipation of the real by the virtual, of the event by virtual time, and in the inexorable confusion of the two. All those who understand nothing of this involuntarily reinforce this halo of bluff which surrounds us.

It is as though the Iraqis were electrocuted, lobotomised, running towards the television journalists in order to surrender or immobilised beside their tanks, not even demoralised: de-cere-

bralised, stupefied rather than defeated — can this be called a war? Today we see the shreds of this war rot in the desert just like the shreds of the map in Borges' fable rotting at the four corners of the territory (moreover, strangely, he situates his fable in the same oriental regions of the Empire).

Fake war, deceptive war, not even the illusion but the disillusion of war, linked not only to defensive calculation, which translates into the monstrous prophylaxis of this military machine, but also to the mental disillusion of the combatants themselves, and to the global disillusion of everyone else by means of information. For deterrence is a total machine (it is the true war machine), and it not only operates at the heart of the event — where electronic coverage of the war devoured time and space, where virtuality (the decoy, programming, the anticipation of the end) devoured all the oxygen of war like a fuel-air explosive bomb — it also operates in our heads. Information has a profound function of deception. It matters little what it "informs" us about, its "coverage" of events matters little since it is precisely no more than a cover: its purpose is to produce consensus by flat encephalogram. The complement of the unconditional simulacrum in the field is to train everyone in the unconditional reception of broadcast simulacra. Abolish any intelligence of the event. The result is a suffocating atmosphere of deception and stupidity. And if people are vaguely aware of being caught up in this appeasement and this disillusion by images, they swallow the deception and remain fascinated by the evidence of the montage of this war with which we are inoculated everywhere: through the eyes, the senses and in discourse.

There are ironic balance sheets which help to temper the shock or the bluff of this war. A simple calculation shows that, of the 500,000 American soldiers involved during the seven months of operations in the Gulf, three times as many would have died from road accidents alone had they stayed in civilian life. Should we consider multiplying clean wars in order to reduce the murderous death toll of peacetime?

On this basis, we could develop a philosophy of perverse effects, which we tend to regard as always maleficent whereas in fact maleficent causes (war, illness, viruses) often produce beneficial perverse effects. They are no less perverse as a result, but more interesting than the others, in particular because it has been a matter of principle never to study them. Except for Mandeville, of course, in *The Fable of the Bees*, where he shows that every society prospers on the basis of its vices. But the course of events has drawn us further and further away from an intelligence of this order.

An example: deterrence itself. It only functions well between equal forces. Ideally, each party should possess the same weapons before agreeing to renounce their use. It is therefore the dissemination of (atomic) weapons alone which can ensure effective global deterrence and the indefinite suspension of war. The present politics of non-dissemination plays with fire: there will always be enough madmen to launch an archaic challenge below the level of an atomic riposte — witness Saddam. Things being as they are, we should place our hopes in the spread of weapons rather than in their (never respected) limitation. Here too, the beneficial perverse effect of dissemination should be taken into account. We should esca-

late in the virtual (of destruction) under penalty of de-escalating in the real. This is the paradox of deterrence. It is like information, culture or other material and spiritual goods: only their profusion renders them indifferent and neutralises their negative perverse effects. Multiply vices in order to ensure the collective good.

That said, the consequences of what did not take place may be as substantial as those of an historical event. The hypothesis would be that, in the case of the Gulf War as in the case of the events in Eastern Europe, we are no longer dealing with "historical events" but with places of collapse. Eastern Europe saw the collapse of communism, the construction of which had indeed been an historic event, borne by a vision of the world and a utopia. By contrast, its collapse is borne by nothing and bears nothing, but only opens onto a confused desert left vacant by the retreat of history and immediately invaded by its refuse.

The Gulf War is also a place of collapse, a virtual and meticulous operation which leaves the same impression of a non-event where the military confrontation fell short and where no political power proved itself. The collapse of Iraq and stupefaction of the Arab world are the consequences of a confrontation which did not take place and which undoubtedly never could take place. But this non-war in the form of a victory also consecrates the Western political collapse throughout the Middle East, incapable even of eliminating Saddam and of imagining or imposing anything apart from this new desert and police

order called world order.

As a consequence of this non-event and living proof of Western political weakness, Saddam is indeed still there, once again what he always was, the mercenary of the West, deserving punishment for not remaining in his place, but also worthy of continuing to gas the Kurds and the Shiites since he had the tact not to employ these weapons against those Western dogs, and worthy of keeping his Presidential Guard since he had the heart to not sacrifice them in combat. Miraculously (they were thought to have been destroyed), the Presidential Guard recovers all its valour against the insurgents. Moreover, it is typical of Saddam to prove his combativity and ferocity only against his internal enemies: as with every true dictator, the ultimate end of politics, carefully masked elsewhere by the effects of democracy, is to maintain control of one's own people by any means, including terror. This function embodied by dictatorships — that of being politically revealing and at the same time an alibi for democracies — no doubt explains the inexplicable weakness of the large powers towards them. Saddam liquidates the communists, Moscow flirts even more with him; he gasses the Kurds, it is not held against him; he eliminates the religious cadres, the whole of Islam makes peace with him. Whence this impunity? Why are we content to inflict a perfect semblance of military defeat upon him in exchange for a perfect semblance of victory for the Americans? This ignominious remounting of Saddam, replacing him in the saddle after his clown act at the head of the holy war, clearly shows that on all sides the war is considered not to have taken place. Even the last phase of this armed mystification will have changed nothing, for the

100,000 Iraqi dead will only have been the final decoy that Saddam will have sacrificed, the blood money paid in forfeit according to a calculated equivalence, in order to conserve his power. What is worse is that these dead still serve as an alibi for those who do not want to have been excited for nothing, nor to have been had for nothing: at least the dead would prove that this war was indeed a war and not a shameful and pointless hoax, a programmed and melodramatic version of what was the drama of war (Marx once spoke of this second, melodramatic version of a primary event). But we can rest assured that the next soap opera in this genre will enjoy an even fresher and more joyful credulity.

What a job Saddam has done for the Americans, from his combat with Iran up to this full scale debacle! Nevertheless, everything is ambiguous since this collapse removes any demonstrative value from American power, along with any belief in the Western ideologies of modernity, democracy, or secularity, of which Saddam had been made the incarnation in the Arab world.

We can see that the Western powers dreamt of an Islamic perestroika, on the newly formed model of Eastern Europe: democracy irresistibly establishing itself in those countries conquered by the forces of Good. The Arab countries will be liberated (the peoples cannot but want to be liberated), and the women of Saudi Arabia will have the right to drive. Alas! this is not to be.

The conquered have not been convinced and have withdrawn, leaving the victors only the bitter taste of an unreal made-to-order victory. Defeat can also be a rival bid and a new beginning, the chain of implication never stops. The eventual outcome is unpredictable and certainly will not be reckoned in terms of freedom.

No accidents occurred in this war, everything unfolded according to programmatic order, in the absence of passional disorder. Nothing occurred which would have metamorphosed events into a duel.

Even the status of the deaths may be questioned, on both sides. The minimal losses of the coalition pose a serious problem, which never arose in any earlier war. The paltry number of deaths may be cause for self-congratulation, but nothing will prevent this figure being paltry. Strangely, a war without victims does not seem like a real war but rather the prefiguration of an experimental, blank war, or a war even more inhuman because it is without human losses. No heroes on the other side either, where death was most often that of sacrificed extras, left as cover in the trenches of Kuwait, or civilians serving as bait and martyrs for the dirty war. Disappeared, abandoned to their lot, in the thick fog of war, held in utter contempt by their chief, without even the collective glory of a number (we do not know how many they are).

Along with the hostage or the repentant, the figure of the

"disappeared" has become emblematic in our political universe. Before, there were the dead and traitors, now there are the disappeared and the repentant: both blanks. Even the dead are blanks: "We have already buried them, they can no longer be counted," *dixit* Schwarzkopf. At Timisoara, there were too many of them, here there are not enough, but the effect is the same. The non-will to know is part of the non-war. Lies and shame appeared throughout this war like a sexually transmitted disease.

Blank out the war. Just as Kuwait and Iraq were rebuilt before they were destroyed, so at every phase of this war things unfolded as though they were virtually completed. It is not for lack of brandishing the threat of a chemical war, a bloody war, a world war — everyone had their say — as though it were necessary to give ourselves a fright, to maintain everyone in a state of erection for fear of seeing the flaccid member of war fall down. This futile masturbation was the delight of all the TVs. Ordinarily we denounce this kind of behaviour as emphatic or as empty and theatrical affectation: why not denounce an entire event when it is affected by the same hysteria?

In many respects, this war was a scandal of the same type as Timisoara. Not so much the war itself but the manipulation of minds and blackmail by the scenario. The worst scandal being the collective demand for intoxication, the complicity of all in the effects of war, the effects of reality and false transparency in this war. We could almost speak of media harassment along the lines of sexual harassment. Alas! the problem

always remains the same and it is insoluble: where does real violence begin, where does consenting violence end? Bluff and information serve as aphrodisiacs for war, just as the corpses at Timisoara and their global diffusion served as aphrodisiacs for the Romanian revolution.

But, ultimately, what have you got against aphrodisiacs? Nothing so long as orgasm is attained. The media mix has become the prerequisite to any orgasmic event. We need it precisely because the event escapes us, because conviction escapes us. We have a pressing need of simulation, even that of war, much more than we have of milk, jam or liberty, and we have an immediate intuition of the means necessary to obtain it. This is indeed the fundamental advance of our democracy: the image-function, the blackmail-function, the information-function, the speculation-function. The obscene aphrodisiac function fulfilled by the decoy of the event, by the decoy of war. Drug-function.

We have neither need of nor the taste for real drama or real war. What we require is the aphrodisiac spice of the multiplication of fakes and the hallucination of violence, for we have a hallucinogenic pleasure in all things, which, as in the case of drugs, is also the pleasure in our indifference and our irresponsibility and thus in our true liberty. Here is the supreme form of democracy. Through it our definitive retreat from the world takes shape: the pleasure of mental speculation in images equalling that of capital in a stock market run, or that of the corpses in the charnel house of Timisoara. But, ultimately, what have you got against drugs?

Nothing. Apart from fact that the collective disillusion is

terrible once the spell is broken; for example, when the corpses at Timisoara were uncovered, or when awareness of the subterfuge of the war takes hold. The scandal today is no longer in the assault on moral values but in the assault on the reality principle. The profound scandal which hereafter infects the whole sphere of information with a Timisoara-complex lay in the compulsory participation of the corpses, the transformation of the corpses into extras which in the same moment transforms all those who saw and believed in it into compulsory extras, so that they themselves become corpses in the charnel house of news signs. The odium lies in the malversation of the real, the faking of the event and the malversation of the war. The charnel houses of Timisoara are such a parody, so paltry by contrast with the real slaughter-houses of history! This Gulf War is such a sham, so paltry: the point is not to rehabilitate other wars, but rather that the recourse to the same pathos is all the more odious when there is no longer even the alibi of a war.

The presumption of information and the media here doubles the political arrogance of the Western empire. All those journalists who set themselves up as bearers of the universal conscience, all those presenters who set themselves up as strategists, all the while overwhelming us with a flood of useless images. Emotional blackmail by massacre, fraud. Instead of discussing the threshold of social tolerance for immigration we would do better to discuss the threshold of mental tolerance for information. With regard to the latter, we can say that it was deliberately crossed.

The delirious spectacle of wars which never happened: the transparent glacier of flights which never flew. All these events, from Eastern Europe or from the Gulf, which under the colours of war and liberation led only to political and historical disillusionment (it seems that the famous Chinese Cultural Revolution was the same: a whole strategy of more or less concerted internal destabilisation which short-circuited popular spontaneity), post-synchronisation events where one has the impression of never having seen the original. Bad actors, bad doubles, bad striptease: throughout these seven months, the war has unfolded like a long striptease, following the calculated escalation of undressing and approaching the incandescent point of explosion (like that of erotic effusion) but at the same time withdrawing from it and maintaining a deceptive suspense (teasing), such that when the naked body finally appears, it is no longer naked, desire no longer exists and the orgasm is cut short. In this manner, the escalation was administered to us by drip-feed, removing us further and further from the passage to action and, in any case, from the war. It is like truth according to Nietzsche: we no longer believe that the truth is true when all its veils have been removed. Similarly, we do not believe that war is war when all uncertainty is supposedly removed and it appears as a naked operation. The nudity of war is no less virtual than that of the erotic body in the apparatus of striptease.

On the slopes at Courchevel, the news from the Gulf War is relayed by loudspeakers during the intensive bombardments. Did the others over there, the Iraqis in the sand bunkers receive the snow reports from Courchevel?

February 22 was the day of the Apocalypse: the day of the unleashing of the land offensive behind its curtain of bombs, and in France, by a kind of black humour, the day of the worst traffic jam on the autoroutes to the snow. While the tanks advanced to the assault on Kuwait, the automobile hordes advanced to the assault on the snowfields. Moreover, the tanks went through much more easily than the waves of leisure-seekers. And the dead were more numerous on the snow front than on the war front. Are we so lacking in death, even in time of war, that it must be sought on the playing fields?

Stuck in traffic, one can always amuse oneself by listening to the Gulf radio reports: the time of information never stops, the slower things are on the roads the more things circulate on the wavelengths. Another distraction was that of the young couple who switched between watching the war on TV and their child to be, filmed and recorded in the mother's womb and made available on ultrasound cassette. When the war stops, they watch the kid. At the level of images it is the same combat: war before it has broken out, the child before it has been born. Leisure in the virtual era.

The liquidation of the Shiites and the Kurds by Saddam under the benevolent eye of the American divisions mysteriously stopped in their lightning advance "in order not to humiliate an entire people" offers a bloody analogy with the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871 under the eye of the Prussian

armies. And the good souls who cried out for seven months, for or against the war but always for the good cause, those who denounced the aberrations of the pro-Iraqi policy ten years after the event when it was no longer relevant, and all the repentants of the Rights of Man, once again do nothing. The world accepts this as the wages of defeat, or rather, on the American side, as the wages of victory. The same Americans who, after having dumped hundreds of thousands of tonnes of bombs, today claim to abstain from "intervening in the internal affairs of a State."

It is nevertheless admirable that we call the Arabs and Moslems traditionalists with the same repulsion that we call someone racist, even though we live in a typically traditionalist society although one simultaneously on the way to disintegration. We do not practise hard fundamentalist traditionalism, we practise soft, subtle and shameful democratic traditionalism by consensus. However, consensual traditionalism (that of the Enlightenment, the Rights of Man, the Left in power, the repentant intellectual and sentimental humanism) is every bit as fierce as that of any tribal religion or primitive society.

It denounces the other as absolute Evil in exactly the same manner (these are the words of François Mitterand apropos the Salman Rushdie affair: whence does he derive such an archaic form of thought?). The difference between the two traditionalisms (hard and soft) lies in the fact that our own (the soft) holds all the means to destroy the other and does not resile from their use. As though by chance, it is always the

Enlightenment fundamentalist who oppresses and destroys the other, who can only defy it symbolically. In order to justify ourselves, we give substance to the threat by turning the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie into a sword of Damocles hanging over the Western world, sustaining a disproportionate terror in complete misrecognition of the difference between symbolic challenge and technical aggression. In the long run, the symbolic challenge is more serious than a victorious aggression. If a simple *fatwa*, a simple death sentence can plunge the West into such depression (the vaudeville of terror on the part of writers and intellectuals on this occasion could never be portrayed cruelly enough), if the West prefers to believe in this threat, it is because it is paralysed by its own power, in which it does not believe, precisely because of its enormity (the Islamic "neurosis" would be due to the excessive tension created by the disproportion of ends; the disproportion of means from which we suffer creates by contrast a serious depression, a neurosis of powerlessness). If the West believed in its own power, it would not give a moment's thought to this threat. The most amusing aspect, however, is that the other does not believe in his powerlessness either, and he who does not believe in his powerlessness is stronger than he who does not believe in his power, be this a thousand times greater. The Arab *Book of Ruses* gives a thousand examples of this, but the West has no intelligence of such matters.

This is how we arrive at an unreal war in which the over-dimensioned technical power in turn over-evaluates the real forces of an enemy which it cannot see. And if it is astonished when it so easily triumphs this is because it knows neither how

to believe in itself nor how to ruse with itself. By contrast, what it does know obscurely is that in its present form it can be annihilated by the least ruse.

The Americans would do well to be more astonished at their "victory," to be astonished at their force and to find an equivalent for it in the intelligence (of the other), lest their power play tricks with them. Thus, if the cunning but stupid Saddam had conceded one week earlier, he would have inflicted a considerable political defeat on the Americans. But did he want to? In any case, he succeeded in his own reinstatement, whereas they had sworn to destroy him. But did they swear it? Saddam played the Americans' game at every turn, but even defeated he was the better player at ruse and diversion. The *Book of Ruses* still harbours many secrets unknown to the Pentagon.

Brecht: "This beer isn't a beer, but that is compensated for by the fact that this cigar isn't a cigar either. If this beer wasn't a beer and this cigar really was a cigar, then there would be a problem." In the same manner, this war is not a war, but this is compensated for by the fact that information is not information either. Thus everything is in order. If this war had not been a war and the images had been real images, there would have been a problem. For in that case the non-war would have appeared for what it is: a scandal. Similarly, if the war had been a real war and the information had not been information, this non-information would have appeared for what it is: a scandal. In both cases, there would have been a problem.

There is one further problem for those who believe that this

war took place: how is it that a real war did not generate real images? Same problem for those who believe in the Americans' "victory": how is it that Saddam is still there as though nothing had happened?

Whereas everything becomes coherent if we suppose that, given this victory was not a victory, the defeat of Saddam was not a defeat either. Everything evens out and everything is in order: the war, the victory and the defeat are all equally unreal, equally non-existent. The same coherence in the irreality of the adversaries: the fact that the Americans *never saw* the Iraqis is compensated for by the fact that the Iraqis never fought them.

Brecht again: "As for the place not desired, there is something there and that's disorder. As for the desired place, there is nothing there and that's order."

The New World Order is made up of all these compensations and the fact that there is nothing rather than something, on the ground, on the screens, in our heads: consensus by deterrence. At the desired place (the Gulf), nothing took place, non-war. At the desired place (TV, information), nothing took place, no images, nothing but filler. Not much took place in all our heads either, and that too is in order. The fact that there was nothing at this or that desired place was harmoniously compensated for by the fact that there was nothing elsewhere either. In this manner, the global order unifies all the partial orders.

In Eastern Europe, global order was re-established in accordance with the same paradoxical dialectic: where there was

something (communism, but this was precisely disorder from a global point of view), today there is nothing, but there is order. Things are in democratic order, even if they are in the worst confusion.

The Arabs: there where they should not be (immigrants), there is disorder. There where they should be (in Palestine) but are not, there is order. The fact that in the Arab world nothing is possible, not even war, and that Arabs are deterred, disappointed, powerless and neutralised, that is order. But this is harmoniously compensated for by the fact that at the marked place of power (America), there is no longer anything but a total political powerlessness.

Such is the New World Order.

A variant on Clausewitz: *non-war is the absence of politics pursued by other means* ... It no longer proceeds from a political will to dominate or from a vital impulsion or an antagonistic violence, but from the will to impose a general consensus by deterrence. This consensual violence can be as deadly as conflictual violence, but its aim is to overcome any hegemonic rivalry, even when cold and balanced by terror, as it has been over the last forty years. It was already at work in all the democracies taken one by one; it operates today on a global level which is conceived as an immense democracy governed by a homogeneous order which has as its emblem the UN and the Rights of Man. The Gulf War is the first consensual war, the first war conducted legally and globally with a view to putting an end to war and liquidating any confrontation likely to threaten the hence-

forward unified system of control. This was already the aim of dualistic (East and West) deterrence; today we pass to the monopolistic stage under the aegis of American power. Logically, this democratic and consensual form should be able to dispense with war, but it will no doubt continue to have local and episodic need of it. The Gulf War is one of these transitive episodes, hesitating for this reason between hard and soft forms: virtual war or real war? But the balance is in the process of definitively inclining in one direction, and tomorrow there will be nothing but the virtual violence of consensus, the simultaneity in real time of the global consensus: this will happen tomorrow and it will be the beginning of a world with no tomorrow.

Electronic war no longer has any political objective strictly speaking: it functions as a preventative electroshock against any future conflict. Just as in modern communication there is no longer any interlocutor, so in this electronic war there is no longer any enemy, there is only a refractory element which must be neutralised and consensualised. This is what the Americans seek to do, these missionary people bearing electroshocks which will shepherd everybody towards democracy. It is therefore pointless to question the political aims of this war: the only (transpolitical) aim is to align everybody with the global lowest common denominator, the democratic denominator (which, in its extension, approaches ever closer to the degree zero of politics). The lowest common multiplier being information in all its forms, which, as it extends towards infinity, also approaches ever closer to the degree zero of its content.

In this sense, consensus as the degree zero of democracy

and information as the degree zero of opinion are in total affinity: the New World Order will be both consensual and televisual. That is indeed why the targeted bombings carefully avoided the Iraqi television antennae (which stand out like a sore thumb in the sky over Baghdad). War is no longer what it used to be ...

The crucial stake, the decisive stake in this whole affair is the consensual reduction of Islam to the global order. Not to destroy but to domesticate it, by whatever means: modernisation, even military, politicisation, nationalism, democracy, the Rights of Man, anything at all to electrocute the resistances and the symbolic challenge that Islam represents for the entire West. There is no miracle, the confrontation will last as long as this process has not reached its term; by contrast, it will stop as though of its own accord the day when this form of radical challenge has been liquidated. This was how it happened in the Vietnam war: the day when China was neutralised, when the "wild" Vietnam with its forces of liberation and revolt was replaced by a truly bureaucratic and military organisation capable of ensuring the continuation of Order, the Vietnam war stopped immediately — but ten years were necessary for this political domestication to take place (whether it took place under communism or democracy is of no importance). Same thing with the Algerian war: its end, which was believed to be impossible, took place of its own accord, not by virtue of De Gaulle's sagacity, but from the moment the maquis with their revolutionary potential were finally liquidated and an Algerian

army and a bureaucracy, which had been set up in Tunisia without ever engaging in combat, were in a position to ensure the continuation of power and the exercise of order.

Our wars thus have less to do with the confrontation of warriors than with the domestication of the refractory forces on the planet, those uncontrollable elements as the police would say, to which belong not only Islam in its entirety but wild ethnic groups, minority languages etc. All that is singular and irreducible must be reduced and absorbed. This is the law of democracy and the New World Order. In this sense, the Iran-Iraq war was a successful first phase: Iraq served to liquidate the most radical form of the anti-Western challenge, even though it never defeated it.

The fact that this mercenary prowess should give rise to the present reversal and to the necessity of its own destruction is a cruel irony, but perfectly justified. We will have shamefully merited everything which happens to us. This does not excuse Iraq, which remains the objective accomplice of the West, even in the present confrontation, to the extent that the challenge of Islam, with its irreducible and dangerous alterity and symbolic challenge, has once again been channelled, subtilised and politically, militarily and religiously deflected by Saddam's undertaking. Even in the war against the West he played his role in the domestication of an Islam for which he has no use. His elimination, if it should take place, will only raise a dangerous mortgage. The real stake, the challenge of Islam and behind it that of all the forms of culture refractory to the occidental world, remains intact. Nobody knows who will win. For as Hölderlin said, "where danger threatens, that which saves

us from it also grows." As a result, the more the hegemony of the global consensus is reinforced, the greater the risk, or the chances, of its collapse.

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The Illusion of the End

Jean Baudrillard

Translated by Chris Turner

Polity Press

This translation copyright © Polity Press 1994.
First published in France as *L'illusion de la fin* © Éditions Galilée, 1992.

Published with the assistance of the French Ministry of Culture.

First published in 1994 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers.

Editorial office:
Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:
Blackwell Publishers
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

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ISBN 0 7456 1221 0
ISBN 0 7456 1222 9 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13pt Sabon by Photoprint, Torquay, S. Devon
Printed in Great Britain by Hartnolls Limited

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Things can reach a state of Breakdown greater than themselves, that is to say, they can attain a degree of impairment at which their existence has less value than a zero-existence, a state where replacement has become a maleficent temptation . . .
Macedonio Fernandez

It is in the absolute void that the absolute event occurs. So the void must only have been relative, since death has remained virtual.

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Translator's acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Leslie Hill and Marie-Dominique Maison for invaluable help with linguistic matters and to Glynis Powell for research assistance. I must also thank Jean Baudrillard for taking time from his many other commitments to respond to my queries. All the footnotes to the text are mine.

This translation is dedicated to the memory of my father, Reggie Turner (1919–94).

Pataphysics of the year 2000

A tormenting thought: as of a certain point, history was no longer *real*. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality; everything happening since then was supposedly not true; but we supposedly didn't notice. Our task would now be to find that point, and as long as we didn't have it, we would be forced to abide in our present destruction.

Elias Canetti

Various plausible hypotheses may be advanced to explain this vanishing of history. Canetti's expression 'all mankind suddenly left reality' irresistibly evokes the idea of that escape velocity a body requires to free itself from the gravitational field of a star or planet. Staying with this image, one might suppose that the acceleration of modernity, of technology, events and media, of all exchanges – economic, political and sexual – has propelled us to 'escape velocity', with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history. We are 'liberated' in every sense of the term, so liberated that we have taken leave of a certain space-time, passed beyond a certain horizon in which the real is possible because gravitation is still strong enough for things to be reflected and thus in some way to endure and have some consequence.

A degree of slowness (that is, a certain speed, but not too much), a degree of distance, but not too much, and a degree of liberation (an energy for rupture and change), but not too much, are needed to bring about the kind of condensation or significant crystallization of events we call history, the kind of coherent unfolding of causes and effects we call reality [*le réel*].

Once beyond this gravitational effect, which keeps bodies in orbit, all the atoms of meaning get lost in space. Each atom pursues its own trajectory to infinity and is lost in space. This is precisely what we are seeing in our present-day societies, intent as they are on accelerating all bodies, messages and processes in all directions and which, with modern media, have created for every event, story and image a simulation of an infinite trajectory. Every political, historical and cultural fact possesses a kinetic energy which wrenches it from its own space and propels it into a hyperspace where, since it will never return, it loses all meaning. No need for science fiction here: already, here and now – in the shape of our computers, circuits and networks – we have the particle accelerator which has smashed the referential orbit of things once and for all.

So far as history is concerned, its telling has become impossible because that telling (*re-citatum*) is, by definition, the possible recurrence of a sequence of meanings. Now, through the impulse for total dissemination and circulation, every event is granted its own liberation; every fact becomes atomic, nuclear, and pursues its trajectory into the void. In order to be disseminated to infinity, it has to be fragmented like a particle. This is how it is able to achieve a velocity of no-return which carries it out of history once and for all. Every set of phenomena, whether cultural totality or sequence of events, has to be fragmented, disjointed, so that it can be sent down the circuits; every kind of language has to be resolved into a binary formulation so that it can circulate not, any longer, in our memories, but in the luminous, electronic memory of the computers. No human language can withstand the speed of light. No event can withstand being beamed across the whole planet. No meaning can withstand acceleration. No history can withstand the centrifugation of facts or their being short-circuited in real time (to pursue the same train of thought: no sexuality can withstand being liberated, no culture can withstand being hyped, no truth can withstand being verified, etc.).

Nor is theory in a position to 'reflect (on)' anything. It can only tear concepts from their critical zone of reference and force them beyond a point of no-return (it too is moving into the hyperspace

of simulation), a process whereby it loses all 'objective' validity but gains substantially in real affinity with the present system.

The second hypothesis regarding the vanishing of history is the opposite of the first. It has to do not with processes speeding up but slowing down. It too comes directly from physics.

Matter slows the passing of time. To put it more precisely, time at the surface of a very dense body seems to be going in slow motion. The phenomenon intensifies as the density increases. The effect of this slowing down will be to increase the length of the light-wave emitted by this body as received by the observer. Beyond a certain limit, time stops and the wavelength becomes infinite. The wave no longer exists. The light goes out.

There is a clear analogy here with the slowing down of history when it rubs up against the astral body of the 'silent majorities'. Our societies are dominated by this mass process, not just in the demographic and sociological sense, but in the sense of a 'critical mass', of passing beyond a point of no-return. This is the most significant event within these societies: the emergence, in the very course of their mobilization and revolutionary process (they are all revolutionary by the standards of past centuries), of an equivalent force of inertia, of an immense indifference and the silent potency of that indifference. This inert matter of the social is not produced by a lack of exchanges, information or communication, but by the multiplication and saturation of exchanges. It is the product of the hyperdensity of cities, commodities, messages and circuits. It is the cold star of the social and, around that mass, history is also cooling. Events follow one upon another, cancelling each other out in a state of indifference. The masses, neutralized, mithridatized by information, in turn neutralize history and act as an *écran d'absorption*.* They themselves have no history, meaning, consciousness or desire. They are the potential residue of all history, meaning and desire. As they have

* The French is retained here, since to translate this by the English term 'dark trace screen' would be to forfeit the connection Baudrillard wishes to maintain with the idea of absorption.

unfurled in our modernity, all these fine things have stirred up a mysterious counter-phenomenon, and all today's political and social strategies are thrown out of gear by the failure to understand it.

This time we have the opposite situation: history, meaning and progress are no longer able to reach their escape velocity. They are no longer able to pull away from this overdense body which slows their trajectory, which slows time to the point where, right now, the perception and imagination of the future are beyond us. All social, historical and temporal transcendence is absorbed by that mass in its silent immanence. Political events already lack sufficient energy of their own to move us: so they run on like a silent film for which we bear collective irresponsibility. History comes to an end here, not for want of actors, nor for want of violence (there will always be more violence), nor for want of events (there will always be more events, thanks be to the media and the news networks!), but by deceleration, indifference and stupefaction. It is no longer able to transcend itself, to envisage its own finality, to dream of its own end; it is being buried beneath its own immediate effect, worn out in special effects, imploding into current events.

Deep down, one cannot even speak of the end of history here, since history will not have time to catch up with its own end. Its effects are accelerating, but its meaning is slowing inexorably. It will eventually come to a stop and be extinguished like light and time in the vicinity of an infinitely dense mass . . .

Humanity too had its big bang: a certain critical density, a certain concentration of people and exchanges presides over this explosion we call history, which is merely the dispersal of the dense and hieratic nuclei of previous civilizations. Today we have the reversive effect: crossing the threshold of the critical mass where populations, events and information are concerned triggers the opposite process of historical and political inertia. In the cosmic order, we do not know whether we have reached the escape velocity which would mean we are now in a definitive state of expansion (this will doubtless remain eternally uncertain). In the

human order, where the perspectives are more limited, it may be that the very escape velocity of the species (the acceleration of births, technologies and exchanges over the centuries) creates an excess of mass and resistance which defeats the initial energy and takes us down an inexorable path of contraction and inertia.

Whether the universe is expanding to infinity or retracting towards an infinitely dense, infinitely small nucleus depends on its critical mass (and speculation on this is itself infinite by virtue of the possible invention of new particles). By analogy, whether our human history is evolutive or involutive perhaps depends on humanity's critical mass. Has the history, the movement, of the species reached the escape velocity required to triumph over the inertia of the mass? Are we set, like the galaxies, on a definitive course distancing us from one another at prodigious speed, or is this dispersal to infinity destined to come to an end and the human molecules to come back together by an opposite process of gravitation? Can the human mass, which increases every day, exert control over a pulsation of this kind?

There is a third hypothesis, a third analogy. We are still speaking of a point of disappearance, a vanishing point, but this time in music. I shall call this the stereophonic effect. We are all obsessed with high fidelity, with the quality of musical 'reproduction'. At the consoles of our stereos, armed with our tuners, amplifiers and speakers, we mix, adjust settings, multiply tracks in pursuit of a flawless sound. Is this still music? Where is the high fidelity threshold beyond which music disappears as such? It does not disappear for lack of music, but because it has passed this limit point; it disappears into the perfection of its materiality, into its own special effect. Beyond this point, there is neither judgement nor aesthetic pleasure. It is the ecstasy of musicality, and its end.

The disappearance of history is of the same order: here again, we have passed that limit where, by dint of the sophistication of events and information, history ceases to exist as such. Immediate high-powered broadcasting, special effects, secondary effects, fading and that famous feedback effect which is produced in acoustics by a source and a receiver being too close together and

in history by an event and its dissemination being too close together and thus interfering disastrously – a short-circuit between cause and effect like that between the object and the experimenting subject in microphysics (and in the human sciences!). These are all things which cast a radical doubt on the event, just as excessive high fidelity casts radical doubt on music. Elias Canetti puts it well: beyond this point, nothing is true. It is for this reason that the *petite musique* of history also eludes our grasp today, that it vanishes into the microscopics or the stereophonics of news.

Right at the very heart of news, history threatens to disappear. At the heart of hi-fi, music threatens to disappear. At the heart of experimentation, the object of science threatens to disappear. At the heart of pornography, sexuality threatens to disappear. Everywhere we find the same stereophonic effect, the same effect of absolute proximity to the real, the same effect of simulation.

By definition, this vanishing point, this point short of which history *existed* and music *existed*, cannot be pinned down. Where must stereo perfection end? The boundaries are constantly being pushed back because it is technical obsession which redraws them. Where must news reporting end? One can only counter this fascination with 'real time' – the equivalent of high fidelity – with a moral objection, and there is not much point in that.

The passing of this point is thus an irreversible act, contrary to what Canetti seems to hope. We shall never get back to pre-stereo music (except by an additional technical simulation effect); we shall never get back to pre-news and pre-media history. The original essence of music, the original concept of history have disappeared because we shall never again be able to isolate them from their model of perfection which is at the same time their model of simulation, the model of their enforced assumption into a hyper-reality which cancels them out. We shall never again know what the social or music were before being exacerbated into their present useless perfection. We shall never again know what history was before its exacerbation into the technical perfection of news: we shall never again know what anything was before disappearing into the fulfilment of its model.

So, with this, the situation becomes novel once again. The fact that we are leaving history to move into the realm of simulation is merely a consequence of the fact that history itself has always, deep down, been an immense simulation model. Not in the sense that it could be said only to have existed in the narrative made of it or the interpretation given, but with regard to the time in which it unfolds – that linear time which is at once the time of an ending and of the unlimited suspending of the end. The only kind of time in which a history can take place, if, by history, we understand a succession of non-meaningless facts, each engendering the other by cause and effect, but doing so without any absolute necessity and all standing open to the future, unevenly poised. So different from time in ritual societies where the end of everything is in its beginning and ceremony retraces the perfection of that original event. In contrast to this *fulfilled* order of time, the liberation of the 'real' time of history, the production of a linear, deferred time may seem a purely artificial process. Where does this suspense come from? Where do we get the idea that what must be accomplished (Last Judgement, salvation or catastrophe) must come at the end of time and match up with some incalculable appointed term or other? This model of linearity must have seemed entirely fictitious, wholly absurd and abstract to cultures which had no sense of a deferred day of reckoning, a successive concatenation of events and a final goal. And it was, indeed, a scenario which had some difficulty establishing itself. There was fierce resistance in the early years of Christianity to the postponement of the coming of God's Kingdom. The acceptance of this 'historical' perspective of salvation, that is, of its remaining unaccomplished in the immediate present, was not achieved without violence, and all the heresies would later take up this leitmotif of the immediate fulfilment of the promise in what was akin to a defiance of time. Entire communities even resorted to suicide to hasten the coming of the Kingdom. Since this latter was promised at the end of time, it seemed to them that they had only to put an end to time right away.

The whole of history has had a millennial (millenarian) challenge to its temporality running through it. In opposition to

the historical perspective, which continually shifts the stakes on to a hypothetical end, there has always been a fatal exigency, a fatal strategy of time which wants to shoot straight ahead to a point beyond the end. It cannot be said that either of these tendencies has really won out, and the question 'to wait or not to wait?' has remained, throughout history, a burning issue. Since the messianic convulsion of the earliest Christians, reaching back beyond the heresies and revolts, there has always been this desire to anticipate the end, possibly by death, by a kind of seductive suicide aiming to turn God from history and make him face up to his responsibilities, those which lie beyond the end, those of the final fulfilment. And what, indeed, is terrorism, if not this effort to conjure up, in its own way, the end of history? It attempts to entrap the powers that be by an immediate, total act. Without awaiting the final term of the process, it sets itself at the ecstatic end-point, hoping to bring about the conditions for the Last Judgement. An illusory challenge, of course, but one which always fascinates, since, deep down, neither time nor history has ever been accepted. Everyone remains aware of the arbitrariness, the artificial character of time and history. And we are never fooled by those who call on us to hope.

And, terrorism apart, is there not also a hint of this parousic exigency in the global fantasy of catastrophe that hovers over today's world? A demand for a violent resolution of reality, when this latter eludes our grasp in an endless hyper-reality? For hyper-reality rules out the very occurrence of the Last Judgement or the Apocalypse or the Revolution. All the ends we have envisaged elude our grasp and history has no chance of bringing them about, since it will, in the interim, have come to an end (it's always the story of Kafka's Messiah: he arrives too late, a day too late, and the time-lag is unbearable). So one might as well short-circuit the Messiah, bring forward the end. This has always been the demonic temptation: to falsify ends and the calculation of ends, to falsify time and the occurrence of things, to hurry them along, impatient to see them accomplished, or secretly sensing that the promise of accomplishment is itself also false and diabolical.

Even our obsession with 'real time', with the instantaneity of

news, has a secret millenarianism about it: cancelling the flow of time, cancelling delay, suppressing the sense that the event is happening elsewhere, anticipating its end by freeing ourselves from linear time, laying hold of things almost before they have taken place. In this sense, 'real time' is something even more artificial than a recording, and is, at the same time, its denial – if we want immediate enjoyment of the event, if we want to experience it at the instant of its occurrence, as if we were there, this is because we no longer have any confidence in the meaning or purpose of the event. The same denial is found in apparently opposite behaviour – recording, filing and memorizing everything of our own past and the past of all cultures. Is this not a symptom of a collective presentiment of the end, a sign that events and the living time of history have had their day and that we have to arm ourselves with the whole battery of artificial memory, all the signs of the past, to face up to the absence of a future and the glacial times which await us? Are not mental and intellectual structures currently going underground, burying themselves in memories, in archives, in search of an improbable resurrection? All thoughts are going underground in cautious anticipation of the year 2000. They can already scent the terror of the year 2000. They are instinctively adopting the solution of those cryogenized individuals plunged into liquid nitrogen until the means can be found to enable them to survive.

These societies, these generations which no longer expect anything from some future 'coming', and have less and less confidence in history, which dig in behind their futuristic technologies, behind their stores of information and inside the beehive networks of communication where time is at last wiped out by pure circulation, will perhaps never reawaken. But they do not know that. The year 2000 will not perhaps take place. But they do not know that.

The reversal of history

At some point in the 1980s, history took a turn in the opposite direction. Once the apogee of time, the summit of the curve of evolution, the solstice of history had been passed, the downward slope of events began and things began to run in reverse. It seems that, like cosmic space, historical space-time is also curved. By the same chaotic effect in time as in space, things go quicker and quicker as they approach their term, just as water mysteriously accelerates as it approaches a waterfall.

In the Euclidean space of history, the shortest path between two points is the straight line, the line of Progress and Democracy. But this is only true of the linear space of the Enlightenment. In our non-Euclidean *fin de siècle* space, a baleful curvature unfailingly deflects all trajectories. This is doubtless linked to the sphericity of time (visible on the horizon of the end of the century, just as the earth's sphericity is visible on the horizon at the end of the day) or the subtle distortion of the gravitational field.

Ségalen says that once the Earth has become a sphere, every movement distancing us from a point by the same token also begins to bring us closer to that point. This is true of time as well. Each apparent movement of history brings us imperceptibly closer to its antipodal point, if not indeed to its starting point. This is the end of linearity. In this perspective, the future no

longer exists. But if there is no longer a future, there is no longer an end either. *So this is not even the end of history.* We are faced with a paradoxical process of reversal, a reversive effect of modernity which, having reached its speculative limit and extrapolated all its virtual developments, is disintegrating into its simple elements in a catastrophic process of recurrence and turbulence.

By this retroversion of history to infinity, this hyperbolic curvature, the century itself is escaping its end. By this retroaction of events, we are eluding our own deaths. Metaphorically, then, we shall not even reach the symbolic term of the end, the symbolic term of the year 2000.

Can one escape this curving back of history which causes it to retrace its own steps and obliterate its own tracks, escape this fatal asymptote which causes us, as it were, to rewind modernity like a tape? We are so used to playing back every film – the fictional ones and the films of our lives – so contaminated by the technology of retrospection, that we are quite capable, in our present dizzy spin, of running history over again like a film played backwards.

Are we condemned, in the vain hope of not abiding in our present destruction, as Canetti has it, to the retrospective melancholia of living everything through again in order to correct it all, in order to elucidate it all (it is almost as though psychoanalysis were spreading its shadow over the whole of our history: when the same events, the same conjunctures are reproduced in almost the same terms, when the same wars break out between the same peoples, and all that had passed and gone re-emerges as though driven by an irrepressible phantasm, one might almost see this as the work of a form of primary process or unconscious), do we have to summon all past events to appear before us, to reinvestigate it all as though we were conducting a trial? A mania for trials has taken hold of us in recent times, together with a mania for responsibility, precisely at the point when this latter is becoming increasingly hard to pin down. We are looking to remake a clean history, to whitewash all the

abominations: the obscure (resentful) feeling behind the proliferation of scandals is that history itself is a scandal. A retroprocess which may drag us into a mania for origins, going back even beyond history, back to the conviviality of animal existence, to the primitive biotope, as can already be seen in the ecologists' flirtation with an impossible origin.

The only way of escaping this, of breaking with this recession and obsession, would seem to be to set ourselves, from the outset, on a different temporal orbit, to leapfrog our shadows, leapfrog the shadow of the century, to take an elliptical short-cut and pass beyond the end, not allowing it time to take place. The advantage is that we would at least preserve what remains of history, instead of subjecting it to an agonizing revision, and deliver it up to those who will carry out the post-mortem on its corpse, as one carries out a post-mortem on one's childhood in an interminable analysis. This would at least mean conserving its memory and its glory, whereas currently, in the guise of revision and rehabilitation, we are cancelling out one by one all the events which have preceded us by obliging them to repent.

If we could escape this end-of-century moratorium, with its deferred day of reckoning, which looks curiously like a work of mourning – a *failed* one – and which consists in reviewing everything, rewriting everything, restoring everything, face-lifting everything, to produce, as it seems, in a burst of paranoia a perfect set of accounts at the end of the century, a universally positive balance sheet (the reign of human rights over the whole planet, democracy everywhere, the definitive obliteration of all conflict and, if possible, the obliteration of all 'negative' events from our memories), if we could escape this international cleaning and polishing effort in which all the nations of the world can be seen vying today, if we could spare ourselves this democratic extreme unction by which the New World Order is heralded, we would at least allow the events which have preceded us to retain their glory, character, meaning and singularity. Whereas we seem in such a hurry to cover up the worst before the bankruptcy proceedings start (everyone is secretly afraid of the terrifying balance sheet we are going to present in the year 2000)

that there will be nothing left of our history at the end of the millennium, nothing of its illumination, of the violence of its events. If there is something distinctive about an event – about what constitutes an event and thus has historical value – it is the fact that it is irreversible, that there is always something in it which exceeds meaning and interpretation. But it is precisely the opposite we are seeing today: all that has happened this century in terms of progress, liberation, revolution and violence is about to be revised for the better.

This is the problem: is the course of modernity reversible, and is that reversal itself irreversible? How far can this retrospective form go, this end-of-millennium dream? Is there not a 'history barrier', analogous to the sound or speed barrier, beyond which, in its palinodical movement, it could not pass?

The ascent of the vacuum towards the periphery

On the eve of the 1990s, in the midst of some unexpected events and with an eye to others just as unpredictable, there formed, among a number of friends, the idea of an agency which would itself be invisible, anonymous and clandestine: the Stealth Agency. This could equally well be called:

ANATHEMATIC ILLIMITED
TRANSFATAL EXPRESS
VIRAL INCORPORATED
INTERNATIONAL EPIDEMICS*

As an agency for gathering news of unreal events in order to disinform the public of them, it remained, itself, unreal. It thus fulfilled its role perfectly, eluding all radar screens – a formula unique and forever virtual.

Implied in this Agency was the point that there are no longer any ideas grappling with facts – that was the 'Utopia' of the 1960s and 1970s – no longer really any actors grappling with events, nor intellectuals grappling with their meaning, but a storm

* All the terms in capitals are in English in the original.

of events of no importance, without either real actors or authorized interpreters: *actio* has disappeared at the same moment as *auctoritas*. All that remains is *actualité*, 'action' in the cinematographic sense, and 'auction', the selling-off of the event on the overheated news market. The event captured not, as it used to be, in action, but in speculation and chain reactions spinning off towards the extremes of a facticity with which interpretation can no longer keep pace.

Simulation is precisely this irresistible unfolding, this sequencing of things as though they had a meaning, when they are governed only by artificial *montage* and non-meaning. Putting the event up for auction by radical disinformation. Setting a price on the event, as against setting it in play, setting it in history. If there are any historical stakes, they remain secret, enigmatic; they are resolved in events which do not really take place. And I am not referring here to ordinary events, but to the events of Eastern Europe, the Gulf War, etc. Now, the aim of the Agency was precisely to set up against this simulation a radical desimulation or, in other words, *to lift the veil on the fact of events not taking place.* And thus to make itself secret and enigmatic in their image, to get through to a certain void, a certain non-meaning, by contrast with the media, which are frantic to plug up all the gaps. To move within the void of events like Chuang Tzu's butcher in the interstitial void of the body.* Admittedly, this kind of sly, surreptitious intervention on the side of the void against the grotesque, Ubuesque infatuation with news and the political scene was merely a dream and, by dint of being secret and enigmatic, no more came into being, in the end, than did the events themselves. It fell into the same black hole, the same virtual space, as the non-events of which it was to speak (secretly, unbeknown to everyone, while remaining operational, exactly like these new-style events which are only events to the extent that they are

* In English translations of Chuang Tzu (Zhuang Zi), this figure is often identified as a 'cook'. Thomas Merton's translation contains the following lines: 'Guided by natural line,/By the secret opening, the hidden space,/My cleaver finds its own way./I cut through no joint, chop no bone' (*The Way of Chuang Tzu*, London: Unwin, 1970, p. 46).

media events). An apparently irresolvable paradox. But the idea is not dead.

The Stealth Agency chimed in with events being on strike, with history being on strike. Like history, it was a consumer of absent events, attempting to give the most precise non-information about that absence of events, that indefinite sit-in strike in which history – the empty space over which the spectres of Power still hover – was occupied, just as workers might occupy a factory – that empty space of Labour, over which the spectre of Capital still hovers.

It is as though events passed on the strike call to each other. One after the other they deserted their time, transforming it into an empty *actualité* where only the visual psychodrama of news was left to unfold. And this event strike led to history being locked out. The fact that it is no longer the event that generates news, but the reverse, has incalculable consequences, as the whole *travail du négatif* disappears on the horizon of the media, exactly as work disappears on the horizon of capital. Here again, the relations are inverted: it is no longer work that serves the reproduction of capital, but capital which produces and reproduces work. A gigantic parody of the relations of production.

This disruption of cause and effect is not now the work of the critical consciousness, but of objective irony alone. Thus it was the Agency's duty not only to avoid the temptation of providing information on the events which had 'downed tools', but also to avoid appending a critical commentary to them, in order to capture the originality of this non-event, which is the originality of an objective irony. For the radical irony of our history is that things no longer really take place, while nonetheless seeming to. This is the opposite of the traditional ruse of history which brought about changes that were crucial but did not appear to be so.

When you think that we took the events in Eastern Europe at face value, with their good, sound coin of freedom and 'democratic values', and the Gulf War, with its Human Rights and New World Order! These events were auctioned off well above their

value. The historical scene today is like the art market. Against this speculative inflation, which leaves everyone on edge – that is, both overexcited and indifferent, riveted and apathetic – against these *gidouille* events, worthy of the *Grande Gidouille* of History,* we had to find an ironic form of the disruption of information, a casual form of writing to match the casual *événementialité* of our age, together with a subtly catastrophic form which fits with the coming of the end of the century. We had to find, in this event strike, the thread running through, which is that of deterrence, the baleful form which presides over the nullity of our age.

Deterrence is a very peculiar form of action: it is *what causes something not to take place.* It dominates the whole of our contemporary period, which tends not so much to produce events as to cause something not to occur, while looking as though it is a historical event. Or else events do take place in the stead of some other event which did not. War, history, reality and passion – deterrence plays its part in all these. It causes strange events to take place(!), events which do not in any way advance history, but rather run it backwards, back along the opposite slope, unintelligible to our historical sense (only things which move in the direction of history [*le sens de l'histoire*] have historical meaning [*sens historique*]), events which no longer have a negative (progressive, critical or revolutionary) potency since *their only negativity is in the fact of their not taking place.* Disturbing.

The hold deterrence has on us even extends to the past. It can remove all certainty about facts and evidence. It can destabilize memory just as it destabilizes prediction. It is a diabolical force which wrecks the actual acting out of events or, if they still take place – if they have taken place – destroys their credibility.

Perhaps this curvature of things which deprives them of meaning or linear end is merely a depression in the meteorologi-

* The *gidouille* here is the great belly or paunch of Jarry's Père Ubu, which has acquired a broader sense in French 'pataphysical' usage. On its origins and signification, see, for example, Keith Beaumont, *Alfred Jarry: A Critical and Biographical Study*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984.

cal sense of the term – the emptiness we feel being the effect not of a failing of meaning or memory, but of a strange attraction coming from elsewhere. Perhaps the atony, the catatonia we are experiencing is to be interpreted in the opposite sense, not as a void left by the ebbing of past events, but a void due to the suction effect of a future event, to the anticipatory sucking up by a nearby mass of all the oxygen we breathe, creating a violent depressurizing of the social, political, cultural and mental sphere.

A pataphysical hypothesis, that of anti-gravity, anti-density – of a science of imaginary solutions rising above physics and metaphysics. In his *Exploits and Opinions of Dr Faustroll*, Jarry sketches the contours of this strange attraction, brought about by overturning the principles of physics: 'Current science is based on the principle of induction: most people have seen a certain phenomenon most often precede or follow some other phenomenon and conclude therefrom that this will always be the case . . . But, instead of formulating the law of the fall of a body towards a centre, why not give preference to that of the ascent of a vacuum towards a periphery, the vacuum being considered a unit of non-density, a hypothesis far less arbitrary than the choice of a concrete unit of positive density.'

Inverse attraction by the void, rather than attraction of solids by other solids. Perhaps it is this which gives our events this particular coloration, this flavour (or, rather, insipidity) of emptiness, this inanity. Even as they occur, they might already be 'vanishing events' – of little meaning because already heading towards the void. Running counter to the old physics of meaning would be a new gravitation – the true, the only gravitation: attraction by the void. Doubtless the most basic of natural laws.

This would explain quite a number of anomalies, including those in the realms of the mind and the 'psychological' field. So, our forms of action and mobility are not so much a matter of positive drives as of expulsion and repulsion. The centrifugal mobility of particles seeking to escape from density and join up with what? A mysterious periphery of space, an anti-gravity. Thus it would be possible to escape from the heavy form, the

gravity of 'desire', conceived as positive attraction, by the much more subtle eccentricity of seduction, which would be, to take up again some old cosmogonies that were not without their charm, the last-gasp escape from the body of molecules that are much too light and know only one line of flight – towards the void (so it is with poetic language, where each particle finds its resolution in anagrammatical resonance).

We may say of the new events that they hollow out before them the void into which they plunge. They are intent, it seems, on one thing alone – being forgotten. They leave hardly any scope for interpretation, except for all interpretations at once, by which they evade any desire to give them meaning and elude the heavy attraction of a continuous history to enter upon the light orbit of a discontinuous one. They arrive – mostly unforeseen – more quickly than their shadows, but they have no sequel. Meteoric events, of the same chaotic inconsequence as cloud formations. So, with the events of Eastern Europe, for example, we have the impression of a long negative accumulation and a sudden resolution, like the obvious, instant conclusion to operations which elude our understanding. In these conditions, such events, which are nonetheless important, have the strange aftertaste of something that has already happened before, something unfolding retrospectively – an aftertaste which does not bode well for a meaningful future. Our only surprise is that we were not able to foresee them and our only regret that we do not know how to draw any consequences from them. The screen of history fluctuates at the same irregular rhythm as natural phenomena.

One has the impression that events form all on their own and drift unpredictably towards their vanishing point – the peripheral void of the media. Just as physicists now see their particles only as a trajectory on a screen, we no longer have the pulsing of events, but only the cardiogram, have neither representation nor recollection of them, but merely the (flat) encephalogram, neither desire nor enjoyment of them, but only the psychodrama and the TV image.

It is a bit like *in vitro* procreation: the embryo of the real event

is transferred into the artificial womb of the news media, there to give birth to many orphaned foetuses which have neither fathers nor mothers. The event is entitled to the same procreative practices as birth and the same euthanasian practices as death.

It is to this perhaps that we owe this 'fun physics' effect: the impression that events, collective or individual, have been bundled into a memory hole. This blackout is due, no doubt, to this movement of reversal, this parabolic curvature of historical space. For the past can only be represented and reflected if it pushes us in the other direction, towards a future of some kind. Retrospection is dependent on a prospection which enables us to refer to something as past and gone, and thus as having really taken place. If, by some strange revolution, we set off in the opposite direction and turn inwards into this dimension of the past, then we can no longer represent that something to ourselves. The beam of memory bends, and makes every event a black hole. We experience this subjectively too, in the sudden loss of our memories, the break in the continuity of names, faces and familiar forms. In this kind of catastrophic memory failure, there is neither natural forgetting nor unconscious repression. It is the inversion of the temporal field of gravity which means that the signs of the past no longer have sufficient specific mass, sufficient nuclear mass to hold them, nor the mirror of the present enough to reflect them. The memory gaps are a little bit like the holes in the ozone layer, the holes into which our protective screen is breaking up. But perhaps they are not big enough for what falls into them to begin to spin, releasing the light particles from the heavy, widening and deepening the black hole through which the dead bodies will release their ethereal substance, as in Dante or Giordano Bruno. It is in the absolute void that the absolute event occurs. So the void must only have been relative, since death has remained virtual.

The event strike

What has been lost is the glory of the event, what Benjamin would term its aura. For centuries, the keynote of history was glory, a very powerful illusion and one which played on the everlasting nature of time, in that it was inherited from one's ancestors and would be handed on to one's descendants. That passion seems laughable today. Whereas, in the past, the aim was to lose oneself in something prodigious, to achieve the 'immortality' Hannah Arendt speaks of, which had a transcendence equal to that of God (glory and salvation long contended for the souls of men, like passion and compassion, those rivals before the Eternal), what we seek now is not glory but identity, not an illusion but, on the contrary, an accumulation of proofs – anything that can serve as evidence of a historical existence.

The prodigious event, the event which is measured neither by its causes nor its consequences but creates its own stage and its own dramatic effect, no longer exists. History has gradually narrowed down to the field of its probable causes and effects, and, even more recently, to the field of current events – its effects 'in real time'. Events now have no more significance than their anticipated meaning, their programming and their broadcasting. Only *this event strike* constitutes a true historical phenomenon – this refusal to signify anything whatever, or this capacity to

signify anything at all. This is the true end of history, the end of historical Reason.

But it would be too much to hope that we had finished with history. For it is possible not only that history has disappeared (the *travail du négatif*, political reason, the prestige of the event have all gone), but also that we still have to *fuel its end*. It is entirely as though we were still continuing to manufacture history, whereas, in accumulating the signs of the social, the signs of the political, the signs of progress and change, we are merely feeding the end of history. While history, cannibalistic and necrophagous, constantly calls for new victims, for new events, so as to be done with them a little bit more. Socialism is a fine example of this. It is to socialism that it will have fallen, by the collapse of the historical reason it claimed to embody, to manage the end of history, to fuel the end.

We used to ask what might come after the orgy – mourning or melancholia? Doubtless neither, but an interminable clean-up of all the vicissitudes of modern history and its processes of liberation (of peoples, sex, dreams, art and the unconscious – in short, of all that makes up the orgy of our times), in an atmosphere dominated by the apocalyptic presentiment that all this is coming to an end. Rather than pressing forward and taking flight into the future, we prefer the retrospective apocalypse, and a blanket revisionism. Our societies have all become revisionistic: they are quietly rethinking everything, laundering their political crimes, their scandals, licking their wounds, fuelling their ends. Celebration and commemoration are themselves merely the soft form of necrophagous cannibalism, the homeopathic form of murder by easy stages. This is the work of the heirs, whose *ressentiment* towards the deceased is boundless. Museums, jubilees, festivals, complete works, the publication of the tiniest of unpublished fragments – all this shows that we are entering an active age of *ressentiment* and repentance.

Acts of glorification and commemoration clearly form part of this collective flagellation. We are particularly well served in France: our public life has been overtaken by a veritable ritual of

mourning and condolence. And all our monuments are mausoleums: the Pyramid, the Arch at La Défense, the Musée d'Orsay, that fine Pharaonic chamber, the new National Library, cenotaph of culture. Not counting the Revolution, which is a monument in itself, the bicentenary of which was the finest simulation of an event to be seen at the end of the century.

There are two forms of forgetting: on the one hand, the slow or violent extermination of memory, on the other, the spectacular promotion of a phenomenon, shifting it from historical space into the sphere of advertising, the media becoming the site of a temporal strategy of prestige . . . This is how we have manufactured for ourselves, with great swathes of promotional images, a synthetic memory which serves as our primal reference, our founding myth, and which, most importantly, absolves us of the real event of Revolution.

'Revolution is not on the agenda in France because the Great Revolution occurred and has served as an example for all others over two centuries . . . Our entire aim in present-day France is to ensure that there will be no revolution' (Louis Mermaz). This is how it is: it happened, it is finished, it will never happen again. The whole of our system is based on this negative anticipation. Not only are we no longer able to produce a new history, we are not even able to ensure its symbolic reproduction. We build an opera house at the Bastille. A laughable rehabilitation: royal music is to be served up there to the people. Yet it is not the people who will benefit. It is the cultural elite who will go there, confirming the rule that the privileged are happy to hallow with art and pleasure the places where others died.

Might one suggest to the people that they storm the opera house and tear it down on the symbolic date of 14 July? Might one suggest that they parade the bloody heads of our modern cultural governors on the end of pikestaffs?

But we no longer make history. We have become reconciled with it and protect it like an endangered masterpiece. Times have changed. We have today a perfectly pious *vision* of the Revolution, cast in terms of the Rights of Man. Not even a nostalgic vision, but one recycled in the terms of post-modern intellectual

comfort. A vision which allows us to eliminate Saint-Just from the *Dictionnaire de la Révolution.* 'Overrated rhetoric', says François Furet, perfect historian of the repentance of the Terror and of glory.

There are those who let the dead bury their dead, and there are those who are forever digging them up to finish them off. Having failed both in their symbolic murder and their work of mourning, it is not enough for them that others should be dead; they have to disinter them once again to impale them – this is the Carpentras complex (after the Timişoara complex: the faking of corpses for TV), the desecration complex.

Nothing lends itself so well to this operation as the centenary of a death. With Rimbaud, Van Gogh and Nietzsche, 1991 will have been exceptional in terms of vile acts of desecration.

One can see a kind of suicidal behaviour in this compulsion on the part of the cultural and intellectual elite to exalt thinkers who have only scorn for that elite and are its living condemnation: Céline, Artaud, Bataille, Nietzsche. Might this be a product of one of those failures of instinct which the last-mentioned diagnosed more than a century ago – a failure which characterizes a species doomed by its inability to judge what is good for it? If the left were a species, and culture obeyed the laws of natural selection, it would have disappeared long ago. Flirting with what is implacably opposed to it, dying from a total contradiction between its critical thinking and its action, attempting to reconcile its critical subconscious and its presence in power by turning culture into a mode of government. These things are all part and parcel, already, of the forms of repentance.

It isn't just terrorists who repent. Intellectuals showed them the way, the Sartreans and others having been in the van of repentance from the 1950s onwards. Today, the whole century is repenting, class (or race) repentance everywhere predominating over class pride and consciousness. It is the sign that the century is becoming intellectualized. It is becoming intellectual today just as it became bourgeois a century ago. And the term 'intellectual'

will one day disappear, just as the word 'bourgeois' – which now exposes only the person who uses it to ridicule – has disappeared.

The auto-dissolution common to both West and East is visible in the deterioration of the structures of power and representation (thus, the more the political sphere becomes intellectualized, the more it secretly denies its own will to govern, and this *ressentiment* towards itself is the source of all corruption). But it can also be seen in the multiple strategies for re-enchanting values, cultures and differences. We expend all the energy of that dissolution in resisting our own end, which we can then neither enjoy nor be engulfed by. A gigantic night of the fourth of August* would be preferable, a great night of the Rights of Man, on which the whole of humanity would renounce those rights as the aristocrats once renounced their privileges, and the renunciation would take on excessive dimensions. What can occur to rescue us from endlessly trawling over our own culture?

It seems we are condemned to the infinite retrospective of all that has preceded us. What is true of politics and morality seems true of art also. The whole drift of painting has withdrawn from the future and shifted towards the past. Present-day art is currently reappropriating the works of the – distant, recent or even contemporary – past. This is what Russell Connor calls the 'abduction of modern art'.† Now, admittedly, this reappropriation is supposed to be ironic. But the humour here is merely the transparent invocation of humour. Like the worn threads of a piece of fabric, it is an irony produced only by the disillusion of things, a fossilized irony. The little trick of placing the nude from Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* opposite Cézanne's *Card Players*, as one might put an admiral's hat on a monkey, is nothing more than the advertising-style irony currently engulfing the world of art. It is the irony of repentance and *ressentiment* towards one's

* A reference to the date in 1789 on which the nobles gave up their feudal rights. Not only was this in itself, as Simon Schama remarks, 'a bonfire of particularisms', it also ushered in what he describes as 'a cult of self-dispossession' (*Citizens*, London, 1989, p. 439).

† This expression has been retranslated from the French exhibition catalogue in which the author encountered it.

own culture. No doubt repentance and *ressentiment* constitute the last stage of the history of art, just as, according to Nietzsche, they constitute the last stage of the genealogy of morals. It is a parody, or rather a palinode, of art and the history of art (a development reflecting that of history *tout court*) – a parody of culture by culture itself as an act of vengeance, characteristic of radical disillusionment. It is as though history were rifling through its own dustbins and looking for redemption in the rubbish.

The end of history is, alas, also the end of the dustbins of history. There are no longer any dustbins even for disposing of old ideologies, old regimes, old values. Where are we going to throw Marxism, which actually invented the dustbins of history? (Yet, there is some justice here since the very people who invented them have fallen in.) Conclusion: if there are no more dustbins of history, *this is because History itself has become a dustbin.* It has become its own dustbin. Just as the planet itself is becoming its own dustbin.

When ice freezes, all the excrement rises to the surface. And so, when the dialectic was frozen, all the sacred excrement of the dialectic came to the surface. When the future is deep-frozen – and, indeed, even the present – we see all the excrement come up from the past.

The problem then becomes one of waste. It is not just material substances, including nuclear ones, which pose a waste problem but also the defunct ideologies, bygone utopias, dead concepts and fossilized ideas which continue to pollute our mental space. Historical and intellectual refuse pose an even more serious problem than industrial waste. Who will rid us of the sedimentation of centuries of stupidity? As for history – that living lump of waste, that dying monster which, like the corpse in Ionesco,* continues to swell after it has died – how are we to be rid of it?

The ecological imperative is that all wastes must be recycled. Otherwise, they will circle endlessly like satellites around the

* A reference to Ionesco's *Amédée, ou comment s'en débarrasser.*

earth, which has itself returned to the state of a lump of cosmic waste. What is happening with history is the foreshadowing of this dilemma: we can either perish under the weight of the non-degradable waste of the great empires, the grand narratives, the great systems made obsolete by their own gigantism, or else recycle all this waste in the synthetic form of a heteroclite history, as we are doing today in the name of Democracy and Human Rights, which are never anything but the confused end-product of the reprocessing of all the residues of history – crusher residues in which all the ethnic, linguistic, feudal and ideological phantoms of earlier societies float. Amnesia, anamnesis, the anachronistic revival of all the figures of the past – royalty, feudalism. Though did they ever really disappear? Democracy itself (a proliferating form, the lowest common denominator of all our liberal societies), this planetary democracy of the Rights of Man, is to real freedom what Disneyland is to the imaginary. In relation to the modern demand for freedom, it offers the same characteristics as recycled paper.

There is in fact no insoluble waste problem. The problem is resolved by the post-modern invention of recycling and the incinerator. The Great Incinerators of history, from whose ashes the Phoenix of post-modernity is resuscitated! We have to come to terms with the idea that everything that was not degradable or exterminable is today recyclable, and hence that there is no final solution. We shall not be spared the worst – that is, *History will not come to an end* – since the leftovers, all the leftovers – the Church, communism, ethnic groups, conflicts, ideologies – are indefinitely recyclable. What is stupendous is that nothing one thought superseded by history has really disappeared. All the archaic, anachronistic forms are there ready to re-emerge, intact and timeless, like the viruses deep in the body. History has only wrenched itself from cyclical time to fall into the order of the recyclable.

The thawing of the East

Hooray, history is back from the dead!

The great event of the end of the century is under way. Everyone can breathe again at the idea that history, stifled for a time in the grip of totalitarian ideology, is resuming its course with renewed vigour now that the blockade on the countries of Eastern Europe has been lifted. The field of history is at last opened up again to the unpredictable bustle of peoples and their thirst for freedom. In contrast to the depressive mythology which generally accompanies the ends of centuries, it seems this one is to usher in a new and illustrious resurgence of the final process, to bring fresh hope and a revival of all historical challenges. Away with all those evil auguries of the end of history. How can its reality and vitality be doubted when such events are taking place before our eyes?

Seen at closer quarters, the event is a bit more mysterious, and might with much greater accuracy be described as an unidentified 'historical' object. This thawing of the Eastern bloc, this thawing of liberty is certainly an extraordinary turn of events. But what becomes of liberty when it is defrosted? The operation is a perilous one and its outcome uncertain (even leaving aside the fact that what has been defrosted cannot be deep-frozen again). The USSR and the Eastern bloc have not just served as a deep-freeze for freedom; they have also provided a testing ground, an

experimental environment in which it was isolated and subjected to very high pressures. The West, for its part, is little more than a repository or, more accurately, a dumping ground for freedom and human rights. If ultra-freezing was the distinctive – and negative – mark of the Eastern world, the ultra-fluidity of our Western world is even more disreputable since, as a consequence of the liberation and liberalization of mores and opinions, the problem of liberty quite simply cannot be posed here any longer. It is virtually over and done with. In the West, freedom – the Idea of Freedom – has died a natural death: this we have seen in all the recent commemorations. In the East it was murdered, but there is no such thing as the perfect crime. It will be very interesting, from an experimental point of view, to see what freedom is like when it resurfaces, when it is resuscitated after all sign of it had been blotted out. We shall see what a process of reanimation or *post-mortem* rehabilitation looks like. Perhaps defrosted liberty is not so attractive as all that. And what if it turned out to be intent on just one thing: bartering itself off in a binge of cars and electrical goods, not to mention mind-bending drugs and pornography; that is, immediately trading itself off against Western liquid assets, switching over from an end of history by deep-freezing to an end of history by ultra-fluidity and circulation? Because the enthralling thing about these events in Eastern Europe is not to see them meekly coming to the aid of an ailing democracy by bringing it fresh energy (and new markets), but to see the telescoping of two specific patterns of the end of history: the one where it ends deep-frozen in the concentration camps and the other where, by contrast, it ends in the total, centrifugal expansion of communication. In each case, it is a final solution. And it may be that the thawing of human rights is the socialist equivalent of the 'depressurizing of the West': a mere discharge into the Western void of the energies trapped for half a century in the East.

The fervour surrounding events can be deceptive: if that of the Eastern bloc countries is merely an ardent desire to be free of ideology, merely a fervent desire to imitate the free-market

countries, where all liberty has already been exchanged for technological ease of living, then we shall see once and for all what freedom is worth and know it cannot perhaps ever be regained. History serves up no second helpings. On the other hand – and this is the unpredictable part for us, for the West (after all, when the Evil Empire collapses Good cannot remain exactly as it was before!) – this thaw in the East may be as harmful in the long term as the excess of carbon gases in the upper layers of the atmosphere, creating a political greenhouse effect and such a warming of human relations on the planet, with the melting of the communist ice-floes, that the shores of the West will be flooded. Curiously, whereas we dread the climatic melting of ice-floes and see it as representing a potential catastrophe, as democrats, we long with all our might for such a thaw on the political front.

If, in the old days, the USSR had dumped its stock of gold on the world market, that market would have been completely destabilized. If the Eastern bloc countries were to put back into circulation the vast stock of freedom they have been keeping on ice, they would similarly destabilize the very fragile metabolism of Western values, which requires that freedom no longer manifest itself as action but as a virtual and consensual form of interaction, not as drama, but as the universal psychodrama of liberalism. A sudden injection of freedom as a lived relationship – as violent and active transcendence, as Idea – would be catastrophic in every way for our air-conditioned redistribution of values. Yet this is what we are asking of those in the East: the idea of freedom in exchange for the material signs of freedom. A perfectly diabolical pact, in which one side is in danger of losing its soul, the other its comfort.

The masked societies (the communist societies) are now unmasked. What face do they present? We shed our masks long ago and it is a long time since we had either masks or faces. We have no memory either. We have reached the point of seeking in water a memory without traces, of hoping (I here crave Benveniste's indulgence) that something still remains when even

the molecular traces have disappeared.* It is the same with our freedom: we would be hard pressed to produce any sign of it and we have reached the point of postulating its infinitesimal, impalpable, undetectable existence in a milieu of such high (programmatic, operational) dilution that only its spectre still hovers across our memories.

The wellspring of freedom has run so dry in the West (as witness the commemoration of the French Revolution) that we must place all our hopes in the East European deposits that have at last been uncovered and opened up. But once this stock of liberty has been released (the Idea of Liberty having become as scarce as a natural resource), what can ensue but, as on any market, an intense, superficial burst of trading, followed by a rapid collapse of differential energies and asset values.

What is the meaning of *glasnost*? The retrospective transparency of all the signs of modernity, speeded up and second-hand (it is almost a post-modern remake of our original version of modernity) – of all the positive and negative signs combined: that is, not just human rights, but crimes, catastrophes and accidents which are, it seems, all joyously increasing in the ex-USSR since the liberalization of the regime. And even the rediscovery of pornography and extra-terrestrials, all previously censored, but celebrating their reappearance along with everything else. This is the experimental dimension of this general thaw: we can now see that crimes and catastrophes, both nuclear and natural, along with everything else that has been repressed, are all part of our human rights (the religious sphere too, of course, and fashion; indeed, nothing is debarred) – and this is a fine object lesson in democracy. For we see re-emerging here all that we are, all the allegedly universal emblems of the human in a kind of ideal hallucination and return of the repressed, including the worst, corniest, most banal things in Western 'culture' – things which will henceforth know no boundaries. It is, then, a moment of truth for that culture, as was the earlier confrontation

* For the background to the 'memory of water' affair, see Philippe Alfonsi, *Au nom de la science.*

with the primitive cultures of the whole world, from which our culture cannot really be said to have emerged with flying colours. The irony of the situation is such that it will perhaps be we who are one day forced to rescue the historical memory of Stalinism, while the countries of Eastern Europe will no longer remember the phenomenon. It will be up to us to keep on ice the memory of this tyrant who, for his part, kept the movement of history frozen, since that glacial age also forms part of our universal heritage.

These events are remarkable from another point of view too. They force us to enquire into the turn history is now taking; not proceeding towards its end (a notion that was part of the fantasy of a linear history), but moving into reverse and into systematic obliteration. We are in the process of wiping out the entire twentieth century, effacing all the signs of the Cold War one by one, perhaps even all trace of the Second World War and of all the political or ideological revolutions of the twentieth century. The reunification of Germany is inevitable, as are many other things, not in the sense that they represent a leap forward in history, but as a topsy-turvy rewriting of the whole of the twentieth century, a rewriting which is going to take up a large part of the last ten years of the century. At the rate we are going we shall soon be back at the Holy Roman Empire. And perhaps this is the illumination this *fin de siècle* offers and the true meaning of that controversial formula 'the end of history'. The fact is that, in a sort of enthusiastic work of mourning, we are in the process of retracting all the significant events of this century, of *whitewashing* it, as if everything that had taken place (revolutions, the division of the world, exterminations, the violent transnationality of states, nuclear cliffhanging) – in short, history in its modern phase – were merely a hopeless imbroglio, and everyone had set about undoing that history with the same enthusiasm that had gone into making it. Restoration, regression, rehabilitation, revival of the old frontiers, of the old differences, of particularities, of religions – and even resipiscence in the sphere of morals. It seems that all the signs of liberation achieved over a century are fading and will in the end perhaps be snuffed out one by one: we are engaged in a gigantic process of

revisionism – not an ideological revisionism but a revisionism of history itself, and we seem in a hurry to finish it before the end of the century, secretly hoping perhaps to be able to start again from scratch in the new millennium. If only we could restore everything to its initial state. But which initial state? Before the twentieth century? Before the Revolution? How far can this reabsorption, this retraction take us? The fact is that it can move very, very quickly (as the events in Eastern Europe show), precisely because it is not a work of construction but a massive deconstruction of history, and one assuming almost a viral, epidemic form.

The strategy of dissolution

All forms of repentance are tiresome, as are all commemorations, since they merely serve as illustrations of repentance. In this sense, even the events in Eastern Europe, even the fantastic *aggiornamento* of the satellite states and the USSR, though that has nothing of the commemoration about it, are also illustrations of this repentance of history, this movement of *istoria repentita.* Neither a regression, nor an end, but a repentance.

The figure of the *pentito* appeared in Italy at the turn of the 1980s. It emerged from within the ultra-left, at the farthest outpost of political modernity, and, in a way, marks that movement's post-modern turn. The *pentiti* suddenly went back on all their previous beliefs and thus came to serve liberal society as a vaccine against all radical temptations. A conversion of this kind was previously unthinkable (the Moscow trials are still about self-criticism, which is a modern value, whereas repentance is post-modern). But this is merely a first phase of a general reversion which does not stop at the extremes: repentance passed first from ultra-leftism to communism, then to the whole of the revolutionary movement. It affected the avant-gardes first, the cutting edge of modernity, then washed back into the central mass, into collective ideologies. The whole of history is repenting the 'excesses' of modernity (and Stalinism was certainly one of those excesses). But, above and beyond the excesses, the whole

movement of modernity is affected. It is not just the revolution that is approaching the moment of repentance, but the evolutionary movement of modernity itself.

Repentance is part of post-modernity – the recycling of past forms, the exalting of residues, rehabilitation by *bricolage*, eclectic sentimentality. With a tendency towards high dilution and low intensities. In this sense, Stalinism was modernity and recent events of 'liberation' would represent, rather, a post-modern drop in voltage. And, indeed, the astonishing ease with which they have occurred, their rapidity, is an obvious sign that we are tumbling down the slope of history. Instead of seeing these events as representing more modernity, history or liberty, one might ask if this is not an entropic process. Does this recouping of the democratic deficit, this alignment with a model of easy-going, laid-back freedom, this dislocation of a bloc of otherness represent an increase in energy and complexity or the dissipation of potential energy, energy leaking away as heat? Admittedly, the world gets warmer this way, but does it not thereby reach a more advanced stage of superficial energy – that of communication, of mere heat exchange – the lowest form of energy? The rule today is that everything must go into global circulation. Every event which has its place in the round of liberation is merely the extension of a physical model of circulation and communication, of a dominant model of consensus and regulation of exchanges, and in this sense profoundly wearisome (the form it takes may, however, be original and have extraordinary consequences – May '68, for example, was a politically lightweight episode, but the event was an inspired one).

Moreover, what are the countries of Eastern Europe to be opened up to now that they have been liberated? To the liberal configuration of human rights and a market economy. But the liberal economy which is triumphant today is by no means the initial, historic, modern version of the market economy. We are in an expurgated version, purged of all its contradictions, of the conflictual infrastructure which was that of historic (one might say heroic) capitalism. It is a market economy with no social force

to battle against it, no competitive force to drive it on, no collective project to propel it into the future. In short, an economy which is no longer political but transpolitical, and perhaps even transeconomic in its incoherence – an economy of speculation and virtual collapse. Production, the market, ideology, profit and utopia (profit itself is a utopia) were all modern. The competitive capitalist economy was modern. Ours, unreal and speculative, lacking even the notion of production, profit and progress, is no longer modern, but post-modern. And if the countries of Eastern Europe gain access to that economy, they will be entering not the modern but the post-modern era.

The same goes for the 'liberal economy' of human rights. Entire peoples are rushing towards a 'historical' objective of liberty which no longer exists at all in the form in which they imagine it, towards a form of 'democratic' representation which has also long been dying from speculation (the statistical speculation of opinion polls, the media speculation of news [*l'information*]). The democratic illusion is universal, linked as it is to the zero degree of civic energy. All we have left of liberty is an ad-man's illusion, that it, the zero degree of the Idea, and it is this which sets the tone for our liberal regime of human rights.

We all dream, no doubt, in some collective unconscious, of the resurrection of history, but we should not take our dreams for realities. This confused state of thawing relations, of rehabilitation, of liberal redemption and support for human rights is part of a reheating of history, not a revolutionary ferment. Ecstasy and beatification should not be confused. We are currently right in the middle of a phase of beatification, of religious consensus on established (or already lost) values. Which explains, by the way, the astonishing pre-eminence in the media of the figure of the Pope, who travels the whole world (even the Islamic Sahel!) blessing all forms of crossbreeding and repentance, while ensuring that durable forms of voluntary servitude are in place. Formal religion is extending its grasp, just as the speculative economy is extending its own through the Stock Exchange and capital movements. In the new forms of religion, as in the new forms of speculation, we are witnessing the striking illustration of

what Hegel calls 'the life, moving within itself, of that which is dead'.*

Something else provides a hint that what is happening in Eastern Europe is not a real historical leap forward – the strange ease with which all the communist regimes collapsed. They were not defeated: they had only to be touched for them to realize that they no longer existed. It was like a cartoon, where the tightrope-walker, teetering over the abyss, suddenly sees his rope is gone and immediately falls, passing without transition from the imaginary to the real (this is the basic mechanism of cartoons). The magical collapse of meaning in the verbal joke is of the same order. In the *Witz*, it is as though the linear structure of language had never existed and suddenly collapses of its own accord with incomprehensible obviousness. What is involved here is not a 'liberation' of language, nor its dislocation as an effect of unconscious contents, but an extreme, accidental form in which language seems to wish to go beyond its intentional operation and get caught up in its own dizzy whirl. Freud saw very well those strange attractors that are condensation, displacement, ellipsis and reversibility. Forms, not values. And recent events have to be seen in terms of a theory of forms, rather than any kind of theory based on relations of force. The communist systems did not succumb to an external enemy, nor even to an internal one (had that been the case, they would have resisted), but to their own inertia, taking advantage of the opportunity, as it were, to disappear (perhaps they were weary of existing). Entire systems lost their immunity and collapsed into themselves, like those buildings subtly dynamited in advance. They sank into their own void. Now, this form of progression, of chain reaction, of superconductivity of events is a marvellous one, like the form of the joke, like all that eludes the rational laws of communication. What took place in Eastern Europe did not come about through ideology and historical violence. It was an almost viral event, and thus mysterious in its form – rather like everything that comes to

* 'Das sich in sich selbst bewegende Leben des Totes'.

us today through the channel of models and images. This is now the only impressive form and can itself act as a strange attractor – on the West in particular.

The spectacle of those regimes imploding with such ease ought to make Western governments – or what is left of them – tremble, for they have barely any more existence than the Eastern ones. In 1968, we saw government authority collapse almost without violence, as if convinced of its non-existence by the mere mirror of the crowds and the street. And the images which came to us from Prague and Berlin were '68-style images, with the same atmosphere, the same faces. The non-existence of governmental power is, admittedly, less visible in the West, on account of its great dilution and the transparency which enables it to survive. In the East, it was opaque and highly concentrated, to the point that, as with an unstable crystal, only an extra little dose was needed for it to liquefy.

It is possible, then, that the countries of Eastern Europe will pass on to us this model of viral collapse, of a virulence deconstructive of power. In exchange, we might pass on to them our liberal virus, our compulsion for objects and images, media and communication, a virus, in our case, which devastates civil society. One virus for another. At bottom, this could be seen as the last episode in the Cold War, a kind of reciprocal contamination between the two blocs formerly shielded from one another by the existence of the Wall. Behind the apparent victory of the West, it is clear, on the contrary, that the strategic initiative came from the East, not by aggression this time, but by disintegration, by a kind of offensive self-liquidation, catching the whole of the West unawares. In the eternal state of deterrence between the two blocs, a situation from which there was no apparent issue, the advantage could be gained only by the side which, one way or another, ended up disarmed. By force of circumstance, which may have equated with a perception of his own weakness, Gorbachev was able to take this strategic tack of disarmament, the real deconstruction of his own bloc, and thereby of the entire world order. This was, in a way, dying communism's witty parting shot, since the quasi-voluntary destabilization of the Eastern bloc, with the complicity of its peoples, is also a destabilization of the West.

Let us beware of the naïve vision of a frozen history suddenly awakening and automatically heading once again, like a turtle, for the sea (for democracy). Things are much more complicated than that.

Now that the problem of the Wall is out of the way, we can see that it perhaps provided more protection for the West than for Eastern Europe. Now that the triumphal illusion of the West annexing the East – for the greater glory of democracy, of course – has faded, we can sense that it might be the other way about: the East gobbling up the West by blackmailing it with poverty and human rights.

The East's great weapon is no longer the H-bomb, but Chernobyl. It is the accident, the accidental virus, the virus of its own decomposition – Chernobyl whose radioactive cloud, by crossing frontiers with far greater ease than armoured divisions, prefigured the collapse of the Wall and the progressive contamination of the Western world. Bush may well disarm in the pretence of having won the Cold War, but it is the USSR and Gorbachev who invented the real *bombe à dépression*, the surest one, the one which turns its own depression into a bomb.*

The Eastern bloc cheerfully destroying its own ideological and bureaucratic foundations is more than a twist or ruse of history; it is a joke, a witty stroke of ironic inversion which forces us to read history the other way around. Perhaps such an involuntary challenge could only come from within the confines of an empire which had shown no glimmer of irony, except the crepuscular variety, for half a century. German would describe this kind of transcendent high spirits, of historical rejoicing in sudden change, as *Übermut*. True freedom is certainly not that of human rights, but the freedom which springs from this ironic turn taken by history (current events are never outdone for irony, even in the West: to see Noriega flouting Bush and taking refuge in the Vatican chancellery is not without its comic side).

However this may be, what is going to come of this transfusion

* '*Une bombe à dépression*' is a fuel-air explosive device, such as the CBU 55-Bs which were used by the Americans to 'clear' jungle areas in Vietnam.

of Good and Evil, beyond the dusting off of liberties and the realignment of democratic façades, remains a mystery.

For Evil is not simply the repressed. If it were only that, it would be sufficient merely to lift the repression weighing upon it, to 'liberate' it, as is being done everywhere (in particular in the East where the barrier of Evil has been broken down). But we are soon going to see that Evil is something different, that it easily outlasts all liberation and that, in dismantling the visible Evil empire, the deeper form of maleficence is simultaneously being liberated. Evil takes advantage of transparency (glasnost) and becomes the transparence of things themselves.

Evil was visible, opaque, localized in the territories of the East. We have exorcized it, liberated it, liquidated it. But has it, for all that, ceased to be Evil? Not at all: it has become fluid, liquid, interstitial, viral. That is the transparence of Evil. It is not that it is transparent [*est transparent*] in the sense that you might see through it. It is, rather, that it shows though [*transparaît*] in all things when they lose their image, their mirror, their reflection, their shadow, when they no longer offer any substance, distance or resistance, when they become both immanent and elusive from an excess of fluidity and luminosity. So long as Evil was opaque, obscene, oblique, obscure, there was still a transcendence of Evil and it could be held at a distance. It has now become immanent and interstitial (in the West, it is assuming, in particular, the form of terrorism as a filterable virus. Political terrorism, but also all the other forms of virulence – biological, sexual, media-based or electronic). With the events in Eastern Europe, this theme is given striking illustration, and Evil is entering upon a phase of definitive dissemination. Shattered, destabilized communism will pass into the veins of the West in metabolic, surreptitious form, and destabilize it in its turn. This will no longer be the violence of the Idea, but the virus of de-immunization. A communism which dissolves itself is a successful communism.

One of the consequences of this East–West transfusion is the elimination of the renegades who functioned as an umbilical cord between the two blocs, condemned on the one side, fêted on the

other, but complicit with both. By way of dissidents – the political avant-garde of the Eastern bloc countries and refuge of the Western intellectual avant-garde – East and West carried on a kind of dialogue of the deaf throughout all the years of the arms race. Some among the dissidents have analysed the ambiguity of this situation. Including Sakharov himself. But Sakharov is dead. He died, significantly, when dissidence, victorious, no longer had any meaning. Dissidents cannot bear a thaw. They have to die, or else become president (Walesa, Havel) in a sort of bitter revenge which, at any event, marks their death as dissidents. They lived in the silent cinema of the political; the 'talkie' era kills them off. They whose strength was in silence (or censorship) are condemned to speak and be devoured by speech. When the Eastern bloc societies catch up with their dissidents and absorb them, it is the end of modernity, as it is when Western society catches up with and absorbs its avant-gardes. In the East and the West, the Idea is finished. The organic consensus marks the dawning of post-modern societies, non-conflictual and at one with themselves. The collapse of the Wall is the visible outward manifestation of an invisible event which has affected all these societies for at least twenty years: the collapse of the division or split internal to each of them, of the conflictual structure which came about with the upheavals and revolutions of the modern era.

The Western intellectuals who embodied that split, that internal division of societies and minds, are themselves fated to disappear like the silent movie actors.

As for those who were pro-dissident in the West, the fine-spirited sympathizers, what is to become of their solidarity? They too are condemned. They spoke for others. Will they now have the courage to shut up? They will not, and are already running off to the scene of the crime, to the Berlin Wall, for that was indeed the site of the crime and the sacrifice. The point when the Wall comes down marks the end of their careers. There is no longer any abominable Other (the communists), no longer any adorable Other (the dissidents).

What of Zinoviev? What of his cynical, merrily nihilistic and paradoxical line (Cioran: history is dying for want of paradoxes)?

The paradox of communism, in Zinoviev's view, is that of being at one and the same time an outdated solution, an end of history, the Evil empire *and* the definitive solution because it has experienced the worst, as the West has not done, and has drawn the consequences from it. It is therefore a solution from after the catastrophe (whatever it may be, whether Third World War or something else), a final solution to the survival of the species and thus an inevitable and definitive model, while nonetheless one that is outdated at the level of the economy and history. This paradox is going to become highly charged when put to the test by the reunification of the two worlds. For the human and ideological failure of communism by no means compromises its potency and virulence as an anthropological model. It is a kind of gigantic snare of the social and the political spheres, which might be said to have succeeded, even if it destroys itself – particularly if it destroys itself – in a kind of *stratégie du pire* which would be imposed on everyone as the last immune defence, *man being taken in hand*, on a universal scale, *to protect him from himself*. On the opposite side, there is only the transparency of democracy, incapable of containing the radiation of Evil.

There is, moreover, a paradox of Western societies opposite and equivalent to that of communism: though they present all the signs of more developed and open societies, at the same time they have one eye on the past as though it were a void they have created behind them, while absorbing the future. It is like the story of the lorry and the hole: some workers dig a hole and load it on to a lorry, but when they hit a bump in the road the hole falls off and, reversing, the lorry falls into the hole. We are the lorry and the hole: we are weighed down by a hole in our memories, weighed down by the retrospective emptiness of our history, to the point that our societies do not even know whether they are heading towards the future. They are riding the surf of their present, problematic wealth. Beneath their apparent mobility and acceleration, they have come to a stop in their hearts and their aims. That is, indeed, why they are accelerating, but they are doing so out of inertia.

The encounter between this type of society with maximum

mobility but immobility in its heart and the Eastern bloc societies which are petrified on the outside but in no way inert in their inward core should be highly dramatic or totally ambiguous. Like blood transfusions today, the transfusion of Good and Evil presents many dangers. There is a risk we shall pass all our germs on to them, and they might give us all of theirs (this is how contacts between dissimilar cultures or races go). First of all, there will be seventy years of 'backwardness' to make up, but are we so sure things are going to happen that way? Instead of the Eastern bloc countries accelerating towards modern democracy, perhaps we are going to drift in the other direction, moving back beyond democracy and falling into the hole of the past. It would be the opposite of Orwell's prediction (strangely, he has not been mentioned of late, though the collapse of Big Brother ought to have been celebrated for the record, if only for the irony of the date Orwell set for the onset of totalitarianism which turned out to be roughly that of its collapse). Even more ironic is the fact that we are not at all threatened by the totalitarian (Stalinist) rewriting of the past, but the democratic rewriting of history: the very images of Stalin and Lenin swept away, streets and cities renamed, statues scattered, soon none of all that will have existed. Yet another ruse of history – not the last but, as ever, the best.

Democratic rewriting. The scenario is off to a good start. Everyone is having a clear-out. All the dictatorships are being wound up and sold off cheap, before the end of the century if possible (before Christmas for Eastern Europe so that everything can shine bright in a new Nativity). Splendid emulation, as stupendous as the tolerance which has reigned over it all so far. Everyone equally committed to the liquidation! Eliminating the planet's blackspots as one might eliminate traffic accident blackspots, as we might eliminate spots from a face: cosmetic surgery elevated to the level of the political, and to Olympic performance levels.

Of course, this great democratic rally is not believable for an instant. Not that there is any Machiavellian strategy going on, but it's too good to be true. There is something suspect about the

sudden consensus. The disappearance, as if by magic, of all contradiction is more than suspect (China has temporarily relapsed, and what remains of world communism is merely a theme park. With a little imagination, Cuba could be joined up with Disneyworld, which is not far away, as part of a world heritage centre). Something tells us that what we have here is not a historical evolution, but an *epidemic* of consensus, an epidemic of democratic values – in other words, this is a viral effect, a triumphant effect of fashion. If democratic values spread so easily, by a capillary or communicating-vessels effect, then they must have liquefied, they must now be worthless. Throughout the modern age they were held dear and dearly bought. Today, they are being sold off at a discount and we are watching a Dutch auction of democratic values which looks very much like uncontrolled speculation. Which makes it highly probable that, as might be the case with financial speculation, these same values may crash.

It is clear that the ultimate deterrence has come from the East – no longer that of the balance of terror, which, for forty years, prevented the event of atomic war from coming about, but of the imbalance of terror, which prevents the confrontation itself from coming about. Deterrence by self-dissolution, demolition, de-escalation, unilateral disarmament, auto-destabilization which completely destabilizes the opponent – a strategy of weakness, an unexpected, unpredictable strategy even for the protagonists themselves, but all the more effective for that. A strategy of disappearance, dispersion, dissemination, contamination, virulence by fragmentation. For not only are the weapons, hardware and brains of the former USSR going to turn up all over the world, but the model of disintegration is going to radiate out also, more effective than a thousand atom bombs. Integral, totalitarian communism could be sealed up and neutralized. Disintegrated communism becomes viral; it becomes capable of passing through its own wall and infecting the whole world, not by ideology or by its model of functioning, but by its model of dysfunctioning and

of sudden, violent destructuring. Certainly, we might ask whether this is still communism? Whatever the answer, it is exerting an influence over the world which it could never muster by arms or by thought, an influence over the whole world by the event of its disappearance. In that sense, it might be said that it is triumphant, since perfect communism, the fully realized communism, like the fully realized utopia, is the one which has disappeared. In that sense, too, the consequences of communism's sudden self-dissolution are perhaps even more incalculable than those of its appearance at the dawn of this century. Not through ideology, but through the *auto-da-fé* of its own principles, the unconditional acting out of capitulation. In terms of ideas, it had opened up a monolithic, totalitarian path; with its inverted acting out, it opens up the path of dislocation for all structures and empires. The East will have victoriously countered capital with capitulation.

It is Chernobyl that will turn out to have been the real starting point in this involuntary, but brilliant strategic inversion which has destabilized the very concept of relations of force, creating out of this a strategy of relations of weakness and completely changing the rules of the game. Up to that point, things were frozen: no military, offensive acting-out was possible. Everything culminated in Star Wars, an impossible scenario: orbital bombs are virtual; they do not explode. The only true bomb explodes – or implodes – on the spot, by superfusion: Chernobyl, an accidental acting-out. It was the Eastern bloc that exploded that bomb in its own heart and it was that bomb which, in the form of the first atomic cloud, crossed the Wall and frontiers without encountering any opposition, inaugurating the fusion between the two worlds by radioactive infiltration. So the initial explosion of the New World Order will indeed have come from the East, and the contamination has passed from East to West. After Chernobyl, the Berlin Wall no longer exists. Symbolically, it is therefore nuclear fusion, after all, which presides over the political, transpolitical confusion of the blocs. By the suicidal accident of Chernobyl, the former USSR both admits its impotence, its weakness, and at the same time passes the whole lot over to the

West, obliging it to manage the collapse, to manage a whole world gone bankrupt. That of communism to begin with, but soon, subtly, the world of capital itself. Up to now, communism had sought out the weakest link in the capitalist chain. Suddenly, it discovered that *it* was the weakest link and, by destroying itself, by cracking up almost accidentally, it sent the other world hurtling to its doom, forced it to deny itself as enemy, contaminated its defences, exported its own economic and political suicide. The captive hell of communism found itself liberated. From this point on, the barrier separating hell from heaven is liquidated. And in this case, of course, the liquefaction is general, and hell always submerges heaven.

Solzhenitsyn writes (against Sakharov and his idea of having the two hostile blocs converge so as to unite their mutual qualities): 'What can come of two societies afflicted with such redhibitory vices when they come closer together and are transformed by the contact between them? A society twice as immoral.' The dream of plurality is indeed precisely this: differences are to be exchanged as positive qualities. Whereas what always wins out in the exchange of differences, in dialogue, is the exchange and addition of negative qualities. Fusion always turns into confusion, contact into contamination. We have an example of this today with AIDS and the fatal potentiality threatening every sexual encounter. But the same goes for computers: maximum interconnectedness brings maximum vulnerability of all networks (the trend now is towards stand-alone computers; it seems in fact that networks transmit viruses even faster than information). Genetic confusion runs in this same direction. It is one of the aspects of the principle of Evil that it always proceeds more quickly than Good.

So Solzhenitsyn, for his part objecting to this immoral confusion, is right and Sakharov wrong. But we have nothing against vice and immorality. If they have to be increased in the confusion of the two worlds, then perhaps that is better, all in all, than the austere, puritanical order of deterrence and the balance of terror. Why not a world society which is entirely corrupt, a single empire which is the empire of confusion, a New World

Disorder which combines the filterable viruses of communism with the discreet charm of the rights of man and nature?

It might seem that the flow of wealth and abundance moving from West to East wins out over the opposite flow. But what flows from West to East is chiefly the illusion of victory. What is moving in the other direction is more subtle and more deadly: the virus of weakness, the multiple forms of disaffection, the end of all democratic illusions. In short, nothing is decided and no one can say who will win, who will be first to destabilize the other, the rich, business-like countries or those trained by Marxism in abulia and corruption? Slackness or efficiency? Fatal apathy or high performance levels? The captive hell of paradise or the captive paradise of hell? The two worlds now stand opposed not with weapons or ideas, but mentally in the artificial promiscuity of the New World Order. This is where the transparence of Evil begins. This is where we shall see, once all the conditions for order are fulfilled, how irresistible is disorder; once all the conditions for Good are fulfilled, how irresistible is Evil, how it circulates in the same arterial system as Good and feeds off it, in all innocence, in all perversity. It is Dracula against Snow White (the Dracula myth is gathering strength all around as the Faustian and Promethean myths fade). We have a good idea who is going to suck the other's blood once their glass coffins are broken open.

It is in Germany that these two worlds are telescoped together, with Berlin as the epicentre, since there, paradoxically, it is from reunification that the antagonism arises. It is not the confrontation but the rapprochement of two worlds which produces violence and the clash of mentalities. The historical failure of the one, when faced with the dazzling success of the other, may turn to defiance, and those very people who eyed the wealth enviously when it was still forbidden may very well turn their backs entirely on the Western model merely to remain consistent with themselves. In the course of their misfortunes, the people of Eastern Europe have certainly acquired an opinion on history and its perverse effects. Against all theoretical predictions, out of the two

opposed worlds of Capital and Labour, it is that of Labour they have seen collapse. Logically, they must have drawn from this a lesson of non-labour and collective irresponsibility. However this may be, it will certainly not be easy to convert them to the liberal cult of performance.

This is how the reversal of Western values begins. Not merely by the infiltration into the metropolitan heartland of a Fourth World which, unlike the Third, has no other territory than the one it destabilizes from within, but also by the osmosis of an Eastern European world which is decomposing, and making of that decomposition if not a strategy then at least a trap, a decoy, a *politique du pire.* Now, we know that one of the characteristics of the West, represented to perfection by the Americans in the recent Gulf War, is a tendency to shoot at decoys.

The drip-feeding of Western values behind the Iron Curtain gives way today to the percolation, the surreptitious infiltration of the impotence, slackness, technological, economic and demographic ill-will of another world that was long considered residual, backward, under-developed and which is rising up today as a fully fledged protagonist, an equal protagonist and perhaps even a superior one to the extent that *its potential of impotence is superior to our potential of potency.* Now, contrary to the apparent facts which suggest that all cultures are penetrable by the West – that is, corruptible by the universal – it is the West which is eminently penetrable. The other cultures (including those of Eastern Europe), even when they give the impression of selling themselves, of prostituting themselves to material goods or Western ideologies, in fact remain impenetrable behind the mask of prostitution. They can be wiped out physically and morally, but not penetrated. This alienness is linked to their complicity with themselves. The West, for its part, is alien to itself, and anyone can just walk right in.

The logic of this challenge is alien to that of the economic and liberal New World Order. In the order of power and wealth, one desires the death of the other so as to take his place. By contrast, what these refractory, incompatible cultures want, what they demand, is not to take the place but to see the death of the West,

even at the risk of dying themselves. The West, naïve as ever, believes it is resented for its power and wealth and, even more naïvely, believes in the compatibility of all cultures. But even when the 'others' seem to be demanding their share of the cake, this is still an allegorical way of desiring its death.

The West is discovering the Eastern bloc countries, weak and drained, as once it discovered the survivors of the concentration camps. The danger is to feed them too quickly, since this kills them. But, in any case, whether or not they are saved, they live in another space – shattered by catastrophe. They will never come back into ours. Certainly, we shall do all we can to wipe this past from their memories. But in vain. It is they, by contrast, who will suck us into their empty space, just as the dead and the survivors of the camps have sucked our last vague desires for culture, law and morality into the empty space and impotent memory of extermination. The attraction of the void is irresistible. The 'victory' of the West is not unlike a depressurizing of the West in the void of communism, in the void of history.

All that began with Chernobyl, as a cold, almost involuntary, strategy, is still going its merry way. Ten or twenty Soviet nuclear power stations sit there, awaiting fissure and meltdown, like a time-bomb that cannot be defused, prolonging the suspense of a phoney, cold war, which, being accidental, would offer no possibility of retaliation. On the contrary, indeed, the enemy is forced to take you in hand to avoid catastrophe. The whole strategy of the ex-Empire is organized in this way – at great cost in poverty, radiation or civil war – around the black hole into which it might itself be said to have fallen, but into which it is dragging all its old adversaries, one after another, along with history itself, causing this latter to ebb back to an uncertain past, a foetal stage where the phantoms of the old conflicts and the old nationalisms bump up against the ghost of the atomic weapons which are now rendered useless (and which it will hence be possible to spread around generously).

To this, we must add the dispersal by auction of the Soviet army which, like the state, is being sold off for spares. We had

never seen anything like this before – the strongest state and largest army in the world fainting right away. We have not taken this great world premiere fully on board. Let us hope it is merely a dress rehearsal. What should have been a source of universal rejoicing passed off almost without interest – a sign of the nullity of the age. But we have to understand what this break-up of the Red Army and the selling-off of its nuclear forces will mean. It amounts to their dispersal over the whole of the globe. Once the reference point of its intended usage is gone, weaponry, like the atom, becomes viral and interstitial.

The illusion is, in fact, to believe that the collapse of the great empires opens up a renewal of history, whereas it merely opens out on to the metastases of empire. The most probable hypothesis is that we are dealing here not with a disappearance, but with a dispersal of empire into all the local, provincial, territorial micro-empires. This is the same homology between the detail and the whole as in holograms: the mirror of the empire is broken, but each fragment preserves its image. The great dismantled systems (and the process isn't over yet; just wait for the end of the American Empire and the 'historic' nations) find the means to perpetuate themselves in another way, not by dynastic filiation as in the past, but by something like fractal division, by scissiparity: micro-imperia, micro-dictatorships, micro-autarkies bearing within themselves, in miniature, all the stigmata and vices of empire. Reintroducing the same servitude, this time administered at the level of identity (whether the identity of the individual, the group, the ethnic group or the enterprise). The end of empires means the unrestricted reign of slave micro-systems. Even in the end of the nuclear empire we find this same trend: the dispersal of atomic weapons will have the effect of enslaving the other nations to the same system of deterrence, the same consensual equilibrium.

And what of the political in all this? That died with the great empires. Their perpetuation in other forms – fragmented, irradiated, decentred, peripheral – the second life of the great empires in retroviral form, so to speak, genetically infecting all their wastes, all their by-products, all their basic cells, is no longer of

the order of the political, but of the transpolitical. A flabby, decentred, high-dilution transpolitical, where ideological options are immaterial and historical violence minimal (in most conflicts, the violence is merely a homeopathic, police violence, internal to the systems).

To all intents and purposes, the political died with the historical passions aroused by the great ideas and the great empires. The transpolitical, for its part, has but a single passion: that of the work of mourning and recycling (intellectuals are passing through the same phase: the work of mourning for morality and the universal conscience). And a single, inexhaustible energy – for managing residues. The new labour power, which has emerged in this *fin de siècle*, is mourning power. The energy of the corpse is recycled, just as Romain Gary recycled the spiritual charge of dead souls as material energy ('the charge of souls'), and as Jarry had dead men pedalling – henceforth indefatigable since they were pedalling by inertia. As something which has failed, this work of mourning is interminable; it becomes lost in the melancholy of homeopathic and homeostatic systems, where even the recognition of death, the intuition of that death (of the political), is impossible, since it would reintroduce a fatal virus into the virtual immortality of the transpolitical. There is the same problem with freedom: the least reinjection of a dose of freedom, or even of a problematic of freedom, would introduce a fatal virus into the chain of networks, the virus of voluntary servitude – a non-violent, consensual, ecological micro-servitude, which is everywhere the successor to totalitarian oppression.

The most amusing feature of this history, the ironic thing about the end, is that communism should have collapsed exactly as Marx had foreseen for capitalism, with the same suddenness, and, ultimately, with such ease that it did not even strike the imagination. The fact that he got the victor wrong in no way detracts from the exactness of Marx's analysis; it merely adds the objective irony which was lacking. Fate took care of that. It is as though some evil genie had substituted the one for the other – communism for capitalism – at the last moment. As if, since

Western society had, in its own way, brought to fruition the prophecies of a future society (the withering away of the State, of the political, of work, the administration of things and generalized leisure – even if all these are simulated) in communism's stead, the latter could simply disappear. An admirable division of labour: Capital has done communism's work and communism has died in Capital's place. But this can just as easily turn around. For all these ideal perspectives, including that of theoretical communism, were perhaps merely absurd. Capital, for its part, ended up achieving the objective of *real* communism, which was generalized exchange. At any price. Precisely at any price, indeed, since it achieved it under the auspices of the market and the commodity. But this too is part of the irony of history: the inversion of the final meaning – the final illusion. One cannot ask events to be true to the initial conditions. They sometimes occur in exactly the opposite way, in an ironic mode, while engendering the same final conditions.

Capital has cannibalized all negativity, that of history and that of work in a – literally – sarcastic fashion: devouring the very substance of the human being to transform it into its essence as productive being. It has unceremoniously devoured the dialectic by parodistically taking the opposing terms upon itself, by parodistically going beyond its own contradictions. What we see before us is the parodic triumph of the classless society, the parodic realization of all utopian metaphors: the man of leisure, transdisciplinary pluralism, the mobility and availability of all signs – the cook become head of state, or almost (we have seen worse since this old dream of Lenin's). Unfortunately, in the meantime, the State has disappeared, or almost disappeared, doubtless as a result of the same effect which enables the cook to accede to its head, without it being possible to say whether the disappearance of the one brought about the promotion of the other, or the other way about. But, in any case, when the State ceases to be the State, the cook ceases to be the cook. As Brecht says, the fact that beer is not beer is harmoniously compensated by the fact that the cigar is not a cigar either. Thus the ironic order is safe and sound.

The other irony of history is the Ubuesque form of repentance. Gorbachev is giving up Marxism! Fantastic! But what does 'giving up' mean? Can you give up Marxism in the way you give up tobacco or alcohol? Can you give up your father and mother? Can you give up God? In its time, the Church has come close to giving up the Devil or the Immaculate Conception, but this has not occurred. Renunciation is the symmetrical and opposite movement to faith – as absurd and useless. If things exist, there is no use believing in them. If they do not exist, there is no use renouncing them. So the renunciation of the class struggle is grotesque: you can deny the class struggle or sacrifice it if you have to, but you can't give it up like an old skin or a childhood superstition.

This renunciation, this apostasy, is a very bad example. What if one day the West too were to renounce capitalism. And what if, one day, the West were forced to revive Marxism, which is, after all, part of our heritage, damn it (as also is damnation).*

* 'Et si un jour l'Occident était forcé de ressusciter le marxisme, qui fait quand même partie du patrimoine, que diable (le Diable aussi d'ailleurs).' I have departed slightly from the French text here in order to retain the pun.

The Timişoara massacre

Yet it seems we are tired of fuelling the end of history with simulacra and are now letting it follow out its course; we are tired of that long simulation of modernity and are entering, with recent events – including those in Eastern Europe – upon a phase of *desimulation*. The Gulf War and the events in Eastern Europe are among those quasi-unreal events which have less meaning in themselves than in the fact that they put an end to things which long ago ceased to have meaning (communism in the Eastern bloc countries, the Cold War for the Gulf). In this sense, they are, after all, symptomatic, but ambiguous events – immediately credible (via the media), but fundamentally undecidable. Retrospectively, it is the same with many past or recent events: they too are not of the order of truth, but of credibility. News [*information*] makes everything credible (that is, uncertain), even previous facts, even future events. The criteria of truth have been supplanted by the principle of credibility (which is also the principle of statistics and opinion polls), and this is the true guiding principle of news. The uncertainty I am speaking of is like a virus which affects or infects all history, current events and images. Even if it is refuted, it can only be refuted virtually, since virtuality forms part of reality itself – a reality which is now uncertain, paradoxical, random, hyper-real, filtered by the medium, cut adrift by its own image.

Hence the interest of submitting the Gulf War and the

Romanian 'revolution' to this uncertainty test, of adding them to that set of objects which are unverifiable other than on the screens, which immediately degrade into news and are rapidly laundered and forgotten like any other spectacle.

In the case of the Romanian revolution, it was the faking of the dead in Timişoara which aroused a kind of moral indignation and raised the problem of the scandal of 'disinformation' or, rather, of *information itself as scandal.*

It was not the dead that were the scandal, but the corpses being pressed into appearing before the television cameras, as in the past dead souls were pressed into appearance in the register of deaths. It was their being taken hostage, as it were, and our being held hostage too, as mystified TV viewers. Being blackmailed by violence and death, especially in a noble and revolutionary cause, was felt to be worse than the violence itself, was felt to be a parody of history.

All the media live off the presumption of catastrophe and of the succulent imminence of death. A photo in *Libération*, for example, shows us a convoy of refugees 'which, some time after this shot was taken, *was to be* attacked by the Iraqi army'. Anticipation of effects, morbid simulation, emotional blackmail. It was the same on CNN with the arrival of the Scuds. Nothing is news if it does not pass through that horizon of the virtual, that hysteria of the virtual – not in the psychological sense, but in the sense of a compulsion for what is presented, in all bad faith, as real to be consumed as unreal.

In the past, to show something up as a fake, we said: 'It's just play-acting', 'It's all romance!', 'It's put on for the cameras!'. This time, with Romania and the Gulf War, we were able to say, 'It's just TV!'

Photographic or cinema images still pass through the negative stage (and that of projection), whereas the TV image, the video image, digital and synthetic, are images without a negative, and hence without negativity and without reference. They are *virtual* and the virtual is what puts an end to all negativity, and thus to all reference to the real or to events. At a stroke, the contagion of

images, engendering themselves without reference to a real or an imaginary, itself becomes virtually without limits, and this limitless engendering produces *information as catastrophe.*

Is an image which refers only to itself still an image? However this may be, that image raises the problem of its indifference to the world, and thus of our indifference to *it* – which is a political problem. When television becomes the strategic space of the event, it sets itself up as a deadly self-reference, it becomes a bachelor machine.* The real object is wiped out by news – not merely alienated, but abolished. All that remains of it are traces on a monitoring screen.

Many Romanian eyewitness accounts speak of being dispossessed of the event in this way, deprived of the lived experience they have of it by being submerged in the media network, by being placed under house arrest in front of their television screens. Spectators then become *exoterics* of the screen, living their revolution as an exoticism of images, themselves exogenous, touristic spectators of a virtual history. From the moment the studio becomes the strategic centre, and the screen the only site of appearance, everyone wants to be on it at all costs, or else gathers in the street in the glare of the cameras, and these, indeed, actually film one another. The street becomes an extension of the studio, that is, of the *non-site* of the event, of the *virtual* site of the event. The street itself becomes a virtual space. Site of the definitive confusion of masses and medium, of the real-time confusion of act and sign.

There is no will to communicate in all this. The only irresistible drive is to occupy this non-site, *this empty space of representation* which is the screen. Representation (political representation too) is currently a trough of depression – meteorological depression – which the media fill up with their turbulences, with the same consequences as occur when any kind of space is suddenly depressurized. The highest pressure of news corresponds to the lowest pressure of events and reality [*le réel*].

* A reference to Michel Carrouges's *Les machines célibataires* and the works by Duchamp et al. which inspired it.

The same unrealism in the Ceauşescu trial. It is not the judicial procedure itself which is scandalous but the video tape, unacceptable as the only, bloodless trace of a bloody event. In the eyes of the whole world, this will remain an event forever suspect, for the sole reason of its – strangely obscene – scenic abduction. This hidden jury, its voice striking out against the accused, these defendants we are forced to see even though they are virtually dead, these dead prisoners shot a second time to meet the needs of news. One might even wonder whether the actors in this staged event were not deliberately trying to make themselves seem suspect in the eyes of world opinion, as though playing at sabotaging their image. At the same time, the Ceauşescu trial was pulled off perfectly as a video production, betraying a sharp sense of the image-function, the blackmail-function, the deterrence-function. Deep down, the intuitive grasp of these things has grown more sophisticated over there, in the shadow of dictatorship, than it has with us. We have nothing to teach them. For, if the Romanians themselves got high on this media speculation which served them as a revolutionary aphrodisiac, they also dragged all the Western media into the same news demagogy. By manipulating themselves, they caused us spontaneously to swallow their fiction. We bear the same responsibility as they do. Or, rather, there is no responsibility anywhere. The question of responsibility cannot even be raised. It is the evil genius of news which promotes such staging.

When information gets mixed in with its source, then, as with sound waves, you get a feedback effect – an effect of interference and uncertainty. When demand is maximal (and everywhere today the demand for events is maximal), it short-circuits the initial situation and produces an uncontrollable response effect. That is, ultimately, why we do the Romanians an injustice when we accuse them of manipulation and bad faith. No one is responsible. It is all an effect of the infernal cycle of credibility. The actors and the media sensed obscurely that the events in Eastern Europe had to be given credibility, that that revolution had to be lent credibility by an extra dose of dead bodies. And the media themselves had to be lent credibility by the reference to the

people. Leading to a vicious circle of credibility, the result of which is the *decredibilizing* of the revolution and the events themselves. The logical sequence of news and history turns back against itself, bringing, in its cyclical movement, a kind of deflation of historical consciousness.

The Americans did just the same in the Gulf War. By the excessive nature of their deployment and stagecraft, by putting their power and news control so extravagantly to the test, they decredibilized both war and news. They were the Ubus of their own power, just as the Romanians were the Ubus of their own impotence. Excess itself engenders the parody which invalidates the facts. And, just as the principle of economics is wrecked by financial speculation, so the principle of politics [*le politique*] and history is wrecked by media speculation.

Contrary to the fiction of universal solidarity surrounding the media and images, events have less and less meaning, less and less reality beyond a near horizon. In the media space, the rate of diffusion is maximal, but the resonance factor is zero. In the past, facts and actions had a real resonance within a limited field, a field of organic proximity. The Europe of the fifteenth or eighteenth centuries communicated in a much livelier, freer way than the interactive, TV Europe of the twentieth century. And that 'natural' horizon opened out on to a possible universe, whereas today the universal promiscuity of images reinforces our exile and immures us in our indifference.

We are convinced that the Eastern European powers collapsed because they had infringed the 'natural and democratic' law of news and information. Everything over there was underexposed to the light of human rights and hence unreal and unnatural. For fifty years, we had regarded all these peoples as mystified victims of dictatorship, whose only way out was to be won over to our marvellous values. As if we were not ourselves hostages to a system every bit as terroristic as theirs, the system of fluidity and transparency, a system just as effective at putting an end to history as the Eastern regimes with their bureaucratic deep-freeze. Today, now that transparency (glasnost!) has been achieved, a

transparency which turns out of course to be rigged and loaded down with all the detritus of history, one might almost feel sorry that entire peoples are coming out of their darkness, even if it was violent and tyrannical, to fall prey to the Enlightenment, to go down like flies in the artificial light of our freedom, our unbounded solidarity, our unscrupulous news system. We who so respect the private life of individuals should also respect that of peoples and their right – against all international morality – to escape this modern tribunal of news and information-gathering which is assuming all the features of an inquisition. For only information has sovereign rights, since it controls the right to existence.

It is this whole democratic pharisaism of the West that is thwarted by the Romanians' media cynicism, by their radical use of the medium and radical contempt for the message (of course, they are only used here as an example). Ultimately, whether or not they intended to, they have taught us a useful lesson. By parodying it, they have booby-trapped our finest technological gimmick: the image. By handling it unscrupulously, they have destroyed its mythology. And they have also given us a useful lesson in freedom, not by truly achieving liberty, but by ensnaring us in a fantasy of liberation which is, in fact, geared to our Western demand. By their revolutionary *mise en scène*, they sent us the message we were expecting, here employing the mirror trick of conformism which blinds its victims. And we were blinded.

At the same time, they showed us that freedom extended as far as the open, cynical manipulation of the facts, whereas we, for our part, only go so far as their shamefaced manipulation. We confine ourselves to the moral, conditional forms of liberty whereas they go as far as the unconditional, parodic, paroxystic form of liberation of the image, of liberation by the image. It is not clear why, once it had been 'liberated', the image would not be entitled to lie. No doubt this may even be seen as one of its vital functions, and it is naïve to think it was going to liberate itself to bring about truth – just as naïve as thinking that the Romanians were going to liberate themselves to arrive at a 'true'

democracy. The truth is that the liberation of the image inclines it quite naturally to simulation, and that is where it finds its true freedom. Though we may not wish to acknowledge this, we have nonetheless to accept the evidence: the image and, with it, news [*l'information*] is not attached to any principle of truth or reality.

Here, then, is the international consciousness foiled by its own ideal, hoist with its own petard. The Gulf War merely accentuated the disastrous impression of our having been drawn so far into simulation that the question of truth and reality cannot even be posed, of our having been drawn so far into the 'liberation' of the medium and the image that the question of freedom cannot even be posed. But can news and the media really be put on trial now? Absolutely not, for the simple reason that the media themselves hold the key to the judicial enquiry. There can be no contesting their innocence since 'disinformation' is always imputed to an accident of news-gathering [*information*]; the guiding principle itself is never questioned.

And yet there will, nonetheless, have been a kind of verdict in this Romanian affair, and the artificial heaps of corpses will have been of some use, all the same. One might ask whether the Romanians, by the very excessiveness of this staged event and the simulacrum of their revolution, have not served as demystifiers of news and its guiding principle. For, if the media image has put an end to the credibility of the event, the event will, in its turn, have put an end to the credibility of the image. Never again shall we be able to look at a television picture in good faith, and this is the finest collective demystification we have ever known. The finest revenge over this new arrogant power, this power to blackmail by events. Who can say what responsibility attaches to the televisual production of a false massacre (Timişoara), as compared with the perpetrating of a true massacre? This is another kind of crime against humanity, a hijacking of fantasies, affects and the credulity of hundreds of millions of people by means of television – a crime of blackmail and simulation. What penalty is laid down for such a hijacking?

There is no way to rectify this situation and we must have no

illusions: there is no perverse effect, nor even anything scandalous in the 'Timişoara syndrome'. It is simply the (immoral) truth of news, the secret purpose [*destination*] of which is to deceive us about the real, but also to *undeceive us about the real*. There is no worse mistake than taking the real for the real and, in that sense, the very excess of media illusion plays a vital disillusioning role. In this way, news could be said to undo its own spell by its effects and the violence of information to be avenged by the repudiation and indifference it engenders.

Just as we should be unreservedly thankful for the existence of politicians, who take on themselves the responsibility for that wearisome function, so we should be grateful to the media for existing and taking on themselves the triumphant illusionism of the world of communications, the whole ambiguity of mass culture, the confusion of ideologies, the stereotypes, the spectacle, the banality – soaking up all these things in their operation. While, at the same time, constituting a permanent test of intelligence, for where better than on television can one learn to question every picture, every word, every commentary? Television inculcates indifference, distance, scepticism and unconditional apathy. Through the world's becoming-image, it anaesthetizes the imagination, provokes a sickened abreaction, together with a surge of adrenalin which induces total disillusionment. Television and the media would render reality [*le réel*] dissuasive, were it not already so. And this represents an absolute advance in the consciousness – or the cynical unconscious – of our age.

The illusion of war

Exchanging war for the signs of war.

America conducted the Gulf War as though it were a nuclear conflict, and thus, ultimately, as a substitute for a Third World War which did not take place. An atomic war without the atom, but analogous in its impact, instantaneousness, non-confrontation and convulsive effect. The first strike is the last. That, at least, is how the nuclear shoot-out was supposed to be, but neither of the two adversaries ever risked it, perhaps because, deep down, they neither of them believed in it. The nuclear shoot-out, the game of deterrence, was a scenario, just made credible by the calculated threat of the balance of terror. When the prospect of an atomic clash disappeared once and for all, when it got lost in space with Star Wars, it had to be tested in simulated form, in a miniature war-game where the possibility of annihilating the enemy could be checked out. But, symptomatically, care was taken not to go that far: Saddam, who will, in the end, have been nothing but that fairground dummy you shoot at from point-blank range, had to be saved. It was just a second-hand scenario.

So this military 'orgy' wasn't an orgy at all. It was an orgy of simulation, the simulation of an orgy. A German word sums all this up very well: *Schwindel*, which means both giddiness and swindle, loss of consciousness and mystification.

The Americans fought the same war in respect of world opinion – via the media, censorship, CNN, etc. – as they fought on the battlefield. They used the same 'fuel air' explosives in the media, where they draw all the oxygen out of public opinion.

The amnesia about it is, in itself, a confirmation of the unreality of this war. Overexposed to the media, underexposed to memory. Built-in obsolescence, as with any consumer article . . . Forgetting is built into the event itself in the profusion of information and details, just as obsolescence is built into the object in the profusion of useless accessories.

If you take one-thousandth of what you see on the TV news to heart, you're done for. But television protects us from this. Its immunizing, prophylactic use protects us from an unbearable responsibility. Its effect and its images self-destruct in the mind. So is this the zero degree of communication? Certainly, it is: people fear communication like the plague.

There was no exulting after the Gulf War either (and yet, it was a victory, wasn't it?). There was, rather, a flight into amnesia and hypocrisy. A botched operation, even in surgical terms: its labours produced nothing, even the two hundred thousand dead produced nothing, apart from that marvellous miscarriage, the New World Order. It was a war without results, but not without an aftermath. Once past the dilemma of the reality/unreality of the war, we are back in the pure and simple reality of political ignominy, in the most odious *Realpolitik*: the Shi'ites, the Kurds, the calculated survival of Saddam . . . Here, the most fervent defenders of the war's reality end up conceding that perhaps nothing has in fact happened. But they prejudge this from the absence of an outcome; they do not judge the event itself. Which shows them to be just as much engaged in *Realpolitik* as anyone else.

The question is not whether one is for or against war, but whether one is for or against *the reality of war*. Analysis must not be sacrificed to the expression of anger. It has to be directed in its entirety against reality, against manifestness – here against the

manifest reality of this war. The Stoics contest the very self-evidence of pain, when the body's confusion is at its height. Here, we must contest the very self-evidence of war, when the confusion of the real is at its height. We must hit out at the weak point of reality. It's too late afterwards: you're stuck with the 'acts of violence', stuck in realist abjection.

In a little time, as we get some distance from it, or even now, with a little imagination, it will be possible to read *La guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu** as a science-fiction novel, as the anticipation, right in the thick of things, of the event as a fictional scenario – something into which it will surely be turned later. Like Borges' chronicling of cultures which never existed.

By making transparent the non-event of the war, you give it force in the imagination – somewhere other than in the 'real time' of news where it simply peters out. You give force to the illusion of war, rather than become an accessory to its false reality.

Anyhow, the book has fallen – quite logically – into the same black hole as the war. It has faded as quickly as the event whose absence it denounced. It was a successful non-event, like the Agency, like appearing on television. All this is as it should have been since it dealt with something which did not take place.

It was the *simulacrum of Helen* that was at the heart of the Trojan War. The Egyptian priests had held on to the original (we do not know what became of it) when she set out again with Paris for Troy. But, even without the magic of the priests, Helen was in any case merely a simulacrum, since the universal form of beauty is as unreal as gold, the universal form of all commodities. Every universal form is a simulacrum, since it is the simultaneous equivalent of all the others – something it is impossible for any real being to be.

There are many analogies between the Trojan and Gulf wars. Before the expedition, Menelaus called all the warriors of the Greek world to arms, just as Bush did with all the nations of the

* J. Baudrillard, Paris: Galileé, 1991.

'free world'. The incubation period of the war was very long (seven years in the case of Troy, seven months for the Gulf War) and the final phase was very rapid in both cases. The Greek victory was won at great cost to the victors, whom the gods punished relentlessly (the murder of Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra, Orestes, etc.). What will be the fate of the 'victors' of the Gulf War? Admittedly, this time the war did not take place. This difference leaves the Americans some hope, the gods having no real cause to avenge themselves.

If the Helen of the Trojan War was a simulacrum, what was the Gulf War's Helen? Where was there simulacrum here, *except in the simulacrum of war itself*?

Catastrophe management

The end of history, being itself a catastrophe, can only be fuelled by catastrophe. Managing the end therefore becomes synonymous with the management of catastrophe. And, quite specifically, of that catastrophe which is the slow extermination of the rest of the world.

We have long denounced the capitalistic, economic exploitation of the poverty of the 'other half of the world' [*l'autre monde*]. We must today denounce the moral and sentimental exploitation of that poverty – charity cannibalism being worse than oppressive violence. The extraction and humanitarian reprocessing of a destitution which has become the equivalent of oil deposits and gold mines. The extortion of the spectacle of poverty and, at the same time, of our charitable condescension: a worldwide appreciated surplus of fine sentiments and bad conscience. We should, in fact, see this not as the extraction of raw materials, but as a waste-reprocessing enterprise. Their destitution and our bad conscience are, in effect, all part of the waste-products of history – the main thing is to recycle them to produce a new energy source.

We have here an escalation in the psychological balance of terror. World capitalist oppression is now merely the vehicle and alibi for this other, much more ferocious, form of moral predation. One might almost say, contrary to the Marxist

analysis, that material exploitation is only there to extract that spiritual raw material that is the misery of peoples, which serves as psychological nourishment for the rich countries and media nourishment for our daily lives.

The 'Fourth World' (we are no longer dealing with a 'developing' Third World) is once again beleaguered, this time as a catastrophe-bearing stratum. The West is whitewashed in the reprocessing of the rest of the world as waste and residue. And the white world repents and seeks absolution – it, too, the waste-product of its own history.

The South is a natural producer of raw materials, the latest of which is catastrophe. The North, for its part, specializes in the reprocessing of raw materials and hence also in the reprocessing of catastrophe. Bloodsucking protection, humanitarian interference, *Médecins sans frontières*, international solidarity, etc. The last phase of colonialism: the New Sentimental Order is merely the latest form of the New World Order. Other people's destitution becomes our adventure playground. Thus, the humanitarian offensive aimed at the Kurds – a show of repentance on the part of the Western powers after allowing Saddam Hussein to crush them – is in reality merely the second phase of the war, a phase in which charitable intervention finishes off the work of extermination. We are the consumers of the ever delightful spectacle of poverty and catastrophe, and of the moving spectacle of our own efforts to alleviate it (which, in fact, merely function to secure the conditions of reproduction of the catastrophe market); there, at least, in the order of moral profits, the Marxist analysis is wholly applicable: we see to it that extreme poverty is reproduced as a symbolic deposit, as a fuel essential to the moral and sentimental equilibrium of the West.

In our defence, it might be said that this extreme poverty was largely of our own making and it is therefore normal that we should profit by it.

There can be no finer proof that the distress of the rest of the world is at the root of Western power and that the spectacle of

that distress is its crowning glory than the inauguration, on the roof of the *Arche de la Défense*, with a sumptuous buffet laid on by the *Fondation des Droits de l'homme*, of an exhibition of the finest photos of world poverty. Should we be surprised that spaces are set aside in the *Arche d'Alliance** for universal suffering hallowed by caviar and champagne?

Just as the economic crisis of the West will not be complete so long as it can still exploit the resources of the rest of the world, so the symbolic crisis will be complete only when it is no longer able to feed on the other half's human and natural catastrophes (Eastern Europe, the Gulf, the Kurds, Bangladesh, etc.). We need this drug, which serves us as an aphrodisiac and hallucinogen. And the poor countries are the best suppliers – as, indeed, they are of other drugs. We provide them, through our media, with the means to exploit this paradoxical resource, just as we give them the means to exhaust their natural resources with our technologies. Our whole culture lives off this catastrophic cannibalism, relayed in cynical mode by the news media, and carried forward in moral mode by our humanitarian aid, which is a way of encouraging it and ensuring its continuity, just as economic aid is a strategy for perpetuating under-development. Up to now, the financial sacrifice has been compensated a hundredfold by the moral gain. But when the catastrophe market itself reaches crisis point, in accordance with the implacable logic of the market, when distress becomes scarce or the marginal returns on it fall from overexploitation, when we run out of disasters from elsewhere or when they can no longer be traded like coffee or other commodities, the West will be forced to produce its own catastrophe for itself, in order to meet its need for spectacle and that voracious appetite for symbols which characterizes it even more than its voracious appetite for food. It will reach the point where it devours itself. When we have finished sucking out the destiny of others, we shall have to invent one for ourselves. The

* This is an allusion to the biblical '*Arche d'Alliance*' (the 'Ark of the Covenant'), as well as an ironic reference to the use here being made of the arch at La Défense.

Great Crash, the symbolic crash, will come in the end from us Westerners, but only when we are no longer able to feed on the hallucinogenic misery which comes to us from the other half of the world.

Yet they do not seem keen to give up their monopoly. The Middle East, Bangladesh, black Africa and Latin America are really going flat out in the distress and catastrophe stakes, and thus in providing symbolic nourishment for the rich world. They might be said to be overdoing it: heaping earthquakes, floods, famines and ecological disasters one upon another, and finding the means to massacre each other most of the time. The 'disaster show' goes on without any let-up and our sacrificial debt to them far exceeds their economic debt. The misery with which they generously overwhelm us is something we shall never be able to repay. The sacrifices we offer in return are laughable (a tornado or two, a few tiny holocausts on the roads, the odd financial sacrifice) and, moreover, by some infernal logic, these work out as much greater gains for us, whereas our kindnesses have merely added to the natural catastrophes another one immeasurably worse: the demographic catastrophe, a veritable epidemic which we deplore each day in pictures.

In short, there is such distortion between North and South, to the symbolic advantage of the South (a hundred thousand Iraqi dead against casualties numbered in tens on our side: in every case we are the losers), that one day everything will break down. One day, the West will break down if we are not soon washed clean of this shame, if an international congress of the poor countries does not very quickly decide to share out this symbolic privilege of misery and catastrophe. It is of course normal, since we refuse to allow the spread of nuclear weapons, that they should refuse to allow the spread of the catastrophe weapon. But it is not right that they should exert that monopoly indefinitely.

In any case, the under-developed are only so by comparison with the Western system and its presumed success. In the light of its assumed failure, they are not under-developed at all. They are only so in terms of a dominant evolutionism which has always

been the worst of colonial ideologies. The argument here is that there is a line of objective progress and everyone is supposed to pass through its various stages (we find the same eyewash with regard to the evolution of species and in that evolutionism which unilaterally sanctions the superiority of the human race). In the light of current upheavals, which put an end to any idea of history as a linear process, there are no longer either developed or under-developed peoples. Thus, to encourage hope of evolution – albeit by revolution – among the poor and to doom them, in keeping with the objective illusion of progress, to technological salvation is a criminal absurdity. In actual fact, it is their good fortune to be able to escape from evolution just at the point when we no longer know where it is leading. In any case, a majority of these peoples, including those of Eastern Europe, do not seem keen to enter this evolutionist modernity, and their weight in the balance is certainly no small factor in the West's repudiation of its own history, of its own utopias and its own modernity. It might be said that the routes of violence, historical or otherwise, are being turned around and that the viruses now pass from South to North, there being every chance that, five hundred years after America was conquered, 1992 and the end of the century will mark the comeback of the defeated and the sudden reversal of that modernity.

The sense of pride is no longer on the side of wealth but of poverty, of those who – fortunately for them – have nothing to repent, and may indeed glory in being privileged in terms of catastrophes. Admittedly, this is a privilege they could hardly renounce, even if they wished to, but natural disasters merely reinforce the sense of guilt felt towards them by the wealthy – by those whom God visibly scorns since he no longer even strikes them down. One day it will be the Whites themselves who will give up their whiteness. It is a good bet that repentance will reach its highest pitch with the five-hundredth anniversary of the conquest of the Americas. We are going to have to lift the curse of the defeated – but symbolically victorious – peoples, which is insinuating itself five hundred years later, by way of repentance, into the heart of the white race.

No solution has been found to the dramatic situation of the under-developed, and none will be found since their drama has now been overtaken by that of the overdeveloped, of the rich nations. The psychodrama of congestion, saturation, super-abundance, neurosis and the breaking of blood vessels which haunts us – the drama of the excess of means over ends – calls more urgently for attention than that of penury, lack and poverty. That is where the most imminent danger of catastrophe resides, in the societies which have run out of emptiness.

Artificial catastrophes, like the beneficial aspects of civilization, progress much more quickly than natural ones. The under-developed are still at the primary stage of the natural, unforeseeable catastrophe. We are already at the second stage, that of the *manufactured* catastrophe – imminent and foreseeable – and we shall soon be at that of the *pre-programmed* catastrophe, the catastrophe of the third kind, deliberate and experimental. And, paradoxically, it is our pursuit of the means for averting natural catastrophe – the unpredictable form of destiny – which will take us there. Because it is unable to escape it, humanity will pretend to be the author of its destiny. Because it cannot accept being confronted with an end which is uncertain or governed by fate, it will prefer to stage its own death as a species.

The dance of the fossils

The fuelling of the end of history, which is proceeding by the recycling of wastes of all kinds, is also being achieved by reinjecting all the vestiges of a world without history. A truly species-wide sense of remorse is inducing humanity to resurrect the whole of its past just when it is losing the thread of its memory. All the relics, all the traces which were shrouded in the greatest secrecy and which, by that token, formed part of our symbolic capital, will be exhumed and resuscitated: they will not be spared our transparency; we shall turn them from something buried and living into something visible and dead; we shall turn their symbolic capital into a folkloric, museum capital. Palaeontology reigns, it would seem, over a kind of criminal unconscious of the species, since this race for fossils, this forced exploration bears a strange resemblance to the exploring of the fossils of the unconscious. Each has about it the same *ressentiment* as to our origins, the same original repentance, an identical vague sense of criminal responsibility towards our ancestors and our fantasies.

Nothing disappears, nothing must disappear: that is the watchword of this new therapeutic overzealousness, the overzealousness of memory and archaeology.* A hypertelic memory

* The notion of *acharnement thérapeutique*, here translated as 'therapeutic overzealousness', has been at the centre of recent debates in France on the lengths to which doctors should properly go to keep patients alive, especially where life expectancy is short.

which stores all data in a constant state of instant retrievability, excluding any work of mourning, any resolution of the past. The Unconscious is already something of this kind. It knows neither past nor forgetting, is neither archaic nor archaeological. It is, indeed, on the contrary, a perpetual present, an instantaneousness of all psychic events, which show on its surface in a continual, potential *passage à l'acte*. Paradoxically, by dint of this zealous effort forcibly to bring back into the present what we no longer even remember, we live in a world which is both without memory and without forgetting. This is what heaven – or hell – must be like: the massive recall, at every moment, of all the patterns of our life. The penitentiary immortality, the carceral immortality of an unrelenting memory.

If modernity, in its day, gave rise to anthropological exploration, post-modernity, for its part, has spawned a positive craze for the neolithic and the paleolithic. The extraction of relics has become an industrial undertaking. And it is, indeed, the great modern construction projects (high-speed trains, motorways, city development) which keep these archaeological finds coming. Palaeontology is advancing at the same pace as the latest technology. Sites, relics, tools and bones: a whole stratum of signs, many thousands of years old, wrested back from oblivion. Thus, technology can pride itself on enriching the cultural heritage at the same time as it is destroying the territory.

Ironically, we might say that we are watching the liberation of fossils, just like everything else. Bercy, Silumian, Cassis, the dugouts, the bones, the wall paintings – relics are everywhere rushing to be discovered. They too want to express themselves. They have waited too long. This is not like America, which had no wish to be discovered at all, but the outcome is the same: everything discovered is wiped out. The fossils return from their immemoriality, and thus from humanity's secret memories, only to be immediately buried again in its artificial ones. No sooner exhumed than sequestered. All the originals are put under lock and key (the Lascaux caves, the Tautavel skull, the underwater

cave at Cassis). More and more things are exhumed to be immediately reinterred, snatched from death only to be cryogenized in perpetuity. Defence secrets: the underwater entrance to the Cassis cave was blocked up by the Navy and, in the same operation, the site scheduled a monument by the Ministry of Culture. A dismal attempt to sequester a collective memory that is everywhere on the slide. Thousands of works of art already slumber in safes, keeping the art market afloat. A striking demonstration that the abstraction of value is based on the subtraction of enjoyment. Even abstract forms, ideas and concepts lie deep-frozen in the sanctuaries of Memory and Artificial Intelligence. As with Lascaux, only copies, photos, duplicates are placed in circulation. The Xerox degree of culture. In its way, Biosphere 2 is also an attempt ideally to sequester the species and its environment behind the crystal curtain of the forbidden gaze, the forbidden touch, safe from all real lusts of the flesh and prey to a definitive fetishism.

Not only does this archaeological fetishism condemn its objects to become museological waste, a phenomenon contemporaneous with industrial waste, it also betrays a suspect nostalgia. It is because we are moving further and further away from our history that we are avid for signs of the past, not, by any means, in order to resuscitate them, but to fill up the empty space of our memories. Or perhaps man, in the process of losing track of his history, is seized by a nostalgia for societies without history, perhaps obscurely sensing that he is returning to the same point. All these relics which we call upon to bear witness to our origin would then become the involuntary signs of its loss.

When faced with the cave paintings, the people of the eighteenth century would not believe in them. They saw them as a mystification got up by libertines to mock the Bible (it was said the caves had been painted to make people believe in a humanity antedating Christ). Today when, for want of any faith in Revelation, we require a certificate of origin, we are *too* keen to believe in them. If these relics did not exist, they would have to be

invented. All is explained by our unsated desire for authenticity, by the poverty of imagination of our modern societies. This explains why we cannot even pose the question of their authenticity since, even if true, they seem invented to satisfy the needs of the anthropological cause, to meet the superstitious demand for an 'objective' proof of our origin duly certified by carbon 14. In fact, their being discovered wrenches them instantly from their truth and secrecy to freeze them in the universe of museums, where they are no longer either true or false, but verified by a scientific fetishism which is an accessory to our fetishistic will to believe in them. In this respect they share the fate of many other things in our culture: arguments, works, events themselves have no other credibility than that deriving from their price on the imaginary stock-exchange of values.

Our reasons for authenticating these relics are as unobjective as the eighteenth-century reasons for denying their authenticity. Then, they were seen as true simulacra. We accord them a false authenticity or, rather, a value which is indeterminable, since our desires play a part in it. Like those objects Freud speaks of, which, because they are closest to the female sexual organs, play that role in sexual hallucinations, we fetishize fossils and relics because they are closest to the lost origin and stand in for us as hallucinations of an origin. In fact, just as fetish objects conceal the refusal of difference and sexual *jouissance*, so the cult of fossils conceals a form of *ressentiment* and of deep disavowal of the origin and the original secret.

Besides, we immediately substitute a copy – the only version appropriate to our universe, where every original constitutes a potential danger and all singularity runs the risk of hindering the free circulation of value – thus, for example, Numa made twelve copies of the sacred shield, one for each tribe of Rome, and destroyed the original. We are not far from doing the same when we lock away the Tautavel skull in a bank vault or open up the simulacrum of the Lascaux cave to the public (we shall no doubt soon have to close the second cave, an exact replica of the first; it seems that simulacra decay even more quickly than the originals.

We ought to think about building a third or a fourth version, at which point the present copy would immediately take on historical value). The fact that we are reduced to gazing at copies admittedly betrays the most profound contempt both for these objects and for ourselves. But, where reality is concerned, we have long contented ourselves with images, and where things are concerned, with copies. We secretly prefer not to be confronted with the original any longer. All we want is the copyright.

Apart from the doubt automatically attaching to anything which turns up so wonderfully on cue (be it relics, scientific discoveries or historical events), and to anything which is, to some extent, invented by our own gaze, another anxiety arises where this enterprise of resurrecting all traces is concerned. Are we trapped in an exhaustive, obsessional recollection of all the moments the species has lived through? In a revival of all previous phases? In the detailed reconstruction of what would then seem like a crime (the appearance of life and the human race on earth), since it is only with crimes that such a relentless reconstitution is mounted? Is the whole of the future going to exhaust itself in the artificial synthesizing of the past? Who knows where this gigantic backward movement is leading? Is it an ephemeral phase in our post-history and therefore a cultural phenomenon, or a development of much profounder import, relating to the fate of the species or even, beyond that, to oscillations of a cosmic type? (With the tadpole, once the high point of sexuation is reached, there is involution towards earlier forms of reproduction. Might human beings be reinventing biological cloning at the end-point of a sexed history? Death drive or a pulsation of a cosmic type?)

At all events, this mass resurgence of fossils and relics is troubling, as troubling as the signs which used to appear in the sky presaging great events. We should be wary of all these phantoms ripped from their tombs. The information they provide about our past is a mask and I can already hear their sarcastic laughter. When our past has been exhumed, when all that had disappeared has reappeared, the dead will outnumber the living

and there will be the same imbalance as will come about when there is more computing matter [*substance informatique*] and artificial intelligence on earth than natural intelligence. Then we shall be cast into sidereal space, the space of networks, or into fossil space, the space of the kingdom of the dead . . .

Maleficent ecology

The worst of it is that, in the course of this universal recycling of waste, which has become our historic task, the human race is beginning to produce itself as waste-product, to carry out this work of waste disposal on itself. What is worst is not that we are submerged by the waste-products of industrial and urban concentration, but that *we ourselves are transformed into residues.* Nature – the natural world – is becoming residual, insignificant, an encumbrance, and we do not know how to dispose of it. By producing highly centralized structures, highly developed urban, industrial and technical systems, by remorselessly condensing down programmes, functions and models, we are transforming all the rest into waste, residues, useless relics. By putting the higher functions into orbit, we are transforming the planet itself into a waste-product, a marginal territory, a peripheral space. Building a motorway, a hypermarket or a metropolis automatically means transforming all that surrounds it into desert. Creating ultra-rapid communication networks immediately means transforming human exchange into a residue. The example of Biosphere 2 is an eloquent one: in the image of ideal synthesis it wishes to provide of our planet, in its character as experimental artifact, it is a way of transforming our environment into an archaic residue, to be tipped into the dustbins of natural history.

As for the dustbins of history themselves, they are not so much

full of events or outdated ideologies as of present events, immediately voided of their meaning by news, transformed into crusher residues, into a charnel-house of images. News is the excremental production of the event as waste; it is the current dustbin of history. There is nothing to counter the implacable rule which states that the virtual produces the real as its waste-product. No ecology – no benevolent ecology – can do anything to stop it. It would take a maleficent ecology – one which treats evil with evil.

Moreover, waste is today produced as such. We build huge office spaces which are intended to remain eternally empty (the spaces, like the people, are 'laid off'). We put up buildings that are still-born, remnants which will never have been anything but remnants (our age no longer produces ruins or relics, only wastes and residues). Genuine monuments to disaffection with the human project, insofar as all that was asked of them was to provide employment, to keep the economic wheels turning for the time required by their useless construction. Perhaps it is they which stand as true testimony to this civilization – commemorating within its own lifetime an industrial and bureaucratic system that is already dead? Here again, history is taking a fantastic step backwards by building the ruins of the future, the ruins of an apparatus which continues to grow like a virtual waste-product. One can imagine entire towns put together not from the wastes of what has already served a purpose and therefore retained some trace of its previous usage, but of things that were waste 'from the outset' (this is already the case with generations of missiles, and with industrial plant and real estate), assured of never growing old or being revived in any memory – the phantoms of breakneck investment and even more rapid disinvestment.

The production of waste *as waste* is accompanied by its idealization and its promotion in advertising. It is the same with the production of *man* as waste-product, which is accompanied by his being idealized and promoted in the form of human rights. Idealization always goes with abjection, just as charity always goes with destitution. This is a kind of symbolic rule. A new wave

of human-beings-as-waste ('boat people', deportees, the disappeared, 'ghost-people' of all kinds) is accompanied by a new human rights offensive.

Hence the recent proposal, following this same logic, from the moment it achieved the status of virtual waste-product, to accord nature international recognition of its rights, to elevate it to the status of a subject in law. Thus the '*contrat naturel*'* amounts to a definitive recognition of nature as waste. Just as, in bygone days, the recognition of the rights of the unfortunate meant not their emancipation as citizens, but their liberation as the unfortunate.

It is always the same with rights: the right to water, the right to air, the right to existence, etc. It is when all these fine things have disappeared that the law arrives to grant their disappearance official recognition. The law is like religious faith. If God exists, there is no need to believe in Him. If people do believe in Him, this is because the self-evidence of his existence has passed away. Thus, when people obtain the right to life, the fact is that they are no longer able to live. When nature is recognized as a subject in law, as it is by Michel Serres, we have objectified it to death, and this ecological cover merely asserts our right to go on doing so.

All this has been brought about by the highly dubious way in which the concept of nature has evolved. What was initially matter became energy. The modern discovery of nature consists in its liberation as energy and in a mechanical transformation of the world. After having first been matter, and then energy, nature is today becoming an interactive subject. It is ceasing to be an object, but this is bringing it all the more surely into the circuit of subjection. A dramatic paradox, and one which also affects human beings: we are much more compromised when we cease to be objects and become subjects. This is a trick that was pulled on us long ago, in the name of absolute liberation. Let's not pull the same one on nature. For the ultimate danger is that, in an interactivity built up into a total system of communication, there is no *other*; there are only subjects – and, very soon, only subjects without objects. All our problems today as civilized beings

* A reference to the title of a work by Michel Serres.

originate here: not in an excess of alienation, but a disappearance of alienation in favour of a maximum transparency between subjects. An unbearable situation, all the more so for the fact that, in foisting on nature the status of a subject in law, we are also foisting on it all the vices of subjectivity, decking it out, in our own image, with a bad conscience, with nostalgia (for a lost object which, in this case, can only be *us*), with a range of drives – in particular, an impulse for revenge. The 'balance' we hear so much of in ecology ('out of balance') is not so much that of planetary resources and their exploitation as the metaphysical one between subject and object. Now, that metaphysical subject/object balance is being upset and the subject, armed as he is with all the technologies of advanced communication (technologies on whose horizon the object has disappeared), is the beneficiary. Once that balance is disrupted, it inevitably sparks violent reactions on the part of the object. Just as individuals counter the transparency and virtual responsibility inflicted on them as subjects with unexplainable acts, acts of resistance, failure, delinquency and collective disorder, so nature counters this enforced promotion, this consensual, communicational blackmail, with various forms of behaviour that are radically other, such as catastrophes, upheavals, earthquakes and chaos. It would seem that nature does not really feel a sense of responsibility for itself, nor does it react to our efforts to give it one. We are, admittedly, indulging in a (bad) ecological conscience and attempting, by this moral violence, to stave off possible violence on nature's part. But if, by offering it the status of subject, we are handing it the same poisoned chalice as we gave to the decolonized nations, we ought not to be surprised if it behaves irrationally merely so as to assert itself as such. Contrary to the underlying Rousseauist ideology, which argues that the profound nature of the liberated subject can only be good and that nature itself, once emancipated, cannot but be endowed with natural equilibrium and all the ecological virtues, there is nothing more ambiguous or perverse than a subject. Now, nature is also germs, viruses, chaos, bacteria and scorpions, significantly eliminated from Biosphere 2 as though they were not meant to exist. Where

are the deadly little scorpions, so beautiful and so translucent, which one sees in the Desert Museum not far away, scorpions whose magical sting certainly performs a higher, invisible – but necessary – function within our Biosphere 1: the incarnation of evil, of the venomous evil of chance, the mortal innocence of desire (the desire for death) in the equilibrium of living beings?

What they have forgotten is that what binds living beings together is something other than an ecological, biospherical solidarity, something other than the homeostatic equilibrium of a system: it is the cycle of metamorphoses. Man is also a scorpion, just as the Bororo are *araras* and, left to himself in an expurgated universe, he becomes, himself, a scorpion.*

In short, it is not by expurgating evil that we liberate good. Worse, by liberating good, we also liberate evil. And this is only right: it is the rule of the symbolic game. It is the inseparability of good and evil which constitutes our true equilibrium, our true balance. We ought not to entertain the illusion that we might separate the two, that we might cultivate good and happiness in a pure state and expel evil and sorrow as wastes. That is the terroristic dream of the transparency of good, which very quickly ends in its opposite, the transparency of evil.

We must not reconcile ourselves with nature.

It seems that the more the human race reconciles itself with nature, the less it is reconciled with itself. Above and beyond the violence it inflicts on others, there is a violence specific to the human race in general, a violence of the species against itself in which it treats itself as a residue, as a survivor – even in the present – of a coming catastrophe. As if it too were ready to repent of an evolution which has brought it such privileges and carried it to such extremes. This is the same conjuncture as the one to which Canetti refers, in which we stepped out of history, except that here we have not stepped out of history, but have passed a point beyond which *nothing is either human or inhuman*

* *Arara* is a name of Tupi origin for a bird of the genus *Ara* which includes the macaws (French: *aras*).

any longer and what is at stake, which is even more immense, is the tottering of the species into the void.

It is quite possible that, in this process, the species itself is commencing its own disappearance, either by disenchantment with – or *ressentiment* towards – itself, or out of a deliberate inclination which leads it here and now to manage that disappearance as its destiny.

Surreptitiously, in spite of our superiority (or perhaps because of it), we are carrying over on to our own species the treatment we mete out to the others, all of which are virtually dying out. In an animal milieu which has reached saturation point, species are spontaneously dissuaded from living. The effects produced by the finite nature of the earth, for the first time contrasting violently with the infinity of our development, are such that our species is automatically switching over to collective suicide. Whether by external (nuclear) violence or internal (biological) virulence. We are subjecting ourselves as a human species to the same experimental pressure as the animal species in our laboratories.

Man is without prejudice: he is using himself as a guinea-pig, just as he is using the rest of the world, animate or inanimate. He is cheerfully gambling with the destiny of his own species as he is with that of all the others. In his blind desire to know more, he is programming his own destruction with the same ease and ferocity as the destruction of the others. He cannot be accused of a superior egoism. He is sacrificing himself, as a species, to *an unknown experimental fate*, unknown at least as yet to other species, who have experienced only natural fates. And, whereas it seemed that, linked to that natural fate, there was something like an instinct of self-preservation – long the mainstay of a natural philosophy of individuals and groups – this experimental fate to which the human species is condemning itself by unprecedented, artificial means, this scientific prefiguring of its own disappearance, sweeps away all ideas of a self-preservation instinct. The idea is, indeed, no longer discussed in the human sciences (where the focus of attention would seem, rather, to be on the death drive) and this disappearance from the field of thought signals that, beneath a frenzy for ecological conservation which is really

more to do with nostalgia and remorse, a wholly different tendency has already won out, the sacrificing of the species to boundless experimentation.

A contradictory dual operation: man, alone of all species, is seeking to construct his immortal double, an unprecedented artificial species. He caps natural selection with an artificial super-selection, claiming sole possession of a soul and a consciousness and, at the same time, he is putting an end to natural selection which entailed the death of each species in accordance with the law of evolution. In ending evolution (of all species including his own), he is contravening the symbolic rule and hence truly deserves to disappear. And this is without doubt the destiny he is preparing for himself, in a roundabout way, in that, in his arrogant desire to end evolution, man is ushering in *involution* and the revival of inhuman, biogenetic forms. Here again, we have before us a reversive effect, running counter to any ideal or 'scientific' vision of the species.

The idea running through the writings of Darwin that natural selection leads to a species capable of morally transcending natural selection is thoroughly specious. In aiming for virtual (technical) immortality and ensuring its exclusive perpetuation by a projection into artifacts, the human species is precisely losing its own immunity and specificity and becoming immortalized *as an inhuman species*; it is abolishing in itself the mortality of the living in favour of the immortality of the dead. It is immortalizing itself as the zero degree of a living species, as an operational artifact which no longer even obeys the law of species, except the law of artificial species, whose mortality is perhaps even more rapid. As a result, by going down these paths of artifice which were supposed to ensure its indefinite survival, it is perhaps hurtling even more quickly to its doom.

The human species is currently domesticating itself, this time for good, by means of its technologies. It is submitting collectively to the same rituals as insects. Soon it will submit to the same controlled techniques of reproduction as the protozoa, will inflict on itself the same biogenetic (phylo- or ontogenetic) destiny to

which it has subjected others. It no longer, in fact, sees itself as different from the others, in spite of its supremacy. It treats itself as a species that may be ruthlessly exploited, condemned to a brutalization and annihilation of its own. Here again, all the advances it has made and has forced others to accept have had a reversive effect upon it. To such an extent that it – the guardian, in its zoos, museums, reserves and laboratories, of condemned species – regards itself as a condemned species, and keeps an anxious eye trained on its biospheric destiny.

The finest example of what the human species is capable of inflicting upon itself is Biosphere 2 – the first zoological gardens of the species, to which human beings come to watch themselves survive, as once they went to watch apes copulate. Outside Tucson, in Arizona, right in the middle of the desert, a geodesic glass and metal structure accommodating all the planet's climates in miniature, where eight human beings (four men and four women, of course) are to live self-sufficiently, in a closed circuit, for two years, in order – since we are not able to change our lives – to explore the conditions for our survival. A minimal representation of the species in an experimental situation, in a kind of spaceship allegory. As a museum mock-up of the future, but of an unpredictable future – a century hence, a thousand years, millions . . . who knows? – it forms a pendant to the Desert Museum some sixty miles away, which retraces the geological and animal history of two hundred million years. The point of convergence between the two being the idea of the conservation and optimal management of residues – of the relics of the past for the Desert Museum, the anticipated relics of the future for Biosphere 2 – not to mention the magical desert site which allows the problem of survival to be examined, both that of nature and that of the species with equal rigour.

Such a very American hallucination this ocean, this savannah, this desert, this virgin forest reconstituted in miniature, vitrified beneath their experimental bubble. In the true spirit of Disneyland's attractions, Biosphere 2 is not an experiment, but an experimental attraction. The most amazing thing is that they have

reconstituted a fragment of artificial desert right in the middle of the natural desert (a bit like reconstituting Hollywood in Disneyworld). Only in this artificial desert there are neither scorpions nor Indians to be exterminated; there are only extraterrestrials trained to survive in the very place where they destroyed another, far better adapted race, leaving it no chance.

The whole humanist ideology – ecological, climatic, microcosmic and biogenetic – is summed up here, but this is of no importance. Only the sidereal, transparent form of the edifice means anything – but what? Difficult to say. As ever, absolute space inspires engineers, gives meaning to a project which has none, except the mad desire for a miniaturization of the human species, with a view perhaps to a future race and its emergence, of which we still dream . . .

The artificial promiscuity of climates has its counterpart in the artificial immunity of the space: the elimination of all spontaneous generation (of germs, viruses, microbes), the automatic purification of the water, the air, the physical atmosphere (and the mental atmosphere too, purified by science). The elimination of all sexual reproduction: it is forbidden to reproduce in Biosphere 2; even contamination from life [*le vivant*] is dangerous; sexuality may spoil the experiment. Sexual difference functions only as a formal, statistical variable (the same number of women as men; if anyone drops out, a person of the same sex is substituted).

Everything here is designed with a brain-like abstraction. Biosphere 2 is to Biosphere 1 (the whole of our planet and the cosmos) what the brain is to the human being in general: the synthesis in miniature of all its possible functions and operations: the desert lobe, the virgin forest lobe, the nourishing agriculture lobe, the residential lobe, all carefully distinct and placed side by side, according to the analytical imperative. All of this in reality entirely outdated with respect to what we now know about the brain – its plasticity, its elasticity, the reversible sequencing of all its operations. There is, then, behind this archaic model, beneath its futuristic exterior, a gigantic hypothetical error, a fierce idealization doomed to failure.

In fact, the 'truth' of the operation lies elsewhere, and you sense

this when you return from Biosphere 2 to 'real' America, as you do when you emerge from Disneyland into real life: the fact is that the imaginary, or experimental, model is in no way different from the real functioning of this society. Just as the whole of America is built in the image of Disneyland, so the whole of American society is carrying on – in real time and out in the open – the same experiment as Biosphere 2 which is therefore only falsely experimental, just as Disneyland is only falsely imaginary. The recycling of all substances, the integration of flows and circuits, non-pollution, artificial immunity, ecological balancing, controlled abstinence, restrained *jouissance* but, also, the right of all species to survival and conservation – and not just plant and animal species, but also social ones. All categories formally brought under the one umbrella of the law – this latter setting its seal on the ending of natural selection.

It is generally thought that the obsession with survival is a logical consequence of life and the right to life. But, most of the time, the two things are contradictory. Life is not a question of rights, and what follows on from life is not survival, which is artificial, but death. It is only by paying the price of a failure to live, a failure to take pleasure, a failure to die that man is assured of survival. At least in present conditions, which the Biosphere principle perpetuates.

This micro-universe seeks to exorcize catastrophe by making an artificial synthesis of all the elements of catastrophe. From the perspective of survival, of recycling and feedback, of stabilization and metastabilization, the elements of life are sacrificed to those of survival (elimination of germs, of evil, of sex). Real life, which surely, after all, has the right to disappear (or might there be a paradoxical limit to human rights?), is sacrificed to artificial survival. The real planet, presumed condemned, is sacrificed in advance to its miniaturized, air-conditioned clone (have no fear, all the earth's climates are air-conditioned here) which is designed to vanquish death by total simulation. In days gone by it was the dead who were embalmed for eternity; today, it is the living we embalm alive in a state of survival. Must this be our hope?

Having lost our metaphysical utopias, do we have to build this prophylactic one?

What, then, is this species endowed with the insane pretension to survive – not to transcend itself by virtue of its natural intelligence, but to survive physically, biologically, by virtue of its artificial intelligence? Is there a species destined to escape natural selection, natural disappearance – in a word, death? What cosmic cussedness might give rise to such a turnabout? What vital reaction might produce the idea of survival at any cost? What metaphysical anomaly might grant the right not to disappear – logical counterpart of the remarkable good fortune of having appeared? There is a kind of aberration in the attempt to eternalize the species – not to immortalize it in its actions, but to eternalize it in this face-lifted coma, in the glass coffin of Biosphere 2.

We may, nonetheless, take the view that this experiment, like any attempt to achieve artificial survival or artificial paradise, is illusory, not from any technical shortcomings, but in its very principle. In spite of itself, it is threatened by the same accidents as real life. Fortunately. Let us hope that the random universe outside smashes this glass coffin. Any accident will do if it rescues us from a scientific euphoria sustained by drip-feed.

Immortality

Curiously, all the assumptions, explicit or implicit, of Biosphere 2 link up with the issues raised in the Middle Ages by the problems of immortality and resurrection. Would bodies resuscitate with all their organs (including the sexual ones), with their illnesses, their distinctive features, with all that made them specific living beings? We might widen the question today by asking whether we shall resuscitate with our desires, our wants, our neuroses, our unconscious, our alienation? With our handicaps, our viruses, our manias? In its simulation of ideal resurrection, with all negative features eliminated, Biosphere 2 provides answers to all these questions. No viruses, no germs, no scorpions, no reproduction. Everything is expurgated, idealized, immunized, immortalized by transparency, disincarnation, disinfection and prophylaxis – exactly as in paradise. Moreover, if the medieval theologians were close to heresy when they enquired into the concrete forms of the resurrection of bodies, the officials at Biosphere 2 certainly make you feel any half-way detailed examination of the conditions of the experiment betokens the most evil intent.

What is being set in place here is, in effect, the immortality of the species *in real time*. We long ago stopped believing in the immortality of the soul, a deferred immortality. We no longer believe in that immortality which assumed a transcending of the

end, an intense investment in the finalities of the beyond and a symbolic elaboration of death. What we want is the immediate realization of immortality by all possible means. At this millennium end, we have all, in fact, become millenarian: we desire the immediate attainment of existence without end, just as the medieval millenarians wanted paradise in real time – God's Kingdom on earth.

But we want this immortality here and now, this real-time afterlife, *without having resolved the problem of the end.* For there is no real-time end, no real time of death. This is an absurdity. The end is always experienced after it has actually happened, in its symbolic elaboration. It follows from this that real-time immortality is itself an *absurdity* (whereas imagined immortality was not: it was an *illusion*). Biosphere 2 is an absurdity. For, at bottom, *nothing takes place in real time.* Not even history. History in real time is CNN, instant news, which is the exact opposite of history. But this is precisely our fantasy of passing beyond the end, of emancipating ourselves from time. And the CNN presenter locked away in his studio at the virtual centre of the world is the homologue of his Bio 2 brothers and sisters. They have all passed over into real time, the one into the real time of events, the others into real-time survival. And, of course, into the same unreality.

It is doubtless because it has not been able to resolve the problem of the end (quite simply because it is insoluble) that humanity has turned its attention to the beginning. We have, so to speak, shifted our sights from the final conditions to the initial ones; we have moved from a vision of things in terms of their final state to a vision in terms of their genesis. Not in the sense of Genesis, of course, but in the sense of their being determined by their origin, of everything following a genetic sequence and being genetically manipulable. Against the illusion of the end and of final determinations, truth has become the truth of what precedes. The illusion of the end has been supplanted by the illusion of the ›use. In this perspective, there is no place for a finalistic ›otion of immortality. We can no more think in terms of the ›ity of the soul or the stars than Kepler could avoid

thinking in those terms. For him, that finality seemed entirely obvious; for us the very opposite seems entirely obvious.

In this genetic order – or random disorder – which is ours, there is no longer any place for a finalistic conception of anything whatever. No end is conceivable, not even the end of history. We are reduced to working on what happens beyond the end, on technical immortality, without having passed through death, through the symbolic elaboration of the end.

One can only arrive at a clear conception of immortality in a stable, unchanging universe. In a universe where a divine sanction ensures the eternity of the cosmic order (Kepler's universe), immortality is akin to a natural property of the human microcosm. It is merely the logical extension of the continuity of an order. The universe could not change since all is ordained by a higher decree. By contrast, as soon as that order begins to break up, as soon as that transcendence is lost, the cosmic order, like the human order, emancipated from God and all finality, becomes shifting and unstable; it falls prey to entropy, to the final dissipation of energy, and death. The happy consciousness of eternity and immortality is ended. The problem of the end becomes crucial and insoluble. *There will no longer be an end.* We enter upon a kind of radical indeterminacy. For not only is the transcendent finality lost, it turns against itself, loses itself in upheavals, and even disrupts causes and the course of events. For all we might strive to forget the problem of the end, then, or circumvent it by artificial technical solutions, the end does not forget us.

So long as there is a finalistic conception of life and death, the soul, the afterlife and immortality are given, like the world, and there is no cause to believe in them. Do you believe in reality [*le réel*]? No, of course not: it exists but we do not believe in it. It is like God. Do you believe in God? No, of course not: God exists, but I don't believe in him. To wager that God exists and to believe in him – or that he doesn't exist and not to believe in him – is of such banality as almost to make us doubt the question,

while the two propositions 'God exists, but I don't believe in him' and 'God doesn't exist, but I believe in him' both, paradoxically, suggest that, if God exists, there is no need to believe in him, but that if he does not exist, there is every need to believe in him. If something does not exist, you have to believe in it. Belief is not the reflection of existence, *it is there for existence*, just as language is not the reflection of meaning, it is there in place of meaning.

To believe in God is, therefore, to doubt his existence, his manifestness, his presence. It is to have a need to appeal to him, to produce him, to bear subjective witness to him. Now, why, if he exists, does he need our witness? This amounts almost to thinking that God only exists by an impulse of the spirit, which is not far removed from blasphemy. In fact, faith is the spiritual impulse which reveals the profoundest uncertainty about the existence of God (but it is the same with all the theological virtues: hope is the spiritual impulse which betrays the deepest despair at the real state of things and charity the spiritual impulse which betrays the deepest contempt for others).

Belief is superfluous, just as Canetti says vengeance is superfluous; it is rendered unnecessary by the inexorable reversibility of things. In exactly the same way, passion is a useless supplement to the natural attraction between beings, and we might say the same of truth, which merely complicates appearances unnecessarily. Belief is, then, merely an unnecessary complication of the question of the existence or non-existence of God. God, for his part, if he exists, does not believe in his existence, but he allows the subject to believe in it, and to believe he believes in it, or not to believe that – but not to believe he does not believe in it (Stravogin). Impenetrable labyrinth of belief, today broken down by the dissipation of the very notion of reality. It is no longer a question today of believing or not believing in the images which pass before our eyes. We refract reality and signs indifferently without believing in them. This is not even incredulity: our images simply pass through our brains without landing on the square marked 'belief', just as we pass through the political space without landing on the square marked 'representation'. We

merely refract the illusion of the political, in the same way as news merely refracts the media illusion of events (it does not, itself, believe in them), or as a mirror merely refracts your image without believing in it.

As for credibility, which has taken the place of belief, it is a property not of the subject but of the object. It is the object which is credible. Or rather, if belief still presupposes an (imaginary) relation between subject and object, credibility, for its part, merely supposes a relation between the object and the code. This is an important new twist, since it reflects what has also happened to immortality, which is no longer for us today a property of the subject but of the biological process.

It is when immortality becomes an object of belief, when God, the soul, the afterlife and resurrection cease to be radical illusions and become objects of belief that they fall prey, by that same token, to philosophical critique. That critique does not attack the radical illusion, but a representation and a belief – that is, a relation already weakened by its ambiguity. It is because there is, in belief, an internal contest with incredulity that it becomes a vulnerable target and one tailor-made for philosophical criticism (that is why, in our view, the critique of the notion of belief is, in substance, ended, just as Marx said religion was ended: one must either cleave to radical illusion or radical indifference, eliminating the intermediate forms of belief).

It is in his *Gedanken über Tod und Unsterblichkeit* [Thoughts on death and immortality] that Feuerbach undertakes the deconstruction of all this religious configuration of the afterlife, the immortality of the soul and resurrection. For the human race, this emancipation from all superstition signifies the recovery of its lost essence. But what will the human race do once free of any belief? It will either fulfil itself egoistically, obeying an exclusive, sovereign individualism (Stirner), or do so collectively, by setting out on a long, historical course, as in Marx, or it will shift its sights to the Superhuman, through a transvaluation of the values of the species – this is the path marked out by Nietzsche, who argued that the human race cannot be left to itself, but must aim

beyond itself and discover the great metamorphosis – that of becoming.

All these bodies of thought have had profound consequences for our world – none has turned itself into a reality. Each aims for an ideal transfiguration and allots a sovereign goal to the emancipated human race, aspiring to a 'beyond' which is no longer that of religion, but a 'beyond' of the human which remains *within* the human, humanity reaching beyond its own condition, achieving a transcendence which arises out of its own capacities – an illusion perhaps, but a superior illusion.

Nietzsche has written magnificently of the vital illusion – not that of 'worlds beyond' [*arrière-mondes*], but the illusion of appearances, of the forms of becoming, of the veil and, indeed, all the veils which, happily, protect us from the objective illusion, the illusion of truth, from the transparent relation of the world to an objective truth, from the transparent relation of man to his own truth. This is the illusion of meaning, secreted by man when he takes himself to be the subject of history and the world. To which we can only oppose the *illusion of the world itself*, whose rules, admittedly mysterious and arbitrary, are nonetheless immanent and necessary. Contrary to the transcendent illusion of religions, the play of appearances is superhuman, which is to say that the human race can only attain sovereignty by a transvaluation of values; otherwise, it remains condemned to superstitious beliefs of all kinds, including the more modern ones of psychology and technology, including the superstitious belief in itself as the definitive species. Not immortal by glory, but definitive by the mastery of survival, by technical fetishism, by a domestication of itself which is merely the parody of the acceptance of its fate, by a biological manipulation which is merely the caricature of the transvaluation of values.

Needless to say, this transvaluation of values of which Nietzsche speaks has not taken place, except precisely in the opposite sense – *not beyond, but this side of, good and evil*, not beyond, but this side of, true and false, beautiful and ugly, etc. A transvaluation folding in upon itself towards a non-differentiation, a non-distinction of values, itself fetishized in an aesthetics of plurality,

of difference, etc. Not any longer a fetishization of divinities, great ideas or grand narratives, but of minimal differences and particles. It is in this respect that fetishism has become radical: it has become minimal and molecular; it is no longer the fetishism of a *form*, but of a mere *formula* – subliminal, subhuman. The boundaries of the human and the inhuman are indeed blurring, yet they are doing so in a movement not towards the superhuman, but towards the subhuman, towards a disappearance of the very symbolic characteristics of the species. *Verklärung des Untermenschen.* Transfiguration of the subman.

What is currently taking place in transmutation's stead is a transcription of the Idea – including that of immortality – into its technical operation, a transcription of the human race itself into an immortal, artificial species, ensuring its genetic and generic survival by all available means. Which shows Nietzsche in one sense to be right: the human race, left to itself, is in fact only able to reduplicate or destroy itself.

Not just by destroying its environment and its biological substratum, but by destroying its symbolic space and, more specifically, every vital illusion – the illusion of appearances, ideas, dreams, utopias, ideal projections, but also the illusion of concepts and representations, including those of death and of the body, which is disappearing more and more – as a result of the immediate effectuation of all these things instead of their symbolic elaboration. Destruction by unconditional actualization of all that was formerly merely a dream, a myth, an ideality, an appearance and which – whether destined to remain so or not – formed part of the symbolic equilibrium of life and death.

This de-differentiation of the human and the inhuman, this reabsorption of the metaphor of life into the metastasis of survival is effected by a progressive reduction to the lowest common denominator. At the level of genes, the genome and the genotype, the signs distinctive of humanity are fading; at least, they no longer have symbolic value, but merely a functional purpose. No more transfiguration, no more metaphors: immortality

has passed over into the (biological, genetic) code, the only immortal token which remains, the only feature immortalized in living matter. We have the perpetual motion of the code, the metonymic eternity of cells. Generation by formulas, algebraic or genetic, has everywhere supplanted the play and destiny of forms. The worst thing is that the living beings generated by formula will not outlive their own formulas; they are therefore, from the outset, living on borrowed time.

Paradoxically, it is the irruption of biology, that is, of the science of life, which marks this irruption of the non-living, marks an end to the transcending of the non-living by the living. Just as the irruption of psychology marks the end of the transcendence of the soul and its supplanting by an analytic deconstruction of the inner world. Just as the irruption of anatomical science marks the end of the body and death as metaphor and its entry on the scene as biological reality and fatality. I write 'entry on the scene' advisedly – the scene of objective truth, where the *confusion by default* between the human and inhuman, the living and the non-living, sex and the unsexed is played out. Whereas on the other scene – the scene of illusion and of forms – which is radically different from that of objective truth, is played out *the transfiguration by excess* of the human by the inhuman, of the living by the non-living, of sex by the unsexed.

The original, Enlightenment humanism was based on man's qualities, his virtues, his natural gifts, his essence, together with his right to freedom and to the exercise of that freedom. Current humanism, which finds its highest expression in the new extension of human rights, is more concerned with the conservation of the individual and of man as a species (in the one case, immortality is a virtue; in the other, it is merely a right to conservation). But human rights immediately become problematic, since the question arises of the potential rights of other species, of nature, etc., in respect of which they have to be defined. Now, does humanity even have rights over its own genome? What does it mean for a species to have the right to its

own genetic definition, and thus to its potential genetic transformation? We share 98 per cent of our genes with the apes, 90 per cent with mice. What rights attach to this common heritage? On the other hand, it seems that 90 per cent of the human genome is of no account. Are we going to claim this obscure part which has no apparent purpose? As soon as the human is no longer defined in terms of freedom and transcendence but in terms of genes, the definition of man – and hence, also, that of humanism – is wiped away.

The demarcation line of the human becomes increasingly elusive as we press on into the biological realm, into the molecular arcana of the biosphere. While Western humanism has felt threatened since the sixteenth century by other cultures bursting in upon it, the bolt currently giving way is no longer merely that of a culture, but of a species. Anthropological deregulation. And a simultaneous deregulation of ethics, of all the moral, juridical, symbolic rules which were those of humanism.

The virtual transcendence of man, as distinct from his mortal body, evaporates with the advance of genetic engineering. Determination (or rather indeterminacy) becomes immanent in the mapping of the genome, and its manipulation. Can we still speak of souls and consciousness in referring to the automata, chimeras and clones we envisage carrying on the human species? Can we even speak of the unconscious, given the prospect of man coming to be defined genetically? Even the immortality of the unconscious, so dear to Freud, is seriously under threat. Not only the individual, ontogenetic capital, but the phylogenetic capital of the species is threatened by the evaporation of the limits of the human, which is no longer an evaporation into the divine, but into the inhuman and, indeed, not even into the inhuman but into something falling short both of the human and the inhuman – the genetic simulation of living beings.

The gods, the soul and immortality, all those things which have been termed superstitions or fetishism, were still a spiritual, metaphorical extrapolation of man's faculties, including the body as a metaphor of resurrection. They were, admittedly, artifacts, but immaterial ones, and ones which retained a projective force,

along with the power and play of illusion. Whereas, with biology and genetics, we are in pure materiality, in the material simulation of objectively immortal beings, since they are made up of nuclear elements and a timeless genetic code. The artificiality is no longer that of a deferred end, but of a prosthesis – a *literal* fetishism, in the sense that it is the fetishism of the literalness of the same and its reproduction. We are no longer dealing with an imaginary prosthesis, with the superstition of a supra-temporal soul, but with a material prosthesis – a simulation much more destructive than the illusion of the soul.

Moreover, the very illusion of the body, the play of appearances of the body, is destroyed in the simulation of the functions of life; appearances are volatilized by genetic transcription. Another vital illusion disappears: that of thought, which is abolished in the instrumentalization of mental faculties, in the fetishism of artificial intelligence.

There are several forms of death: a differentiated, dual, tragic form in the destiny of the higher mammals, which is linked to sexuality – in a way, a sexed form of death. And there is the asexual, undifferentiated form – a recessive stage which harks back to the molecular and protozoan stage of living beings, to their unceremonious obliteration, leaving them no other form of destiny.

In the concentration camps, even more than life, it was death that was exterminated. The prisoners were dispossessed of their deaths – deader than dead, disappeared. But death can also be exterminated by the creation of *indestructible life-processes.* Which is what we are doing when we attempt to capture immortality in anatomical, biological and genetic processes. Locked into their undifferentiated forms, either by the definitive autonomization of multiple functions or by reduction to the smallest possible elements, the life processes become indestructible, and it is by the automatic working of these processes that we are exterminating death by easy stages.

It was with this form of immortal life, this nostalgia for a pure contiguity of life [*le vivant*] and its molecular sequentiality, that Freud associated the death instinct. And it is to this kind of

immortality that we are condemned today, as we are condemned to an absence of destiny, to the negative immortality of what cannot end and thus reproduces itself indefinitely.

In the past, man thought himself immortal, but he was not. Or rather he secretly doubted that he was not. Otherwise, he would not have needed to believe it. Today, we no longer believe we are immortal, yet it is precisely now that we are becoming so, becoming quietly immortal without knowing it, without wishing it, without believing it, by the mere fact of the confusion of the limits of life and death. No longer immortal in terms of the soul, which has disappeared, nor even in terms of the body, which is disappearing, but in terms of the formula, immortal in terms of the code. That is, we are beings for whom there will soon no longer be death, nor representation of death, nor even – and this is the worst – illusion of death.

In its classical, glorious sense, immortality is the quality of what passes beyond death, the quality of the supra-living. In its contemporary version, it is the quality of the sur-viving, that is, of what is already dead and, by that token, becomes immortal, but not at all in the same way. It is no longer a fateful attribute; it is the banal attribute of what is no longer threatened with death since it is already dead. Of what no longer comes to an end since it has already passed beyond its own ends, beyond its possibilities, into hypertely, so to speak, or into a 'surpassed' coma.

That immortality is the worst of fates, for death was the finest of man's conquests – subjective, dramatized death, death ritualized and celebrated, sought after and desired: by death, man distinguishes himself from all the other living species endowed with a natural immortality which, indeed, they share with the gods, whose immortal form is, initially, an animal one.

The question is whether, beyond all vicissitudes of religion and matters spiritual, beyond all belief, we are not returning, by the extradition of death, to that basic immortality. Are we not going back, as a result of all our technologies, to a (clonal, metastatic) *de facto* eternity which was, formerly, the destiny of the inhuman? But this functional immortality, instead of occurring in

a 'world beyond', which at least had the advantage of being *another world*, is happening in this world, our world, which has, consequently, become our 'world beyond'. The disappearance of the boundaries of the human and the inhuman, of the limits of life and death, has turned our world itself into a 'world beyond' – this time a definitive 'world beyond', since there is no alternative to it in a real world, since it *is* the real world. It has itself become the site of total superstition.

How can you jump over your shadow when you no longer have one?

This compulsive desire for immortality, for a definitive immortality, revolves around a strange madness – the mania for what has achieved its goal. The mania for identity – for saturation, completion, repletion. For perfection too. The lethal illusion of perfection: hence these objects from which wear-and-tear, death or ageing have been eradicated by technology. The compact disc. It doesn't wear out, even if you use it. Terrifying, this. It's as though you'd never used it. It's as though you didn't exist. If objects no longer grow old when you touch them, you must be dead.

There is no better way of illustrating this madness than ironically, by the story of the man walking in the rain with his umbrella under his arm. When asked why he doesn't open it, he replies: 'I don't like to feel I've called on all my resources.' This says it all. Calling on all your resources is completely wrong-headed. To do so is to achieve immortality, but the immortality of the totalization, addition and repetition of yourself. Paradoxically, calling on all your resources is the opposite of knowing how to come to an end. To reach your own limits is no longer to

have the end at your command. It means the abolition of death as vital horizon. It means losing your shadow. And so it means the impossibility of jumping over that shadow – how can you jump over your shadow when you no longer have one? In other words, if you want to live, you must not call on all your resources.

Yet this is the ideal everywhere set before us today, by way of the techniques of self-maximization, of performance blackmailing, of absolute realization of the human being as programme. The programming of all the genetic, biological, professional, existential variants of the individual. Going to the end of the programme, to the end of the tape! This way you arrive at a *de facto* immortality merely by forgetting the formula for stopping. Horizontal immortality, by acceleration and inertia, by exhaustion of possibilities, with the vertical cut-off of death no longer intervening. Even more illusory than all the transcendent forms of immortality, since it exhibits all the signs of material efficacy.

Yet nature provides us with an opposite example by leaving two-thirds of the human genome to lie fallow. One wonders what purpose these useless genes might serve, and why they should be forcibly decoded. What if they were only there to meet a requirement for a degree of leeway? If all the genes were functional, nothing would be wasted and we should be close to a total definition. It is perhaps to avert such a catastrophe that nature has provided this shadowy area. The same goes for language: the mass of floating signifier is what preserves language from calling on all its resources, which in turn preserves human beings from expressing everything and the world from signifying everything, from signifying in its totality. Yet this is precisely the aim today with computer technology, artificial intelligence, etc.: mobilizing all the neurons, all possible senses, and simultaneously reducing all margins, all the interstitial spaces. The trend in physics itself is towards the reduction of this interstitial void. It is the dream of that science to render matter totally concrete, to wrest all its energy from it by impelling it to limit-densities, densities artificial and monstrous.

What is it all about, then, this business of going as far as you can, exploiting all your resources, reaching your limits? It is a fantasy of death which leaves only the alternative of downfall and collapse. It is a strategy for wretches, for those who have so few means they are forced to exploit them to the full. It is a policy of self-exploitation one would never accept if it were imposed by someone else. It means cultivating servitude without the presence of the other, since each person substitutes himself for the other in the role of oppressor. The pinnacle of self-inflicted servitude. What will preserve us from this unlimited frenzy, this desire to abolish the horizon as perpetual line of flight, as virtual line of flight, which must remain virtual, but which we are precisely crossing today – towards that 'event horizon' beyond which nothing happens, nothing has meaning any longer and whence not even light escapes?

The intellectual field also functions like a system of crop-rotation, with ground left untilled, fallow. It has a mortal dread of developing all its faculties. Thought is precisely what puts a brake on ideas, which, left to themselves, tend to spread out uncontrolled and occupy the whole of space. Ideas proliferate like polyps or seaweed and perish by suffocating in their own luxuriant vegetation. There is an idea horizon just as there is an event horizon: the horizon of their death-dealing accomplishment, their absolute realization. Thought, for its part, leaks out into the void.

History too has called on all its resources. That is why it can now only turn around or repeat itself. It has not managed to leak out into the void. That is why it has become interminable, leaving scope only for a negative immortality.

The same goes for the social: we have attempted to mine the entire social sphere, to express it all, extort it all – we have tried to *realize* it by stripping it of any metaphorical dimension. This was to kill it by effusion, by diluting it into the real, by snuffing out its idea in the real.

It is, invariably, totally wrongheaded to attain the real – *real* immortality, the reality of the social. The end of metaphor, the absolute realization of all metaphors invariably marks the

twilight of the idea and the refusal of death in death-dealing accomplishment.

A striking illustration of this killing of metaphors, dreams, illusions and utopias by their absolute realization, and of all ideas and transcendence by their material effectuation is provided by Canetti, who cites the example of the atomic bomb. He writes that, with Hiroshima and the dropping of the bomb, men put an end to the sun by harnessing its energy and materializing it on earth. They put an end to the illusion of the sun and its myth by mimicking the violence of its light and materializing it on earth in its radical form.*

The real is, in fact, the last resource of metaphor, but that resource must not be called on – on pain of death, on pain of losing its metaphorical power, its power of illusion. As in history, you have to keep your umbrella under your arm – a metaphor for the last chance – and not open it on any account. 'Every ecstasy ultimately prefers to take the path of renunciation rather than sin against its own concept by realizing itself' (Adorno).

One of the aspects of this mania for accomplishment is the elevation to the universal, which is commonly regarded as progress, as constituting in a way the extensional equivalent of immortality. This extension actually amounts to a dilution and extenuation of values in the universal. The same goes for events: it is when they are disseminated worldwide that their intensity is at its weakest and they are most rapidly obsolescent. The universalization of facts, data, knowledge, information is a precondition of their disappearance. Every idea and culture becomes universalized before it disappears. As with stars: their maximum expansion comes at the point of death, their transformation into red giants and then black dwarfs. The death agony of concentrated solutions in high dilution, the death agony of forms and images in high definition. This ending of cultures is not

* The Canetti passage to which Baudrillard is referring can be found in *The Human Province*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel. London: Deutsch, 1985, pp. 66–7.

perceptible from within. From within, a culture is immortal; it seems to approach its end only in an asymptotic curve. It has, in fact, already disappeared. The elevation of a value to universality is a prelude to its becoming transparent, which itself is a prelude to its disappearance.

There is no point, then, aiming for the universal, no point aiming for the heights, since there are no more heights. Erosion has done its work. If there is no longer any possibility of a philosophy of transcendence, since thought has been exiled to the other side of the looking-glass, there is no longer any possibility of conquering power either, since the political has been exiled to the other side of representation. There are no longer any heights to storm, either in the political domain or anywhere else, and the single-handed ocean crossings, which are our modern equivalent of climbing Annapurna, are posthumous fantasies.

This is the same impossibility as that of jumping over your shadow when you don't have one. It's a metaphysical leap which is beyond us. Peter Schlemihl had at least sold his shadow to the devil; ours we have simply lost. This is because we have, in the meantime, become entirely transparent. Or because there is not even a source of light, a bright enough energy source, to give us a shadow. Our only shadow is the one projected onto the wall opposite by atomic radiation. These stencilled silhouettes produced by the Hiroshima bomb. The atomic shadow, the only one left to us: not the sun's shadow, nor even the shadows of Plato's cave, but the shadow of the absent, irradiated body, the delineation of the subject's annihilation, of the disappearance of the original.

Another form of this identity mania is our contemporary individualism.

Neo-individualism, bent on performance and entrepreneurial heroism, athletic individualism (Alain Ehrenberg) – possibly neo-hedonistic, syncretic and tribal – bears no relation to the hero of bourgeois individualism. This latter, the hero of subjectivity, of breaking with the old, of free will and Stirner's radical singularity, is well and truly dead. Even Riesman's 'self-directed'

individuality has disappeared from the horizon of the social as it has from the purview of the human sciences. The neo-individual is, by contrast, the purest product of 'other-directedness': an interactive, communicational particle, plugged into the network, getting continuous feedback, and with a clear vision of the podium in his mind's eye. Everyone is ready to turn themselves, depending on their various advantages or handicaps, into an autonomous micro-particle. And why not? This is the age of the daily invention of new particles. Why should the innumerable particles of our society not each demand their own identity and personal 'charm'? Obviously, this gives rise to chaotic sets and Brownian motion, in which freedom is merely the statistical end-product of impacts between singularities and no longer, therefore, in any sense a philosophical problem.

This individual is not an individual at all. He is a *pentito* of subjectivity and alienation, of the heroic appropriation of himself. His only aim is the technical appropriation of the self. He is a convert to the sacrificial religion of performance, efficiency, stress and time-pressure – a much fiercer liturgy than that of production – total mortification and unremitting sacrifice to the divinities of data [*l'information*], total exploitation of oneself by oneself, the ultimate in alienation.

No religion has ever demanded as much of the individual as such, and it might be said that radical individualism is the very form of religious integrism.* The modern religion of self-abnegation, of all-out operationality – the worst one of all since it recoups all the energy of irreligion, all the energy released by the eclipsing of traditional religions. This is the greatest irreligious conversion in history. By comparison with this voluntary holocaust, this escalation of sacrifice, the so-called return of religion which we pretend to fear – these occasional upsurges of religiosity or traditional integrism – is negligible. It merely conceals the fundamental integrism of this consensual society, the

* For reasons of context, this expression is used to render the French '*intégrisme religieux*' which, in other circumstances, might quite properly be translated as 'religious fundamentalism'.

terroristic fundamentalism of this new sacrificial religion of performance. It masks the fact that society as a whole is moving towards religious metastasis. Religious effects are taken too seriously in their religious dimension and not seriously enough as effects, that is, as masking the true process. This is a screen tumour, a fixation abscess which, by focusing it, allows the evil to be exorcized at little cost, sparing the need to analyse the whole society, to analyse 'democratic' society, which is virtually converted to integrism and revisionism, to security and protectionism and, at the same time, to the techniques of crude promotion and intimidation.

This 'post-modern' individualism arises not out of a problematic of *liberty* and *liberation*, but out of a *liberalization* of slave networks and circuits, that is, an individual diffraction of the programmed ensembles, a metamorphosis of the macro-structures into innumerable particles which bear within them all the stigmata of the networks and circuits – each one forming its own micro-network and micro-circuit, each one reviving for itself, in its micro-universe, the now useless totalitarianism of the whole.

In any case, in all registers – sex, culture, the economy, the media, politics – the concepts of liberty and liberation are diametrically opposed, unconditional liberation being the surest way of keeping liberty at bay. Liberty operates in a field that is limited and transcendent, in the symbolic space of the subject, where he is confronted with his own finality, his own destiny, whereas liberation operates in a potentially unlimited space. It is a quasi-physical process (its prototype is the liberation or release of energy) which pushes every function, every force, every individual to the limit of its possibilities and even beyond, where it is no longer answerable for its own actions. That is why liberty is a critical form, whereas liberation is a potentially catastrophic form. The former confronts the subject with his own alienation and its overcoming. The other leads to metastases, chain reactions, the disconnection of all elements and, finally, the radical expropriation of the subject. Liberation is the effective realization of the metaphor of liberty and, in this sense, it is also

its end. There is no resolving the dilemma posed by these two. But the present system has found the final solution to both – in liberalization. Not the free subject any longer, but the liberal individual. No longer the liberation, but the liberalization of exchanges. From liberty to liberation, from liberation to liberalization. The extreme point of highest dilution, minimal intensity, where the problem of liberty cannot even be posed any longer.

And, in the process, the concept of alienation disappears. This new, cloned, metastatic, interactive individual is not alienated any longer, but self-identical. *He no longer differs from himself* and is, therefore, indifferent to himself. This indifference to oneself is at the heart of the more general problem of the indifference of institutions or of the political [*le politique*], etc., to themselves.

The indifference of time: the non-distance between points in time, the promiscuity of points in time, the instantaneousness of real time. Boredom.

The indifference of space: the televisual, remote-controlled contiguity and contamination of all points in space, which leaves you nowhere.

Political indifference: the superimposition, the proliferation of all opinions in a single media continuum.

Sexual indifference: indistinguishability and substitution of sexes as a necessary consequence of the modern theory of sex as difference.

The individual's indifference to himself and to others is a mirror-image of all these other kinds of indifference: it results from the absence of division within the subject, the suppression of the pole of otherness, from the subject's being inscribed in the order of identity, which is a product, paradoxically, of the demand that he be different from himself and from others.

For this identitary individual lives on the hymning and hallucinating of difference, employing to that end all the devices for simulating the other. He is the first victim of that psychological and philosophical theory of difference which, in all spheres, ends in indifference to oneself and others.

Difference is the infantile disorder of the subject (of our culture in general) and identity mania (the de-differentiation of self,

indifference to self) is its senile disorder. We have conquered otherness with difference and, in its turn, difference has succumbed to the logic of the same and of indifference. We have conquered otherness with alienation (the subject becomes its own other), but alienation has, in its turn, succumbed to identity logic (the subject becomes the same as itself). And we have entered the interactive, sidereal era of boredom.

This identity syndrome has a particular form of madness specific to it. To the 'free' individual, the divided subject, there corresponds the vertical madness of yesteryear: psychical madness, the transcendent madness of the schizophrenic, that of alienation, of the inexorable transparence of otherness. To the identitary individual, that virtual clone, there corresponds a *horizontal* madness, our specific delirium and that of our whole culture: the delirium of genetic confusion, of the scrambling of codes and networks, of biological and molecular anomalies, of autism. No longer deliria of self-impairment or expropriation, but a delirium of self-appropriation – all the monstrous variants of identity – the delirium not of the schizophrenic but of the isophrenic, without shadow, other, transcendence or image – that of the mental isomorph, the autist who has, as it were, devoured his double and absorbed his twin brother (being a twin is, conversely, a form of autism *à deux*). Identitary, ipsomaniacal, isophrenic madness. Our monsters are all manic autists. As products of a chimerical combination (even where this is genetic), deprived of hereditary otherness, afflicted with hereditary sterility, they have no other destiny than desperately to seek out an otherness by eliminating all the Others one by one (whereas 'vertical' madness suffered, by contrast, from a dizzying excess of otherness). The problem of Frankenstein, for example, is that he has no Other and craves otherness. This is the problem of racism. But our computers also crave otherness. They are autistic, bachelor machines: the source of their suffering and the cause of their vengeance is the fiercely tautological nature of their own language.

Exponential instability, exponential stability

The whole problem of speaking about the end (particularly the end of history) is that you have to speak of what lies beyond the end and also, at the same time, of the impossibility of ending. This paradox is produced by the fact that in a non-linear, non-Euclidean space of history the end cannot be located. The end is, in fact, only conceivable in a logical order of causality and continuity. Now, it is events themselves which, by their artificial production, their programmed occurrence or the anticipation of their effects – not to mention their transfiguration in the media – are suppressing the cause–effect relation and hence all historical continuity.

This distortion of causes and effects, this mysterious autonomy of effects, this cause–effect reversibility, engendering a disorder or chaotic order (precisely our current situation: a reversibility of reality [*le réel*] and information, which gives rise to disorder in the realm of events and an extravagance of media effects), puts one in mind, to some extent, of Chaos Theory and the disproportion between the beating of a butterfly's wings and the hurricane this unleashes on the other side of the world. It also calls to mind Jacques Benveniste's paradoxical hypothesis of the memory of water. This latter becomes fascinating when we draw

the parallels with our present world: through the extension of media and the means of communication, we too inhabit a highly diluted social and cultural universe in which the original molecules are increasingly rare. It would be interesting to know whether, in the human order too, effects persist in the absence of causes, whether a nominal substance remains active in the absence of its elements or even whether something can exist apart from any origin and reference. This is the problem of a logic of effects which is different from that of causes or perhaps simply of another causality than that of substances and forces – of an efficient causality of forms (some strange attractor?) out of all proportion with normal causal efficacy, and equivalent to the virtual efficacy of absent molecules. In this sense, we should no longer have to look for new energies in the material unleashing of substances but in the unconditional sequencing of forms.

Perhaps history itself has to be regarded as a chaotic formation, in which acceleration puts an end to linearity and the turbulence created by acceleration deflects history definitively from its end, just as such turbulence distances effects from their causes. We shall not reach the destination, even if that destination is the Last Judgement, since we are henceforth separated from it by a variable refraction hyperspace. The retroversion of history could very well be interpreted as a turbulence of this kind, due to the hastening of events which reverses and swallows up their course. This is one of the versions of Chaos Theory – that of *exponential instability* and its uncontrollable effects. It accounts very well for the 'end' of history, interrupted in its linear or dialectical movement by that catastrophic singularity which expresses itself in the exceptional form taken by contemporary events: these are both dramatic and insignificant, impatient to occur and indifferent to themselves (and to all of us). And it accounts, at the same time, for the impossibility of being done with history.

But the exponential instability version is not the only one. The other is that of *exponential stability*. This latter defines a state in which, no matter where you start out, you always end up at the same point. The initial conditions, the original singularities do

not matter: everything tends towards the Zero point – itself also a strange attractor. None of the potentialities develops, whereas in exponential instability they extrapolate demonically. In exponential stability, there is therefore no end, not from effects becoming excessive and unpredictable, but because everything is already there, everything has already taken place.

We are thus immortal survivors, since the second existence is without end. It has no end because the end is already in the beginning. This is, therefore, a paradoxical immortality. 'The bomb exploded long ago, at Hiroshima. The process of dehumanization is complete and the clear effect of this phenomenon is that we no longer possess the psychical, ethical and spiritual resources which would enable us to realize this fact' (Romain Gary).

Though incompatible, the two hypotheses – exponential instability and stability – are in fact simultaneously valid. Moreover, our system, in its *normal* – normally catastrophic – course combines them very well. It combines in effect an inflation, a galloping acceleration, a dizzying whirl of mobility, an eccentricity of events and an excess of meaning and information with an exponential tendency towards total entropy. Our systems are thus doubly chaotic: they operate both by exponential stability and instability.

It would seem then that there will be no end because we are already in an excess of ends: the transfinite. And in an exceeding of finalities: transfinality. It is this excess which creates endless turbulence, indeed an involution and spiral disaggregation of time and history.

A disturbance is not, however, necessarily enigmatic. Sensitivity to initial conditions (Cleopatra's nose or the beating of a butterfly's wings) should not be confused, on the grounds that they are both incalculable, with fate or predestination. Indeed, precisely the opposite might be said to be true, insofar as predestination is, much rather, a *hypersensitivity to the final conditions* of a process, not to the initial ones. This is what makes a fateful – and not simply a chaotic or unpredictable –

configuration. In predestination, the end is there before the beginning and every effort to move away from the end brings that end closer: this is why it is tragic and ironic in character, and not merely eccentric or catastrophic, as in the patterns of chaos. Meteorology is chaotic; it is not a figure of destiny. All the extreme phenomena, the exorbitant effects, the vertiginous forms of disorder, everything which attests to the precession of effects over causes is fascinating, but not spiritually enthralling (and, here, we should have to include in the same order of forms the precession of models over the real, a phenomenon which encapsulates our modern 'destiny', the destiny of simulation which one may, in effect, read as a form of catastrophe of reality, this dizzying whirl of the model, the virtual and simulation carrying us further and further from the initial conditions of the real world). It is a logic of perverse effects (though some of these are beneficial), but it has nothing of a fatal strategy about it, since this latter requires a secret, but contradictory, will and a presentiment of total reversibility.

Chaos is a parody of any metaphysics of destiny. It is not even an avatar of such a metaphysics. The poetry of initial conditions fascinates us today, now that we no longer possess a vision of final conditions, and Chaos stands in for us as a negative destiny. The strangeness of the strange attractor is merely a metaphor; the radical strangeness lies in the enigmatic duality of a world and in the inexorable contradiction (that of our will and its loss) which keeps up the indestructible illusion. *Destiny is the ecstatic figure of necessity. Chaos is merely the metastatic figure of Chance.* Chaotic processes are random and statistical in nature and, even if they culminate in the hidden order of strange attractors, that still has nothing to do with the fulgurating notion of destiny, the absence of which is cruelly felt. It could even, no doubt, be said that only when destiny is absent do things begin to proliferate in all directions, only when there is no fateful resolution do the random equations of Chaos proliferate.

Our complex, metastatic, viral systems, condemned to the exponential dimension alone (be it that of exponential stability or instability), to eccentricity and indefinite fractal scissiparity, can

no longer come to an end. Condemned to an intense metabolism, to an intense internal metastasis, they become exhausted within themselves and no longer have any destination, any end, any otherness, any fatality. They are condemned, precisely, to the epidemic, to the endless excrescences of the fractal and not to the reversibility and perfect resolution of the fateful [*fatal*]. We know only the signs of catastrophe now; we no longer know the signs of destiny. (And besides, has any concern been shown in Chaos Theory for the equally extraordinary, contrary phenomenon of *hyposensitivity* to initial conditions, of the inverse exponentiality of effects in relation to causes – the potential hurricanes which end in the beating of a butterfly's wings?)

Hysteresis of the millennium

We are, self-evidently, entering upon a retroactive form of history, and all our ideas, philosophies and mental techniques are progressively adapting to that model. We may perhaps even see this as an adventure, since the disappearance of the end is in itself an original situation. It seems to be characteristic of our culture and our history, which cannot even manage to come to an end, and are, as a result, assured of an indefinite recurrence, a backhanded immortality. Up to now, immortality has been mainly that of the beyond, an immortality yet to come, but we are today inventing another kind in the here and now, an immortality of endings receding to infinity.

The situation is, perhaps, an original one, but clearly, so far as the final result is concerned, the game is already lost. We shall never experience the original chaos, the Big Bang: the file is closed on that; we weren't there. But, where the final moment is concerned – the Big Crumb – we might have some hope of seeing that. Some hope of enjoying the end, to make up for not being able to enjoy the origin. These are the only two interesting moments and, since we have been denied the first, we might as well put all our energies into accelerating the end, into hastening things to their definitive doom, which we could at least consume as spectacle. Just imagine the extraordinary good luck of the generation which would have the end of the world to itself. It is

every bit as marvellous as being present at the beginning. But we came too late for the beginning. Only the end seemed to be within our means.

We had come close to this possibility with the atomic age. Alas, the balance of terror suspended the ultimate event, then postponed it for ever(?) and, now deterrence has succeeded, we have to get used to the idea that *there is no end any longer, there will no longer be any end*, that history itself has become interminable. Thus, when we speak of the 'end of history', the 'end of the political', the 'end of the social', the 'end of ideologies', none of this is true. The worst of it all is precisely that there will be no end to anything, and all these things will continue to unfold slowly, tediously, recurrently, in that hysteresis of everything which, like nails and hair, continues to grow after death. Because, at bottom, all these things are already dead and, rather than have a happy or tragic resolution, a destiny, we shall have a thwarted end, a homeopathic end, an end distilled into all the various metastases of the refusal of death. The metastases of all that resurfaces as history goes back over its own tracks in a compulsive desire for rehabilitation, as though with regard to some crime or other (a crime committed by us, but in spite of ourselves, a crime of the species against itself, by a process which is quickening with contemporary history, a crime of which universal waste, universal repentance and universal *ressentiment* are, today, the surest signs), a crime on which the file has to be reopened, which necessarily involves going back into the past, right back to origins if necessary, where, for want of being able to find a resolution of our destiny in the future, we seek a retrospective absolution. We absolutely have to know what went wrong at a certain point and, hence, explore all the vestiges of the path we have travelled, root through the dustbins of history, revive both the best and the worst in the vain hope of separating good from evil. To return to Canetti's hypothesis: we have to get back beyond a fateful demarcation line which, in history too, might separate the human from the inhuman, a line which we might be said to have thoughtlessly crossed, in the dizzying whirl of some liberation of the species or other. It seems as though, caught up in a collective

panic over this blind spot at which we passed out of history and its ends (but what were those ends? all we know is that we passed beyond them without noticing), we are hurriedly trying to get into reverse, in order to escape this state of empty simulation. Trying to relocate the zone of reference, the earlier scene, the Euclidean space of history. Thus the events in Eastern Europe claimed to set in train the onward march of peoples once more and the democratic process. And the Gulf War sought to reopen the space of war, the space of a violence that could establish a new world order.

This is, in every case, a failure. This revival of vanished – or vanishing – forms, this attempt to escape the apocalypse of the virtual, is a utopian desire, the last of our utopian desires. The more we seek to rediscover the real and the referential, the more we sink into simulation, in this case a shameful and, at any event, hopeless simulation.

By analogy with illnesses, which are perhaps merely the reactivation of previous states (cancer, for example, reproducing the undifferentiated proliferation of the first living cells, or viral pathology, which causes the earlier states of the biogenetic substance to resurface in moments when the body is weak and its immune defences low), can we not imagine that, in history itself, previous states have never disappeared, but present themselves again in succession, as it were, taking advantage of the weakness or excessive complexity of the present structures?

However, these earlier forms never resurface as they were; they never escape the destiny of extreme modernity. Their resurrection is itself hyper-real. The resuscitated values are themselves fluid, unstable, subject to the same fluctuations as fashion or stock-exchange capital. The rehabilitation of the old frontiers, the old structures, the old elites will therefore never have the same meaning. If, one day, the aristocracy or royalty recover their old position, they will, nonetheless, be 'post-modern'. None of the 'retro' scenarios that are being got up has any historical significance: they are occurring wholly on the surface of *our* age, as though all images were being superimposed one upon another, but with no change to the actual course of the film. Relapsed

events: defrosted democracy, *trompe-l'oeil* freedoms, the New World Order cellophane-wrapped and ecology in mothballs, with its immune-deficient human rights. None of these will make any difference to the *present* melancholy of the century, which we shall never get right through, since it will, in the meantime, have swung around and headed off in the opposite direction.

This is all, at bottom, a triumph for Walt Disney, that inspired precursor of a universe where all past or present forms meet in a playful promiscuity, where all cultures recur in a mosaic (including the cultures of the future, which are themselves already recurrent). For a long time we thought this was all imaginary, that is, derivative and decorative, puerile and marginal. But we are going to see that it was something like a prefiguration of the real trend of things – Disneyworld opening up for us the bewildering perspective of passing through all the earlier stages, as in a film, with those stages hypostasized in a definitive juvenility, frozen like Disney himself in liquid nitrogen: Magic Country, Future World, Gothic, Hollywood itself reconstituted fifty years on in Florida, the whole of the past and the future revisited as living simulation. Walt Disney is the true hero of deep-freezing, with his utopian hope of awakening one day in the future, in a better world. But that is where the irony bites: he had not foreseen that reality and history would turn right around. And he, who expected to wake up in the year 2100, might well, following out his own fairytale scenario, awaken in 1730 or the world of the Pharaohs or any one of his many primal scenes.

We wondered what the point of this coming *fin de siècle* might be. Here we have it: the sale of the century. History is being sold off, as is the end of history. Communism is being sold off, as is the end of communism. Communism will have had no historical end; it will have been sold off, knocked down like useless stock. Just like the Russian army, sold off at the four corners of the earth – an unprecedented event relegated to the status of a banal market operation. All Western ideologies are knocked down too; they can be had at bargain prices in all latitudes.

The sales used to come after the feast days but now they precede them. It's the same with our century: we are anticipating the end – everything must go, everything has to be sold off. We learn, for example, that, alongside the great Red Army stock clearance, the industrial laboratories are currently 'selling off' the human genome, which they are copyrighting and commercializing sequence by sequence. Here again, everything must go, even if we don't know what these genes are for. Things must not be allowed to reach their natural term. They have first to be cryogenized, in order to ensure them a virtual, derisory immortality.

Messianic hope was based on the *reality* of the Apocalypse. But this latter has no more reality than the original Big Bang. We shall never be allowed this dramatic illumination. Even the idea of putting an end to our planet by an atomic clash is futile and superfluous. If it has no meaning for anyone, God or man, then what is the point? Our Apocalypse is not real, it is *virtual*. And it is not in the future, it is *here and now*. Our orbital bombs, even if they did not mean a natural end, were at least manufactured by us, designed, as it seems, the better to end it all. But, in actual fact, that is not how it was: they were made *the better to be rid of the end*. We have now put that end into satellite form, like all those finalities which, once transcendent, have now become purely and simply orbital.

It circles around us, and will continue to do so tirelessly. We are encircled by our own end and incapable of getting it to land, of bringing it back to earth. This is like the parable of the Russian cosmonaut forgotten in space, with no one to welcome him, no one to bring him back – the sole particle of Soviet territory ironically overflying a deterritorialized Russia. Whereas on earth everything has changed, he becomes practically immortal and continues to circle like the gods, like the stars, like nuclear waste. Like so many events, of which he is the perfect illustration, which continue to circle in the empty space of news [*l'information*], without anyone being able or willing to bring them back into historical space. A perfect image of all those things which continue their uncompromising performance in orbit, but have

lost their identity along the way. Our history, for example, has also got lost along the way and revolves around us like an artificial satellite.

Nostalgia for the lost object? Not even that. Nostalgia had beauty because it retained within it the presentiment of what has taken place and could take place again. It was as beautiful as utopia, of which it is the inverted mirror. It was beautiful for never being satisfied, as was utopia for never being achieved. The sublime reference to the origin in nostalgia is as beautiful as the reference to the end in utopia. It is something else again to be confronted with *the literal manifestness of the end* (of which we can no longer dream as end), and the literal manifestness of the origin (of which we can no longer dream as origin). Now, we have the means today to put into play both our origins and our end. We exhume our origins in archaeology, reshape our original capital through genetics, and operationalize our dreams and the wildest utopias by means of science and technology. We appease our nostalgia and our utopian desires *in situ* and *in vitro*.

We are, then, unable to dream of a past or future state of things. Things are in a state which is literally definitive – neither finished, nor infinite, nor definite, but de-finitive that is, deprived of its end. Now, the feeling which goes with a definitive state, even a paradisiac one – is melancholic. Whereas, with mourning, things come to an end and therefore enjoy a possibility of returning, with melancholia we are not even left with the presentiment of an end or of a return, but only with *ressentiment* at their disappearance. The crepuscular profile of the *fin de siècle* is more or less of this order, combining the features of a linear order of progress and a regression, itself also linear, of ends and values.

Against this general movement, there remains the completely improbable and, no doubt, unverifiable hypothesis of a *poetic reversibility of events*, more or less the only evidence for which is the existence of the same possibility in language.

The poetic form is not far removed from the chaotic form. Both

flout the law of cause and effect. If, in Chaos Theory, for sensitivity to initial conditions we substitute sensitivity to final conditions, we are in the form of predestination, which is the form of fate [*le destin*]. Poetic language also lives with predestination, with the imminence of its own ending and of reversibility between the ending and the beginning. It is predestined in this sense – it is an unconditional event, without meaning and consequence, which draws its whole being from the dizzying whirl of final resolution.

It is certainly not the form of our present history and yet there is an affinity between the immanence of poetic development and the immanence of the chaotic development which is ours today, the unfolding of events which are themselves also without meaning and consequence and in which – with effects substituting themselves for causes – there are no longer any causes, *but only effects*. The world is there, *effectively*. There is no reason for this, and God is dead.

If nothing exists now but effects, we are in a state of total illusion (which is also that of poetic language). If the effect is in the cause or the beginning in the end, then the catastrophe is behind us. This reversing of the sign of catastrophe is the exceptional privilege of our age. It liberates us from any future catastrophe and any responsibility in that regard. The end of all anticipatory psychoses, all panic, all remorse! The lost object is behind us. We are free of the Last Judgement.

What this brings us to, more or less, is a poetic, ironic analysis of events. Against the simulation of a linear history 'in progress', we have to accord a privileged status to these backfires, these malign deviations, these lightweight catastrophes which cripple an empire much more effectively than any great upheavals. We have to accord a privileged status to all that has to do with non-linearity, reversibility, all that is of the order not of an unfolding or an evolution, but of a winding back, a reversion in time. Anastrophe versus catastrophe. Perhaps, deep down, history has never unfolded in a linear fashion; perhaps language has never unfolded in a linear fashion. Everything moves in loops, tropes, inversions of meaning, except in numerical and artificial languages

which, for that very reason, *no longer are* languages. Everything occurs through effects which short-circuit their (metaleptic) causes, through the *Witze* of events, perverse events, ironic turnabouts, except within a rectified history, which, for just that reason, *is not* a history.

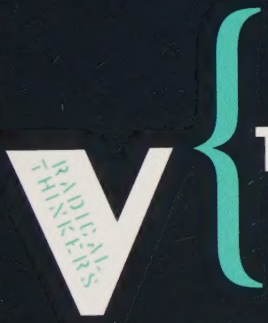
Might we not transpose language games on to social and historical phenomena: anagrams, acrostics, spoonerisms, rhyme, strophe and catastrophe? Not just the major figures of metaphor and metonymy, but the instant, puerile, formalistic games, the heteroclite tropes which are the delight of a vulgar imagination? Are there social spoonerisms, or an anagrammatic history (where meaning is dismembered and scattered to the winds, like the name of God in the anagram), rhyming forms of political action or events which can be read in either direction? In these times of a retroversion of history, the palindrome, that poetic, rigorous form of palinode, could serve as a *grille de lecture* (might it not perhaps be necessary to replace Paul Virilio's dromology with a palindromology?). And the anagram, that detailed process of unravelling, that sort of poetic and non-linear convulsion of language – is there a chance that history lends itself to such a poetic convulsion, to such a subtle form of return and anaphora which, like the anagram, would – beyond meaning – allow the pure materiality of language to show through, and – beyond historical meaning – allow the pure materiality of time to show through?

Such would be the enchanted alternative to the linearity of history, the poetic alternative to the disenchanted confusion, the chaotic profusion of present events.

In this very way, we enter, beyond history, upon pure fiction, upon the illusion of the world. The illusion of our history opens on to *the greatly more radical illusion of the world.* Now we have closed the eyelids of the Revolution, closed our eyes on the Revolution, now we have broken down the Wall of Shame, now that the lips of protest are closed (with the sugar of history which melts on the tongue), now Europe – and memories – are no longer haunted by the spectre of communism, nor even by that of

power, now the aristocratic illusion of the origin and the democratic illusion of the end are increasingly receding, we no longer have the choice of advancing, of persevering in the present destruction, or of retreating – but only of facing up to this radical illusion.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD



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THE PERFECT CRIME

Jean Baudrillard

Translated by Chris Turner

VERSO

London • New York

Published with the financial assistance of the French Ministry of Culture

First published by Verso 1996
This edition published by Verso 2008
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014-4606
www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-84467-203-5

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Marston Book Services Ltd, Oxfordshire

'So, my friend, after the example of the Phoenicians, you charted your course by the stars?'

'No,' said Menippus, 'it was among the stars themselves I journeyed.'

Given the mass of evidence, there is no plausible hypothesis but reality.
Given the mass of evidence to the contrary, there is no solution but illusion.

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TRANSLATOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Marie-Dominique Maison, Leslie Hill, Glynis Powell, Mike Gane, Yasmina Lallemand and the author for their help, both direct and indirect, with parts of this translation. As ever, of course, I take sole responsibility for its shortcomings. All the notes are my own.

This is the story of a crime – of the murder of reality. And the extermination of an illusion – the vital illusion, the radical illusion of the world. The real does not disappear into illusion; it is illusion that disappears into integral reality.

If the crime were perfect, this book would have to be perfect too, since it claims to be the reconstruction of the crime.

Alas, the crime is never perfect. Moreover, in this grim record of the disappearance of the real, it has not been possible to pin down either the motives or the perpetrators, and the corpse of the real itself has never been found.

And the idea which underlies the book has never been pinned down either. That idea was the murder weapon.

Though the crime is never perfect, perfection, true to its name, is always criminal. In the perfect crime it is the perfection itself which is the crime, just as, in the transparence of evil,[1] it is the transparence itself that is the evil. But perfection is always punished: the punishment for perfection is reproduction.

Are there extenuating circumstances to this crime? Certainly not, since these always have to be sought among the motives or the perpetrators. But the crime has no motivation and no perpetrator, and therefore remains perfectly inexplicable. This is its true perfection. Though admittedly, from the point of view of the concept, this is more of an aggravating circumstance.

Though the consequences of the crime are never-ending, there is neither murderer nor victim. If there were either, the secret of the crime would be unmasked some day, and the inquiry concluded. The secret, in the end, is that the two are merged: 'In the last analysis, the victim and the persecutor are one. We can only grasp the unity of the human race if we can grasp, in all its horror, the truth of this ultimate equivalence' (Eric Gans).

In the last analysis, object and subject are one. We can only grasp the essence of the world if we can grasp, in all its irony, the truth of this radical equivalence.

The Perfect Crime

Were it not for appearances, the world would be a perfect crime, that is, a crime without a criminal, without a victim and without a motive. And the truth would forever have withdrawn from it and its secret would never be revealed, for want of any clues [*traces*] being left behind.

But the fact is that the crime is never perfect, for the world betrays itself by appearances, which are the clues to its non-existence, the traces of the continuity of the nothing. For the nothing itself – the continuity of the nothing – leaves traces. And that is the way the world betrays its secret. That is the way it allows itself to be sensed, while at the same time hiding away behind appearances.

The artist, too, is always close to committing the perfect crime: saying nothing. But he turns away from it, and his work is the trace of that criminal imperfection. The artist is, in Michaux's words, the one who, with all his might, resists the fundamental drive not to leave traces.[2]

The perfection of the crime lies in the fact that it has always-already been accomplished – *perfectum*. A misappropriation of the world as it is, before it even shows itself. It will never, therefore, be discovered. There will be no Last Judgement to punish or pardon it. There will be no end, because things have always-already happened. Neither resolution nor absolution, but inevitable unfolding of the consequences. Precession of the original

crime – which we might perhaps be said to find in derisory form in the current precession of simulacra. After that, our destiny is the accomplishment of this crime, its inexorable unfolding, the continuity of the evil, the continuation of the nothing. We shall never experience the primal scene, but at every moment we experience its prolongation and its expiation. There is no end to this and the consequences are incalculable.

Just as we cannot plumb the first few seconds of the Big Bang, so we cannot locate those few seconds in which the original crime took place either. It is a fossilized crime, then, like the 'fossilized' background noise scattered about the universe. And it is the energy of that crime, like that of the initial explosion, which will spread through the world until, perhaps, it exhausts itself.

This is the mythic vision of the original crime, the vision of the alter-ation[3] of the world in the play of seduction and appearances, and of its definitive illusoriness.

This is the form the mystery takes.

The great philosophical question used to be 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' Today, the real question is: 'Why is there nothing rather than something?'

The absence of things from themselves, the fact that they do not take place though they appear to do so, the fact that everything withdraws behind its own appearance and is, therefore, never identical with itself, is the material illusion of the world. And, deep down, this remains the great riddle, the enigma which fills us with dread and from which we protect ourselves with the formal illusion of truth.

On pain of dread, we have to decipher the world and therefore wipe out the initial illusoriness of the world. We can bear neither the void, nor the secret, nor pure appearance. And why should we decipher it instead of letting its illusion shine out as such, in all its glory? Well, the fact that we cannot bear its enigmatic character is also an enigma, also part of the enigma. It is part of

the world that we cannot bear either the illusion of the world or pure appearance. We would be no better at coping with radical truth and transparency, if these existed.

Truth wants to give herself naked. She is desperately seeking nudity, like Madonna in the film which brought her fame. That hopeless striptease is the very striptease of reality, which 'disrobes' in the literal sense,[4] offering up to the eyes of gullible voyeurs the appearance of nudity. But the fact is that this nudity wraps it in a second skin, which no longer has even the erotic charm of the dress. There is no longer any need even of bachelors to strip her bare, since she has herself given up *trompe-l'œil* for striptease.

And, indeed, the main objection to reality is its propensity to submit unconditionally to every hypothesis you can make about it. With this its most abject conformism, it discourages the liveliest minds. You can subject it – and its principle (what do they get up to together, by the way, apart from dully copulating and begetting reams of obviousness?) – to the most cruel torments, the most obscene provocations, the most paradoxical insinuations. It submits to everything with unrelenting servility. Reality is a bitch. And that is hardly surprising, since it is the product of stupidity's fornication with the spirit of calculation – the dregs of the sacred illusion offered up to the jackals of science.

To recover the trace of the nothing, of the incompleteness, the imperfection of the crime, we have, then, to take something away from the reality of the world. To recover the constellation of the mystery [*secret*],[5] we have to take something away from the accumulation of reality and language. We have to take words from language one by one, take things from reality one by one, wrest the same away from the same. Behind every fragment of reality, something has to have disappeared in order to ensure the continuity of the nothing – without, however, yielding to the temptation of annihilation, for disappearance

has to remain a living disappearance, and the trace of the crime a living trace.

What we have forgotten in modernity, by dint of constantly accumulating, adding, going for more, is that force comes from subtraction, power from absence. Because we are no longer capable today of coping with the symbolic mastery of absence, we are immersed in the opposite illusion, the disenchanted illusion of the proliferation of screens and images.

Now, the image can no longer imagine the real, because it is the real. It can no longer dream it, since it is its virtual reality. It is as though things had swallowed their own mirrors and had become transparent to themselves, entirely present to themselves in a ruthless transcription, full in the light and in real time. Instead of being absent from themselves in illusion, they are forced to register on thousands of screens, off whose horizons not only the real has disappeared, but the image too. The reality has been driven out of reality. Only technology perhaps still binds together the scattered fragments of the real. But what has become of the constellation of meaning in all this?

The only suspense which remains is that of knowing how far the world can derealize itself before succumbing to its reality deficit or, conversely, how far it can hyperrealize itself before succumbing to an excess of reality (the point when, having become perfectly real, truer than true, it will fall into the clutches of total simulation).

Yet it is not certain that the constellation of the mystery is wiped out by the transparency of the virtual universe, nor that the power of illusion is swept away by the technical operation of the world. Behind all technologies one can sense a kind of absolute affectation and double game, their very exorbitance turning them into a game by which the world shows through, from behind the illusion of its being transformed. Is technology the lethal alternative to the illusion of the world, or is it merely

a gigantic avatar of the same basic illusion, its subtle final twist, the last hypostasis?

Perhaps, through technology, the world is toying with us, the object is seducing us by giving us the illusion of power over it. A dizzying hypothesis: rationality, culminating in technical virtuality, might be the last of the ruses of unreason, of that will to illusion of which, as Nietzsche says, the will to truth is merely a derivative and an avatar.

On the horizon of simulation, not only has the world disappeared but the very question of its existence can no longer be posed. But this is perhaps a ruse of the world itself. The iconolaters of Byzantium were subtle folk, who claimed to represent God to his greater glory but who, simulating God in images, thereby dissimulated the problem of his existence. Behind each of these images, in fact, God had disappeared. He was not dead; he had disappeared. That is to say, the problem no longer even arose. It was resolved by simulation. This is what we do with the problem of the truth or reality of this world: we have resolved it by technical simulation, and by creating a profusion of images in which there is nothing to see.

But is it not the strategy of God himself to use images in order to disappear, himself obeying the urge to leave no trace?

So the prophecy has been fulfilled: we live in a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and, at the same time, to mask that disappearance. Art today does the same. The media today do the same. That is why they are doomed to the same fate.

Because nothing wants exactly to be looked at any longer, but merely to be visually absorbed and circulate without leaving a trace – thus outlining, as it were, the simplified aesthetic form of impossible exchange – it is difficult today to recover a grasp on appearances. With the result that the discourse which would account for them would be a discourse in which there was nothing

to say – the equivalent of a world where there is nothing to see. The equivalent of a pure object, of an object which is not an object. The harmonious equivalence of nothing to nothing, of Evil to Evil. But the object which is not an object continues to obsess you by its empty, immaterial presence. The whole problem is: on the outer fringes of the nothing, to materialize that nothing; on the outer fringes of the void, to trace out the mark of the void; on the outer fringes of indifference, to play by the mysterious rules of indifference.

There is no point identifying the world. Things have to be grasped in their sleep, or in any other circumstance where they are absent from themselves. As in the *House of the Sleeping Beauties*,[6] where the old men spend the night beside the women and, though mad with desire, do not touch them, and slip away before they wake. They too are lying next to an object which is not an object, the total indifference of which heightens the erotic charge. But the most enigmatic thing is that it is not possible to know whether the women are really asleep or whether they are not maliciously taking pleasure, from the depths of their sleep, in their seductiveness and their own suspended desire.

Not to be sensitive to this degree of unreality and play, this degree of malice and ironic wit on the part of language and the world is, in effect, to be incapable of living. Intelligence is precisely this sensing of the universal illusion, even in amorous passion – though without the natural course of that passion being impaired. There is something stronger than passion: illusion. There is something stronger than sex or happiness: the passion for illusion.

There is no point identifying the world. We cannot even identify our own faces, since mirrors impair their symmetry. To see our own face as it is would be madness, since we would no longer have any mystery for ourselves and would, therefore, be annihilated by transparency. Might it not be said that man has evolved into a form such that his face remains invisible to him and he

becomes definitively unidentifiable, not only in the mystery of his face, but in any of his desires? But it is the same with any object which reaches us only in a definitively alter-ed state, even when it does so on the screen of science, in the mirrors of information or on the screens of our brains. Thus, all things offer themselves up without a hope of being anything other than illusions of themselves. And it is right that this should be so.

Fortunately, the objects which appear to us have always-already disappeared. Fortunately, nothing appears to us in real time, any more than do the stars in the night sky. If the speed of light were infinite, all the stars would be there simultaneously and the celestial vault would be an unbearable incandescence. Fortunately, nothing takes place in real time. Otherwise, we would be subjected, where information is concerned, to the light of all events, and the present would be an unbearable incandescence. Fortunately, we live on the basis of a vital illusion, on the basis of an absence, an unreality, a non-immediacy of things. Fortunately, nothing is instantaneous, simultaneous or contemporary. Fortunately, nothing is present or identical to itself. Fortunately, reality does not take place. Fortunately, the crime is never perfect.

The Spectre of the Will

The radical illusion is that of the original crime, by which the world is alter-ed from the beginning, and is never identical to itself, never real. The world exists only through this definitive illusion which is that of the play of appearances – the very site of the unceasing disappearance of all meaning and all finality. And this is not merely metaphysical: in the physical order, too, from its origin – whatever that may be – the world has been forever appearing and disappearing.

An alter-ation which tends to diminish with increasing information and which will, in the end, be eliminated by absolute information: the world's equivalence to the world – the final illusion, that of a world which is perfect, fully realized, fully effectuated, a world which is consummated and has attained the height of existence and reality, and also the furthermost extent of its possibilities. It is God (this we cannot hide) who stands at the end of this process of increasing information and complexification, of verification of the world in real time. It is God who presides over this dissolution of the world as illusion and its resurrection as simulacrum and virtual reality, at the end of a process of extenuation of all its possibilities by the real. It is God who presides over the unconditional realization of the world and its final illusion. God is never at the origin, but always at the end. And so we can say that that end is necessarily an unhappy one, and it is as well to leave it hanging.[7]

The fact that the world is illusion follows from its radical imperfection. If everything had been perfect, the world would quite simply not exist and if, by some misfortune, it were to become so again, it would quite simply not exist any more. This is the essence of crime: if it is perfect, it leaves no clue, no trace. So what guarantees the world's existence for us is its accidental, criminal, imperfect character. And it follows from this that it can be given to us only as illusion.

All that is projected beyond this illusion, beyond this accidental manifestness of the world, which forever distances it from its meaning and origin, is merely a justificatory phantasy. The projecting back of a phantom causality and intelligibility, of an exceptional order which merely confirms the rule of accidental disorder and is, doubtless, merely one episode in that disorder.

We oscillate between an illusion and a truth which are each equally unbearable. But perhaps truth is even more unbearable, and we ultimately desire the illusion of the world, even if we take up all the arms of truth, science and metaphysics against it. Our latent truth is that of nihilism, but, as Nietzsche writes, 'truth cannot be regarded as the highest power. The will to semblance, to illusion, to deception, to becoming, to change (to objective deception) is to be regarded here as deeper, more original, more metaphysical than the will to truth, to reality, to being – the latter is itself merely a form of the will to illusion.'

['*Aber die Wahrheit gilt nicht als oberste Macht. Der Wille zum Schein, zur Illusion, zur Täuschung, zum Werden, zum Wechseln (zur objektiven Täuschung) gilt hier als tiefer, ursprünglicher, metaphysischer als der Wille zur Wahrheit, zur Wirklichkeit, zum Sein – letzterer ist selbst bloss eine Form des Willens zur Illusion.*']

How can we believe in the truth of what has neither principle nor end? All we can add to it is this little final illusion, together with the causal illusion of a non-accidental effect – a reparative illusion when set against the devastating illusion of the world. But this is merely an artificial supplement. Our consciousness,

by which we aspire to outdo the world, is merely a secondary excess, the phantom extremity of a world for which this simulation of consciousness is entirely superfluous. We shall never achieve anything equivalent, by act of will, to the accidental irruption of the world.

We cannot project more order or disorder into the world than there is. We cannot transform it more than it transforms itself. This is the weakness of our historical radicality. All the philosophies of change, the revolutionary, nihilistic, futurist utopias, all this poetics of subversion and transgression so characteristic of modernity, will appear naive when compared with the instability and natural reversibility of the world. Not only transgression, but even destruction is beyond our reach. We shall never, by an act of destruction, achieve the equivalent of the world's accidental destruction.

What we can add by artificial destruction already falls within the scope of the world's own ceaseless revolution, the ironic trajectory of particles and the chaotic turbulence of natural systems. And the final accident is no more within our power than the initial accident. Here, once again, we must not delude ourselves. We shall add nothing to the nothingness of the world, since we are part of it. But we shall add nothing to its meaning either, since it does not have any.

Excess is the world's excess, not ours. It is the world that is excessive, the world that is sovereign.

This protects us from the illusion of the will, which is also that of faith and desire. The metaphysical illusion of having some effect and frustrating the continuation of the nothing.

Our will is like a phantom pregnancy or an artificially innervated prosthesis. Or the 'virtual' suffering of the phantom limb that follows the amputation of the real one (all virtual reality is the product, like this, of a surgical operation on the real world). The will is of this same order. Its extrapolation into the affairs of the world is merely the extrapolation of desire, or of the suffering of the phantom limb. Dreams, too, give us the illusion that we

are in control of them, or can delay their coming to their term. They even give us the illusion of being aware of dreaming, which is part of their mechanism. This is the clinamen of the will interfering with the chromosomes of the dream.

As in dreams, the will must espouse this accidental declension of the world – must inflect, not reflect (on), itself. Must be merely itself an unexpected continuation which perpetuates the event of the world, and perhaps hastens it on its course. Must be in no way different from desire.

In Nabokov, in the gracious universe of *Ada*, as in the tragic universe, there are never any decisions. Everything is made up of – happy or unhappy – accidents. There is neither misdeed nor remorse. Everything is immoral and, as a result, so sensual. Not just bodies, but the will itself becomes sensual and accidental. The actors do not believe in their own existence, and do not take responsibility for it. They are happy just to obey the successive promptings of their will and their desire, to respect the enigmatic incidence of these things, while observing certain rules of the game towards existence, the first of which is not to consent to it.

Existence is something we must not consent to. It has been given to us as a consolation prize, and we must not believe in it. The will is something we must not consent to. It has been given to us as the illusion of an autonomous subject. Now, if there is anything worse than being subject to the law of others, it is surely being subject to one's own law. The real is something we must not consent to. It has been given to us as simulacrum, and the worst thing is to believe in it for want of anything else. The only thing we should consent to is the rule. But in that case, we are speaking not of the rule of the subject, but the rule of the way of the world [*jeu du monde*].

The real, for its part, is merely the natural child of disillusion. Which is itself a secondary illusion. Faith in reality is, of all the imaginary forms, the basest and most trivial.

Yet determination is extending its grasp, and the field of what

is now ours to decide is expanding daily. We are no longer free not to will. We have to will even where we have no wish to.

And why stop there? We shouldn't just consult the parents on the choice of sex, but the embryos themselves. Then, at least, the absurdity of the situation would be plain for all to see. The fact is that we are, most often, in a situation of having to decide on matters we know nothing of and have no wish to know anything of. The power of others to have control of one's life is an abuse. But each person's right and duty to have control of him- or herself is even more dangerous. This is how voluntary servitude has transformed itself into its opposite – being commanded to desire, commanded to exercise freedom and choice – which is the consummate form of that servitude. The will is entrapped by the limitless freedom it is accorded, and consents to this out of an illusion of self-determination.

Now, the same order reigns over wills as reigns in biology. The same random and automatic regulation applies to wills in our operational universe as applies in the distribution of sexes at birth or in the freely expressed opinions of millions of citizens, which produces the same statistical outcome as would be achieved by consulting monkeys.

Where, then, does this wish to substitute the human will for the random course of things come from? There remains, of course, the glory of artifice and of frustrating the natural order. We want to will – that is the secret – just as we want to believe and want to be able [*pouvoir*], because the idea of a world without will, belief and power [*pouvoir*] is unbearable to us. But most of the time we can will only what has already come to fruition. So the Student of Prague arrives on the duelling ground and his opponent is already dead – his double has passed that way.[8] Precession of the double, of the involuntary operator of desire. Precession of the event, of the effect over the cause – metalepsis of the will.

The anteriority of the will is always stressed, as is the cause's

preceding of the effect. But most often, the will merges with the event as its retrospective *mise en scène*, in the same way as a dream sequence gives expression to the physical sensation of the sleeping body. In any case, whatever one wills, subsequent events will still be of the order of the fateful – that is, of what happens to you, for good or ill, inadvertently – though not without some secret connection between them.

Why, then, should we will? Why should we desire? We cannot do otherwise. We have to contribute by our desires or our wills to the coming to term of a world in which they have no part. This is our involuntary contribution to our own destinies. According to Nietzsche, this drive is so great in man that for fear of desiring nothing, he will prefer the desire for the nothing, thus making himself, by the deployment of a will without object, the surest agent of that continuity of the nothing which is the continuation of the original crime.

'Why is there nothing rather than something?' There is, ultimately, no answer to this, since the nothing originates in myth, in the original crime, whereas the something originates in what, by convention, we call reality. Now, the real is never sure. The question then becomes, not 'Where does illusion come from?', but 'Where does the real come from?' How is it that there even is a reality effect? That is the true enigma. If the world was real, how is it that it did not become rational long ago? If it is merely illusion, how can a discourse of reality and the rational even arise? But that is the question. Is there anything but a *discourse* of the real and the rational? Perhaps there never has been any kind of progress towards more science, consciousness and objectivity, and all this has merely been talk on the part of intellectuals and ideologues who, for three centuries, have derived considerable advantage from it.

The same problem arises in the physical sciences. Bruno Jarrosson writes:

> The first reaction of the fathers of quantum physics at the aberrations coming out of their equations (collapse of the universe of reference: time, space, the principle of identity and of the excluded middle, inseparability, non-locality of particles) was to regard the microscopic world as radically strange and mysterious. Such an interpretation is not, however, the most logical. For the microscopic world is to be accepted as it is. If we cannot derive a conception of the macroscopic world from it, then the mystery lies in the macroscopic world. From that point, we have to think that the strangest thing is not the strangeness of the microscopic world, but the non-strangeness of the macroscopic. Why are the concepts of identity, excluded middle, time and space operative in the macroscopic world? That is what we have to explain. (*Du micro au macro – le mystère des évidences*)

Since the universe of reference has become unintelligible, reason, being part of that universe, cannot but pose the question of its own existence: how can measurable time exist, how can elements and bodies exist separately? Given the uncertainty principle, how can there be an object and a subject of science?

Similarly, the real, having become unintelligible, poses an insoluble question for reason, which is part of it: How is it that the concepts of reality, objectivity, truth, causality and identity can function? Why does something seem to exist rather than nothing?

But in fact there is nothing.

Why is there will rather than no will?

But there is no will. There is no real. There isn't something. There is nothing. Or, in other words, the perpetual illusion of an ungraspable object and the subject who believes he grasps it. The illusion of a Thing and a rational causality which is, admittedly, comforting to our intellects, but unimaginable in any other universe, including that of particle physics. As Updike says, God is solely responsible for what we can see and hear, but in no way for anything whatever at the microscopic level.

So no purpose is served by attempting to reconcile the order of the will with that of the world to the philosophical advantage of the latter. There is the continuity of the world, as it has meaning for us, and the continuity of the world as, in secret, it is nothing and means nothing. This latter does not, strictly speaking, exist. It cannot be verified, but can only betray itself, only 'show through' [*transparaître*] like evil, squint out through appearances. There is no dialectic between the two orders. Each is alien to the other.

The Radical Illusion

So the world, then, is a radical illusion. That is, at least, one hypothesis. At all events, it is an unbearable one. And to keep it at bay, we have to realize the world, give it force of reality, make it exist and signify at all costs, take from it its secret, arbitrary, accidental character, rid it of appearances and extract its meaning, divert it from all predestination and restore it to its end and its maximum efficacy, wrest it from its form to deliver it up to its formula. This gigantic enterprise of disillusionment – of, literally, putting the illusion of the world to death, to leave an absolutely real world in its stead – is what is properly meant by simulation.

It is not, then, the real which is the opposite of simulation – the real is merely a particular case of that simulation – but illusion. And there is no crisis of reality. Far from it. There will always be more reality, because it is produced and reproduced by simulation, and is itself merely a model of simulation. The proliferation of reality, its spreading like an animal species whose natural predators have been eliminated, is our true catastrophe. This is the inevitable fate of an objective world.

We have to restore the potency and the radical meaning of illusion, which is most often reduced to the level of a chimaera diverting us from what is true: what things deck themselves out in to hide what they are. When, in fact, the illusion of the world is the way things have of presenting themselves for what they are when they are not actually there at all. In appearance, things are what they give themselves out to be. They appear and disappear without letting

anything at all show through. They unfurl without concern for their being, or even for their existence. They signal to us, but are not susceptible of decipherment. On the other hand, in simulation, in this giant *dispositif* of meaning, calculation and efficiency that encompasses all our technical devices, including current virtual reality, the illusion of the sign is lost, and only its operation remains. The happy non-distinction between true and false, between real and unreal, gives way to the simulacrum, which consecrates the unhappy non-distinction between true and false, between the real and its signs, the unhappy, necessarily unhappy, destiny of meaning in our culture.

We continue to manufacture meaning, even though we know there is none. It remains to be seen, in fact, whether the illusion of meaning is a vital illusion or one that is destructive of the world and the subject itself. However this may be, faced with this strategy on the part of the subject, the world develops a much more subtle and paradoxical one, which is to give itself out for what it is, when it is actually not there. Over against the subject, that indomitable producer of meaning, stands the world, that inexhaustible producer of illusion, including, no doubt – with the involuntary complicity of the subject – the illusion of meaning.

There will be no end to this frenzied race around the Möbius strip where the surface of meaning perpetually feeds into the surface of illusion, unless the illusion of meaning were to win out once and for all, which would put an end to the world.

The whole of our history bears witness to this machinery of reason, which is itself now coming apart. Our culture of meaning is collapsing beneath the excess of meaning, the culture of reality collapsing beneath the excess of reality, the information culture collapsing beneath the excess of information – the sign and reality sharing a single shroud.

They are trying to persuade us that technology will inevitably produce good, to give a role to the artificial environment as a

second nature, to select only automatic reflexes in line with a kind of mental genetic code. They are trying to wipe out all the supernatural reflexes of thought, of that thought which reacts instinctively to the illusion of the world, turns appearances back on reality, uses the illusion of the world against the world itself: the Manichaean understanding of evil, the understanding of the world as machination. It is said that the state of nature is unthinkable, because in that state thought does not exist. But this is exactly what we are moving towards: a state of pure operational intelligence, and thus of radical disillusioning of thought.

This dream of extirpating all the magic from thought, of eliminating every principle of evil, is as absurd as the dream of eliminating all concupiscence, even in dreams.

If the heresy of appearances is our original crime, then every rational impulse to eliminate it is the symptom of a fantastic error on the part of the will, the symptom of an aberration of desire.

At all events, illusion is indestructible. The world as it is – which is not at all the 'real' world – perpetually eludes the investigation of meaning, thus causing the present catastrophe of the apparatus of production of the 'real' world, so true is it that illusion cannot be combated with truth – that is merely to redouble the illusion – but only by a higher illusion.

The only response to the phantasmagoria of worlds-beyond, the latest and most subtle of which is the artificial synthesis of this world, is the higher illusion of our world.

Every revolution brings about a general involution in a kind of downward spiral. This negative spiral can be countered only by striking an opposite blow, by upping the stakes – outdoing insignificance with the nothing, the visible with appearance, the false with illusion, evil with greater evil.

The radical illusion of the world cannot be dispelled. The illusion of dispelling it is the secondary illusion of the disavowal and transformation of the world. But perhaps, in going to its extreme,

that movement gets caught up in its own game and ends up wiping out its own traces, leaving the field free for misappropriation, imperfection, the original crime? Perhaps there is a ruse of the world, just as there is a ruse of history, and rationality and perfection in general might merely be implementing its irrational decree? Sciences and technologies would then merely be an immense, ironic diversion on the horizon of its disappearance.

What within truth is merely truth falls foul of illusion. What within truth exceeds truth is of the order of a higher illusion. Only what exceeds reality can go beyond the illusion of reality.

Trompe-l'œil Genesis

Bertrand Russell's paradox in *The Analysis of Mind*, in which the world is supposed to have been created only a few minutes ago but peopled with a humanity which remembers an illusory past, is well-known.

We might, in this connection, revive the hypothesis of P.H. Gosse, the nineteenth-century English naturalist, in his book *Omphalos* (which Stephen J. Gould discusses in *The Flamingo's Smile*), that all the geological and fossil traces of the origin and evolution of species, including the human species, are a simulation contemporaneous with the creation of the world by God five thousand years ago, as in the biblical account.

Everything which appears to reach back beyond that point, right down into the depths of time, has, he alleges, merely been got up by God in his infinite kindness to bestow an origin and a history upon our world, and is intended to create the illusion of elapsed time. God, argues Gosse, gave men a past in order to soften the unbearable confrontation with the world as it is, the product of an act of force on the part of a higher will. We can no longer even imagine the brutality of the creative act, but God has perhaps taken this into account and, in compensation, provided us with a simulacrum of history, to make man's existence bearable to him. Obviously, we can ask: did God really take pity on the human race, or is this merely a gratuitous joke, to mock man once again by holding out before him the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of his own origins, whereas this is in fact merely a mirage?

Gosse's suggestion is, at all events, extraordinary: to safeguard biblical revelation, he makes God an evil genius of simulation. Is there not a subtle impiety in this? God might have contented himself with creating the world, without inventing this *trompe-l'œil* anamorphosis. So that could only have been the product of his malicious pleasure. This immediately makes him quite a likeable character, even if it does so to future archaeologists' cost, doomed as they will be to live in permanent uncertainty. For Gosse argues: 'as thoughts in God's mind, solidified in stone by creation *ab nihilo*, strata and fossils are just as true as if they recorded the products of conventional time'.[9] If the unreal past is no less true than our objective reality, then this latter is no more true than that unreal past. And we can say, with the Ecclesiast, 'The simulacrum is not what conceals the truth, it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.'[10]

Fortunately, all this is false, dictated by a blind and illogical faith. Yet if we take away the prejudice of faith, and retain only the simulation hypothesis, Gosse's idea opens on to some surprising horizons and one quite serious possibility. It even assumes a prophetic air. For his hypothesis is indeed coming true: the whole of our past is indeed sliding into a fossilized simulacrum, but it is man who has inherited the evil genius of artifice which was God's. Today the virtual reconstruction of the genesis of the species is the work of human beings themselves, and it is becoming the virtual reality of our past and our future.

Not only are our fossils itemized, inventoried, interpreted and reinterpreted according to changing scientific hypotheses and fashions, but the whole thing has taken on the air of cinematic work (editing, framing, lighting, sequences, dissolves) on geological and archaeological material whose objective reality is becoming intangible. It is the same with these relics as it is with those particles in subatomic physics which have no other existence than the traces they leave on our screens.

The accumulation of traces and contradictory hypotheses leaves

the same aftertaste of uncertainty, of relative credibility. The objectivity of these relics is beyond doubt. The problem is their status as reality and, therefore, as evidence, their status as objects suddenly rendered incredible by the very intensity of their itemization and the methods of analysis applied to them. These traces pass into hyperreality, as does any 'material' pursued down to the tiniest detail, all 'scientific' exploration ending up exterminating its real object.

Clearly, it is no longer God overseeing all this, as in Gosse. It is our own apparatus of knowledge, by which we are currently obliterating the traces of our existence, spiriting away the evidence for our sensible world. We have supplanted the God of *Omphalos* in the invention of a definitively fictitious past. Yet there is a difference in the ways of simulation. For though the illusionist God of Gosse had completely invented the traces of the past of the species, his creation set in train a real world and a history. Once set in place in that creation, things drift on towards their final destinations unaffected by their illusory pasts. This special effect of the divine imagination or the Creator's irony has no impact on their present state. We, on the other hand, are no longer part of reality and simulation. For us, the question of Adam's navel (which had no reason to exist since he was not born of woman, but which had to be represented in pictures so that the divine arbitrariness of the original act might be erased) no longer even arises: it is the whole of the human race which will have to be rigged out with a *trompe-l'œil* navel, in so far as there is no longer any trace, with us, of any umbilical cord which might connect us to the real world. We are born of woman still, and shall be for some time to come, but with the coming of *in vitro* fertilization we shall shortly return to the 'anomphalous' condition of Adam: future 'humans' will have no navels.

Metaphorically, we are already in the 'umbilical limbo'. Not only have the traces of our past become virtual, but our present itself is given over to simulation. It is as though Gosse's God,

far more cunning and devilish than Gosse himself imagined him to be, had, as part of his inscrutable, humorous design, extended his divine simulation to the furthermost reaches of the future. Or, alternatively, this simulation of the past might not, after all, be a good practical joke, but the remorseless consequence of the generalized simulation of our present life, the logical extension of our Virtual Reality.

Beneath all this theological allegory there lie some very burning problems. It is of some consequence whether this simulation is the work of a beneficent God or the trap set by a malicious one. It is of some consequence whether the virtual illusion upon which we are entering is a beneficent illusion or whether, by moving further in this direction, we are merely getting more and more caught up in the strategem, as a result of what is, on this occasion, a deliberate choice on the part of the human race, fascinated by the idea of inventing an artificial destiny for itself. Or is it that humanity simply dreams of exacting revenge by putting the divine Creation out of joint, debasing it by systematic simulation and turning the universe into a total artefact out of scorn for the Last Judgement?

By conjuring away the process of evolution, God had protected man from an inescapable end. For, paradoxically, the only insurance against death is to have been created *ex nihilo*, which keeps open the possibility of an equally miraculous resurrection, whereas if you are the product of an evolution, the only thing you can do is disappear when your time is up. The intervention of a superior power in Genesis guarantees a future immortality, whereas the genealogy of the species condemns it, in time, to disappear. And our whole problem, in our efforts to give birth to a real world, is fundamentally the same as God's: not to drive the human race to despair by the recognition of its real existence and finitude.

For Gosse, matters are simple: reality exists on God's authority. But what can we do if that same God is capable of simultaneously

creating the true and the false? (This is not even a diabolical manipulation, since the germ of the illusion came from God himself.) In this case, what is there to guarantee that our world is not as false as the simulacrum of an earlier world? All of reality – present, past and future – suddenly comes into doubt. If God is capable of conjuring up a perfect illusion of the pre-Genesis era, then our current reality is eternally unverifiable. It is not, therefore, a scientific hypothesis.

The Automatic Writing of the World

The perfect crime is that of an unconditional realization of the world by the actualization of all data, the transformation of all our acts and all events into pure information: in short, the final solution, the resolution of the world ahead of time by the cloning of reality and the extermination of the real by its double.

This is precisely the theme of Arthur C. Clarke's short story 'The Nine Billion Names of God'.[11] A community of Tibetan monks have for centuries devoted themselves to transcribing these nine billion names of God, and once they have accomplished this the purpose of the world will be achieved, and it will come to an end. The task is a tiresome one and the weary monks call in technicians from IBM, whose computers do the job in a few months. In a sense, the history of the world is completed in real time by the workings of virtual technology. Unfortunately, this also means the disappearance of the world in real time. For suddenly, the promise of the end is fulfilled and, as they walk back down into the valley, the technicians, who did not really believe in the prophecy, are aghast to see the stars going out one by one.

This is perhaps the fate that awaits us at the end-point of this technical transfiguring of the world: its accelerated end, its immediate resolution – the final success of modern millenarianism, though with no hope of salvation, apocalypse or revelation. Merely hastening the final term, accelerating the movement towards

disappearance pure and simple. And so, quite without knowing it, the human race might, like the IBM technicians, be assigned to this noble task: triggering the code for the world's automatic disappearance by exhausting all its possibilities.

This is the very essence of the Virtual.

Live your life in real time – live and suffer directly on-screen. Think in real time – your thought is immediately encoded by the computer. Make your revolution in real time – not in the street, but in the recording studio. Live out your amorous passions in real time – the whole thing on video from start to finish. Penetrate your body in real time – endovideoscopy: your own bloodstream, your own viscera as if you were inside them.

Nothing escapes this. There is always a hidden camera somewhere. You can be filmed without knowing it. You can be called to act it all out again for any of the TV channels. You think you exist in the original-language version, without realizing that this is now merely a special case of dubbing, an exceptional version for the 'happy few'. Any of your acts can be instantly broadcast on any station. There was a time when we would have considered this a form of police surveillance. Today, we regard it as advertising.

In any case, the virtual camera is in our heads. No need of a medium to reflect our problems in real time: every existence is telepresent to itself. The TV and the media long since left their media space to invest 'real' life from the inside, precisely as a virus does with a normal cell. No need of the headset and the data suit: it is our will that ends up moving about the world as though inside a computer-generated image. We have all swallowed our receivers, and this produces intense interference on account of the excessive proximity of life and its double, and the collapsing of time and distance. Whether in this telepresence, in the live TV psychodrama or in the immediacy of information on all screens, what we have here is the same short-circuiting of real life.

* * *

Virtuality is different from the spectacle, which still left room for a critical consciousness and demystification. The abstraction of the 'spectacle' was never irrevocable, even for the Situationists. Whereas unconditional realization is irrevocable, since we are no longer either alienated or dispossessed: we are in possession of all the information. We are no longer spectators, but actors in the performance, and actors increasingly integrated into the course of that performance. Whereas we could face up to the unreality of the world as spectacle, we are defenceless before the extreme reality of this world, before this virtual perfection. We are, in fact, beyond all disalienation. This is the new form of terror, by comparison with which the horrors of alienation were very small beer.

In what was the golden age of joyful disillusionment, we carried out the critique of all illusions – the metaphysical, the religious and the ideological. Only one remains: the illusion of criticism itself. The objects we subjected to the full glare of criticism – sex, dreams, work, history, power – have taken their revenge by disappearing, producing, in return, the consoling illusion of truth. Having no more victims to devour, the critical illusion has devoured itself. Even more than the industrial machines, it is the machinery of thought itself that is laid off. At the extreme end of its journey, critical thought has wound back on itself. Where once it was future-orientated, it is now umbilical. In surviving its own self, it in fact helps its object to survive. Just as religion has become definitively realized in other – irreligious, secular, political and cultural – forms, where it is impossible to pin it down as religion (including the current revival, where it assumes the mask of religion), so the critique of virtual technologies masks the fact that their concept is seeping everywhere into real life in homoeopathic doses. In denouncing the ghostliness of those technologies – and of the media – one implies that there is somewhere an original form of lived existence. Whereas, if the rate of reality is falling every day, this is because the medium itself has passed into life, has become the ordinary ritual of transparency. All this

digital, numeric, electronic equipment is merely incidental to the deep-seated virtualization of human beings. And if this so grips the collective imagination, that is because we are already – not in some other world, but in this life itself – in a state of socio-, photo- and videosynthesis. The virtual and the media are our chlorophyllous function. And if we are able today to produce a clone of a particular famous actor which will be made to act in his place, this is because long ago, without knowing it, he became his own replica or his own clone, before he actually was cloned.

This whole virtual technology media circus, this perpetual 'reality show,'[12] has an ancestor: the ready-made. Those who are plucked from their real lives to come and act out the psychodrama of their AIDS or their marital problems on TV have an ancestor in Duchamp's bottle-rack which that artist similarly plucked from the real world to confer on it elsewhere – in a field we still agree to call art – an undefinable hyperreality. Paradoxical acting-out, instantaneous short-circuiting. The bottle-rack, exscribed from its context, purpose and function, became more real than reality (hyperreal) and more art than art (transaesthetics of banality, of insignificance, of nullity, against which the pure and indifferent form of art is verified today).

Any old object, individual or situation is today a virtual ready-made in so far as one can say of anyone or anything what Duchamp was, at bottom, saying of the bottle-rack: it exists, I've met it. Everyone is invited, in this same way, to present themselves as they are and play out their lives 'live' on-screen, just as the ready-made played out its role exactly as it was, 'live' on the gallery screen. And the two are merged in the initiative launched by new museums where the aim is not now to bring people to stand *in front of* the pictures – which can be done successfully, but isn't interactive enough and smacks too much of the 'spectacle' – but to stand *in* the pictures – in the virtual reality of *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, for example – which they can in this way enjoy in real time, possibly even interacting with the work and the figures in it.

There is the same problem with the TV 'reality shows': the viewer has to be brought not in front of the screen (he has always been there, and that is indeed his alibi and refuge) but into the screen, taken to the other side of the information set-up. He has to be made to carry out the same conversion as Duchamp did with his bottle-rack when he transferred it, just as it was, to the other side of art, creating, as he did so, a definitive ambiguity between art and reality.

Art today is simply this paradoxical confusion of the two, and the aesthetic intoxication which ensues. Similarly, information is simply the paradoxical confusion of the event and the medium, and the political uncertainty which ensues. So, we have all become ready-mades. Hypostatized like the bottle-rack, our sterile identities taxidermized, we have become living museum pieces, like those entire populations which are transfigured *in situ* by aesthetic or cultural decree, cloned in our own image by High Definition and condemned, by that exact resemblance, to media stupefaction, just as the ready-made is condemned to aesthetic stupefaction. And just as Duchamp's acting-out opens on to the (generalized) zero degree of aesthetics, where any old item of rubbish can be taken as a work of art (which also means that any old work of art can be taken for rubbish), so this media acting-out opens on to a generalized virtuality which puts an end to the real by its promotion of every single instant.

The key concept of this Virtuality is High Definition. That of the image, but also of time (Real Time), of music (High Fidelity), of sex (pornography), of thought (Artificial Intelligence), of language (digital languages), of the body (the genetic code and the genome). Everywhere, High Definition marks the transition – beyond any natural determination – to an operational formula – and, precisely, a 'definitive' one, the transition to a world where referential substance is becoming increasingly rare. The highest definition of the medium corresponds to the lowest definition of the message – the highest definition of the news item corresponds to the lowest definition of the event, the highest definition of

sex (porn) corresponds to the lowest definition of desire, the highest definition of language (in digital coding) corresponds to the lowest definition of meaning, the highest definition of the other (in immediate interaction) corresponds to the lowest definition of otherness and exchange, etc.

The high-definition image. This has nothing to do with representation, and even less to do with aesthetic illusion. The whole generic illusion of the image is cancelled out by technical perfection. As hologram or virtual reality or three-dimensional picture, the image is merely the emanation of the digital code which generates it. It is merely the mania for making an image no longer an image or, in other words, it is precisely what removes a dimension from the real world.

Already, in moving from the silents to the talkies, then to colour and 3-D and the current range of special effects, the cinematographic illusion faded as the technical prowess increased. No empty space any more, no ellipsis, no silence. The more we move towards that perfect definition, that useless perfection, the more the power of the illusion is lost. To appreciate the truth of this, one only has to think of the Peking Opera and how, with the mere movement of their bodies, the old man and the girl brought to life on the stage the sheer size of the river and how, in the duel scene, the two bodies, skimming each other with their weapons yet not touching, made the darkness in which the duel took place tangible. That was total illusion – an ecstasy more physical and material than aesthetic or theatrical, precisely because all realist presence of the night or the river had been excised. Today, they would pipe tons of water into the studio, and the duel would be shot in darkness with infra-red cameras.

Real Time: instantaneous proximity of the event and its double in information. Proximity of human beings and their remote action: settle all your business at the other end of the world, via an ectoplasmic intermediary. Like every detail of the hologram, every instant of real time is microscopically encoded. Every little

bit of time packs in the total information relating to the event, as though it were being mastered in miniature from all sides at once. Now, there is something obscene about the instant replication of an event, act or speech and their immediate transcription, for some degree of delay, pause or suspense is essential to thought and speech. The immediate totting up, itemizing and storing of all these exchanges, precisely as occurs with writing on word-processors, bespeaks an interactive compulsion which respects neither the timing nor the rhythm (not to mention the pleasure) of exchange, and combines artificial insemination and premature ejaculation in the same operation.

There is a profound incompatibility between real time and the symbolic rule of exchange. What governs the sphere of communication (the interface, immediacy, the abolition of time and distance) has no meaning in the sphere of exchange, where the rule is that what is given should never be returned immediately. It has to be returned, but never right away. That is a serious, mortal insult. There must never be immediate interaction. It is, precisely, time which separates the two symbolic moments and holds their resolution in abeyance. Time with no delay, 'live' time, is inexpiable. The whole field of communications is, thus, of the order of the inexpiable, since everything in that field is interactive, is given and returned without delay, without that suspense, minute as it may be, which constitutes the temporal rhythm of exchange.

Artificial Intelligence. Thought at last realized, fully materialized by all the virtualities of analysis, synthesis and calculation, just as real time is defined by the ceaseless interaction of all moments and all participants. A high-definition operation: the information which results is truer than truth – it is true in real time. That is why it is fundamentally uncertain. The fact that Artificial Intelligence veers off into over-high definition, into a crazy sophistication of data and operations, merely confirms that this is indeed the achieved utopia of thought.

And now computers controlled by thought are on the way.

There is a danger that this extreme form will produce some strange results. At what threshold of consciousness or formalization will the machine intervene? There is a danger that, by reflex anticipation, it will log into subconscious – if not, indeed, unconscious – thoughts, into the most primitive phantasies. Like the double of the Student of Prague, who was always there before him, transforming his obscurest whims into acts. In this way our 'thoughts' will be actualized even before they occur, exactly like the event in the information system. If that is what we must necessarily come to, then the consequence would be that the whole system of thought would soon be aligned to the system of the machine. Thought would end up thinking only what the machine can take in and process, or would think only when the machine requests it. This is already how things stand with computers and information technology. In the generalized interface, thought itself will become virtual reality, the equivalent of computer-generated images or the automatic writing of word-processors.

Artificial Intelligence? There is not a shadow of artifice in it, not the shadow of an idea of illusion, seduction or the play of the world, which is much more subtle, perverse and arbitrary. Now, thought is neither a mechanics of higher functions nor a range of operational reflexes. It is a rhetoric of forms, of shifting illusion and appearances – an anamorphosis of the world, not an analysis. The cerebral, computing machine is not the master of appearances; it is the master only of calculation, and its task, like that of all cybernetic and virtual machines, is to destroy this essential illusion by counterfeiting the world in real time.

Just as the illusion of the image disappears into its virtual reality, the illusion of the body into its genetic formulation and the illusion of the world into its artificial technical form, so also do we see disappear, in Artificial Intelligence, the (super)natural understanding of the world as play, as delusion, as machination, as crime – and not as logical mechanism, or as reflex cybernetic machine which would have its mirror and model in the human brain.

End of the raw illusion of thought, of the scene, of passion, end of the illusion of the world and its vision (and not its representation), end of the illusion of the Other, of Good and Evil (particularly of Evil), of true and false, end of the raw illusion of death, or that of existing at any cost: all these things vanish into telereality, into real time, into the sophisticated technologies which are our initiation into models, into the virtual, into the opposite of illusion – total disillusion.

In the realm of shadows, no one any longer has a shadow, and there is no danger of treading on it and ripping it, as Peter Schlemihl did.[13] What can happen, on the other hand, is for bodies no longer to project their shadows, but shadows to project their bodies, which might then be said to be mere shadows of shadows. This is already the case with our virtual reality, which is merely the putting back into circulation, *sub specie corporis, sub specie realitatis*, of the abstraction and the digital data of life. As in that other fable where the Devil put the shadow of the student who had sold it to him back into circulation in the living form of the Double, for which the student was then merely the stand-in.

This virtual operation of the world is a paradoxical chimaera. The worldwide listing of all data is the same phantasy as that of the spelling of the names of God – a chimaera in which we bury ourselves as though inside a metal sarcophagus, in a state of weightlessness, dreaming of living out all possible situations by the grace of the Digital. Phantasy of synthesis of all the elements, by which we seek to force the gates of the real world.

With Virtual Reality and all its consequences, we have passed over into the extreme of technology, into technology as an extreme phenomenon. Beyond the end, there is no longer any reversibility; there are no longer any traces of the earlier world, nor is there even any nostalgia for it. This hypothesis is much graver than that of technological alienation or Heidegger's *Gestell*. It is the hypothesis of a project of irreversible disappearance in the purest

logic of the species. The hypothesis of an absolutely real world, where, unlike Michaux's artist, we would have succumbed to the temptation not to leave traces.

This is what is at stake in Virtuality. And there can be no doubting its absolute ambition. If it were brought to completion, that radical effectuation would be the equivalent of a perfect crime. Whereas the 'original' crime is never perfect and always leaves traces (we ourselves as living, mortal beings are the trace of that criminal imperfection), future extermination – that extermination which would be produced by an absolute determination of the world and its elements – would leave no trace. We would not even have the time to disappear. We would be disintegrated in Real Time and Virtual Reality long before the stars went out.

Fortunately, all this is literally impossible. Very High Definition, with its ambition of producing images, sounds, information, bodies in microvision, in stereoscopy, as you have never seen them before, as you will never see them, is unrealizable. As is the phantasy of Artificial Intelligence: the brain's becoming a world, the world's becoming a brain, so as to function without bodies, unfailing, autonomized, inhuman. Too intelligent, too super-efficient to be true.

There is, in fact, no room for both natural and artificial intelligence. There is no room for both the world and its double.

The Horizon of Disappearance

> When the horizon disappears, what then appears is the horizon of disappearance.
>
> Dietmar Kamper

Man is constantly expelling what he is, what he experiences, what he means to himself. Either through language, which has an exorcistic function, or through all the technical artefacts he has invented and over whose horizon he is currently disappearing in an irreversible process of transference and substitution. McLuhan saw modern technologies as 'extensions of man'. We should see them, rather, as 'expulsions of man'.

This kind of energy, which tends to get rid of something – beginning, no doubt, with itself – is best encapsulated in the term 'acting-out'. Ridding yourself of your phantasies by having them pass into reality – and yet, for all that, they do not actually become real: the 'acting-out' merely expresses the impossibility of the phantasy remaining a phantasy. Projecting ourselves into a fictive, random world for which there is no other motive than this violent abreaction to ourselves. Building ourselves a perfect virtual world so as to be able to opt out of the real one. Or else, in the case of history, ridding itself of its incoherences and contradictions in a single unpredictable event, in which the actors seem mere extras – as in the events in Eastern Europe, which have no meaning in themselves, being merely the liquidation of an impossible situation. The excess of positivity, and of operational

stimulation of current systems, plunges us everywhere into this kind of impossible situation where we are no longer in a position of action but of pure reaction, reflex operation and automatic response.

We are no longer alienated within a conflictual reality; we are expelled by a definitive, non-contradictory reality. Our desires expropriated from us by their very fulfilment. Absorbed and introjected and, at the same time, totally ejected. Lévi-Strauss used to distinguish between two types of culture: those which introject and absorb, which devour – anthropophagic cultures – and those which spew out, eject, expel – anthropo-emic cultures, modern cultures. But ours – our contemporary culture – seems to effect a brilliant synthesis of the two; of the most extreme integration – of functions, spaces and human beings – and the most radical ejection, quasi-biological rejection – the system expelling us, even as it integrates us, into countless technical prostheses, right down to the very latest and most admirable stage in the process: the prosthetics of thought in Artificial Intelligence.

The 'acting-out' of a whole society caught up in its phantasy of dissipation of itself in pure energy, in pure circulation, without any visible objective other than this specific feat, than this deliverance into the void, than this mobility at any cost, of which we, the living particles, the living bodies, are now merely the orbiting refuse.

We are, in this way, moving further and further from our centre of gravity (ours, the world's). And in this way we are becoming like the galactic systems which are moving apart from each other at velocities proportional to their mass. For it is only inside systems that the law of gravity prevails. Everywhere else, it is anti-gravity and negative attraction which rule. Where do we get our energy from – that energy mobilized in networks – if not from the demobilization of our own bodies, from the liquidation of the subject and of the material substance of the world?

One day, perhaps, all that substance will be transformed into

energy and all that energy into pure information. This will be, in a way, the definitive 'acting-out', the total achievement,[14] the final solution. Everything will be accomplished, realized and, at the same time, ejected into the void. Delivered from ourselves, we shall enter the spectral, problem-free universe. That is what is meant by the great model of Virtuality.

Perhaps it is to escape this terrifying objectivity of the world that we are currently derealizing it; perhaps it is to escape the ultimatum of a real world that we are currently rendering it virtual. For though it lends force to existence and happiness, the concept of reality even more surely lends force of reality to evil and misery. In a real world, death too becomes real, and secretes a commensurate horror. Whereas in a virtual world we dispense with death and birth, as we dispense with a responsibility so diffuse and overwhelming that it becomes impossible to bear. We are doubtless ready to pay this price so as no longer to have perpetually to perform the overwhelming task of distinguishing between true and false, good and evil, etc. The species is, perhaps, collectively ready to reject the moral and metaphysical anguish which ensues from this and has eventually built up into a neurosis, as well as to reject the privilege of critical consciousness, and accept instead a liquidation of differences, categories and values. Perhaps it is ready to abandon transcendence and metaphor for metonymic sequences. No more polarity, otherness, antagonism, but, instead, a superconductivity, a static electricity of communication. Perhaps by paying this price we shall pass death by, in the transparent shroud of a made-to-measure immortality.

The question whether the technical project of Virtuality is a step in humanity's upward progression or a moment in its vertiginous disappearance still remains (the two are not incompatible). Might we not have invented an extremely roundabout means for radicalizing our existence by offering it a chance of total disappearance? All other cultures have left traces. *Our*

crime would be perfect, for it would leave no trace, and would be irreversible.

What is the most radical metaphysical desire, the deepest spiritual joy? Not to be there, but to see. Like God. For God, precisely, does not exist, and this enables him to watch the world in his absence. We too would love, above all, to expunge man from the world in order to see it in its original purity. We glimpse, in this, an inhuman possibility, which would restore the pluperfect form of the world, without the illusion of the mind or even that of the senses. An exact and inhuman hyperreality, where we could at last delight in our absence and the dizzying joys of disincarnation. If I can see the world after the point of my disappearance, that means I am immortal. The Immortals themselves came and involved themselves episodically in the events of the world, to derive pleasure from passing unrecognized.

This might be taken so far as the staging of some collective disaster or other, merely to see what would happen. But there is nothing of the death instinct here. It is the ruse of God, eluding the question of his existence by vanishing beneath his images. It is the ruse of the original, vanishing beneath its many copies. By the very fact of existing, we are from the beginning in an impossible anthropological situation. We can nowhere test out our existence or its authenticity. Existence, being and the real are, strictly speaking, impossible. The only solution to this situation, apart from the metaphysical recourse to a higher will (the will of God, but that is obsolete), is crime. Crime stands at the beginning of all cultures, as the supreme form of 'acting-out'. And in this sense, the technological enterprise itself can be seen as criminal projection, sacrificial 'acting-out', exorcism – one of those eccentric forms which defy the gravity of existence.

Other cultures have been able to manage this metaphysical illusion by having it circulate, each person taking responsibility for the next one's life over the generations by means of rituals. Whereas we, obsessed by objective reality, unload our illusion of

being on to technology. And doubtless, we play with death in technology as other cultures did in sacrifice. But this sacrifice no longer evokes the same magic or the same dreams. It is more like an experimental murder in which the murderer and the victim would be mere technical functions.

But perhaps the function of disappearing is a vital one. Perhaps this is how we react as living beings, as mortals, to the threat of an immortal universe, the threat of a definitive reality. So this whole array of technology could be taken to mean that man has ceased to believe in his own existence, and has opted for a virtual existence, a destiny by proxy. Then all our artefacts become the site of the subject's non-existence, of his desire for non-existence. For a subject without an existence of his own is at least as vital a hypothesis as that of a subject decked out with such metaphysical responsibility.

Seen from this angle, technology becomes a marvellous adventure, just as marvellous in this case as it seems monstrous in the other. It becomes an art of disappearance. It might be seen as aiming not so much to transform the world as to create an autonomous world, a fully achieved world, from which we could at last withdraw. Now, there can be no perfecting of the natural world, and the human being in particular is a dangerous imperfection. If the world is to be perfect, it will first have to be made. And if the human being wishes to attain this kind of immortality, he must produce himself as artefact also, expel himself from himself into an artificial orbit in which he will circle forever.

So we dream of a world carried along miraculously, without our intervention, and of autonomous beings which, far from escaping our will, as in the story of the sorcerer's apprentice, might fulfil the desire we ourselves have of escaping our will.

So we dream of seeing computers reach the stage of intelligent self-programming. And yet, though we concede their becoming more intelligent than us, we do not accord them a will of their own. We do not conceive a rival will in any other species and,

if we are to give way to superior artificial beings, their very intelligence has to be the manifestation of our desire. Though God allowed man to pose the question of his own freedom, we cannot contemplate beings we have engendered doing the same. No freedom, no will, no desire, no sexuality – it is precisely in these respects that we want them perfect. Above all, we cannot grant them what God eventually conceded to man: the knowledge of Evil.

It seems, however, that these 'intelligent' machines have got wind, if not of crime and sin, then at least of the obscure paths of accident and catastrophe. That they have equipped themselves with a number of functional gremlins, electronic viruses and other negative side-effects which protect them from perfection and spare them, in their turn, from pushing to their limits. The perfect crime would have been to invent a faultless world and withdraw from it without leaving a trace. But we cannot achieve this. We leave traces everywhere – viruses, lapses, germs and catastrophes – signs of imperfection which are, so to speak, man's signature in the heart of the artificial world.

Not only Artificial Intelligence, but all of the advanced technological process points up the fact that behind his doubles and his prostheses, his biological clones and his virtual images, man takes advantage of these things to disappear. So it is with the answerphone: 'We aren't here. Leave a message. . . .' And the video plugged into the TV takes over the job of watching the film for you. Had there not been that possibility, you would have felt obliged to watch it, since you always feel a little responsible for the films you haven't seen, the desires you haven't fulfilled, the people you haven't replied to, the crimes you haven't committed, the money you haven't spent. This amounts to a whole array of repressed possibilities, and the idea that there is a machine to store them and filter them, into which they go to die away quietly, is a profoundly reassuring one. All these machines may be termed virtual, since they are the filter (the philtre) of virtual *jouissance*,

that of the image, which most of the time is enough to keep us happy.

All these machines, which claim to be 'live' interactive devices, are in fact deferred-responsibility machines. For of course, I can see this film later if I want to, but most of the time I won't do anything about it. Besides, am I sure I want to see it? On the other hand, it is certain that the machine must function. And so the amortizing of the cost of the machine coincides with the amortizing, the deadening, of desire. These machines are all marvellous. They give man back a kind of liberty; they relieve him of the burden of his own will. They relieve him of the machine itself, as they are often interconnected and operate in a loop. They relieve him of his own production: what a relief to see twenty pages that had been stored in memory wiped out at a stroke, at a whim of the computer (or by a slip of the hand, which amounts to the same thing)! They would never have had such value if they hadn't had the good fortune to disappear. What the computer had given you – perhaps too easily – it takes away with the same ease. Everything is in order. A zero-sum technological equation. We are always talking of unforeseen, negative side-effects; here technology produces a positive (homoeopathic) side-effect. The integrated circuit loops back on itself, ensuring, as it were, the automatic deletion of the world.

To the tragic illusion of destiny we prefer the metaphysical illusion of subject and object, the true and the false, good and evil, the real and the imaginary; but, in a final phase, we prefer the virtual illusion even more – that of the neither true nor false, of the neither good nor evil, of a lack of distinction between the real and the referential, of an artificial reconstruction of the world where, at the cost of total disenchantment, we would enjoy a total immunity.

But why seek to escape destiny, to escape the order of disappearance? Out of an instinct of self-preservation? A feeble

motive. Out of a defiance of the natural order and for the glory of artifice? To have the illusion of changing the world, or of mastering it? From some phantasy of wiping out origins of any kind, and substituting a self-generation stretching back to infinity?

Where can it come from, this compulsion to be rid of the world by realizing it, by forcing material objectivity upon it? Whence the idea of inflecting it, by altering even the genetic code of matter? The absurdity of this enterprise is already evident where the human genome is concerned. Once he has been deciphered and digitalized, once he has become transparent and operational, what better destiny can we invent for man? What destination can we give the world in general once we have it at our command? Physically and metaphysically, the universe has no other destiny than to be the universe itself.

In our determination to invent the real world, so as to have it transparent to our science and our consciousness, so that it no longer escapes us, we do not escape that very transparency - become now the transparence of evil – by which destiny, in any case, unfolds, seeping through the very interstices of that transparency we were trying to set against it. Once again, the crystal takes its revenge.

For a time we kept destiny and death at bay. Today, it is destiny which is surging back towards us through the screens of science. Finally, by an ironic twist, it will perhaps even be science that has brought things more quickly to a head. But of course, as in the tragic order – re-emergent at last after we had believed it lost in the comic illusion of reality – we shall realize this only at the last moment.

The sad consequence of all this is that we no longer know what to do with the real world. We can no longer see any need whatever for this residue which has become an encumbrance. A crucial philosophical problem, that of the real which has been 'laid off'. And we have the same problem with unemployment: what is to be done with labour in the computer age? What are we to make

of this exponential waste? Dump it back into the dustbins of history? Put it into orbit, send it into space? It will be no easier getting rid of the corpse of reality. In desperation, we shall be forced to turn it into a special attraction, a historical tableau, a nature reserve: 'Coming to you live from reality! Visit this strange world! Experience the thrill of the real world!'

Perhaps there will one day be fossilized vestiges of the real, as there are of past geological ages? A clandestine cult of real objects, venerated as fetishes, which will take on mythic value? Already old objects seem like real ones by contrast with objects from the industrial age, but this is merely a prefiguring of the days when the tiniest tangible object will be as precious as an Egyptian relic.

We are, even now, working only for those who will discover us one day – us and our 'reality' – as vestiges of a mysterious or heteroclite age, like the skull of Piltdown Man which was a mix of the skull of a Neanderthal with the jaw of an Australopithecus. This is what will be found some day by the archaeologists of a metaphysical age, to whom our problems will have become as unintelligible as the way of life and the thinking of neolithic tribes are to us. The only problem will be one of dating and classification deep in the 'archaeological finds centres', which will have become the excavation sites of the Digital Era. Thanks to the moribund radioactivity of these few remains, some as yet undreamt-of carbon dating system will make it possible to reconstruct the genesis of all these concepts – not to mention their meaning. For in the meantime, another chronology will have been born – the Year Zero of Virtual Reality. All that preceded will have become fossilized. Thought itself is already coming to be seen as a fossilized object, an archaeological relic, itself also to be visited as a special attraction, with some 'think-operator'[15] as guide: 'Thought in real time! Experience the historical thrill of thought!'

Deep down, we are not far removed from Gosse's God who provided men with the ready-made signs of a previous history. For we are currently manufacturing the prehistory of an age which

will not even remember it, to the point where all these remains will possibly even be suspected (as was the case with cave paintings in the eighteenth century) of having been fabricated at some later date by twenty-first-century impostors, depicting an obscure and, in the end, useless anthropological prehistory – that of a native wit happily now supplanted by Artificial Intelligence.

The Countdown

Reality and the real world will have lasted only for a certain time, then. Just as long as it took for our species to pass them through the filter of the material abstraction of the code and calculation. Having been real for a while, the world was not destined to remain so for long. It will have taken only a few centuries to traverse the orbit of the real, and be very rapidly lost beyond it.

In purely physical terms, we may say that the reality effect exists only in a system of relative speed and continuity. In slower societies – primitive ones, for example – reality does not exist; it does not 'crystallize', for want of a sufficient critical mass. There is not enough acceleration for there to be linearity and, hence, for there to be causes and effects. In societies which are over-rapid, like our own, the reality effect becomes hazy: acceleration brings a jostling of causes and effects, linearity gets lost in turbulence, and reality, in its relative continuity, no longer has time to happen. Reality exists, then, only within a certain time-frame at a certain level of acceleration, within a certain window of expanding systems, within a phase of 'liberation', a phase in which our modern societies found themselves until now, but which they are currently leaving behind, with reality being lost once again – as the same expanding systems undergo further anamorphosis – in illusion, though this time in virtual illusion.

Even if it is now merely an endangered masterpiece, threatened by the very advance of the sciences and technologies which ensured its pre-eminence, the reality of the world is, none the less, a reassuring hypothesis and, as such, still dominates our value system today. The denial of reality is still morally and politically suspect. The principle of simulation is still the equivalent of the principle of Evil. The real scandal is not offending against public decency but offending against the reality principle, and we are not far removed here from the medieval trials in which the gravest crime laid at the door of witches was not that of succumbing to Evil, but that of succumbing to the illusion of Evil and its phantasmagoria.

However, it is not just particle physics and the technologies of the virtual which are on the verge of disavowing reality. We all are, in our most everyday acts. The concept has taken on a kind of ghostly flimsiness, and there is abroad something of a collective, panic-stricken sense that by wishing the world ever more real, we are devitalizing it. The real is growing and growing; one day everything will be real; and when the real is universal, that will spell death.

In one of the Marx Brothers' films, Harpo is leaning against a wall. 'What are you doing there?' 'Holding up the wall,' he gestures. 'Are you kidding? Get away!' Harpo steps aside, and the wall collapses. Are we not all leaning against that wall, and is it not the wall of Reality? If just one person moved away, the wall would come down, burying the millions of people squatting this disused barracks. The situation is certainly one of a devastated reality, and there are already innumerable victims buried alive in the rubble. The point is not, then, to assert that the real does or does not exist – a ludicrous proposition which well expresses what that reality means to us: a tautological hallucination ('the real exists, I have met it'). There is merely a movement of the exacerbation of reality towards paroxysm, where it involutes of its own accord and implodes leaving no trace, not even the sign of its end. For the body of the real was never

recovered. In the shroud of the virtual, the corpse of the real is forever unfindable.

Once, the two terms were linked in the living movement of a history: the actual form emerged from the virtual, like the statue emerging from the block of marble. Today, they are entwined in the notorious movement of the dead. For the dead man continues to move, and the corpse of the real never stops growing. The virtual is, in fact, merely the dilatation of the dead body of reality – the proliferation of an achieved universe, for which there is nothing left but to go on endlessly hyperrealizing itself.

We are in the speeded-up phase of that movement where all 'real' things are in a hurry to live and die. We are in the – perhaps interminable – phase of hysteresis of the real, of remanence of the shreds of reality in the immense virtuality which surrounds them, like the shreds of territory over the expanse of the map in the Borges story.

We are, in effect, persisting in the increasingly sophisticated deconstruction of a world which can no longer secrete its end. So everything is able to go on to infinity. We no longer have the means to stop the processes which now run on without us, beyond reality, so to speak, in an endless speculation, an exponential acceleration. But do so, as a result, in an indifference which is also exponential. '*Sans fin*' – without end – equals '*sans faim*' – without hunger: it is a kind of anorexic history which no longer feeds on real happenings, and wears itself out in counting down. A history without desire, without passion, without tension, without real events, where the problem is no longer one of changing life, which was the maximal utopia, but of surviving, which is the minimal utopia.

We live both haunted by the primal scene and with the threat of the terminal phase hanging over us. And this latter is in fact characterized by the resurrection of all the demons of the primal scene, which no progress or historical revolution has disarmed, just as the germs and viruses which were thought to be buried revive one by one in the terminal phase of illness.

And AIDS is, indeed, the illustration of this preordained falling-due of death. But it is merely one particular case of it: in the future we shall all be condemned to know in advance the date and detailed form of our deaths. So we shall all be in a countdown situation, in a situation of a programmed rundown of time. This stipulation of death within a finite period makes it a kind of time-bomb, a terrifying event, because it puts an end even to the prospect of its random occurrence. Hence the vitally urgent need to stay this side of the running of the programme, to de-programme the end. Now the aim of our system is precisely the opposite: to drive right through to the end, to exhaust all the possibilities.

The human race has already gone beyond its potential. Excess of potential intelligence, hypertely of intelligence. If the law of natural selection were true, our brains would have to shrink, for their capacities exceed all natural purposes and endanger the species. This is the same question Darwin and Wallace debated, the latter resolving it by the intervention of God. God was alone responsible for this supernatural privilege of man. But if God is responsible for this biological extravagance, then he is in collusion with the spirit of Evil, whose specific peculiarity is to drive the universe to excess. Are there not signs of the aberrancy of the divine will in the catastrophic success of man?

This disproportion between the human brain and the specific tasks of the species is a glaring one in the immense majority of our activities (gambling on horses, jogging, TV, not to mention 'sleaze' and politics). If 80 per cent of human genes are useless, how do matters stand with the useable power of the brain? Was it necessary to mobilize such a cortical and cerebrospinal machinery to get to where we are? Who can say why a particular person possesses an arsenal of a billion neurons? Obviously, this is a stupid question so far as his positioning within the teleonomic mutations of the species is concerned. And he can flatter himself that he is part of that mysterious proportion of useless beings (like the 80 per cent of the genes – useless for what?) which

doubtless perform a function for the species as a reserve and a backup, by contrast with those hyper-brains glued to their computers which, though already considerably underused, diminish themselves even more by having a machine function in their stead.

It is the same with Artificial Intelligence and the new technologies. Computer chips have already outstripped any possible use that can be made of them, and are leading the system into insane applications. The two together – brains and human technologies – are colluding in an effort to maximize time-capital, life-capital, in which all margins, all free zones, are being wiped out. There are no longer any reserves of uselessness: these are threatened with intensive exploitation. Insignificance is under threat from an excess of meaning. Banality is threatened with its hour of glory. The supply of floating signifiers has fallen to dangerous levels. Death itself is under threat of death. . . . Once the dialectical balance is upset, the whole system becomes terroristic. We ought now to turn those lines of Hölderlin around: 'But where there is danger, there grows also what saves' [*Da, wo die Gefahr wächst, wächst das Rettende auch*], and say 'But where what saves grows, there also grows danger' [*Da, wo das Rettende wächst, wächst die Gefahr auch*], which would characterize the much graver threat of disintegration and death represented by our excess of security, prevention, immunity, and the fatal excess of positivity.

The clock at the Pompidou Centre, where the countdown to the end of the millennium is shown digitally, in millions of seconds, is a fine illustration of this virtual exhaustion. As with rocket launches or time-bombs (perhaps the Pompidou Centre is a time-bomb?), time is not counted from an origin, but is counted down from the end. And that end is no longer the final term of a history, of a progressive unfolding, but the mark of a zero-sum, of the exhaustion of a time-capital.

Humanity no longer has any finality once the human is set down in a genetic capital and the transcription of the genome. There is no longer, strictly speaking, any history or time once it becomes part of a counting-down. When you count the seconds which separate you from the end, then everything is already finished. Perhaps it is the shadow of the year 2000 which hovers over this descending count and over the enjoyment, whether in delight or in terror, of the span of time left to us.

The Material Illusion

So long as an illusion is not recognized as an error, it has a value precisely equivalent to reality. But once the illusion has been recognized as such, it is no longer an illusion. It is, therefore, the very concept of illusion, and that concept alone, which is an illusion.

This holds true for the subjective illusion, the illusion of the subject who opts for the wrong reality, who mistakes the unreal for the real or, worse, mistakes the real for the real (that illusion is quite a hopeless one). Against this subjective and metaphysical illusion: the radical illusion, the objective illusion of the world. A contradiction in terms – how can an illusion be objective? But this is precisely the point: it is tempting to take this objectivity which has for so long been deployed in favour of truth and deploy it in the opposite direction, just as it was tempting, in days gone by, to believe in an objective reality of Evil. Admittedly this was a spiritual heresy, but it was an enthralling hypothesis. And since, in any case, even our scientific objectivity is gradually taking on an illusory character these days, there is nothing to stop illusion, for its part, taking an objective turn.

The objective illusion is the physical fact that in this universe no things coexist in real time – not sexes, stars, this glass, this table, or myself and all that surrounds me. By the fact of dispersal and the relative speed of light, all things exist only in a recorded version, in an unutterable disorder of time-scales, at an inescapable

distance from each other. And so they are never truly present to each other, nor are they, therefore, 'real' for each other. The fact of this irremediable distance and this impossible simultaneity, the fact that when I perceive this star it has perhaps already disappeared – a relationship which can be extended, relatively speaking, to any physical object or living being – this is the ultimate foundation, the material definition, so to speak, of illusion.

The illusion of time is of the same order. It is the objective fact that you are never entirely there at the particular moment, and that integral presence is only ever virtual. If it is true that at any point in time you are in that moment and not elsewhere, you are never at the single point where the whole event might be said to be summed up. 'Real' time does not, therefore, exist; no one exists in real time; nothing takes place in real time – and the misunderstanding is total.

This distance is vital, for without it we would perceive nothing; everything would be totally crowded together, as it doubtless was in the primal state of the world – the only state we can say existed in real time, since all matter was coexistent with itself, present to itself at a single point and a single moment. Once that initial (and perfectly hypothetical) state came to an end, the illusion of the world began. After that, the elements were never again to be present to each other. Everything began to exist but, by that very token, did so on the basis of a relative but definitive absence of every thing from every other. Hence on the basis of an irrevocable illusion.

That distance, that absence, are today under threat. What is impossible at the cosmic level (that the night should disappear by the simultaneous perception of the light of all the stars) or in the sphere of memory and time (that all the past should be perpetually present, and that events should no longer fade into the mists of time) is possible today in the technical universe of information. The info-technological threat is the threat of an eradication of the night, of that precious difference between night and day, by a total illumination of all moments. In the

past, messages faded on a planetary scale, faded with distance. Today we are threatened with lethal sunstroke, with a blinding profusion, by the ceaseless feedback of all information to all points of the globe.

It's a good thing we ourselves do not live in real time! What would we be in 'real' time? We would be identified at each moment exactly with ourselves. A torment equivalent to that of eternal daylight – a kind of epilepsy of presence, epilepsy of identity. Autism, madness. No more absence from oneself, no more distance from others. Now, otherness is that happy distortion without which everyone would simultaneously be me. It is the vital illusion of otherness which prevents the ego from succumbing to absolute reality. Language, too, is what prevents everything from signifying at every moment, and allows us to escape the perpetual irradiation of meaning. This specific illusion of language, this poetic function, no longer exists in virtual or digital languages, where the equivalence is total, the interaction as well regulated as in closed question-and-answer circuits and the energy as immediately decodable as a heat source's energy is decodable by water in a pan. These languages are no more languages than the computer-generated image is an image.

Fortunately, something in language is irreducible to this computation, something in the subject is irreducible to identification, something in exchange is irreducible to interaction and communication.

Even the scientific object is ungraspable in its reality. Like the stars, it appears only light years away, as a trace on the screens. Like them, by the time we record it, it might also have disappeared. The fact that we cannot determine both the velocity and position of a particle is part of the illusion of the object and its perpetual play. Even the particles in the accelerator do not smash into each other in real time, and are not exactly contemporaneous with each other.

Modern physics offers us other schemas than that of our reality principle. This latter is based on distinction between things, yet on their correlation within a single space – their presence one to another. The schema of physics, by contrast, is based on inseparability, yet on the absence of things one from another (they do not interact in a homogeneous space). Particles are inseparable, but light years apart.

That everything is secretly inseparable, but that nothing truly communicates – that is to say, nothing passes through the same so-called real world – that all that is exchanged are singular effects from times and spaces, beings and objects which are not, strictly speaking, 'real' for each other (their 'reality-in-itself' being forever unintelligible), is the objective illusion of the world. This singularity effect applies to all things – earthly and stellar, extraordinary or banal, living or inanimate: our perception of them shows them to us definitively distanced from – and necessarily never getting back to – their sources.

The objective illusion is the impossibility of an objective truth once the subject and object are no longer distinct, and the impossibility of any knowledge based on that distinction. This is the current situation of experimental science – inseparability of phenomena, inseparability of subject and object. Not that of their magical confusion in so-called irrational thought, but that of the most sophisticated investigation, at the end of which one has to accept the radical enigma of the object, and its disappearance as such.

The distinction between subject and object, a fiction that can be maintained in a zone of perception that is on a human scale, breaks down at the level of extreme phenomena and microscopic phenomena. These restore the fundamental inseparability of the two or, in other words, the radical illusion of the world where our cognitive apparatus is concerned. Much has been made of the alteration of the object by the subject in observation. But no one has raised the question of the opposite alteration and its

diabolical mirror-effect. Now, the interesting situations are those in which the object slips away, becomes elusive, paradoxical and ambiguous, and infects the subject himself and his analytical procedure with that ambiguity. The main focus of interest has always been on the conditions in which the subject discovers the object, but those in which the object discovers the subject have not been explored at all. We flatter ourselves that we discover the object and conceive it as waiting there meekly to be discovered. But perhaps the cleverer party here is not the one we think. What if it were the object which discovered us in all this? What if it were the object which invented us? This would give us not merely an uncertainty principle, which can be mastered by equations, but a principle of reversibility which is much more radical and more aggressive. (Similarly, didn't viruses discover us at least as much as we discovered them, with all the consequences that follow? And didn't the American Indians themselves discover us in the end? This is the eternal revenge of the mirror peoples.)

These phenomena are not confined to micro-universes. In politics, economics and the 'human' sciences, the inseparability of subject and object is everywhere resurgent where the simulated objectivity of science had taken hold over the last three centuries.

It isn't just in physics that it's impossible to calculate the momentum and the position of a particle simultaneously. It's the same where the possibility of calculating both the reality and the meaning of an event in news coverage is concerned, the imputation of causes and effects in a particular complex process, the relationship between terrorist and hostage, between virus and cell. Each of our actions is at the same stage as the erratic laboratory particle: we can no longer simultaneously calculate its end and its means. We can no longer simultaneously calculate the price of a human life and its statistical value. Uncertainty has filtered into all areas of life: it isn't clear why it might be confined to science alone. And this is not an effect of the complexity of the parameters: that problem we can always surmount. It is a

radical uncertainty, because it is linked to the extreme character of phenomena and not just to their complexity. Beyond the limit [*ex-terminis*], the laws of physics themselves become reversible, and we are no longer in command of the rules, if there are any. At any event, the rules are no longer those of subjects and truth.

Since we cannot grasp both the genesis and the singularity of the event, the appearance of things and their meaning, we are faced with an alternative: either we master their meaning, and appearances elude us, or the meaning eludes us, and appearances are saved. Since most of the time the meaning escapes us, this makes it certain that the secret, the illusion which binds us under the seal of secrecy, will never be unmasked. This is not something mystical but something that arises from an active strategy of the world towards us – a strategy of absence and relinquishment, as a result of which, by the very play of appearances, things stray further and further from their meaning, and doubtless further and further from each other also, the world accentuating its flight into strangeness and the void.

While physicists seek the equations which would unify all physical forces, the galaxies continue to move apart at fabulous speeds. While semiotics seeks a unified theory of the linguistic field, languages and signs continue to move apart like galaxies, as an effect of some sort of linguistic Big Bang, but always remaining secretly inseparable.

The illusion of the world – its enigma – also derives from the fact that for the poetic imagination, the imagination concerned with appearances, it is there in its entirety at a stroke, whereas for analytical thought it has an origin and a history. Now, everything which appears at a stroke, without historical continuity, is unintelligible. None of the means by which we aspire to elucidate it can change anything of the original *coup de force*, of this sudden irruption into appearance which the will to transparency and information vainly seek to resolve.

If the world has a history, we can hope to get a final explanation out of it. If, on the other hand, it was born at a stroke, it is not susceptible of having an end set to it – we are protected from its end by this non-meaning which takes on the force of poetic illusion. Illusion, being pre-eminently the art of appearing, of emerging from nothing, protects us from being. And being also pre-eminently the art of disappearing, it protects us from death. The world is protected from its end by its diabolic indeterminacy. By contrast, all that is determinate is condemned to be exterminated.

Two orders of thinking hover around this ontological obstacle. For the one, classical and 'rational', the only hypothesis is that of an evolution and a progress of living forms. For the other, which is highly improbable (with no hope of proof), the biomass appeared at a stroke – the Big Bang of living matter – and is present in its entirety from the beginning (even if the history of complex forms was then to follow). Exactly like language in Lévi-Strauss: the logomass, the mass of signifier, emerges at a stroke, in its entirety. Nothing further will be added in terms of information. There is even too much – an excess of signifier, which will never be reduced. Once it has appeared, it is, like the biomass, indestructible. As indestructible as mass itself, as the material substance of the world and, closer to us, the sociological masses whose just as sudden and unpredictable appearance is also irreversible, up until their possible collapse.

Astromass, biomass, logomass, sociomass – all of these are doubtless destined to come to an end, though not gradually but, rather, by a breakdown which is, like their appearance, sudden. Cultures also invent themselves at a stroke – their emergence is inexplicable in evolutionistic terms. They have all their intensity at the outset, and they disappear very quickly – sometimes even suddenly, and without any apparent reason (only ours seems inclined to go on for ever).

As for the world of the mind, it functions according to the same catastrophic rule: everything is there from the outset, it is

not negotiated stage by stage. It is like the rules of a game – perfect the way it is, any idea of progress or change being absurd.

And, by the same token, one cannot imagine the illusion coming about gradually, the world becoming progressively more and more of an illusion (one can, on the other hand, imagine it increasingly taking itself for real, and becoming so in its own eyes). We have, then, to propose the same hypothesis of a total, unpredictable and definitive emergence: the level of illusion could neither grow nor diminish, since it is coextensive with the world as appearance. The illusion is the world-effect itself.

This suddenness, this emergence from the void, this non-anteriority of things to themselves, continues to affect the event of the world at the very heart of its historical unfolding. What constitutes an event is what breaks with all previous causality. The event of language is what makes it re-emerge miraculously every day, as a finished form, outside of all previous significations. Photography, too, is the art of dissociating the object from any previous existence and capturing its probability of disappearing in the moment that follows. In the end, we prefer the *ab nihilo*, prefer what derives its magic from the arbitrary, from the absence of causes and history. Nothing gives us greater pleasure than what emerges or disappears at a stroke, than emptiness succeeding plenitude. Illusion is made up of this magic portion, this accursed share which creates a kind of absolute surplus-value by subtraction of causes or by distortion of effects and causes.

This machination of the Nothing, which means that things contradict their very reality, may be conceived either as poetic or as criminal. All that is unintelligible is criminal in substance, and all thinking which fuels this enigmatic machination is the perpetuation of this crime. If the world is without reference and without ultimate reason, why do you expect thought to have these things?

The Secret Vestiges of Perfection

> The hope of theory is that, by impressing upon formalism a sufficiently high degree of symmetry, while preserving its coherence, it might be possible to determine the perfect equation of the world in unequivocal fashion. Once that task has been completed, it is right and proper to destroy the equation immediately.
>
> The necessary feat of symmetry-breaking – the passage from perfection to imperfection – is accomplished in physics by a most artful procedure.
>
> One abstracts, first of all, from the clumsy appearances of reality, to render it consonant with the canon of classical beauty, then one breaks, one by one, the symmetries of absolute beauty in order to make the model resemble the sensible appearance.
>
> (Michel Cassé, *Du Vide et de la Création*)

At the extreme original temperatures (the hypothetical ones of the Big Bang), particles and anti-particles are produced in equal number. The prodigious formation, in a very short time, of all elementary particles and their doubles.

Then comes the expansion and cooling of the Universe – the process of materialization of the Universe slows down. Disappearance of anti-particles in favour of simple particles, without anti-matter. From this comes the 'real' world, the effect of the 'material' reality of the world. But in the beginning, this materialization involves both matter and anti-matter. It is only the eclipsing of anti-matter

that puts an end to maximal density and energy, in favour of the minimal energy of reality. The cooling of the universe is accompanied by a restricted materiality, governed, at last, by a few verifiable physical laws (including, with the emergence of light, the possibility of observation, and thus of an 'objectivity' of the world).

Before this material 'objectivity', then, there is the primal void, which is defined as a space without any real particles. Not nothingness but an ocean of virtual particles, which give it an energy of its own, a potential energy, which is nothing, but can transform itself into everything that is. A capricious energy, from before the precipitation of matter into the cycle of causes and effects.

Such is the Nothing, the Void, primal scene of the material illusion, and continuation of the Nothing as perpetuation of that state. This enables us to sketch out what illusion is, as opposed to the real. Illusion is the quality of a world which, by the antinomic structure of matter, retains the potentiality of the nullification and immaterial return of energy. Illusion is the characteristic of what retains the possibility of wiping itself out by a violent reversion (matter/anti-matter abreaction) and, therefore, of passing beyond 'material' objectivity (matter and antimatter are indistinguishable in the absolute; they shine with the same light; they are distinct, linked to each other, only by virtue of the possibility of cancelling each other out). Only energy bound to restricted materiality – to our materiality – is doomed to dissipation and entropy.

The original void is amorphous, sterile, homogeneous, symmetrical. It is perfect. No reality can emerge there. It is absolute illusion. This symmetry has to be broken if a law-governed materiality is to establish itself – an imperfection, in which real bodies emerge (but where can such an imperfection possibly come from? What sets off breakings of symmetry?). Of that imperfection, we – human beings – are the trace, since perfection is of the order of

the inhuman. We are also, however, the heirs of the Void, of the Nothing, of that primal scene of absence, that perfectly indecipherable and enigmatic state of the Universe – a situation which will never be compensated for by the real and the hegemony of the real. We are the heirs both to symmetry and to breakings of symmetry, and our imperfection is as radical as the radical illusion of the Void can be.

On the further slope looms the perfect crime: the destruction of all illusion, saturation by absolute reality. All traces of the initial state are wiped away. With the venture of technology, we are embarked upon the completion of what began with the dispersion of the initial void: the annihilation of the void, of that perfect illusion, in the name of an achieved reality – the equivalent of total entropy – to be completed at some unknowable date. But this may be unforeseeably hastened, as a function of the process of increasing information. For this latter, contrary to the negentropic illusion of information theory, is itself part of entropic dissipation, of that destiny of restricted materiality, that destiny of greater visibility, transparency and hypercoincidence which takes us ever further from the initial conditions and brings us closer to the final solution.

Unless. . . . Unless, perhaps, we rediscover – coming to a deeper understanding of the essence of technology, as Heidegger conceives it – 'the stellar course of the mystery'. Unless, perhaps, indestructible illusion awaits us at the end of the process. Are we not dealing, through our hypertechnologies, with the transformation of all matter into virtuality, into information, into irradiation? And the world will be seen to have taken on force of reality, force of materiality, only for an intermediate phase, in which there was a possibility of establishing a few laws, a few physical constants that are already becoming problematic at sub-atomic level. Perhaps, in our reality effects, we are merely obeying a gravitational effect that is the opposite of the prodigious anti-gravitational effect at the

origin of the Universe and its expansion. And why might that fundamental anti-gravity not still be at work? Should we not, then, in accordance with a new physics, grant primacy not to the attraction of the solid body towards the centre, but to the attraction of the void towards the periphery?

The Height of Reality

We labour under the illusion that it is the real we lack the most, but actually, reality is at its height. By our technical exploits, we have reached such a degree of reality and objectivity that we might even speak of an excess of reality, which leaves us far more anxious and disconcerted than the lack of it. That we could at least make up for with utopianism and imagination, whereas there is neither compensation for – nor any alternative to – the excess of reality. No longer any possible negation or surpassing, since we are already beyond. No longer any negative energy arising from the imbalance between the ideal and the real – only a hyper-reaction, born of the superfusion of the ideal and the real, of the total positivity of the real.

However, even though we have gone beyond the real, into virtual accomplishment, we still have the unpleasant impression of having missed the end. The whole of modernity had as its aim the coming of this real world, the liberation of men and of real energies, bent upon an objective transformation of the world, beyond all the illusions with which critical analysis has kept philosophy and practice fed. Today, the world has become real beyond our wildest expectations. The real and the rational have been overturned by their very realization.

Such a proposition may seem paradoxical when we look at all the traces of the unfinished nature of the world, the traces of penury and poverty, such that one might think it had barely begun to evolve towards a more real, more rational state. But we

have to leap ahead of ourselves: this systematic practicalization of the world has gone very quickly, the system actualizing all the utopian potential and substituting the radicalism of its operation for the radicalism of thought. There is no point taking refuge in the defence of values, even critical ones. That is politically correct, but intellectually anachronistic. What we must do is think this unconditional realization of the world, which is at the same time its unconditional simulacrum. What we lack most is a conceptualization of the completion of reality.

This paradoxical configuration of an achieved universe imposes another mode of thinking than the critical. A thinking that goes beyond the end, a thinking of extreme phenomena.

Up to now, we have thought an incomplete reality, shot through with negativity; we have thought what was lacking in reality. Today, we have to think a reality which lacks nothing, individuals who potentially lack nothing and therefore can no longer dream of a dialectical sublation. Or rather, the dialectic has indeed fulfilled itself, but ironically, one might say, not at all by taking in the negative, as in the dream of critical thought, but in a total, irrevocable positivity. By absorption of the negative, or quite simply by the fact that the negative, denying itself, has merely generated a redoubled positivity. Thus, the negative disappears in substance and, if the dialectic has run its course, it has done so in the parodic mode of its elimination, by the ethnic cleansing of the concept. So we are still forced to think this pure positivity, to think the 'depassed real' (as one speaks of a 'depassed coma') and no longer the peaceful surpassing of the real or its doubling in the imaginary.

It is not certain that we possess the necessary concepts to think this *fait accompli*, this virtual performance of the world which is tantamount to the elimination of all negation, that is, a pure and simple de-negation. What can critical thought, thought based on the negative, do against the state of denegation?[16] Nothing. To think extreme phenomena, thought must itself become an extreme

phenomenon; it must abandon any critical pretensions, any dialectical illusions, any rational hope, and move, like the world, into a paradoxical phase, an ironic and paroxystic phase. It has to be more hyperreal than the real, more virtual than virtual reality. The simulacrum of thought has to move more quickly than the others. Since we can no longer multiply the negative by the negative, we have to multiply the positive by the positive. One has to be even more positive than the positive to take in both the total positivity of the world and the illusion of that pure positivity.

Nothing has the same meaning any more once it has been confronted not with its unfinished form, but with its accomplished or even excessive form. We are no longer fighting the spectre of alienation, but that of ultra-reality. We are no longer fighting our shadows, but transparency. And every step in technological progress, every advance in information and communications, brings us closer to that inescapable transparency. All the signs have been reversed as a result of this precession of the end, this irruption of the final term at the very heart of things and their unfolding. The same acts, the same thoughts and the same hopes which brought us nearer to that finality we so longed for now take us away from it, since it is behind us. Similarly, everything changes meaning once the movement of History crosses this fatal demarcation line: the same events have different meanings depending on whether they take place in a history that is being made or in a history being unmade. It's the same with the curve of History as it is with the trajectory of reality. It is the upward movement which gives them force of reality. On the downward curve – or because the movement is simply continuing as a result of its own inertia – everything is caught in a different refraction space, as in a gravity alternator. In that new space, as in Alice's looking-glass space, words and effects are stood on their head, and every movement impedes every other.

The balance which, by the force of the negative, governed our world has been upset. Events, discourses, subjects or objects exist only within the magnetic field of value, which only exists as a

result of the tension between two poles: good or evil, true or false, masculine or feminine. It is these values, now depolarized, which are beginning to spin in the undifferentiated field of reality. And objects, too, are beginning to spin in the undifferentiated field of value. All there is now is a circular form of switching or substitution between disconnected and erratic values. Everything which stood in a fixed relation of opposition is losing its meaning by becoming indistinguishable from its opposite as a result of the upsurge of a reality which is absorbing all differences and conflating opposing terms by promoting them all unreservedly.

With everything losing its distance, its substance, its resistance in the in-different acceleration of the system, crazed values are beginning to produce their opposites, or to eye each other longingly. And so the transparence of Evil is merely the transpiration of the worst through the best. Nothing is more entertaining than the fact that Evil comes out of Good. But isn't there an equal irony in the fact that Good comes out of Evil? We have, in fact, to look at things differently. Good is when Good comes out of Good, or Evil out of Evil. That is when there is order. Evil is when Evil comes out of Good, or Good out of Evil. That is when things are all wrong. It is as though the cells of the heart were producing liver cells. Every discrepancy between cause and effect is of the order of Evil.

The extermination of the negative is, therefore, the final solution. But the die is not cast. The destiny of the positive, of a system culminating in positivity and pure speculation, remains, itself, enigmatic. By a form of secret coherence, one finds there a kind of balance of Evil, a kind of syllogism of the Void and Absence – a dialectics of nullity.

In his *Flüchtlingsgespräche*, Brecht has two refugees in transit talking over a beer in a station buffet. Ziffer says: 'This beer isn't a beer. But the fact that this cigar isn't a cigar either makes up for that. If the beer weren't a beer, but the cigar were a cigar, then things would be all wrong.' So order is established out of

the harmonious compensating effect of several disorders. This is the ironic version of the double negative. In the French expression '*bête et méchant*',[17] the fact of being nasty is harmonious compensation for the fact of being stupid – there is no longer any scandal about it; logic remains intact. We have here the subtle equilibrium of the negative, the balancing of Evil by Evil. Though this does not find an equivalent in the balancing of Good by Good, since that is the utopia of an ideal world, of the ideal good – precisely the utopia of stupidity.

So the world goes its way naturally, by a logical enchainment of Evil which seems much more capable of accounting for it than the opposite enchainment of Good.

In the same dialogue, Brecht writes: 'When, in the wrong place, there is something, that's disorder. When, in the right place, there is nothing, that's order.' So the dialectic follows its course – not towards an ideal solution, but towards a null order, and the self-evidence of the world as the self-evidence of a zero-sum equation. A *dialectique du pire*, but a well-tempered dialectic none the less. The only one you can rely on with certainty. It is a good thing, in the end, that, in the right place, there is nothing rather than something.

If this dialectics of nullity is more reliable, this is because it corresponds profoundly to the symbolic rule. Nothing is exchanged in terms of positive equivalence – the only things really exchanged are absence and the negative. Evil has to be given and returned for human beings to be bound by a profound reciprocity. Such is the economy of the accursed share, of which the nothing, the evil, the irreducible and absence are the symbolic operators.

So, when, in the right place (in the streets in May '68), something happens, there is disorder. But is there not equal disorder if, where something should have happened (on the screens during the Gulf War), nothing happens? No pictures and, strictly speaking, no war. But the non-happening of the pictures was secretly in tune with the non-happening of the war, to the point

that there too everything was in order, as in the story of the beer and the cigar.

Is it better to be where you should not be, but where there is something to see (elsewhere than in front of your television) or where you should be, but where there is nothing to see (in front of the screen)?

Our critical morality tends to make something emerge in place of nothing – the subject in place of the object. But the true challenge is to be nothing rather than something, not to be there where there should be someone: a strategy of non-happening, *stratégie du pire*, strategy of illusion, strategy of seduction. There is perhaps some affectation in this, but where there is affectation, there is pleasure. The idea, on the other hand, that a thing is precisely where it should be, that something is precisely what it must be – the objective point of view of order – is inconceivable. There is no possibility of that order in a real world.

There is, at any rate, no possibility of being oneself. There is no possibility of ideas being themselves. If they come to pass, they do so disavowing themselves. Everything which becomes reality runs counter to its own concept. Thus, in the *Flüchtlingsgespräche*, it is also said that though the beer isn't a beer, though the cigar isn't a cigar, though the man is no longer a man, the passport, for its part, still remains a passport. The man is without identity, but the passport which identifies him is identical to itself. Now, the passport is also the mark of exile, and so the only thing which identifies him simultaneously bears witness to the fact that the man has become foreign to himself. In our universe of all dreams, of all desires, there is no other destiny than this disavowal of the idea, of the concept or the dream. The passport is there, but at what is, in the passport's terms, the right place, there is nothing. Things are in order.

The present world exceeds the grasp of criticism in that it is caught up in a perpetual movement of disillusion and dissolution, the very movement which is pushing it towards order and towards

an absurd conformism, the excess of which creates much greater disorganization than the opposite excess of disorder.

Having reached this point, the real (if we may call it that) now responds only to a kind of objective irony and pataphysical description.

Pataphysics is the imaginary science of our world, the imaginary science of excess, of excessive, parodic, paroxystic effects – particularly the excess of emptiness and insignificance.

The existence which believes in its own existence is an infatuation, a ridiculous flatulence. Pataphysical irony is aimed at this presumptuousness on the part of beings sustained by the fierce illusion of their existence. For that existence is merely an inflatable structure, similar to Ubu's belly, which distends into the void and ends up exploding like the *Palotins.*[18]

There is irony in all extreme processes, in all processes of involution, collapse, inflation, deflation, reversibility. An irony which plays not on negation but on empty positivity, on exponential platitude, to the point where the process turns around of its own accord and rediscovers the splendour of the void.

The Irony of Technology

At the peak of our technological performance, the irresistible impression remains that something eludes us – not because we seem to have lost it (the real?), but because we are no longer in a position to see it: that, in effect, it is not we who are winning out over the world, but the world which is winning out over us. It is no longer we who think the object, but the object which thinks us. Once we lived in the age of the lost object; now it is the object which is 'losing' us, bringing about our ruin.

We very much labour under the illusion that the aim of technology is to be an extension of man and his power; we labour under the subjective illusion of technology. But today, this operating principle is thwarted by its very extension, by the unbridled virtuality we see outrunning the laws of physics and metaphysics. It is the logic of the system which, carrying it beyond itself, is altering its determinations. At the same time as reaching a paroxystic stage, things have also reached a parodic one.

All our technologies might, therefore, be said to be the instrument of a world which we believe we rule, whereas in fact the world is using this machinery to impose itself, and we are merely the operators. An objective illusion, then, similar to the one that prevails in the media sphere. The naive illusion about the media is that the political authorities use them to manipulate or mystify the masses. The opposite hypothesis is more subtle. Through the media, it is the masses who definitively modify the exercise of power (or what sees itself as such). It is at the point where the

political authorities think they are manipulating them that the masses impose their clandestine strategy of neutralization and destabilization. Even if the two hypotheses are simultaneously valid, this is still the end of media Reason, the end of political Reason. Everything which will be done or said in the media sphere is, from this point on, ironically undecidable. The same hypothesis holds for the object of science. Through the most refined procedures we deploy to pin it down, is it not the object which dupes us and mocks our objective pretensions to analyse it? Scientists themselves are not, it seems, far from admitting this.

Can one advance the hypothesis that beyond the objective and critical phase there is an ironic phase of science, an ironic phase of technology? A proposition which would deliver us from the Heideggerian vision of technology as the final phase of metaphysics, from the retrospective nostalgia for being and from all unhappy critique in terms of alienation and disenchantment. And would put in its place a conception of the gigantic objective irony of this whole process, which would not be far from radical snobbery, from the post-historical snobbery Kojève spoke of.

It seems, in fact, that though the illusion of the world has been lost, the irony of the world, for its part, has passed into things. It seems that technology has taken into itself all the illusion it has caused us to lose, and that what we have in return for the loss of illusion is the emergence of an objective irony of this world. Irony as universal form of disillusionment, but also as the universal form of the stratagem by which the world hides behind the radical illusion of technology, and by which the mystery (of the continuation of the Nothing) conceals itself beneath the universal banality of information. Heidegger: 'When we look into the ambiguous essence of technology, we behold the constellation, the stellar course of the mystery.'

The Japanese sense the presence of a divinity in every industrial object. For us, that sacred presence has been reduced to a tiny ironic glimmer, a nuance of play and distantiation. Though this

is, none the less, a spiritual form, behind which lurks the evil genius of technology which sees to it itself that the mystery of the world is well-guarded. The Evil Spirit keeps watch beneath artefacts and, of all our artificial productions, one might say what Canetti says of animals: that behind each of them there is a hidden someone thumbing his nose at us.

Irony is the only spiritual form in the modern world, which has annihilated all others. It alone is the guardian of the mystery, but it is no longer ours to exercise. For it is no longer a function of the subject; it is an objective function, that of the artificial, object world which surrounds us, in which the absence and transparency of the subject is reflected. The critical function of the subject has given way to the ironic function of the object. Once they have passed through the medium or through the image, through the spectrum of the sign and the commodity, objects, by their very existence, perform an artificial and ironic function. No longer any need for a critical consciousness to hold up the mirror of its double to the world: our modern world swallowed its double when it lost its shadow, and the irony of that incorporated double shines out at every moment in every fragment of our signs, of our objects, of our models. No longer any need to confront objects with the absurdity of their functions, in a poetic unreality, as the Surrealists did: things move to shed an ironic light on themselves all on their own; they discard their meanings effortlessly. This is all part of their visible, all too visible sequencing, which of itself creates a parody effect.

The aura of our world is no longer sacred. We no longer have the sacred horizon of appearances, but that of the absolute commodity. Its essence is promotional. At the heart of our universe of signs there is an evil genius of advertising, a trickster who has absorbed the drollery of the commodity and its *mise en scène*. A scriptwriter of genius (capital itself?) has dragged the world into a phantasmagoria of which we are all the fascinated victims.

All metaphysics is swept away by this turnabout in which the subject is no longer the master of representation ('I'll be your mirror'), but the operator of the objective irony of the world. It is, henceforth, the object which refracts the subject and imposes upon it its presence and its random form, its discontinuity, its fragmentation, its stereophony and its artificial instantaneity. It is the power of the object which cuts a swathe through the very artifice we have imposed on it. There is something of revenge in this: the object becomes a strange attractor. Stripped of all illusion by technology, stripped of all connotation of meaning and value, exorbitated – i.e. taken out of the orbit of the subject – it is then that it becomes a pure object, superconductive of illusion and non-meaning.

We are faced, ultimately, with two irreconcilable hypotheses: that of the extermination of all the world's illusion by technology and the virtual, or that of an ironic destiny of all science and all knowledge in which the world – and the illusion of the world – would survive. The hypothesis of a 'transcendental' irony of technology being by definition unverifiable, we have to hold to these two irreconcilable and simultaneously 'true' perspectives. There is nothing which allows us to decide between them. As Wittgenstein says: 'The world is everything which is the case'.

Machinic Snobbery

Nothing is perfect, because it is opposed to nothing.[19]

There is nothing to say about Warhol, and Warhol has said just this in all his interviews and in his Journal, without rhetoric, without irony, without commentary – he alone being able to refract the insignificance of his images and his doings into the insignificance of his discourse. It is for this reason that whatever light one casts on the object Warhol, the Warhol effect, there is always something enigmatic about him which wrenches him out of the paradigm of art and the history of art.

The enigma is that of an object which offers itself up in total transparency, and hence cannot be naturalized by critical or aesthetic discourse. It is that of a superficial, artificial object which succeeds in preserving its artificiality, in shaking free of any natural signification to take on a spectral intensity, empty of meaning, which is that of the fetish.

The fetish object, as we know, has no value. Or rather, it has an absolute value; it lives off the ecstasy of value. Each of Warhol's images is thus insignificant in itself and of absolute value; it has the value of a figure from which all transcendent desire has withdrawn, leaving room only for the immanence of the image. It is in this sense that it is artificial. Warhol was the first to bring us modern fetishism, transaesthetic fetishism – that of an image without quality, a presence without desire.

Warhol starts out from any old image, eliminates its imaginary dimension and makes it a pure visual product. Those who work on scientific, video or computer-generated images do exactly the opposite. They use the raw material and the machine to remake art. Warhol *is* a machine. He is the true machinic metamorphosis. The others exploit technology to create illusion. Warhol offers us the pure illusion of technology – technology as radical illusion – an illusion far superior today to that of painting.

Warhol's images are banal not because they might be said to be the reflection of a banal world, but because they are products of the absence of any interpretative pretension on the part of the subject. They are products of the elevation of the image to pure figuration, without the least transfiguration. Not transcendence any longer, but the rise and rise of the sign which, losing all natural signification, shines forth in the void with the full gleam of its artificial light.

In the mystical vision, the illumination of the slightest detail comes from the divine intuition which lights it, the sense of a transcendence which inhabits it. For us, by contrast, the stupefying exactness of the world comes from the sense of an essence fleeing it, a truth which no longer inhabits it. It comes from a minutely detailed perception of the simulacrum and, more precisely, of the media and industrial simulacrum. Such is Warhol and his serial hypostasis of the image, of the pure and empty form of the image, its ecstatic, insignificant iconry. He is at once both our new mystic and the absolute anti-mystic, in the sense that every detail of the world, every image, remains initiatory, but initiatory into nothing at all.

This fetishistic transmutation separates Warhol from Duchamp and all his predecessors. For Duchamp, Dada, the Surrealists and all who worked to deconstruct representation and smash the work of art are still part of an avant-garde, and belong, in one way or another, to the critical utopia. For us moderns, at any rate, art has ceased to be an illusion; it has become an idea. It is no longer idolatric now, but critical and utopian, even when – particularly

when – it demystifies its object or when, with Duchamp, it aestheticizes at a stroke, with its bottle-rack, the whole field of daily reality.

This is still true of a whole segment of Pop Art, with its lyrical vision of popcorn or comic strips. Banality here becomes the criterion of aesthetic salvation, the means of exalting the creative subjectivity of the artist. Obliterating the object the better to mark out the ideal space of art and the ideal position of the subject. But Warhol belongs to no avant-garde and to no utopia. And if he settles utopia's hash, he does so because, instead of projecting it elsewhere, he takes up residence directly at its heart, that is, at the heart of nowhere. He is himself this no place: this is how he traverses the space of the avant-garde and, at a stroke, completes the cycle of the aesthetic. This is how he at last liberates us from art and its critical utopia.

Modern art had gone a very long way in the deconstruction of its object, but it is Warhol who has gone furthest in the annihilation of the artist and the creative act. That is his snobbery, but it is a snobbery which relieves us of all the affectation of art. Precisely because it is machine-like. In Picabia and Duchamp, the machine is still present as surrealist mechanicity, not as machinality – not, in other words, as the automatic reality of the modern world. Whereas Warhol identifies purely and simply with the machinic, which is what gives his images their contagious power. Other artists, even if they flirt with banality, do not have this same chain-reaction power of images. This is because they have not become true snobs. They are merely artists. Their works go only halfway down the path of artifice. Though they too have lost the secret of representation, they do not draw the consequences from this, consequences which may indeed, in machinic snobbery, involve a kind of suicide.

With Warhol we have the minimum pretension to being, the minimum strategy of means and ends. One should read Warhol's Journal – the whole of it – as the finest account of this transparency,

this meticulous expressionlessness, this will to insignificance which is doubtless our contemporary version of the will to power.

Behind what some have chosen to see as obsession or urbanity:

> . . . it's all there. The affectless gaze. The diffracted grace. . . The bored languor, the wasted pallor . . . The chic freakiness, the basically passive astonishment, the enthralling secret knowledge . . . The childlike, gum-chewing naïveté, the glamour rooted in despair, the self-admiring carelessness, the perfected otherness, the wispiness, the shadowy, voyeuristic, vaguely sinister aura, the pale, soft-spoken magical presence, the skin and bones.[20]

This is perhaps, secondarily, why one can multiply a Warhol image to infinity, but cannot get greater depth from a detail. To my knowledge, there are no blown-up details of a Warhol work. The fact is that each one already functions like a hologram, where there is no difference between the detail and the whole, where the gaze spreads and diffuses into an insubstantial object to the point of merging with its virtual presence.

Warhol himself was never anything but a kind of hologram. Famous people came to the Factory to hover around him without being able to get anything from him, but they tried to pass through him as you might with a filter or a camera lens, which is what he had in effect become. Valerie Solanas was even to try to shatter that lens by shooting at it, to pass through the hologram to establish that blood could still flow from it. So we can agree with Warhol: 'You can't get more superficial than me and live'. And he nearly didn't come out of it alive.

Everything in Warhol is phoney: the object is phoney because it is no longer related to the subject but solely to the desire for an object. The image is phoney because it no longer has any relation to an aesthetic exigency, but solely to the desire for an image (and Warhol's images desire and engender each other). In this sense, Warhol is the first artist to have reached the stage of

radical fetishism, the stage beyond that of alienation – the paradoxical stage of an otherness raised to perfection.

This is what earned him that quite peculiar form of fascination which fetishes alone attract, that fetishistic aura which attaches to the singularity of the void. And the famous fifteen minutes of fame he spoke of was only ever the ability to accede to that extreme insignificance – that insignificance which generates a vacuum all around it, and towards which all desires are thus irresistibly drawn. It is not so easy, that insignificance. In the empty space of desire, the seats don't come cheap.

Fetishes communicate with each other by the omnipotence of thought and with the rapidity of dreams. Whereas there is a deferred relationship between signs, there is an immediate chain reaction between fetishes because they are made of an indifferent mental substance. We see this in fashion items, where the transmission is unreal and instantaneous because they do not have meaning. Ideas, too, can have this mode of transmission: they just have to be fetishized.

Let us not be deceived about the cool forms, forms indifferent to themselves, which this fetishism can assume in Warhol. Behind this machinic snobbery, what is really going on is a rise and rise of objects, images, signs and simulacra, as well as a rise and rise of values, the finest example of which is the art market itself. We are a long way from the alienation of price, which is still a real measure of things. We are in the ecstasy of value, which explodes the notion of market and simultaneously destroys the art work as such. Warhol is naturally party to this extermination of the real by the image, and to such an overdoing of the image as to put an end to all aesthetic value.

Warhol reintroduces nothingness into the heart of the image. In this sense, we cannot say he is not a great artist: fortunately for him, he is not an artist at all. The point of his work is a challenge to the very notion of art and aesthetics.

The reign of art is the reign of a conventional management

of illusion, of a convention which contains the frenzied effects of illusion, which exorcizes illusion as an extreme phenomenon. Aesthetics restores mastery over the order of the world to a subject, restores a form of sublimation of the total illusion of the world, which would otherwise annihilate us.

Other cultures have accepted the cruel self-evidence of this illusion, attempting to engineer a sacrificial equilibrium within it. We modern cultures no longer believe in anything but reality (which is, of course, the last of illusions), and have chosen to temper the ravages of illusion with that cultivated, docile form of the simulacrum that is aesthetic form.

There is a long history to this. However, because it has a history, it also lasts only for a time, and it is perhaps now that we are seeing the disappearance of that history, of that restrained and conventional form of the simulacrum, and its replacement by the unconditional simulacrum, that is, a primal scene of illusion where we would meet up with all the inhuman phantasmagorias of all the cultures which preceded ours.

Warhol is the illustration of this unconditional simulacrum.

Warhol is a mutant.

At this stage of machination, of automachination, there is no longer any critical space, a space where subject and object are respectively present, but a paradoxical space, a space where subject and object have, respectively, disappeared. Not unlike current science, where subject and object positions disappear simultaneously, the only reality of the object being that of its traces on a computer screen. This new scientific space is itself a paradoxical space. There is no more a real universe behind the screens which trace the trajectory of particles than there is a subject, Warhol, behind the image of Warhol. Doubtless we no longer have art here; nor, perhaps, do we even precisely have science (what is a paradoxical science?). But this paradoxical stage is the stage we are at, and it is irreversible.

We must, then, put the interminable polemic regarding the

critical or non-critical value of Warhol behind us, the polemic about his complicity with the media or the capitalist system. Certainly, there is no denunciation in the Warhol universe, since there is not even, strictly speaking, any enunciation. That is his strength. Any critical meaning would only weaken the paradoxical position. Any negativity would merely detract from the image as extreme phenomenon, that is to say, the radical indifference of images to the world. Therein lies the secret of the image, of its superficial radicality and its material innocence, this capacity to refract every interpretation into the void. It is by preserving this indifference of images to the world and our own (Warholian) indifference to images that we preserve their virulence and their intensity.

Such is the objectless image, which lacks the imagination of the subject. Like the famous knife without a blade which lacks a handle. Instead of the handle being counterposed to the blade, as it is in the case of a real knife, in the ideal knife the absence of handle is counterposed to the absence of blade. Such is the perfection of the knife and such, too, is Warhol's universe, where nothing is opposed to nothing. That no one is opposed to no one is also, in his own terms, the perfection of otherness, because it is insignificance which binds things together, which binds people together.

Warhol is agnostic, as we all are secretly. The agnostic does not claim that God does not exist. He says: God exists (perhaps), but I don't believe in him. Warhol says: art exists (perhaps), but I don't believe in it. And it is precisely because I don't believe in it that I am the best. This is neither pride nor the cynicism of advertising. It is the logic of the agnostic. Sexual fetishism, too, is sexually indifferent: it does not believe in sex, but only in the idea of sex which is, of course, asexual. Thus we no longer believe in art, but only in the idea of art which has itself, of course, nothing aesthetic about it.

So Warhol can say: if I could be sure everything I do was just

bluff, I would do extraordinary things. If I knew everything I did wasn't by me, I would do marvellous things. That is snobbery, and at the same time it is the defiant challenge of the person who does not believe in the thing that he can do it better than all those who do.

Warhol never tires himself. The agnostic isn't going to tire himself out working for the glory of God, or to prove his existence. Warhol isn't going to tire himself out proving the existence of art. Because, fundamentally, there is no need. We no more need the pathos of art than we need the pathos of suffering or the pathos of desire. A Stoic trait, this. What is good about Warhol is that he is Stoical, agnostic, puritanical and heretical all at the same time. Having all the qualities, he generously credits all around him with them. The world is there, and it's excellent. People are there, and they're OK. They have no need to believe in what they are doing, they're perfect. He is the best, but everyone's a genius. Never before has the privilege of the creator been quashed in such a way, by a kind of maximalist irony. And all without contempt or demagogy: there is in him a kind of airy innocence, a gracious form of the abolition of privileges. There is in him something of the Cathars and the theory of the Perfect.[21]

This Warholian munificence, so different from the sense of caste which is generally that of art and artists, does not derive from democratic principles. It comes, rather, from a principle of illusion (the concept of the world as the work of the devil and, at the same time, that of perfection achieved here on earth are the two fundamental concepts of the Cathars. They are also the two basic heresies in the eyes of the Church, as they are indeed today for all political and moral orthodoxies). Illusion is, in effect, the most egalitarian, the most democratic principle there is: everyone is equal before the world as illusion, whereas we are not at all equal before the world as Truth and Reality, where all inequalities are engendered.

* * *

This is why Warhol is able to make himself the scenarist of a perfect 'walk-on', where all are equal. All images are good, because they are all equally illusory. Everyone is wonderful, and the snaps you take of them are inevitably successful. This is the universal democracy of extras. Warhol himself does merely this: a walk-on part. Marilyn Monroe is a walk-on actor: she is a star only because she has entered pure walk-on. When she fires at Warhol, Valerie Solanas is merely one extra shooting at another. His assistants are extras, working for him, working in his stead. Everyone – and not just in the stage and media world, but in the political and moral world – is doomed to walk-on parts. What we have here is a metaphysical state of our modern world, which is akin to that of the unconditional simulacrum. The difference is that, instead of having a depressed view of this, linked to our naturalistic prejudice, Warhol delights in this walk-on state, as though it were second nature to him. A machine should be unhappy, because it is perfectly alienated. But Warhol is not: he has invented the joy of the machine, the joy of making the world even more illusory than it was before. For this is the fate of all our technologies: to render the world yet more illusory. Warhol understood that. He understood that it is the machine which generates the total illusion of the modern world, and that it is by joyously espousing this machinic 'walk-on' position [*figuration*] that he effects a kind of transfiguration, whereas art which takes itself for art merely looks like vulgar simulation.

So far as fame is concerned, Warhol's position is very simple. Fame is based on boredom, just as the aura of images is founded on their insignificance. In his Journal, the meticulous management of his fame is accompanied by a remarkable indifference to his own life. Fame is the accidental spotlight that lights up the involuntary actor of his own life. It is the aura of an existence conceived as an exceptional *fait divers*, rendered exceptional by artificial light. Everything is in the lighting. The natural light of genius is rare, but the artificial light which reigns over our world is so

plentiful that there will inevitably be enough for everyone. Even a machine can become famous, and Warhol never aspired to anything but this machinic celebrity, a celebrity without consequence which leaves no trace. A celebrity which comes from the demand of everything today to be approved and fêted by the gaze. It is said that he was self-advertising. Not so: he was merely the medium for that gigantic advertising operation the world carries out through technology and images, forcing our imaginations to fade, our passions to turn outwards, shattering the mirror we held up to it (hypocritically, as it happens) to tap it for our profit.

This is why Warhol is not part of the history of art. He is, quite simply, part of the world. He does not represent it; he is a fragment of it: a fragment in the pure state. This is why, seen from the viewpoint of art, he can be disappointing. Seen as a refraction of our world, he is perfectly self-evident. Like the world itself: looked at from the angle of meaning, the world is thoroughly disappointing. From the angle of appearance and detail, it is perfectly self-evident. And so is the Warhol machine, that extraordinary machine for filtering the world in its material self-evidence.

No one can claim to describe that machine. That would imply a literal complicity, a machinic complicity, with Warhol. Now, not everyone has the good fortune to be a machine.

Objects in This Mirror

'I'll be your mirror': this is the formula of the subject. 'We shall be your favourite disappearing act!': this is the slogan of the object.[22] Yet that disappearance also has to be the 'appearing act' of the Other. For that is the only way for him to exist. What you engender in the mode of production will never be anything but the image of yourselves. Only what comes to pass in the mode of disappearance is truly other.

Beings, objects are such that, in themselves, their disappearance changes them. It is in this sense that they deceive us, that they delude us. But it is in this sense, too, that they are faithful to themselves, and that we must be faithful to them, in their minute detail, in their precise figuration, in the sensuous illusion of their appearance and their sequencing. For illusion is not the opposite of reality; it is a more subtle reality which enwraps the primary one in the sign of its disappearance.

Every photographed object is merely the trace left by the disappearance of everything else. From the summit of this object exceptionally absent from the rest of the world, you have an unbeatable view on the world.

The absence of the world which is present in every detail, reinforced by every detail – like the absence of the subject reinforced by every feature of a face. This illumination of detail can also be

obtained by mental gymnastics or a subtlety of the senses. But here the technique effects this with ease. It is, perhaps, a trap.

The photo is not an image in real time. It retains the moment of the negative, the suspense of the negative, that slight time-lag which allows the image to exist before the world – or the object – disappears into the image, which they could not do in the computer-generated image, where the real has already disappeared. The photo preserves the moment of disappearance and thus the charm of the real, like that of a previous life.

The silence of photography. One of its most precious qualities, unlike the cinema, TV or advertisements, on which you always have to impose a silence – unsuccessfully. Silence of the image, which requires (or should require!) no commentary. But silence of the object, too, which photography wrests from the thunderous context of the real world. Whatever the violence, speed or noise which surrounds it, it gives the object back its immobility and its silence. In the greatest turbulence, it re-creates the equivalent of the desert, of the stillness of phenomena. It is the only way of moving through cities in silence, of moving through the world in silence.

Photography has an obsessional, narcissistic, ecstatic character. It is a solitary activity. The photographic image is irreparable, as irreparable as the state of things at a particular moment. All retouching, all repentance, has, like all posing, an abominably aesthetic character. The solitude of the photographic subject in space and time is correlative with the solitude of the object and its temperamental silence. What photographs well is what has found its temperamental identity, that is, no longer has need of the desire of the other.

The only deep desire is not for what I lack, nor even for the person who lacks me (though that is, itself, more subtle), but for the person who does not lack me, for what is perfectly capable

of existing without me. Someone who does not lack me – that is radical otherness. Desire is always the desire for that alien perfection, at the same time as it is the desire perhaps to shatter it, to break it down. You get aroused only for things whose perfection and impunity you want both to share and to shatter.

Where does the objective magic of photography come from? The answer is that it is the object which does all the work. Photographers will never admit it, and always argue that all the originality lies in their vision of the world. This is how they take photos which are too good, confusing their subjective vision with the reflex miracle of the photographic act.

This has nothing to do with writing, the seductive power of which is far superior. But photography's power to stupefy is far greater than that of writing. It is rare for a text to be able to offer itself up with the same instantaneity, the same manifestness as a shadow, a light, a texture, a photographic detail. Just sometimes in Gombrowicz or in Nabokov, when their writing recaptures the trace of the original disorder, the material, objectal vehemence of things without qualities, the erotic potency of a senseless world.

Hence the difficulty of photographing individuals and faces. It is impossible to get someone into focus photographically when you can't properly get them 'into focus' psychologically. Subjects, unlike objects, are never willing accessories. They make the lens tremble. Within any human being whatever, there is such a drama going on, such a complex (de-)construction, that the lens – tempted, in spite of itself, by resemblance – strips it of its character. The problem does not arise with objects which, not having passed through the mirror stage, are exempt from all resemblance.

They say there is always a photographic moment to be seized where the most banal of beings yield up their secret identity. But what is interesting is their secret alterity, and rather than looking for the identity beneath the appearances, we should look for the mask beneath the identity, the figure which haunts us and diverts

us from our identities – the masked divinity which, in effect, haunts each of us for a moment, one day or another.

For objects, savages, animals, primitives, otherness is sure, singularity is sure. The least significant of objects is 'other'. For the subject, it is much less sure. Because the subject – is this the price he pays for his intelligence or the sign of his stupidity? – succeeds, by dint of often incredible efforts, in existing only within the limits of his identity. If we can have any hope of staving off this process, it is by making people a little more enigmatic to themselves, a little more alien one to another. Thus, in the photographic act, it is not a question of taking them for objects but of making them become objects, and hence making them become other – that is, of taking them for what they are.

If there is a secret to illusion, it involves taking the world for the world and not for its model. It involves restoring to the world the formal power of illusion, which is precisely the same as becoming again, in an immanent way, a 'thing among things'.

> Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu had strolled on to the bridge over the Hao, when the former observed, 'See how the minnows are darting about! That is the pleasure of fishes.'
>
> 'You not being a fish yourself,' said Hui Tzu, 'how can you possibly know in what consists the pleasure of fishes?'
>
> 'And you not being I,' retorted Chuang Tzu, 'how can you know that I do not know?'
>
> 'If I, not being you, cannot know what you know,' urged Hui Tzu, 'it follows that you, not being a fish, cannot know in what consists the pleasure of fishes.'
>
> 'Let us go back', said Chuang Tzu, 'to your original question. You asked me how I knew in what consists the pleasure of fishes. Your very question shows that you knew I knew. For you asked me *how* I *knew*. I knew it from my own feelings on this bridge.'[23]

The Babel Syndrome

To restore the world to its pitiless illusoriness, its irrevocable indeterminacy, only one solution: disinformation, de-programming, the thwarting of perfection.

We came very close to the perfect crime with the Tower of Babel. Fortunately, God stepped in to scatter the languages of the world and sow confusion among men. For the dispersion of languages is a disaster only from the point of view of meaning and communication. From the point of view of language itself, the richness and uniqueness of language, it is a blessing from heaven – against God's secret intention, which was to punish men. But who knows? Perhaps it was all a ruse on the part of the Almighty.

Languages are so beautiful – all of them without exception – only because they are incomparable, irreducible one to another. It is by this distinctness that they exert their particular seductions, by this otherness that they are profoundly complicit. The true curse is when we are condemned to the universal programming of language. Democratic fiction of language in which all languages would be reconciled under the umbrella of sense and good sense. Fiction of information, of a universal form of transcription which cancels out the original text. With virtual languages we are currently inventing anti-Babel, the universal language, the true Babylon, where all languages are confounded and prostituted one to another. A veritable pimping on the part of communication which is the opposite of the magic illusion of otherness.

As though languages could be reconciled! The very hypothesis is absurd. They could be if they were – merely – different. But languages are not different, they are other. They are not plural, they are singular. And, like all that is singular, they are irreconcilable. We must prefer the singular to the plural. We should extend to all objects the fateful dispersion of languages.

Infected by this virus of communication, language itself falls victim to a viral pathology. It does, admittedly, suffer traditionally from rhetoric, ideological rigidity, verbal diarrhoea and tautology, just as a body can suffer from mechanical and organic attacks. The sign, too, can be ill, but it keeps its form for all that, and a critical and clinical analysis can always restore the conditions for its fitness. But with virtual languages we are no longer dealing with a traditional pathology of form but with a pathology of the formula, of a language dedicated to simplified operational commands: a cybernetic language. It is then that the stolen otherness of language takes its revenge, and these endogenous viruses of decomposition against which linguistic reason is powerless take hold. Doomed to its digital ordering, to the infinite representation of its own formula, language, from the depths of its evil genius, takes its revenge by de-programming itself all alone, by automatically disinforming itself. (The de-programming of language will be the work of language itself! The deregulation of the system will be the work of the system itself!)

Why not generalize this de-programming to the individual and the social order – extend the Babel Syndrome to the Babylon Lottery?[24]

Everything begins, in Borges's fiction, with chance being collectively put into power, with statuses, fortunes and the social game being randomly redistributed: the Lottery. As a result, each existence becomes singular, incomparable and free of logical determination. And yet – it works. Everyone ends up preferring this to the traditional social game, which was itself, in any case, also

doomed to arbitrariness. Now, the objective arbitrariness of chance – open indeterminacy – is preferable to the masked illusion of free will. Everyone ends up preferring to be 'just anyone', at the Lottery's whim; ends up preferring to have an accidental destiny rather than a personal existence. We have, in any case, become 'just anyone' today. But we have become so shamefacedly, in our statistical promiscuity, our collective monotony, instead of being so with brilliance, being truly free, by a decree that comes from elsewhere.

In communication, by crowding and perpetual interaction, individuals suffer the same fate – the same absence of fate. Communication totally screens out the radiations of otherness. To preserve the strangeness between people, that personal destiny of a 'singularity of some kind' (G. Agamben), to break down that 'social' programming of exchange which equalizes destinies, all one can do is introduce the arbitrariness of chance, or of the rules of a game. Against the automatic writing of the world, the automatic de-programming of the world.

Unlike all the illusions which present themselves as truth (including that of reality), the illusion of gaming presents itself as just that. Gaming does not require us to believe in it, any more than we are called on to believe in appearances once they present themselves as such (in art, for example). But because they do not believe in the game, there is an all the more necessary relationship between the players and the rules of the game: there is between them a symbolic pact, which is never the same relationship one has with the law. The law is necessary, the rule is of the order of fate. There is nothing to understand in the rule. The players themselves do not have to understand each other. They are not real for one another, they merely partake of the same illusion, and this must indeed be shared between them – a fact which renders it superior to truth and the law, both of which claim an undivided sovereignty.

Hence the paradoxical fact of illusion as the only true democratic

principle. No one is equal before the law, whereas all are equal before the rule, since it is arbitrary. The only democracy, therefore, is that of gaming. That is why the popular classes indulge in it with fervour. Though the fruits of gambling are unequal – ruled by 'luck', though this is an inequality for which you do not have to answer to your conscience – the distribution of opportunities is equal, because it is that of chance. It is neither just nor unjust. And so the people of Babylon end up preferring the chance distribution of destinies, because it leaves them free to act in total innocence. Uncertainty being our fundamental condition, the miracle of gaming is that it transforms that uncertainty into a set of rules, and thus stands outside the natural condition.

With this form of thinking based on Gaming and the Lottery, on Singularity and Arbitrariness, an end is put to the obsession with a rationalist God encompassing all the details of the universe in his vision and ruling all its movements. The idea that the slightest thought, the tiniest beating of a butterfly's wings, could be accounted for in the overall programme of creation was an exhausting situation, entailing the maximum degree of responsibility for everyone. With the Lottery and random turbulence, we have thrown off this obsession. What a relief to know that innumerable processes take place not just without us, but without God either – without anyone! The Ancients were cleverer than we are. They had bestowed responsibility for the world – for its chance happenings, its whims – on the gods, which left them free to act as they saw fit. The gods were the incarnation of the play, chaos and illusoriness of the world, not of its truth. Perhaps with Game and Chaos Theory we are casting off this historical responsibility, this terroristic responsibility for salvation and truth, which is exploited by science and religion, and recovering that same freedom enjoyed by the Ancients.

Radical Thought

> The novel, which is a work of art, exists, not by its resemblances to life, which are forced and material . . . but by its immeasurable difference from life . . .
>
> (R.L. Stevenson)

So, too, the value of thought lies not so much in its inevitable convergences with truth as in the immeasurable divergences which separate it from truth.

It is not true that, in order to live, one has to believe in one's own existence. Indeed, our consciousness is never the echo of our existence in real time but the 'recorded' echo, the screen for the dispersal of the subject and its identity (only in sleep, unconsciousness and death do we exist in real time, are we identical to ourselves). That consciousness results much more spontaneously from a challenging of reality, from a bias towards the objective illusoriness of the world rather than its reality. This challenging is more vital for our survival and the survival of the species than the belief in reality and existence, which is of the order of otherworldly spiritual consolation. Our world is as it is, and it is no more real for that. 'Man's most powerful instinct is to come into conflict with the truth and, therefore, with the real.'

Belief in reality is one of the elementary forms of religious life. It is a failing of the understanding, a failing of common sense, as well as the last refuge of moral zealots and the apostles

of rationality. Fortunately, no one lives by this principle – not even those who profess it. And with good reason. No one believes fundamentally in the real, nor in the self-evidence of their real lives. That would be too sad.

But surely, say these good apostles, you aren't going to discredit reality in the eyes of those who already find it difficult enough to get by, and who surely have a right to reality and the fact that they exist? The same objection for the Third World: surely you aren't going to discredit affluence in the eyes of those dying of starvation? Or: surely you aren't going to run down the class struggle in the eyes of those who haven't even had their bourgeois revolution? Or again: you aren't going to discredit feminist and egalitarian demands in the eyes of all those who haven't even heard of women's rights, etc.? You may not like reality, but don't put others off it! It's a question of democratic morality: you must not demoralize the masses. You must never demoralize anyone.

Underlying these charitable intentions is a profound contempt. First, in the fact of instating reality as a kind of life insurance or a burial plot held in perpetuity, as a kind of human right or consumer good. But, above all, in crediting people with placing their hope only in the visible proofs of their existence: by imputing this plaster-saint realism to them, one takes them for naive and feeble-minded. In their defence, it has to be said that the propagandists of reality vent that contempt on themselves first of all, reducing their own lives to an accumulation of facts and evidence, causes and effects. Well-ordered resentment always begins at home.

Say: This is real, the world is real, the real exists (I have met it) – no one laughs. Say: This is a simulacrum, you are merely a simulacrum, this war is a simulacrum – everyone bursts out laughing. With forced, condescending laughter, or uncontrollable mirth, as though at a childish joke or an obscene proposition. Everything to do with the simulacrum is taboo or obscene, as is everything relating to sex or death. Yet it is much rather reality

and obviousness which are obscene. It is the truth we should laugh at. You can imagine a culture where everyone laughs spontaneously when someone says: 'This is true', 'This is real'.

All this defines the irresolvable relationship between thought and reality. A certain form of thought is bound to the real. It starts out from the hypothesis that ideas have referents and that there is a possible ideation of reality. A comforting polarity, which is that of tailor-made dialectical and philosophical solutions. The other form of thought is eccentric to the real, a stranger to dialectics, a stranger even to critical thought. It is not even a disavowal of the concept of reality. It is illusion, power of illusion, or, in other words, a playing with reality, as seduction is a playing with desire, as metaphor is a playing with truth. This radical thought does not stem from a philosophical doubt, a utopian transference, or an ideal transcendence. It is the material illusion, immanent in this so-called 'real' world. And thus it seems to come from elsewhere. It seems to be the extrapolation of this world into another world.

At all events, there is incompatibility between thought and the real. There is no sort of necessary or natural transition from the one to the other. Neither alternation, nor alternative: only otherness and distance keep them charged up. This is what ensures the singularity of thought, the singularity by which it constitutes an event, just like the singularity of the world, the singularity by which it too constitutes an event.

It has doubtless not always been so. One may dream of a happy conjunction of idea and reality, cradled by the Enlightenment and modernity, in the heroic age of critical thought. Yet critical thought, the butt of which was a certain illusion – superstitious, religious or ideological – is in substance ended. Even if it had survived its catastrophic secularization in all the political movements of the twentieth century, this ideal and seemingly necessary relationship between the concept and reality would, at all events,

be destroyed today. It has broken down under pressure from a gigantic technical and mental simulation, to be replaced by an autonomy of the virtual, henceforth liberated from the real, and a simultaneous autonomy of the real which we see functioning on its own account in a demented – that is, infinitely self-referential – perspective. Having been expelled, so to speak, from its own principle, extraneized, the real has itself become an extreme phenomenon. In other words, one can no longer think it as real, but as exorbitated, as though seen from another world – in short, as illusion. Imagine the stupefying experience which the discovery of a real world other than our own would represent. The objectivity of our world is a discovery we made, like America – and at almost the same time. Now what one has discovered, one can never then invent. And so we discovered reality, which remains to be invented (or: so we invented reality, which remains to be discovered).

Why might there not be as many real worlds as imaginary ones? Why a single real world? Why such an exception? Truth to tell, the real world, among all the other possible ones, is unthinkable, except as dangerous superstition. We must break with it as critical thought once broke (in the name of the real!) with religious superstition. Thinkers, one more effort![25]

In any case, the two orders of thought are irreconcilable. They each follow their course without merging; at best they slide over each other like tectonic plates, and occasionally their collision or subduction creates fault lines into which reality rushes. Fate is always at the intersection of these two lines of force. Similarly, radical thought is at the violent intersection of meaning and non-meaning, of truth and non-truth, of the continuity of the world and the continuity of the nothing.

Unlike the discourse of the real, which gambles on the fact of there being something rather than nothing, and aspires to being founded on the guarantee of an objective and decipherable world, radical thought, for its part, wagers on the illusion of the world. It aspires to the status of illusion, restoring the

non-veracity of facts, the non-signification of the world, proposing the opposite hypothesis that there is nothing rather than something, and going in pursuit of that nothing which runs beneath the apparent continuity of meaning.

The radical prediction is always the prediction of the non-reality of facts, of the illusoriness of the state of fact. It begins only with the presentiment of that illusoriness, and is never confused with the objective state of things. Every confusion of that kind is of the order of the confusion of the messenger and the message, which leads to the elimination of the messenger bearing bad news (for example, the news of the uncertainty of the real, of the non-occurrence of certain events, of the nullity of our values).

Every confusion of thought with the order of the real – that alleged 'faithfulness' to the real of a thought which has cooked it up out of nothing – is hallucinatory. It arises, moreover, from a total misunderstanding about language, which is illusion in its very movement, since it is the bearer of that continuity of the void, that continuity of the nothing at the very heart of what it says, since it is, in its very materiality, deconstruction of what it signifies. Just as photography connotes the effacing, the death of what it represents – which lends it its intensity – so what lends writing, fictional or theoretical, its intensity is the void, the nothingness running beneath the surface, the illusion of meaning, the ironic dimension of language, correlative with that of the facts themselves, which are never anything but what they are [*ne sont jamais que ce qu'ils sont*]. That is to say, they are never more than what they are and they are, literally, never only what they are [*jamais que ce qu'ils sont*]. The irony of the facts, in their wretched reality, is precisely that they are only what they are but that, by that very fact, they are necessarily beyond. For *de facto* existence is impossible – nothing is wholly obvious without becoming enigmatic. Reality itself is too obvious to be true.

It is this ironic transfiguration which constitutes the event of language. And it is to restoring this fundamental illusion of the

world and language that thought must apply itself, if it is not stupidly to take concepts in their literalness – messenger confused with the message, language confused with its meaning and therefore sacrificed in advance.

There is a twofold, contradictory exigency in thought. It is not to analyse the world in order to extract from it an improbable truth, not to adapt to the facts in order to abstract some logical construction from them, but to set in place a form, a matrix of illusion and disillusion, which seduced reality will spontaneously feed and which will, consequently, be verified remorselessly (the only need is to shift the camera angle from time to time). For reality asks nothing other than to submit itself to hypotheses. And it confirms them all. That, indeed, is its ruse and its vengeance.

The theoretical ideal would be to set in place propositions in such a way that they could be disconfirmed by reality, in such a way that reality could only oppose them violently, and thereby unmask itself. For reality is an illusion, and all thought must seek first of all to unmask it. To do that, it must itself advance behind a mask and constitute itself as a decoy, without regard for its own truth. It must pride itself on not being an instrument of analysis, not being a critical tool. For it is the world which must analyse itself. It is the world itself which must reveal itself not as truth, but as illusion. The derealization of the world will be the work of the world itself.[26]

Reality must be caught in the trap, we must move quicker than reality. Ideas, too, have to move faster than their shadows. But if they go too quickly, they lose even their shadows. No longer having even the shadow of an idea. . . . Words move quicker than meaning, but if they go too quickly, we have madness: the ellipsis of meaning can make us lose even the taste for the sign. What are we to exchange this portion of shadow and labour against – this saving of intellectual activity and patience? What

can we sell it to the devil for? It is very difficult to say. We are, in fact, the orphans of a reality come too late, a reality which is itself, like truth, something registered only after the event.

The ultimate is for an idea to disappear as idea to become a thing among things. That is where it finds its accomplishment. Once it has become consubstantial with the surrounding world, there is no call for it to appear, nor to be defended as such. Evanescence of the idea by silent dissemination. An idea is never destined to burst upon the world, but to be extinguished into it, into its showing-through in the world, the world's showing-through in it. A book ends only with the disappearance of its object. Its substance must leave no trace. This is the equivalent of a perfect crime. Whatever its object, writing must make the illusion of that object shine forth, must make it an impenetrable enigma – unacceptable to the *Realpolitiker* of the concept. The objective of writing is to alter its object, to seduce it, to make it disappear for itself. Writing aims at a total resolution – a poetic resolution, as Saussure would have it, that resolution indeed of the rigorous dispersal of the name of God.

Contrary to what is said about it (the real is what resists, what all hypotheses run up against), reality is not very solid and seems predisposed, rather, to retreat in disorder. Whole swathes of reality are collapsing, as in the collapse of Baliverna (Buzzati), where the slightest flaw produces a chain reaction. We find decomposed remnants of it everywhere, as in Borges's 'Of Exactitude in Science'.[27]

Not only does it no longer put up any resistance against those who denounce it, but it even eludes those who take its side. This is perhaps a way of exacting vengeance on its partisans: by throwing them back on their own desire. In the end, it is perhaps more a sphinx than a bitch.

More subtly, it wreaks vengeance on those who deny it by paradoxically proving them right. When the most cynical, most provocative hypothesis is verified, the trick really is a low one;

you are disarmed by the lamentable confirmation of your words by an unscrupulous reality.

So, for example, you put forward the idea of simulacrum, without really believing in it, even hoping that the real will refute it (the guarantee of scientificity for Popper).

Alas, only the fanatical supporters of reality react; reality, for its part, does not seem to wish to prove you wrong. Quite to the contrary, every kind of simulacrum parades around in it. And reality, filching the idea, henceforth adorns itself with all the rhetoric of simulation. It is the simulacrum which ensures the continuity of the real today, the simulacrum which now conceals not the truth, but the fact that there isn't any – that is to say, the continuity of the nothing.

Such is the paradox of all thought which disputes the validity of the real: when it sees itself robbed of its own concept. Events, bereft of meaning in themselves, steal meaning from us. They adapt to the most fantastical hypotheses, just as natural species and viruses adapt to the most hostile environments. They have an extraordinary mimetic capacity: no longer is it theories which adapt to events, but the reverse. And, in so doing, they mystify us, for a theory which is verified is no longer a theory. It's terrifying to see the idea coincide with the reality. These are the death-throes of the concept. The epiphany of the real is the twilight of its concept.

We have lost that lead which ideas had over the world, that distance which meant that an idea remained an idea. Thought has to be exceptional, anticipatory and at the margin – has to be the projected shadow of future events. Today, we are lagging behind events. They may sometimes give the impression of receding; in fact, they passed us long ago. The simulated disorder of things has moved faster than we have. The reality effect has succumbed to acceleration – anamorphosis of speed. Events, in their being, are never behind themselves, are always out ahead of their meaning. Hence the delay of interpretation, which is now merely the retrospective form of the unforeseeable event.

What are we to do, then? What becomes of the heterogeneity of thought in a world won over to the craziest hypotheses? When everything conforms, beyond even our wildest hopes, to the ironic, critical, alternative, catastrophic model?

Well, that is paradise: we are beyond the Last Judgement, in immortality. The only problem is to survive there. For there the irony, the challenging, the anticipation, the maleficence come to an end, as inexorably as hope dies at the gates of hell. And it is indeed there that hell begins, the hell of the unconditional realization of all ideas, the hell of the real. You can see why, as Adorno says, concepts prefer to scupper themselves rather than reach that point.

Something else has been stolen from us: indifference. The power of indifference, which is the quality of the mind, as opposed to the play of differences, which is the characteristic of the world. Now, this has been stolen from us by a world grown indifferent, as the extravagance of thought has been stolen from us by an extravagant world. When things, events, refer one to another and to their undifferentiated concept, then the equivalence of the world meets and cancels out the indifference of thought – and we have boredom. No more altercations; nothing at stake. It is the parting of the dead sea.

How fine indifference was in a world that was not indifferent – in a different, convulsive, contradictory world, a world with issues and passions! That being the case, indifference immediately became an issue and a passion itself. It could pre-empt the indifference of the world, and turn that pre-emption into an event. Today, it is difficult to be more indifferent to their reality than the facts themselves, more indifferent to their meaning than images. Our operational world is an apathetic world. Now, what good is it being passionless in a world without passion, or detached in a world without desire?

It is not a question of defending radical thought. Every idea one defends is presumed guilty, and every idea that cannot defend

itself deserves to disappear. On the other hand, one must fight all charges of irresponsibility, nihilism or despair. Radical thought is never depressive. On this point, there is total misunderstanding. Ideological and moralistic critique, obsessed with meaning and content, obsessed with the political finality of discourse, never takes into account writing, the act of writing, the poetic, ironic, allusive force of language, of the juggling with meaning. It does not see that the resolution of meaning is to be found there – in the form itself, the formal materiality of expression.

Meaning, for its part, is always unhappy. Analysis is, by definition, unhappy, since it is born of critical disillusionment. But language, for its part, is happy, even when referring to a world without illusion and without hope. That might even be the definition of a radical thinking: a happy form and an intelligence without hope.

Critics, being unhappy by nature, always choose ideas as their battleground. They do not see that if discourse always tends to produce meaning, language and writing, for their part, always create illusion – they are the living illusion of meaning, the resolution of the infelicity of meaning by the felicity of language. And this is surely the only political – or transpolitical – act that can be accomplished by the person who writes.

As for ideas, everyone has them. More than they need. What counts is the poetic singularity of the analysis. That alone can justify writing, not the wretched critical objectivity of ideas. There never will be any resolving the contradictoriness of ideas, except in the energy and felicity of language. 'I do not paint sadness and loneliness,' says Hopper. 'What I wanted to do was to paint sunlight on the side of a house.'

At any rate, better a despairing analysis in felicitous language than an optimistic analysis in an infelicitous language that is maddeningly tedious and demoralizingly platitudinous, as is most often the case. The absolute tediousness secreted by that idealistic, voluntaristic thought is the secret sign of its despair – as regards both the world and its own discourse. That is where true depressive

thought is to be found, among those who speak only of the transcending and transforming of the world, when they are incapable of transfiguring their own language.

Radical thought is a stranger to all resolving of the world in the direction of an objective reality and its deciphering. It does not decipher. It anagrammatizes, it disperses concepts and ideas and, by its reversible sequencing, takes account both of meaning and of the fundamental illusoriness of meaning. Language takes account of the very illusion of language as definitive stratagem and, through it, of the illusion of the world as infinite trap, as seduction of the mind, as spiriting away of all our mental faculties. While it is a vehicle of meaning, it is at the same time a superconductor of illusion and non-meaning. Language is merely the involuntary accomplice of communication – by its very form it appeals to the spiritual and material imagination of sounds and rhythm, to the dispersal of meaning in the event of language. This passion for artifice, for illusion, is the passion for undoing that too-beauteous constellation of meaning. And for letting the imposture of the world show through, which is its enigmatic function, and the mystification of the world, which is its secret. While at the same time letting its own imposture show through – the impostor, not the *composteur* [composing stick] of meaning. This passion has the upper hand in the free and witty use of language, in the witty play of writing. Where that artifice is not taken into account, not only is its charm lost, but the meaning itself cannot be resolved.

Cipher, do not decipher. Work over the illusion. Create illusion to create an event. Make enigmatic what is clear, render unintelligible what is only too intelligible, make the event itself unreadable. Accentuate the false transparency of the world to spread a terroristic confusion about it, or the germs or viruses of a radical illusion – in other words, a radical disillusioning of the real. Viral, pernicious thought, corrosive of meaning, generative of an erotic perception of reality's turmoil.

Promote a clandestine trade in ideas, of all inadmissible ideas, of unassailable ideas, as the liquor trade had to be promoted in the 1930s. For we are already in a state of full-scale prohibition. Thought has become an extremely rare commodity, prohibited and prohibitive, which has to be cultivated in secret places following esoteric rules.

Everything must take place in secret. We shall take the view that the official thought market is universally corrupt and implicated in the prohibition of thought by the dominant clerisy. Every intervention by critical, enlightened and right-thinking intellectuals, all of them politically correct even when they do not know it, will be considered vacuous and shameful.

Eradicate within oneself every trace of the intellectual conspiracy. Spirit away the reality file to wipe out all its conclusions. It is, in fact, reality which is fomenting its own disavowal, preparing its own ruin by way of our lack of reality. Hence the feeling that this whole affair – the world, thought and language – has come from elsewhere, and might disappear as though by magic. For the world does not seek to exist more, nor to persist in existing. It seeks, rather, the wittiest way to escape reality. It seeks, by way of thought, what can lead it to its doom.

The absolute rule is to give back more than you were given. Never less, always more. The absolute rule of thought is to give back the world as it was given to us – unintelligible. And, if possible, to render it a little more unintelligible.

The Other Side Of The Crime

With the Virtual, we enter not only upon the era of the liquidation of the Real and the Referential, but that of the extermination of the Other.

It is the equivalent of an ethnic cleansing which would not just affect particular populations but unrelentingly pursue all forms of otherness.

The otherness of death – staved off by unrelenting medical intervention.

Of the face and the body – run to earth by plastic surgery.

Of the world – dispelled by Virtual Reality.

Of every one [chacun] *– which will one day be abolished by the cloning of individual cells.*

And, quite simply, of the other, currently undergoing dilution in perpetual communication.

If information is the site of the perfect crime against reality, communication is the site of the perfect crime against otherness.

No more other: communication.
No more enemy: negotiation.
No more predators: conviviality.
No more negativity: absolute positivity.
No more death: the immortality of the clone.
No more otherness: identity and difference.
No more seduction: sexual in-difference.

No more illusion: hyperreality, Virtual Reality.
No more secret: transparency.
No more destiny.

The perfect crime.

The World Without Women

The World Without Women (*Il Mondo senza Donne*, 1935) by Virgilio Martini describes the ravages of a mysterious illness (eventually named 'fallopitis') which decimates all childbearing women between puberty and the menopause. The symptoms of the illness irresistibly evoke those of AIDS some fifty years later. By an amazing coincidence, it begins in Haiti and spreads throughout the world and, by another paradoxical coincidence, it is eventually discovered that this illness, which science is powerless to control (exactly as with AIDS), originated in a plot hatched by homosexuals to exterminate the female of the species! The epidemic runs its course, all adolescent girls and young women disappear, and the human race is soon threatened with extinction. The rest of the book, full of dramatic twists and turns, carries on rather like a thriller. But the central idea is that of an extermination of femaleness – a terrifying allegory of the extermination of all otherness, for which the feminine is the metaphor and, perhaps, more than the metaphor.

What we ourselves have fallen victim to – and by no means allegorically – is a virus destructive of otherness. And we may predict that – even more than in the case of AIDS – no science will be able to protect us from this viral pathology which, by dint of antibodies and immune strategies, aims at the extinction, pure and simple, of the other. Though, for the moment, this virus does not affect the biological reproduction of the species, it affects

an even more fundamental function, that of the symbolic reproduction of the other, favouring, rather, a cloned, asexual reproduction of the species-less individual. For to be deprived of the other is to be deprived of sex, and to be deprived of sex is to be deprived of symbolic belonging to any species whatsoever.

On its appearance in Italy (in 1953 – it was left unpublished for twenty years, as no publisher would take it) the book was condemned and withdrawn from circulation on grounds of obscenity, though in point of fact there is nothing less pornographic than a world without women. But that was merely an alibi to conceal, under cover of a destruction of femaleness, the panic idea of a yet more monstrous destruction – the idea of a world given over entirely to the selfsame [*le Même*].

This is the literal end of alienation. There is no one on the other side any more. In the past we would have seen this as the ideal goal of the subject – total appropriation of and control over oneself. Today we can see that alienation protected us from something worse: from the definitive loss of the other, from the expropriation of the other by the same.

In German, there are two apparently synonymous terms with a very significant distinction between them. '*Verfremdung*' means becoming other, becoming estranged from oneself – alienation in the literal sense. '*Entfremdung*', by contrast, means to be dispossessed of the other, to lose all otherness. Now, it is much more serious to be dispossessed of the other than of oneself. Being deprived of the other is worse than alienation: a lethal change, by liquidation of the dialectical opposition itself. An irrevocable destabilization, that of the subject without object, of the same without other – definitive stasis and metastasis of the Same. A tragic destiny for individuals and for our – self-programming and self-referential – systems: no more adversaries, no more hostile environments – no environment at all any longer, no more exteriority. This is like wresting a species away from its

natural predators. No longer threatened by them, it cannot but destroy itself (by 'depredation', as it were). Death being the great natural predator, a species we attempt at all costs to immortalize and wrest away from death – as we do with all our replacement technologies for the body's organs – is doomed to disappear. The best strategy for bringing about someone's ruin is to eliminate everything which threatens him, thus causing him to lose all his defences, and it is this strategy we are applying to ourselves. By eliminating the other in all its forms (illness, death, negativity, violence, strangeness), not to mention racial and linguistic differences, by eliminating all singularities in order to radiate total positivity, we are eliminating ourselves.

We have fought negativity and death, rooting out evil in all its forms. By eliminating the work of the negative, we have unleashed positivity, and that is what has become lethal today. By setting off the chain reaction of the positive, we have at the same time – by a perverse, but perfectly coherent effect – released an intense viral pathology. For a virus, far from being negative, is the product, rather, of an ultra-positivity of which it is the lethal embodiment. This had escaped us, as had the metamorphoses of evil which follow the advances of reason about like a shadow.

This paradigm of the subject without object, of the subject without other, can be seen in all that has lost its shadow and become transparent to itself. Even in devitalized substances: in sugar without calories, salt without sodium, life without spice, effects without causes, wars without enemy, passions without object, time without memory, masters without slaves, or the slaves without masters we have become.

What becomes of a master without a slave? He ends up terrorizing himself. And of a slave without a master? He ends up exploiting himself. The two are conjoined today in the modern form of voluntary servitude: enslavement to data systems and calculation systems – total efficiency, total performance. We

have become masters – at least virtual masters – of this world, but the object of that mastery, the finality of that mastery, have disappeared.

The Surgical Removal of Otherness

This liquidation of the Other is accompanied by an artificial synthesis of otherness – a radical cosmetic surgery of which cosmetic surgery on faces and bodies is merely a symptom. For the crime is perfect only when even the traces of the destruction of the Other have disappeared.

With modernity, we enter the age of the production of the other. The aim is no longer to kill the other, devour it, seduce it, vie with it, love it or hate it, but, first, to produce it. It is no longer an object of passion, it is an object of production.

Perhaps, in its irreducible singularity, the Other has become dangerous or unbearable, and its seduction has to be exorcized? Perhaps, quite simply, otherness and the dual relation progressively disappear with the rise of individual values? The fact remains that otherness does come to be in short supply and, for want of living otherness as destiny, the Other has to be produced imperatively as difference. This also goes for the body, sex and social relations. It is to escape the world as destiny, the body as destiny, sex (and the opposite sex) as destiny, that the production of the Other as difference is invented. It is the same with sexual difference. To wish to disentangle the inextricable otherness of male and female, to restore each to its specificity and difference, is an absurdity. Yet this is the absurdity of our sexual culture of liberation and emancipation of desire. Each sex with its anatomical and psychological characteristics, with its own desire and all the irresolvable

dramas that ensue, including the ideology of sex and the utopia of a difference based both in right and in nature.

This invention of difference coincides with the invention of a new image of woman, and thus a change of sexual paradigm. That change, on the threshold of modernity, at the turn of the nineteenth century, was the production by male hysteria of an imagining of woman in place of her stolen femininity (Christina von Braun, *Nicht-Ich*, 1985; and *Die schamlose Schönheit des Vergangenen*, 1989). In this hysterical configuration, it was to some extent the femininity of man which was projected into woman, shaping her as ideal figure in his likeness. The point was no longer, as in the courtly and aristocratic figure of seduction, to conquer woman, to seduce or be seduced by her, but to produce her as realized utopia – ideal woman or *femme fatale*, a hysterical and supernatural metaphor. The staging of this ideal was the work of Romantic Eros: woman as projective resurrection of the selfsame, a twin-like, almost incestuous figure – an artefact doomed from that point on to amorous confusion, that is, to a pathos of the ideal resemblance between beings and sexes. The sexual difference, the concept of sexual difference which was established in the same movement, was merely a variant of the incestuous form. In that concept, man and woman were no longer anything but the mirroring [*mirage*] of each other. They were separated and different only the better to become the – often indifferent – mirrors of each other. The whole machinery of eroticism was turned on its head, since the erotic attraction which formerly emanated from strangeness and otherness now shifted over to emanate from similarity and likeness.

So Martini's *Il Mondo senza Donne* is not as allegorical as all that. By the invention of a femaleness which makes woman superfluous, makes her a supplemental incarnation, woman really has disappeared – if not physically, then at least beneath a substitute femininity.

* * *

Moreover, this goes for man too, since it is his own stolen femininity that he transposes into the theatrical mirror of the role and idea of woman. And if the real woman seems to disappear in this hysterical invention, we have to see that male desire also becomes entirely problematic, since it is now capable only of projecting itself into its image, and thus becoming purely speculative.

All the endless commentaries on the sexual privilege of the masculine gender are thus mere foolishness. There is, in the sexual illusion of our time, a kind of immanent justice which means that, in this *trompe-l'œil* difference, both sexes lose their singularity equally, their difference culminating inexorably in non-differentiation. The process of extrapolation of the Selfsame and twinning of the sexes (if twinhood is such a topical theme, this is because it reflects this mode of libidinal cloning) results in a progressive assimilation which goes so far as to render sexuality a useless function. Here anticipating the clones of the future, who will be sexed to no purpose, since sexuality will no longer be needed for their reproduction.

The coming of the problematic of gender, now taking over from that of sex, illustrates this progressive dilution of the sexual function. This is the era of the Transsexual, where the conflicts linked to difference – and even the biological and anatomical signs of difference – survive long after the real otherness of the sexes has disappeared.

When the sexes eye each other up, squint out through each other's eyes. The male eyes up the female, the female eyes up the male. This is no longer the seductive gaze but a generalized sexual strabismus, reflecting that of moral and cultural values: the true eyes up the false, the beautiful eyes up the ugly, good eyes up evil, and vice versa. They each 'lock on to' the other in an attempt to misappropriate its distinctive signs. But both are in fact in league to short-circuit difference. They function like communicating vessels, according to the new machinic rituals of switching

or commutation. The utopia of sexual difference ends in the switching of sexual poles, and in interactive exchange. Instead of a dual relation, sex becomes a reversible function. In place of alterity, an alternating current.

It is in seduction, in illusion, in artifice that there is the maximum intensity, that each sex is *fatal* for the other, that is, the bearer of a radical otherness. In naturalistic terms, by contrast – the terms on which our difference and, consequently, our 'liberation' are based – the sexes are less different than is commonly thought. They tend, rather, to merge, or even to change places. What is 'liberated' is precisely not their singularity but their relative conflation and, of course, once the orgy and the ecstasy of desire are over, their respective indifference. Where do we find talk of passion now? It would seem that we talk, rather, of sexual compassion. We don't even hear much talk of desire. That rapidly declined in the firmament of concepts. It has become the astral theme of a stereotyped jargon of psychoanalysis and advertising.

Liberation is always naturalistic: it naturalizes desire as function, as energy, as libido. And that naturalization of pleasures and differences leads just as 'naturally' to the loss of the sexual illusion. Sex removed from artifice, illusion and seduction, and restored to its conscious or unconscious economy (you would have to be very clever indeed to say whether this was the 'reality' of sex). Woman wrested from her artificial condition and restored to her natural being, her 'legitimate' status as sexual being and, at the same time, to formal recognition. Now, seduction and passion care nothing for the recognition of the other. And singularity has nothing to do with identity or difference – its mode of action is singular and illegal, and that's all there is to it. Recognition goes with difference, and both are bourgeois virtues.

In any case, in this whole business about difference, there is always one term more different than the other. Woman is, in fact, more different than man. And not only more different than him, but more than different. Man is only different, but woman

is other: strange, absent, enigmatic, antagonistic. And it was to conjure away this radical otherness that biological difference, and also psychological, ideological and political difference, and so on, were invented. These things can all be worked out in terms of an ordered opposition, albeit one conceived in terms of relations of force. But, strictly speaking, the opposition does not exist. It is merely the substitution of a symmetrical, differential form for a dual, dissymmetrical one. In other words, this form of 'natural' compromise is as fragile as can be. You cannot trust nature.

The *femme fatale* is never *fatale* as a natural element, but as artifice, as seductress or as the projective artefact of male hysteria. The absent woman, ideal or diabolic, but always fetishized, that constructed woman, that machinic Eve, that mental object, scoffs at the difference of the sexes. She scoffs at desire and the subject of desire. More feminine than the feminine: the woman-object. Yet we are not dealing with alienation here but with a mental object, a pure object (which does not take itself for a subject), a being which is unreal, fake, cerebral, a devourer of grey and libidinal matter. Through her, it is sex which denies sexual difference, it is desire itself which lays a trap for itself, the object which takes its revenge. The woman-object, the *femme fatale*, plays on that hysterical femininity which is masculine in essence. She plays on that speculative image by an unconditional speculation, by an inflation of her own image. By overbidding her condition as object, she becomes 'fatal' for herself, and this is how she becomes so for others. In the very features of the artificial ideal which has been manufactured for her, it is the feminine which shows through – not to meet up again with the 'real' woman she is supposed to be, but to distance her yet further from her nature, and make of that artifice a triumphant destiny.

But the sexes have asymmetrical destinies. It is not possible for man to take this same 'double or quits' option with the ideal type of virility imposed on him. He cannot raise his bid, but only let go of some of his cards. And if there are fewer and fewer

femmes fatales, this is because there aren't even any men for them to prey on.

This respective hystericization of roles is, in any case, diminishing as belief in nature fades in the contemporary period and as, with its 'liberation', the problematic and ambiguous character of this difference becomes glaringly obvious. Hysteria was sexuality's last form of fatal strategy. It is not by chance, then, that it is disappearing today, after fomenting all the extreme figures of the sexual mythology of a whole century. Fatal strategies step aside before the final solution.

A new spectrum of dispersion has appeared and, in this low-definition sexual game, it does indeed seem that we are sliding from ecstasy to metastasis, the metastasis of countless little *dispositifs* of libidinal transfusion and perfusion – micro-scenarios of unsexuality and transsexuality in all its forms. Resolution of sex into its *disjecta membra*, its part-objects, its fractal elements.

The only alternative, in these new sexual conditions of indifference, would seem to lie with woman. Because she herself wishes to produce herself as different, because she no longer wishes to be produced as such by male hysteria, it is incumbent upon her to produce the other in return, to produce a new figure of the other as object of seduction, as the male succeeded in doing to some extent in producing a culture of the seductive image of woman. We have here the problem of a woman, having once become a subject of desire, no longer finding the other she could desire as such (part of the more general problem of our age of achieving subjecthood in a world in which, in the interim, the object has disappeared). For the secret never lies in the equivalent exchange of desires, under the sign of egalitarian difference; it lies in inventing the other who will be able to play on – and make sport of – my own desire, defer it, suspend it, and thus arouse it indefinitely. Is the female gender capable today of producing – since it no longer wishes to personify it – this same seductive otherness? Is the female gender still hysterical enough to invent the other?

It seems, unfortunately, that we are coming close to the opposite extreme – that is to say, to the exacerbated form of difference or, in other words, the final solution: sexual harassment. The ultimate development of female hysteria – pornography being the ultimate and caricatural development of male hysteria. These are, basically, the two sides of the same hysterical indifference.

Sexual harassment: phobic caricature of every sexual approach, unconditional refusal to seduce and be seduced. Is this compulsion merely the alibi of indifference or does it, like all allergic symptoms, conceal a hypersensitivity to the other? The fact remains that the slightest hint of seduction, any expression of desire, is met by a charge of rape. There would be a presumption of rape at every stage in the relationship, even a conjugal relationship, if it is not expressly consented to. Italian law regards inducement as an offence – that is to say, not forcing oneself on the other to provoke their desire, nor even to seduce them, but the mere fact of inducing their consent by some gesture or sign or other. If we are to take this attitude, we should put the sperm on the blacklist too, since its effort to penetrate the ovum is surely the prototype of sexual harassment (though perhaps there is inducement on the part of the ovary?).

Where does rape begin, where does sexual harassment begin? Once we have marked out the demarcation line of an unassailable difference between the sexes, there is no longer any possibility of their coming together except in violence. So, in Bellochio's film *The Sentence* [*La Condanna*], the question is whether the man really raped the woman, since she had an orgasm. The prosecution claims that he did, while the defence's plea is that, in the end, the victim consented. But no one asks whether the orgasm wasn't an aggravating circumstance. One may in fact argue that forcing the other to have pleasure, to feel rapture, is indeed the height of rape, and more serious than forcing the other to give you pleasure. At any rate, this brings out the absurdity of this entire problematic. Sexual harassment marks the arrival on the scene of

an impotent, victim's sexuality, a sexuality impotent to constitute itself either as object or as subject of desire in its paranoid wish for identity and difference. It is no longer decency that is threatened with violation, but sex or, rather, sexist idiocy, which 'takes the law into its own hands'.

At the same time, this illustrates the dead-end of difference. The problem of difference is insoluble, for the simple reason that the terms involved are not different but incomparable. The terms we are used to setting in opposition to each other are quite simply incompatible, which means that the concept of difference has no meaning. Thus, Female and Male are two incomparable terms, and if there is, deep down, no sexual difference, this is because the two sexes are not opposable.

This goes for all the traditional oppositions. We can say the same of Good and Evil. They are not on the same plane, and it is an illusion to oppose them. The real problem [*le mal*] is precisely the strangeness, the imperviousness of Good and Evil [*le Mal*] to each other, which means there is no reconciling, no superseding them, and thus no ethical solution to the problem of their opposition. The inexorable otherness of Evil passes across the ecliptic of morality. The same goes for freedom in its grapplings with information – the leitmotiv of our media ethics: this is a false conflict, because there is no real confrontation, since the two terms are not on the same plane. There is no ethics of information.

What defines otherness is not that the two terms are not identifiable, but that they are not opposable. Otherness is of the order of the incomparable. It is not exchangeable in terms of a general equivalence; it is not negotiable; and yet it circulates in the mode of complicity and the dual relation, both in seduction and in war.

It is not even opposed to identity: it plays with it, just as illusion is not opposed to the real, but plays with it, and as the simulacrum is not opposed to truth, but plays with truth – doing so, therefore, beyond true and false, beyond difference – and just as the feminine is not opposed to the masculine, but plays with

the masculine, somewhere beyond sexual difference. The two terms do not correlate: the second always plays with the first. The latter is always a more subtle reality which enwraps the former in the sign of its disappearance. The whole effort will be to reduce this antagonistic principle, this incompatibility, to a mere difference, to a well-tempered play of opposition, to a negotiation of identity and difference in place of the stolen otherness.

All that seeks to be singular and incomparable, and does not enter into the play of difference, must be exterminated. Either physically or by integration into the differential game where all singularities vanish into the universal field. So it is with primitive cultures, for example: their myths have become comparable under the aegis of structural analysis. Their signs have become exchangeable under the umbrella of a universal culture, in exchange for their right to difference. Whether denied by racism or neutralized by differential culturalism, those cultures were faced, at any event, with a final solution. This reconciliation of all antagonistic forms in the name of consensus and conviviality is the worst thing we can do. We must reconcile nothing. We must keep open the otherness of forms, the disparity between terms; we must keep alive the forms of the irreducible.

The 'Laying-Off' of Desire

In facial features, sex, illnesses and death, identity is perpetually changing. This is the body as destiny, which has to be exorcized at all costs – through the appropriation of the body as projection of self, the individual appropriation of desire, of one's appearance, one's image: cosmetic surgery on all fronts. If the body is no longer a site of otherness but of identification, then we have urgently to become reconciled with it, repair it, perfect it, turn it into an ideal object. Everyone treats their bodies the way men treat women in projective identification: they invest them as a fetish, making an autistic cult of them, subjecting them to a quasi-incestuous manipulation. And it is the body's resemblance to its model which becomes a source of eroticism and 'white' seduction – in the sense that it effects a kind of white magic of identity, as opposed to the black magic of otherness.[28]

This is how it is with body-building: you get into your body as you would into a suit of nerve and muscle. The body is not muscular, but muscled. It is the same with the brain and with social relations or exchanges: body-building, brainstorming, word-processing. Madonna is the ideal specimen of this, our muscled Immaculate Conception, our muscular angel who delivers us from the weaknesses of the body (pity the poor shade of Marilyn!).

The sheath of muscles is the equivalent of character armour. In the past, women merely wrapped themselves in their image and their finery – Freud speaks of those people who live with a kind of inner mirror, in a fleshly, happy self-reference. That

narcissistic ideal is past and gone; body-building has wiped it out and replaced it with a gymnastic Ego-Ideal – cold, hard, stressed, artificial self-reference. The construction of a double, of a physical and mental identity shell. Thus, in 'body simulation', where you can animate your body remotely at any moment, the phantasy of being present in more than one body becomes an operational reality. An extension of the human being. And not a metaphorical or poetic extension, as in Pessoa's heteronyms, but quite simply a technical one.[29]

The contemporary individual is never without his clones – reincarnation of the old fatality of incest, of the infernal cycle of identity which, at least in the fable, still had an air of tragic destiny to it but which, for us, is now no longer anything but the code of the automatic disappearance of the individual. We can't exactly even speak of individuals any longer. Individuation was part of the golden age of a subject–object dynamics. Since he has become truly indivisible, and has thus achieved his perfect – that is to say, delirious, self-referential – form, we cannot speak of the individual any longer, but only of the Selfsame and the hypostasis of the Selfsame. As is illustrated by the absolute, intransitive difference which marks the final point of that self-reference: 'my', 'your', 'his or her' difference. The pure and simple appropriation of difference. Previously, it was at least the other who was taken to be different. Metastases of identity: all the particles disperse into individual histories. To each his cocktail, his own life story, all equivalent in their simultaneously differential and insignificant character. Each one defended by such a scrambling system that his voice, speech and face will soon be unrecognizable to the others, except to those who have a personal decoder – including when making love: the body will materialize only for those who have the key to the decoder. Soon we shall all be decoding machines. Since every spontaneous relationship, every natural movement of desire, is laid off [*en chômage technique*], then the technical ritual will have to substitute for this 'technically' unemployed desire.

Madonna Deconnection:[30] Madonna is 'desperately' fighting in a world where there is no response – the world of sexual indifference. Hence the urgent need for hypersexual sex, the signs of which are exacerbated precisely because they are no longer addressed to anyone. This is why she is condemned successively and simultaneously to take on all the roles and all the versions of sex (rather than the perversions), because for her there is no longer any sexual otherness, something which brings sex into play beyond sexual difference, and not just by parodying it wildly, but always from within. She is, in fact, fighting against her own sex; she is fighting against her own body. For want of some other who would deliver her from herself, she is unrelentingly forced to provide her own sexual enticement, to build up for herself a panoply of accessories – in the event a sadistic panoply, from which she tries to wrench herself away. Harassment of the body by sex, harassment of sex by signs.

It is said that she lacks nothing (this might be said of women in general). There are, however, different ways of lacking nothing. She lacks nothing by virtue of the artefacts and technology with which she surrounds herself, in the manner of a woman producing and reproducing herself – herself and her desire – in a cycle or closed circuit. She lacks precisely that nothing (the form of the other?) which would undress her and deliver her of all this panoply. Madonna is desperately seeking a body able to generate illusion, a naked body costumed by its own appearance. She would like to be naked, but she never manages it. She is perpetually harnessed, if not by leather and metal, then by the obscene desire to be naked, by the artificial mannerism of exhibition. But this produces total inhibition and, for the spectator, radical frigidity. So, paradoxically, she ends up personifying the frenetic frigidity of our age.

She can play all the roles. But is this because she enjoys a solid identity, a fantastic power of identification, or because she has none at all? Surely because she has none. But the trick is to know – as she does – how to exploit this fantastic absence of identity.

We know people who, for want of being able to communicate, are victims of profuse otherness (as we speak of profuse sweating). They play all the roles at once, their own and the other person's; they both give and return, ask the questions and supply the answers. They embrace the other's presence so fully that they no longer know the limits of their own. The other is merely a transitional object. The secondary gain from the loss of the other is an ability to transform oneself into anyone at all – through role-playing, virtual and computer games, through that new spectrality Marc Guillaume speaks of, with the age of Virtual Reality still to come, when we shall don otherness like a data suit.

This whole movement of construction of an artificial double of the body and desire ends in the pornographic, the culmination of a henceforth desireless hyper-body, of a now indifferent and useless sexual function. But a function which works all the better in sex-processing, like text in word-processing, art in art-processing, war in war-processing, and so on. It is in this transparency, this charnel house of signs of the body disincarnate, that pornographic images move (it is, indeed, transparency itself that is pornographic, not the lascivious obscenity of the body): everything is presented to the gaze there with a kind of objective irony. Transgression, prohibitions, phantasies, censorship – everything is presented as phallic 'quotation'. It is the minimal illusion of sex: become cool, ironic and promotional, porn has definitely not gained anything in pagan innocence, but it has gained something in media insolence.

It is the pure form of sex which can no longer be said to be encumbered by the mystery of sexual difference, nor the figures of otherness attaching to it. The signs of masculine and feminine no longer function there as such (as they do in erotic art) but as something purely sexual, dispelling all ambiguity: sexual difference is suddenly realized in its objective, anatomical, technical form as a surgical mark. The pornographic is thus the model of a

society where sexual difference and the difference between reality and the image both disappear at the same time, and all registers become eroticized as they fall into non-distinction and the confusion of genres. Thus, if it was possible for la Cicciolina to be elected a member of the Italian Parliament, this is because the political and the sexual, having become transpolitical and transsexual, meet in the same ironic indifference. This previously unthinkable achievement is the mark of the profound travestying of our culture. The state of prostitution is quite simply that of the total substitution of terms, sexes and categories one for another.

In reality there no longer is any identifiable pornography, because the essence of the pornographic has passed into things, into images, into all the techniques of the visual and the virtual – all of which, in a way, deliver us from that collective phantasmagoria. We are doubtless merely play-acting obscenity, play-acting sexuality, as other societies play-act ideology, as Italian society, for example (though it is not the only one), play-acts power. Thus, in advertising, it is merely the comedy of the bared female body that is being played out. Hence the error of feminist recriminations: if this perpetual striptease and sexual blackmail were real, that would be unacceptable. Not morally unacceptable, but unacceptable because we would be exposed to pure obscenity, that is to say, the naked truth, the mad pretension of things to express their truth (this is the nauseous secret of TV 'reality shows'). Fortunately, we have not reached that point. The hyperreality of everything in our culture and the High Definition which underlines its obscenity are too glaring to be true. And so they protect us by their very excess. As for art, it is too superficial to be truly worthless. There must be some mystery to it. There must surely be some meaning to such a riot of sex and signs, but we can't see what it is. Perhaps this worthlessness, this meaninglessness, take on a sense when they are viewed from another world, from another angle, like objects in anamorphosis? In the unreality of porn, in the insignificance of images, in all the figures of simulation, there is an allegory running beneath the surface, an

enigma lurking in it all like a negative image – who knows? If everything becomes too obvious to be true, then there's still a chance for illusion. What lurks behind this moronic world? Another form of intelligence or a definitive lobotomy?

The dictatorship of images is, at any rate, an ironic dictatorship. Take Jeff Koons and la Cicciolina, and their erotic, allegorical, infantile, incestuous machine – at Venice, they came together to mime their real coupling in front of the depiction of that coupling. Autoerotic confusion, new aphrodisiac mysticism, no more and no less carnal or provocative than the fluorescent or geometric erectility of Gilbert and George.

Obscenity may be sublime or grotesque, if it shatters the innocence of a natural world. But what can porn do in a world pornographied in advance? What can art do in a world simulated and travestied in advance? Except bring an added ironic value to appearances? Except tip a last paradoxical wink – of sex laughing at itself in its most exact and hence most monstrous form, laughing at its own disappearance beneath its most artificial form?

What solution is there? There is no answer to this collective syndrome of a whole culture, this fascination, this mad whirl of denial of otherness, of all strangeness, all negativity, this repudiation of evil and reconciliation around the selfsame and its multiple figures: incest, autism, twinship, cloning. We can only remember that seduction resides in the safeguarding of alienness, in non-reconciliation. One should not be reconciled with one's body, nor with oneself, one should not be reconciled with the other, one should not be reconciled with nature, one should not reconcile male and female, nor good and evil. Therein lies the secret of a strange attraction.

The New Victim Order

Just as the whole movement of technical construction of the body and desire ends in the pornographic, so the whole movement of an indifferent society ends in victimhood and hatred.

Doomed to our own image, our own identity, our own 'look', and having become our own object of care, desire and suffering, we have grown indifferent to everything else. And secretly desperate at that indifference, and envious of every form of passion, originality or destiny. Any passion whatever is an affront to the general indifference. Anyone who, by his passion, unmasks how indifferent, pusillanimous or half-hearted you are, who, by the force of his presence or his suffering, unmasks how little reality you have, must be exterminated. There you have the other resuscitated, the enemy at last re-embodied, to be subjugated or destroyed.

Such are the incalculable effects of that negative passion of indifference, that hysterical and speculative resurrection of the other.

Racism, for example. Logically, it should have declined with the advance of Enlightenment and democracy. Yet the more hybrid our cultures become, and the more the theoretical and genetic bases of racism crumble away, the stronger it grows. But this is because we are dealing here with a mental object, an artificial construct, based on an erosion of the singularity of cultures and entry into the fetishistic system of difference. So

long as there is otherness, strangeness and the (possibly violent) dual relation – as we see in anthropological accounts up to the eighteenth century and into the colonial phase – there is no racism properly so-called. Once that 'natural' relation is lost, we enter into a phobic relationship with an artificial other, idealized by hatred. And because it is an ideal other, this relationship is an exponential one: nothing can stop it, since the whole trend of our culture is towards a fanatically pursued differential construction, a perpetual extrapolation of the same from the other. Autistic culture by dint of fake altruism.

All forms of sexist, racist, ethnic or cultural discrimination arise out of the same profound disaffection and out of a collective mourning, a mourning for a dead otherness, set against a background of general indifference – a logical product of our marvellous planet-wide conviviality.

The same indifference can give rise to exactly opposite behaviour. Racism is desperately seeking the other in the form of an evil to be combated. The humanitarian seeks the other just as desperately in the form of victims to aid. Idealization plays for better or for worse. The scapegoat is no longer the person you hound, but the one whose lot you lament. But he is still a scapegoat. And it is still the same person.

No pity for Sarajevo[31]

In the programme '*Le couloir pour la parole*' on Arte, with its Strasbourg–Sarajevo link-up, what was striking was the absolute superiority, the exceptional status conferred by misfortune, distress and total disillusionment – that very disillusionment which allowed the people of Sarajevo to treat the 'Europeans' with contempt, or at least with an air of sarcastic freedom which contrasted with the hypocritical remorse and contrition of those who were linked up with them. They were not the ones in need of compassion; they had compassion for our wretched destinies.

'I spit on Europe,' said one of them. Nothing offers greater freedom, in fact, or greater sovereignty, than justified contempt – and not even towards the enemy, but towards those basking with their good consciences in the warm sun of solidarity.

And they have seen plenty of these fine friends. Actors have even come from New York to put on *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo. Why not *Bouvard et Pécuchet* in Somalia or Afghanistan? Yet the worst part of it isn't the surfeit of cultural fine feeling, but the condescension and the error of judgement. It is they who are the strong ones and we who are weak, going over there looking for the means to make up for our weakness and loss of reality.

Our reality: that is the problem. We have only one, and it has to be saved. 'We have to do something. We can't do nothing.' But doing something solely because you can't not do something has never constituted a principle of action or freedom. Just a form of absolution from one's own impotence and compassion for one's own fate.

The people of Sarajevo do not have to face this question. Where they are, there is an absolute need to do what they do, to do what has to be done. Without illusion as to ends and without compassion towards themselves. That is what being real means, being in the real. And this is not at all the 'objective' reality of their misfortune, that reality which 'ought not to exist' and for which we feel pity, but the reality which exists as it is – the reality of an action and a destiny.

This is why they are alive, and we are the ones who are dead. This is why, in our own eyes, we have first and foremost to save the reality of the war and impose that – compassionate – reality on those who are suffering from it but who, at the very heart of war and distress, do not really believe in it. To judge by their own statements, the Bosnians do not really believe in the distress which surrounds them. In the end, they find the whole unreal situation senseless, unintelligible. It is a hell, but an almost hyper-real hell, made the more hyperreal by media and humanitarian

harassment, since that makes the attitude of the whole world towards them all the more incomprehensible. Thus, they live in a kind of spectrality of war – and it is a good thing they do, or they could never bear it.

But we know better than they do what reality is, because we have chosen them to embody it. Or simply because it is what we – and the whole of the West – most lack. We have to go and retrieve a reality for ourselves where the bleeding is. All these 'corridors' we open up to send them our supplies and our 'culture' are, in reality, corridors of distress through which we import their force and the energy of their misfortune. Unequal exchange once again. Whereas they find a kind of additional strength in the thorough stripping-away of the illusions of reality and of our political principles – the strength to survive what has no meaning – we go to convince them of the 'reality' of their suffering – by culturalizing it, of course, by theatricalizing it so that it can serve as a point of reference in the theatre of Western values, one of which is solidarity.

This all exemplifies a situation which has now become general, in which inoffensive and impotent intellectuals exchange their woes for those of the wretched, each supporting the other in a kind of perverse contract – exactly as the political class and civil society exchange their respective woes today, the one serving up its corruption and scandals, the other its artificial convulsions and inertia. Thus we saw Bourdieu and the Abbé Pierre offering themselves up in televisual sacrifice, exchanging between them the pathos-laden language and sociological metalanguage of wretchedness. And so, also, our whole society is embarking on the path of commiseration in the literal sense, under cover of ecumenical pathos. It is almost as though, in a moment of intense repentance among intellectuals and politicians, related to the panic-stricken state of history and the twilight of values, we had to replenish the stocks of values, the referential reserves, by appealing to that lowest common denominator that is human misery, as though we had to restock the hunting grounds with

artificial game. A victim society. I suppose all it is doing is expressing its own disappointment and remorse at the impossibility of perpetrating violence upon itself.

The New Intellectual Order everywhere follows the paths opened up by the New World Order. The misfortune, wretchedness and suffering of others have everywhere become the raw material and the primal scene. Victimhood, accompanied by Human Rights as its sole funerary ideology. Those who do not exploit it directly and in their own name do so by proxy. There is no lack of middlemen, who take their financial or symbolic cut in the process. Deficit and misfortune, like the international debt, are traded and sold on in the speculative market – in this case the politico-intellectual market, which is quite the equal of the late, unlamented military–industrial complex. Now, all commiseration is part of the logic of misfortune [*malheur*]. To refer to misfortune, if only to combat it, is to give it a base for its objective reproduction in perpetuity. When fighting anything whatever, we have to start out – fully aware of what we are doing – from evil, never from misfortune.

And the theatre of the transparence of Evil is truly there – at Sarajevo. The repressed canker which corrupts all the rest, the virus of which Europe's paralysis is already the symptom. Europe's furniture is being salvaged at the GATT talks, but it is being burned at Sarajevo. In a sense, this is a good thing. The specious, sham Europe, the Europe botched up in the most hypocritical upheavals, is scuppering itself at Sarajevo. And, in this sense, we might almost see the Serbs as providing the unofficial litmus test, as demystifying that phantom Europe – the Europe of techno-democratic politicians who are as triumphalist in their speeches as they are deliquescent in their actions.

But that is not, in fact, what is really going on here. The real story is that the Serbs, as the vehicles of ethnic cleansing, are at the forefront of the construction of Europe. For it *is* being constructed, the real Europe, the white Europe, a Europe whitewashed, integrated and purified, morally as much as economically

or ethnically. It is being victoriously constructed at Sarajevo and, in this sense, what is happening there is not an accident at all, but a logical, ascendant phase in the New European Order, that subsidiary of the New World Order, everywhere characterized by white fundamentalism, protectionism, discrimination and control.

It is said that if we just leave things to happen at Sarajevo, we shall be the next to get it. But we already have got it. All the European countries are undergoing ethnic cleansing. This is the real Europe, taking shape in the shadow of the Parliaments, and its spearhead is Serbia. It is no use appealing to some sort of passivity, protesting that we are in some way impotent to do anything about it, since what we have here is a programme that is currently being carried out, a programme in which Bosnia is merely the new frontier. Why do you think Le Pen has largely disappeared from the political stage? Because the substance of his ideas has everywhere filtered into the political class in the form of national opt-outs, cross-party unity, Euro-nationalist instincts and protectionism. No need for Le Pen any more, since he has won, not politically, but virally – in mentalities. Why should this stop at Sarajevo, since what is at stake there is exactly the same? Solidarity will not make a jot of difference to this. It will end, miraculously, the day the extermination has finished, the day the demarcation line of 'white' Europe has been drawn up. It is as though Europe, irrespective of its national distinctions and political differences, had 'taken out a contract' with the Serbs, who have done the dirty deed for it, as the West once took out a contract on Iran with Saddam Hussein. Only, when the hired gun goes too far, he too may have to be bumped off. The operations against Iraq and Somalia were relative failures from the point of view of the New World Order; the Bosnia operation seems set for success so far as the New European Order is concerned.

And the Bosnians know this. They know they are condemned by the international democratic order, not by some hangover from the past or some monstrous excrescence called fascism. They

know they are doomed to extermination or banishment or exclusion, like all the heterogeneous and refractory elements the world over – irrevocably so, because whether the kind souls and bad consciences of the West like it or not, that is the inexorable path of progress. The price to pay for Modern Europe will be the eradication of Muslims and Arabs, who are indeed already being eradicated everywhere, except where they remain as immigrant slaves. And the major objection to the bad-conscience offensive, as mobilized in media happenings like the one at Strasbourg, is that by perpetuating the image of the alleged impotence of European policies and the image of a Western conscience racked by its own impotence, it provides a cover for the real operation by lending it the spiritual benefit of the doubt.

The people of Sarajevo shown on Arte certainly looked as if they had no illusions and no hope, but they didn't look like potential martyrs. Far from it. They had their objective misfortune, but the real wretchedness, that of the false apostles and voluntary martyrs, was on the other side. Now, as has very rightly been said, 'no heed will be paid in the hereafter to voluntary martyrdom'.

Victim society as the easiest, most trivial form of otherness. Resurrection of the Other as calamity, as victim, as alibi – and of ourselves as unhappy consciousnesses extracting from this necrological mirror an identity which is itself wretched. We explore the multiple signs of misfortune to prove God by Evil, as we explore the wretchedness of others to prove our existence *a contrario*. The new identity is the victim's identity. Everything is organized around the deprived, frustrated, handicapped subject, and the victim strategy is that of his acknowledgement as such. Every difference is asserted in the victimal mode of recrimination (of the reparation of a crime); others are called on only for purposes of recognition. This is the social sphere as human rights therapy, as surgery for the mending of identities. An effective strategy, this, the strategy of cashing in one's debt, trading on one's losses –

negative blackmail. A defective strategy, one to parallel the strategies of weakness and disbandment. A minimalist, victimalist, humanitarian strategy, characteristic of emotional and promotional societies. Hands off my difference![32]

Rights as universal reference, as underwriting all differences. A hegemony which has little to do with public affairs and the collective institution, but much to do with that kind of contract that indiscriminately sanctions the loss of natural qualities – as, for example, when the right to existence sanctions the loss of the most precious thing obtained without our having a right to it: life. Or when the right to pure air substitutes for asphyxia, the right to freedom for the exercise of freedom, or right itself for desire in the form of the right to desire, and so on. Rights are what mobilize the energies of an enervated social body. Weak value of an existence under guarantee – a formal, insurance-minded, risk-free society.

The assumption of human suffering into the heaven of the media and the mental space of advertising is accompanied by its irruption into political and sociological metadiscourse. This is because politics and sociology are themselves faced with their own destitution. Together, therefore, they have struck a pact with social destitution on the basis of commiseration. Sociologists speak wretchedly, and the wretched set about expressing themselves sociologically. So we move into a situation of the celebration of one's deficit, one's misfortune, one's personal insignificance – with the intellectual and media discourse, by its simultaneously sadistic and sentimental takeover of these matters, sanctioning people's right to their own suffering, their consecration as victims and the loss of their natural defences. The victims themselves do not complain, since they get the benefit of confessing their misery. Foucault argued that a whole culture was at one time engaged in the confession of sex. It has now gone over to the confession of wretchedness.

* * *

Atonement, expiation, laundering, prophylaxis, promotion and rehabilitation – it is difficult to put a name to all the various nuances of this general commiseration which is the product of a profound indifference and is accompanied by a fierce strategy of blackmail, of the political takeover of all these negative passions. It is the 'politically correct' in all its effects – an enterprise of laundering and mental prophylaxis, beginning with the prophylactic treatment of language. Black people, the handicapped, the blind and prostitutes become 'people of colour', 'the disabled', 'the visually impaired', and 'sex workers': they have to be laundered like dirty money. Every negative destiny has to be cleaned up by a doctoring even more obscene than what it is trying to hide.

Euphemistic language, the struggle against sexual harassment – all this protective and protectionist masquerade is of the same order as the use of the condom. Its mental use, of course – that is, the prophylactic use of ideas and concepts. Soon we shall think only when we are sheathed in latex. And the data suit of Virtual Reality already slips on like a condom.

Today, the contraceptive sheath is used for seduction. 'He seeks to seduce her, she resists, he brings out his condom, she falls into his arms.' She would, in the past, have been seduced by the erection; now, she is seduced by the protection. A step further, and being HIV positive [*séropositif*] will be seductive in itself ('This product can damage your health' serves almost as an advertising slogan). We have seen on our walls and our buses: 'I'm HIV positive – will you come to the dining hall with me? (say yes!)'; 'I'm a mongol – will you come and play with me?'; *Sero is beautiful.*[33] The direst thing becomes an advertising statement. A new moral order, a new conviviality based on this marvellous legitimacy of difference, even when it is the difference of the negative and the lack of living.

The AIDS obsession doubtless arises from the fact that the exceptional destiny of the sufferers gives them what others cruelly lack today: a strong, impregnable identity, a sacrificial identity –

the privilege of illness, around which, in other cultures, the entire group once gravitated, and which we have abolished almost everywhere today by the enterprise of therapeutic eradication of Evil [*le Mal*]. But in another way, the whole strategy of the prevention of illness merely shifts the problem [*le mal*] from the biological to the social body. All the anti-AIDS campaigns, playing on solidarity and fear – 'Your AIDS interests me' – give rise to an emotional contagion as noxious as the biological. The promotional infectiousness of information is just as obscene and dangerous as that of the virus. If AIDS destroys biological immunities, then the collective theatricalization and brainwashing, the blackmailing into responsibility and mobilization, are playing their part in propagating the epidemic of information and, as a side-effect, in reinforcing the social body's immunodeficiency – a process that is already far advanced – and in promoting that other mental AIDS that is the Aids-athon, the Telethon and other assorted Thanatons – expiation and atonement of the collective bad conscience, pornographic orchestration of national unity.

AIDS itself ends up looking like a side-effect of this demagogic virulence. '*Tu me préserves actif, je te préservatif*':[34] this scabrous irony, heavy with blackmail, which is also that of Benetton, as it once was of the BNP,[35] in fact conceals a technique of manipulation and dissolution of the social body by the stimulation of the vilest emotions: self-pity and self-disgust. Politicians and advertisers have understood that the key to democratic government – perhaps even the essence of the political? – is to take general stupidity for granted: 'Your idiocy, your resentment, interest us!' Behind which lurks an even more suspect discourse: 'Your rights, your destitution, your freedom, interest us!' Democratic souls have been trained to swallow all the horrors, scandals, bluff, brainwashing and misery, and to launder these themselves. Behind the condescending interest there always lurks the voracious countenance of the vampire.

* * *

Behind the facelifting of all categories in the name of their difference there always lurks contempt. 'There is nothing to prevent us thinking that a woman or a homosexual will one day become President,' declares an official candidate. As though elevation to the presidency would finally make a woman or a homosexual a full member of the human race! No doubt we must one day give the job to a blind albino mongol with cancer. Already Miss America is deaf and dumb!

In this same way, on the pretext of unconditional respect for life (what could be more politically correct?), we have heard the following humanitarian profession of faith pronounced: no idea in the world is worth killing for (nor, doubtless, worth dying for). No human being deserves to be killed for anything whatsoever. A final acknowledgement of insignificance: both of ideas and of people. This statement, which actually seeks to show the greatest respect for life, attests only to a contempt and an indifference for ideas and for life. Worse than the desire to destroy life is this refusal to risk it – nothing being worth the trouble of being sacrificed. This is truly the worst offence, the worst affront possible. It is the fundamental proposition of nihilism.

Indifference and Hatred

In the past, we had objects to believe in – objects of belief. These have disappeared. But we also had objects not to believe in, which is just as vital a function. Transitional objects, ironic ones, so to speak, objects of our indifference, but objects none the less. Ideologies played this role reasonably well. These, too, have disappeared. And we survive only by a reflex action of collective credulity, which consists not only in absorbing everything put about under the heading of news or information, but in believing in the principle and transcendence of information. While, at the same time, remaining deeply incredulous and resistant to that kind of knee-jerk consensus. We no more believe in information by divine right than serfs ever believed they were serfs by divine right, but we act as though we do. Behind this façade, a gigantic principle of incredulity is growing up, a principle of secret disaffection and the denial of any social bond.

There is a considerable danger of the inertia threshold being crossed, danger of a potential gravitational collapse by an exceeding of the critical mass, thanks to the absorption by the system of all negative elements: crashes, errors, scandals, conflicts – everything is absorbed back into it as though by evaporation. All the wastes and disorders are digested and recycled. Maddening metastability which gives rise to a whole range of violent, virulent, destabilizing abreactions, which are the symptom of that collapse.

All our contemporary passions arise from this: objectless, negative passions, all born of indifference, all built (in the absence

of a real object) on a virtual other, and thus doomed to crystallize for preference on any old thing at all.

We are in a social trance: vacant, withdrawn, lacking meaning in our own eyes. Abstracted, irresponsible, enervated. They have left us the optic nerve, but all the others have been disabled. It is in this sense that information has something of dissection about it: it isolates a perceptual circuit, but disconnects the active functions. All that is left is the mental screen of indifference, which matches the technical in-difference of the images.

Like those people walking in the streets of Sarajevo who pass by with just a furtive glance at the body of a woman killed in the shelling, as though at a cat that had been run over. Neither mourning nor compassion. This is exactly the way the whole of Europe passes by the corpse of Bosnia, without any real emotion, except the work of mourning we carry out on ourselves.

Everyone is moving in their own orbit, trapped in their own bubble, like satellites. Strictly speaking, no one has a destiny any more, since there is destiny only where one intersects with others. Now, the trajectories do not intersect (the vague *clinamen* sometimes produced by the sentimental collision of a few atoms cannot be called destiny, nor can the occasional turbulence produced by acceleration). They merely have the same destination. And so, as on interchanges or motorways (and this goes for information superhighways too), people see only those travelling in the same direction. And even then, they see them no more than fish see each other, when they all instantly veer off in the same direction. There is less risk of an accident that way, but the possibility of meeting is non-existent. The other no longer has any but a marginal value.

This is the great syndrome of the social menopause. Allergy to the social, sociality disorders, the end of social ovulation. Allopause: relational disorders. Oneiropause: the end of the ovulation of dreams. Feverishness, anxiety, dizzy spells, default

of heirs. Irritation. Everything begins with irritation, the most inoffensive form. A question: 'What gets on your nerves?' In the past, we would have asked what excites you, what outrages you? But we are no longer excited or outraged; things get on our nerves, we are irritated. Irritation is the epidermal fallout of the grand passions, a little burst of reaction to the undesirable, the unbearable daily round. What gets on your nerves? Everything, by definition. Irritation is an allergic form without any definite object, a profuse, diffuse creeping of the flesh, a sidelong sort of affect. Mechanical problems, other people's mannerisms, your own mannerisms, children, objects get on your nerves – their failings, their ruses, their clandestine resistance. Everything which plagues you, everything which has to do with the futile burdening of existence and whose express function it is to irritate you. The French term '*énervement*', which once referred to the severing of the tendons of people who then lay insensible, unable to move, is today synonymous with annoyance and nervous hyperreaction, but the two senses are closely related since this hyperreaction in fact corresponds to a profound disaffection, an annoyed indifference, a devitalization.

Allergy is of the same order: an indefinable form of repulsion, a diffuse abreaction, a repressed hostility, as though the body were attacking itself, producing its annoyance from the inside. It is impatience, or frustrated passion, linked to the suspect otherness of an artificially overcathected world. Every system like our own, which functions by surface impulse, produces this kind of surface repulsion, which is its bodily manifestation. Every society which functions by rejection, by exclusion, causes this kind of inflammation or protective rash – a barrage against the seduction of a world you fear, but also against the crowding-in of a world which disgusts you.

Contrary to the hysteric, who, by making an exhibition of himself, betrays his despair at not being there, allergy testifies to the confusion of being there, and to the excessive presence of the body. Let us not forget that allergy is hypersensitivity to a particular

substance. It is an excess of positive reaction. Thus an allergic world is a world of excess, of an oversensitivity to anything whatever -- precisely, to others? – but one which turns around in a negative conversion. The same pattern in anorexia: denial of the excess of body, metaphor for the hypertrophy of the system.

All these indifferent passions, or passions born of indifference, all these negative passions, culminate in hatred. A strange expression: 'I've got the hate' [*J'ai la haine*]. No object. It is like 'I'm demonstrating', but for whom, for what? 'I take responsibility' [*J'assume*], but for what? Nothing in particular. One perhaps takes responsibility precisely for the nothing. One demonstrates for or against the nothing – how are we to know? This is the fate of all these intransitive verbs. The graffiti said: 'I exist', 'I live at this particular place'. This was stated with a kind of exultation, yet at the same time it said: 'There is no meaning to my life'. Similarly, 'I've got the hate' says at the same time: 'This hate I have has no object'; 'There's no meaning to it'. Hatred is doubtless something which does indeed outlive any definable object, and feeds on the disappearance of that object. Who are we to take against today? There, precisely, is the object: the absent other of hatred. 'Having' hatred is like a sort of potential of – negative and reactive – energy, but energy all the same. These are, indeed, the only passions we have today: hatred, disgust, allergy, aversion, rejection and disaffection. We no longer know what we want, but we know what we don't want. In its pure expression of rejection, it is a non-negotiable, irremediable passion. Yet there is in it something like an invitation to the absent other to offer himself as an object for that hatred.

The dream of hatred is to give rise to a heartfelt enmity, which is scarcely available at all in our world now, as all conflicts are immediately contained. Over against the hatred born of rivalry and conflict there is a hatred born of accumulated indifference which can suddenly crystallize in an extreme physical outburst. We are not speaking of class hatred now, which, paradoxically,

remained a bourgeois passion. That had a target, and was the driving force behind historical action. This hatred is externalized only in episodes of 'acting-out'. It does not give rise to historical violence, but to a virulence born of disaffection with politics and history. In this sense, it is the characteristic passion not of the end of history but of a history without end, a history which is a dead-end, since there has been no resolution of all the problems it posed. It is possible that beyond the end, in those reaches where things turn around, there is room for an indeterminate passion, where what remains of energy also turns around, like time, into a negative passion.

A negative passion cannot become universal. You cannot imagine a federation of hatreds. You might almost wish to see such a scenario come about. But the worst situation doesn't always materialize. The fact remains that from this point on there is something which is completely beyond social regulation. If this is not the end of History, it is certainly the end of the social. We are no longer in anomie, but in anomaly. Anomaly is what escapes not only the law but the rule. What is outside the game, 'offside', no longer in a position to play. The outlaw space bred violence; this offside space breeds virulence. But as to what exactly is being bred in anomaly, we have no notion. When a system becomes universal (the media, networks, the financial markets, human rights), it automatically becomes anomalous and secretes virulences of all kinds: financial crashes, AIDS, computer viruses, deregulation, disinformation. Hatred itself is a virus of this kind.

Take Paulin, the man from Guadeloupe who went around murdering old ladies a few years ago. A monstrous individual, but cool, and with no apparent hatred in him. He had no identity, and was of indeterminate sex and mixed race. He committed his murders without violence or bloodshed. And he recounted them with an odd detachment. Being indifferent to himself, he was eliminating people who were themselves indifferent. But we can assume that behind all this there was a deep fund of radical

hatred. Doubtless Paulin 'had the hate', but he was too classy, too educated, to express it openly.

In the consensual universal order (the New World Order, the New Democratic Order) violent singularities well up, reflecting the extent of the inadmissibility of that order. The principle of negotiation and reconciliation at any price is a principle implying a final solution, which sometimes leads to 'the' final solution. We do not need psychoanalysis to tell us that man is an ambiguous, untameable animal, and that it is senseless to attempt to extirpate evil from him in order to turn him into a rational being. Yet it is upon this absurdity that all our progressive ideologies are based.

In the process, a residue is left over which is not dealt with because it cannot be, and naturally this becomes transformed into hatred. In this sense, hatred, a viral passion, is also a vital passion. Against the perfection of the system, hatred is a last vital reaction.

It is the same sentiment which, in all non-Western peoples, fuels that deep, visceral denial of what we represent and what we are. As though those peoples also 'had the hate'. We can lavish on them all the universal charity we are capable of, but there is about them a kind of otherness which will not be understood, a kind of incompatibility which will not be bargained away. The gulf between our culture of the universal and what remains of singularities is growing firmer and deeper. Their *ressentiment* may be impotent, but from the depths of their virtual extermination a passion for revenge is infiltrating and dislocating the Western world, just as the ghost of the excluded is beginning to haunt our conventional societies.

The Revenge of the Mirror People

Here begins the great revenge of otherness, of all the forms which, subtly or violently deprived of their singularity, henceforth pose an insoluble problem for the social order, and also for the political and biological orders.

> In those days the world of mirrors and the world of men were not, as they are now, cut off from each other. They were, besides, quite different; neither beings nor colours nor shapes were the same. Both kingdoms, the specular and the human, lived in harmony; you could come and go through mirrors. One night the mirror people invaded the earth. Their power was great, but at the end of bloody warfare the magic arts of the Yellow Emperor prevailed. He repulsed the invaders, imprisoned them in their mirrors, and forced on them the task of repeating, as though in a kind of dream, all the actions of men. He stripped them of their power and of their forms, and reduced them to mere slavish reflections. Nonetheless, a day will come when the magic spell will be shaken off . . . shapes will begin to stir. Little by little they will differ from us; little by little they will not imitate us. They will break through the barriers of glass or metal and this time will not be defeated.
>
> J.L. Borges[36]

Such is the allegory of otherness vanquished and condemned to the servile fate of resemblance. Our image in the mirror is not innocent, then. Behind every reflection, every resemblance, every representation, a defeated enemy lies concealed. The Other vanquished, and condemned merely to be the Same. This casts a singular light on the problem of representation and of all those mirrors which reflect us 'spontaneously' with an objective indulgence. None of that is true, and every representation is a servile image, the ghost of a once sovereign being whose singularity has been obliterated. But a being which will one day rebel, and then our whole system of representation and values is destined to perish in that revolt. This slavery of the same, the slavery of resemblance, will one day be smashed by the violent resurgence of otherness. We dreamed of passing through the looking-glass, but it is the mirror peoples themselves who will burst in upon our world. And 'this time will not be defeated'.

What will come of this victory? No one knows. A new existence of two equally sovereign peoples, perfectly alien to one another, but in perfect collusion? Something other, at least, than this subjection and this negative fatality.

So, everywhere, objects, children, the dead, images, women, everything which serves to provide a passive reflection in a world based on identity, is ready to go on to the counter-offensive. Already they resemble us less and less . . .

I'll not be your mirror![37]

To sum up, we find ourselves faced with a dual project: a bid to complete the world, to achieve an integral reality – and a bid to continue the Nothing (of which the book is a part). Both are doomed to fail. But, whereas the failure of an attempt at completion is, necessarily, negative, the failure of an attempt at annihilation is, necessarily, vital and positive. It is for this reason that thought, which knows it will fail in any case, is duty-bound to set itself criminal objectives. An undertaking directed towards positive objectives cannot allow itself to fail. One which pursues criminal objectives is duty-bound to fail. Such is the well-tempered application of the principle of evil.

If the system fails to be everything, nothing will remain of it. If thought fails to be nothing, something will remain of it.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. As ever in my translation of this term, I have retained 'transparence' to mark a distinction from 'transparency' in its everyday sense. This solution was arrived at after discussion with the author.
2. Henri Michaux (1899–1984), Belgian-born French poet and painter.
3. The French verb '*altérer*' has the sense of making something other than its (perfect?) self and thus of distorting, impairing or even falsifying it. In parts of this chapter and in other parts of this book, the word has, therefore, been translated by an equivalent English term, such as 'impair'. However, since – particularly in the early chapters of this work – Baudrillard's argument depends both on (French) meaning and (shared French and English) etymology, I have found it necessary to invent an English verbal form 'alter-ed' and a related noun 'alter-ation', which I must ask the reader to understand as involving a *negative* alteration, a change *for the worse*. I have tried to use this as sparingly as possible, and wherever '*altérer*' seems to me to be employed to describe a relatively 'neutral' change, I have used the ordinary English 'alter'.
4. There is a play here on the French verb '*se dérober*', which normally means 'to hide or conceal itself'.
5. Baudrillard's expression '*la constellation du secret*' refers to a passage in Martin Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning

Technology', which William Lovitt renders as 'the constellation, the stellar course of the mystery' (*The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays*, Harper Colophon Books, Harper & Row, New York 1977, p. 33). For this reason, the French word 'secret' has been treated here as equivalent to the German *Geheimnis* and has, at times, been translated as 'mystery' in other related contexts.

6. By Kawabata Yasunari.
7. The French expression here, '*rester sur sa fin*', is a play on the expression '*rester sur sa faim*', which literally means to remain hungry, but is used metaphorically in the sense of being left 'up in the air'.
8. There are, to my knowledge, three films which bear this title, the first dating from 1913. Internal evidence from other texts suggests that the author is probably referring either to Henrik Galeen's silent version of 1926 or to the German film of 1936 made by the Chicago-born director Arthur Robison.
9. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Flamingo's Smile: Reflections in Natural History*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1991, p. 108 (first published 1985).
10. Those inclined to search for this quotation in Ecclesiastes would be better advised to consult Baudrillard's *Fragments. Cool Memories III*, Éditions Galilée, Paris 1995.
11. In Arthur C. Clarke, *Of Time and Stars*, Roc (an imprint of Penguin Books) in association with Victor Gollancz, London 1992, pp. 15–23.
12. '*Reality show*' is the term that has been imported into French to describe those TV programmes which deal mainly in personal confessions and 'real-life' stories, the most prominent of which has been Mireille Dumas's *Bas les Masques* on France 2.
13. Peter Schlemihl is the eponymous hero of *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* (1814) by the French-born poet, translator, botanist and philologist Adelbert von Chamisso (1781–1838). Schlemihl's 'remarkable story' comes about in large part as a result of selling his shadow to the devil.

14. The phrase 'total achievement' is in English in the original.
15. The term 'think-operator' is in English in the original.
16. This translation of the French term 'dénégation' – which I do not usually favour, since it is at variance with normal English usage – has been employed here because Baudrillard is playing upon an affinity (and also, of course, an antithesis) between this term and the newly coined 'dé-négation' in the previous sentence. 'Dénégation' is frequently used by French theorists to translate the Freudian '*Verleugnung*', when it is perhaps best rendered as 'denial' or 'disavowal'. This latter is, however, also a de-negation of sorts, since in its earliest Freudian usage it is the denial *of an absence* (the absence of a penis in the girl).
17. The French comic magazine *Hara Kiri* has for many years employed this expression (literally: 'stupid and nasty') as its device.
18. Characters in Jarry's Ubu plays, rendered into English as 'Palcontents' in Cyril Connolly and Simon Watson Taylor's 1968 translation, 'Ubu Rex', *The Ubu Plays*, Methuen, London 1968.
19. Epigraph in English in the original.
20. Warhol, *From A to B and Back Again: The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, Pan, London 1976, pp. 17–18.
21. The 'Perfect' were those Cathars who had been 'consoled', i.e. had received the gift of the Paraclete.
22. The two passages in quotation marks, and the chapter title, are in English in the original.
23. *Chuang Tzu*, trans. Herbert A. Giles, Unwin, London 1980, p. 171.
24. Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Babylon Lottery', trans. Anthony Kerrigan, in *Fictions*, John Calder, London 1965, pp. 59–65.
25. A reference to the famous section of Sade's *La philosophie dans le boudoir* entitled *'Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains'*.

26. This phrase echoes the socialist dictum that the workers themselves will bring about their own emancipation.
27. The references here are to Dino Buzzati's *Il crollo della Baliverna* and to Jorge Luis Borges, 'Of Exactitude in Science', in *A Universal History of Infamy*, Allen Lane, London 1973, p. 141.
28. The French here, '*séduction blanche*', implies that the seduction is, like *un mariage blanc*, unconsummated.
29. Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935), Portuguese modernist poet.
30. The words 'Madonna Deconnection' are in English (?) in the original.
31. This text first appeared in *Libération*, 6 January 1994. The television programme referred to was a special broadcast of Arte's political weekly, *Transit*, billed in fact as 'Sarajevo–Strasbourg, un corridor pour la parole' and shown live on Sunday 19 December 1993.
32. The French here, '*Touche pas à ma différence*', is presumably an allusion to the anti-racist slogan '*Touche pas à mon pote!*' (Hands off my pal!).
33. Italicized text in English in the original.
34. Literally: 'You keep me active, I condom you'.
35. The Banque Nationale de Paris was responsible for the 'Your money interests us' slogan to which Baudrillard is alluding here.
36. *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1974, pp. 67–8.
37. The phrase 'I'll not be your mirror!' is in English in the original.

TRANSLATIONS FROM VERSO

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JEAN BAUDRILLARD was born in Paris in 1929 and died in 2007. He was the author of, among other works, *America*, *The Transparency of Evil*, *Impossible Exchange* and *The Spirit of Terrorism*, all from Verso.

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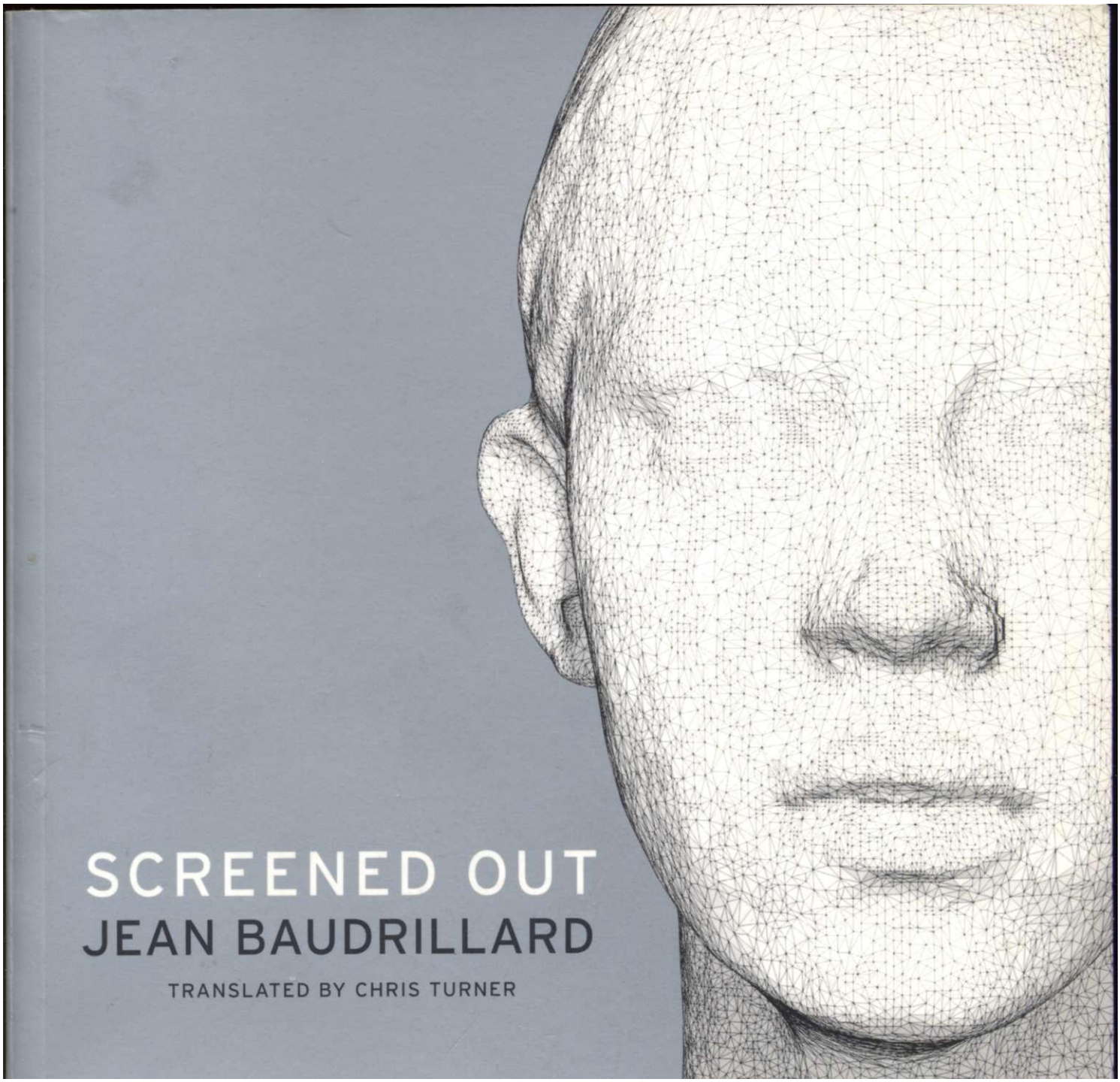
KQ-946-576

ISBN 978-1-84467-203-5

www.versobooks.com
$12.95/£6.99/$14.50CAN

Design: Dan Mogf[illegible]



SCREENED OUT

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER

Screened Out

Jean Baudrillard

Translated by Chris Turner

VERSO
London • New York

This edition first published by Verso 2002
© Verso 2002
Translation © Chris Turner 2002
First published as *Ecran total*
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014-4606
www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN 1-85984-660-2
ISBN 1-85984-385-9 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset by M Rules
Printed at the Bath Press

History reproducing itself becomes farce
Farce reproducing itself becomes history

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Translator's Foreword

i

With a few exceptions, these pieces originally appeared as articles in the Paris newspaper *Liberation* between June 1987 and May 1997. The author made several minor changes in turning them into book form and a very few, even more minor rectifications have been made in preparing this translation.

The publication in book form contained no footnotes, some of the material initially published as such in the newspaper articles having been restored to the body of the text. The footnotes to this translation are therefore without exception my own and are included solely to elucidate points that would have been clear to a French audience at the time, but may be obscure to a non-French audience today.

C.T.

AIDS: Virulence or Prophylaxis?

AIDS, computer viruses, terrorism . . . Virulence makes its appearance when a body, system or network expels all its negative elements and resolves into a combinatorial of simple ones. In this sense, virality is closely related to fractality and digitality. It is because computers and electronic machines have become abstractions, virtual machines, non-bodies, that viruses run riot in them (they are much more vulnerable than traditional mechanical machines). It is because the body itself has become a non-body, an electronic, virtual machine, that viruses seize hold of it.

The current pathology of the body is now beyond the reach of conventional medicine, since it affects the body not *us form,* but *as formula.* The body of cancer is the body fallen victim to the disruption of its genetic formula. The AIDS body is the body damaged and impaired in its immune systems, in its systems of controls and anti-bodies.

These new pathologies are the illnesses of a codified, modelled body; they are sicknesses of the code and the model.

The human being, conceived as an electronic, cybernetic machine, makes a

perfect home for viruses and viral illnesses, just as computers provide an ideal terrain for electronic viruses.

Here again, there is no effective prevention or therapy; the metastases invade the whole network 'virtually'; de-symbolized machine languages offer no more resistance to viruses than do de-symbolized bodies. The traditional mechanical accident or breakdown had a good old reparative medicine to deal with it, but the sudden failures, anomalies and 'betrayals' of anti-bodies (quite apart from any deliberate 'hacking' into their functions) are beyond remedy.

Virality is the pathology of closed circuits, of integrated circuits, of promiscuity and chain reactions. It is a pathology of incest, understood in a broad, metaphorical sense.

He who lives by the same will die by the same. The impossibility of exchange, of reciprocity, of alterity secretes that other invisible, diabolic, elusive alterity, that absolute Other, the virus, itself made up of simple elements and of recurrence to infinity.

We are in an incestuous society. And the fact that AIDS first hit the homosexual community and drug abusers has to do with this incestuousness of groups which function as closed circuits.

In the past, haemophilia struck at families with long histories of consanguine marriages, highly endogamous lineages. The strange disease which for a long time attacked cypress trees was a kind of virus which was in the end attributed to a reduction in the temperature differential between summer and winter, to the seasons coming to intermingle. There again, the spectre of the Self-same struck. In every compulsion for resemblance, every excision of differences, in every case of things being contiguous with their own images or becoming confused with their own code, there is a threat of incestuous virulence, of a diabolical alterity, knocking the marvellous machinery out of kilter. In other cases, this takes the form of the

resurgence of the principle of Evil (there is no moral dimension or guilt here: the principle of Evil is merely synonymous with the principle of reversion and the principle of adversity). In systems moving towards total positivization — and hence de-symbolization - evil simply equates, in all its forms, with the fundamental rule of reversibility.

The uninterrupted production of positivity has a terrifying consequence: if negativity engenders crisis and critique, absolute positivity, for its part, engenders catastrophe, precisely through its incapacity to distil the crisis. Every structure, system or social body which ferrets out its negative, critical elements to expel them or exorcise them runs the risk of a catastrophe by total implosion and reversion, just as every biological body which hunts down and eliminates all its germs, bacillae and parasites - in short, all its biological enemies - runs the risk of cancer or, in other words, of a positivity devouring its own cells. It runs the risk of being devoured by its own anti-bodies, which now have nothing to do.

It is logical that AIDS (and cancer) should have become the prototypes for our modern pathology and for all lethal virality. When the body is exposed to artificial prostheses and, at the same time, to genetic fantasies, its defence systems are disorganized, its biological logic destroyed. This fractal body, fated to see its own external functions multiply, is at the same time doomed to unstoppable internal division among its own cells. It metastasizes: the internal, biological metastases are in a way symmetrical with those external metastases, the prostheses, the networks, the connections.

In an over-protected space, the body loses all its defences. We know that in operating theatres, there is such a level of prophylaxis that no microbe or bacteria can survive. Now, it is precisely there, in that absolutely spotless space that we are seeing mysterious, anomalous, viral diseases emerging. For viruses survive and proliferate as soon as room is made for them. So long as there were microbes, there were no

viruses. In a world cleansed of its old infections, in an 'ideal' clinical world, an intangible, implacable pathology unfurls, a pathology born of disinfection itself.

A pathology of the third kind. Just as we are up against a new violence in our societies — a violence born of the paradox of a permissive and pacified society, so we are up against new diseases, the diseases of bodies over-protected by their artificial shields - both medical and computer shields. Bodies which are, as a result, susceptible to every virus, to the most 'perverse', unexpected chain reactions. A pathology no longer based in accidents or anomie, but in 'anomalies'. And it is the same in the social body, where the same causes produce the same perverse effects, the same unpredictable dysfunctions and a whole range of anomalies and terrorisms, comparable to the genetic disturbance of cells — a phenomenon similarly brought about by over-protection and over-coding. The social system, like the biological body, is losing its natural symbolic defences in direct proportion to the increased technological sophistication of its prostheses. And medicine is not going to find it easy to deal with this entirely new pathology, since it is itself part of the system of over-protection, the system of protectionist and prophylactic zeal towards the body. Just as there is apparently no political solution to the problem of terrorism, so there does not currently seem to be any biological solution to the problem of AIDS or cancer. And for the same reason: these are anomalous symptoms, a certain type of violence and certain types of illness arising from the depths of the system itself and countering, with reactive violence or virulence, the political over-control of the social body, the biological over-control of the physical body.

Yet this new form of virulence is ambiguous, and AIDS is an example of it. AIDS provides an argument for a new sexual prohibition, but it is no longer a *moral* prohibition: it is a functional prohibition on the circulation of sex. This breaks all the commandments of modernity. Sex, like money, like information, must circulate freely. Everything must be fluid, and acceleration is inevitable. To revoke

sexuality on the grounds of a viral danger is as absurd as stopping international trade on the grounds that it is fuelling the cancerous rise of the dollar. No one seriously envisages such a thing. Now, at a stroke with AIDS: a stopping of sex. A contradiction in the system? Perhaps this suspension has some enigmatic purpose, linked contradictorily to the equally enigmatic purpose of sexual liberation?

The spontaneous self-regulation of systems is something well-known. We know how they produce accidents of their own, put a brake on their own operation, in order to survive on a basis contrary to their own principles. All societies survive *against* their own value-systems: they have to have such a system, but they also have to deny it and operate in opposition to it. Now, we live by at least two principles: the principle of sexual liberation and that of communication and information. But it is entirely as though the species were, through the AIDS threat, producing an antidote to its principle of sexual liberation, and, through cancer, which is a disruption of the genetic code and therefore a pathology of information, a resistance to the all-powerful principle of cybernetic control. What if all this signified a rejection of the obligatory flows of sperm, sex, signs and words, a rejection of forced communication, programmed information and sexual promiscuity? What if all this were a vital resistance to the expansion of flows, circuits and networks - admittedly, at the cost of a new lethal pathology, but a pathology which would in the end protect us from something even more serious? With AIDS and cancer, we might be said to be paying the price for our own system: we are exorcising its *banal* virulence in a *fatal* form.

No one can foretell how effective this exorcism will be, but we have to ask the question: what is it - what even worse eventuality (the total hegemony of the genetic code?) - that cancer is resisting? What is it - what even worse eventuality (a sexual epidemic, total sexual promiscuity?) - that AIDS is resisting? The drugs problem is the same: all dramatizing apart, we have to ask what it is protecting us

from, what kind of escape route it represents from an even worse evil (rational stupefaction, normative sociability, universal regimentation). We may say the same of terrorism: isn't its secondary, reactional, abreactional violence protecting us from an epidemic of consensus, from a growing political leukaemia and deliquescence, and the invisible transparency of the State? Everything is ambiguous and reversible. After all, it is by neurosis that man protects himself most effectively from madness. In this sense, AIDS is not a punishment from on high; it might rather be a defensive emotional reaction of the species against the danger of a total promiscuity, a total loss of identity in the proliferation and acceleration of the networks.

If AIDS, terrorism, economic collapse and electronic viruses are concerns not just for the police, medicine, science and the experts, but for the entire collective imagination, this is because there is more to them than mere episodic events in an irrational world. They embody the entire logic of our system, and are merely, so to speak, the points at which that logic crystallizes spectacularly. Their power is a power of irradiation and their effect, through the media, within the imagination, is itself a viral one.

They are immanent phenomena which are all related to each other; they obey the same protocol of virulence and have contamination effects way beyond their actual impact. For example, a single terrorist act forces us to review the whole political dimension in the light of the terrorist hypothesis. The very emergence of AIDS, even at a statistically low level, forces us to review the whole spectrum of diseases and bodies in the light of the viral, immunodeficiency hypothesis. The tiniest little computer virus which degrades the Pentagon's memory banks or floods entire networks with Christmas greetings is enough to wreck the credibility of computer systems, and forces us to review all data with an eye to possible infiltration, calculated disinformation, risk and uncertainty. Which is not, objectively, without its funny side.

This is the privilege of extreme phenomena, and of catastrophe in general, since all these viral processes are clearly of the order of catastrophe (not in the moral sense, but as an anomalous way of things turning out). The secret order of catastrophe lies in the inseparability of all these contemporary processes - and, also, in the affinity of these eccentric phenomena with the banality of the whole system. All extreme phenomena are coherent with one another; they are so because they are coherent with the whole system.

This means it is no use looking to the rationality of the system to combat its excrescences. It is a total delusion to think extreme phenomena can be abolished. They will, rather, become increasingly extreme as our systems become increasingly sophisticated. And this is fortunate, since they are the cutting-edge therapy, the homeopathic therapy for those systems. Pitting Good against Evil no longer exists as a strategy. In transparent - homeostatic or homeofluid - systems, the only remaining strategy is that of Evil against Evil: the strategy of the greater evil. The only possible strategy is a fatal strategy. And this is not even a matter of choice: we can see it happening before our eyes. There is, then, a *homeopathic* virulence to AIDS, to stock market crashes, to computer viruses etc. Stock market crashes, terrorism, computer viruses, debt etc. are the part of the catastrophe which shows above the waterline. The other nine-tenths are submerged in virtuality.

The total catastrophe would be a situation in which all information was omnipresent, a state of total transparency - a state which is happily obscured in its effects by the computer virus. Thanks to that virus, we shall not race straight to the end of information and communication. That would be death. As an excrescence of this lethal transparency, the virus also serves as an alarm signal. It is rather like the acceleration of a fluid: it produces turbulence and anomalies which halt its course, or disperse it. Chaos serves as a limit to what would, otherwise, run off into the absolute void. So extreme phenomena serve, in their secret disorder, as prophylaxis-by-chaos

against an extreme escalation of order and transparency. That catastrophe, the true catastrophe, does, thanks to them, remain virtual. If it did materialize, that would be the end. And indeed, in spite of them, we are already today seeing the beginning of the end of a certain thinking process. Similarly, in the case of sexual liberation, we are already seeing the beginning of the end of a certain process *of jouissance.* If total sexual promiscuity came about, it is sex itself which would be abolished in its asexual explosion. It is the same with stock market crashes and with trade. Speculation as extreme phenomenon, as turbulence, puts a stop on the total emancipation of real trading. By simulating the instantaneous ultra-circulation of value, by shorting out the economic model, it also shorts out the catastrophe that the free communication of all exchange would represent - this total liberation of trade being the true catastrophic moment of value.

In the face of this threat of total weightlessness, of an unbearable lightness of being, a universal promiscuity, a linearity of processes which would pitch us into the void, these sudden whirlwinds we call catastrophes are what keep us from catastrophe. These anomalies, these extreme phenomena recreate zones of gravitation and density which prevent things from dispersing totally We may see this as our societies secreting their own particular form of 'accursed share', like those tribes which rid themselves of their excess population by suicidal plunges into the ocean - a homeopathic suicide of some of their members which preserved the homeostatic balance of the whole.

Catastrophe reveals itself, then, to be a well-tempered strategy of the species. Or, rather, our viruses, our extreme phenomena — very real, but localized — would seem to enable us to maintain intact the energy of virtual catastrophe, which is the engine driving all our processes - in the economy, in politics, in the arts and in history. And isn't energy itself, in its concept, a form *of catastrophe?*

1 June 1987

We are all Transsexuals Now

It is interesting to track the changes in the sexed body, exposed as it is today to a kind of artificial fate. And that artificial fate is transsexuality. An artificial fate not in the sense of a deviation from the natural order, but insofar as it is the product of a change in the symbolic order of sexual difference. And transsexual not (just) in the sense of anatomical sexual transformation, but in the wider sense of transvestism — of playing on interchangeable signs of sex, and, by contrast with the previous play on sexual difference, *of playing on sexual indifference.*

Indifference in two senses: the transsexual is both a play on non-differentiation (of the two poles of sexuality) and a form of indifference to *puissance,* to sex as *puissance.* The sexual has *puissance* as its focus *(jouissance* is the leitmotif of sexual liberation), whereas the transsexual tends towards artifice - both the anatomical artifice of changing sex and the play on vestimentary, morphological and gestural signs characteristic of cross-dressers. In both cases - surgical or semiurgical operation, sign or organ - what is involved is prosthetics and today, when it is the body's destiny to become a prosthesis, it is logical that the model of sexuality should become transsexuality and that transsexuality should everywhere become the site of seduction.

SCREENED OUT

We are all transsexuals. Just as we are all potential biological mutants, so we are all also potential transsexuals. And this is not even a matter of biology. We are all *symbolically* transsexuals.

Take La Cicciolina.[1] Is there any more wonderful embodiment of sex, of the pornographic innocence of sex? She has been contrasted with Madonna, the virgin product of aerobics and a glacial aesthetic, devoid of all charm and sensuality, a muscled android, ripe for precisely that reason for conversion into a computer-generated idol on account of the strange deterrence she generates. But, if we think about it, is not La Cicciolina also a transsexual? Her long, platinum-blonde hair, her ample, pneumatic breasts, her ideal blow-up-doll forms, her lyophilized-cartoon or science-fiction eroticism and, above all, the exaggeration of the sexual discourse (never perverse, never libertine), total transgression on a plate; the ideal telephone chat-line woman, plus a carnivorous erotic ideology which no woman today would sign up to — except, precisely, a transsexual, a transvestite: they alone, as we know, live by the exaggerated, carnivorous signs of sexuality. Here, that fleshly ectoplasm La Cicciolina meets the artificial nitroglycerine of Madonna or the androgynous, Frankenstinian charm of Michael Jackson. They are all mutants, transvestites, genetically baroque beings, whose erotic 'look' conceals their gender indeterminacy. They are all 'gender-benders', as they say in the USA.

In reality, the myth of sexual liberation is still alive in many forms, but, in the imaginary register, the transsexual myth — with its androgynous, hermaphroditic variants — is dominant. After the orgy, desire and sexual difference, we have here the flourishing of erotic simulacra of all kinds and transsexual kitsch in all its glory. Postmodern pornography, so to speak, in which sexuality gets lost in the theatrical

1. The Hungarian-born porn star Ilona Staller, who went on to become an Italian member of parliament on an anti-nuclear, pro-sexual freedom platform.

excess of its ambiguity and indifference. Things have certainly changed since sex and politics were part of the same subversive project: if La Cicciolina can be elected to the Italian Parliament now, that is precisely because the transsexual and the transpolitical meet in the same ironic indifference. This particular feat, which would have been unthinkable just a few years ago, but which today meets with warm general approval, attests to the fact that it is not just sexual culture, but the whole of the political culture that has gone over to transvestism.

The strategy of exorcizing the sexual body by wildly exaggerating the signs of sex, of exorcizing desire by its secret depolarization and the exaggeration of its *mise en scene,* is much more effective than that of good old repression, which, by contrast, used prohibition to create difference. Yet it is not clear who benefits from this strategy, as everyone suffers it without distinction. This travestied regime - in the broadest sense — has become the very basis of our institutions. You find it everywhere — in politics, architecture, theory, ideology and even in science.

You even find it in our desperate quest for identity and difference. We no longer have the time to seek out an identity in the historical record, in memory, in a past, nor indeed in a project or a future. We have to have an instant memory which we can plug in to immediately - a kind of promotional identity which can be verified at every moment. What we look for today, where the body is concerned, is not so much health, which is a state of organic equilibrium, but fitness, which is an ephemeral, hygienic, promotional radiance of the body - much more a performance than an ideal state — which turns sickness into failure. In terms of fashion and appearance, we no longer pursue beauty or seductiveness, but the 'look'.

Everyone is after their 'look'. Since you can no longer set any store by your own existence (we no longer look at each other - and seduction is at an end!), all that remains is to perform *an appearing act,* without bothering to *be,* or even to be seen. It is not: 'I exist, I'm here', but 'I'm visible, I'm image — look, look!' This is not

even narcissism. It's a depthless extraversion, a kind of promotional ingenuousness in which everyone becomes the impresario of his/her own appearance.

The 'look' is a kind of minimal, low-definition image, like the video image or, as McLuhan would say, a tactile image, which provokes neither attention nor admiration, as fashion still does, but is a pure special effect without any particular meaning. The look is not exactly fashion any more; it is a form of fashion which has passed beyond. It no longer subscribes to a logic of distinction and it is no longer a play of difference; it plays at difference without believing in it. It is indifference. Being oneself becomes an ephemeral performance, with no lasting effects, a disenchanted mannerism in a world without manners.

Retrospectively, this triumph of the transsexual and the travestied casts a strange light on the sexual liberation of earlier generations. That liberation, far from being, as in its own self-image, the irruption of a maximum erotic value of the body — with an elevation of the feminine and *jouissance* (the masculine having rather reserved for itself up to that point the field of power) - will perhaps merely have been an intermediate phase on the path to gender confusion. The sexual revolution will perhaps merely have been a decisive stage in the journey towards transsexuality. This is, ultimately, the problematic fate of every revolution. By releasing all the potentialities of desire, the sexual revolution leads to the basic question: am I man or woman? (psychoanalysis has at least played a part in generating this sexual uncertainty principle). As for the political and social revolution - the prototype for all the others - by giving human beings the use of their freedom and their own free will, it will have led them, in an implacably logical process, to wonder where their free will lies, what they ultimately want and what they are entitled to expect of themselves - a problem previously quite unknown. This is the paradoxical outcome of every revolution. With revolution begins indeterminacy, anxiety and confusion, but many other pleasures too: choice, pluralism, democracy.

But there simply is no democratic principle of sexuality. Sex is not part of human rights and there is no principle of the emancipation of sexuality. Once the orgy was over, sexual liberation could be seen to have had the effect of leaving everyone searching for their gender, their sexual and gender identity, with fewer and fewer possible answers, given the circulation of signs and the multiplicity of pleasures. This is how we subtly became transsexuals, just as we secretly became transpolitical — that is to say, politically indifferent and undifferentiated beings, politically androgynous and hermaphroditic. Having subscribed to, digested and rejected the most contradictory ideologies, we now merely wear the masks and have become in our minds, perhaps unwittingly, political cross-dressers.

What other things do we see simultaneously gaining the upper hand? Terrorism as (transpolitical) political form, AIDS and cancer as pathological form, the transsexual and the travestied as sexual and aesthetic form in general. Only these forms provide any genuine mental fascination today. Neither the sexual revolution nor the political debate, neither cardiovascular disease nor accidents at work, nor even conventional warfare, interest anyone collectively any more (this is a good thing where war is concerned; we shall have been spared many wars because they would have been of no interest to anyone). The true phantasms lie elsewhere. They lie in these three forms, all of them products of the disturbance of a principle of functioning and the resultant confusion of effects, and each of them (terrorism, transvestism, AIDS) corresponding to an exacerbation of the political, sexual or genetic game, as well as to a defectiveness and collapse of the respective codes of the political and sexual spheres.

They are all viral, fascinating, indifferent forms, forms multiplied by the virulence of images, since all the modern media - the information and communications systems - have themselves a viral power and their virulence is contagious. We are in a culture where bodies and minds are irradiated by signals and images and,

though that culture produces the finest effects, it comes as no surprise that it also produces the most lethal viruses. The nuclearization ofbodies began at Hiroshima, but it continues endemically, incessantly, in irradiation by the media, by images, signs, programmes and networks.

14 October 1987

Necrospective around Martin Heidegger

The futile quarrel over Heidegger has no specific meaning within philosophy. It is merely symptomatic of a weakness in current thinking. Unable to find any new energy, philosophical thought keeps going back obsessively over its origins, over the purity of its references; it is now painfully reliving, in this *fin de siecle* period, its own primal scene of the early part of the century. More generally, the Heidegger case is symptomatic of the collective vogue for revivals which has taken hold of this society as it begins its end-of-century stock-taking: a revival of Nazism, fascism and the holocaust. The same temptation to re-examine the century's historical primal scene is at work here, a temptation to 'launder' the corpses and clean up the historical record, but at the same time there is also in all this a perverse fascination with a return to the wellsprings of violence, a collective attempt to hallucinate the historical truth of evil. Our present imagination must be weak indeed and our indifference to our own situation and our own philosophizing very great for us to need such regressive magic.

In the case of Heidegger we are suddenly discovering his act of intellectual treachery (if such it was) today, even though we have lived quite happily with it for

forty years. We saw the same thing happen with Marx and Freud. When Marxist thought lost its triumphal aura, people started ferreting about in Marx's life and discovered that he was a bourgeois who slept with his maid. When psychoanalytic thought began to lose its uncontested influence, people began looking into Freud's own life and psychology and, inevitably, found he was sexist and patriarchal. Now we have Heidegger accused of being a Nazi.

The fact that he has been so accused and that efforts are being made to prove his innocence is really of no consequence: both parties to the quarrel have fallen into the same petty-minded intellectual trap, the trap of an enervated form of thinking which no longer even takes pride in its own basic tenets, nor has the energy to go beyond them, and which is squandering what energy it still possesses in historical trials, accusations, justifications and verifications. This is the self-defence of the philosophical world casting a suspicious eye on the dubious morals of its masters (if not, indeed, trampling them down as 'master-thinkers'). It is the self-defence of an entire society which is unable to generate a new history and is hence condemned to keep on re-hashing past history to prove its own existence, or even to prove its own crimes.

But what are we trying to prove? It is because we have disappeared *today* politically and historically (this is our real problem) that we want to prove we actually died between 1940 and 1945 at Auschwitz or Hiroshima — that at least is a kind of history that really has some weight to it. In this we are behaving just like the Armenians who never stop trying to prove they were massacred in 1917; an inaccessible, useless proof, but one which is vital to them in a way. It is because philosophy today has disappeared (that is its problem: how can it live on in a state of disappearance?) that it has to prove that it was definitively compromised by what Heidegger did or rendered aphasic by Auschwitz. What is happening, then, is a desperate attempt to snatch a posthumous truth from history, a posthumous

exculpation — and this at a moment when there is precisely not enough truth around to allow us to arrive at any sort of verification, nor enough philosophy to ground any relation whatever between theory and practice, nor enough history to produce any kind of historical proof of what happened.

We tend all too easily to forget that our reality comes to us through the media, the tragic events of the past included. This means that it is too late to verify and understand them historically, for precisely what characterizes our century's end is the fact that the tools of historical intelligibility have disappeared. History had to be understood while there still was history. Heidegger should have been denounced (or defended) while there still was time. A trial can only be conducted when there is some way for justice to be done afterwards. It is too late now; we have been moved on to other things, as we saw when *Holocaust* was shown on television, and even when *Shoah* was screened. Those phenomena were not understood at the time when we still had the means to understand them. They will not be understood now. This is so because such fundamental notions as responsibility, objective cause and the meaning (or non-meaning) of history have already disappeared or are disappearing. The effects of moral conscience, or collective conscience, are entirely media effects, and you can see from the extraordinary therapeutic effort being made to resuscitate that conscience how little life is left in it.

We shall never know whether Nazism, the concentration camps or Hiroshima were intelligible or not. We are no longer in the same mental universe. The reversibility of victim and victimizer, the diffraction and dissolution of responsibility - these are the virtues of our marvellous interface today. We no longer have the strength to forget; our amnesia is the amnesia of images. Amnesties seem impossible: since everyone is guilty, who could declare one? As for autopsies, no one believes in the anatomical veracity of facts any more. We work on models. Even if the facts were there staring us in the face, we would not be convinced.

Thus the more we have pored over Nazism and the gas chambers in an effort to analyse those things, the less intelligible they have become, and we have in the end arrived quite logically at the improbable question: 'When it comes down to it, did all these things really exist?' The question may be stupid or morally indefensible, but what is interesting is what makes it logically *possible* to ask it. And what makes it possible is the way the media have substituted themselves for events, ideas and history. This means that the longer you examine these phenomena, the more you master all the details to identify their causes, the more their existence fades and the more they come to have not existed at all: a confusion over the identity of things induced by the very act of investigating and memorizing them. An indifference of memory, an indifference to history that is exactly equal to the very efforts made to objectify it. One day we shall ask ourselves if Heidegger himself really existed. Faurisson's paradox[2] may seem abominable - and, insofar as he claims that the gas chambers did not exist historically, it *is* abominable - but in a sense it exactly expresses the situation of an entire culture: the dead-end that our *fin-de-siecle* society has got itself into, fascinated as it is to the point of distraction by the horror of its own origins. Since it is impossible to forget those origins, the only way out is denial.

If proof is futile here, as there is no historical discourse in which to conduct a trial, punishment is also impossible. Nothing can atone for Auschwitz and the holocaust. There is no possible way of fitting the punishment to the crime, and the unreality of a possible punishment makes the facts themselves seem unreal. What we are living through has nothing to do with all this. What is happening right now, collectively, confusedly, in all these trials and polemics is the transition from the

2. Robert Faurisson, formerly a professor at the University of Lyon is the most prominent of France's 'revisionist' historians.

phase of history to a phase of myth. We are seeing the mythic reconstruction, the media reconstruction, of all these events. And in a sense this mythic conversion is the only operation which can, if not perhaps morally exculpate us, at least absolve us in fantasy of responsibility for this original crime. But before this process can take place, before a crime can become a myth, the crime has first to be divested of its historical reality. Otherwise, since we have been, and still are, unable to come to terms historically with all these things - fascism, concentration camps, the holocaust - we would be condemned to repeat them eternally as a primal scene.

It is not nostalgia for fascism which is dangerous. What is dangerous and lamentable is this pathological revival of the past, in which everyone — both those who deny and those who assert the reality of the gas chambers, both Heidegger's critics and his supporters - is currently participating (indeed virtually conniving), this collective hallucination which transfers the power of imagination that is lacking from our own period, and all the burden of violence and reality which has today become merely illusory, back to that earlier period in a sort of compulsion to relive its history, a compulsion accompanied by a profound sense of guilt at not having been there. All this is a desperate emotional response to the realization that the events in question are currently eluding us at the level of reality. The Heidegger affair, the Barbie trial etc. are the pathetic little convulsions produced by the loss of reality that afflicts us today, and Faurisson's propositions are simply the cynical transposition of that loss of reality into the past. Faurisson's 'none of this ever existed' quite simply means that we do not even exist enough today to sustain a memory, and that all that remains to give us a sense of being alive are the techniques of hallucination.

Postscript: in view of all this, could we not just skip the rest of the century? I intend to launch a collective petition (which will make a change from the usual humanitarian or presidential petitions) calling for the 1990s to be cancelled, so that

we can move directly from 1989 to the year 2000. As the *fin-de-siecle* has already arrived, with all its necrocultural pathos, its endless lamentations, commemorations and mummifications, do we really have to spend another ten boring years on this same old treadmill?

27 *January 1988*

In Praise of a Virtual Crash

The interesting element in the tragicomedy on the stock exchanges in recent months is the uncertainty as to whether a catastrophe has occurred. Has there been a 'real' catastrophe? Will there be one? The answer is: the catastrophe is a virtual one, and there will be no real catastrophe because we live under the sign of virtual catastrophe. This is connected with a state of affairs which was shown up strikingly here: the discrepancy between the fictional economy and the real economy. It is this discrepancy which protects us from a real catastrophe of the productive economies. Is this a good or a bad thing? It is exactly the same as the discrepancy between orbital war and land wars. Land wars go on everywhere, but nuclear war has not broken out. If the two were not disconnected, the nuclear confrontation would have erupted long since. We are dominated by bombs and virtual catastrophes which do not explode: the international stock market crash (this has not really eventuated and it will not), nuclear war, the third-world debt, and even the demographic time-bomb. One could, of course, argue that all these things will inevitably blow up in our faces one day, just as there has long been a prediction that, within the next fifty years, an earthquake will surely see California slide into the Pacific.

■

But the facts are clear: we are in the situation where the catastrophe does not eventuate, in a situation of virtual catastrophe — *eternally* virtual catastrophe.

This is how things are for us; it is the only reality objectively facing us: a wild, orbital round-dance of capital which, when it breaks down, produces no substantial disequilibrium in real economies (unlike the 1929 Crash, when the fictional and the real economies were by no means as disconnected, and, as a result, the catastrophe within the one had an impact on the other), either because real economies are themselves so speculative that they absorb more easily today what they could not absorb in 1929, or because the sphere of virtual capital has become so autonomous, so orbitalized, that it can in some cases proliferate — or even devour itself — without leaving any trace. It does, however, leave at least one catastrophic trace: the crash that has occurred has been not so much in the economy as in economic theory, which is now at a total loss before this explosion of its object. For everything has become a problem of communication. In the orbital sphere of capital, there is wonderfully good communication (the perverse computers and the 'golden boys', who are themselves human computing machines). This is the reason why it is in a permanently catastrophic state: the communications are too good. On the other hand, between the two spheres (of the virtual and the real), there is no longer any communication. Fortunately or otherwise. For it is this break between the two, this loss of a referent on the part of the virtual economy, which enables it to produce prodigious effects, but it is also this which protects the real economy from the catastrophes which may occur in the other sphere. Would it be better if the real economy became the referent and criterion for the fictional economy (every economist's dream)? There is little indication that it would, and in any case it is unthinkable.

Traditional theorists of war must be equally at a loss before the explosion of their object of study. For, paradoxically, it isn't the bomb which has exploded, but the

war-object, which has exploded into two separate parts - a total, virtual war in orbit and multiple real wars on the ground. The two have neither the same dimensions nor the same rules, just as the virtual economy and the real economy do not have the same dimensions or the same rules. We shall have to get used to this virtually definitive division, accustom ourselves to a world dominated by this discrepancy. There was, admittedly, a crisis in 1929, and an explosion at Hiroshima, and hence there was a moment when these two worlds explosively contaminated each other, a moment when the economic slump and nuclear warfare were real, but we should not be misled by this as to what was to follow. Capital has not lurched from one crisis to another, each worse than the last (as Marx argued it would), nor have we lurched from one war to another. The event took place once and that is all. What came after was something quite different: it was the hyper-realization of big finance capital, the hyper-realization of overkill capacity, both orbitalized above our heads on a course quite beyond our grasp, and a course which is, fortunately, also beyond the grasp of reality itself. Hyper-realized war and hyper-realized money circulate in an inaccessible space, but in doing so they leave the world just as it is. In the end, the economies continue to produce, whereas the tiniest logical consequence of the fluctuations in the fictional economy would long ago have sufficed to wipe them out (let us not forget that in the daily figures for international trade, only 100 billion dollars goes on commercial transactions, while capital movements stand at 900 billion). The world continues to exist, even though one thousandth of the available nuclear power would have been enough to annihilate it; the Third World - and the other — survive even though the slightest inclination to meet its debt would already have wiped it from the map. Instead, that debt has begun to put itself into orbit; it is beginning to circulate from one bank to another, one country to another, each buying it back from the others. In this way it will eventually be forgotten, as it is sent into orbit with nuclear waste and a great many other things.

When the debt becomes too burdensome we expel it into a virtual space, where it appears as a catastrophe frozen in orbit. The debt becomes a satellite of the earth, just as war has become a satellite of the earth, just as the billions of dollars of speculative capital have become a satellite-heap, revolving endlessly around the planet. And it is, no doubt, better that it should be that way. While they are revolving - and even if they explode in space (as the billions 'lost' in the 1987 crash did) - the world is not changed by them, and this is the best we can hope for. The 'rational' hope of reconciling the fictional and real economies is entirely Utopian: these billions of dollars exist only virtually; they cannot be transposed into the real economy. And a good thing too, for if they could by some miracle be re-injected into the production economies, that would spell real catastrophe. Similarly, we definitely should not try to re-connect the two separate spheres of warfare: let us leave virtual war in orbit, since that is where it protects us. In its very abstraction, its monstrous eccentricity, the nuclear is our best protection. And let us get used to living in the shade of these monstrous excrescences: the orbital bomb, financial speculation, the world debt, over-population (for which no orbital solution has yet been found — perhaps here again it will lie in the eccentric mobilization and circulation of the excess). As they are, they exorcize themselves in their excess, in their very hyperreality, and, after a fashion, leave the world intact, leave it free of its double.

The end of political economy is a thing we dreamed of with Marx. It was a dream in which classes died out and the social sphere became transparent, in accordance with an ineluctable logic of the crisis of capital. Then we dreamed the dream against Marx himself, disavowing the postulates of economics. A radical alternative this, denying any primacy to the economic or political spheres in first or last instance: political economy quite simply abolished as epiphenomenon, vanquished by its own simulacrum and by a higher logic. We no longer even need to

dream of that end today. Political economy is disappearing by its own hand before our very eyes; it is turning into a transeconomics of speculation and flouting its own logic (the law of value, of the market, production, surplus-value, the very logic of capital), as it develops into a game with floating, arbitrary rules, a *jeu de catastrophe*. Political economy will have come to an end, but not at all as we expected it to - it will have ended by becoming exacerbated to the point of parody. Speculation is no longer surplus-value; it is the ecstasy of value, without reference to production or its real conditions. It is the pure and empty form, the expurgated form of value, which plays now on its own orbital circulation and revolution alone. It is by destabilizing itself monstrously, ironically, as it were, that political economy short-circuits every alternative. For what can you set against such an upping of the stakes, which in its own way takes over the energy of potlatch, of poker, of the challenge to its own logic, and represents, as it were, the transition to the aesthetic and frenzied phase of the economy — a way of putting an end to the economy that is the most singular in style, ultimately more original than our political Utopias? Faced with this dangerous leap, can theory make a double leap to maintain its advantage?

2 March 1988

The Viral Economy

AIDS, the stock market crash (followed by the dawn raiders and a string of takeover bids), computer viruses - we are having more than our fair share of 'superconductive' events. More than our fair share of these sudden intercontinental ravages which no longer affect states, individuals or institutions, but entire structures, structures running right across society: sex, money, information and communications.

The three things are not interchangeable, but there is a family resemblance between them. AIDS is a kind of collapse of the sexual market, and we ought not to forget that computers, themselves affected with a kind of AIDS today, played a 'virulent' role in the Wall Street Crash. But the galloping contamination of computers could also be seen as akin to a devastating fall in the stock of computing. Contagion is not merely active *within* each system; it operates *between* systems.

All these developments have a generic pattern to them: the pattern of catastrophe. Admittedly, signs of this virulence and disruption have long been present in each of these systems: AIDS is now endemic; financial collapse, prefigured in the famous Wall Street Crash of 1929, is always a risk if panic sets in on the markets;

and hacking (and serial electronic accidents) go back at least twenty years. But the fact of all these endemic forms appearing together - and being almost simultaneously ratcheted up to a virulent state, a state of galloping anomaly - creates an entirely original, exciting situation. The effects are not necessarily of the same order in the collective consciousness: AIDS may be experienced as a real catastrophe; the stock market crash, by contrast, seems a *jeu de catastrophe,* and as for the computer virus, that is, admittedly, dramatic in its virtual consequences, but at the same time it is hilariously ironic. It is, in a sense, a catastrophic parody. The contagion of computer viruses is also the contagion of laughter (laughter is a form of contagion born of the catastrophic collapse of the real — even an infinitesimally tiny collapse; laughter is a homeopathic catastrophe). And the sudden epidemic which is striking down computers, destroying their defence and immune systems, can be a source of justified rejoicing — at least in the imagination (though not for the professionals concerned).

To these various aspects of a single eccentric cluster of phenomena, I shall add two very different things, though they inevitably put us in mind of the same mechanisms. The first is art, which is everywhere beset by questions of falsehood, authenticity, copying, cloning and simulation (there is a positive contagion here, destabilizing aesthetic values, which are also losing their immune defences) and simultaneously by a mad, speculative upward spiral of prices (though the art 'market' is no longer a market, but a centrifugal proliferation of value, in every way equivalent to the secondary infections of a body irradiated by lucre).

The second phenomenon is a political one: terrorism. Nothing more resembles the chain reaction of terrorism in our irradiated societies (irradiated by what? By superfusion of happiness, security, information and communication; by the disintegration of core symbols, fundamental rules, social contracts? — who knows?) than the chain reaction of AIDS, the dawn raiders, or the hackers. And the contagion of

terrorism is as locally-confined, ephemeral, enigmatic and irrepressible as the contagion of all these phenomena. Hostage-taking is contagious too: when a software engineer puts a 'soft bomb' into the programme, using the possible destruction of that programme as a means of exerting pressure, what is he doing but taking the programme and all its future users hostage? And what do dawn raiders do but take - and hold — companies hostage, speculating on their death or resurrection on the stock market? We may say, then, that all the effects described operate on the same model as terrorism (hostages have a market price like shares or paintings), with the same Dutch auction going on, the same unpredictability, the same destabilization and chain-reaction effects. But we could just as well see terrorism on the model of AIDS, computer viruses or hostile takeover bids: none of these phenomena takes precedence over the others; there is no process of cause and effect here; it is a single constellation of collusive, contemporary phenomena.

The stock market crash finds a continuation in the takeover frenzy. It is no longer stocks and shares being bought, but companies being bought up. A virtual effervescence is created, with a potential impact on economic restructuring which, in spite of what is said, is purely speculative. The hope is that this enforced circulation will produce a broker's commission — exactly as on the Stock Exchange. Not even an objective profit exactly: the profit from speculation is not exactly surplus-value, and what is at stake here is certainly not what is at stake in classical capitalism. Speculation, like poker or roulette, has its own runaway logic, a chain-reaction logic, a process of intensification *[Steigerung]*, in which the thrill of the game and of bidding up the stakes plays a considerable role. This is why there is no point criticizing it on the basis of economic logic (this is what makes these phenomena so exciting: the economic being overtaken by a random, vertiginous form).

The game is such as to become suicidal: big companies end up buying back their own shares, which is nonsensical from the economic point of view: they end up

mounting takeover bids for themselves! But this is all part of the same madness. In the case of takeovers, companies are not traded - do not circulate - as real capital, as units of production; they are traded as a quantity of shares, as a mere probability of production, which is enough to create a virtual movement within the economy. That this will be a prelude to other crashes is highly probable, for the same reasons as apply in the case of stocks and shares: things are circulating too quickly. We might imagine labour itself - labour power — moving into this speculative orbit too. The worker would no longer sell his labour power for a wage, as in the classic capitalist process, but sell his job itself, his employment. And he would buy others and sell them on again, as their stock went up or down on the Labour Exchange (the term would then assume its full meaning). It would not be so much a question of doing the jobs as keeping them circulating, creating a virtual movement of employment which substituted for the real movement of labour.

Science fiction? Hardly. Information and communication are based on the principle of a value which has ceased to be referential and is now based on pure circulation. Pure added-value — added by dint of the message, the meaning passing from image to image and screen to screen. This is no longer even the surplus-value and exchange-value of the commodity (which does, however, anticipate this process). That is based in principle on a use-value and hence still belongs to the sphere of the economy. Here there is no longer any exchange properly speaking: we are in the realm of pure circulation and chain reactions through the networks: a whole new definition of value as something purely centrifugal, linked to pure speed and intensified exchange. This is largely what we see in the communications and information field - a field of virtuality; operational, but never operative.

But this 'transeconomic' model of value already exists in a sense in primitive cultures. For example, *kula* is a cycle of gift-exchange in which the gifts acquire

increasing value the more they have been given and received.[3] They can even return to the starting point without having changed, but with their value enhanced a hundredfold (isn't it the same on today's art market?). The mere fact of passing from one person to another creates a kind of symbolic circulation energy, which transmutes into value. But that value cannot be realized. It cannot be 'produced', nor can it be transferred into the circuit of useful values *(gimwali);* it can only circulate indefinitely, increasing as exchanges occur (or, possibly, collapsing if they stop). Now *kula* is, in a sense, the sacred level, the prestige level of (symbolic) exchange. The other level, the level of barter, of equivalence, has no symbolic value; it is functional. *Potlatch* too is a speculative structure of outbidding, of production of value by purely and simply bidding up the price.

Can we say, then, that there is an echo of *kula* and *potlatch* in these wayward effects, which basically contradict the economic principle of value and equivalence, the principle of labour and production? In all logic (even in the logic of radical critique), we could not condemn these excesses. And everyone enjoys them as spectacle: the stock market, the art market, the Wall Street raiders. We all delight in these things as part of capital's spectacular brightening of our lives, its mania for the aesthetic. At the same time we delight - with more difficulty and more pain, and more ambiguously - in the spectacular pathology of that system, in the viruses which, like AIDS, the stock market crash and computer viruses, latch on to this delicate machinery and knock it out of kilter. But they are in fact following out the same logic: viruses and virulence are part of the logical, hyperlogical coherence of all our systems; they take the same paths and even create some new ones (computer viruses explore marginal areas of the networks which even

3. On the *kula* system, see Marcel Mauss, *Tlte Gift. Hie Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York/London: W. W. Norton, 2000), pp. 21-31.

the networks had not planned to use). Computer viruses are an expression of the lethal transparency of information throughout the world. AIDS is an emanation of the lethal transparency of sexual liberation on a scale affecting entire social groups. Financial crashes are an expression of the lethal transparency of economies one to another, of the fulgurating circulation of values, which is the very basis of the liberation of production and exchange. Once they have been 'liberated', all these processes enter a supercooled state, the French term chiming felicitously here with notions of fusion and meltdown. This supercooling of event processes which become decoupled from their real substance is one of the great attractions of our age.[4]

And it is quite some paradox to see the economy coming triumphantly back on to the agenda, including the media agenda (let us not forget that the world of the media is a viral world too, and that the circulation of images and messages functions as a perpetual rumour mill). But can we still speak of the 'economy'? Or, indeed, of political economy (the logic of capital)? Certainly not. At the very least, the striking prominence of the economy at the moment has not at all the same meaning it had in the classical or Marxist analysis. For it is no longer in any sense driven by the infrastructure of material production, nor indeed by the superstructure. The engine of the economy is the destructuring of value, the destabilizing of markets and real economies, the triumph of an economy relieved of ideologies, social sciences, history and political economy and yielded up to pure speculation; it is the triumph of a virtual economy relieved of real economies (not really, of course, but virtually: yet it is not reality which holds sway today but virtuality); the triumph of a viral economy which connects up in this way with all the other viral processes. It

4. Baudrillard is here exploiting the term *suffusion* ('supercooling' or 'undercooling') for its poetic resources. This is also 'surfusion' as an excess of, a beyond of, 'fusion'.

is as an arena of special effects, of unpredictable (almost meteorological) happenings - as the destruction and exacerbation of its own logic - that it is becoming once again a kind of exemplary theatre of current events.

9 November 1988

The Depressurization of the West

With the Rushdie affair, Khomeini can be said to have opened up a new era in the history of hostage-taking. The awkward part in hostage-taking, as is well known, is storing and keeping the hostage. Khomeini has pulled off the brilliant trick of having the Western powers themselves detain and stand guard over the hostage. And, through Rushdie, he has pulled off the brilliant trick of having the West as a whole take itself hostage. This spectacular enhancement of hostage-taking strategy has turned it into something global - a symbolic strategy capable of overturning all relations of force merely by opening one's mouth.

Instead of talking a lot of nonsense about the Ayatollah's medieval barbarity and hoping the whole thing will disappear miraculously with his death, it would be better to ponder why an act of this kind has such symbolic potency, why it is so symbolically - diabolically - effective.

After an exhausting war and in an entirely negative political, military and economic situation, with the whole world united against him, the Ayatollah has a single, tiny, immaterial weapon at his disposal. But it is close to being the absolute weapon: the principle of Evil. A position of absolute disavowal of the Western

values of progress, rationality, political morality, democracy, etc. Denying the universal consensus on all these fine things confers on him the whole energy of Evil — all the satanic energy of the outcast, the *eclat* of the accursed share. He alone speaks today, because he alone, against all comers, has taken up the Manichean principle of Evil; he alone has taken it upon himself to speak evil and exorcise it, he alone agrees to embody it in terror.

What lies behind his decision is beyond our understanding, and there is little to be gained from rambling on about the internal divisions within Islam. What we can state with certainty, however, is the superiority this affords him over the West, where the possibility of speaking evil no longer exists anywhere, where the slightest criticism, the slightest radical negativity is stifled by the virtual consensus on all values based on negotiation and reconciliation. Political power in the West now only half-heartedly exercises its former functions, one of which was to designate the Other, the Enemy, the stakes, the threat, the evil. Power exists only as long as it has this symbolic potency. It no longer has that potency today and, conversely, there is no opposition which is able or willing to designate the current powers-that-be as the evil. We are now very low on satanic, ironic, polemical, antagonistic energy; we have become fanatically soft societies, or softly fanatical ones.

By hounding out the 'accursed share' from within ourselves, and allowing only positive values to shine forth, we have become dramatically vulnerable to the slightest viral attack, including that of the Ayatollah, whose immune defences are certainly not down. The only thing we can range against him - and it is not much — is human rights, which is itself part of our political immunodeficiency. And, moreover, in the name of human rights, we end up describing the Ayatollah himself as 'absolute Evil' (Mitterand), that is to say, end up identifying with his irrational curse in a way that stands in total contradiction to our enlightened

discourse (do we call a madman 'mad' today? We don't even call a handicapped person 'handicapped', so afraid are we of Evil, so much do we wallow in euphemisms in order to avoid designating the Other, misfortune, the irreducible).

We should not be surprised that someone capable of speaking the language of Evil - speaking it literally and triumphantly - should trigger such an access of weakness in Western cultures, in spite of petitions by intellectuals the world over. The fact is that legality, humanitarian good conscience and reason itself yield in the face of imprecation. Reason is completely fascinated by it and falls in with it, as do all the world's media. All it can do is mobilize its reserves of stigmatization and satanization, but, in so doing, it lapses into the same language and falls into the trap of the principle of Evil, which is essentially contagious. Who is the winner? The Ayatollah of course. Admittedly, we still have the power to destroy him, but symbolically he has won and symbolic power is always superior to the power of weapons and money; our modern idealism should have taught us that. It is, in a way, the revenge of the other world. The Third World had never really managed to mount a challenge to the West. And the USSR, which for a few decades personified the principle of Evil for the West, has clearly moved over quietly to the side of Good, the side of a well-tempered management of the world's affairs. By a marvellous irony, that country even offered itself as mediator between the West and the Satan of Teheran. And it has the experience to do that, having spent five years defending Western values in Afghanistan, without anyone properly realizing it. Some commentators have at least acknowledged, with some bitterness, that Khomeini's sentence has, by force of anathema, restored a fantastic value to books — a value they had lost. This is to recognize the shameful state politics has fallen into in our countries.

The effect of fascination, attraction and repulsion on a world scale, unleashed by the Ayatollah's death sentence on Rushdie, is exactly like the phenomenon of

sudden depressurization of an aircraft cabin when there is a hole or crack in the fuselage (even if this is accidental, it always resembles a terrorist act). Everything is sucked violently outwards into the void, as a result of the pressure differential between the two spaces. You have only to make a breach, a hole in the ultra-thin film separating the two worlds. Terrorism, hostage-taking, is pre-eminently the act which makes this kind of breach in an artificial — and artificially protected — universe (our universe). The whole of Islam, *current* Islam, which is not in any sense the Islam of the Middle Ages, and which has to be assessed in strategic, not moral or religious terms, is creating a vacuum around the Western system (including the countries of Eastern Europe) and, from time to time, making breaches in that system, by a single act or statement, through which all our values hurtle out into the void. Islam does not exert revolutionary pressure on the Western world; there is no danger that Islam will convert or conquer it: it is happy to destabilize it by this viral aggression in the name of the principle of Evil (to which we have no answer) and on the basis of the virtual catastrophe that is the pressure differential between the two milieus - the perpetual risk for the protected universe (our universe) of a sudden de-pressurizing of the air (the values) we breathe. Admittedly, quite a bit of oxygen has already escaped from our Western world through all kinds of fissures and cracks. We would be well advised to hold on to our oxygen masks.

Our entire system rushes to serve the Ayatollah. He has merely to raise his little finger and the principle of Evil draws us to him in frenzied fascination. Contrary to all that is said of it, his strategy is astonishingly modern. Much more modern than ours, since it consists in subtly injecting archaic elements into a modern context: a *fatwa,* a decree of execution, a curse or any old thing. If our Western world were robust, this would simply be meaningless. But the whole of our system falls into the trap and becomes a sounding-box for these elements, a superconductor for

the virus. How can we explain this? Once again, what we have here is the revenge of the Other World: we, in our time, infected the rest of the world with enough germs, diseases, epidemics and ideologies against which they had no resistance. Today, in an ironic twist, it seems we are ourselves defenceless in the face of a tiny little archaic microbe.

The hostage himself is becoming microbial. Alain Bosquet shows in his latest book *(Le Metier d'otage)* how, once deflected into the void, the hostage — that particle of the Western world — cannot go home, no longer wants to go home. For one thing he is demeaned in his own eyes, but also his own people, his country and fellow citizens are collectively demeaned by their enforced passivity, their routine cowardice, the very act of negotiation, which is degrading in itself and fundamentally useless. For, quite apart from the negotiation, every hostage-taking proves the inescapable cowardice of entire communities *vis-a-vis* the least significant of their members. And indeed, the indifference of the community to its members has its counterpart in the indifference of each individual to the community: this is how we function (badly) in the West and it is this political impoverishment which the strategy of hostage-taking ruthlessly exposes. By destabilizing a single individual, an entire system is destabilized. This is why the hostage cannot even forgive his own people for having made him into a hero — an elevation which in fact it immediately retracts.

We can neither get into the mind of the Ayatollah, nor into the hearts of Muslims, and there can be no question of espousing their passions or beliefs. Ail we can do is get away from that feeble, dogmatic thinking which imputes all this to religious fanaticism, and garner at least a glimmer of strategic understanding of what is at stake in this symbolic challenge; in this respect, the hotchpotch of pious and pathetic reactions one reads is next to useless and represents little but an attempt at exorcism.

I fear we are ill-equipped to meet the challenge of this symbolic violence of Islam at the very moment when we are trying to wipe the Terror from our memory of the revolution for the sake of a commemoration which, like the current consensus, has all the features of an inflatable structure. How are we to react to this new violence if we choose to blot out the violence of our own history?

14 March 1989

The Defrosting of Eastern Europe and the End of History

The event of the end of the century is under way. The idea that history, stifled for a time by the grip of totalitarian ideology, is resuming its course with renewed vigour now that the blockade of the countries of Eastern Europe has been lifted, has put air back in everyone's lungs. The field of history is at last opened up again to the unpredictable movement of peoples and their thirst for freedom. In contrast to the depressive mythology which generally accompanies the ends of centuries, it seems this one is to usher in a new and illustrious resurgence of the final process, to bring fresh hope and a revival of all historical challenges. Away with all those evil auguries of the end of history. How can its reality and vitality be doubted when such events are taking place before our eyes?

Seen at closer quarters, the event is a bit more mysterious, and might with much greater accuracy be described as an unidentified 'historical' object. This thawing of the Eastern bloc, this thawing of liberty is certainly an extraordinary turn of events. But what becomes of liberty when it is defrosted? The operation is a perilous one and its outcome uncertain (even leaving aside the fact that what has been defrosted cannot be deep-frozen again). The USSR and the Eastern bloc have

not just served as a deep-freeze for freedom; they have also provided a testing ground, an experimental environment in which it was sequestered and subjected to very high pressures. The West, for its part, is little more than a repository or, more accurately, a dumping ground for freedom and human rights. If ultra-freezing was the distinctive — and negative - mark of the Eastern world, the ultra-fluidity of our Western world is even more shocking since, as a consequence of the liberation and liberalization of mores and opinions, the problem of liberty quite simply cannot be posed here any longer. It is resolved virtually. In the West, freedom — the Idea of Freedom - has died a natural death: this we have seen in all the recent commemorations. In the East it was murdered, but there is no such thing as the perfect crime. It will be very interesting, from an experimental point of view, to see what freedom is like when it resurfaces, when it is resuscitated after all signs of it have been blotted out. We shall see what a process of reanimation or *post mortem* rehabilitation looks like. Perhaps defrosted liberty is not so attractive as all that. And what if it turned out to be intent on just one thing: bartering itself off in a binge of cars and electrical goods, not to mention mind-bending drugs and pornography; that is, immediately trading itself off against Western liquid assets, switching over from an end of history by deep-freezing to an end of history by ultra-fluidity and circulation?

The enthralling thing about these events in Eastern Europe is not to see them meekly coming to the aid of an ailing democracy by bringing it fresh energy (and new markets), but to see the telescoping of two specific patterns of the end of history: the one where it ends deep-frozen in the concentration camps and the other where, by contrast, it ends in the total, centrifugal expansion of communication. In each case, a final solution. And it may be that the unfreezing of human rights is the socialist equivalent of the 'depressurization of the West': a mere discharge into the Western void of the energies trapped for half a century in the East.

SCREENED OUT

The fervour surrounding events can be deceptive: if that of the Eastern bloc countries is merely an ardent desire to be free of ideology, merely a fervent desire to imitate the free-market countries, where all liberty has already been exchanged for technological ease of living, then we shall see once and for all what freedom is worth and know that it can perhaps never be regained. History serves up no second helpings. On the other hand - and this is the unpredictable part for us, for the West (after all, when the Evil Empire collapses Good cannot remain exactly as it was before!) - this defrosting of the East may be as harmful in the long term as the surfeit of carbon gases in the upper layers of the atmosphere, creating a political greenhouse effect and such a warming of human relations on the planet, with the melting of the Communist ice-floes, that the shores of the West will be flooded. Curiously, whereas we dread the climatic melting of ice-floes and see it as representing a potential catastrophe, we long with all our might as democrats for such a thaw on the political front.

If, in the old days, the USSR had dumped its stock of gold on the world market, that market would have been completely destabilized. If the Eastern bloc countries were to put back into circulation the vast stock of freedom they have been keeping on ice, they would similarly destabilize the very fragile metabolism of Western values, which requires that freedom no longer manifest itself as action but as a virtual and consensual form of interaction, not as drama, but as the universal psychodrama of liberalism. A sudden injection of freedom as a lived relationship — as violent and active transcendance, as Idea — would be catastrophic in every way for our air-conditioned redistribution of values. Yet this is what we are asking of those in the East: the idea of freedom in exchange for the material signs of freedom. A perfectly diabolical pact, in which one side is in danger of losing its soul, the other its comfort.

But it is perhaps better this way. On both sides. The masked societies (the Communist societies) are now unmasked. What face do they present? It is a long

time since we shed our masks, a long time since we had either masks or faces. We have no memory either. We have reached the point of seeking in water a memory without traces, of hoping (I crave Benveniste's indulgence here)"' that something still remains when even the molecular traces have disappeared. It is the same with our freedom: we would be hard-pressed to produce any sign of it and we have reached the point of postulating its infinitesimal, impalpable, undetectable existence in a milieu of such high (programmatic, operational) dilution that only its spectre still hovers in a memory which is now merely the memory of water.

The wellspring of freedom has run so dry in the West (as witness the commemoration of the French Revolution) that we must place all our hopes in the East European deposits that have at last been uncovered and opened up. But once this stock of liberty has been released (the Idea of Liberty having become as scarce as a natural resource), what can ensue but, as on any market, an intense, superficial burst of trading, followed by a rapid collapse of differential energies and asset values.

What is the meaning of *glasnosi?* The retrospective transparency of all the signs of modernity, speeded up and second-hand (it is almost a postmodern re-make of our original version of modernity) — of all the positive and negative signs combined: that is, not just human rights, but crimes, catastrophes and accidents which are, it seems, all joyously increasing in the former USSR since the liberalization of the regime. And even the rediscovery of pornography and extra-terrestrials, all previously censored, but celebrating their reappearance along with everything else. This is the experimental dimension of this general defrosting: we can now see that crimes and catastrophes, both nuclear and natural, along with everything else that

5. The 'memory of water affair' was the name generally applied in the media to Jacques Benveniste's claim in 1984 that he had discovered reactions produced by solutions so highly diluted that they 'contained only water molecules'.

has been repressed, are part of our human rights (the religious sphere too, of course, and fashion; indeed, nothing is debarred) - and this is a fine object lesson in democracy. For we see re-emerging here, in a kind of ideal hallucination and return of the repressed, all that we are, all the allegedly universal emblems of the human, including the worst, dullest, corniest things in Western 'culture' — things which will henceforth know no boundaries. It is, then, a moment of truth for that culture, as was the earlier confrontation with the primitive cultures of the whole world, a confrontation from which our culture cannot really be said to have emerged with flying colours. The irony of the situation is such that it will perhaps be we who are one day forced to rescue the historical memory of Stalinism, while the countries of Eastern Europe will no longer recall it. It will be up to us to keep on ice the memory of this tyrant who, for his part, kept the movement of history frozen, since that glacial age also forms part of our universal heritage.

These events are remarkable from another point of view too. They force us to enquire into the turn history is now taking; not simply proceeding towards its end (a notion that was part of the linear phantasm of history), but moving into reverse and into systematic obliteration. We are in the process of wiping out the entire twentieth century, effacing all the signs of the Cold War one by one, perhaps even all trace of the Second World War and of all the political or ideological revolutions of the twentieth century. The reunification of Germany is inevitable, as are many other things, not in the sense of a leap forward in history, but in the sense of a re-writing in reverse of the whole of the twentieth century, a re-writing which is going to take up a large part of the last ten years of the century. At the rate we are going we shall soon be back at the Holy Roman Empire. And perhaps this is the illumination this *fin de siecle* offers and the true meaning of that controversial formula, 'the end of history'. The fact is that, in a sort of enthusiastic work of mourning, we are in the process of retracting all the significant events of this century, of *whitewashing*

the century, as if everything that had taken place (revolutions, the division of the world, exterminations, the violent transnationality of states, going to the nuclear brink — in short, history in its modern phase) were merely a hopeless imbroglio, and everyone had set about unmasking that history with the same enthusiasm that had gone into making it. Restoration, regression, rehabilitation, revival of the old frontiers, of the old differences, of particularities, of religions, resipiscence, even at the level of morals. It seems that all the signs of liberations achieved over a century are fading and will, in the end, perhaps be snuffed out one by one: we are into a gigantic process of *revisionism* — not an ideological revisionism but a revisionism of history itself, and we seem in a hurry to get it over before the end of the century, secretly hoping perhaps to be able to start again from scratch in the new millennium. If only we could restore everything to its initial state. But which initial state? Before the twentieth century? Before the Revolution? How far can this retraction, this restoration go? The fact is that it can move very, very quickly (as the events in Eastern Europe show), precisely because it is not a work of construction but a massive deconstruction of history, and one assuming almost viral, epidemic form. Perhaps even, in the end, the year 2000 will not take place, quite simply because the curve of history will have bent so far backwards that it will never cross that time horizon.

15 December 1989

No Pity for Sarajevo

In the TV programme *Le Couloir pour la parole* (broadcast on the 'Arte' channel, 19 December), with its Strasbourg-Sarajevo video link-up, the striking feature was the absolute superiority, the exceptional status conferred by misfortune, distress and total disillusionment - that very disillusionment which allowed the people of Sarajevo to treat the 'Europeans' with contempt, or at least with an air of sarcastic freedom, which contrasted with the hypocritical remorse and contrition of those at the other end of the video-link. It was not *they* who needed compassion; they had compassion for *our* wretched destinies. 'I spit on Europe', said one of them. Nothing offers greater freedom, in fact, or greater sovereignty, than justified contempt — and not even for the enemy, but for those sunning their good consciences in the warm glow of solidarity.

And they have seen plenty of these fine friends. Recently, even Susan Sontag, who came to stage *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo. Why not *Bouvard and Pecuchet* in Somalia or Afghanistan?[6] Yet the worst part of this isn't the high-flown cultural sentiment, but

6. *Bouvard et Pecuchet* was Flaubert's last, unfinished novel. It was published in serial form in the *Nouvelle Revue,* beginning on 15 December 1880, some seven months after his death.

the condescending attitude and the misconception regarding where strength and weakness lie. *They* are the strong ones. It is *we* who are weak, going over there searching for something to compensate for our weakness and loss of reality.

Our reality: that is the problem. We have only one reality, and it has to be rescued. And rescued even with the worst of slogans: 'We have to do something. We can't just do nothing'. But doing something just because you cannot not do it has never amounted to a principle of action or freedom. Merely a form of absolution from your own impotence and compassion for your own fate.

The people of Sarajevo do not have to face this question. Where they are, there is an absolute need to do what they do, to do what has to be done. With no illusions as to ends and no compassion for themselves. That is what being real means; that is what it means to be in the real. And this is not in any sense the 'objective' reality of their misfortune, that reality which *ought not to exist* and for which we feel pity, but the reality which exists as it is — the reality of an action and a destiny.

This is why they are alive and we are the ones who are dead. This is why, from our own point of view, we have, first, to rescue the reality of the war and impose that — compassionate — reality on those who are suffering from it, but who, at the very heart of war and distress, do not really believe in it.

In her opinion pieces, Susan Sontag confesses that the Bosnians do not really believe in the distress all around them. In the end, they find the whole situation unreal, senseless, unintelligible. It is a hell, but an almost hyperreal hell, made the more hyperreal by media and humanitarian harassment, since that makes the attitude of the whole world towards them even more incomprehensible. So, they live in a kind of spectral war - and a good thing too or they could never bear it. It is not I who say this; they say it themselves.

But Susan Sontag, who is from New York, must know better than they do what reality is because she has chosen them to embody it. Or perhaps simply because it

is what she — and the whole of the West — lacks most. So it is necessary to go and rebuild a reality for ourselves where the bleeding is. All these 'corridors' we open up to send our supplies and our 'culture' are, in reality, corridors of distress through which we import their strength and the energy generated by their misfortune. Once again, an unequal exchange. And Susan Sontag comes to convince them - they who find a kind of additional strength in the thorough stripping-away of the illusion of the real (including the principle of political rationality by which we are governed, and which is part of the European reality principle) - of the 'reality' of their suffering, by culturalizing it, of course, by theatricalizing it so that it can serve as a point of reference in the theatre of Western values, one of which is solidarity.

Yet Susan Sontag herself is not the issue. She is merely fashionably emblematic of what has now become a widespread situation, in which harmless, powerless intellectuals trade their woes with the wretched, each supporting the other in a kind of perverse contract — exactly as the political class and civil society trade their respective woes today, the one serving up its corruption and scandals, the other its artificial convulsions and inertia. Not so long ago, we saw Bourdieu and the Abbe Pierre offering themselves up in televisual sacrifice, trading off between them the pathos-laden language and the sociological meta-language of misery.[7] And so, also, our entire society is embarked on the path of commiseration in the literal sense, under cover of ecumenical pathos. It is almost as though, in a moment of intense repentance among intellectuals and politicians, a moment related to the panic currently surrounding history and the twilight of values, we had to replenish the stocks of values, the referential reserves, by appealing to that lowest common

7. The Abbe Pierre has been a prominent French figure since the 1950s, being particularly well known for his work with the homeless. Pierre Bourdieu was Professor of Sociology at the College de France and Director of Studies at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

denominator that is human misery, restocking the hunting grounds with artificial game, as it were. 'It is currently impossible, in news and documentaries, to show any other spectacle than suffering' (Daniel Schneidermann). A victim society. I suppose all it is doing is expressing its own disappointment and remorse for an unthinkable violence against itself.

The New Intellectual Order everywhere treads the paths marked out by the New World Order. The misfortune, suffering and misery of others have everywhere become the raw material and the primal scene. Victimhood, accompanied by human rights, as the only, funereal, ideology. Those who do not exploit it directly and in their own name do so by proxy. And there is no lack of middlemen who take their financial or symbolic cut in the process. Deficit and misfortune, like the international debt, are traded and sold on in the futures market — in this case the politico-intellectual market, which is quite the equal of the late, unlamented military-industrial complex.

Now, all commiseration is part of the logic of misfortune. To refer to misfortune, if only to combat it, is to give it a base for objective reproduction in perpetuity. When fighting against anything whatever, we have to start out from the evil to be combated, never from the misfortune produced.

And the theatre of the transparency of Evil is truly there — in Sarajevo. The suppressed canker which corrupts all the rest, the virus of which Europe's paralysis is the symptom. Europe's irons are being pulled out of the fire at the GATT talks, but things are going up in smoke at Sarajevo. In a sense, this is a good thing. The specious, sham Europe, the Europe botched together in the most hypocritical convulsions, is coming unstuck at Sarajevo. And in this sense we might almost see the Serbs as providing the unofficial acid test, as demystifying that phantom Europe — the Europe of technocratic politicians who are as triumphalist in their speeches as they are deliquescent in their actions. For we can see that the more talk

there is of Europe, the more it decays (just as the more talk there is of human rights, the less they are respected). But this is not the real point here. The real story is that the Serbs, as the agents of ethnic cleansing, are at the forefront of the construction of Europe. For it *is* being constructed, the 'real' Europe: a white Europe, a white-washed Europe, integrated and purified morally as much as economically or ethnically. It is being victoriously constructed at Sarajevo and, in this sense, what is happening there is not an accident at all, but a logical, ascendant phase in the New European Order, that subsidiary of the New World Order, everywhere characterized by 'white' fundamentalism, protectionism, discrimination and control.

It is said that if we just leave things to happen at Sarajevo we shall be the next to 'get it'. But we have already got it. All the European countries are undergoing ethnic cleansing. This is the real Europe taking shape in the shadow of the Parliaments, and its spearhead is Serbia. It is no use talking about some sort of passivity or powerlessness to react, since what we have here is a programme currently being carried out, a programme in which Bosnia is merely the new frontier. Why do you think Le Pen has largely disappeared from the political stage? Because the substance of his ideas has everywhere filtered into the political class in the form of national opt-outs, cross-party unity, Euro-nationalist instincts and protectionism. There is no need now for Le Pen, since he has won, not politically, but virally - in mentalities. Why should this stop at Sarajevo, since what is at stake is exactly the same? Solidarity will not make a jot of difference to all this. It will end miraculously the day the extermination is complete, the day the demarcation line of 'white' Europe has been drawn. It is as though Europe, irrespective of national distinctions and political differences, had 'taken out a contract' with the Serbs, who have done the dirty deed for it, as the West once took out a contract on Iran with Saddam Hussein. Only, when the hired gun goes too far, he too may have to be bumped off. The operations against Iraq and Somalia were relative failures from the point of

view of the New World Order; so far as the New European Order is concerned, the Bosnian operation seems set to succeed.

The Bosnians know this. They know they are condemned by the international democratic order, not by some hangover from the past or some monstrous excrescence called fascism. They know they are doomed to be exterminated or banished or excluded, like all heterogeneous, refractory elements the world over - irrevocably so because, whether the kind souls and bad consciences of the West like it or not, that is the inexorable path of progress. The price to pay for modern Europe will be the eradication of Muslims and Arabs, who are indeed already being eradicated everywhere, except where they remain as immigrant slaves. And the major objection to the bad-conscience offensive, as mobilized in media happenings like the one at Strasbourg, is that, by perpetuating the image of the alleged powerlessness of European policies and the image of a Western conscience racked by its own impotence, it provides a cover for the real operation by lending it the spiritual benefit of the doubt.

The people of Sarajevo shown on Arte certainly looked as if they had no illusions and no hope, but they did not look like potential martyrs. Far from it. They had their objective misfortune, but the real wretchedness, that of the false apostles and voluntary martyrs, was on the other side. Now, as has very rightly been said, 'in the hereafter no heed will be paid to voluntary martyrdom'.

7 *January 1993*

Otherness Surgery

With modernity, we enter the age of the production of the Other. The aim is no longer to kill the Other, devour it, seduce it, vie with it, love it or hate it, but, in the first instance, to produce it. The Other is no longer an object of passion, but an object of production. Perhaps, in its radical otherness or its irreducible singularity, the Other has become dangerous or unbearable, and its seductive power has to be exorcized? Or perhaps, quite simply, otherness and the dual relation progressively disappear with the rise of individual values and the destruction of symbolic ones? The fact remains that otherness does come to be in short supply and, *if we are not to live otherness as destiny, the other has to be produced imperatively as difference.* This goes for the world as much as for the body, sex and social relations. It is to escape the world as destiny, the body as destiny, sex (and the opposite sex) as destiny, that the production of the other as difference will be invented. For example, sexual difference: each sex with its anatomical and psychological characteristics, with its own desire and all the irresolvable consequences that ensue, including the ideology of sex and the Utopia of a difference based both in right and in nature. None of this has any meaning in seduction, where it is a question not of desire but of a game with

desire, and where it is a question not of the equality of the sexes or the alienation of the one by the other, since game-playing involves a perfect reciprocity of partners (not difference and alienation, but otherness and complicity). Seduction is as far from hysteria as can be. Neither of the sexes projects its sexuality on to the other; the distances are given; otherness is intact - it is the very condition of that higher illusion that is play with desire.

However, with the coming of the nineteenth century and Romanticism, a *masculine hysteria* comes into play and with it a change in the sexual paradigm, which we must once again situate within the more general, universal framework of the change in the paradigm of otherness.

In this hysterical phase, it was, so to speak, the femininity of man which projected itself on to woman and shaped her as an ideal figure in his image. In Romantic love, the aim was not now to conquer the woman, to seduce her, but to create her from the inside, to invent her, in some cases as achieved Utopian vision, as idealized woman, in others as *jemme jatale,* as star - another hysterical, supernatural metaphor. The Romantic Eros can be credited with having invented this ideal of harmony, of loving fusion, this ideal of an almost incestuous form of twin beings — the woman as projective resurrection of the same, who assumes her supernatural form only as ideal of the same, an artefact doomed henceforth to *Vamour ox,* in other words, to a pathos of the ideal resemblance of beings and sexes - a pathetic confusion which substitutes for the dual otherness of seduction. The whole mechanics of the erotic changes meaning, for the erotic attraction which previously arose out of otherness, out of the strangeness of the Other, now finds its stimulus in sameness - in similarity and resemblance. Auto-eroticism, incest? No. Rather a hypostasis of the Same. Of the same eyeing up the other, investing itself in the other, alienating itself in the other - but the other is only ever the ephemeral form of a difference which brings me closer to me. This indeed is why, with Romantic

love and all its current spin-offs, sexuality becomes connected with death: it is because it becomes connected with incest and its destiny - even in banalized form (for we are no longer speaking of mythic, tragic incest here; with modern eroticism we are dealing with a secondary incestuous form - of the protection of the same in the image of the other - which amounts to a confusion and corruption of all images).

We have here then, in the end, the invention of a femininity which renders woman superfluous. The invention of a difference which is merely a roundabout copulation with its double. And which, at bottom, renders any encounter with otherness impossible (it would be interesting to know whether there was not any hysterical quid pro quo from the feminine in the construction of a virile, phallic mythology; feminism being one such example of the hystericization of the masculine in woman, of the hysterical projection of her masculinity in the exact image of the hysterical projection by man of his femininity into a mythical image of woman).

However, there still remains a dissymmetry in this enforced assignment to difference.

This is why I have contended, paradoxically, that man is more different from woman than woman is from man. I mean that, within the framework of sexual difference, man is merely different, whereas in woman there remains something of the radical otherness which precedes the debased status of difference.

In short, in this process of extrapolation of the Same into the production of the Other, of hysterical invention of the sexual other as twin sister or brother (if the twin theme is so prominent today, that is because it reflects this mode of libidinal cloning), the sexes become progressively assimilated to each other. This develops from difference to lesser difference through to the point of role-reversal and the virtual non-differentiation of the sexes. And it ends up making sexuality a useless

function. In cloning, for example, pointlessly sexed beings are going to be reproduced, since sexuality is no longer needed for their reproduction.

If the real woman seems to disappear in this hysterical invention of the feminine (though she has other means of resisting this), in this invention of sexual difference, in which the masculine occupies the privileged pole from the outset, and in which all the feminist struggles will merely reassert that insoluble privilege or difference, we must recognize too that masculine desire also becomes entirely problematical since it is able only to project itself into another in its image and, in this way, render itself purely speculative. So all the nonsense about the phallus and male sexual privilege, etc. needs revising. There is a kind of transcendent justice which means that, in this process of sexual differentiation which culminates inexorably in non-differentiation, the two sexes each lose as much of their singularity and their otherness. This is the era of the Transsexual, in which all the conflicts connected with this sexual difference carry on long after any real sexuality, any real alterity of the sexes, has disappeared.

Each individual repeats on his or her own body this (successful?) takeover of the feminine by masculine projection hysteria. The body is identified and appropriated as a self-projection, and no longer as otherness and destiny. In the facial features, in sex, in sickness and death, identity is constantly being altered. You can do nothing about that. It is destiny. But this is precisely what has to be warded off at all costs in the identification of the body, the individual appropriation of the body, of your desire, your appearance, your image: plastic surgery on all fronts. For if the body is no longer a site of otherness, of a dual relation, if it is a site of identification, then you have urgently to reconcile yourself with it, to repair it, perfect it, turn it into an ideal object. Everyone treats his/her body as man treats woman in the projective identification we have described: he invests it as a fetish in a desperate attempt at self-identification. The body becomes an object of autistic worship, of an almost

incestuous manipulation. And it is the body's resemblance to its model which becomes a source of eroticism and unconsummated self-seduction, insofar as it virtually excludes the Other and is the best means of excluding any seduction from elsewhere.

Many other things relate also to this production of the Other - a hysterical, speculative production. Racism is one example, in its development throughout the modern era and its current recrudescence. Logically, it ought to have declined with progress and the spread of Enlightenment. But the more we learn how unfounded the genetic theory of race is, the more racism intensifies. This is because we are dealing with an artificial construction of the Other, on the basis of an erosion of the singularity of cultures (of their otherness one to another) and entry into the fetishistic system of difference. So long as there is otherness, alienness and a (possibly violent) dual relation, there is no racism properly so called. That is to say, roughly, up to the eighteenth century, as anthropological accounts attest. Once this 'natural' relation is lost, we enter upon an exponential relation with an artificial Other. And there is nothing in our culture with which we can stamp out racism, since the entire movement of that culture is towards a fanatical differential construction of the Other, and a perpetual extrapolation of the Same through the Other. Autistic culture posing as altruism.

We talk of alienation. But the worst alienation is not being dispossessed *by* the other, but being dispossessed *of* the other: it is having to produce the other in the absence of the other, and so continually to be thrown back on oneself and one's own image. If, today, we are condemned to our image (to cultivate our bodies, our 'looks', our identities, our desires), this is not because of alienation, but because of the end of alienation and the virtual disappearance of the other, which is a much worse fate. In fact, the definition of alienation is to take oneself as one's focus, as one's object of care, desire, suffering and communication. This definitive short-circuiting of the

other ushers in the era of transparency. Plastic surgery becomes universal. And the surgery performed on the face and the body is merely the symptom of a more radical surgery: that performed on otherness and destiny.

What is the solution? There is no solution to this erotic trend within an entire culture; to this fascination, this whirl of denial of otherness, of all that is alien and negative; to this foreclosing of evil and this reconciliation around the Same and its multiple figures: incest, autism, twinship, cloning. All we can do is remind ourselves that seduction lies in non-reconciliation with the other, in preserving the alien status of the Other. One must not be reconciled with oneself or with one's body. One must not be reconciled with the other, one must not be reconciled with nature, one must not be reconciled with the feminine (that goes for women too). Therein lies the secret of a strange attraction.

5 July 1993

The Powerlessness of the Virtual

A recent episode: students demonstrate and hold up the TGV in Angouleme station. They pour down both sides of the train, past the passengers sitting motionless behind their tinted windows. A shout here and a slogan there. An occasional outburst of rage — but against whom? It is as though they were barking at an artificial satellite. For the TGV is virtual reality crossing France *in vitro* - an embodiment of speed, money and all those things which circulate — confronted here with *their* very real world of potential unemployment. A surrealistic confrontation between time's arrow and a youth already spent. All they will wrest from the transparency of the rich is this ten minutes of immobility, this ten-minute freezing of the TV spectacle of which they are the victims.

A scaled-down version of the clash between the real and the virtual and its fantastic consequences at the planetary level: the dissociation between a very high-frequency virtual space and a zero-frequency real space. The two no longer have anything in common, nor is there any communication between them: the unconditional extension of the virtual (which includes not just the new images or remote simulation, but the whole cyberspace of geo-finance, the space of multimedia and

the information superhighways) brings with it an unprecedented desertification of real space and of all that surrounds us. The information superhighways will have the same effect as our present superhighways or motorways. They will cancel out the landscape, lay waste to the territory and abolish real distances. What is merely physical and geographical in the case of our motorways will assume its full dimensions in the electronic field with the abolition of mental distances and the absolute shrinkage of time. All short circuits (and the establishment of this planetary hyperspace is tantamount to one immense short circuit) produce electric shocks. What we see emerging here is no longer merely territorial desert, but social desert, employment desert, the body itself being laid waste by the very concentration of information. A kind of Big Crunch, contemporaneous with the Big Bang of the financial markets and the information networks. We are merely at the dawning of the process, but the waste and the wastelands are already growing much faster than the computerization process itself. The two worlds, though literally cut off from each other, are equally exponential. But the discrepancy between them does not create any new political situation or genuine crisis, for memory fades at the same time as does the real. The discrepancy is only virtually catastrophic.

Another catastrophic prospect, of which none of the champions of the virtual of whatever stamp have any inkling (whether we are talking of the occult masters of world finance or the proponents of a universal democracy of information), is the phenomenon *of critical mass.* We know how this operates at the cosmological level: if the mass of the universe is below a certain threshold, the universe goes on expanding and the Big Bang goes on to infinity. If it is above this threshold, the universe implodes and contracts in a Big Crunch. Now, without wishing to exaggerate, the sphere of information (understanding by this, once again, the orbital circulation in real time both of money and images or messages) is in danger, given the prospect

of infinite development - the universal connection of all the networks we are promised — of experiencing a brutal reversion of the same kind. With the information superhighways, it would seem we are doing all we can to get beyond this critical threshold. Where its dewy-eyed advocates see only a marvellous centrifugal expansion, are we not moving towards such a degree of saturation and density that a deflation and automatic collapse will ensue? And this eventuality is no longer the product of a discrepancy between an ultra-sophisticated, ultra-connected sphere and the wasteland of the rest of the world (the information Fourth World), but a catastrophe internal to the virtual high-tech world - an implosion by exceeding of the critical mass.

We may indeed ask ourselves whether we have not already passed this threshold and whether the information catastrophe has not already occurred, insofar as the multimedia profusion of data cancels itself out and the balance sheet in terms of substance of information is already a negative one. There is a precedent here in the form of the 'social': we are already well beyond the threshold of the critical social mass with the profusion of populations, control networks, socialization, communication, interactivity and with the extrapolation of the 'social' as a catch-all category — a move which is even now causing the real sphere of the social and its concept to implode. When everything is social, suddenly nothing is.

But perhaps beneath this crazed technological optimism, this messianic incantation of the virtual, our dream is of just this critical threshold, and this phase-reversal of the sphere of information. Not having experienced this momentous event, this general implosion at the world level, we might be said to be enjoying it experimentally, at the level of a micro-model. Given the acceleration of the process, it may not be far from actually occurring. We should, then, heartily encourage this massive meltdown of information and communication.

At any rate, there is still an alternative hypothesis. This is that the picture we are given of the power of virtual technologies - from the irresistible promotion of virtual reality to the uncontrollable power of those new masters of the universe, the lords of Microsoft and tele-capitalism *(Le Monde diplomatique,* May 1995) - largely represents media hype reflecting the self-hyping of those milieus themselves (the whole process is a self-driving loop).

One of two things must be the case. Either the whole world is in thrall to these technological barons, who might be said to be concentrating every kind of real *power* in their own hands; in this case, all we can do is disappear, since in this scenario we are already virtually wiped off the map - and the territory. Or this is not the way things are at all and this whole story is virtual too. The power of the virtual is merely virtual. This is why it can intensify in such a mind-boggling way and, moving ever further from the so-called 'real' world, itself lose hold of any reality principle. For these technical forces to extend their grip over the world, they would have to have a purpose — power must be power to some *end* - but they do not. All they can do is transcribe themselves indefinitely into their own networks, their own codes. Even speculative capital rarely comes out of its orbit: it is amassed and lost in its own speculative vacuum. As for the transformation of this media power into political power, we have seen, in the case of Berlusconi, that it failed at the first hurdle, contrary to the thesis of the media *coup d'etat* (according to which, once you had gained control of the economy and communications, it was merely a formality to seize political power).[8] We were frightened by an over-estimation of media power, whilst the media in fact sap the reality of all power, for better or for worse. It is an inevitable consequence of virtuality:

8. Berlusconi's government lasted for seven months, falling when Umberto Bossi's Lega Nord pulled out of the coalition.

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there can be no strategy *of* the virtual, since the only strategies now are themselves virtual ones.

So there are no 'masters of the universe'. There are only masters of transparency, and just because their money, products and ideas cross the borders of a globalized market unhindered, that is no reason to bend the knee to this supremacy of the virtual in what would merely be a new form of voluntary servitude.

6June 1995

Western Subserbience

It has taken a superhuman effort and three years of sporadic massacres, and, most importantly, it has needed the forces of the international community to be humiliated, but it seems that — grudgingly and with every possible reservation - Western opinion has finally recognized the Serbs as the aggressors. This recognition seems to represent the ultimate in firmness and lucidity. The fact is that we have, at last, got to the starting line in this war. Even those who reject the official doctrine of the 'belligerents' and are long-standing critics of Serb aggression are celebrating this turnabout as a victory, naively hoping that the Western powers now have no alternative but to put an end to the aggression. Clearly, nothing of the kind will occur. This entirely platonic recognition of the victimizers as victimizers in no way entails recognizing the victims as victims. To be fooled into thinking that it does, one has to share the evangelical idealism of those who believe that the 'depths of ridicule and dishonour' have been plumbed and that the international powers and a 'suicidal' Europe can be called on to recover themselves, without realizing for a moment the futility of such efforts. This, indeed, is every bit a match for the politicians' endless hypocrisy. Recrimination goes hand in glove with the crime,

and the two proliferate in an interminable orchestration of the event. Since the Western conscience takes it upon itself to mourn the situation, since it monopolizes both the hypocrisy and good intentions, it is understandable that the murderer should retain his monopoly both of arrogance and crime.

In fact, neither the grotesque gesticulations of the international forces nor the disgusted lamentations of the representatives of good causes can have any real effect, because we have not taken the decisive step — the final step — in the analysis of the situation. No one dares, or wants, to take that step, which is to recognize, not simply that the Serbs are the aggressors (which is to state the obvious), but that they are our objective allies in a cleansing operation for a future Europe where there are no awkward minorities and for a New World Order where there is no radical opposition to its own values — the values of the democratic dictatorship of human rights and the transparency of markets.

In all this, it is the question of the evil which is at issue. Having denounced the Serbs as 'dangerous psychopaths', we congratulate ourselves on having pinpointed the evil without doubting for a second the purity of our democratic intentions. We believe we have done all that is needful by pointing to the Serbs as bad - but not as the enemy. And with good reason, since, on the world front, we Westerners and Europeans are fighting exactly the same enemy as they are: Islam, the Muslims. We are fighting them everywhere: in Chechnya with the Russians (where the West displays the same shameful tolerance); in Algeria, where we denounce the military government while providing all-out logistical support (there, as if by chance, the fine souls who stigmatize the official doctrine of the 'belligerents' in Bosnia use precisely the same language: state terrorism against fundamentalist terrorism — the one side as bad as the other. And we, the impotent onlookers amid this barbarism — as though state terrorism were not precisely our terrorism — already use it in our own countries in homeopathic doses). In short, we may well

bombard a few Serb positions with smoke bombs, but we will not really intervene against them since they are doing basically the same work as we are. We would more readily break the backs of the victims if we had to, to settle the conflict. The victims, when they put up some token defence, are much more awkward than their persecutors and you will see that it will be the Bosnian Muslims the Rapid Intervention Force are soon forced to liquidate and neutralize. If a sizeable Muslim offensive were mounted, then you would see the international force becoming really effective.

This is the real reason why this war is interminable. If we think about it, without this deep-level collusion, despite all appearances (but the appearances, in their ambiguity, tell their own story), without this objective alliance (without it being intentional or deliberate), there is no reason why the war should not already be over. It is exactly the same scenario as with Saddam Hussein. We fought him with the full panoply of media and technological deployment. But he was nonetheless — and remains still - our objective ally. He has been reviled, denounced and stigmatized in the name of human rights, but he is nonetheless our objective ally against Iran, against the Kurds, against the Shi'ites. And that is one of the reasons why that war (the Gulf War) did not really take place: Saddam never was our real enemy. And it is the same with the Serbs, for whom in a way we provide cover, denouncing them as beyond the pale, while continuing to let them do their work.

The whole problem is to convince the Bosnians they are responsible for their own predicament. If we cannot do this by diplomacy, as we have been trying to do for two years, we shall have to do so by force. We should, all the same, attempt to see what is going on behind the enormous smokescreen, behind the stereotyped humanitarian, military and diplomatic language. In any conflict, you have to distinguish between what is being fought against - the specifically political level of the war - and what is being sacrificed — what, in particular, is being liquidated and

swept away: this remains the thing most deeply at issue, the final objective. In the Algerian war, for example, we fought against the Algerian army, but what was really sacrificed in the conflict was the Algerian revolution - and this we did working alongside the Algerian army (and we continue to do so). In Bosnia we are fighting the Serbs (without overdoing it) in the name of a multicultural Europe, but what is actually being sacrificed is precisely the other culture, the culture which stands opposed at the level of values to an undifferentiated world order with no values. And this we are doing at the Serbs' side.

Imperialism has changed. What the West now wishes to foist on the whole world, in the guise of universality, is not its — completely unhinged - values, but its absence of values. Wherever some singularity, minority or specific idiom survives and persists; wherever there is some irreducible belief or passion; above all, where there is some antagonistic view of the world, we have to impose an in-different order upon it - an order as indifferent as we are to our own values. We generously distribute the right to difference, but secretly, and on this occasion unyieldingly, we are working to produce a bloodless, undifferentiated world.

This particular terrorism is not fundamentalist. Indeed, it is the terrorism of a culture without fundaments. It is the integrism of emptiness. What is at stake here is beyond political forms and events. We are no longer speaking of a political front or relation of forces, but of a transpolitical fault line, and that fault line today passes mainly through Islam. But it also runs through the heart of every so-called civilized, democratic country — and it certainly runs through every one of us.

3 July 1995

When the West Takes the Dead Man's Place[9]

Western military impotence in the face of Serbian aggression equates directly with the impossibility of risking the life of a single Western soldier. In this sense, these soldiers are hostages long before the Serbs actually capture them: their lives have to be preserved above all else. Zero death: this is the leitmotif of clean warfare. It is the perfection of war, but also war reduced to a mockery — war as faultless sporting performance, as 'clear round'. We have already seen this with the Gulf War, where the only Western deaths occurred by accident. At least that war ended in a technological demonstration which provided the illusion of power (of virtual omnipotence). Whereas Bosnia offers an example of total powerlessness. And though this powerlessness, which gives the Serbs a free rein, in fact fits in with the undisclosed objective of the war, it amounts, nonetheless, to a symbolic castration of the

9. *Quand VOccident prend la place du mort.* The term 'la place du mort' owes its currency to the fact that it is used, in everyday parlance, to refer to the front passenger seat in a car. It is also occasionally employed as an image to represent the position of the analyst in the psychoanalytic relationship. Here, however, Baudrillard is using the term rather more literally.

Western war machine. The poor old West! If only it could joyfully and victoriously fulfil its mission of establishing world Order (by liquidating all the pockets of resistance), but it still has to look on impotently, from the depths of its riven conscience, while that dirty little job is carried out at the global level by mercenaries. To look on impotently while it is itself humiliated and sidelined.

There is, however, nothing surprising about this military paralysis. It is linked to the mental paralysis of the civilized world. We might think that the fact the West can no longer risk the life of a single one of its soldiers represents some higher stage of civilization, in which even the military has become committed to humanitarianism and respect for the sacred rights of human life. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. The destiny of this virtual soldier - this soldier who no longer is a soldier - reflects the destiny of civilized man. The things he fought for and his collective values have largely disappeared; his existence cannot be sacrificed for anything whatever. Only a thing which has some value in itself can be put 'at stake'.

The individual we have produced, the absolutely self-regarding individual we glorify, the individual we protect in his impotence with the whole legal panoply of human rights is the 'last man' Nietzsche speaks of. He is the end-user of his own self and his own life, the terminal individual, with no real hope either of descendants or transcendence. He is the end-of-the-line man, doomed to hereditary sterility and the countdown. This individual is the end of the cycle and of the species. All that remains for him is to attempt desperately to outlive himself by being spectralized, fractalized, pluralized, by becoming his own creation and his own clone. This last man cannot, then, be sacrificed, precisely because he is the last. Once life is reduced to its use-value, to its survival in real time, then no one has the right to risk his life for anything. This is the destiny — or, rather, the absence of destiny - of the last man. This is the way his impotence has developed, reflecting the

development of the civilized nations, incapable even of taking the risk of facing up to their enemies - or saving face.

At a deep level the two things are connected: the elimination of any foreign culture, any singular minority in the name of ethnic cleansing, and the elimination of death itself as singularity, as irreducible fact - the most singular of singularities — in the name of protection and survival at all costs. Our lives are also being cleansed or purified in a sense. They are increasingly being played out inside a virtual carapace protecting them from death, in much the same way as the virtual soldier of the UN goes around in his technical carapace. Even when he is taken hostage, that doesn't make him any more real. He merely becomes a trading item in the potlatch of illusory divergences and collusions between the West and the Serbs, in the improbable chain of collusion and cowardice that is this military masquerade, in which the place of the unknown soldier is taken by the virtual soldier - the one who does not die, but who, paralysed and immobilized, takes the dead man's place. So we are seeing a redeployment of death in all these forms where we no longer expected to find it.

Take UNPROFOR and the Rapid Reaction Force: they too immediately took the dead man's place (which they defend tooth and nail!) in the Bosnian conflict. We ourselves, all of us behind our TV screens, are surreptitiously taking the place of the dead. The Serbs, the murderers, are alive in their own way. The people of Sarajevo, the victims, are in a place of real death. But we are in a strange situation: neither dead, nor alive, but standing in for the dead. And in this sense the Bosnian conflict is a global test; everywhere in the present world, the West has taken the place of the dead.

And yet this is not for want of trying to avert this situation by all available means. We almost pulled off the old trick of the Swiss who, for years, supplied the whole of Europe with mercenaries and thereby managed to keep free of wars. This is what all the rich countries do today - providing weapons for the whole world

and succeeding in that way in exiling, if not violence, then at least war, from their territories. But there is nothing to be done; just where we hope to drive out death, it surfaces again through all the protective screens, extending to the furthest reaches of our culture.

Our humanitarian and ecological ideologies all speak to us of nothing but the human species and its survival. We can see here the great difference there is between humanitarianism and humanism. Humanism was a system of strong values linked to the concept of the human race, with its philosophy and morality. It was characteristic of a history that was being made. Whereas humanitarianism is a system of weak values, linked to the safeguarding of the threatened human species and characteristic of a history that is being unmade, that is coming apart; and there is no perspective here other than the negative one of an optimal management of waste — waste which we know to be, by definition, non-degradable. Seen in terms of survival or, in other words, of life superstitiously prolonged and protected from death, life itself becomes a waste-product we can no longer rid ourselves of, doomed, as it is, to indefinite reproduction.

Now, it is just such indefinite reproduction we see in Bosnia, just such a macabre parody and the sinister confusion of a history coming apart — a farce in which the military and the humanitarian are merged.

History reproducing itself becomes Farce.

Farce reproducing itself becomes History

17 July 1995

The Great Laundering

Whitewashing is the main activity of this century's end. With the first three-quarters of the century largely given over to an accumulation of evils, violence, corruption and guilt, we have a colossal rubbish heap before us. We are engaged in an indefinite work of mourning for all the ideologies, violence and incidents which have marked the century. Repentance of the past, history being sold off at knock-down prices or given a face-lift. The whitewashing of a dirty history, of dirty money, of corrupt consciences, of the polluted planet.

The cleansing of memory; the cleansing of the environment; the ethnic and racial cleansing of populations. In particular, the political class has entered the victimal era of repentance. Every politician, everyone in a position of power, is potentially liable to prosecution and has to be laundered like dirty money. They have to submit, if not to a brainwashing, then at least to a reputation-washing, before being put back into circulation, the way blood is washed before it is reinjected into the body's circulation (this was not, in fact, done in the case of AIDS and it has given the political class its biggest scandal for years — the contaminated

blood virus circulating even faster through the political system than through the systems of the patients)."[10]

One has, where possible, to show off one's vices to restore one's virtue. This has even become a kind of fashionable political tactic: protesting one's errors, one's corruption, one's immorality; attempting at all costs to be found guilty. It is a kind of simulated expiation, a way of whitewashing oneself which the public conscience eagerly swallows at little cost to itself. Not everyone can whitewash themselves by committing suicide, as Pierre Beregovoy did.[11] By that very act, he whitewashed the whole of the political class (by making politics a noble calling, since you can die by it), but this was also something of a poisoned chalice, as he simultaneously showed up the wretchedness and cowardice of all those who, though suffering the same powerlessness and dishonour - i.e. having the same reasons to do away with themselves — took considerable pains not to do so.

This same perspective of the whitewashing and face-lifting of the political class casts light also on the judiciary's anti-corruption offensive. That so-called 'Clean Hands' offensive makes the headlines daily, ranking alongside the lives of the stars. The situation is as follows: the political class was fretting away in its immunity and impunity. It was dying — weightless and far removed from the social body — on the far side of representation, in the tele-absence of the masses, in an immunity which had become lethal, while the tele-citizen, who had himself become auto-immune,

10. In spite of a circular of 1983 pointing out the risk, France continued to use blood from potentially contaminated sources in the 1980s, with the result that seven people contracted AIDS. Three ministers stood trial on manslaughter charges, but only one, Edmond Herve, was convicted, though no sentence was passed on him.

11. Pierre Beregovoy, the third prime minister of Mitterand's presidency, committed suicide on 1 May 1993, apparently because of damage done to his reputation by a scandal over an interest-free loan.

looked on. The media class had the same problem. It too was dying on the far side of the screen, in its tele-immunity. Hence the need for a huge 'reality show', an interactive perfusion, which could give the masses a role as fully-fledged extras. In the political field, the absolute imperative was also to remove this impunity by any means whatever - including being accused of wrongdoing, being exposed by scandal — so as to give the politicians the chance to overcome their isolation and reattach the umbilical cord.

For the political class, this was a matter of life and death. Now, that class is not capable of giving up its own privileges: it is capable only, as we have seen, of granting itself a general amnesty. In a sense, then, the politicians delegate this work to the judges. They use the judiciary to absolve them of their supposed immunity and isolation and overcome the public disaffection afflicting them. And they do this by appearing vulnerable and fragile, and hence open and accessible.

It is a great illusion to believe that, in our system, the politicians and the judiciary can really come into conflict. What is going on is merely a division of labour within a caste carrying out a simulated purge on itself- destabilizing itself in homeopathic doses the better to re-stabilize itself. There is, however, nothing to indicate that this stability has any long-term prospects. There is nothing to say the invoice for this laundering (after the laundering of the 'invoices')[12] - together with the bill for the collective brainwashing which accompanies it — will not one day land on the government's doorstep. The media and the political class will pay dearly. They are already paying for the loan they have taken out against our imaginary advance, by forfeiting all credence and credibility.

12. A series of scandals involving false invoices rocked France throughout the eighties and nineties, from the Urba affair, in which monies were laundered through a consultancy company into Socialist Party coffers, to the *affaires* associated with the names of Alain Carignon and Michel Noir.

There has recently been a widely orchestrated campaign against the presidential amnesty on grounds of public morality.[13] It is, in fact, the first time motorists have had such a secondary gain from elections to look forward to.

But perhaps this 'immoral' behaviour was compensation for the absence of any political stakes in these elections? At least in this way the citizens re-injected some real issues into them. At any rate, they expressed the truth of the elections themselves, which are no longer so much a political act of representation as a collective act — underwritten by a blank cheque from the people - of the obliteration and absolution of all corruption, all previous political wretchedness. Scandals, failures, embezzlement and simple mistakes are all whitewashed and amnestied for a moment. The Right has won, the Left is reborn from its ashes — everything starts off again from scratch. This is the marvellous illusionism of the electoral system! So we're not talking about an amnesty for petty lawbreaking here, but a general amnesty of the political system as a whole (the anything but petty larceny of the financial system having largely served to finance these same elections). Elections are like the black box of the political system. Input: dirty money, murky consciences, compromises, opportunism; output: a squeaky clean political situation. And the motorists' immorality is as nothing compared with the cynical way the politicians, the insiders, the financial experts and the manipulators of all kinds have cynically jumped the gun on the great electoral pardon. The criminals, fraudsters and other political and financial speculators have also unreservedly, unscrupulously pre-empted this symbolic amnesty, this liquidation of all civic criminality which the *trompe-l'oeil* democratic operation of the elections represents. Democracy, having treated its haemorrhages, its menstrual flow, with repeated scandals, regenerates in electoral coitus.

13. The tradition of incoming presidents granting amnesties on driving offences has been widely criticized for leading to increased numbers of road deaths.

Yet civic virtue still has the last word: where there are more than three points on the licence, there will be no amnesty for motorists. A happy idea, since the points-based licence is an excellent formula. It is merely scandalous that it applies only to motoring. We should expand the system and create a points-based existential licence. For every offence, misdeed or act of immoral behaviour you would have existence points docked from your licence. When the points ran out, it would be withdrawn altogether. In this way, the roadways of existence would be less crowded, with the removal of all those who cannot behave properly. You might be sent for remedial treatment under the direction of conscience experts, but otherwise the ban on living would be immediately enforceable. The points licence would just have to be inserted as a programmed implant and the offender would be 'terminated' by automatic heart-failure. This would be the full-blown application of human rights. And then we would have a clearer view of the just, unyielding application of democracy.

7 August 1995

Weep, Citizens!

Democracy is no exception to the rule that systems never function better than when running counter to their own rules and operating in spite of their own principles. This is their fundamental vice and systems, like individuals, draw their strength from their vices. Tocqueville should always be tempered with Mandeville; *Democracy in America* with the *Fable of the Bees.* It is this joyful perversity, this perpetual subversion of principles which is the most exhilarating thing about the political sphere. All the great political operations have drawn their inspiration from this. It is the end of cynical reason we should bemoan, and the advent of sentimental reason. The decline of the political sphere can be measured by the desperate attempt to identify with its own principles, and the repentance which always ensues from this in the exercise of power. The paradox of the actor also applies to the political sphere: if that sphere identifies with its own principles, as the actor identifies with his own character, the very illusion of the political — or of the theatre - is lost.

Now, the political sphere as we know it has sacrificed its own stage. By incorporating the entire population as extras in a great sentimental, demagogic

groundswell of participation, it has abolished that distance which is the basic rule of the political game. The law of the greater number has been substituted for the rules of the game. The end of the theatre, the end of the political scene.

We each of us operate on an entirely immoral basis, acting, in spite of our own principles, by a set of rules we conform to spontaneously. Only incidentally do those rules coincide with the moral law; they take the form, rather, of subtle rituals which are entirely our own affair. All institutions and political systems do the same. It is with a full sense of the wrong we do that we sacrifice moral value here. Sadly, this strategy no longer applies today, when you have to be politically correct. But the contradiction with the actual operation of the system which ensues is so flagrant as to be thoroughly amusing. What is astounding is the total lack of understanding of that actual operation on the part of enlightened souls; the way the democratic consciousness denies itself and its own principles - for example, blindly and unconditionally proscribing Le Pen in just the way he treats immigrants; denouncing violence and intolerance whatever their source, but at the same time priding itself on its 'good' intolerance and openly manipulating the electoral system, as in Algeria or Denmark to ensure the right cause wins. To which we might add the daily litany of political and media discourse, wholly preoccupied with the justification of this denial of its own principles and the shameful practices of an unavowed integrism. Such is the victory by contamination, by contagion, of the Front National. *Honi soil qui mal y pense* . . .

Is it not the role of politicians to focus the chronic sickness of the social sphere on themselves — the accursed share of the social sphere, which is the essence of power — and find a political use for it? The prince's privileged role derives from the fact that he condenses in himself all the arbitrary power scattered and spread throughout society, so that society can be rid of it. If arbitrary power is not concentrated at the top, then it is everywhere in society - this is how it is in the

democratic state, where such power is diffuse and endemic, with the same perverse effects as generated by crumbling empires.

Similarly, is it not the role of the 'intellectual' to concentrate in himself the accursed share of thought and purge the whole of society of it - society thereby becoming freer to balance up good and evil for itself? Is it not his role to focus the sickness of thought on himself and find a baleful use for it?

Neither intellectuals nor politicians in any way play this role any more; in no way do they take up that cynical reason Sloterdijk speaks of.[14] They see it as their role merely to express opinions, to guide, to enlighten and to rationalize. They are all for openness and transparency (the transparency of the good, obviously); they deck themselves out with moral consciences, with suffering, witness, proselytism and cruelly unremitting zeal in the treatment of sick values (they are, of course, themselves part of the sickness). They no longer claim to be representative; theirs is a self-effacing role, allowing everyone to express themselves. A senile malady this, the pious desire to shed power - including the power of speech - and hand it on to everyone else (which, in the present situation, actually adds to the burden of liberty). Of course this hypocritical *auto-da-fe* is no solution, and everyone — politicians and intellectuals alike — still dies in the end, but now they die playing someone else's role. As for society and thought, they are exposed in this way to internal confusion and virulence — literally: to the transparence of evil, which, no longer finding anywhere to manifest itself, filters everywhere into repentance, indifference and hatred.

The exercise of power always involved the risk of death. That is the price to be paid for having public life become a matter of total indifference. But, ultimately, why complain about the current deliquescence and senility of the political class? As

14. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (London: Verso, 1988).

though we still believed intelligence were in power, when we have blindingly clear evidence of the opposite! We should, rather, pride ourselves on this end to the political sphere and the collusion of the political class itself in that end! It is that class, without distinction of party or faction, which is now carrying out the *fatwa* we have issued against it, the decree that it shall dissolve itself and disappear. We no longer need to attack it. It is undergoing spontaneous self-destruction. All we have to do is steadfastly refuse to assist it in its hour of need.

It is, however, a shameful end. So we are torn between the recognition of this shameful state of affairs - a shame in which we inevitably feel implicated — and secret jubilation at this death foretold. We might even suggest that the task of politicians today is to swallow the corpse of the political sphere, and we might then thank them for protecting us, like living sarcophagi, from its decay, which would otherwise invade the whole of society.

All calamities protect us from something worse. So the stupidity and blindness of politicians must have a higher function — the function of protecting us, by the thick layer of dirt and discourse they secrete, from the secret violence of the judgement which, were it not for them, we would be forced to exercise and turn against ourselves.

Above all, we should not try to correct their illusory conceptions. That would leave us exposed without protection to an unequal encounter with stupidity and with the burden of our freedom.

21 August 1995

Helots and Elites

We live in a thoroughly split political reality. On the one hand, we have the political class, a parallel micro-society which has secretly been made redundant, going about its business with impunity, and apparently doomed to perform the single task of reproducing itself in an endogamous confusion of all persuasions - the incestuous alliance of Right and Left producing an entire pathology and degeneracy characteristic of inbreeding. On the other hand, we have a 'real' society which is increasingly disconnected from the political sphere. Both of these, moving apart from each other at considerable speed, seem destined more or less to wither away or to break up each in their own little corner - drip-fed as they are solely through the umbilical of the media and the opinion polls. Virtuality - in the sense that the political will now operates only on the mental screens of TV sets and through opinion polls - has turned the political function and the political scene into more or less useless vestigial remains. No dialectic, not even a dialectic of conflict, keeps the two opposing poles interacting.

We find the same situation in the economy. On the one hand, the battered remnants of production and the real economy; on the other, the circulation of

gigantic amounts of virtual capital. But the two are so disconnected that the misfortunes which beset that capital - stock market crashes and other financial debacles — do not bring about the collapse of real economies any more. It is the same in the political sphere: scandals, corruption and the general decline in standards have no decisive effects in a split society, where responsibility (the possibility that the two parties may *respond to each other)* is no longer part of the game.

This paradoxical situation is in a sense beneficial: it protects civil society (what remains of it) from the vicissitudes of the political sphere, just as it protects the economy (what remains of it) from the random fluctuations of the Stock Exchange and international finance. The immunity of the one creates a reciprocal immunity in the other — a mirror indifference. Better: real society is losing interest in the political class, while nonetheless availing itself of the spectacle. At last, then, the media have some use, and the 'society of the spectacle' assumes its full meaning in this fierce irony: the masses availing themselves of the spectacle of the dysfunctionings of representation through the random twists in the story of the political class's corruption. All that remains now to the politicians is the obligation to sacrifice themselves to provide the requisite spectacle for the entertainment of the people. For if, in the past, the principle of power involved laying your life on the line, the zero degree of power merely involves an artificial *auto-da-fe.* Once again we have cause to thank the politicians, who free us from the tiresome obligation of having to manage that empty place power has become - much as it falls to others to manage money, business, leisure, morals and culture. All superfluous tasks happily left to the charlatans, predators and speculators, not to mention the waxen-lipped philosophers.

The socialist episode will have been the finest illustration of this leukaemia of the political sphere. With political will having gone into abeyance and with the pole

position of power virtually vacant (since 1968 perhaps?), the Left dashed in to take it and immediately crumbled into the void. (In the same way, with the masculine pole position virtually unoccupied - male privilege having disappeared - feminism rushed in to assume it and, naturally, fell into the trap that is the power vacuum itself.)

We should, in fact, congratulate Mitterand on doing a large part of the work: on ensuring, by a kind of posthumous sweep, the deep corruption of the whole political system, on mystifying and sweeping away the whole of the divine Left![15]

If the Left collapsed in this way, far beyond the actual point of its true decline - with it going all dreams of putting the imagination in power - this was not because it lacked any gift for exercising power or had committed any fatal errors (unfortunately, it merely accumulated banal ones), but because, in spite of the advanced brittleness of its historical bones, it proved incapable of speaking for the indifference and inertia of the social body. In a sense, it is almost to its credit that it was not able to shake off its ideals totally - even though it had given up pursuing them.

The Right, for its part, identifies spontaneously with this inert ghost of the social body and its deep resentment of the political sphere. It is, in this sense, not so much political as transpolitical — that is to say, aligned with the lowest common denominator of a politically disaffected society. It is the Right which reaps the fruits of this disaffection. But, since it also has no political perspective, the failings of Right and Left combine harmoniously.

Who spoke of putting the imagination in power? There never is any imagination in power.

15. See Jean Baudrillard, *La Gauche divine* (Paris:'Grasset, 1985).

As for the type of events this split society produces, Europe is a fine example. It is the archetype of the contemporary event, the vacuum-packed event, the vacuum-packed phantasmagoria. Europe (at least the current European project) will not have happened in the heads, dreams or natural inspiration of anyone whatsoever. If it has happened, it has been in the somnambulistic space of the political will, of the dossiers and speeches, the programmes and calculations - and in that artificial synthesis of opinion that is universal suffrage, a process strictly guided and controlled by the cunning idealism of politicians and experts. Europe, as it is emerging, is, in a way, a simulation model projected into a scene of social desertification - an obligatory virtual reality, to be slipped into like a data suit (the Gulf War was already handed to us as a vacuum-packed war - also for us to slip into like virtual reality).

We shall no more be spared Europe than we shall the Internet, the single currency or the chains selling deep-frozen foods. These things happen come what may. They follow out their course in spite of any opinions to the contrary. Decisions will go on being made, circulating among the elites, experts and strategists, heedless of any collective opinion. We are totally powerless in spite of— or as a consequence of - the information in which we are steeped. We saw this in Rwanda. All the media said clearly where the killers were — the instigators (which included us) — and yet the whole business went on happening. We have total information, but it has no effect. The consensus, the collective cowardice find an alibi in this generalized news and information. Information plays the role of a scalpel, forever separating the juntas in power in all the countries of the world from any collective will, and cicatrizing, as if with hot irons, the contradictions which may ensue.

In this fracture between helots and elites, it is silly and senseless to wrap oneself in the flag of the divine Left and its democratic arrogance and deplore the

stupidity of the masses, duped by the media and the electoral system — a position we have recently seen adopted towards Berlusconi in Italy or Le Pen's advances in the French local elections. That is merely a short-sighted, conventional analysis of political reason. In the end, the 'blind' masses seem to see things more subtly than the 'enlightened' intellectuals: they see that the seats of power are empty, corrupt places of despair, and hence logically one should put characters of precisely this type in them: empty individuals, buffoons, ham actors and charlatans — the ideal people for the situation. Take Berlusconi for example. The political world, as it is, represents the only possible 'real' — even if it is not rational. If you want to change something, then you have to set about reality itself, which is quite another matter. Berlusconi and Le Pen are what they are, and all recriminations against the 'irrational' masses are merely the product of a naive illuminism (both cunning and politically correct). However, it is equally undeniable that we find this state of affairs unbearable — whether it be Berlusconi, Le Pen or the current deliquescent state of politics. We have, then, to come to terms with a contradictory situation in that we both have the system we deserve and — equally non-negligibly — we cannot bear it. This is a form of insoluble dilemma. You can have a visceral anti-mass, anti-yob, anti-redneck reaction. But an equally visceral anti-elite, anti-caste, anti-culture, anti-*nomenklatura* reaction. Should you be on the side of the mindless masses or of arrogant privilege (arrogant particularly in claiming an affinity with the masses)? There is no solution. We are caught between two integrisms: the one populist (or Islamic and fundamentalist), the other liberal and elitist, the integrism of enforced democracy and the universal. For this latter an Enlightenment fanaticism which no longer knows what values to subscribe to, the other form — the populist, Islamic type — provides a providential target. But it is itself a fanaticism, which Islamic fundamentalism, with equal intolerance, does not recognize as having a moral and

political right to exist. And the two operate against the same backdrop of an indifferent New World Order. Is there still a place between the two for a profane practice of freedom?

4 September 1995

Information at the Meteorological Stage

Information long ago broke through the truth barrier and moved into the hyper-space where things are neither true nor false, since everything in the realm of information depends on instantaneous credibility. Or, to put it more accurately, information is truer than true *since it is true in real time* — this is why it is fundamentally uncertain. Or again, to draw on Mandelbrot's recent theory we can say that things in the information space or the historical space, like those in fractal space, are no longer one-, two- or three-dimensional: they float in some intermediate dimension. We no longer have any standards of truth or objectivity, but a scale of probability.

You put out an item of information. So long as it has not been denied, it is plausible. And, barring some happy accident, it will never be denied in real time and so will always remain credible. Even if denied, it will no longer ever be absolutely false, since it has once been credible. Unlike truth, credibility has no limits; it cannot be refuted, because it is virtual. We are in a kind of *fractal truth:* just as a fractal object no longer has one, two or three dimensions (in whole numbers), but 1.2 or 2.3 dimensions, so an event is no longer necessarily true or false, but

hovers between 1.2 or 2.3 octaves of truth. The space between the true and the false is no longer a relational space, but a space of random distribution.

We could, of course, say the same of the space between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, cause and effect. Even sexuality today moves in a curious intermediate dimension - neither masculine nor feminine — but at 1.5 or 1.7 somewhere between the two (hence the impossibility of operating with the concept of sexual difference, from lack of definition). The uncertainty principle does not belong to physics alone; it is at the heart of all our actions, at the heart of 'reality'.

This erratic situation, this lack of moorings and generalized uncertainty, is shifting all facts, events and their interpretation into a phase or stage we might term *meteorological.* Yet this is no longer the stage of the natural unpredictability of the elements, of wind and weather, but of a secondary undecidability, arising from the very perfection of calculations and information.

Take the TV weather forecast. The presenters have turned this into a game show. From the satellite data, which serve as a scientific alibi, they seek the ideal formula: the words which will satisfy the public without being too wide of the actual events. They are caught between the instability of atmospheric flows and the instability of collective expectations, which makes the forecast virtually a political matter. They try more or less consciously, on a daily basis, to cobble the two things together into ephemeral simulation models. So, news of the weather can run precisely counter to what you see out of your window, but it is true *in simulation,* since it is deduced from the various data of a model scenario. Which involves many other factors besides meteorological considerations. The presenter will take account of the errors in the previous day's forecast, of the consideration that the weather cannot be bad three weekends running (the population would not stand for it) and naturally also the objective fact of the approach of a depression or anti-cyclone - but this fact, which so often turns out to be wrong, cannot be

determinant in the forecast. It follows that the degree of pertinence of the weather forecast is, taken overall, less than that of normal intuition. As a result, to the poetic uncertainty of the skies we must daily add the arbitrary uncertainty of meteorological discourse.

Yet we are told that it is going to be possible, using ultra-sophisticated computer techniques, to make an accurate forecast of the weather over the next two days. But the computers will take four days to do it. So in four days' time we shall know precisely what the weather was on the preceding two days. The truth of the forecast has no concern with *truly* being a *forecast.* And the facts simply have to fall into line. If necessary, truth will correct them retrospectively. It will have been fine even if it rained. For facts are facts and truth is truth. It always arrives too late, but when it does arrive it is truth which commands belief.

It is no accident that in all the media the weather bulletin always directly precedes or follows the stock market report. The incoherence of stock exchange movements is a fitting counterpart to the fluctuations of weather computations. To which we can add the many opinion polls, which obey the same logic at the level of public opinion.

If we may hypothesize a reality of economic activity, a reality of weather and a reality of public opinion, whatever it may be, then the version given to us through the Stock Exchange, the weather forecasts and the opinion polls is a purely speculative one, which only distantly reflects the realities concerned. There is doubtless some kind of strategy behind this transcription in simulated form, but, as with fashion, no one can tell who gains by it. No one can claim to exploit the opinion polls - not even those who believe they manipulate them. As for the purposes of the Stock Exchange, they are unintelligible. You get the worrying feeling that this undecidability, this floating of rates, prices and exchange rates must have a meaning and a purpose, but for whom and for what? In our perverse system of

government, it is, at any rate, a powerful wellspring of collective uncertainty and disillusionment. It is a transpolitical form of destabilization of the social body.

For if meteorology is becoming, in a way, political, politics is becoming meteorological. As much play is made of figures, co-efficients, rates and indices as of the random movements of the heavens; and periods of depression and high pressure alternate in the field of events and opinion with the same regularity as in the stratosphere.

It even seems that, by a supreme irony, reality is now beginning to conform to these (misplaced) speculations. Opinion is beginning to merge with the polls; or at any rate there is virtually no other mirror of public opinion but the polls (there is a good reason for this: namely, that, as Bourdieu says, public opinion does not exist). The real economy is now coming to merge with the mirror of the Stock Exchange, where it assumes its ultimate face as instantaneous flow, as a limitless operation with no precise goal, a collective spectacle. Little by little, the kind of fluctuations which occur on the Stock Exchange — of buying and selling, transference and dumping, loss-making speculation and forward-trading - has invaded the production and management sectors of the real economy.

It seems that everything - even the weather — has wearily come round to complying with the models, and has meekly become as incoherent as the weather forecast. It is as though the forecasts had finally unsettled the weather, in much the same way as financial speculation ends up modifying economic processes and polls end up obsessing and obscuring public opinion. There can be no doubt that reality is driven into turmoil on contact with models, or ends up ironically conforming to them, like the dreams and unconscious of primitive peoples on contact with psycho-anthropologists. One thing is certain: meteorology has become a reference scenario. So long as the wind was blowing in the direction of the rational and the predictable across all disciplines, from the human to the exact sciences,

meteorology remained the emblem of the unpredictable, the uncontrollable element of our daily lives, and, as a result, the subject of perpetual comment (secret marvelling at the weather).

But now that the same disciplines - from physics to economics, from cosmogony to sociology, from biology to history - are going over, if not to the irrational, then at least to the uncertainty principle, to calculations of probability, to flexible hypotheses, floating verification and the reversibility of propositions, the meteorological realm is becoming the mirror of their uncertainty, the paradigm for their absence of moorings. What was once pleasant climatic fantasy has developed into a prophetic approximation of the new kind of events by which we are beset. The promotion of the random, the accidental and the insignificant in analysis — such as the promotion of the *fait divers* in sociology or the slip in psychology - is not new.

The anomaly is becoming a source of understanding, as is everything which is an exception to the rule. Why should this not also apply to weather events? Is it not marvellous that our most sophisticated calculations turn out to be as uncertain as the unpredictability of the weather? Is it not the most attractive feature of politicians that their strategies turn out in the end to be the equivalent of stratospheric events?

This restores to all fields - politics among them - a suspense which disappeared long ago. The only events today run *counter to* statistics (similarly, only what runs *counter to* politics and *counter to* history constitutes an event today). For people who no longer have any opinion, and who do not in any event have any chance of making it count - hemmed in as they are by discourses even before they are hemmed in by figures - the stakes are shifting from the ideological terrain to the statistical. And the only pleasure, the only hope - sometimes fulfilled — is to prove the pollsters wrong, to have one's choices and acts produce some other outcome than the one anticipated. A collective evil genius is at work here. In a game as tiresome as politics, the only interesting event is the statistical reversal of the situation

(as, for example, in 1992 with the French referendum on Europe). The fickleness of the statistical masses, not unlike the capricious movement of clouds, reduced the opinion polls to a kind of lottery and, through that lottery, brought democracy itself down to a kind of random game, elevating the uncertainty principle - as in Babylon or with the horse races in Byzantium - to the status of a rule.

18 September 1995

Disembodied Violence: Hate[1]

Hate: instead of deploring the resurgence of an atavistic violence, we should see that it is our modernity itself, our hypermodernity which produces this type of violence, and these special effects. Indeed, terrorism is part of this too. Traditional violence is much more enthusiastic and sacrificial. Ours is a simulated violence in the sense that it wells up, not so much from passion and instinct, but from the screen. It is, in a sense, potentially present in the screen and the media, which pretend to record it and broadcast it, but which in reality precede it and prompt it. As everywhere else, the media here precede this violence, as they do terrorist acts. This is what makes it a specifically modern form; and this too is why it is impossible to assign real (political, sociological or psychological) causes to it. One senses that all explanations of that type are deficient. Similarly, it makes little sense to berate the media for propagating violence by showing it or telling violent stories. For the screen, a virtual surface, protects us rather well, whatever is said about it, from the real contents of the image. Because of the way the screen breaks the cycle, violence

16. Mathieu Kassovitz's film *La Maine* (Hate) was released in France in March 1995.

in films and TV does not lead on to behavioural violence. It is the violence of the medium itself which leaves us defenceless - the violence of the virtual and its non-spectacular proliferation. What is to be feared is not the psychological spread of violence, but its technological extension — the extension of a transparent violence, the kind which leads to the disembodiment of all reality and referentiality: the degree Xerox of violence.

It is because our society no longer allows space for real violence, historical or class violence, that it generates a virtual, reactive violence. A phantom violence as it were, the way we speak of a phantom pregnancy, a violence which, like that phantom condition, gives birth to nothing whatever, neither founds nor generates anything whatever. 'Hate' is like this. One might regard it as an archaic impulse, but, paradoxically, because it is disconnected from its object and its ends, it is contemporaneous with the hyperreality of the great metropolises. We may distinguish a basic form of violence, the violence of aggression, oppression, rape, domination, humiliation and spoliation - the unilateral violence of the strongest. And this might find a reply in a contradictory violence — historical violence, critical violence, the violence of the negative. Ruptural, transgressive violence (to which we may add the violence of analysis, the violence of interpretation). These are forms of determinate violence, with an origin and an end, and their causes and effects can be identified. They correspond to a transcendence, whether it be the transcendence of power, history or meaning.

Against this there stands opposed a properly contemporary form of violence. More subtle than the violence of aggression: a violence of deterrence, pacification, neutralization, control - a violence of quiet extermination, a genetic, communicational violence - the violence of the consensus and conviviality which tends to abolish — through drugs, disease prevention, psychical and media regulation — the very roots of evil and hence of all radicality. The violence of a system which roots

out any form of negativity and singularity (including the ultimate form of singularity - death itself). The violence of a society in which negativity is virtually prohibited, conflict is prohibited, death is prohibited. A violence which, in a way, puts an end to violence itself. A violence which can be met by no equal and opposite violence. Only hate.

Born of indifference - particularly the indifference radiated by the media - hate is a cool, discontinuous form, which can switch instantly to any object. It is not heated and it lacks conviction; it is consumed in the process of its acting-out - and often in its image and the immediate repercussions - as can be seen from the current outbursts of delinquency on the big city estates. If traditional violence reflected the level of oppression and conflict, hate reflects the level of consensus and conviviality. Our eclectic culture is the culture of the mingling of opposites, the co-existence of all differences within a great cultural melting pot. But let us not have any illusions about this: it is precisely this multiculturalism, this tolerance, this synergy, which stir up the temptation of a general abreaction, a gut rejection. Synergy produces allergy. Over-protection leads to a loss of defences and immunity: the redundant anti-bodies turn around against the organism itself. Hate is of this order: like many modern diseases, it has something of self-aggression and auto-immune pathology about it. We are not yet ready to cope with the condition of artificial immunity which our big cities provide for us. We are like a species whose natural predators have been removed — doomed either very quickly to disappear or to destroy itself. In a sense, we use hate to protect ourselves from this lack of the other, the enemy or opposition - with hate mobilizing a kind of artificial, object-less oppositionality. In this way, hate is a kind of 'fatal strategy' against the pacification of existence. In its very ambiguity, it is a desperate protest against the indifference of our world and doubtless, for that reason, a much more intense mode of relation than consensus or conviviality.

The contemporary transition from violence to hate is characteristic of the shift from an object passion to an objectless passion. A pure and undifferentiated violence, a violence of a third type, as it were, contemporaneous with the exponential violence of the terrorist and with all the viral, epidemic forms of contagion and chain reaction. Hate is more unreal, more elusive in its manifestations than straight violence. You can see this clearly in racism and delinquency. This is why it is so difficult to counter it, either by prevention or police crackdowns. You cannot de-motivate it, since it has no explicit motivation. You can't demobilize it, since it has no clear mobilizing factor. And it is none too easy to punish it, since most of the time it takes itself as the target: it is, pre-eminently, a passion at odds with itself.

We seem doomed to reproduce the Same in an endless identification, in a universal culture of identity, and this gives rise to an enormous resentment: self-hatred. Not hatred of the other, as a superficial interpretation of racism would have it, but the loss of the other and resentment of that loss. The usual contention is that hate is a hatred of the other - hence the illusion one is opposing it by preaching tolerance and respect for difference - but in fact hate (racism, etc.) is not so much a rejection of the other as a *fanatical desire for otherness.* It seeks despairingly to compensate for the loss of the other by the exorcizing of an artificial other, which may, as a result, be anyone whatever. In a lobotomized world, where conflicts are immediately contained, it seeks to resuscitate otherness — if only to destroy it. It seeks to escape that fateful identification, that autistic confinement to which the very movement of our culture condemns us. This is a culture of *Ressentiment,* then, but one in which, behind the resentment of the other, one cannot but sense a resentment of self, of the dictatorship of the self and the selfsame, which may extend as far as self-destruction.

So we must see 'hate', in all its ambiguity, as a crepuscular passion — simultaneously symptom and operator of this sudden loss of the social, of otherness, of

conflict and, lastly, of the system itself, threatened with gravitational collapse. A symptom of the end or the failure of modernity — if not the end of history, for paradoxically there has never been any end of history, since there has never been a resolution of all the problems it has posed. There is, rather, a passing beyond the end, without anything having been resolved. And in the current 'hate', there is precisely a resentment of everything that has not taken place. And, with this, the urgent desire to hurry things on so as to be done with the system, to bring something else into being, to conjure up the other, the event from elsewhere. In this cool fanaticism, one can glimpse a millenarian form of provocation.

We've all 'got hate'. It is more than we could manage not to. We are all ambiguously nostalgic for the end of the world, that is to say, wanting to give it an end, some end-goal, at any price — if only through resentment and total rejection of the world as it is.

2 October 1995

Psychedelic Violence: Drugs

Drugs in general no longer play a part in the symbolic rituals of the industrialized societies. These societies are given over to deferred goals which assume a calculated sacrifice of time and energy, whereas drug-use always presupposes the immediacy of a mental process and a kind of achieved Utopia. Throughout the ages, all thinking which has advocated the immediate achievement of Utopia has been condemned as heretical.

In the view we take of modern drugs, something of this ancestral condemnation remains, together with something of the occult power drugs derive from their ancient virtues. We may say, then, that they fascinate as much as they repel, and that, from the standpoint of Western reason, they are definitively ambivalent. They have a narcotic effect on the body and the brain — and also on the way we judge them.

In our present-day analysis, it has long been customary to see drugs as relating to 'anomie' in Durkheim's sense. In this, they are akin to a certain type of suicide which characterizes the social bodies of the industrialized countries. These are residual, marginal, transgressive forms, forms which lie outside the law,

beyond the general social organization and system of organic values of the group. It is a matter of margins, but of margins which do not challenge the principle of the law and of value and can potentially be integrated into the cycle of the law and values.

The current status of drugs is, in fact, quite different. In common with certain other specifically contemporary phenomena, it is not anomic, but *anomalous*. The anomalous is not what is marginal, unbalanced or organically in deficit; it is the product of an excess of organization, regulation and rationalization within a system. It is that which for no apparent reason comes, seemingly from outside, to disrupt the operation of the system. It is that which comes from the very logic, the excess of logic and rationality, of a system which, once it has reached a certain saturation threshold, secretes its antibodies, its internal pathologies, its strange dysfunctions, its unforeseeable, incurable accidents, its *anomalies*.

This is no longer the effect of a society's inability to integrate its margins, but rather of an over-capacity for integration and normalization. It is at this point that societies which are apparently omnipotent are destabilized from within - and this involves serious consequences, for the more the system attempts to resolve its anomalies, the more it will enter the logic of over-organization and the more it will fuel their eccentric growth.

We have to leave rationalist conceptions behind here. In the past, the anomic margins provided an occasion for increased rationalization of the system. Today it is the over-rationalization of the system which causes anomalous accidents and aggravates them.

We have to take this 'perverse' logic into account and distinguish between a drug-use linked to inadequate social and economic development (which is still often found in the developing countries or among the underprivileged) and a form of use linked, rather, to the saturation of the world of consumption - as both

apogee and parody of that same consumption, as a contestatory anomaly of a world one has to escape from because it is *too abundant,* not because it could be said to lack something.

We are thus dealing here with what might be described as a drug-use of a 'second type'. And we should see this in terms of all those processes of a 'second type' contemporaneous with it — processes which obey this same anomalous logic. In particular, forms of violence of the 'second type' - forms which are not of the order of primary offending behaviour or aggression, but born of a reaction to the industrialized societies' excessive tolerance, the over-protection of the social body. Terrorism is of this order. It is a response to the omnipotence of modern states, which secrete it not as historic violence, but as anomalous violence, which they cannot stamp out, other than by turning themselves into even more controlled, more detersive, more powerful states, and so continuing the upward spiral.

Such pathologies of the 'second type' as AIDS and cancer are also of this order. These are no longer traditional illnesses caused by the organic deficiency of bodies exposed to external attack; they result rather from a destabilization of over-protected bodies (all the hygienic, chemical, medical, social and psychological prosthetics) which, as a result, lose their immunity and fall prey to any old virus. And just as there is apparently no 'political' solution to the problem of terrorism, there does not for the moment seem to be any biomedical solution to the problem of AIDS and cancer - and for the same reason. The fact is that these are anomalous processes, which precisely run counter — with a savage, reactional violence - to the political or biological over-protection of the social body or the physical one.

The use and abuse of drugs is part of this same symptomatology. We may condemn the existence of this curse and the behaviour which goes with it, but what

we can be sure of is that the society which seeks to root it out and expunge it once and for all from the social body is running a very great risk. Now, the desire to do this exists; it is even part of the rationalist paranoia of our social systems. We have to weigh up the serious deficit we incur because of drugs, but we must also weigh up the serious deficit or deficiency that would result from their elimination. This is how we generate cancers or viruses which are much more cunning, and which do not even have the mitigating charm of accursedness.

The point where collective loss of immune defences or individual loss of symbolic defences occurs is the point where some societies become vulnerable to terrorism, drugs or violence (but also to depression and fascism). And we can easily see that the only solution lies in restoring these immunities or symbolic defences. But we know that our system tends, in the very name of science and progress, to destroy all natural immunities and substitute artificial immune systems - prosthetics - for them. What hope is there that such a system will do anything other than continue in this same direction? With this, we can suddenly see drug-use from a quite different angle, which is directly contrary to what has so far been argued: while being part of the syndrome of immunodeficiency, drugs are themselves a defence. There are doubtless better defences, but it is not inconceivable that this use and abuse represent a vital, symbolic reaction — though an apparently desperate and suicidal one — to something even worse.

Without subscribing to the 'feel-good' ideology of the sixties and seventies on the 'mind-expanding powers of drugs', we may still take the — rather more prosaic — view that there is here something of an escape from the objective drudgery of life in some societies, a communal reflex of misbehaviour in the face of universal normalization, rationalization and programming, which are undoubtedly an even graver danger to society and the species in the long term. We know that human beings gain effective protection from madness by resorting to neurosis.

Similarly, it is not by good, but by relative evil that one can protect oneself from absolute evil. The Church has understood how to manage its heresies in this same way — as necessary (from its point of view) aberrations, as pernicious germs of something (but germs all the same). A Church which no longer gives rise to heresies, or which has eliminated them all, eventually withers away, just as a body which stops producing germs, including those working to destroy it, is a dead body.

Having said this, drug-use is no longer in its intensive phase, the phase in which it was supported by a euphoric or heroic, subversive or suicidal discourse. It is in its extensive phase. And if it is spreading further, it is, as a result, losing some of its violence. Drug-use is no longer a subversive anomie, but an anomaly becoming institutionalized.

So should we crack down on it more than ever? A new hard anti-drug line may seem problematic (when there is no pro-drug discourse). In the fragile state of equilibrium or disequilibrium in which the immune system of the social or individual body finds itself, that hard line would introduce a rigid moralizing element, a legal rigidity which is no longer appropriate in the delicate management of anomalies (and this is all the more ambiguous in that it often provides a cover for political strategies for which drugs, like any other form of offending behaviour, provide an easy alibi).

The problem of drug-use must be treated *delicately,* and (since it is an ambiguous problem) with strategies which are themselves ambiguous. Above all, unilateral strategies of denunciation, which simply bolster the hypocrisy of a certain type of society, are to be avoided, as are strategies of differentiating between use and abuse, since no one could specify the shifting limits between the two. Drugs — all drugs - are forms of exorcistic behaviour: they exorcize reality, the social order, the indifference of things. But through drugs, it is society itself

which exorcizes certain forgotten powers, drives and internal contradictions. It is society which produces this perverse effect and society which condemns it. If it is not going to stop producing the effect, then it should at least stop cursing it.

UNESCO

The Dark Continent of Childhood

There is now within the social and political order a specific problem of childhood. A problem inseparable from those of sexuality, drugs, violence, hatred and all the insoluble problems posed by social exclusion. Like so many other areas, childhood and adolescence are today becoming spaces doomed by abandonment to marginality and delinquency.

The news offers a daily chronicle of this violence: adolescents murdering their parents, violence of children against other children, violence among inner city youth, this latter still taking a relatively socialized form in gangs. But there are also cases of purely individual 'acting out' (with the youngster from Cuers, a child has for the first time entered the annals of mass killers). All these episodes are inexplicable in simple psychological, social or moral terms. There is something else going on here, which arises out of the very breakdown of the biological and symbolic orders.

To begin with, the status of birth has been turned upside down (after the status of death, which is unrecognizable today in properly human terms). Artificial insemination in all its forms, genetic control and manipulation: everywhere birth seems

in danger of being deflected from its natural destiny into an artificial one. The liquidation in the long term of a familial, sexual genesis, of a psychical and biological begetting. It is the end of the child as bearer not only of the duality of a man and a woman, but the duality of a past and a future, which alone creates a memory. As a result, the child becomes a technical performance, a mini-extension of the parents, rather than a genuine 'other'. A sort of by-product of an incestuous doubling - ultimately not unlike the scissiparity or schizogenesis of protozoa — conceived as an ideal outgrowth in your image: the clone-child, whose production from the DNA of a single one of your cells is currently being planned. As a technical operation this is as yet some way off, but it is already present in the scientific and collective imaginary - and even in the relationship between parents and their children.

In fact, the child is no longer a child. Children are substitute beings, who are losing their natural otherness and entering upon a satellite existence on the artificial orbit of sameness. They will find it increasingly difficult to detach themselves; to find, not their identity and their autonomy — as they are constantly being told they must — but their distance and their strangeness. The more genetic heredity is foregrounded, the more the symbolic heritage disappears. Even the Oedipal drama is not played out any longer. There is no longer any resolution of childhood, since the psychical and symbolic conditions of childhood no longer even exist. Childhood is losing even the chance of surpassing and denying itself as such. It is disappearing as a phase in the metamorphosis of the human being. At the same time as it is losing this distinctive spirit of its own and its singularity, it is becoming a sort of dark continent.

For otherness inevitably re-emerges, but differently, in the form of a vast, shady complicity on the part of a generation which is at last free from adult attention, but is no longer minded to grow up. An endless, purposeless adolescence, which is

acquiring autonomy with no reference to the Other, acquiring it for itself — and turning, in some cases violently, against the Other, against the adult with whom it now has no sense either of descendance or solidarity. This is no longer a symbolic break, but a pure and simple rejection, which may find expression in a lethal 'acting out'. And it is not even 'acting out', since that still presupposes the irruption of the phantasm into a real world, whereas here we are dealing with an infantile, quasi-hallucinatory state which reaches back before the reality principle. Moreover, this pre-reality-principle, infantile state coincides strangely with the world of virtual reality, our adult media world, the post-reality-principle world, in which the real and the virtual merge.

This explains the spontaneous affinity of the entire younger generation with the new virtual technologies. The child has a special relationship with the instantaneous. Music, electronics, drugs - all these things are immediately familiar to him. Psychedelic isolation does not frighten him. Where real time is concerned, he is way ahead of the adult, who cannot but seem a retard to him, just as in the field of moral values, he cannot but seem a fossil.

So the child enters a state of anomie, of organic desocialization. But even when 'naturally' produced, he has become an anomaly. He is out of time. The current tempo, based on immediacy, acceleration, 'real time', runs precisely counter to generation, gestation, the time of bearing and raising, the long haul in general, which is the duration of human childhood. The child is, then, logically condemned to disappear. Other methods ought to make it possible for us to do without this natural maturation of the human being, a process which is so long and the source of so many neuroses, of conflicts which few modern couples can withstand, and which was designed for a situation of generational continuity, where there were long-term transgenerational rituals in place. Today, the general quickening of the pace of life condemns childhood to accelerated obsolescence.

Let us take some comfort, however, from the fact that there will always be children, though as objects of curiosity or sexual perversion, or compassion, or pedagogical manipulation and experimentation, or quite simply as vestiges of a genealogy of living beings - just as there will always be thoroughbred horses or pets, or works of art, as protected species or reserves, even when the natural species long since died out. They will be preserved in the same way as animals, which will soon have no other purpose than to be preserved and kept in museums as traces of the genesis of man (man himself being destined for the status of future remnant in a world of clones). So the child, the child concept, will be fetishized. It already is: idealized and fetishized as a vestige of a species whose reproduction — become progressively a technical operation — no longer in any sense involves a sexed destiny, nor the marvellously accidental product of that destiny, the child.

You only have to look at the Universal Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN, to know that childhood is already an endangered species: 'I can say no ... I have the right to know who I am ... I have the right to suitable and balanced food . . . Everyone must protect me against mental and physical violence ... I have the right to sing, dance, play and develop my gifts for my greater happiness, etc' (Never has there been a more Ubu-esque declaration; moreover, it makes a mockery of children, turning them into performing monkeys by foisting upon them the legalistic mania of adults.)

So children will be exorcized as natural beings, as anachronistic survivals from another age in a time of immediate optimal performance. Simultaneously, they will become a wild, delinquent, criminal species. They will lose the belief that they are children, ceasing to compare themselves pejoratively with the adult model. Doubtless they have always been potentially dangerous beings — a reality concealed by pedagogy and the modern, bourgeois idealization of childhood — and they have always taken revenge for their inferiority in their own way, through ruse

and blackmail, but that subordination and revenge were merely relative because they were always doomed to disappear — with time. But now it is time which childhood is not going to have, and the evolutionary chain is broken: the child is going to turn against the adult as an all-out enemy He will become the Other, all the same, but now the other as *Alien* - a monster produced by the breakdown in the symbolic chain of the generations.

Reality was the reality of the adult (not even this is true today when he is no longer the master of it). Childhood, from the depths of its unreality, the depths of its *idiotie,* was one of the last bastions of the poetic illusion of the world. Like all other forms of illusion, it is doomed to disappear sooner or later - or to lead a purely auxiliary existance. This is the child no longer in any sense as destiny, as the accident bearing death as well as jubilation for the parents, but the child as commodity, unfortunately unintegratable into the cycle of accelerated exchange and hence become a non-standard product, an item from another age, floating most of the time between parents who no longer know what to do with it.

But which, like the dead, like women, like the masses, like the object, like all the categories expelled from the dominant reason, still has all it needs to take its revenge and pose an insoluble problem for the masters of reality.

16 October 1995

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The Double Extermination

Today we do not think the virtual, the virtual thinks us. And to us this elusive transparency, which separates us definitively from the real, is as unintelligible as is the window pane to the fly which bangs against it without understanding what separates it from the outside world. The fly cannot even imagine what is setting this limit on its space. Similarly, we cannot even imagine how much the virtual - as though running ahead of us — has already transformed all the representations we have of the world. We cannot imagine this, for it is the particularity of the virtual that it puts an end not just to reality, but to the imagining of the real, the political and the social; not just to the reality of time, but to the imagining of the past and the future (this is what is known, in a kind of black humour, as 'real time'). So we are far from having understood that information's entry on the scene spelt an end to the unfolding of history, that the coming of artificial intelligence spelt an end to thought, etc. The illusion we still harbour about all these traditional categories — including our illusion of 'opening ourselves up to the virtual', as if it were a real extension of all potentialities - is the illusion of the fly unflaggingly banging up against the window pane. For we still believe in the *reality* of the virtual, whereas

the virtual has already virtually scrambled all the pathways of thought. To shed a little light on this confusion, I shall take the most delicate example - most delicate precisely because it arises out of the most horrifying, unintelligible event in our modern history: the holocaust and those who deny it. The holocaust denial proposition is, in itself, absurd. This is so obvious that the crucial question becomes: why is there any need to plead the truth against the holocaust-deniers? Why can the question of the existence of the gas chambers even be raised? In other ages it never could have been. Those who contest holocaust denial never ask themselves why such denial is possible; they content themselves with vehement indignation. Now, the very fact of having to defend the historical reality of the gas chambers as a moral cause, of having to defend 'reality' in general by a kind of political commitment, attests sufficiently to the change in register which has occurred where historical truth is concerned, and to the ways in which objectivity has been disrupted.

Where the holocaust-deniers are plainly absurd and wrong is when they themselves espouse realism and contest *the objective, historical reality* of the holocaust. In historical time, the event took place and the evidence is there. But we are no longer in historical time; we are now in *real time,* and in real time there is no longer any evidence of anything whatever. The holocaust will never be verified in real time. Holocaust denial is, therefore, absurd in its own logic, but by its very absurdity it sheds light on the irruption of another dimension, paradoxically termed 'real time' - a dimension in which, paradoxically, objective reality disappears. And not just the reality of the present event, but also that of past and future events. Everything now runs out its course in a state of simultaneity, so that acts no longer find their meaning, effects no longer find their cause, and history can no longer be an object of reflection.

Real time is a kind of black hole into which nothing penetrates without losing its substance. In fact, the extermination camps themselves become virtual

in real time, and show up only on the virtual screen. All testimony, including *Holocaust* and *Shoah,* sinks, in spite of itself — in spite of us — into the same virtual abyss - the abyss *of events* or facts which exist for as long as they exist and that is all. This is not to argue that the testimonies themselves, in their absolute sincerity, and the films (as images fully exhausting horror in the present time of the image) do not themselves contribute to this impossibility of memory: *the real holocaust is doomed to that other extermination which is that of the virtual.* This is the true final solution. So the holocaust-denial argument can no longer be truly refuted since everything and all of us — including those who reject the argument — have gone over, whether we like it or not, into an age when there is no longer any objective recourse. We are, therefore, condemned to oppose it in a kind of mirror denial, and this is indeed the undoing or defeat of thought, of historical thought and critical thought - but in fact it is not *its* defeat: it is the victory of real time over the present, over the past, over any form of logical articulation of reality whatsoever.

This destabilization of truth may be verified (so to speak) in many other cases. The O. J. Simpson affair, for example. Apart from any political or juridical considerations, we saw the trial build up into an autonomous event, following out its own media script in a stupefying way, mirroring itself in its own closed loop. As it did so, it eclipsed the real event of the murder and secreted its own truth wholly unrelated to the objective truth of the facts, for which the evidence was there. But the true guilt of Simpson may very well coincide - in this unhinging of truth from its model - with his virtual innocence. To the point that Simpson himself must no longer know exactly — once again in the real time of the trial - whether he is guilty or not. Or whether, like Oedipus, he can 'sincerely' set in train investigations to discover the criminal - who may perhaps be himself.

Even the future is not assured in real time (this was the meaning of the paradoxical

proposition: 'The Year 2000 will not take place').[17] And it would seem appropriate here to discuss Paul Virilio's vision of the 'final Accident', the 'Accident to end all Accidents', the 'Apocalypse of the Virtual' which he foresees at the end of this evolution — or, better, involution — of our world into real time. Yet nothing could be less sure than that apocalypse (alas, even this certainty eludes us!). To dream of the 'final Accident' is to succumb to the illusion of the end. It is to forget that virtuality itself is virtual and that, by definition, its definitive advent, its apocalypse, cannot take on the force of reality. There will be no apocalypse of the virtual and of real time precisely because real time abolishes linear time and duration, and thereby the dimension in which they might develop to their extreme limits. There is no linear-exponential function of the Accident — any more than such a function exists for anything else - and its possible eventuation remains a random matter. The radical break with the real which the virtual creates, the black-out or collapse of time which real time brings about, happily preserve us from the ultimate extermination. The virtual system, like any other, is doomed, as it expands, to destroy its own conditions of possibility.

We should not dream, then, of an apocalypse in the future, any more indeed than we should dream of any Utopia whatsoever: they will never take place in real time: they will run out of time itself.

If there is a virtual revolution, then we should accord it its full meaning and think through all its consequences, even if we remain free radically to reject it. If there is no virtual apocalypse, but the apocalypse is itself virtual (and, virtually, we are in the apocalypse: you only have to see the devastation of the real world all around), then it is the same with all the other categories. The social, the political, the historical — even the moral and psychological - *there are no longer any but virtual events within all*

17. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), p. 9.

these categories. This means it is useless searching for a politics *of* the virtual, an ethics *of* the virtual, etc., since it is politics itself which is becoming virtual, ethics itself which has become virtual, in the sense that both politics and ethics are losing the principles governing their action, losing their force of reality. And this even applies where technology is concerned: we speak of 'technologies of the virtual', but the truth is that there are now only — or there will soon only be - virtual technologies. Now, there can no longer be any notion of artifice in a world in which thought itself, intelligence, is becoming artificial. It is in this sense that we can say that it is the Virtual which thinks us, not the other way around.

This enquiry into the virtual is made even more delicate and complex today by the extraordinary hype surrounding it. The excess of information, the massive advertising effort, the technological pressure, the media, the infatuation or panic — everything is contributing to a kind of collective hallucination of the virtual and its effects. Windows 95, the Internet, the information superhighways — these things are already consumed in advance in discourse and fantasy. Perhaps it is a way of short-circuiting their effects to unleash them in this way in the imagination. But we are not even sure of that. Aren't hype and brainwashing themselves part of the virtual? We don't know. This is still the story of the fly banging its head against the incomprehensible fact of the window pane.

'Certitude does not exist', says a piece of New York graffiti. Beneath which has been written, 'Are you sure?'

6 November 1995

'Lost from View' and Truly Disappeared

The story of the illusionist who has a fine act making things vanish - rabbits, snakes, scarves and the like — and yet dreams of just one thing: making the woman who shares the stage with him disappear. He has tried all he knows, but to no avail. One day, however, in the middle of a banal conjuring trick, there is a burst of rapturous applause. He turns around, amazed, to see that the woman has disappeared. He does not know how he did it, or how to get her back. He will spend his whole life looking for the key to that disappearance, the secret of that spell.

In his own way, Jacques Pradel is also a TV illusionist, a virtuoso of disappearing tricks. Under cover of searching for missing persons, what does he do in his TV show *Perdu de vue* but make us vanish?[18]* He shows us we are all potential 'missing persons', just as, to the police, we are all potential suspects. He reveals to us - hidden as he is behind the screen and the images - that the real 'missing persons' are the millions of TV viewers looking on dumbfounded at his sleight of hand and

18. *Perdu de vue* ran from November 1991 to 1999 on the French TF1 channel. Over that period it claimed to have reunited thousands of people with their friends and loved ones.

identifying for all they are worth with the object of the search, hoping against hope that *they* will be discovered and wrenched from their non-existence. So they are the people who are truly 'not around any more'. And the programme's more or less failed demonstration (but that is of no importance; it is always simulated) plunges them back for another week into the nothingness of their anonymity.

'We are all missing persons' the programme might be called. And in this sense — though in this sense alone - the programme is blindingly obvious. Like all the most 'mass-market' television, whose message (which is much more edifying than that of 'high-brow' television) is very clear, though initially indecipherable: 'We are all potential defectives, potential victims or terrorists, potential sufferers from AIDS or muscular dystrophy'.[19] And this is true. But, first and foremost, we are missing persons. And if we had to put Pradel's programme under the microscope, to draw some lesson from it, it would tell us: 'We all know something essential has disappeared, but we don't know what'. And Pradel pretends to be looking for a Mr X or a Mrs Y, but in reality no one gives a damn and no one is fooled. In reality, it is the real which has disappeared and behind Mr X or Mrs Y it is the disappearance of the real which fascinates people.

This is, in fact, the most important event in modern history and everyone is an actor in that event by the very fact of being there in front of their TV screens: they lost sight of the real at exactly the same time as they lost sight of themselves.

Fortunately, there are lots of other modes of disappearance and one of the most interesting aesthetic forms is Christo's: wrapping things up. What his work offers is not in any sense the classical aesthetic of the veil allowing forms to show through. The point, for him, is to make something disappear: an island, a cliff, a bridge, a

19. French television holds a 'telethon' event for muscular dystrophy sufferers and a similar annual event for people with AIDS.

monument, and hence to put it completely out of circulation. Allusively, of course, and for a limited time, but the phantasm is clearly to obliterate the object once and for all. The dream is that once the veil is removed, the hill (or the Reichstag) will really have disappeared, the way David Copperfield does these things (though what was 'aesthetic' illusion in Christo becomes pure illusionism with Copperfield). And, in the case of the Reichstag, the operation was in the highest degree revealing: by removing from view this emblem of the most dramatic period of twentieth-century history, Christo inadvertently revealed how that history had disappeared. That conjuring trick would have been impossible before the disappearance of the Berlin Wall (conversely, it is hard to imagine Christo wrapping up the Berlin Wall when it actually existed). Five million visitors came to celebrate this aesthetic laundering of history. An ambiguous collective jubilation: if Nazism thrived on the aestheticization of politics, our new democracy thrives on the aestheticization of the end of history.

Here again, behind these techniques of conjuring-away and obliteration, veiling and disappearance, the double phantasm consists either in disappearing from our own view or asking what becomes of the object when ***it*** disappears from view. Once again, as ever, the problem of the real. What are we in the absence of the object? What becomes of the object when we are no longer there? Does it become real again?

We have another example of this suspension, this withdrawal from circulation - for reasons of preserving the real and the original — in the Combes d'Arc cave.[20] This is a paleontological wonder that was closed to the public before it was ever

20. The Combes d'Arc cave, which has been widely compared with Lascaux and Altamira, was discovered on 24 December 1994 by Jean-Marie Chauvet at Vallon-Pont d'Arc in the Ardeche. Some time later, Mr Jean Clottes, the 'conservateur general du patrimoine', announced that the caves would be 'preserved for ever from the curiosity of the public'.

opened - in its way put under wraps - with its original paintings, sequestered for their own preservation, passing straight into a virtual existence from which they will not re-emerge. In this same spirit, a 'total nature reserve entirely off-limits to humans' has been created in the Ecrins National Park.[21] In the absence of man, it is hoped that an original flora and fauna will be rediscovered there, a 'state of nature' within the space of a century! Increasingly, whole chunks of the biosphere will be buried in order to restore them to a state of artificial authenticity. They are being protected, deep-frozen, put under wraps, in the insane hope that our own traces can be erased and things can be restored to their initial, original state. For we know that with us and all our undertakings, the world will never be real or original again, and that everything is doomed, henceforth, to the curse of the screen, the curse of the simulacrum. We are in a world where the essential function of the sign is to make reality disappear and at the same time to mask that disappearance. Behind each image something has disappeared (it is not so much what it represents as this conjuring trick inherent in the image which gives it its force as sign). It is the same with the illusionism of information and memory. Behind every news item an event has disappeared; on the pretext of providing news and information, events are taken from us one by one. In this way, they enter the realm of the virtual, like the sealed-off wall paintings, like the buildings wrapped up by Christo - like the Chernobyl reactors sealed away in their concrete sarcophagi. In this way, the threat of a nuclear catastrophe has also passed into virtual reality. That was the greatest operation of 'putting an object under wraps' in history, costing somewhere between one and four billion dollars, and taking ten years to complete. The biggest object ever taken out of circulation for all time.

21. The Ecrins national park, which lies in the area between Grenoble, Briancon and Gap, contains a central zone of 91,740 hectares in which there are no permanent inhabitants.

And should we add here the people of Strasbourg religiously burying a jumbled cocktail of signs of the human species (cassettes, an opera, a bra, etc.) in a container that is not intended to be opened until the year 3050? A provincial variant of the capsule sent into interstellar space some years ago with the noblest attestations to our humanity on board (some music by Bach, a photo of Liz Taylor, etc.). The oddest thing is that, at the same time as we are burying these signs of the present in the future (who are they intended for, if not for some other species than our own, for a world we shall have no further part in and which amounts therefore to an absolute origin?), where the traces of our own species and all the others are concerned, we are digging up everything that can be dug up. We desperately want nothing to have disappeared. And in some cases we are exhuming things that have been buried since the world began (the Lascaux caves) in order to put them immediately out of harm's way and keep them from view until the end of the world. What is the meaning of these things which will have hardly had time to pass through the stage of reality before being consigned to the status of video? Why wrench these traces, objects and vestiges from the secret lairs where they were alive, when they will immediately decompose in the open air? Conversely, what is the point of cryogenizing (like Disney in his liquid nitrogen capsule), freezing and museifying art works and cultures in order to afford them an improbable, artificial immortality, unless we have obscurely sensed that everything is disappearing? Even the human genome is declared part of the 'universal heritage'. Isn't this a way of sequestering it, as though it 'belonged to us', as though it were our biological capital? Isn't it also a way of putting it under wraps, of embalming it, as though we were aware that, having discovered it, we are capable now of destroying it?

Like the illusionist in the story, we are suddenly aware of the rapid, unintended disappearance of something very precious (a disappearance for which we must in some way be responsible). But of what? And how are we to bring it back?

SCREENED OUT

'One should not believe that truth remains truth when you remove its veil,' said Nietzsche. But we should not believe either, as we seem to (we, who are contemporaries of the stripping-bare of the truth), that truth becomes truth again when we dress it once more and wrap it up. We should not believe that the real, which for us is dissipating into visibility and transparency, has a chance of becoming real again only if we make it disappear and render it invisible.

It is true that, to make something exist today, the best tactic is to play at making it disappear, to mask it so that it recovers the power of illusion. However, the revived object is never the same again. The real and nature, even revived, only get a secondary existence.

20 November 1995

Sexuality as a Sexually Transmitted Disease

Somewhere in New England, not far from Dartmouth College, you still find Shaker villages. In accordance with the religious law of that sect, the sexes live meticulously separate lives and do not reproduce (the world being given over to evil, there is no point perpetuating it; the only proper course is to await the Last Judgement). Now, on the nearby campus, which, like the other American campuses was one of the centres of sexual liberation, more or less the same situation pertains: the sexes no longer touch each other, no longer rub shoulders with each other, no longer attempt to seduce each other. Without any explicit prohibition or discrimination, they find themselves - in the name of sexual harassment and for obsessive fear of it - in the same condition of apartheid as prevails among the Shakers. The AIDS obsession doubtless plays a role in this voluntary exiling of sex — though there are never any causal relations in these kinds of things: AIDS is perhaps just one of the obscure pathways for a disaffection with sex which began long before the appearance and spread of that disease. It seems here that sexuality itself is at issue - each sex being, as it were, afflicted with a sexually transmitted disease that is sex itself.

There is a fear of catching AIDS, but a fear also of simply catching sex. There is a fear of catching anything whatever which might seem like a passion, a seduction, a responsibility. And, in this sense, it is once again the male who has most deeply fallen victim to the negative obsession with sex. To the point of withdrawing from the sexual game, exhausted by having to bear such a risk, and no doubt also wearied by having historically assumed the role of sexual power for so long. Of which feminism and female liberation have divested him, at least *dejure* (and, to a large extent, *de facto).* But things are more complicated than this, because the male who has been emasculated in this way and stripped of his power, has taken advantage of this situation to fade from the scene, to disappear — doffing the phallic mask of a power which has, in any event, become increasingly dangerous.

This is the paradoxical victory of the movement for feminine emancipation. That movement has succeeded too well and now leaves the female faced with the (more or less tactical and defensive) defaulting of the male. A strange situation ensues, in which women no longer protest against male power, but are resentful of the 'powerlessness' of the male. The defaulting of the male now fuels a deep dissatisfaction generated by disappointment with a sexual liberation which is going wrong for everyone. And this dissatisfaction finds expression, contradictorily, in the phantasm of sexual harassment. This is, then, a very different scenario from traditional feminism. Women are no longer alienated by men, but dispossessed of the masculine, dispossessed of the vital illusion of the other and hence also of their own illusion, their desire and privilege as women. It is this same effect which causes children secretly to hate their parents, who no longer wish to assume the role of parent and seize the opportunity of children's emancipation to liberate themselves as parents and relinquish their role. What we have, then, is no longer violence on the part of children in rebellion against the parental order, but hatred on the part of children dispossessed of their status and illusion as children. The

person who liberates himself is never who you thought he was. This defaulting of the male has knock-on effects which extend into the biological order. Recent studies have found a fall in the rate of sperm in the seminal fluid, but, most importantly, a decline of their will to power: they no longer compete to go and fertilize the ovum. There is no competition any more. Are they, too, afraid of responsibility? Should we see this as a phenomenon analogous to what is going on in the visible sexual world, where a reticence to fulfil roles and a dissuasive terror exerted by the female sex currently prevail? Is this an unintended side-effect of the battle against harassment - the assault of sperm being the most elementary form of sexual harassment?

Despite appearances, this sexual disaffection and deterrence have nothing to do with any new prohibition of a religious or moral nature. All those prohibitions and inhibitions disappeared long ago. And the women who decorate the campuses with purple ribbons to mark rapes (in this way, every woman raped, or threatened with rape or dreaming of rape signals the memory of the crime publicly, in the same way as, in the USA, yellow ribbons signalled the memory of soldiers who had gone off to the Gulf War) - these women, representative of a new aggressive order and, simultaneously, of a new victim order — are certainly not victims of indecent exposure. There would seem, rather, to be a nostalgia for prohibitions in all this - or for anything that might resemble them — a reflex reaction to a virtual liberation of sexual mores and a banalization of sexuality now perceived as more dangerous than traditional censorship (which at least allowed transgression). A demand for a prohibition (for a rule, a limit, an obligation) which you can interpret as you will (and doubtless see as negative) from the psychological and political point of view - from the point of view of liberation and progress — but which may look like an instinctual defence of the species in respect of its sexual function, which is threatened by its emancipation and its very fulfilment.

SCREENED OUT

Sexual harassment (the obsession with it and with AIDS) as a ruse of the species to revive the anxiety around sexuality — and more particularly a ruse on women's part to revive desire (men's desire, but their own too)? A very banal strategy (but a fatal one in the case of AIDS) to turn sex into something other than the sequence without consequence which it is becoming today, with all forms of sexual liberation - including contraception — moving ultimately in the direction of an 'erotic entropy' (Sloterdijk).

For what, in a traditional order, was accounted a liberation and a transgression (contraception) changes its meaning in a world moving increasingly towards asexual reproduction. Sexuality without reproduction leads on to reproduction without sexuality, and what was freedom of choice becomes quite simply the growing hold of the system over all forms of generation.

So, with the hatred that comes of disillusion following in the wake of liberatory violence, and the demand for prohibitions following in the wake of the problematic removal of all prohibitions, a kind of sentimental, familial, political and moral revisionism has ensued and is currently winning out on all fronts. This tidal wave of revisionism, running counter to all the liberations of the twentieth century, finds expression also in repentance and the decline of sex. Whereas in the past it was freedom, desire, pleasure and love which seemed to be sexually transmitted, today it seems to be hatred, disillusionment, distrust and resentment between the sexes. Behind this polemic over harassment lies a later form of Marcuses 'repressive desublimation' — the lifting of prohibitions and repressions ushering in a new system of suppressions and control. In our view, this might better be described as a 'depressive resublimation', leading directly to moral, if not indeed religious, fundamentalism, or, at any rate, beneath the fantasies of rape and harassment, to a sexual protectionism. In that protectionism, sex, for the male, becomes the obsession with a lost function, which now finds an outlet only in fantasies of rape; for the

female, it becomes an instrument of blackmail. We are living through all this, subjectively and collectively: a painful phase transition after what was perhaps merely an illusion of progress and liberation. But we have no idea whatever as to the ultimate designs of the species here (nor even if it has any). Animal species react to situations of crisis, shortage or overpopulation with sexual continence and automatic sterility. We are perhaps reacting similarly - quite outside any subjective conviction or ideology - to a situation of plenty, liberation, well-being and *release* which, being quite alien to the species over its history, we find agonizing and inhuman. The hatred which the issue of sexual harassment releases may perhaps simply be the repentance of a liberty, individuality and freedom to express our desire which were hard won, and which we are now paying for with a new-found voluntary servitude. Might not servitude itself become a sexually transmitted disease?

4 December 1995

Sovereignty of the Strike

It is difficult to speak of this strike in terms which are not tritely political or economic — this behaviour which is both banal and demented, this silent solidarity, this quasi-joyful, excessive commitment of the strikers and others to a destiny that has already been sacrificed, come what may.[22] We can undoubtedly see in it a form of radical questioning of the fact of being governed (the fact of being exploited already being part of an old history). But, as with all good questions, there is no answer to this one, for governments will never have an answer to the questions: Why do you govern us? Why do you speak in our name? Why do you want to do good to us?

It has not been easy, over the generations, to push people into work, school, health and security — into the economy of their own lives. It has always been the understanding that the masses did not know what they wanted and that you had to will and act for them. That has even been the sign of a courageous democracy:

22. The reference is to the French strike wave of December 1995, aimed at preventing the implementation of public spending cuts associated with the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty.

doing the popular good against the people's will. So, they have been evangelized in the name of Enlightenment and, like it or not, they have allowed it to happen, have let it be done to them. They are rebelling today against this forced evangelization. Or rather they are anticipating their own disappearance (for all these social categories — railwaymen, civil servants, craftsmen — are destined to disappear in any event, like workers and peasants), but doing so in a joyful way, or at any rate in a way that is invigorating and exuberant. Active self-destruction can be preferable to slow extermination. And this suicide is the more forceful for showing up for all to see the inanity of governments which are incapable of any response whatever, and merely rely on inertia and decay to do the work for them. The key element in this unconscious strategy of the masses is to disqualify governments by exposing them - either for their violence and oppression as in 1968, or for their transparency and indigence as today. In 1968 it was the *auto-da-fe* of a bourgeois, elitist, academic culture joyfully doing away with its privileges, destroying its consecrated places, sensing what was inevitably to come: the demagogy of a mass culture to be unleashed on us over the next twenty years. Something rather similar is happening now with all kinds of disappearing occupational categories: they are playing out their anachronistic resurrection (and this includes the trade unions) in a last stand which does at least transform this exit from History into an event. So, there are movements which lag behind their own history, but are ahead of the history being foisted on them.

Why do you expect people to sacrifice the current social security regime, which they have themselves, as it happens, pushed to the brink of catastrophe? If they are not to be recognized as citizens, it is their only means of blackmailing the State, their only way of extorting money from it. The result is to show up the State (and the whole of the political class) as being, by its *de facto* impotence, even further down the road to disappearance than those who call on its aid. 'Ask not what the State can do

for you; ask what you can do for the State' (to borrow a famous phrase). For it can do nothing - nothing economically and certainly nothing politically, being at the whim of markets and capital flows which are way beyond its control. Do not even ask the State what it can do for the State: it has made itself redundant.

But the strike movement is not content merely to relegate the state to the passenger seat. It is practically testing out a different way of living, a social condition which could function at a minimum level of operation, capable of deploying a fantastic energy in the absence of the State or a system of control. These people setting out for their workplaces at four in the morning, these people fired with an ambulatory - if not indeed jubilatory - rage. Of course, they are afraid of losing their jobs, but at the same time they are setting out their stalls. They are proving that they can get by on their own, that they can cope without institutional mechanisms and powers. For a moment, at least, they will have proved this. This is what the strike in action represents: the welling-up of an incredible capacity to construct your life in total freedom, to do without all those who want at all costs to do good *to you.* Such a demonstration has a lethal effect on any kind of power. Its arrogance is met with a collective upsurge of pride, even if this takes the form of a pig-headed defence of those on the scrap heap or a sectional defence of the 'economically under-developed'. It is the very excess of the strike and its spilling-over in time, its exceeding of its own objectives, which expresses - beyond any economic stakes involved - what is symbolically at issue at a deep level in this strike. The surest sign of this sovereignty of the strike - and a lethal sign for governments - is that, when governments no longer respect people, people begin to respect each other.

Walking, walking - this has been the great revelation of this strike movement. Much more than traditional demonstrations. For in social fracture, circulation is the crux. The only circulation in this society is the circulation of elites and networks,

the circulation of money and information in real time. An abstract circulation, inaccessible to most people. It is against this that people are walking. They are walking in the deferred[23] time of space against the real time of the networks - in the physical time of the journey against the breakneck circulation of flows. It is an original and direct form of protest against the very norm of this society. The contrast with the Telethon, which happened coincidentally to be held during the period of the strike, was stunning. There too you saw people walking, running and cycling out of a sense of media solidarity to keep the Telethon going — with its records in millions of kilometres, its displays in millions of francs. And the contrast with the strike showed up just where the Society of the Spectacle had taken refuge: in the servile organization of charity.

You have to have (by some miracle) caught an empty TGV train - the last one from Lyon to Paris - without tickets, without inspectors, perhaps even without a driver (the phantom train of the strike) to appreciate the incredible ease of our technical automatisms and, at the same time, the magical possibility of a removal of all controls — the whole of society reflecting the current situation by functioning at a minimum level of operation. An immense relief (in Italy, the back-up services already function better than the normal ones). What this long march of a society also expresses is the dream of a lightened society, a society in which democracy is no longer the condescending democracy of elites or the democracy of helots clamouring for advancement, but one in which people would advance under their own constraints and by their own laws.

23. *'Differe* . In French, the term *en differe* refers to a 'pre-recorded' television broadcast. French television commonly shows events — particularly sporting events — in an 'as-live' format. That is to say, they are recorded, but broadcast in their entirety rather than in the form of highlights. Hence the contrast here with 'real time'.

SCREENED OUT

The 1992 referendum on Europe was the first indication of a 'democratic' coalition of all powers — political, media, cultural and intellectual - against a recalcitrant public opinion resistant to the universal gospel of rationality. It is now clear that two antagonistic forces are in opposition, and there is nothing to suggest that they can be reconciled. This is not just a social, but a mental fracture. Between a manifest power which believes it is moving in the direction of history (even if, in the end, that history of the cybernetic and technocratic domestication of the world makes no more sense to it than to others) and an irreducible opposing power which is growing day by day: not the power of intelligence, but the power of cunning — of the ruse of the victims of history, of the cunning, ironic movement of the masses; a power which runs parallel to history and is opposed at any price to a single order, an enforced orthodoxy of thought, a single currency and the stereotyped language of the universal. Two antagonistic forces no longer of the order of the class struggle: the one, the rational power, with a (decreasing) mastery of signs and language, and an (increasing) mastery of the techniques of persuasion and discussion. The other fragmentary, erratic and non-representative; the force on which the linear sense of progress and history has been imposed. No one wants to acknowledge that force. For no one understands the subterranean preparatives to anger.

There are events, said Nietzsche, which take a century to reach us, truths we do not dare face up to which remain stuck in a kind of purgatory. One such truth, no doubt, is that events no longer take place now with the tide of history and political strategies, but against history and against politics. If we are being offered the New European Order, dovetailing into the New World Order, as the key occurrence of this century's end, then our French strike, with its millions of walkers and millions standing silently by in solidarity is indeed the anti-event, the counter-event par excellence.

18 December 1995

Tierra del Fuego - New York

Land of disasters, as has been said. Devastated forests seemingly felled by some recent cataclysm. Hulks of wrecked ships. Graveyards of immigrants (why so many Yugoslavs?) and sailors. But there is another disaster here today, the disaster of a completely anachronistic modernity - a chaotic, incoherent cowboy-film modernity: concrete, dust, duty-free, transistors, petrol, computers and the hubbub of useless traffic - as though the silence of the ends of the earth had to be obliterated. All that is inhuman here is sublime in its natural desolation. All that is human is sordid: civilization's wastes.

There is some justice in the fact that modern man actually treats himself as a waste product, having previously treated the Indians that way. A higher justice, which balances out the destinies of persecutor and victim. Those closest to these Fuegian Indians (and we know neither their names nor what crime they committed to be wiped out as they were) are the outcasts, the criminals, the inmates of the old Ushuaia jailhouse, whose photos adorn the museum.[24] This one in particular,

24. The Museo Maritimo de Ushuaia is located in the old prison building.

of whom a superb photo remains, though we do not know his name, his crime, his ultimate destiny or the date of his death - the photo of the perfect unknown prisoner. Or the photo of Radowitzski, the anarchist who blew up the Buenos Aires police chief (the renowned Falcon), broke out of jail, was recaptured, attempted suicide, was pardoned after twenty years and ended his days in exile.

Ranged against these criminals and Indians, the Salesian missionaries - charitable parasites of this ill-starred land, which they evangelize like the lichen that wraps itself around the forests of nothofagus and submerges those trees as they are gobbled up by it.

On every side is nothingness, wasteland, sterile horizons, infinite vistas. There is, in fact, neither nature nor culture here, but a savage denial of both - a denial of landscape in the nothingness of the wind, the sooty sky, the Bahia Inutil; a denial of culture in the nothingness of the towns (but how else could it have been once those who ended up in their own language calling themselves 'the foreigners' had been exterminated?). The geographical remoteness highlights the contrast between the two without giving any meaning - even a surrealistic one - to their being huddled together like this. What you discover here is not a new, original world, but the relentless mix of a wild, elemental form and an equally relentlessly destructive grip exerted by the human race.

The phantasm of the ends of the earth. You think you have left the world behind and cut the umbilical cord. Not a bit of it. The other world is already there well before you are, with its 'real time' — in this unreal, timeless land. You can receive a fax of an article that appeared in Paris only this morning. There is, then, no end of the world. Or everywhere is at the ends of the earth. Wherever we are, we are, at the same time, at the extreme outer reaches. One becomes, oneself, an extreme phenomenon - beyond one's own end. Now, the phantasm of the ends of the earth is a phantasm of the territory having some extreme furthest point — the

symbol of a possible end and of the outer reaches of thought. It is a fantasy of verifying that, despite what they say, the earth is not a sphere and does not have that hope-sapping curvature.

The Alakaluf did not know they were at the ends of the earth. They were where they were and nowhere else — something we shall never be. For the sailors, adventurers and missionaries, it wasn't the end either: they discovered a world entirely unlike their own, but one against which they could pit themselves, a new frontier. We arrive here today with only an imaginary notion of the ends of the earth (to which space travel long since put an end). And while the Fuegians were never parted from their fires (they carried them everywhere, even on their boats in the form of burning embers), we take pains to carry our artificial coldness with us everywhere - even into glacial latitudes.

After Tierra del Fuego, New York. After the ends of the earth, the centre of the earth. A double extremity: the point where the curvature of the earth comes to an end; the place where human technology and verticality have gone as far as they can go. But each gives the impression of being on another planet. The archaeological stillness of time on Tierra del Fuego, its depth. And here in New York its superficial acceleration. The two are equally timeless. And if, down in the Southern hemisphere, the sun lies to the north at noon (which always seems so marvellous to a Westerner), it seems just as strange that the same sun rises and sets on New York, whose astral theme seems so indifferent to any other orbit but its own.

When you are at the tip of Manhattan, by Battery Park and the Staten Island ferry, you might think you were at the furthest point of Tierra del Fuego, on the banks of the Beagle Channel. On a New York morning, you have the same impression of primordial energy, of a primal scene, as at a dawning of the world. Everywhere else, the energy expended gives an impression of wear and fatigue, of being consumed by the activity. Here, by contrast, it regenerates in hyperactivity.

Only natural energies give this impression of inexhaustibility. Here it is the artificial energy, the high voltage, which gives New York this quality of a perpetual anticyclone.

Primal scene, primitive society - perhaps. But when you go directly from Patagonia to Broadway and Times Square, you cannot but be terrified by the proliferation of the human race. You feel like Ishi, the last Indian, wrenched by the anthropologist from the solitude of his race and hurled into the crowds of San Francisco. In his bewilderment at the number of simultaneously present human beings (he had never before seen more than thirty or forty together), the only explanation he could find was that all the dead were present alongside the living, since it was unthinkable that the gods could watch over so many existences at once. Ten dead people for every living one seems a good proportion. As in the primal forest of Tierra del Fuego for example, where there is one living tree to every ten dead ones. Hence the conclusion that, in the thronging metropolises, nine out of ten human beings are living dead, are zombies. Their physical appearance is deceptive, for the so-called human beings who no longer have any physical contact other than through crowds and no human relations other than through communications are truly virtual corpses or ghosts. Only a few hundred or a few thousand perhaps maintain a secret bond, the only living symbolic chain in this immense, incapacitated human genome.

The millions of people in the streets seem to have nothing to do but be at the centre of the world and head off in all directions, in a dispersal as spectacular as it is useless. Nothing else to do but make New York exist in its useless, eccentric form. A city of the utmost urgency, a once-and-for-all city with no tomorrow - very far removed from any democratic form of representation. In New York the people represent only themselves, not the rest of society. The city represents only itself, not the rest of America. This is what gives it its global importance. It is a

detector, a sensor of prestige; its charm is to have transformed not only the rest of the United States, but the rest of the world into an immense province (which in no way detracts from the charm of the provinces).

There is no social bond here, no conviviality, no collective sentimentality, no responsibility towards past or future. You don't reproduce in New York. It isn't a city made for reproducing. Yet everything happens here. Hence the foreboding of catastrophe which hovers over the whole city - though it is an upbeat sense of foreboding. Down in Tierra del Fuego, at the edges of the earth, in the lonely Antarctic wastes, there is a poignant sense of natural catastrophe, which reaches back to time immemorial, and of genocide which dates from recent history. A world devastated by wind, ice, human predators, the exhaustion of earlier ages - a disaster continuing even now. A curse which the Fuegians maintained with their own gods, when they had any (it is difficult for the gods to find a foothold in a pitiless world, to embody elemental powers which are themselves pitiless to one another).

The sense of catastrophe you get in New York is quite different. It is the sense of a vital catastrophe, of what can end only in excess and prodigality. The maximum imminence of present time and hence the exhaustion of any future, of any future energy, which is gathered into a single instant, an absolute present.

Having said this, we no doubt have a naive view of energy. An entropic view. Whereas energy — the millennial energy of the wind in Patagonia or the energy of humanity's workings - is doubtless inexhaustible.

1 January 1996

World Debt and Parallel Universe

The electronic display of the American national debt in Times Square registers an astronomical figure of some thousands of billions of dollars, increasing at the staggering rate of 20,000 dollars a second. The electronic display at Beaubourg registers the millions of seconds separating us from the year 2000. The one, representing time, falls steadily. The other, representing money, rises vertiginously. One is a countdown to zero second. The other, by contrast, tends towards infinity. Both imply catastrophe, at least in the imaginary register. In the Beaubourg case, the catastrophe of the exhaustion of time; in the American case, the catastrophe of the debt beginning to grow exponentially, bringing a world financial crash in its wake.

In fact, this debt will never be paid off. No debt will ever be paid off. The final accounting will never take place. If our days are numbered, accounted for, the absent capital, for its part, is beyond any accounting. If the United States is already in virtual breach of its obligations, this will have no effects. There will be no Judgement Day for this virtual bankruptcy. One has merely to enter the exponential or virtual mode to be released from all responsibility, since there is no longer any reference, any referential world to serve as measure.

This disappearance of the referential universe is an entirely new situation. When you contemplate the electronic display on Broadway, you have the impression of something taking off into the stratosphere; the debt figure might be the distance, expressed in light years, of a galaxy moving away from us in the cosmos, the escape velocity of a terrestrial satellite. And, indeed, it is a satellite: the debt moves on an orbit that is entirely its own, the orbit of capital released from any economic contingency, moving in a parallel universe, having escaped, by its very acceleration, from any relapse into the banal universe of production, value and use. Not even an orbital universe, but an exorbital, ex-centred, eccentric one. And the probability of its ever re-entering our world is faint indeed.

This is why, from this point on, no debt will be paid off. It can at best be bought back at a knock-down price and put back on to a debt market — the public sector borrowing requirement, the national debt, the world debt — having once again become an exchange value. It is unlikely the debt will ever be called in, and this is what gives it its incalculable value. For, suspended as it is in this way, it is our only insurance against time. Unlike the countdown, which signifies the exhaustion of time, the indefinitely deferred debt is our guarantee that time itself is inexhaustible. Now, we very much need assuring about time in this way at the very point when the future itself is tending to be wholly consumed in real time. Clearing the debt, balancing up the books, writing off Third World debt — these are things not even to be contemplated. It is only the disequilibrium of the debt, its proliferation, its promise of infinity, which keeps us going. The global, planetary debt clearly has no meaning in traditional terms of obligation and credit. On the other hand, it is our true collective claim on each other — a symbolic claim, by which persons, companies and nations find themselves bound to one another through lack. Each is bound to the other (even the banks) by their virtual bankruptcy, as accomplices are bound by their crime. All assured of existing for each other in the shade

of a debt which cannot be settled or written off, since the repayment of the accumulated world debt would take far more than the funds available. The only sense of it, then, is to bind all civilized human beings into the same destiny as creditors. Just as nuclear weapons, stockpiled across the world to a point of considerable planetary overkill, have no other meaning than to bind all human beings into a single destiny of threat and deterrence.

One understands, then, why the Americans make such a show of their debt. The initiative is supposed to shame the State for its bad management and alert the citizens to an imminent collapse of the finances and public services. But the exorbitant scale of the figures robs them of all meaning. It is, in fact, just a massive advertising exercise and, indeed, the luminous billboard looks for all the world like a triumphant stock market index that has broken all records. The population contemplate it with the fascination they might accord to a world record (though few gather in front of the Beaubourg digital clock to see the run-in to the end of the century). At the same time, the people are collectively in the same situation as the Tupolev test pilot who right up to the last second could see his aircraft nose dive and crash into the ground on his internal video circuit. Did he, by some last-minute reflex, glance at the image as he died? He could have imagined himself living out his last moments in virtual reality. Did the image survive the man if only for a fraction of a second? Or was it the other way about? Does virtual reality survive the real world's catastrophic end?

Our real artificial satellites are the world debt, the speculative capital and the nuclear warheads which girdle the earth on their orbital round. Having become pure artefacts - sidereally mobile and instantly convertible - they have at last found their true place, more extraordinary than the Stock Exchange, the banks and the silos: the orbit on which they rise and set like artificial suns.

The latest of these exponentially growing parallel universes is the world of the Internet and the global information systems. Here too, the irresistible growth, the out-

growth of information, could be posted up in real time in terms of millions of individuals and millions of operations - that information now so extensive that it no longer has any connection with the acquisition of knowledge. As of now, we can say that this immense potential will never be redeemed, in the sense of a use or purpose ever being found for it. Things here, then, are exactly as they are with debt: *information is as inexpiable as debt,* in the sense that we shall never be able to settle our account with it. Moreover, the storage of data, the accumulation and worldwide circulation of information, in every respect resemble the build-up of an irremissible debt. And, here again, as soon as this proliferating information far exceeds the needs and capacities of the individual and the species in general, it has no other meaning than to bind all humanity in a single destiny of cerebral automatism and mental underdevelopment. For it is clear that, though a certain dose of information reduces our ignorance, a massive dose of artificial intelligence can only convince us of the failings of our natural intelligence and plunge us deeper into them. The worst thing in a human being is to know too much and not to be equal to one's knowledge. It is the same with responsibility and emotional capacity: the media, by perpetually assailing us with violence, misfortune and catastrophe, far from firing some kind of collective solidarity, merely demonstrate our real impotence and plunge us into panic and remorse.

All these parallel universes, caught in an autonomous, exponential logic, are time bombs. This is clear with nuclear power, but it is the case too with debt and speculative capital. The tiniest irruption of these worlds into our own, the merest intersection of their orbit with ours would immediately smash the fragile equilibrium of our trade and our economies. It would (or will) be the same with the total liberation of information, making us free radicals desperately seeking their molecules in a rarefied cyberspace.

Reason would doubtless dictate that we reintegrate these worlds into ours, into an homogeneous universe: that a peaceful use be found for nuclear power, that all

debts be paid off, that speculative capital be reinvested in social wealth, and that the whole of information become part of knowledge. But this is no doubt a dangerous Utopia. It would be better for these universes to remain parallel and for their suspended threat, their eccentricity, to protect us. Parallel and eccentric as they are, they are nonetheless ours. We created them like this, beyond our reach, as an ersatz transcendence; we put them into orbit as a kind of catastrophic imaginary. But perhaps this is all to the good. For, if the cohesion of our societies was in the past maintained by the 'imaginary' of progress, it is maintained today by the 'imaginary' of catastrophe.

15 January 1996

The Shadow of the Commendatore

It has been an extraordinary adventure, this cancer of Mitterand's. After being concealed, hidden and repressed for fifteen years, it was 'illegally' revealed by Dr. Gubler in *Le Grand Secret* - at which point the courts intervened with a ban.[23] It was then revived on the Internet in virtual space, and, in the end, placed virtually under lock and key in the person of the offending cybercafe

25. The book *Le Grand Secret* by Claude Gubler (Mitterand's personal physician) and Michel Gonod was published by Plon on 17 January 1996, nine days after the president's death. It claimed that Mitterand's prostate cancer was first diagnosed in 1981 and that medical information after that date was falsified at the president's request. Gubler also argued that, by the end of his second term, the president was so ill he could barely fulfil his duties. The book was banned on 18 January when the Mitterand family brought an action against the publishers and Dr. Gubler (for breach of confidentiality). By that date, 33,000 copies are said to have been sold. The ban was confirmed in the Paris Appeal Court on 13 March 1996. The text of the book has since been available periodically on the Internet.

owner.[26] From one cancer to another. From cancer of the prostate to the cancer of information. Since the biological secondaries cannot be spirited away by medicine, they are spirited away by silence. Since the secondary cancers of information cannot be spirited away, they are prohibited by law. This elegantly resolves the problems of data protection and bioethics, of openness and unchecked proliferation: use the law to stop the viruses. Sadly, the secondaries have already got out into the outside world — through the 'mirror sites'.

Having passed through all the phases of secrecy and openness in this way, Mitterand's cancer can be seen as emblematic of his reign, based on the systematic usage of secrecy and, particularly towards the end, on the calculated trickling-out of the parts of his life he found too shameful to mention. His cancer can be seen on these two levels, as having crowned a life which might be said to have begun with the assassination attempt on the avenue de l'Observatoire.[27] Simulated attack, dissimulated cancer - in both cases, he escapes by a minor miracle (he leapfrogs the railings; he leapfrogs a death foretold), then arranges for the facts to come out, without anyone being able to make them count. All the lies of his life were given

26. The text was apparently first placed on the Internet by Pascal Barbraud, manager of the 'Le Web' cybercafe in Besancon (Doubs). On 26 January 1996, Barbraud was arrested by the Besancon police, not for any infringement of the ban on publication, but because of a three-month sentence passed on him on 20 September 1994 at Nanterre for desertion of his family and non-payment of alimony. In the meantime, the text of Gubler's book had appeared on a variety of mirror sites from which it could be downloaded. On 5 February 1996, the equipment at his cybercafe was seized as a result of action taken by one of Barbraud's creditors.

27. In October 1959 Mitterand's car apparently came under machine-gun fire on the avenue de l'Observatoire. He escaped by jumping over railings (or in some accounts, over a hedge) into the grounds of the Observatory. Mitterand was subsequently accused by various far Right personalities of having staged the attack himself for his own political ends.

to the French people, which was made to swallow them. Not only did he cultivate insider-trading, where his illness and many other things were concerned — everyone in power does that - but he cultivated the opposite: blackmail by threat of revelation, a coded revelation so to speak, more or less orchestrated in secret by himself (his extreme-Rightist past, Bousquet, the Elysee scandals, his second sex life, his clandestine daughter, his retrospective cancer), which he used as a grim form of advertising.

He delighted in having the public swallow the fraud and cunning of what has been the greatest case of embezzlement in recent history: the embezzlement of the socialist heritage for ends which were impenetrable, though they were certainly not social (nor perhaps historic: the appetite for glory or historical concupiscence were not uppermost with him, as they were with De Gaulle, but rather sarcasm, the Commendatore's rigid manipulation, the obscure, dominating irony of the person in the *'place du morf,* which the stiff mask of a face and uncertain, pale smile already expressed to perfection). But, above all, the intercepting of opinion,[28] the political de-vitalization of a society into which he can be said to have instilled, for years, the imagining of his own death.

And to have thrown down a kind of challenge to servility in doing this — a challenge to the servility of the masses (though, once again, this is part of ordinary governance) and the servility of those around him, for whom, one fondly imagines, he felt a 'lordly' contempt. At least you want this to be the case, since he had so many contemptible people around him! To the point where, in repaying his contempt, one is merely doing him homage and remaining faithful to his memory. For the power of contempt alone drove him. And that, paradoxically, deserves respect.

28. *'La captation de {'opinion . Captation* has overtones both of telephone tapping and the improper solicitation of a legacy.

In the end, history will have proved him right, since the people - the dear old people - flattered, deceived and made to look retrospectively ridiculous by all that has been hidden from them (worse: by all that was revealed to them too late, always too late, and then impudently hushed up and whitewashed afterwards) will have compliantly wept collectively over his death (we shall not even speak of the sadness of the courtiers and the *pentiti).*

This might even be said to be the most demoralizing thing in the whole story. For in the end Mitterand himself has no case to answer. All he can be accused of is the servility of other people, the extraordinary indulgence, complicity and wilful lack of lucidity he promoted and the fruits of which he enjoyed throughout his reign: this collective failure of the political reflex, this growing impotence in the face of the enormous insider-deal government had become. We may, for the time being, mourn Mitterand (since, in any event, he has organized the mourning himself - perhaps he even ordered his *cliche mortuaire* and its distribution, this is all part of the same logic), but what we are going to have to mourn forever, given this gloomy consensus around his death, including around the virtual corpse he had been for fifteen years, is any prospect of democracy, any chance of any sort of understanding and openness in public affairs. The point is proven: nothing can ever change. He brought that home to us; that was his victory, and I am sure he will have delighted in that bitter truth even from beyond the grave.

It must be said that he sacrificed himself— even in death - to the hypostasis of his own person. The ambition and arrogance of 'great men' and the automatic servility of the masses are, in our media system, mere extensions of each other. Unless voluntary servitude, far from being a capitulation, is actually a double-edged sword and the people, which gets cannibalized, also cannibalizes the politicians. It is cannibalizing Mitterand - through all the posthumous revelations and the great popular show they make - with a necrophagous zeal equal to the therapeutic zeal he can be

seen to have deployed to defer his own death. And that death, deferred over at least ten years, remains a mystery. Where did he get the energy from? It could only have been from the power of secrecy, and, more importantly, from the force which comes from the exercise of power, by a process of absorbing the energy of all those around him — feeding on that and regenerating from it, and leaving his entourage limp and subservient. The system is a simple one: take all the positive energies from the others; dump all the negative energy on them.

Adduction of positive flows, abduction of negative flows. Mitterand practised this strategy not just on the political class, but on the whole of French society. On the political society: liquidating the Communist Party, anaesthetizing the Right, vampirizing and parasiting a Socialist Party which he kept alive on a drip, though it was already in an advanced vegetative state (the political class's loss of its ability to reason - its going to pieces - was most clearly revealed in the suicide of Pierre Beregovoy) and promoting a phoney Europe which he will hand on like a hot potato to all who follow him (second negative event of the reign: the referendum on Europe). On French society: it was by concealing his cancer that he managed to govern, but it was by projecting that cancer on to French society that he managed to survive for so long. Only by passing his secondary infections on to us during his reign and sucking the lifeblood one by one from those forces which could oppose that reign was he able to hold on for such a time. We were governed by a man solely preoccupied with his own death and dripping it in homeopathic doses into all the systems and tissues of political life - heading off any other way of imagining governance. For if, contrary to what is said of it, imagination has never dreamed of taking power, power has always dreamed of devouring the imagination - and has generally ended up devouring its own image.

This is why we should thank Mitterand for this personal obsession, since, by force of negativity, he can be said to have given us a remarkable political lesson. He

has taught us that one could govern - that one could govern only — by virtue of an internal weakness, an anticipated death - but in secrecy and to the people's disgrace. For the people has indeed been disgraced, disgraced the way the last of the courtiers were. And this is very much the worst of it all. The people of France - to whom he passed on corruption on the sly, like a dirty picture slipped to them under the counter - were clearly made aware that they did not count for much.

This is the art of government today: government by negative means, by deterrence, by convincing people of their powerlessness. So it is still for them - for the betrayed, the insulted, those on the scrap heap, those who have been given the run-around - to take the shame of it all, and, indeed, to accept and absolve this state of affairs as something criminal but inevitable.

This is the abominable political lesson he can be said to have taught us. But, if his was merely the dead man's hand, who was steering the ship of state? Who but death itself?

5 February 1996

The Mirror of Corruption

A bill to reform the law on the misuse of public funds, amounting virtually to a veiled amnesty, almost made it to Parliament recently. And, make no mistake about it, it will come before it one day in some form or another. The Pelat affair has already been shelved.[29] What is euphemistically called the misuse of public funds often relates to the apportionment of funds and property that are almost as illicit as drugs money. You cannot, in fact, see where the chain of corruption begins and ends. Tapie embezzling money to fix football matches can be called corrupt, but isn't the Credit Lyonnais, which so generously kept Tapie's coffers topped up, just as corrupt? (and indeed Tapie wasn't slow to criticize it in an effort to excuse his own actions). And doesn't all the money squandered in risky

29. Mr Patrice Pelat was said to have benefited from building work which was invoiced as part of projects relating to a hospital in Le Mans and a school at Courbevoie, but actually carried out on his property in Sologne. This was, allegedly, part of an arrangement to pay Mr Pelat back for obtaining a contract in North Korea. Mr Pelat was a friend of the French president Francois Mitterand and was in fact the man alleged by *Le Canard enchaine* to have supplied Pierre Beregovoy with the interest-free loan of 1 million francs in 1986. See note 11, p. 71

ventures by the same Credit Lyonnais, like many other banks and financial institutions, amount to embezzlement and misuse of public funds? No one speaks out against this scandal, on the grounds that it is not a matter for the law. But we know that there is much more 'legal' fraud than illegal. This throws the anti-corruption operation into perspective, and in a sense renders it ridiculous - that operation which, in its way, provides a cover for (and a diversion from) the real corruption.

Getting to the roots of corruption would be an endless business. No one could plumb its depths. Without any doubt, it is consubstantial with social functioning. But at least the 'war on corruption' evokes its spectre and presents us with it as spectacle. Now, the spectacle of corruption is a vital function in a democracy: it provides entertainment and has an educative, cathartic function. It does not produce any deep-seated bitterness; otherwise revolt would be permanently festering. In the end, corruption does not arouse any collective indignation (though, this, naturally is filtered by the media). And, though it is positively an outrage, the amnesty bill which is in the offing (echoing the amnesty French members of parliament have generously granted themselves) - an amnesty which amounts virtually to an invitation to corruption - has not brought the outcry one would have expected from a body of democratic public opinion.

This is because, at bottom, no one believes in democracy Everyone dimly realizes that any system functions in denial of its own principles, transgressing its own rules. And this resignation over principles feeds an abashed consensus on the hidden, immoral rules by which our society operates. Corruption in democracy is simply the new form assumed by privilege — the rule in earlier societies — which has merely become illegal, thus adding further to its charm.

Corruption itself is, in this way, a vital function: a secret mechanism of a whole society, a source of political energy, a public service.

Everything in the ARC story is scandalous and repulsive, but is it not also scandalous that millions of people are prepared to give when asked to do so in any way by charities or the media?[30] How can we demand that officers of charities make rational and honest use of funds gathered so easily, and given so trustingly to such a shady charity? It would be amazing if they did so. Moreover, the skulduggery does not prevent the mystified victims from continuing to give with the same naivety. Isn't there an element of responsibility in this servility, whether spontaneous or orchestrated? What people ultimately want is to be given a chance to give, as they have elsewhere been given the chance to vote or, on any of the confessional TV programmes, the chance to speak. So those who satisfy this desire, taking their cut from it as they do, are performing a genuine public service. At any rate, the money misappropriated in the process, being deflected first from its useful (private) purposes, then from its useful (public) purposes by the cancer crooks, still meets the same fate: it is squandered. In this respect it is similar to the money sacrificed in gambling and in playing the lottery.

The State has not been alone in exploiting this formula in all the various forms of gambling. Are the improbable sums wasted on gambling for pointless (and hence immoral) purposes so different from the sums misappropriated by banks or companies to pay to politicians or embezzled by the bureaucrats of cancer research for purposes of lavish entertainment and advertising? The citizen is not punished for this 'misuse of private funds', for this immoral use of his own money. It might be said that the State encourages lotteries for the profit it makes from them. But you

30. Jacques Crozemarie, former president of ARC (Association de Recherche contre le Cancer), was found guilty of embezzling the charity's funds and sentenced to four years in prison by the Paris Court of Appeal. He was also fined 2.5 million francs and required to pay 200 million francs in damages to ARC.

could also say that the colossal reverses suffered by banking concerns through fraudulent properly dealings have created thousands of jobs along the way: and is this not the number one priority?

In fact, interest and utility are never the key to the story. It has never been the primordial function of a society to put money and resources to moral ends, even if it is the alleged ideal of all our democracies. Money remains at all times and in all places the accursed share, the immoral share, the evil portion. And the primordial function remains that of managing that accursed share, of voiding and laundering money through gambling, waste, misappropriation and corruption; destroying money by its immoral use; destroying evil with evil. This is the strategy of evil, the politics of evil which preserves the symbolic equilibrium of a society. Evil be to him who evil thinks. No more than it is conceivable to rebalance debt (on the lines of the same ideal vision of credit and the proper use of money) is it conceivable that there will be an 'economically correct' social distribution of misspent money. That money, like debt, cannot be redeemed or transferred to a 'social satisfaction' of needs, for - and this is true of the most archaic or the most modern societies - every social bond is fundamentally threatened by money. The only solution, then, is to 'launder' it and, to that end, to misspend it, or at all costs to put it into circulation, as quickly as possible — to put the accursed share into orbit. Which is done, in their own tiny way, by individuals and, on a much larger scale, by all the syndicates of fraudsters.

Apart from being impractical, as experience has shown, the rational redistribution of resources is a dangerous ideology. It confuses means and ends. It believes that money is a means and can be redeemed by useful ends. A touching illusion. Money is a medium, not a means, and it has all the power of a medium which develops according to its own ends. 'Enlightened' minds think money, like man for Rousseau, would be naturally good if it were not misdirected toward evil. But the

opposite is true: money is, by its very principle, of the order of evil; it is its destiny to work for evil and for it to move towards good it has to be subtly re-routed. Things here are as they are with human beings, whose fundamental passion, according to Freud, is and remains hatred. It is hatred which binds human beings together much more strongly than love. And it changes into love only by travelling down exceptional pathways, which remain forever fragile. This error on the part of people 'of good will' is fatal in the political management of societies, since it merely perpetuates evil by misunderstanding its guiding principle and the perverse economy on which our society is based.

If we follow the paths of this politics of evil, the ironic paths of corruption, we arrive at a reassuring conclusion: the fact is that corruption is the 'bad' which preserves us from the worst. Take the scandal which has been most in the headlines: the embezzlement of public or private funds for financing election campaigns or political parties. What finer end-goal for money than to be squandered in that supremely useless operation, that laughable venture, an election? These funds have at least genuinely vanished into thin air. It is merely corrupt money re-used for corrupt ends and at bottom that does little harm to the community. When you think what would have come of a healthy, enlightened management of these funds, all the projects for the public good which would have been visited upon us, all the gyratory road schemes, the thousands of useless offices — that whole superstructure, that urban, cultural blight, on which towns and even the smallest villages nowadays pride themselves! Not counting the further sophistication of administration, policing and security, the additional helping of culture and control - and all this for our greater good! At least in the clandestine squandering of the cash, we are spared all these dubious blessings.

Ceronetti: 'One silly idea currently doing the rounds: what good things we could do with all the money that's spent! In fact, stupid and criminal as we are, we

would certainly do worse things. The most expensive weapons are ones that are unusable as such: their utility lies precisely in the quantity of wealth sunk into them, which would otherwise unleash itself in other fields for the ruination of the earth and the degradation of its peoples. If, instead of millions of private cars, we built battle tanks, they would all end up in underground depots and our cities would be able to breathe.'

So, we shouldn't keep going on about corruption and embezzlement of all kinds (in any case, the recrimination is part of the crime). We should lucidly take the view that, from a rational point of view and a reasonable human perspective, there are no longer sufficient needs or useful ends to cope with such a mass of money and resources. Were it not for efficient, organized embezzlement, there is a danger we would be confronted with an excess of means and a shortage of ends — a grave and demoralizing situation which we must stave off with bankruptcies, waste, misuse of public funds, etc.

The only offender in all this, if we accept that the main function of money is to circulate and be spent, is the small saver. For whereas the big financial crooks merely contravene the moral law or legality, he contravenes the immoral law, the profound law of our society . . . Saving, the retention of monies, the unlawful imprisonment of private funds which could be put to public use, that is to say which could become liquid capital — that is where real corruption lies today. And it is only right that the law should come down on the small saver at the same time as it grants an amnesty to the large-scale fraudsters and gives the green light to their operations.

19 February 1996

Disneyworld Company

In the early 1980s, when the iron and steel industry of Lorraine went into irreversible decline, the authorities had the idea of cushioning the collapse by creating a European leisure park, an 'intelligent' theme park intended to re-inject some dynamism into the region. It was called SmurfJand.[31] The managing director of the defunct steelworks became, quite naturally, the managing director of the theme park and the unemployed steelworkers were re-employed as 'Smurfmen'. Sadly, when the park itself had for various reasons to close its doors, the ex-steelworkers found themselves unemployed once again. A grim destiny which made them, first, real victims of the world of work, then phantom victims of leisure, then, in the end, cast-offs from both spheres.

But Smurfland was merely a miniature. The Disney enterprise is on quite another scale. To get some idea of it, you have to know that Disney 'Unlimited', after taking over one of the biggest American TV channels, is currently buying up

31. Strictly speaking, it was called Schtroumpfland, but was largely known as Smurfland in the UK *(les Schtwumps* = the Smurfs).

42nd Street in New York, the 'red light district' of 42nd Street, to turn it into a kind of erotic amusement zone, without changing it in any — significant — way It is merely transforming a mecca of pornography, *in situ,* into a subsidiary of Disneyworld. Transforming the pornographers and the prostitutes, like the Smurfland steelworkers, into extras in their own world, all metamorphosed into something identical, into museum pieces, Disney characters. And do you know how General Schwarzkopf, architect of the US Gulf War strategy, celebrated his 'victory'? With a gigantic party at Disneyworld. Such revellings in the mecca of the imagination were surely a worthy conclusion to that virtual war.

But the Disney enterprise goes further than the imagination. The great precursor, the initiator of the virtual reality of the imagination, is currently taking over the whole of the real world to incorporate it into its synthetic world in the form of an immense 'reality show', in which it is reality itself which presents itself as spectacle, in which the real itself becomes a theme park. A reality transfusion, the way we speak of blood transfusions. Except, in this case, it is a transfusion of real blood into the bloodless universe of the virtual.

They are even rebuilding an exact replica of Disneyland Los Angeles at Disneyworld in Orlando. Like a kind of second-level attraction, a simulacrum raised to the second power. This is the same job as CNN did on the Gulf War - the prototype of the event which did not take place because it took place in real time, in the instantaneity of CNN. Today, Disney might well restage the Gulf War as a global attraction. Christmas at Eurodisney was celebrated with the Red Army choirs. Everything is possible, everything can be recycled in the polymorphous world of the virtual. Nothing is irredeemable. There is no real reason why Disney should not buy up the human genome, which is currently being sequenced, to turn it into a genetic attraction. Why not cryogenize the whole planet, exactly as Walt Disney had himself cryogenized in liquid nitrogen, with a view to some kind

of resurrection or other in the real world? But there no longer is a real world, and there won't be one — not even for Walt Disney: if he wakes up one day he'll get the shock of his life. In the meantime, from the depths of his liquid nitrogen he goes on annexing the world - both imaginary and real - subsuming it into the spectral universe of virtual reality in which we have all become extras. The difference is that, as we slip on our data suits or our sensors, or tap away at our keyboards, we are moving into living spectrality, whereas he, the brilliant precursor, has moved into the virtual reality of death.

The New World Order is a Disneyish order. But Disney is not alone in this kind of attractive cannibalism. We've seen Benetton draw on all the immediacy of the human drama in its advertising campaigns (AIDS, Bosnia, poverty, apartheid) by transfusing reality into the New Media Figuration at the point where misery and commiseration come to resonate together interactively. The virtual buys up the real 'as is' and serves it up just so: 'ready-to-go'.

If this operation can be successful on such a scale, without incurring anything but moral disapproval, and indeed arousing universal fascination, this is because reality itself, the world itself, with all its frenetic clone activity, has already transformed itself into an interactive performance, into a kind of Lunapark of ideologies, technologies, works, knowledge - and even of death and destruction. All just right for cloning and resuscitation in an infantile museum of the Imagination, in a virtual museum of Information.

Similarly, there's no point looking for computer viruses. We are all caught up in the viral interconnection of systems, and it is information itself which is the virus, not yet transmitted sexually, but much more effectively conducted along digital channels.

So Disney merely has to stoop down to pick up reality as it is. 'Built-in spectacle', as Guy Debord would say. But we are no longer in the society of the

spectacle, which has itself become a spectacular concept. It is no longer the contagion of spectacle which alters reality, it is the contagion of the virtual which obliterates the spectacle. With its diverting, distancing effects, Disneyland still represented spectacle and folklore, but with Disneyworld and its tentacular extension, we are dealing with a generalized metastasis, with a cloning of the world and of our mental universe, not in the imaginary register, but in the viral and the virtual. We are becoming not alienated, passive spectators, but interactive extras, the meek, freeze-dried extras in this immense reality show. This is no longer the spectacular logic of alienation, but a spectral logic of disembodiment; not a fantastic logic of diversion, but a corpuscular logic of transfusion, transubstantiation of each of our cells. An undertaking of radical deterrence of the world, then, but from the inside this time, not from outside, as we saw in what is now the almost nostalgic world of capitalist reality. In virtual reality the extra is no longer either an actor or a spectator; he is off-stage, he is a transparent operator.

And Disney wins on yet another level. Not content with obliterating the real by turning it into a 3-D, but depthless, virtual image, it obliterates time by synchronizing all periods, all cultures in the same tracking shot, by setting them alongside each other in the same scenario. In this way, it inaugurates real time — time as a single point, one-dimensional time, a thing which is also without depth: neither present, past nor future, but the immediate synchrony of all places and all times in the same timeless virtuality. The lapsing or collapsing of time: this is the real fourth dimension. The dimension of the virtual, of real time, the dimension which, far from superadding itself to the three dimensions of real space, obliterates them all. So it has been suggested that in a century or a millennium, the old 'swords and sandals' epics will be seen as actual Roman films, dating from the Roman period, as true documentaries on Antiquity; that the Paul Getty Museum at Malibu, a pastiche of a villa from Pompeii, will be confused anachronistically with a villa from the third

century B.C. (as will the works inside: Rembrandt and Fra Angelico will all be jumbled together in the same flattening of time); and that the commemoration of the French Revolution at Los Angeles in 1989 will be confused retrospectively with the real event. Disney achieves the *de facto* realization of this timeless Utopia by producing all events, past or future, on simultaneous screens, remorselessly mixing all the sequences as they would — or will — appear to a civilization other than our own. But this is already *our* civilization. It is already increasingly difficult for us to imagine the real, to imagine History, the depth of time, three-dimensional space - just as difficult as it once was, starting out from the real world, to imagine the virtual one or the fourth dimension.

4 March 1996

The Global and the Universal

Globalization and universality do not go together. Indeed, they might be said to be mutually exclusive. Globalization is the globalization of technologies, the market, tourism and information. Universality is the universality of values, human rights, freedoms, culture and democracy. Globalization seems irreversible; the universal might be said, by contrast, to be disappearing. At least as constituted as a system of values at the level of Western modernity, which is something that has no equivalent in any other culture. Even a living, contemporary culture like the Japanese has no term for it. No word to refer to a system of values which regards itself as attuned to all cultures and their difference but which, paradoxically, does not conceive itself as relative, and aspires, in all ingenuousness, to be the ideal transcendence *[depassetnent]* of all the others. We do not imagine for a moment that the universal might merely be the particular style of thinking of the West, its specific product - an original one, admittedly, but in the end no more exportable than any home-grown product. And yet, this is how the Japanese see it, as a specific, Western feature; and, far from signing up to an abstract concept, they, by a strange twist, relativize our universal and incorporate it into their singularity.

Every culture worthy of the name comes to grief in the universal. Every culture which universalizes itself loses its singularity and dies away. This is how it is with those we have destroyed by their enforced assimilation, but it is also how it is with ours in its pretension to universality. The difference is that the others died of their singularity, which is a fine death; whereas we are dying from the loss of all singularity, from the extermination of all our values, which is an ignoble death. We believe the fate of every value is to be elevated to universality, without gauging the mortal danger that promotion represents: far rather than an elevation, that process represents a reduction or, alternatively, an elevation to the degree zero of value. In Enlightenment times, universalization occurred at the top, by an upward progression. Today, it happens at the bottom, by a neutralization of values due to their proliferation and indefinite extension. This is how it is with human rights, democracy, etc. Their expansion corresponds to their weakest definition, their maximum entropy. Degree Xerox of value. In fact, the universal perishes in globalization. Once it is turned into a reality, the dynamic of the universal as transcendence, as ideal goal, as Utopia, ceases to exist as such. The globalization of trade puts an end to the universality of values. It is the triumph of *la pensee unique* over universal thought.[32]

What first becomes globalized is the market, the promiscuity of all exchanges and products, the perpetual flow of money. In cultural terms, it is the promiscuity of all signs and values or, in other words, pornography. For the worldwide broadcasting

32. *'La pensee unique'* has in recent years become one of the watchwords of French political discussion. It implies a single-track thinking of the kind once referred to in Britain by the acronym TINA ('There is no alternative'). The editor *of Le Monde diplomatique* has defined it as 'the translation into ideological terms ... of the interests of a set of economic forces, in particular those of international capital' (Ignacio Ramonet, 'La pensee unique', *Le Monde diplomatique,* no. 490, January 1995).

and parading of anything and everything over the networks is pornography. No need for sexual obscenity; this interactive copulation suffices. At the end of this process there is no longer any difference between the global and the universal. The universal itself is globalized: democracy and human rights circulate like any other global product - like oil or capital.

Given all this, we may ask ourselves whether the universal has not already succumbed to its own critical mass, and if it has ever had anything but lip-service paid to it, or been honoured anywhere but in official moralities. At any rate, for us the mirror of the universal is shattered (we can, in fact, see in this something like the mirror-stage of humanity). But perhaps this is fortunate, for, in the fragments of this broken mirror, all the singularities re-emerge. The ones we thought threatened survive, the ones we thought had disappeared revive. The case of Japan is, once again, quite remarkable in this connection. Japan has achieved its (technical, economic and financial) globalization better than any other country, but has done so *without passing through the universal* (the succession of bourgeois ideologies and forms of political economy) and without losing anything of its singularity, despite what is said. We may even suppose that it was as a result of not being encumbered by the universal that it has had such global, technical success, directly combining the singular (the power of ritual) with the global (virtual power).

The increasingly intense resistances to globalization — social and political resistances, which may seem like an archaic rejection of modernity at all costs - have to be seen as harbouring an original defiant reaction to the sway of the universal. Something which goes beyond the economic and the political. A kind of painful revisionism in respect of the established positions of modernity, in respect of the idea of progress and history - a kind of rejection not only of the famous global technostructure, but of the mental structure of the identification of all cultures and all continents in the concept of the universal. This resurgence — or even insurrection — of singularity may assume

violent, anomalous, irrational aspects from the viewpoint of 'enlightened' thought - it may take ethnic, religious or linguistic forms, but also, at the individual level, may find expression in character disorders or neuroses. But it would be a basic error (the very error one sees emerging in the moral orchestration of the politically correct discourse common to all the powers-that-be and to many 'intellectuals') to condemn all these upsurges out of hand as populist, archaic or even terroristic. Everything which constitutes an event today is done against the universal, against that abstract universality (and this includes the frantic antagonism of Islam to Western values: it is because it is the most vehement protest against this Western globalization that Islam today is public enemy number one). If we will not understand this, then we will be caught up in an endless and pointless wrangle between a universal thought assured of its power and good conscience and an ever greater number of implacable singularities. Even in our societies which are acculturated to the universal, one can see that none of what has been sacrificed to this concept has really disappeared. It has simply gone underground. And what is now running backwards is a whole self-styled progressive history, a whole evolutionism crystallized on its end-point — an end-point which has, in fact, been lost sight of in the meantime. That Utopia has fallen apart today and its deep-level dislocation is advancing even more quickly than its consolidation by force.

We have before us a complex three-term arrangement: there is the globalization of exchanges, the universality of values and the singularity of forms (languages, cultures, individuals and characters, but also chance, accident, etc. - all that the universal, in keeping with its law, impugns as an exception or anomaly). Now, as universal values lose some of their authority and legitimacy, the situation changes and becomes more radical. So long as they could assert themselves as mediating values, they were (more or less well) able to integrate the singularities as differences, in a universal culture of difference. However, as triumphant globalization sweeps away all differences and all values, ushering in a perfectly in-different (un)culture,

they can no longer do this. And once the universal has disappeared, all that remains is the all-powerful global technostructure standing over against the singularities which have reverted to the wild state and been thrown back on their own devices.

The universal has had its historical chance. But today, confronted with a new world order to which there is no alternative, with an irrevocable globalization on the one hand and the wayward drift or tooth-and-nail revolt of singularities on the other, the concepts of liberty, democracy and human rights cut a very pale figure indeed, being merely the phantoms of a vanished universal. And it is hard to imagine the universal rising from its ashes or to believe that things can be sorted out by the mere play of politics - this latter being caught up in the same deregulation and having barely any more substance to it than intellectual or moral power.

Matters are not, however, finally settled, even if it is now all up with universal values. In the void left by the universal, the stakes have risen, and globalization isn't certain to be the winner. In the face of its homogenizing, solvent power, we can see heterogeneous forces springing up all over, forces which are not only different, but antagonistic and irreducible.

18 March 1996

Deep Blue or the Computer's Melancholia

The clash between a human being and an 'intelligent' artefact (Kasparov against Deep Blue) is highly symbolic, not only on account of the prestige of the game of chess, but because it sums up the dilemma of human beings where all our contemporary machines are concerned: computers, virtual or cybernetic devices, networks, etc. Behind the instrumental, creative or interactive use we make of such machines, there is, at bottom, always a clash, a challenge, a match, a duel, in which one of the parties may be checkmated or lose face. There is no interactivity with machines (any more, in fact, than there is with human beings: that is the illusion of communication). The interface does not exist. There is always, behind the apparent innocence of the technology, an issue of rivalry and control. The game of chess merely carries this situation to extremes.

So, in the end, Kasparov beat the computer, and everyone was greatly relieved, since in a way the honour of the species was at stake. Even if human intelligence will one day have to admit defeat, that moment must be postponed for as long as possible. And this is what makes this victory somewhat ambiguous, for even if it was not rigged (and it certainly wasn't), Kasparov could not - at all costs - not win. Man dreams with

all his might of inventing a machine which is superior to himself, while at the same time he cannot conceive of not remaining master of his creations. He can no more do this than God could. Could God have envisaged creating man superior to himself and confronting him in a decisive combat (with Deep Blue, Kasparov was more or less pitting himself against a technical divinity, a technical superego divine in essence)? Yet that is what we do with our cybernetic creations, and we offer them a chance to beat us. Or, rather, it is our dream that they should surpass us - and do this, of course, as a mark of our power, though we cannot bear this either. So, man is trapped in the Utopian aspiration of having a double superior to himself, but one he nonetheless has to beat to save face. God himself, defeated by his own creature, would have committed suicide. Moreover, on the only occasion on which human beings really stood up to him, in the Tower of Babel episode, he immediately cut their supply lines, in the form of language and mutual understanding. If computers were in danger of gaining the upper hand, should we not spread the same confusion among artificial languages as God did among natural ones? But we know that the diversity of language eventually became man's privilege and his absolute weapon. It is, in a way, thanks to that diversity that human beings got the better of God by inventing multiple worlds and divinities, each in the image of their respective languages.

But, to come back to Kasparov, if he won, it was surely because he is (metaphorically) capable of speaking more than one language: that of the emotions, of intuition, of the stratagem, in a word, the language of play - not to mention the language of calculation. Whereas Deep Blue speaks only the language of calculation. The day this latter language prevails, in whatever form, Kasparov will be beaten. The day man himself speaks only that single language - the language of computers - he will be beaten.

In terms of play, man is neither inferior nor superior to God: he has managed to keep up a kind of rivalry and open game. This is what we can best hope for.

Balthazar Gracian said that God's strategy is to keep man eternally in suspense. But the proposition is reversible and we too keep Him in suspense. It is the same in the confrontation between natural and artificial intelligence: the rivalry is ultimately irresolvable, and the best thing is for the match to be eternally postponed.

The possible victory of the computer poses no problem: we know it can be due only to calculating power. The interesting question is: what makes Kasparov win? The first answer is given by Kasparov himself when he says, 'I play without thinking. My hands move faster than my thinking.' Clearly, Deep Blue has no hands to move faster than its thinking. It can only think fast. Now, it is a feature of human beings that they move faster than their thinking, thanks to something relating to their bodies, their sex, and which, in a way, does not even pass through the black box of the brain. You can call it affect, intuition, strategy. You can call it 'psychology'. But it isn't so much a question of any 'psychical' faculties which man might possess in addition to his mental faculties of calculation. The basic difference is that, for Kasparov, there is an opponent, another party. For Deep Blue, there is nothing out there - no other, no opponent. It moves within the confines of its own programme. The same applies here, relatively speaking, as with 'Desert Storm': for the Gulf War computers, there were no others, no Iraqis, no enemies (not even any Americans, in the end); the whole thing was played out in a closed circuit on the basis of calculation.

Now, it is precisely at this point, beyond the mental power of calculation, that the human being can expect to be definitively superior — in that relationship of otherness which is based on relinquishment of his own thought. This relinquishment, which Deep Blue will never know, is the subtle assumption of game-playing. It is here that the human being can impose himself through illusion, decoy, challenge, seduction and sacrifice. It is this strategy of not going the full hog, of playing within one's capabilities, that the computer understands least well, since it is

condemned to play at the height of its capabilities. This syncopation or ellipsis of presence by which you provoke the emergence of the other - even in the form of the virtual ego of the computer - is real game-player's thinking. Kasparov himself has spoken (to ask that it be taken account of in the time on the clocks) of this 'dead time of the real during which he really thinks'. That is to say, during which he is mentally absent, while the other party, Deep Blue, is sunk in calculation. The human being takes this distraction of thought, this 'dead time', from his available time, whereas the computer does not divert a single second from its own calculating time. But, paradoxically, it is this which turns round against it. Kasparov insists on the fact that after his first defeat (but doubtless you have always to know to lose the first game), he played against his own nature, 'within himself, to entrap his adversary (this is just like *Tire Diary of a Seducer).* He learns to play weak moves, to simplify or close up the game. Clearly, with a simulacrum, you have to play against nature, to simulate better than it does and catch it out, catch it out by simulation which, for it, is merely the simulation of calculation, whereas for human beings it is an ironic power.

When up against the machine they have themselves programmed (let us not forget that it was men like Kasparov who programmed Deep Blue), human beings can only subtly de-programme themselves, become 'technically incorrect' to stay ahead of the game. They may even have to take over the machine's own place. Like the illusionist who had invented an automaton which imitated human being so well that, on stage, he was himself forced to become mechanical and mimic the automaton to maintain the distinction. This is the only possible strategy: if you become technically correct, you are unfailingly beaten by the machine.

There is another factor favouring human supremacy here: this is the basic symbolic rule which states that no player can be bigger than the game itself. The player must not be unbeatable, or the game may die. The player is mortal; the rules

alone are immortal. Now the absolute aim of the machine (its secret ambition perhaps?) is to be perfect, unbeatable and immortal. Which shows it has understood nothing of the very essence of game-playing, and for that reason it will always be beaten in the end, if not by the opponent, at least by the game itself.

So there is little sense in predicting the certain victory of the machine in 2005, on the grounds that man has only cumulative knowledge, whereas the machine has exponential knowledge. For if the computer's knowledge is exponential, its thinking is not — which condemns it to a kind of exponential stability: at each move, it goes back to zero and goes through all the operations again. Whereas man, who filters the data, and actively considers only a few of what is actually an immense number of possibilities, is capable of extrapolating the data in a single direction, without regard for the initial state. He thus has truly exponential thought at his command, thought which is creative of unprecedented, unpredictable constellations - a kind of chaotic strategy which even a computer a thousand times more powerful than Deep Blue could not match up to. Against the computer, man personifies, as it were, the infinity of complexity, which is not the infinity of calculation, and which is perhaps closer to the infinity of chance (it would in fact be interesting to confront the computer with a game of chance or, in other words, a probabilistic disorder, which is different from human disorder. Where would it find a winning formula?)

The machine may, then, be unbeatable at all kinds of operations, but, where the essence of play is concerned, it is forever disadvantaged — forever out of the game. To have access to that essence, the machine would have had to have invented it, would have had to have been able to invent the very arbitrariness of the rules, which is unimaginable. And it is too late for this. More generally to be a match for man, the machine would have had to have invented him - and it is too late for that too. In a desperate effort to look like him, or compete with him, the only remain-

ing possibility is accident: an accident of calculation - and making a strategy out of that. Or suicide.

Man has invented machines which work, move and think better than him, or think for him. He has never invented any which could take pleasure or suffer in his stead. Nor even which can play better than he can. Which perhaps explains why computers get such deep blues.

1 April 1996

The Racing Driver and his Double

Formula One is a rather good example of the era of performance, in which the heights achieved are the work of man and machine simultaneously, each propelling the other to extremes without it being really clear which is the engine of this meteoric advance and which merely the other's double.

If man is haunted by the evil genius of technology, which pushes him to the limits - and even beyond his capabilities - then technology is haunted by man, who identifies with it and projects all his passions into it. The alliance between the two, the pact between them, can be brought about only through an excessive expenditure, a spectacular sacrifice. In Formula One, the two are reconciled by speed — the phantasm, the spectre, the ecstasy of speed — which has become an unstoppable, undeniable collective passion.

Viewed in machine terms, Formula One looks like a pyramid: a pyramidal synthesis of the efforts of thousands of people which culminate in a single car, a single man, a single brief, dazzling moment. The condensation is extreme, and the mirror of the race refracts all the energies deployed - energies all working towards one goal - into the performance of a single man, or rather into a two-sided confrontation, the

intensity and brevity of which have nothing to do with the accumulation of effort and the extent of the infrastructure. The collective fascination with the race certainly owes much to this transfiguration of all into one. But this pyramid, of which the driver is simply the tip, is projected in its turn through the media and television on to millions of people — a gigantic redirection, a spectacular superstructure (even leaving out of account the commercial and promotional aspects of the operation). High concentration, then high dilution. In this way Formula One encapsulates a whole — collective, technical and imaginary — cycle.

The driver, for his part, is alone. In his cockpit he no longer is anyone. He merges with his double, with the car, and so no longer has an identity of his own. He is a bit like Italo Calvino's *Non-existent Knight* in his armour. And he does not see the others, the other tournament knights. 'You don't have to like them or respect them,' said Alain Prost, 'when the green light comes on, they don't exist. I know I'm going to do battle with a Williams, a Lotus or a Ferrari.' The only time they see each other, when they really *feel* like adversaries, is on the start line, in pole position or just behind - the most dramatic moment, when often the race is decided on a single reflex in a perilous moment of dicing with a rival in close combat. After that, car and driver are merely a living projectile, whose purpose is to reach the goal. Keep your sights fixed on the podium. A Grand Prix is very much an obstacle race these days, with one's opponents among the obstacles, together with the rain, the state of the tyres and unpredictable accidents. A perpetual calculation. The projectile has to be constantly regulated, corrected. Only in appearance is the circuit the site of the competition. The competition takes place elsewhere — on the world car market, in the drivers' popularity charts, in advertising and the star system. The race takes place on a screen, the screen of speed. For, in these extreme reaches, speed is no longer exactly a spatial dimension but a screen on which the driver has to move with the dexterity of a teleconductor. 'As

the fans can imagine, the real pleasure of driving has, if we are honest about it, practically disappeared.' The erosion of one's own pleasure is the price to be paid for shifting up from movement to pure speed, from the body in movement to the screen of speed. There is no passion in this - except the passion for winning, of course, though that is not a personal, but an operational passion. It shows up in the driver's brain the way the technical data show on the dashboard. It is in-built in the technical object itself, which is made to win, and which incorporates the driver's will as one of the technical elements required for victory. This seems inhuman, but to be honest about it, it is the mental logic of the race.

Having said this, at 180 mph, there is calm. This is the equivalent of the eye of the storm, the stasis of speed, the trance-like state: you are no longer in the same world (more modestly, you can achieve this same sensation in a normal car at over 125 mph). The background becomes definitively televisual, the physical perception of the other cars fades; you are in the pure event of speed; the perception of space becomes a tactile, reflex perception (in McLuhan's sense: the car becomes a tactile, tactical extension of the human body). There is no longer any reference here to a real landscape, or to competition or prestige: you pass into virtual imagery. You approach real time, the instantaneity of motion - but also, of course, catastrophe.

And here might be said to lie the other passion — alongside the passion for winning - a passion both more spectacular and murkier. Connected, admittedly, with the dramatization of the danger by the media, but also, more profoundly, with the symbolic rule of the challenge and the duel: the passion for accidents and death. There was a time when not just the drivers, but the spectators too, risked their lives on the circuits. Those sacrificial days are gone. As the personal pleasure in driving is gradually disappearing from the circuits, so too is the personal risk of death. Death is no longer anything but a virtual imaginary element. Only the cars die, only the engines are driven to destruction. Only the technical 'double' dies, which

reinforces the abstract nature of the race. Admittedly, everyone dreams of it (which is not to say that they desire it), but the spectacle of death, shown 'live', is unacceptable today. However, the definitive elimination of accidents is unthinkable, as unthinkable as the absence of spectators. Even if the real spectators are only a tiny part of the virtual (television) audience, they are there. Even if the real risk is tiny in relation to the imaginary risk, it is there. And this dimension is absolutely vital. Without any random factor, without incident, expurgated of all its unpredictable elements, motor racing would lose all interest.

So the Formula One driver has a dual status: he is both an automatic terminal of the most refined technical machinery, a technical operator, and he is the symbolic operator of crowd passions and the risk of death. The paradox is the same for the motor companies, caught as they are between investment and potlatch. Is all this a calculated — and hence rational — investment (marketing and advertising)? Have we here a mighty commercial operation, or is the company spending inordinate sums, far beyond what is commercially viable, to assuage a passion for prestige and charisma (there is also a manufacturers' world championship)? In this confrontation between manufacturers, isn't there an excessive upping of the stakes, a dizzying passion, a delirium? This is certainly the aspect which appeals, in the first instance, to the millions of viewers. In the end, the average TV viewer has doubtless never been aware that McLaren is a flagship for Honda. And I am not sure he or she is tempted to play the Formula One driver in ordinary life. The impact of Formula One lies, then, in the exceptional and mythic character of the event of the race and the figure of the driver, and not in the technical or commercial spin-offs. It is not clear why speed would be both severely limited and morally condemned in the public domain and, at the same time, celebrated in Formula One as never before, unless there is an effect of sublime compensation going on here. Formula One certainly serves to popularize the cult of the car and its use, but it does much more to maintain the

passion for absolute difference — a fundamental illusion for all, and one which justifies all the excesses.

In the end, however, hasn't it gone about as far as it can? Isn't it close to a final state, a final perfection, in which all the cars and drivers, given the colossal resources deployed, would, in a repetitive scenario, achieve the same maximum performance and produce the same pattern in each race? If Formula One were merely a rational, industrial performance, a test-bed for technical possibilities, we should have to predict that it would simply burn itself out. On the other hand, if Formula One is a spectacle, a collective, passionate (though perfectly artificial) event, embracing the multiple screens of technological research, the living prosthesis of the driver, and the television screens into which the viewers project themselves, then it certainly has a very fine future.

In a word, Formula One is a monster. Such a concentration of technology, money, ambition and prestige is a monster (as is the world of *haute couture,* which is equally abstract, and as far removed from real clothing as Formula One is from road traffic). Now, monsters are doomed to disappear, and we are afraid they might be disappearing. But we are not keen, either, to see them survive in a domesticated, routinized form. In an era of daily insignificance — including the insignificance of the car and all its constraints — we want at least to save the passion of a pure event, and exceptional beings who are permitted to do absolutely anything.

March 1995

Ruminations for Spongiform Encephala

The mad cow epidemic is, first and foremost, a softening of human brains on an epidemic scale, with populations of human beings reeling in panic in a massive outbreak of bovine mimicry. What we have before us is a full-scale test of the quality of the human herd.

There is no danger of cattle passing on their spongiform disease to us. It is already all around us, a mental virus far more harmful than the biological one. If our news and information system is itself the area most seriously affected (whatever *it* says about that), there is good reason: it is because that system represents an ideally sensitive target-area for the whole epidemic. The communications networks are a huge viral system and instant transmission is, in itself, a lethal danger. In this perpetual critical-mass situation, the slightest spark is sufficient to prick the abscess of collective responsibility, just as the tiniest body projected into a diffuse solution brings about lightning-quick crystallization.

Our systems secrete such a charge of floating responsibility that this condenses from time to time as static electricity does in lightning. To the real threats we face, we must also add this vast store of responsibility, this radioactive cloud awaiting the

slightest chance to burst. The mad cow is a reincarnation of the sacred cow as rotting cow. Unlike the Indian example, where the sacred animal shares infectious diseases with human beings but does so in endemic mode, cattle doomed to the butcher's knife take their revenge by shifting from the endemic to the epidemic. Cows have never come to terms with being fed rotten sheep carcases and so turned into carnivores. In spite of their own tranquil obliviousness, they have never come to terms with being turned into butcher's meat for a single species, which remained entirely oblivious of the break thus created with the rest of the animal kingdom. Cows have never come to terms with being turned into simulacra, as, in keeping with this carnivorous ideal, has recently been the case. For everything about them is programmed now: by hormones, transplants, the genetic redistribution of parts of the body, by way of a plastic surgery aimed at maximum profitability of the animal as meat. The cow is not what it once was. It is an artefact, a kind of disembodied meat, which takes its suicidal revenge by infecting its predator. This is the vengeance cows have been ruminating.

It is because the body of the cow has become a non-body, a meat-machine, that the viruses lay hold of it. It is because our human bodies have become non-bodies - neuronal, operational machines — that they have lost their immunity and the viruses are laying hold of them. And it is also because computing has become purely a matter of media technology that it has become vulnerable to all the viruses of information. All viruses are in league: from the prion which infects the cow to the cow which infects man, and to man who infects the whole planet (to the point of infiltrating himself into his own genetic code to modify it). Perhaps there is a secret purpose in all this? Who can know what subterranean processes of revolt and vengeance exist among those beings we have doomed to imprisonment and butchery?

The biological virus in a sense 'knows' that it can avail itself of the technical virus of computing and the mental virus of brain-softening to spread itself and gain total

revenge. Studies had already shown cattle — and, indeed, all ruminants — to be the main destroyers of the ozone layer, with their sulphurous farting, their poisonous flatulence. So, the conspiracy has been going on for quite some time! There is no point imputing all this to anyone in particular: collective madness is a pyramidal synthesis of convergent effects, of phenomena in resonance.

From the protein to the cow's brain, from that brain to our information systems, from those systems and networks to the automatic mental decoder of opinion and on into the spongiform encephalon of the political class, the structure is the same, and therefore allows exponential development to occur. Let us run back along this chain from the other end: there is nothing now to protect politicians from the virus of opinion; but nothing protects that opinion from the virus of information; nothing protects our computerized information system from the tiniest little news story or from its own hysteria; and, for mysterious reasons, what protected the cow from the prion seems to have disappeared too. There is total immunodeficiency from one end of the chain to the other. And so it is that in an allegedly rational system, chaos can grow exponentially, producing massive effects of collective intoxication wholly out of proportion with the initial conditions.

AIDS, terrorism, the stock market crash, computer viruses, natural catastrophes: all these phenomena are correlated and conform to the same protocol of virulence. They are wholly consistent with each other, and with the banality of the system. For example, a single terrorist act forces us to review the whole political scene in the light of terrorism. The mere appearance of AIDS, even at a statistically low level, forces us to review the whole spectrum of disease and the body in the light of the viral, immunodeficiency hypothesis, etc. So, the appearance of mad cows is the equivalent of a terrorist act.

There is savage irony in the fact of cows providing the litmus test, so to speak, for the European political situation (when even the massacre in Bosnia had not

managed to disturb its incoherent, hypocritical state). So, British public opinion can only either turn on its government, as guilty of negligence, or on a Europe allegedly seeking to impose its law on the country. An immediate boost for all nationalisms: 'Spongiform or not, they're *our* cows!' When a situation is rotten and contradictory, the tiniest incident reveals all its rottenness and contradictoriness. Even the rottenness and contradictoriness of the liberal system. 'Everything must circulate freely' - well, so then must germs, viruses, drugs, capital and terrorists. And this circulation of the worst of things is much quicker than the circulation of the best. There will be no end, then, to the opening and re-closing of frontiers.

History itself argues in favour of the terrorist hypothesis where mad cow disease is concerned, the Turin European summit on spongiform encephalopathy following on from that at Sharm-el-Sheik on Islamic terrorism. Except that the wobbly solidarity of the Europeans around the eradication of this threat was even more pitiful and Ubuesque than the world parade of heads of State assembled to do battle with a phantom enemy The British mad cow and the Palestinian kamikaze bomber are all part of the same struggle, then: they share the same suicidal energy, the same unfathomable hatred. And even the prion is in on it. From what genetic abyss has that protein arisen? Where does the international terrorist plot originate? And what is the meaning of this sequence: the prion infecting the cow, the cow infecting the media, the media driving the masses to hysteria - all victims of each other and, at the same time, all colluding towards maximum catastrophic effect.

Seen from the angle of the serial deregulation of the system, the success is total. Who is harmed by any of this? The masses finally have a distraction from their dull lives and the powers-that-be have a way to distract attention from their wicked ones. However, through such events, the social order loses credibility by the day. Not being 'personally' responsible for anything (as in the contaminated blood

affair), the governing classes are all the more impotent in the face of the indiscernible consequences of the event. Admittedly, they can fight the symptoms - slaughter cows or eradicate terrorists - but they will have great problems breaking the chain of events which has led up to this point, the epidemic of circumstances and objective conditions which have themselves colluded in the catastrophe. The powers-that-be understand nothing of the 'perverse' processes of virality, in which even calming and prophylactic measures - the excess of prophylactic measures - merely increase the panic. And there is another 'perverse' variable - the media. Accused as scapecows, they protest that they are only doing their job. But it is precisely in doing their job (which was, we might remember, the excuse of the concentration camp officials) that they are most solidly in the viral loop.

Doubtless, the next world summit will be against earthquakes - with the same success. And there is no doubt, either, that this storm whipped up by the collusion between a cow and a protein will end in a beating of butterfly wings - that is to say, in no perceptible change to the order of things. But, in the meanwhile, it will have revealed the secret disorder, the colossal disorder of our systems, the threat of imminent failure by which they are constantly beset. This at least can be chalked up to the event, not to mention the useful finding that human livestock teeters on the brink of the same fate as mad cows, and that the brain-softening effect of news and information is every bit the equal of spongiform encephalopathy. And not counting, also, the secret delight there is in panic, even for those who are panicking, the (aesthetic) pleasure in the absurd disproportion of the event, and the pleasure generated by the impotence of a system grappling with its own viruses.

15 April 1996

Screened Out

Video, interactive screens, multimedia, the Internet, virtual reality — we are threatened on all sides by interactivity. What was separated in the past is now everywhere merged; distance is abolished in all things: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between stage and auditorium, between the protagonists of action, between subject and object, between the real and its double. And this confusion of terms, this collision of poles means that nowhere — in art, morality or politics - is there now any possibility of a moral judgement. With the abolition of distance — of the 'pathos of distance' - everything becomes undecidable. And this is true even in the physical realm: when the receiver and the source of a transmission are too close together, a feedback effect ensues which scrambles the transmission waves; when an event and the broadcasting of that event in real time are too close together, this renders the event undecidable and virtual, stripping it of its historical dimension and removing it from memory. Whether it is virtual technologies which create undecidability or our undecidable world which gives rise to these technologies is itself undecidable.

Wherever a mingling of this kind - a collision of poles - occurs, then the vital tension is discharged.

SCREENED OUT

Even in 'reality' TV, where, in the live telling of the story, the immediate televisual acting, we see the confusion of existence and its double. There is no separation any longer, no empty space, no absence: you enter the screen and the visual image unhindered. You enter your life as you would walk on to a screen. You slip on your own life like a data suit.

Unlike photography, cinema and painting, in which there is a scene and a gaze, the video image - and the computer screen - induce a kind of immersion, a sort of umbilical relation, of 'tactile' interaction, as McLuhan, in his day, said of television. A cellular, corpuscular immersion: you enter the fluid substance of the image — possibly to modify it — in the same way as science infiltrates itself into the genome, the genetic code, to transform the body itself by that means. You move as you like, you make of the interactive image what you will, but immersion is the price to pay for this infinite availability, this open combinatorial of elements. It is the same with the 'virtual' text — any virtual text (the Internet, word-processing). This is worked on like a computer-generated image — something which no longer bears any relation to the transcendence of the gaze or of writing. At any rate, as soon as you are in front of the screen, you no longer see the text as text, but as image. Now, it is in the strict separation of text and screen, of text and image, that writing is an activity in its own right — never an interaction.

Similarly, it is only with the strict separation of stage and auditorium that the spectator is a participant in his/her own right. Everything today conspires to abolish that separation: the spectator being brought into a user-friendly, interactive immersion. The apogee of the spectator or his/her end? When all are actors, there is no action any longer, no scene. The end of the aesthetic illusion.

Machines produce only machines. This is increasingly true as the virtual technologies develop. At a certain level of machination, of immersion in virtual machinery, there is no longer any man-machine distinction: the machine is on both

sides of the interface. Perhaps you are indeed merely the machine's space now - the human being having become the virtual reality of the machine, its mirror operator. This has to do with the very essence of the screen. There is no 'through' the screen the way there is a 'through' the looking-glass or mirror. The dimensions of time itself merge there in 'real time'. And, the characteristic of any virtual surface being first of all to be there, to be empty and thus capable of being filled with anything, it is left to you to enter in real time into interactivity with the void.

Similarly, everything which is produced by way of machines is a machine. The texts, images, films, speech and programmes which come out of computers are machine products, and they bear the features of such products: they are artificially padded-out, face-lifted by the machine; the films are stuffed with special effects, the texts full of *longueurs* and repetitions due to the machine's malicious will to function at all costs (that is *its* passion), and the operator's fascination with this limitless possibility of functioning. Hence the wearisome character in films of all this violence and pornographied sexuality, which are merely special effects of violence and sex, no longer even fantasized by humans, but pure machinic violence which no longer even affects us. And this explains all these texts which resemble the work of 'intelligent' virtual agents, whose only act is the act of programming, the rest unfolding on purely automatic lines. This has nothing to do with *ecriture automatique,* which played on the magical telescoping of words and concepts, whereas all we have here is the automatism of programming, an automatic run-through of all the possibilities. Roll on the machine design of the body, the text, the image. This is called cybernetics: controlling the image, the text, the body from within, as it were, from its matrix, by playing with its code or the genetic details. It is this phantasm of the ideal performance of the text or image, the possibility of correcting endlessly, which produce in the 'creative artist' this vertige of interactivity with his own object, alongside the anxious vertige at not having reached the technological limits

of his possibilities. In fact, it is the (virtual) machine which is speaking you, the machine which is thinking you.

And is there really any possibility of discovering something in cyberspace? The Internet merely simulates a free mental space, a space of freedom and discovery. In fact, it merely offers a multiple, but conventional, space, in which the operator interacts with known elements, pre-existent sites, established codes. Nothing exists beyond these search parameters. Every question has its anticipated response. You are the automatic questioner and, at the same time, the automatic answering device of the machine. Both coder and decoder — in fact your own terminal, your own correspondent. That is the ecstasy of communication. There is no 'Other' out there and no final destination. And so the system goes on, without end and without purpose. And its sole potential is for infinite reproduction and involution. Hence the comfortable vertige of this electronic, computer interaction - like the vertige induced by drugs. You can spend your whole life at this, without a break. Drugs themselves are only ever the perfect example of a crazed, closed-circuit interactivity.

To win you over to it, they tell you the computer is merely a handier, more complex kind of typewriter. But this is not true. The typewriter is an entirely external object. The page flutters in the open air, and so do I. I have a physical relation to writing. I touch the blank or written page with my eyes - something I cannot do with the screen. The computer is a true prosthesis. I am not merely in an interactive relation with it, but a tactile, intersensory relation. I become, myself, an ectoplasm of the screen. And this, no doubt, explains, in this incubation of the virtual image and brain, the technical faults which afflict computers, and which are like the failings of one's own body.

On the other hand, the fact that identity is the identity of the network and never that of individuals, the fact that priority is given to the network rather than to the network's protagonists implies the possibility of hiding, of disappearing into the

intangible space of the virtual, so that you are not detectable anywhere — even by yourself. This resolves all problems of identity, not to mention those of alterity. So, the attraction of all these virtual machines no doubt derives not so much from the thirst for information and knowledge as from the desire to disappear, and the possibility of dissolving oneself into a phantom conviviality. A kind of 'high', which takes the place of happiness, of obvious happiness, by the very fact that happiness no longer has any *raison d'etre* here.

Virtuality comes close to happiness only because it surreptitiously removes all reference to things. It gives you everything, but at the same time it subtly deprives you of every thing. The subject is realized to perfection, but when realized to perfection, the subject automatically becomes object, and panic sets in.

6 May 1996

The Art Conspiracy

Just as, amid all the pornography which surrounds us, we have lost the illusion of desire, so in contemporary art we have also lost the desire for illusion. In porn, there is no longer any room for desire. After the orgy and the liberation of all desires, we have moved into the transsexual, in the sense of a transparency of sex, into signs and images which obliterate the whole secret, the ambiguity of sex. Transsexual in the sense that sex now has nothing to do with the illusion of desire, but relates solely to the hyperreality of the image.

So it is with art, which has also lost the desire for illusion — preferring the elevation of everything to aesthetic banality - and has consequently become trans-aesthetic. For art, the orgy of modernity consisted in the exhilaration of deconstructing the object and representation. During that period, the aesthetic illusion was still very powerful, as is, for sex, the illusion of desire. The energy of sexual difference, which passes into all the figures of desire, has as its counterpart in art the energy of dissociation from reality (Cubism, abstraction, Expressionism), though each of these corresponds to a desire to pierce the secret of desire and the secret of the object. To the point where these two strong configurations, the scene of desire

and the scene of illusion, disappear, giving way to the same transsexual, transaesthetic obscenity — the obscenity of visibility and of the inexorable transparency of everything. In reality, there is no longer any pornography identifiable as such, because the essence of the pornographic has passed into all the technologies of the visual and televisual spheres.

But perhaps, deep down, we are merely playing out the comedy of art, as other societies have played out the comedy of ideology, as Italian society, for example (though it is not the only one), plays out the comedy of power, as we play out the comedy of porn in the obscene advertising of the images of the female body. This perpetual striptease, these phantasies *a sexe ouvert,* this sexual blackmail - if it were all true, it would be genuinely unbearable. But fortunately it is all too obvious to be true. Transparency is too good to be true. As for art, it is too superficial to be really useless. There must be an underlying mystery. As with anamorphosis, there must be an angle from which all this useless orgy of sex and signs makes complete sense but, for the moment, we can only adopt an attitude of ironic indifference towards it. In this unreality of porn, this insignificance of art, there is something of the order of an underlying enigma, an inherent mystery. An ironic form of our destiny perhaps? If everything becomes too obvious to be true, perhaps there is still a chance for illusion. What lurks behind this falsely transparent world? Another sort of intelligence or a definitive lobotomy?

(Modern) art was able to be part of the *part maudite,* the 'accursed share', by being a sort of dramatic alternative to reality, by expressing the irruption of unreality into reality. But what can art mean now in a world that is hyperrealist from the outset, a world that is cool, transparent, image-conscious? What can porn mean in a world that is pornographied from the outset? What can they do but tip us a last paradoxical wink - that of reality mocking itself in its most hyperrealistic form, that of sex mocking itself in its most exhibitionistic form, that of art mocking itself and

its own disappearance in its most artificial form: irony. The dictatorship of images is, in any event, an ironic dictatorship. But that irony itself is no longer part of the accursed share; it is, rather, party to insider-trading, to that hidden, shameful complicity which binds the artist, playing on his/her aura of derision, to the stupefied, incredulous masses. Irony, too, is a part of the art conspiracy.

Art playing on its own disappearance and the disappearance of its object was still an art of great works. But art playing at re-cycling itself indefinitely by helping itself to reality? Most contemporary art is engaged in just this: appropriating banality, the throwaway, mediocrity as value and as ideology. In these innumerable installations and performances, what is going on is merely a compromise with the state of things - and simultaneously with all the past forms of the history of art. An admission of unoriginality, banality and worthlessness, elevated into a perverse aesthetic value, if not indeed a perverse aesthetic pleasure. Admittedly, it is claimed that all this mediocrity is sublimated in the transition to the level of art, which is distanced and ironic. But it is just as worthless and insignificant at that level as before. Transition to the aesthetic level rescues nothing. In fact the opposite is true: it is mediocrity raised to the second power. It claims to be worthless: *'I'm worthless, I'm worthless!'* and it really is worthless!

We have here the whole duplicity of contemporary art: laying claim to worthlessness *[la nullite],* insignificance and non-meaning; aiming for worthlessness, when it is already worthless; aiming for non-meaning, when it already signifies nothing; claiming to achieve superficiality in superficial terms. Now, nullity is a secret quality which not everyone can aspire to. Insignificance - true insignificance, the victorious defiance of meaning, the stripping away of meaning, the art of the disappearance of meaning — is an exceptional quality possessed by a few rare works — works which never claim that quality.

There is an initiatory form of nullity, just as there is an initiatory form of the nothing, or an initiatory form of evil. And then there is insider-trading, the fakers

of nullity, the snobbery of nullity, of all those who prostitute the Nothing for value, who prostitute Evil for useful ends. We must not let these fakers get away with it. When the Nothing shows up in signs, when Nothingness emerges at the very heart of the system of signs, that is the fundamental event of art. It is the proper task of poetry to raise the Nothing to the power of the sign — not the banality or indifference of the real, but the radical illusion. In this way, Warhol truly is a 'zero', in the sense that he reintroduces nothingness into the heart of the image. He turns nullity and insignificance into an event which he transforms into a fatal strategy of the image.

The others merely have a commercial strategy of nullity, to which they give a promotional form, the sentimental form of the commodity, as Baudelaire put it. They hide behind their own nullity and the metastases of the discourse on art, which works generously to promote this nullity as a value (among other things, a value on the art market, of course). In a sense, this is worse than nothing, because it means nothing and yet it exists all the same, giving itself every reason to exist. With this paranoia colluding with art, there is no room for critical judgement any more, but merely for an amicable, and inescapably convivial, participation in nullity. This is the art conspiracy and its primal scene, carried forward by all the private shows, hangings, exhibitions, restorations, collections, donations and speculations. It is a conspiracy which cannot be 'unhatched' in any known universe, since, behind the mystification of images, it has put itself beyond the reach of thought.

The other side of this trickery is the way people are bluffed into according importance and credence to all this, on the grounds that it is not possible that it should be so worthless and empty and there must be something to it. Contemporary art plays on this uncertainty, on the impossibility of a reasoned aesthetic value-judgement, relying on the guilt of those who simply cannot understand, or have not understood that there is nothing to understand. Here again, this is insider-trading.

But we may also take the view that these people, whom art keeps at bay, have indeed fully understood, since, by their very stupefaction, they show an intuitive understanding that they are victims of an abuse of power; that they are not being let in on the rules of the game; that the wool is being pulled over their eyes. In other words, art has made its entry into the general process of insider-trading (and not merely from the financial point of view of the art market, but in the very management of aesthetic values). In this it is not alone: the same kind of collusion is to be found in politics, the economy and information, with the same ironic resignation on the part of the 'consumers'.

'Our admiration for painting is the consequence of a long process of adaptation which has gone on over centuries, and exists for reasons which very often have nothing to do either with art or the mind. Painting created its receptor. It is, at bottom, a relationship of convention' (Gombrowicz to Dubuffet). The only question is how such a machine can continue to function in a situation of critical disillusionment and commercial frenzy. And if it can, how long will this illusionism, this occultism last? A hundred years? Two hundred? Will art have a second, interminable existence, like the secret services, which, though we know they have long had no secrets to steal or exchange, still thrive amid a superstitious belief in their usefulness, and continue to generate a mythology?

20 May 1996

TV Fantasies

Television has been in the news a lot lately. It is supposed to exist to speak to us about the world. And, like any self-respecting medium, it is also supposed to put events first and its own concerns second. But for some time now, it seems either to have lost this respect for itself or to have come to regard *itself* as the event.

Even the 'Guignols' on Canal Plus have started to target the confused goings-on in the little world of TV and radio, including those on their own channel.[33] Not to mention all the movements of star presenters, channel heads and programme directors between the different companies, and the intrigue and corruption which one supposes is endemic in that jungle, but which has now been transferred to the screen and is served up to the audience as a TV show in its own right.

There seemed little chance the media would escape the compulsive syndrome of investigation, whitewashing, rehabilitation and repentance the political class and big business have been going through for some time now. All forms of power are

33. Canal Plus's satirical puppet show 'Les Guignols de l'Info' has been running since 29 August 1988.

currently afflicted with the depressive syndrome of power - the justification complex which besets all power once it grows to excess and no longer has any representative function. This is the case with political power, and today also with media power. If television has begun to revolve around its own concerns and to engage endlessly in examining its own convulsions, this is because it is no longer capable of finding a meaning outside itself, of getting beyond itself as a medium, and finding its purpose: to produce the world as information and give meaning to that information. Through using and abusing events with images - to the point of coming under suspicion of conjuring events up out of nothing - television has become virtually disconnected from the world and has begun to turn back in on its own universe like a meaningless signifier, desperately seeking an ethic to replace its failing credibility, a moral status to replace its lack of imagination (once again, the same applies with the political class).

It is at this point that it begins to become corrupt. It is challenged on all sides and incapable of responding to the basic question, which is at the same time the major charge levelled against it: how do things stand with images and their meaning, how do things stand with the very myth of information and television which is everywhere trumpeted shamelessly? Where is your responsibility in all this? The media world as a whole, incapable of replying to these questions, or doubtless even of asking them, prefers to pick at its own sores, to put its own conflicts, rivalries, profligacy and bad management on show. But this is merely a diversion. Excessive pay deals, settlings of old scores, the polemic between public service broadcasting and the private companies — all these things which make the headlines today are merely masking the fundamental fact that television has lost both any idea of what it is doing and the ability to imagine the real world. As a result, it is talking only to itself or to an unidentified audience whose role is merely to provide viewing figures — which amounts to the same thing. It is consequently losing its credibility

with the public, and losing all credit in its own eyes. In the light of the latest goings-on, it seems it no longer has any illusions about its own practices.

The vice here is circularity. The vice of the medium for the medium's sake, as in the past we had art for art's sake. It is the vice of all institutions which begin to operate autarkically, no longer showing any concern for their object or their function. Immense bachelor machines whose whole energy goes into fuelling and reproducing themselves. This is our dilemma, one that comes to us from the depths of simulation: what if the sign did not relate either to the object or to meaning, but to the promotion of the sign as sign? And what if information did not relate either to the event or the facts, but to the promotion of information itself as event? And more precisely today: what if television no longer related to anything except itself as message? This is where McLuhan's formulation can be seen to be absolutely brilliant: the medium has swallowed the message and it is this, the multi-medium, which is proliferating in all directions. And we are, indeed, seeing terrestrial and cable channels and services proliferating while actual programme content is disappearing and melting away — the TV viewer's almost involuntary channel-hopping here echoing television's own obsession with its own channels.

But this is not where the true corruption lies. The secret vice, already pointed out by Umberto Eco, lies in the way the media become self-referring and speak only among themselves. The *multimedium* is becoming the *intermedium.* This already problematic situation is aggravated when it is a single hypermedium — television — eyeing itself. All the more so as this tele-centrism is combined with a very severe implicit moral and political judgement: it implies that the masses basically neither need nor desire meaning or information — that all they ask tor is signs and images. Television provides them with these in great quantities, returning to the real world, with utter - though well- —nouflaged — contempt, in the form of'reality shows'

or vox-pops — that is to say, in the form of universal self-commentary and mocked-up scenarios, where both the questions and the answers are 'fixed'.

Of course, television is not alone in being confronted with this destiny - this vicious circle: the destiny of all those things which, no longer having an objective purpose, take themselves for their own ends. In so doing, they escape all responsibility, but also become bogged down in their own insoluble contradictions. This is, however, more particularly the critical situation of all the current media. Opinion polls themselves are a good example. They have had their moment of truth (as, indeed, did television), when they were the representative mirror of an opinion, in the days when such a thing still existed, before it became merely a conditioned reflex. But perpetual harassment by opinion polls has resulted in their being no longer a mirror at all; they have, rather, become a screen. A perverse exchange has been established between polls which no longer really ask questions and masses who no longer reply. Or rather they become cunning partners, like rats in laboratories or the viruses pursued in experiments. They toy with the polls at least as much as the polls toy with them. They play a double game. It is not, then, that the polls are bogus or deceitful, but rather that their very success and automatic operation have made them random. There is the same double game, the same perverse social relationship between an all-powerful, but wholly self-absorbed, television and the mass of TV viewers, who are vaguely scandalized by this misappropriation, not just of public money, but of the whole value system of news and information. You don't need to be politically aware to realize that, after the famous dustbins of history, we are now seeing the dustbins of information. Now, information may well be a myth, but this alternative myth, the modern substitute for all other values, has been rammed down our throats incessantly. And there is a glaring contrast between this universal myth and the actual state of affairs. The real catastrophe of television has been how deeply it has failed to live up to its promise of providing information -

its supposed modern function. We dreamed first of giving power - political power - to the imagination, but we dream less and less of this, if indeed at all. The fantasy then shifted on to the media and information. At times we dreamed (at least collectively, even if individually we continued to have no illusions) of finding some freedom there — an openness, a new public space. Such dreams were soon dashed: the media turned out to be much more conformist and servile than expected, at times more servile than the professional politicians. The latest displacement of the imagination has been on to the judiciary. Again this has been an illusion, since, apart from the pleasing whiff of scandal produced, this is also dependent on the media operation. We are going to end up looking for imagination in places further and further removed from power - from any form of power whatever (and definitely far removed from cultural power, which has become the most conventional and professional form there is). Among the excluded, the immigrants, the homeless. But that will really take a lot of imagination because they, who no longer even have an image, are themselves the by-products of a whole society's loss of imagination, of the loss of any social imagination. And this is indeed the point. We shall soon see it is no use trying to locate the imagination somewhere. Quite simply, because there no longer is any. The day this becomes patently obvious, the vague collective disappointment hanging over us today will become a massive sickening feeling.

3 June 1996

Of Course Chirac is Useless

As we know, compulsory revelling makes the year-end a severe ordeal. Even among those having a whale of a time, the spectre of abandonment looms. It is precisely here, in this staged euphoria, that the crucial question of the social bond arises. Is the human being a social being? Nothing could be less certain. And it seems much less certain when you hear the midnight howling, in every tongue, of the crowd on the Champs-Elysees. But is the human being in fact *a human being?* That is what everyone seems to be trying to prove to themselves with all these pathetic year-end initiatives (whatever will the end of the century be like?), forcing their excessive therapeutic attentions on the poor. The attention is therapeutic for the rich, of course, whom it rescues from depression, but there is also an excess of charitable zeal directed at the poor, which at times amounts to harassment, as, for example, when the homeless are driven into hostels against their wills, some of them preferring to live and die non-socially. Through this hypochondriacal emotion for these sick members and organs of a society which indulges all the while in the fantasy that it is the world's fourth largest power, we are keen to prove to ourselves that we are human. It would be nice if this pathos of automatic mourning of the Christmas

holiday period could be swept up by the current cold front and fall in stalactites of frozen tears on all the prophets of other people's misery.

We find the same icy preoccupation at Notre-Dame, where to the exclusion of the poor and the transparency of the cold is added the televisual transparency of the omnipresent screens. Like the new Year-2000 cribs, these screens are everywhere, in all the naves and aisles — the pulpit being occupied by the camera equipment. If the Word was made flesh, then solid flesh today has melted into the screen. Cardinal Lustiger[34] might simply be a hologram — he might not even be there - and the mass might be a kind of barely interactive CD-Rom; a reality as virtual as the Virgin's Immaculate Conception. Outside, with the queues at the doors of the cathedral, we have a prefiguration of Paradise. But this is not at all interactive: rather it is directive and the police are in control. The crowd is funnelled in through barriers and searched by the security forces. Paradise is over-full, the church is saturated - there's a waiting list (there's some danger it may be like this at the gates of the real Paradise). For those who will not get in, the sound is relayed live in the icy wind. 'Unto you a Saviour is born'. But the original is inaccessible. It's like the Lascaux caves. Lascaux and Bethlehem: one struggle! Perhaps the faithful carry the hymn in their hearts, the hymn to this original reality, this original descent of humanity which they carry to baptismal fonts, but the secret is closely guarded. For outside, terrorism is on the prowl and the police stand by. Only in the shadow of an anti-terrorist crackdown can the God-child be revived.

Watching the president's Christmas message produces this same necropolar, white-mass sensation. Seeing the video broadcast of the Christmas service in the cathedral itself, with these pathetic screens and the young worshippers slumped

34. Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris.

around them here and there, you tell yourself that God and religion deserved better. Deserved to die, yes, but not this. However, watching the presidential figure and his sonorous inanity, you tell yourself that here you got what you deserved. Chirac is useless — that goes without saying — but so are we all. The question doesn't even arise whether we're useless because he is, or the other way around. Uselessness of this kind has no origin: it exists immediately, reciprocally; like a shared secret, you savour it implicitly — with its warm bitterness - particularly in these cold snaps, as the very essence of the social bond. Sanctioned by that other interactive uselessness — the uselessness of the screen.

Chirac's uselessness cannot be verified. It could be perhaps, if it were a specific quality - or if he were equal to himself. But, unlike Mitterand, who took himself for Mitterand, Chirac doesn't even see himself as Chirac. He neither takes himself for himself nor for anyone else. He does something or he doesn't. And if the situation dictates, he does the opposite. Political will plays no part, for, the way the political sphere is today, it is not a place of will or representation. And how could Chirac start representing something when there no longer is, among the 'people', any profound will or demand to be represented? No point, for example, discussing the dissolution of the Assembly when it is the people itself that has been dissolved. Or when the people has dissolved itself and goes on dissolving in a perpetual night of the fourth of August, surrendering its privilege of being represented, cancelling itself in its own mass.[35]

Today, as a 'people', we are all worthless and useless, which means there are no representatives or represented any more, but merely 'extras'. We at the grass roots are statistical extras and the 'politicians' are TV extras.

35. On 4 August 1789 the French National Assembly met at 8 p.m. and made sweeping reforms, which were generally represented as putting an end to 'feudal' privilege.

SCREENED OUT

Up to this point, everything is fine. As Brecht said of the beer and the cigar, the fact that Chirac does not in himself exist is harmoniously counterbalanced by the fact that the people no longer is a people. It is simply the end of a fine story, or of history itself - a thing which occurs, to use Rivarol's uncompromising formula, between revolution and the spectacle of revolution. (Rivarol is harsher, arguing that doubtless the people 'had only ever wanted the spectacle of revolution' — but let us at least allow history its historical chance.) With that moment past and gone, we no longer have to deal with history or power exactly (and, even less, with seizing power), but with the fiction and spectacle of power which, for the entertainment of the people, has to feed on the same simulated events as real history (the undying — though transparent and nostalgic - image of which still haunts imaginations).

Only those events — strikes, speeches, elections, assassination attempts - which are caught up in their own spectacle exist today. Those involving real issues of representation do not.

Moreover, the characteristic real events (for example, the three which top this year's list: paedophilia, unemployment and mad cow disease) are unrepresentable; they are impossible to pin down politically (even unemployment seems like a viral epidemic or a slow-motion social collapse). Highly symptomatic events, but representative of nothing whatsoever.

Without this — possibly violent — element of spectacle and in the absence of any real issues, everything goes along smoothly, merging in with the normal state of political affairs, which is, as we know, as flat and spongy as an encephalogram. Now, if the fiction and the pleasure of spectacle are to be preserved, a differential tension has to be maintained. As in the story of the illusionist who was forced during his performance artificially to mechanize his gestures to mark himself off from the automaton at his side — an automaton so perfect you could not tell the difference between man and machine. Now, this is precisely what is happening: you cannot

distinguish Chirac from the general state of things. He blends in perfectly with the automatic nullity of the state of things. You cannot hold this against him; you can only pity him for it. This is his deepest nature - this basic mimicry, this Rousseauism of a natural landscape gardener of the political scene. But, as a consequence, even in a zero-sum game, he saps all the passion from things. And this is inexcusable. Except that in this extreme corruption — connected with simplicity — by which he, a useless person, becomes the perfect mirror of everyone's uselessness, he might well give all those he (so negatively) represents the idea of smashing the mirror to recover another image — at least in the scattered fragments. And this might be (who knows?) a new form of presence or representation, involving the dispelling of this representative uselessness.

But wouldn't this elimination (and that of many others) still be the *spectacle* of his disappearance? Now, that is something Chirac provides, unaided, on every occasion.

7 January 1991

The Clone or the Degree Xerox of the Species

Assuredly, the animal world still has some surprises in store for us. After the mad cow, the cloned sheep. Crazy Cow and Baby Dolly. And it is not by chance that together they form the astral theme of this century's end. We are going to be able to clone ever more sheep and so make more and more animal feed with which to feed ever more mad cows . . .

But there is even more of a connection between the two: cloning is itself a form of epidemic, of contagion, of metastasis of the species — of a species in the clutches of identical reproduction and infinite proliferation, beyond sex and death. The key event here is the liquidation of sexual reproduction and, as a result, of any differentiation of - and singular destiny for - the living being. By way, paradoxically, of science and progress, we are now quite simply eradicating the greatest revolution in the history of living beings, the transition from proto-zoan, bacterial, undifferentiated cell-division - the immortality of single-cell organisms - to sexual reproduction and the inalienable death of every individual being, and replacing this with the biological monotony of the earlier state of

affairs, the perpetuation of a minimal, undifferentiated life, for which we have perhaps never stopped yearning.

What Freud termed the death drive was simply this dizzying temptation to return to annihilation in the eternal repetition of the Same, to go back beyond the biological revolution of sex, back beyond death. This is ontology become pure tautology, phylogenesis become pure tautogenesis. Whereas living beings have striven for hundreds of millions of years to wrest the same away from the same — to tear themselves free from this kind of primitive entropy and incest — we are working at the disinformation of the species by cancelling differences and manufacturing entropy with information. The very idea of it! With cloning, we are engaged upon a crucial revision of the whole evolution of living beings, and this represents both the technical and scientific triumph of a species and its death by repetition of its own formula.

The paradox of cloning is that it will produce and reproduce beings which are still sexed, whereas the sexual function has become absolutely useless since, just as each segment of earthworm reproduces itself as a whole worm, every cell of a managing director can produce a new managing director (in much the same way as every fragment of a hologram can again become the matrix of the complete hologram).

But this phantasm of repetition is merely one side of the biogenetic enterprise: the other is perfection. For centuries, in the theological debate on resurrection, there was speculation as to which body would be resuscitated. Would it be the body in the full flush of youth, the regenerated, transfigured body, or the old, sick one? This same debate now comes back to us in a bio-industrial version, for it is clear that it won't be the sheep with staggers or the African with AIDS that will be cloned. It is obvious that cloning, if it is to develop, will be automatically discriminatory — far more than natural selection ever was. In this way it will connect with

that other phantasm underlying the whole genetic project (the whole technical project in general): the phantasm of perfecting the ideal formula for the species so that nothing remains but to reproduce it. But we have to look at what 'ideal' and 'perfection' mean here. They assume an unrelenting selection in terms of agreed models of race, health, performance and 'intelligence' (defined by operational quotients). Now, this does not raise too many problems where transgenic maize or butchers' meat are concerned, where perfection is a question of what is best to eat. And it does, perhaps, pose no problems for God, since He is the (dis)embodiment of perfection. But where the human species and other complex beings are concerned, the problem is insoluble. Biologically, however, it will be resolved in terms of the weakest formula, that is to say, in terms of perfect normality, unerring adaptation, eradication of all anomalous (or useless) characteristics and genes, and thus, ultimately, in terms of functional and statistical perfection. And in this way, we shall meet the same fate as animals (it is only justice that we should). Immortality and perfection achieved through genetic engineering and cloning will only ever be the immortality and perfection of the average formula, of the 'mediocrity' of the species raised to a higher power.

All this virtual eugenics might perhaps be justified, at a pinch, if the aim were to create a 'higher race' (a higher level of complexity). But all manipulation intended to bring the species closer to normal perfection - or, in other words, statistical mediocrity — is thoroughly abject. Unless there is here, perhaps, some obscure desire to obliterate the specificity of the species by genetic confusion, to change the rules of the game at the risk of coming to grief. In which case, there can be no objection: human beings have always done this in the symbolic order, now they will do it in the biological order. There is, however, an appreciable difference in actually carrying out the biological deed, when this fated character of the Same, which up to now was merely mental or metaphysical, becomes materially inscribed in our

cells, and when science itself becomes a 'fatal strategy'. Everyone may at some time have dreamt of duplicating or multiplying himself to perfection, but this is, precisely, a fantasy: it is destroyed when you attempt to force reality to conform to it. Everything - Utopias, transparency, perfection - becomes terrifying as soon as it is turned into a reality.

DNA itself, that meta-stabilized formula for life, is perhaps merely an average formula, which has only managed to universalize itself on the basis of a statistical outcome — that is to say, a lowest common denominator. Singularity being, by definition, what can never be reproduced, all that can be reproduced to infinity can only ever be of very low definition.

Multiplication is positive only in our system of accumulation. In the symbolic order, it is equivalent to subtraction. If five men pull on a rope, the force they exert is added together. By contrast, if an individual dies, his death is a considerable event, whereas if a thousand individuals die, the death of each is a thousand times less important. Each of two twins, because he has a double, is ultimately just half an individual - if you clone him to infinity, his value becomes equal to zero.

This is already visible here and now in the social register, where what the system produces and reproduces are virtually matching beings, beings substitutable for each other, already mentally cloned. In the end, this whole cloning business is not so very new; we have experience of it in all areas of life - intellectual, cultural and operational, not to mention the fields of work and technology, where the system long since trained us to be clones of ourselves or of each other. Cloning, the *ecriture automatique* of 'ready-made' individuals and their identification with a minimal formula (their mental, behavioural code), their unthinking inscription in the operational networks — all these things are already largely achieved. The clones are already there; the virtual beings are already there. We are all replicants! We are so

in the sense that, as in *Blade Runner,* it is already almost impossible to distinguish properly human behaviour from its projection on the screen, from its double in the image and its computerized prostheses.

This is the case in a number of fields. We are familiar with the replica of the Lascaux cave and with Richard Bohringer's cinematic double.[36] But isn't Europe itself, as it is being developed from the top down, a virtual, artificially cloned entity? And isn't virtual reality as a whole an immense cloning of the so-called real world?

Admittedly, with cloning, we are dealing with an infinitely more subtle and artificial prosthesis than any mechanical one. The genetic code, substituting for the father and the mother, becomes the true universal matrix, the individual being now only the cancerous metastasis of his basic formula. Such is the incredible violence of genetic simulation. But this is, at bottom, merely the final phase of a process our modern technologies have simply speeded up: the process of an ideal counterfeiting of the world, allied to the phantasm of an immortal recurrence. In other words, the perfect crime: the work of finishing off the world, for which we now have to undergo a process of mourning. A recurrence which is the exact opposite of Nietzsche's Eternal Return (of the Same). That assumed that things were caught in a necessary, fatal concatenation which exceeded them. Nothing of the kind applies today, where they are caught in a contiguity running off, with no great consequence, to infinity. Today's Eternal Return is the return of the infinitely small, the fractal — the obsessive repetition of things on a microscopic, inhuman

36. Bohringer was the first French actor to provide a voice for a virtual reality 'double' of himself. This virtual 'clone' starred as Dr. Nemo in *20,000 licues au-dela du reel* (20,000 Leagues beyond the Real), a documentary produced by the Cite des Sciences et de l'Industrie de La Villette.

scale. It is no longer the exaltation of a will, nor the sovereign affirmation of an event, a 'becoming', and its consecration by an immutable sign, as Nietzsche had it. It is the viral recurrence of micro-processes, which is equally ineluctable, but which no powerful sign brings alive in our imaginations.

This is why none of the ethics committees will change anything. With all their good intentions, they are merely the expression of our bad conscience about the irresistible and fundamentally immoral development of our sciences — a development which has brought us to this point and to which we secretly consent, while supplementing that consent with the moral delights of repentance.

Let us say, to console ourselves, that the cloned twin will never be the same as his 'begetter', that he will never be 'as turned into himself by the genetic code',[37] because thousands of complicating factors will make him a different being in spite of everything, but also because there will have been another before him — which is not the case with the original.

And in fact the clone can be seen — this is the positive side of repetition - as the parody of the original, as its ironic, grotesque version, the way Napoleon III was, in Marx's view, the grotesque double of Napoleon I. One can imagine all kinds of new-style conflicts arising from this. Such as the future clone doing away with his 'father', not in order to sleep with his mother (something which is now impossible), but so as to recover his status as original and his exclusive identity. Like the final scene of *Jurassic Park,* where the living dinosaurs, all cloned from fossilized DNA, burst into the dinosaur museum and wreak havoc among their ancestors before being themselves exterminated. Or, alternatively, the disqualified original taking revenge on his clone. For what becomes of the human being

37. In the original French text here, Baudrillard is playing on the first line of Mallarme's *Tombcau d'Edgar Poe:* 'Tel qu'en Lui-meme enfin l'eternite le change'.

when he is pushed out by his own clone and rendered useless? A reserve? A relic? A fossil? A fetish? An art object? There is no immediate end in sight to the conflict between the original and its double, the clash between the real and the virtual.

17 March 1997

Exorcism in Politics or the Conspiracy of Imbeciles

Two situations, each equally critical and irresolvable: the worthlessness of contemporary art; political impotence in the face of Le Pen. There is a trade-off between the two and a resolution by transfusion: powerlessness to mount any political opposition to Le Pen is displaced on to the terrain of culture and the cultural Holy Alliance. So, when it comes to questioning contemporary art, this can be the product only of reactionary and irrational - if not, indeed, fascistic - thinking.

How can one counter this respectful conspiracy of imbeciles? Sadly, nothing can correct this mechanism of intellectual perversion, since it is inspired by bad conscience and the impotence of our 'democratic' elites to resolve both the impasse of art and the political impasse of the struggle against the Front National. The easiest solution is to merge the two problems in the same moralizing vituperation. The real question then becomes: can one not 'open up' the issue in some way, suggest something unusual, irreverent, unconventional or paradoxical without automatically being seen as coming from the extreme Right (which is, it must be said, a homage paid to the extreme Right)? Why has everything moral, conventional and conformist - things which were traditionally on the Right — now gone over to the Left?

A painful revision. Whereas the Right embodied moral values and the Left, by contrast, a certain contradictory historical and political resolve, the Left today, stripped of all political energy, has become a pure court of morality — the embodiment of universal values, the champion of the reign of Virtue and upholder of the antiquated values of the Good and the True — a court before which everyone is answerable but itself. The political illusion of the Left, deep-frozen for twenty years spent in opposition, has turned out, on the Left's gaining power, to be pregnant not with the meaning of history, but with a morality of history. With a morality of Truth, Right and good conscience — the degree zero of politics and even, we may safely say, the lowest point of the genealogy of morals. This moralization of values in which the historical truth of a particular event, the aesthetic quality of a work of art or the scientific pertinence of a particular hypothesis can be judged only in moral terms, is the historical defeat of the Left (and of thought). Even reality, the reality principle, is an article of faith. Question the reality of a war and you'll be condemned for betraying the moral law.

With the Left as lacking in political vitality as the Right, where has politics moved to? The answer is simple: on to the ground of the extreme Right. As Bruno Latour put it very well in *Le Monde,* the only person talking politics in France today is Le Pen. All the others are talking morality or civics; they sound like schoolteachers or instructors, managers or programmers. Le Pen, committed to evil and immorality, snaffles all the political stakes, scoops up all that has been cast aside or positively repressed by the politics of Good and Enlightenment. The more the moral coalition hardens against him - a mark of political impotence - the more political capital he makes out of immorality, out of being the only one on the side of evil. When, in the past, the Right went over to defending moral values and the established order, the Left did not hesitate to defy those same moral values in the name of political ones. It is itself today the victim of such a slide, of such a dereliction: with the Left

overtaken by moralism, the repressed political energy necessarily crystallizes elsewhere - in the enemy camp. And so the Left, by embodying the reign of Virtue, which is also the reign of the greatest hypocrisy, can only fuel Vice.

If Le Pen didn't exist, he'd have to be invented. He it is who delivers us from a whole evil side of ourselves, from the quintessence of all that is worst in us. For this we should rightly anathematize him. But if he disappeared, woe betide us, exposed to all our racist, sexist and nationalist viruses (we all have them) or, quite simply, to the murderous negativity of social being. In this respect he is the mirror of the political class, who use him to exorcize their own evils, just as we use them to exorcize all the corruption inherent in the operation of society. The same corrupting function, the same cathartic function. The desire to root all this out, the desire to purify society and moralize public life, to liquidate all that represents evil, shows a total misconception of the mechanisms of evil, and thus of the very form of the political.

The anti-Le Pen forces, employing tactics of unilateral condemnation and showing no appreciation of this reversibility of evil, have entirely abandoned its use to Le Pen himself. As a result he is, by his very exclusion, in an impregnable position. The political class, by stigmatizing him in the name of Virtue, puts him in the most comfortable of situations, where all he has to do is sweep up the symbolic charge of ambivalence, of rejection of evil and hypocrisy which his righteous adversaries obligingly produce for him — almost as if they were in his pay. He draws his energy from his enemies themselves, who rush to turn his own mistakes to his advantage. They have not understood that good is never the product of rooting out evil, which always exacts a glorious revenge, but of subtly treating evil with evil.

Le Pen is, then, the embodiment of stupidity and worthlessness, admittedly, but of the stupidity and worthlessness of the others, of those who, in denouncing him,

denounce their own impotence and stupidity, simultaneously revealing the absurdity of fighting him head on without any understanding of this diabolical game of musical chairs - thus, in a terrifying lack of lucidity, feeding up their own phantoms, their own negative doubles.

What governs this perverse effect by which the Left is stuck in denunciation, while Le Pen retains an exclusive hold on enunciation — with the one profiting fully from his crime and the other harvesting all the negative effects of recrimination, the one delighting in evil and the other becoming entangled in victimhood? The answer is a simple truth: by confining Le Pen to a ghetto, the democratic Left has walled itself up; it points to itself as the discriminatory power and exiles itself in its obsession. It automatically cedes the other party's claim of a denial of justice. And Le Pen does not shy from appealing to Republican legality for his own advantage. Above all, however, he cloaks himself in the illegal, imaginary, but very profound prestige of the persecuted — so well, indeed, that he can enjoy the benefits both of legality and illegality. From this ostracism he derives a freedom of language and a boldness of judgement which the Left denies itself.

An example of the magical thinking which currently does service for political thought: Le Pen is criticized for rejecting and excluding immigrants, but this is as nothing compared with the process of social exclusion which is going forward at all levels of society (exclusion itself, together with the 'social fracture', found itself excluded by the decree dissolving the National Assembly). And this complex, inextricable process of collective responsibility is one we are all accessories to, and victims of. It is, therefore, typically magical thinking to seek to ward off this virus which is spreading everywhere as an effect of our social and technical 'progress'; to exorcize this curse of exclusion and our impotence in the face of it by vesting it in one execrable man, institution or group, whoever or whatever they may be; to treat it as a canker that could simply be surgically removed, when the

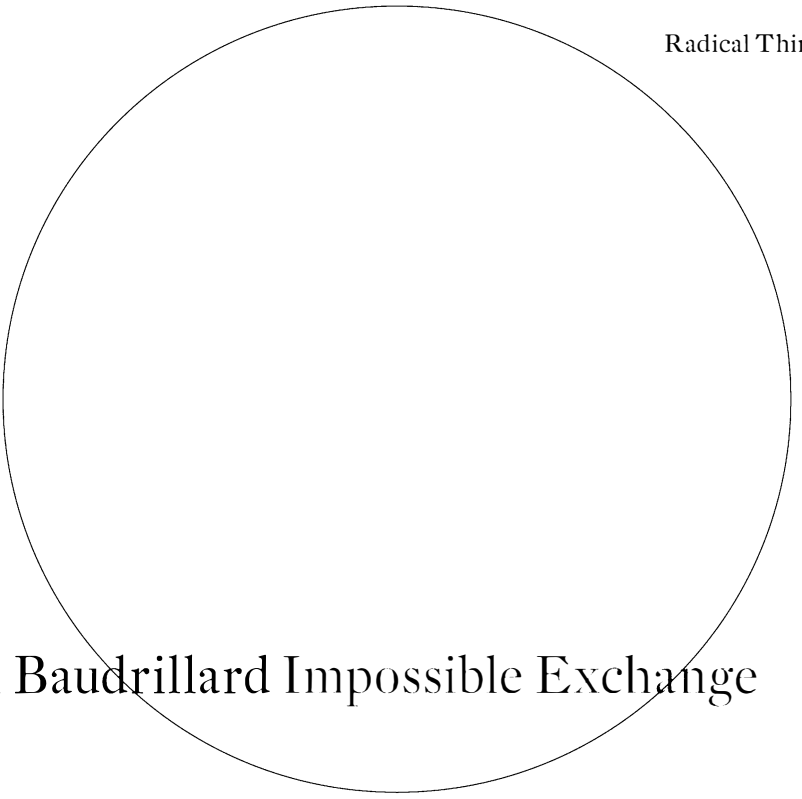
secondary infections have already spread to all parts. The Front National is merely following the paths beaten by these secondaries — paths beaten with all the more virulence for the fact that we believe we have eliminated the tumour, and so, as a result, the germs spread into the whole organism. Not to mention that this magical projection where the Front National is concerned does to ***it*** precisely what ***it*** does to immigrants. We must beware of this ruse of contamination in which, by sheer transparence of evil, the positive changes into a negative virus, and the demand for liberty into 'democratic despotism'. As ever, we see here that reversibility, that subtle coiling and winding, of evil which catches rational intelligence off its guard (when the whole of modern pathology teaches us so much about this at the level of the physical body, we pay no heed to it where the social body is concerned).

To remain with politics, we must avoid ideology and see things in terms of social physics. Our democratic society is the stasis and Le Pen the metastasis. Society as a whole is dying of inertia and immunodeficiency. Le Pen is the visible transcription of this viral state, its spectacular projection. Things here are as they are in dreams: he is the burlesque, hallucinatory figuration of this latent state, of this silent inertia made up in equal measure of enforced integration and systematic exclusion. Since, in this society, the hope of reducing social inequality has (almost) definitively disappeared, we should not be surprised to see the resentment shifted on to race inequality. The bankruptcy of the social project is responsible for the successful re-emergence of race (and of all the other forms of fatal strategies). In this sense, Le Pen is the only 'unofficial' analyser of this society. The fact that the analysis is on the extreme Right is merely a sad consequence of the fact that there is no such analyst on the Left or the far Left. And certainly none is to be found among the judges or the intellectuals. Only immigrants, at the opposite extreme, might also be in a position to analyse what is going on, but a certain form of 'right thinking' has largely taken them over. Le Pen is the only one radically to minimize the Right—Left

distinction — admittedly, because it is of little importance to him, but the uncompromising critique of that distinction made since the 1960s and in 1968 has unfortunately disappeared from political life. He benefits, then, from a *de facto* situation the political class refuses to face up to (indeed, they do all they can to mask it with elections), but one day the extreme consequences of that situation will have to be drawn. If, one day, political imagination, political will and resolve have some opportunity to bounce back, they will do so only on the basis of the radical abolition of this fossilized distinction which has, over the decades, revealed itself to be an empty sham, and which only holds up now by corrupt collusion. It is a distinction which has vanished in reality, but which, by some incurable revisionism, is constantly being revived, thereby making Le Pen the begetter of the only new political scene. It is as though everyone were involved in scuppering what remains of democracy, doubtless to give the retrospective illusion that it once existed. Many things today have no other existence than this staging of their disappearance. Proving that they existed by a premature act of mourning, Le Pen here being the agent of that work of mourning and the man carrying out the 'contract'.

Is there some chance of drawing the consequences of this extreme (but original) situation other than through the hallucinatory medium of Le Pen — that is to say, other than by a magical conjuration which saps all energies? How are we to avoid succumbing to this viral excrescence of our own demons, other than by going back, beyond political moralism and democratic revisionism, to that unofficial analysis which Le Pen and the Front National have in a sense snatched from us?

7 May 1997



Jean Baudrillard Impossible Exchange

IMPOSSIBLE EXCHANGE

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

Translated by Chris Turner

VERSO
London • New York

This English-language edition first published by Verso 2001
© Verso 2001, 2011
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201
www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-84467-791-7

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset in fournier by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in the US by Maple Vail

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Translator's Foreword

I would like to thank Marie-Dominique Maison, Leslie Hill and Mike Gane for their help, direct and indirect, with the preparation of this translation.

There are no footnotes in the original French edition. All notes here are my own, and are intended to provide background information which an ordinary French reader (the woman on the metro to Denfert-Rochereau, perhaps) might be assumed to possess.

C.T.

Impossible Exchange

Impossible Exchange

Everything starts from impossible exchange. The uncertainty of the world lies in the fact that it has no equivalent anywhere; it cannot be exchanged for anything. The uncertainty of thought lies in the fact that it cannot be exchanged either for truth or for reality. Is it thought which tips the world over into uncertainty, or the other way round? This in itself is part of the uncertainty.

There is no equivalent of the world. That might even be said to be its definition – or lack of it. No equivalent, no double, no representation, no mirror. Any mirror whatsoever would still be part of the world. There is not enough room both for the world and for its double. So there can be no verifying of the world. This is, indeed, why 'reality' is an imposture. Being without possible verification, the world is a fundamental illusion. Whatever can be verified locally, the uncertainty of the world, taken overall, is not open to debate. There is no integral calculus of the universe. A differential calculus, perhaps? 'The Universe, made up of multiple sets, is not itself a set' (Denis Guedj).

This is how it is with any system. The economic sphere, the sphere of all exchange, taken overall, cannot

be exchanged for anything. There is no meta-economic equivalent of the economy anywhere, nothing to exchange it for as such, nothing with which to redeem it in another world. It is, in a sense, insolvent, and in any event insoluble to a global intelligence. And so it, too, is of the order of a fundamental uncertainty.

This it tries to ignore. But the indeterminacy induces a fluctuation of equations and postulates at the very heart of the economic sphere and leads, in the end, to that sphere lurching off into speculation, its criteria and elements all interacting madly.

The other spheres – politics, law and aesthetics – are characterized by this same non-equivalence, and hence the same eccentricity. Literally, they have no meaning outside themselves and cannot be exchanged for anything. Politics is laden with signs and meanings, but seen from the outside it has none. It has nothing to justify it at a universal level (all attempts to ground politics at a metaphysical or philosophical level have failed). It absorbs everything which comes into its ambit and converts it into its own substance, but it is not able to convert itself into – or be reflected in – a higher reality which would give it a meaning.

Here again, this impossible equivalence finds expression in the increasing undecidability of its categories, discourses, strategies and issues. The political – together with its *mise-en-scène* and its discourse – proliferates in scale with its fundamental illusoriness.

There is great uncertainty, even in the sphere of

living matter and biology. Schemes for genetic experimentation and investigation are becoming infinitely ramified, and the more ramified they become, the more the crucial question is left unanswered: who rules over life, who rules over death? Complex as it may be, the phenomenon of life cannot be exchanged for any ultimate purpose. One cannot conceive life and the ultimate purpose of life at one and the same time. And this uncertainty haunts the field of biology, rendering it also increasingly speculative, as each further discovery is made – not through some temporary incapacity on the part of science, but because it is approaching the definitive uncertainty which is its absolute horizon.

The transcription and 'objective' assessment of an overall system have, ultimately, no more meaning than the assessment of the weight of the earth in millions of billions of tons – a figure which has no meaning outside of a calculation internal to the terrestrial system.

Metaphysically, it is the same: the values, purposes and causes we delineate are valid only for a form of thought which is human, all too human. They are irrelevant to any other reality whatever (perhaps even to 'reality' *tout court*).

The sphere of the real is itself no longer exchangeable for the sphere of the sign. As with floating currencies, the relationship between the two is growing undecidable, and the rate at which they exchange increasingly

random. Both are becoming speculative, each in its own space. Reality is growing increasingly technical and efficient; everything that can be done is being done, though without any longer meaning anything. And the metalanguages of reality (the human and social sciences, technical and operational languages) are also developing eccentrically, after the fashion of their objects. As for the sign, it is passing into the pure speculation and simulation of the virtual world, the world of the total screen, where the same uncertainty hovers over the real and 'virtual reality' once they go their separate ways. The real no longer has any force as sign, and signs no longer have any force of meaning.

Any system invents for itself a principle of equilibrium, exchange and value, causality and purpose, which plays on fixed oppositions: good and evil, true and false, sign and referent, subject and object. This is the whole space of difference and regulation by difference which, as long as it functions, ensures the stability and dialectical movement of the whole. Up to this point, all is well. It is when this bipolar relationship breaks down, when the system short-circuits itself, that it generates its own critical mass, and veers off exponentially. When there is no longer any internal reference system within which exchange can take place (between production and social wealth, for example, or between news coverage and real events), you get into an exponential phase, a phase of speculative disorder.

The illusion of the economic sphere lies in its

having aspired to ground a principle of reality and rationality on the forgetting of this ultimate reality of impossible exchange. Now, that principle is valid only within an artificially bounded sphere. Outside that sphere lies radical uncertainty. And it is this exiled, foreclosed uncertainty which haunts systems and generates the illusion of the economic, the political, and so on. It is the failure to understand this which leads systems into incoherence, hypertrophy and, in some sense, leads them to destroy themselves. For it is from the inside, by overreaching themselves, that systems make bonfires of their own postulates, and fall into ruins.

To put it another way: has there ever been any 'economy', in the sense of an organization of value that is stably coherent and has a universal purpose and meaning? In absolute terms, the answer is no. Has there ever even been a 'real'? In this chasm of uncertainty, the real, value and the law are exceptions, exceptional phenomena. Illusion is the fundamental rule.

Everything which sets out to exchange itself for something runs up, in the end, against the Impossible Exchange Barrier. The most concerted, most subtle attempts to make the world meaningful in value terms, to endow it with meaning, come to grief on this insuperable obstacle. And that which cannot be exchanged for anything else proliferates wildly. The most structured systems cannot but be thrown out of kilter by the reversion of this Nothing which haunts

them. And not in the aftermath of some future catastrophe, but right now. Here and now, the whole edifice of value is exchangeable for Nothing.

The true formula of contemporary nihilism lies here, rather than in any philosophical or moral considerations: it is the nihilism of value itself. This is our fate, and from this stem both the happiest and most baleful consequences. This book might be said to be the exploration, first, of the 'fateful' consequences, and subsequently – by a poetic turnabout – of the fortunate, happy consequences, of impossible exchange.

Behind the exchange of value and, in a sense, serving as an invisible counterpart to it, behind this mad speculation which reaches a peak in the virtual economy, behind the exchange of Something, we have, then, always, the exchange of the Nothing.

Death, illusion, absence, the negative, evil, the accursed share are everywhere, running beneath the surface of all exchanges. It is even this continuity of the Nothing which grounds the possibility of the Great Game of Exchange. All current strategies boil down to this: passing around the debt, the credit, the unreal, unnameable thing you cannot get rid of. Nietzsche analysed the stratagem of God in these terms: in redeeming man's debt by the sacrifice of His son, God, the great Creditor, created a situation where the debt could never be redeemed by the debtor, since it has already been redeemed by the

creditor. In this way, He created the possibility of an endless circulation of that debt, which man will bear as his perpetual sin. This is the ruse of God. But it is also the ruse of capital, which, at the same time as it plunges the world into ever greater debt, works simultaneously to redeem that debt, thus creating a situation in which it will never be able to be cancelled or exchanged for anything. And this is true also of the Real and the Virtual: the endless circulation of the Virtual will create a situation where the Real will never be able to be exchanged for anything.

If it is the forgetting and denial of the Nothing which brings about the catastrophic deregulation of systems, there is no way of warding off this process by the magical addition of some *ex machina* corrective – the kind of regulation we see at work in the physical, biological and economic sciences, where new hypotheses, new forces and new particles are constantly being invented to shore up the equations. If it is the Nothing whose absence is missing, it is the Nothing which must be brought (or returned) into play, with the attendant risk of internal catastrophe being constantly present.

The irruption of radical uncertainty into all fields and the end of the comforting universe of determinacy is not at all a negative fate, so long as uncertainty itself becomes the new rule of the game. So long as we do not seek to correct that uncertainty by injecting new values, new certainties, but have it circulate as the basic rule. It is the same here as with the will: you

can resolve the problem of the will only by a (poetic) transference into the play of otherness, without ever claiming to resolve the question of its ends and its object. It is on the continuity and reciprocal exchange of the Nothing, of illusion, of absence, of non-value, that the continuity of Something is founded.

Uncertainty in this sense becomes the very precondition for the divided nature of thought. Just as uncertainty in physics arises in the end from the fact that the object, in its turn, analyses the subject, so the uncertainty of thought comes from the fact that I am not alone in thinking the world – that the world, in its turn, thinks me.

The Nothing is the only ground – or background – against which we can apprehend existence. It is existence's potential of absence and nullity, but also of energy (there is an analogy here with the quantum void). In this sense, things only ever exist *ex nihilo*. Things only ever exist out of nothing.

The Nothing does not cease to exist as soon as there is something. The Nothing continues (not) to exist just beneath the surface of things. This is Macedonio Fernandez's 'perpetual continuation of the Nothing'. Everything which exists continues, then, not to exist at the same time. This antinomy is beyond the imagining of our critical understanding.

Ex nihilo in nihilum: this is the cycle of the Nothing. It is also – against a thinking based on origins and ends, on evolution and continuity – a discontinuity-based thinking. Only the consideration of an end

allows us to conceive a continuity, and our sciences and technologies have accustomed us to see everything in terms of a continuous evolution, which is never anything other than our own – the theological form of our superiority. The essential form, however, is that of discontinuity.

Everywhere in the universe, discontinuity alone is probable. The Big Bang itself is the absolute model. Might it not be the same for living things, events, language? Infinitesimal as is the passage from one form to another, it is always a jump, a catastrophe – from which the strangest, most anomalous forms ensue unexpectedly, with no regard for the end result. Closer to home, languages also provide a fine example of this singular discontinuity (from one signifier to the other, one language to the other), developing in largely random manner, without any continuous progress or superiority of one over another.

For analytical thought, the evolution and advance of living forms is the only possible hypothesis. If the world has a history, then we can aspire to a final explanation of it. But, as Cioran says, 'if life has a meaning, we are all failures'. In other words, the finalistic hypothesis is a despairing one. It emphasizes our failure, and plunges us into an unhappy uncertainty. On the other hand, if the world emerged at a single stroke, it cannot have any determinate meaning or end. We are protected from its end by this non-meaning which assumes a force of poetic illusion. The world,

admittedly, then becomes wholly enigmatic, but this uncertainty, like that of appearances, is a happy uncertainty. Illusion, being *par excellence* the art of appearing, of emerging out of nothing, protects us from *being*. As the art of disappearance, it protects us from death. The world is protected from its end by its diabolical indeterminacy.

According to this other hypothesis, the biomass emerged at a stroke. It has been here in its entirety from the beginning: the subsequent history of its complex forms changes nothing about the Big Bang of life. Things here are exactly as they are with the universe, where everything was present in the primal instant. Exactly as it is for language in Lévi-Strauss's thinking: the logomass, the mass of language, emerges in its entirety at a stroke. There will be no addition to it in terms of potential information. There is even too much information – an excess of signifier, which will (we hope) never be reduced. Once it has appeared, it is indestructible. As indestructible as the material substance of the world, or – closer to us – as the material substance of the sociological masses, whose equally sudden appearance is also irreversible (until their eventual collapse, which is as unpredictable, from our limited standpoint, as was their appearance).

Astromass, biomass, logomass, sociomass, semiomass – all are doubtless destined to end one day. Yet they will end not gradually, but suddenly, the way they appeared. Like cultures, which are also invented

at a stroke. Their emergence is inexplicable in evolutionary terms, and they sometimes disappear for no visible reason, like living species.

As for our mental universe, it no doubt functions according to this same catastrophic rule: everything is there from the beginning; it is not negotiated by stages. It is like a set of rules: perfect in itself; any idea of progress or change is absurd. It emerges *ex nihilo*; it can disappear only *ex abrupto*. This suddenness, this emergence out of the void, this non-anteriority of things to themselves continue to affect the event of the world at the very heart of its historical unfolding. What constitutes an event is what breaks with all prior causality. The event of language is what makes it re-emerge miraculously every day, as finished form, outside of all prior significations, even outside its current meaning – as though it had never existed. Gosse's hypothesis and Russell's paradox.*

And, in the end, we prefer the *ex nihilo*. We prefer something which draws its magic from arbitrariness, from the absence of causes and history. Nothing gives us greater pleasure than something emerging

* Here Baudrillard is referring not to what is commonly termed 'Russell's paradox' (a proposition in set theory), but to Russell's argument in *The Analysis of Mind*: 'There is no logical impossibility in the hypothesis that the world sprang into being five minutes ago, exactly as it then was, with a population that "remembered" a wholly unreal past.' The nineteenth-century English naturalist P.H. Gosse actually contended that all geological and fossil findings were merely a simulation contemporaneous with the creation of the world by God five thousand years ago – a contention clearly designed to rescue the biblical account.

or disappearing at a stroke, than plenitude giving way to the void. Illusion is made of this magic portion, this accursed share, which creates a kind of absolute gain by removing causes, or by distorting effects and causes.

The fundamental uncertainty lies in this machination of the Nothing, in this parallel machinery of the Nothing.

The illusion of having 'overcome' this uncertainty is a mere phantasm of the understanding – a phantasm which lurks behind all value systems and representations of an objective world, including the traditional philosophical question: 'Why is there Something rather than Nothing?' Whereas the true question should, rather, be: 'Why is there Nothing rather than Something?'

But, then, if Nothing is the underlying fabric of all things, it is safely there for eternity, and it profits us 'nothing' to concern ourselves overmuch either with it or with the apparent hegemony of an objective world. Come what may, the Nothing will recognize its own. But the Nothing is precisely not a state of things. It is the product of the dramatic illusion of appearances. And it is the predestined target of the truth enterprise, the enterprise of verifying and objectifying the world – a gigantic homeopathic treatment of the world with the single reality-principle – putting an end to that dramatic illusion, putting an end, with a definitive coherence, to the divine incoherence of the world, an incoherence which is

not measured against its own end, and which, indeed, is measured against Nothing.

Not to mention the fact that if this 'dark matter' did not exist, our universe would long ago have vanished into thin air. And this is, indeed, the most likely outcome if we succeed in eliminating it. Wherever this void – this antagonistic parallel universe, this radical illusion irreducible to the facts of the real and the rational – is eliminated, the real meets with immediate catastrophe. For matter in itself is a delusion, and the material universe is supported only by the missing mass, whose absence is decisive. The real divested of the anti-real becomes hyperreal, more real than the real, and vanishes into simulation. Matter divested of anti-matter is doomed to entropy. By elimination of the void, it is condemned to gravitational collapse. The subject deprived of all otherness collapses into itself, and sinks into autism. The elimination of the inhuman causes the human to collapse into odium and ridicule (this we see in the pretension and vanity of humanitarianism).

There is a very fine parable for this situation in the story of Ishi. Ishi, the last Indian of his tribe, who was taken to San Francisco, was stupefied by the sight of the vast crowds there. He could think only that the dead – all the previous generations – were also there among the living. And the dead, indeed, shield us from being continually present one to another. If you eliminate the dead, then, by dint of sheer

overcrowding, the living become strangers to one another. This is what happens in our state of urban overpopulation, overinformation, overcommunication: the whole space is suffocated by this hyper-presence. This is the mass state, where only the living dead remain.

However, the question remains: why are we so intent on ferreting out and destroying the void, absence and death? Why this fantasy of expelling the dark matter, making everything visible, making it real, and forcibly expressing what has no desire to be expressed, forcibly exhuming the only things which ensure the continuity of the Nothing and of the secret? Why are we so lethally tempted into transparency, identity and existence at all costs? An unanswerable question. But perhaps this tendency to be done with all secrets has itself a secret purpose?

In the past, through Creation and Nature, God was quite naturally the instigator of Good, as a providential transcendence worked itself out. God being naturally good, and mankind, in its modern, Rousseauist version, being basically good too, we did not have to transform the world to make it positive, and Evil was only ever an accident.

It is only since God died that the destiny of the world has become our responsibility. Since it can now no longer be justified in another world, it has to be justified here and now. The equivalent of the Kingdom of God – that is to say, the immanence of an entirely

positive world (not the transcendence of an ideal world) – has to be brought about by technical means. And to create such an equivalent is, from the theological viewpoint, a total heresy. It is a diabolic temptation to wish for the Reign of Good, since to do so is to prepare the way for absolute Evil. If Good has a monopoly of this world, then the other will be the monopoly of Evil. We shall not escape the reversal of values, and the world will become the field of the metastases of the death of God.

Another explanation for our fall from grace is that the world is given to us. Now, what is given we have to be able to give back. In the past we could give thanks for the gift, or respond to it by sacrifice. Now we have no one to give thanks to. And if we can no longer give anything in exchange for the world, it is unacceptable.

So we are going to have to liquidate the given world. To destroy it by substituting an artificial one, built from scratch, a world for which we do not have to account to anyone. Hence this gigantic technical undertaking for eliminating the natural world in all its forms. All that is natural will be rejected from top to bottom as a consequence of this symbolic rule of the counter-gift and impossible exchange.

But, by this same symbolic rule, we are going to have to pay the price for this artificial creation, and settle this new debt towards ourselves. How are we to be absolved of this technical world and this artificial omnipotence if not by destruction, which is the only

possible decompensation for this new situation – the only future event which will leave us with nothing to answer for?

So, all our systems are converging in a desperate effort to escape radical uncertainty, to conjure away the inevitable, fateful fact of impossible exchange. Commercial exchange, exchange of meaning, sexual exchange – everything has to be exchangeable. With all things, we have to find their ultimate equivalence, have to find a meaning and an end for them. When we have that end, that formula, that purpose, then we shall be quits with the world; all will be 'redeemed', the debt will be paid, and radical uncertainty will come to an end. Up to now, all systems have failed. The magical, metaphysical, religious systems which worked in the past are now a dead letter. *But this time we seem to have the final solution, the definitive equivalent: Virtual Reality in all its forms* – the digital, information, universal computation, cloning. In short, the putting in place of a perfect virtual, technological artefact, so that the world can be exchanged for its artificial double. A much more radical solution than all the others, this, since it will no longer have to be exchanged for some transcendence or finality from elsewhere, but for itself, by the substitution of a double which is infinitely 'truer', infinitely more real than the real world – thus putting an end to the question of reality, and to any inclination to give it a meaning. An automatic writing of the world in the

absence of the world. Total equivalence, total screen, final solution. Absolutely consolidating the idea of the network as niche, into which it is so easy to disappear. The Internet thinks me. The Virtual thinks me. My double is wandering through the networks, where I shall never meet him. For that parallel universe has no relation to this one. It is an artificial transcription of it, a total echoing of it, but it does not reflect it. The Virtual is no longer the potentially real, as once it was. Non-referential – orbital and exorbital – it is never again intended to meet up with the real world. Having absorbed the original, it produces the world as undecidable.

But is not this parallel universe, which is based on the disappearance of the other, itself doomed to disappear, and is it not itself prey to undecidability? Perhaps it is simply an outgrowth of this world, playfully duplicating itself, in which case this world continues to exist as it is, and we are merely play-acting the Virtual? In the same way as, with the religious 'ulterior worlds', we were play-acting transcendence, though this time we would be play-acting immanence, operational power, play-acting *la penée unique* and the automatic writing of the world. In other words, here again, a system doomed to fail, a phantasmagoria without the power to ward off the uncertainty and deregulation which ensued from impossible exchange.

In our general anthropology, there is meaning only in what is Human. The story has meaning only when it fits

into some unfolding of events, some rational purpose. There is no reason in history, no reason in Reason, except as part of this triumphant evolutionism.

Measuring life by its meaning.

Measuring the world by the Human.

Measuring the event by History.

Measuring thought by the Real.

Measuring the sign by the thing, and so on.

Instead of *measuring oneself* against the world, measuring oneself against the event, measuring oneself against thought . . .

We are moving everywhere towards an elimination of the Inhuman, towards an anthropological integrism which aims to submit everything to the jurisdiction of the Human. This is an enterprise of hominization which has been extended to animals, nature, and all other species under the banner of human rights, a moral anthropology and a universal ecology – this latter spearheading a campaign to annex the Inhuman to the *pensée unique* of the Human. A planetary project to exterminate the Inhuman in all its forms, an integrist project to domesticate any reality from outside our own sphere – the extreme turn of an imperialism by which, ironically and paradoxically, we deprive ourselves of any idea of the Human as such. For this can come to us only from the Inhuman. It is only on the basis of a radical alteration of our viewpoint that we can have a vision of ourselves and the world – not to fall into a universe of non-meaning, but to recover the

potency and originality of the world before it assumes force of meaning and becomes, in that same movement, the site of all powers.

Thought itself must play its part in this process. It must register a leap, a mutation, an intensification. The point is no longer to throw the system into internal contradiction (we know that it regenerates in this spiral of contradiction), but to destabilize it by the infiltration of a viral – or, in other words, inhuman – thought, a thought which lets itself be thought by the Inhuman.

Ultimately, is not thought already a form of the Inhuman, a luxurious dysfunction which contravenes the evolution of life in general by taking stock of that evolution and trapping it in its own image? Does not the neuronal development of the brain already constitute a critical threshold from the point of view of evolution and the species? Then why not speed up the process and precipitate other concatenations, other forms – forms of an objective fate of which we simply have no inkling?

This exclusion of the Inhuman means that from now on it is the Inhuman which thinks us. We can grasp the world only from an omega point external to the Human, from objects and hypotheses which play, for us, the role of strange attractors. Thought has already run up against these kinds of objects at the margins of the inhuman in the past – as, for example, when it came up against primitive societies. Today, however,

we have to look further than this critical thinking, a derivative of Western humanism, to far stranger objects which are bearers of a radical uncertainty, and on which we can no longer impose our perspectives in any way whatever.

The convergence of thought is no longer a convergence with truth, but a collusion with the object and a convergence with a set of rules in which the subject is no longer in control.

And what of all these hypotheses themselves which are advanced here? Do they have an equivalent, a use-value, an exchange-value? Absolutely not; it is impossible to exchange them. They can only strike at the chinks in the world's defences, and thought cannot but destroy itself in the object which thinks it, at the same time as it destroys the object it thinks. This is how it escapes truth. Now we have, at the very least, to escape truth. And to escape truth, you must not, whatever you do, trust the subject. You have to leave matters to the object and its strange attraction, the world and its definitive uncertainty.

The whole problem is one of abandoning critical thought, which is the very essence of our theoretical culture, but which belongs to a past history, a past life.

The conventional universe of subject and object, ends and means, true and false, good and evil, no longer matches up to the state of our world. The 'normal' dimensions – of time, space, determination, representation, and hence also of critical, reflexive

thought – are deceptive. The discursive universe of psychology, sociology and ideology in which we move is a trap. It is still functioning in a Euclidean dimension. Now, we have almost no theoretical intuition of what has, without realizing it, become a quantum universe – just as we have never had anything but a dim theoretical awareness of the order of simulation into which our modern world long ago unwittingly passed, while retaining a blind faith in the idea of an objective reality. I would even say that it is this superstitious belief in – this hysteresis of – the 'real' and the reality principle that is the true imposture of our times.

We analysed a deterministic society deterministically. Today we have to analyse a non-deterministic society non-deterministically – a fractal, random, exponential society, the society of the critical mass and extreme phenomena, a society entirely dominated by relations of uncertainty.

Everything in this society stands under the sign of uncertainty. As a consequence, we can no longer approach it in terms of social determinacy, even if we were to do so critically. Crisis always brought with it its share of tensions and contradictions; it is the natural movement of our history. But we are no longer in crisis; we are in a catastrophic process – not in the sense of a material apocalypse, but in the sense of an overturning of all rules. Catastrophe is the irruption of something which no longer functions according to

the rules, or functions by rules we do not know, and perhaps never will. Nothing is simply contradictory or irrational in this state; everything is paradoxical. To pass beyond the end – into the excess of reality, the excess of positivity, the excess of events, the excess of information – is to enter a paradoxical state, a state which can no longer be content with a rehabilitation of traditional values, and demands a thinking that is itself paradoxical: a thinking that no longer obeys a truth principle, and even accepts the impossibility of verification.

We have passed beyond a point of no-return, and beyond this things develop along quite other lines. Ideas of linear development no longer apply. Everything is cast into a turbulence which makes control impossible, including the control of time, for the simultaneity of world information – that transparency of all places brought together in a single moment – is not unlike a perfect crime perpetrated on time.

The uncertainty principle, which states that it is impossible to calculate the speed of a particle and its position simultaneously, is not confined to physics. It applies also to the impossibility of evaluating both the reality and the meaning of an event as it appears in the information media, the impossibility of distinguishing causes and effects in a particular complex process – of distinguishing the terrorist from the hostage (in the Stockholm syndrome), the virus from the cell (in viral pathology). This is just as impossible as isolating

subject from object in experiments in subatomic physics. Each of our actions is at the same erratic stage as the microscopic particle: you cannot evaluate both its end and its means. You can no longer calculate both the price of a human life and its statistical value. Uncertainty has seeped into all areas of life. And this is not a product of the complexity of parameters (we can always cope with that); it is a definitive uncertainty linked to the irreconcilable character of the data. If we cannot grasp both the genesis and the singularity of the event, the appearance of things and their meaning, then two courses are open to us: either we master meaning, and appearances escape us; or the meaning escapes, and appearances are saved. By the very play of appearances, things are becoming further and further removed from their meaning, and resisting the violence of interpretation.

However this may be, we live in the real and in the order of rational determination, but we do so as though these things represented a 'state of exception'. We live in a double bind: with a dual allegiance, a dual obligation. We live, for the most part, in a Newtonian universe, but we are governed basically by non-determinist equations. Is there no getting over this disparity? Things are the same in social physics as in the physics of nature: macroscopic phenomena still conform to a deterministic analysis, but microscopic phenomena do not behave in any such way. At the level of physical processes, no

flagrant contradictions occur: we get along very well in a Newtonian universe. But in the social and historical world, the world of relationships, the mismatch between behaviour and analysis is becoming blatant. A whole area of social functioning still corresponds to a deterministic analysis, a 'realist' sociology (Marxist, empiricist, behaviourist or statistical), and we operate in large measure in this register of the 'real'. But, simultaneously, another kind of functioning – probabilistic, relativistic, aleatory – is gaining the upper hand, and the 'realist' area is secretly immersed in this. In this de-polarized social space (is it still a social or historical space?), traditional analysis no longer has any purchase, and solutions worked out at this level come to grief on a general uncertainty in the same way as classical calculations come to grief in quantum physics.

There is no longer any social determinism. The increase in speed renders all positions improbable. In a field of exclusion, you cannot calculate both the current position of an individual and his or her velocity of exclusion. With a particular type of work or status (or particular kinds of stocks and shares), you cannot calculate both the real value and the rate of devaluation. With entire categories, you cannot calculate both their advancement and their virtual downgrading (as if by chance, the advancement of women is accompanied by a creeping disqualification of the occupations concerned, which cancels out the social advantage gained). With signs, you cannot

calculate both their sense and their obsolescence. And with anything in general, you cannot calculate both its effect in real time and its duration. So it is with the indeterminacy of the social.

Hitherto, priority has been given to the analysis of determinate historical forms, in terms of distinct oppositions, such as capital and labour. Today, however, the sphere of labour has become hazy, and the concept itself has lost its definition. As Canetti says of history, we have passed beyond the 'blind point' of the social, and also imperceptibly beyond capital and labour and their antagonistic dynamic. The social machine now moves in a general cycle or, rather, on a Moebius strip, and the social actors are always on both sides of the contract.

The term 'social fracture' is itself part of an attempt to rehabilitate the old objective conditions of capital and labour. Just as the nineteenth-century utopians tried, in a period of industrial boom, to revive values associated with the land and with craft work, so we are trying, in an age of information technology and virtual reality, to revive the social conflicts and relations associated with the industrial era. The same utopia, the same optical illusion. And if the golden age of relations of force and dialectical contradictions has to go, that is just too bad. Marx's analysis itself was of the order of a deterministic simplification of conflicts and history, but it was linked to an ascending curve, and to the possibility of a determinate

negation: the social and the proletariat were still concepts destined to surpass and negate themselves. They bore no relation to the positivistic mystification of the social and of labour in our current context. What is lost in our 'interactivist' sociality is precisely the negative element, and the possibility of a determinate negation of the objective conditions. There are no 'objective conditions' anymore. More generally, the virtuality of information no longer offers the possibility of a determinate negation of reality. There is no 'objective' reality anymore. We may as well accept this, and stop dreaming of a situation that is long dead. We are no longer in the negative and in history, we are in a state where relations of force and social relations have more or less yielded their vitality to a virtual interface and a diffuse collective performance at the point where all speculative flows intersect – flows of employment, capital flows, information flows. But we have to regard this situation as an unprecedented one, and if history has become – as Marx put it – a farce, it might well be that that farce, by reproducing itself, may become our history.

A painful revision of the reality principle, a painful revision of the principle of knowledge. This latter assumes the existence of a dialectic between subject and object, with the subject in control, since he invents it.

Now, the rules of the game have only to change, or become uncertain, or we have only to lose control of

the principles, or the object has only to refuse to allow itself to be decoded in the terms we have laid down, for knowledge to become metaphysically impossible. And this is not simply a *metaphysical* impossibility: right now, the sciences are incapable of according a definite status to their object.

The object is not what it was. In all areas it evades us. It now appears only as a fleeting trace on computer screens. At the end of their experimenting, the most advanced sciences can only register its disappearance. Are we not faced here with an ironic revenge of the object, a strategy of deterrence, flouting experimental protocols and divesting the subject itself of its subject position?

Ultimately, science has never stopped churning out a reassuring scenario in which the world is being progressively deciphered by the advances of reason. This was the hypothesis with which we 'discovered' the world, atoms, molecules, particles, viruses, and so forth. But no one has ever advanced the hypothesis that things may discover us at the same time as we discover them, and that there is a dual relationship in discovery. This is because we do not see the object in its originality. We see it as passive, as waiting to be discovered – a bit like America being discovered by the Spaniards. But things are not like that. When the subject discovers the object – whether that object is viruses or primitive societies – the converse, and never innocent, discovery is also made: the discovery of the subject by the object. Today, they say that

science no longer 'discovers' its object, but 'invents' it. We should say, then, that the object, too, does more than just 'discover' us; it invents us purely and simply – it thinks us. It seems that we have victoriously wrenched the object from its peaceful state, from its indifference and the secrecy which enshrouded it. But today, before our very eyes, the enigmatic nature of the world is rousing itself, resolved to struggle to retain its mystery. Knowledge is a duel. And this duel between subject and object brings with it the subject's loss of sovereignty, making the object itself the horizon of its disappearance.

At any rate, it seems that reality, indifferent to any truth, cares not one jot for the knowledge to be derived from observing and analysing it. A docile – if not, indeed, hyper-docile – reality bends to all hypotheses, and verifies them all without distinction. For reality, it is all merely a superficial and provisional 'enframing' [*Gestell*] in the Heideggerian sense. Reality itself has become simulative, and leaves us with a sense of its fundamental unintelligibility, which has nothing mystical about it, but would seem, rather, to be ironic. Having reached the paroxystic state (which is, as the name implies, the state just before the end), reality slips over of its own accord into the parodic – irony and parody being the last glimmer reality sends out to us before disappearing, the last sign the object sends out to us from the depths of its mystery.

* * *

Critical thought sees itself as holding up a mirror to the world, but the world knows no mirror stage. Thought must, then, go beyond this critical stage and reach the ulterior stage of the object which thinks us, the world which thinks us. That object-thought is no longer reflective, but reversible. It is merely a special case in the succeeding states of the world, and no longer has the privilege of universality. It has no privilege whatsoever in respect of the incomparable event of the world (though it doubtless has the charm of singularity). It is, in any event, irreducible to the consciousness of the subject. In the disorder of the world, thought, as an exceptional attribute and destiny of the species, is too precious to be reduced to the consciousness of the subject. There could be said, then, to be an interplay between thinking and the world which has nothing to do with the exchange of truth – and which, indeed, might even be said to suppose such exchange impossible.

Object-thought, thought become inhuman, is the form of thinking which actually comes to terms with impossible exchange. It no longer attempts to interpret the world, nor to exchange it for ideas; it has opted for uncertainty, which becomes its rule. It becomes the thinking of the world thinking us. In so doing, it changes the course of the world. For though there is no possible equivalence between thought and the world, there does occur, beyond any critical point of view, a reciprocal alteration between matter and

thought. So the situation is reversed: if, once, the subject constituted an event in the world of the object, today the object constitutes an event in the universe of the subject. If the sudden emergence of consciousness constituted an event in the course of the world, today the world constitutes an event in the course of consciousness, in so far as it now forms part of its material destiny, part of the destiny of matter, and hence of its radical uncertainty.

Physical alteration of the world by consciousness, metaphysical alteration of consciousness by the world: there is no cause to ask where this begins, or 'who thinks whom'. Each is simultaneously in play, and each deflects the other from its goal. Has not humanity, with its inborn consciousness, its ambiguity, its symbolic order and its power of illusion, ended up altering the universe, affecting or infecting it with its own uncertainty? Has it not ended up contaminating the world (of which it is, nevertheless, an integral part) with its non-being, its way of not-being-in-the-world?

This raises many questions regarding the pertinence of knowledge – and not only classical knowledge but quantum, probabilistic science too, since, above and beyond the experimentation which alters its object – now cited as a commonplace example – man is faced in all registers with a universe altered and destabilized by thought. The hypothesis has even been advanced (Diran) that, if there were objective laws of the universe, it is because of humankind that they could neither be formulated nor operate

in fact. Rather than humanity bringing reason into a chaotic universe, it would be the bringer of disorder, by its act of knowledge, of thought, which constitutes an extraordinary *coup de force*: establishing a point (even a simulated one) outside the universe from which to see and reflect (on) the universe. If the universe is what does not have a double, since nothing exists outside it, then the mere attempt to make such a point exist is tantamount to a desire to put an end to it.

The Final Solution, or The Revenge of the Immortals

This final solution is, in fact, our deepest fantasy and the fantasy of our science. A fantasy of immortality by deep-freezing or cryogenics, or by replication and cloning in all its forms.

The most famous example is obviously Walt Disney in his coffin of liquid nitrogen. But at least he, with his whole body cryogenized, has the prospect of being resurrected whole. Other variants are appearing today which are so many experimental chimeras. In Phoenix, Arizona, for example – a place predestined for rebirth (from one's ashes) – only bodiless heads are now cryogenized, since the hope is to resuscitate individuals in their entirety from the brain, regarded as the core of the individual. By contrast with these cephaloid beings, in some laboratories across the Atlantic headless mice and frogs are being cloned, the intention being later to clone headless human beings which will serve to provide substitute organs. Since the head is regarded as the site of consciousness, it is better to manufacture headless creatures, so as to be able freely to use their organs without too many moral and psychological difficulties.

These are some of the forms of experimental cloning; but there is also cloning – and hence automatic immortality – in nature. It lies in the heart of our cells.

Normally, these cells are destined to divide a certain number of times, then die. If, during these divisions, a disturbance occurs (an impairment of the anti-tumour gene, or of the function of apoptosis), the cell becomes cancerous: *it forgets to die*, it forgets how to die. It will clone itself in billions of identical copies, forming a tumour. Usually, the subject dies and the cancerous cells die with him. But in the case of Henrietta Lacks,* tumour cells removed during her lifetime were grown on in the laboratory, and continued to proliferate endlessly. Because they were particularly virulent, remarkable specimens, these cells were sent to all parts of the world, and even into space on *Discoverer 17*. Thus the disseminated body of Henrietta Lacks, cloned at the molecular level, continues on its immortal rounds many years after her death.

Something in us is hidden: death. But something else lurks in each of our cells: the act of forgetting to die. Immortality hovers ominously over us. We speak always of the struggle of life against death, not of the

* Henrietta Lacks, an African-American resident of Turner Station, Baltimore County, USA, died of cervical cancer in 1951 at Johns Hopkins Hospital. It was found that cells from her tumour were able to reproduce themselves outside the body, a process which is still not properly understood. These so-called 'HeLa' cells have been used in medical experiments throughout the world, and it is often argued that the polio vaccine could not have been created without them.

opposite danger. But we have to fight against the impossibility of dying. At the least let-up on the part of living beings in their struggle for death – their struggle for division, sex and otherness – they become indivisible again, self-identical, and hence immortal.

Contrary to everything we ordinarily believe, nature first created immortal beings, and it was only by winning the battle for death that we became the living beings that we are. Blindly, we dream of defeating death and achieving immortality, whereas that is our most tragic destiny, a destiny inscribed in the previous life of our cells. It is this we are coming back to today in cloning (Freud's version of the death drive is simply this nostalgia for the unsexed, non-individuated states we knew before becoming mortal and discontinuous – true death being not so much the physical disappearance of the individual being as a regression towards a minimal state of undifferentiated living matter).

The evolution of the biosphere leads from immortals to mortals. In moving from absolute continuity to the subdivision of the selfsame – unicellular organisms – we gradually come closer to birth and death. Then the egg is fertilized by a sperm, and germinal cells specialize out: the organism produced is no longer the one or the other of its progenitors, but a peculiar combination of the two. We have moved from pure and simple reproduction to procreation. For the first time, the first two will die; and, for the first time, the third is born: we are at the stage of mortal, sexed, differentiated beings. The earlier order of viruses, of immortal beings,

continues, but henceforth that world of eternal beings is encompassed within the world of mortals. The victory in evolution lies with mortal, discontinuous beings – with us. But things are not set in stone, and reversion to the earlier state is always possible. Not only in the viral revolt of cells, but in the present colossal undertaking, on the part of living beings themselves, to reconstruct a homogeneous, continuous universe – a continuum which in this case is artificial, in which, through our technical media and machinery, through our immense system of communications and information, we are building a perfect clone, an identical double of our world, a virtual replica of the world which heralds an endless replication.

We are currently reproducing and copying the cancer cell's pathological immortality in the individual and the species.

This is the revenge of the immortal, undifferentiated beings over mortal, sexed beings. It is this we may term the final solution.

After the great revolution in evolution which the coming of sex and death represented, we have before us the great involution – the involution which, through cloning and any number of other techniques, aims to free us from sex and death. Whereas living matter has done its utmost for millions of years to wrest things out of sameness, to wrench itself out of this kind of primitive entropy and incest, we are currently, through the very progress of science, re-creating the conditions for entropy and incest, and

working on the disinformation of the species by cancelling out differences.

Here the question of the destiny of science arises. Does not its very progress lie on a (perverse) curve of evolution which could be said to lead to a total involution? And might not this final solution, towards which we are unconsciously working, be the secret destination of nature, and simultaneously that of all our efforts? This casts an unexpected light on everything we still regard today as a positive development.

The sexual revolution – the one and only sexual revolution – is that of the coming of sexuality in the evolution of living beings. The revolution of a duality putting an end to perpetual undividedness, to the perpetuity of the Same and its subdivision to infinity. It is, therefore, also the revolution of death. The opposite movement – ours – is the involutive movement of the species back beyond the revolution of the sexual and death. A colossal revisionist movement in the evolution of living matter.

Seen in this perspective, 'sexual liberation' is perfectly ambivalent. For though it seems to run in the same direction as the sexual revolution, of which it might be said to be the crowning glory, it turns out to be completely opposite to that revolution in its effects. The first phase is that of the dissociation of sexual activity from procreation: contraception, the pill, and so on. The second phase, even more fraught with consequences, is the dissociation of reproduction

from sex. Sex had liberated itself from reproduction; today, reproduction is liberating itself from sex. Asexual, biotechnical reproduction, running from artificial insemination to full-blown cloning. This, too, is a form of liberation, but it is the complete opposite of the other. We were sexually liberated; now, we are liberated from sex or, in other words, virtually rid of the sexual function. In clones – and soon in humans too – sexuality, following upon its total liberation, becomes a useless function. Thus sexual liberation, the self-styled crowning glory of the evolution of sexed beings, marks, in its final consequences, the end of the sexual revolution. There is the same ambiguity here as with science. The benefits we had foreseen are inextricably intertwined with the harmful effects, or the perverse side-effects.

And death? Being linked to sex, it must, in some respects, meet the same fate. There is indeed a liberation of death which is contemporary with sexual liberation. Similarly, we attempt to dissociate life from death – conserving only life, of course, and making death a useless function which we should be able to do without, just as we can do without sex in reproduction. Deprogramming death as fateful event, as symbolic event, and including it from now on only as virtual reality, as an option, as an alternative in the software of living beings. Like that virtual reality of sex – cybersex – which awaits us in the future: as a kind of attraction, so to speak. All these functions which have become useless – sex, thought, death

– will not disappear purely and simply, but will be recycled as leisure activities. It will be possible to preserve the – now useless – human being itself as an ontological attraction – a new variant of what Hegel called 'the self-propelling life of the dead [*das sich in sich selbst bewegende Leben des Todes*]'. From having been a vital function, death will become a luxury, a diversion. In a future civilization from which death has been eliminated, future clones might, perhaps, afford themselves the luxury of death, and become mortals once again in simulated form (cyberdeath).

Nature itself offers us a kind of anticipation of cloning in the form of twins and twinness: a mind-boggling situation of the reduplication of the same, of primitive symmetry, which we escape only by a breaking of – a break in – symmetry. But perhaps we have never entirely escaped this. And, with cloning, this hallucination of the twin from which we have never fully managed to separate ourselves might be said to re-emerge, at the same time as the fascination for a sort of archaic incest with this original double (for the dramatic consequences which ensue, see Cronenberg's film *Dead Ringers*).

Most of the time this twinness remains symbolic, but when it assumes material form it illustrates the mystery of that undivided separation that lies deep within us all (some have even claimed to find a biological trace of it). Hence, no doubt, the sacred, accursed character of twinness in all cultures and, as its

converse, the eternal remorse of individuation. It is, in fact, with this 'ontological' break from the twin that individual being begins, and hence the possibility of otherness and a dual relation. Individuated beings we are – and proud of it – but somewhere, in an unconscious deeper than the psychological, we have never quite come to terms with this. . . . Do we not still hanker after this double, and – going even further back – do we not feel a yearning for all the many fellow beings from which we were wrenched during evolution? Is there not, where all this is concerned, an eternal remorse of individuation?

A double repentance, in fact: not just the repentance of individual emancipation from the species but, more deeply, sexed living beings repenting of leaving the inorganic realm. This is how it is. Any liberation whatsoever is experienced as anomie and betrayal, and hence as a source of interminable neurosis, more and more serious as we move away from that origin. It is difficult to bear freedom – difficult, perhaps, to bear life itself as a break with the inorganic chain of matter. This is the revenge of matter, of the species, of the immortal beings we thought we had won out over.

Should we not see this collective phantasm of a return to an undivided existence, to the destiny of undifferentiated living matter, this drift towards an in-different immortality, as the very form of the repentance of living matter in respect of the non-living? As an age-old repentance for a state that is past

and gone, but has become, by virtue of – by the power of – our technologies, a form of silent compulsion?

Have we here a desire to put an end to the genetic randomness of differences, to put an end to the vagaries of living matter? Are we not tired of sex and difference, of emancipation and culture? The social and individual world offers many examples of this faltering, this resistance, or this nostalgic faithfulness to some earlier state. We are dealing with a kind of revisionism, a painful revision of the whole evolution of living matter and of the human species in particular – incapable of confronting its diversity, its complexity, its radical difference, its otherness.

But this may also be an adventure: pushing the artificialization of life as far as possible, to see what will survive this life-size experiment. If it turns out that not everything can be cloned, programmed, genetically and neurologically controlled, then what survives can truly be termed 'human' – an indestructible, inalienable form of the human. Naturally, in veering off down this experimental side-road, there is the danger that nothing will remain – the danger that the human will, purely and simply, be wiped out.

This was the experience of Biosphere II, the artificial synthesis of all the planet's data, the ideal duplication of the human species and its environment. In miniature, Biosphere II revealed the fact that the species and the entire planet (Biosphere I) had become their own virtual reality, that they had already been yielded up, beneath the giant geodesic

dome of information, to a one-way experimental destiny. But can we still speak here of the human species? Is a species which aims to become artificially immortal, and to transform itself into pure information, still human?

Humankind has no prejudices: it is as happy to use itself as a guinea-pig as anything else, animate or inanimate. It will as happily gamble with the destiny of its own species as with that of all the others. In its blind will for greater knowledge, humanity is programming its own destruction with the same offhandedness, the same ferocity, as it is programming that of other species. It cannot be accused of greater egoism. Humanity is sacrificing itself to an experimental destiny unknown to the other species, which have hitherto been left to meet their natural fates. And whereas something like a self-preservation instinct seemed to be associated with that natural fate, this recent experimental destiny sweeps any such notion aside. A sign that, behind the ecological obsession with protection and conservation, which has more to do with nostalgia and remorse, a quite different trend has already won out: the trend towards the sacrifice of the species and unlimited experimentation.

A double, contradictory movement: alone of all species, the human being seeks to construct his immortal double – crowning natural selection with an artificial selection, which confers upon him an

absolute privilege. But by that very act he puts an end to natural selection, which implied the death of each species, including his own, in accordance with the law of evolution. In this way he is breaking the symbolic rule and, in his haughty attempt to put an end to evolution, ushering in the involution of his own species, which is currently losing its own specificity, its natural immunity. The morality of artificial species is even more rapid than that of natural species; hence, along these artificial paths, the human race is perhaps rushing even faster towards its end.

There is a very strange truth underlying all this: namely, that the human species seems to have trouble being reconciled with itself. In parallel with the violence it wreaks on others, it wreaks a violence of its own on itself – a violence in which it treats itself, here and now, as the survivor of a future catastrophe. As though, while being convinced of its own superiority, it were repenting of an evolution which has brought it to such a position of privilege and taken it, in a sense, beyond its end as a species. This moment is like the one Canetti identifies as the point when we passed out of history, except that here we are passing out of the species – and hence out of something even more fundamental. We are crossing a point beyond which nothing is human or inhuman anymore (in Canetti's piece, this was the point beyond which nothing was true or false anymore), and what is at stake here is no longer merely history lurching over into post-history, but the species lurching into the void.

Might not the human race, by some unexpected twist, rediscover that law of animal species which, at the critical point of saturation, automatically turn towards a form of collective suicide?

The inhumanity of the undertaking can be seen in the abolition of everything within us that is human, all too human: our desires, our deficiencies, our neuroses, our dreams, our disabilities, our viruses, our lunacies, our unconscious and even our sexuality – all the features which make us specific living beings – are now being ruled out of court. All genetic manipulation is haunted by an ideal model from which all negative traits are eliminated. So, in Biosphere II, an experimental prototype, there are no viruses, no germs, no scorpions, no sexual reproduction. Everything is expurgated, immunized, immortalized by transparency, disembodiment, disinfection, prophylaxis.

The reduction of life to survival is achieved by gradual reduction to the lowest common denominator – to the genome and the genetic inheritance – where it is the perpetual movement of the code which carries the day, and the distinctive signs of the human are effaced before the metonymic eternity of cells. The worst thing is that the living beings generated by their own formulae will undoubtedly not survive the process. What lives by the formula will die by the formula.

The boundaries between the human and the inhuman are indeed being wiped out. But we are transcending those boundaries not towards the superhuman and the

transvaluation of values, but towards the subhuman and a disappearance of the very characteristics symbolic of the species. In the end, Nietzsche is being proved right: the human species, left to itself, can only duplicate or destroy itself.

The original humanism, the humanism of the Enlightenment, was based on the qualities of human beings, their natural gifts and virtues, their human essence, together with the right to have freedom and to exercise that freedom. Current humanism, in its extended version, is more concerned with conserving the organic being and the species. The justification for human rights no longer lies in a sovereign, moral being, but in the prerogatives of an endangered species. And with this shift these rights themselves become problematic, since the question arises of the rights of other species, other breeds, and of nature, against which those rights have to be defined. Now, is there a definition of the Human in genetic terms? And if such a thing existed, could a species have rights over its own genome, and over its potential genetic transformation? We share 98 per cent of our genes with the apes, and 90 per cent with mice. What rights does this shared heritage confer on apes and mice? Moreover, it seems that 90 per cent of the genes in our genome have no function. What right have those genes to exist? This is a crucial question, for if we decree that they are useless, we grant ourselves the right to eradicate them. And there is the same

problem for any part of humanity itself: as soon as the human is no longer defined in terms of freedom and transcendence, but in terms of a biological equilibrium and functions, the specificity of human beings is eradicated and, with it, the specificity of humanism. Western humanism has already seen itself threatened once: by other cultures bursting on to the scene in the sixteenth century. At present, things are not giving way at the cultural level, but at that of the species: anthropological deregulation and simultaneous deregulation of all the moral, legal and symbolic rules that were those of humanism. Can we still speak of a soul and a conscience, can we speak of an unconscious, in view of the automata, clones and chimeras which will carry on the human species? Not just individual capital, but phylogenetic capital is threatened by this evaporation of the boundaries of the human – an evaporation not even into the inhuman, but into something which falls short of the human and the inhuman: the genetic simulation of life.

The respective interplay of the human and the inhuman has been halted, the balance between them destroyed. And, though the potential disappearance of the human is indeed a serious matter, the disappearance of the inhuman is every bit as grave. The specificity of everything that is not a human being, and of everything in human beings which is inhuman, is threatened by an emerging hegemony of the human in its highly modern, highly rational definition. Everywhere we see the desire to annex nature,

animals, other races and cultures, to a universal jurisdiction. Everything is assigned its place in a hegemonic evolutionary anthropology, marking the positive triumph of a single-track conception of the human (in its Western definition, of course) in the name of the universal, the good, and democracy. Human rights are the engine of this anthropic, anthropocratic thinking today, behind which both the human and the inhuman proliferate in strict formal contradiction. And the result is a simultaneous re-emergence of human rights and human rights violations.

The other cultures do not make this distinction between the human and the inhuman. We invented it, and we are currently abolishing it – not in a higher synthesis, but by reduction to an undifferentiated technical abstraction, in accordance with the same dizzying prospect of a final solution.

We are told that whatever the genetic destiny of the clone, it will never be exactly the same as the original (naturally enough, since there will have been an original before it). Allegedly, we have nothing to fear from biological cloning, since culture already differentiates us in any case. Salvation is to be found in acquired characteristics, and in culture. They alone save us from infernal sameness. Now, it is, in fact, precisely the other way round. It is culture which clones us, and mental cloning precedes biological cloning by a long way. It is the acquired characteristic which clones us today culturally, under the banner of

la pensée unique. It is through ideas, ways of life, the cultural context and milieu that our innate differences are most surely cancelled out. It is through the school system, the media system, the mass culture and information systems, that human beings become copies of each other. And it is this *de facto* cloning – social cloning, the industrial cloning of persons and things – which engenders the biological idea of the genome and genetic cloning, which is a mere ratification of mental and behavioural cloning.

This changes all thinking on prescriptive limits and the rights of the individual where scientific and technical experimentation is concerned. All the issues currently before the ethical committees and the collective consciousness, and all the speculation on them, have no meaning (other than a pseudo-moral and pseudo-philosophical meaning) when it is our culture of difference itself which acts most effectively to produce indifferentiation, the 'Human Xerox' and *la pensée unique*.

On the other hand, this whole business of cloning may have an unexpected side to it. For example, the clone may be seen as the parody of the original, its ironic, grotesque version. In that case, we may imagine all kinds of situations which might overturn our 'Oedipal' psychology. Such as the future clone killing his father, not in order to sleep with his mother – something which is impossible now, since there is only one parent-cell, and the father may very well be a woman – but to recover his status as an original. Or, conversely,

the original, disqualified by his double, avenging himself on his clone. All kinds of conflicts which will be not between children and parents, but between the original and its double. We may even envisage an entirely new function of clones (one that runs counter to all the functions assigned to them today, which generally have to do with perpetuating life): they may be used to satisfy the death drive, the instinct of self-destruction. One will be able, for example, to kill off one's own clone and so destroy oneself without any really mortal risk: to commit suicide by proxy. But our biologists and moralists have not got round to this yet. They have not got to the point of seeing the death drive as a fact just as basic as immortality, though both are simultaneously in play in cloning – which by no means simplifies matters.

It has been one of the benefits of this enterprise more generally to reveal to us what any halfway-radical philosophy already knew: that there is no morality to set against this immoral desire, this technical desire for immortality. There are no laws of nature, nor is there any moral law which might be said to emanate from such laws. That is all an idealist vision which has, indeed, been perpetuated within science itself. There are, then, no natural rights or prohibitions which could base themselves on a division between Good and Evil. What is at stake here is not moral, but symbolic. There is a set of rules for living things; its form is secret and its purpose unexplained. Life is not 'worth' anything, not even human life. And if it is

precious, it is precious not as a value, but as a form – an excessive and immoral form. Unexchangeable for any other life or value whatsoever. The human race itself is not exchangeable for any other artificial race of beings, even if that race were superior to it in value and performance.

Against the alleged immorality of cloning we should not, then, set an 'ethics of difference' and a humanistic, value-based morality. Cloning should be opposed, rather, with a superior immorality of forms. Not an abstract conception of law, but a vital exigency – which is the exigency of thought also, for thought, too, is a form which is not exchangeable for any objective purposive goal, or for its own artificial double. And this is how it can protect us.

So immortal creatures first ruled the earth, followed by the reign of mortal, sexed beings, which got the upper hand. But now the immortals are taking their silent revenge with all the techniques of cloning, artificial immortality and the marginalization of sex and death.

However, the outcome of the contest is not yet decided, and we can be sure of some fierce resistance from the mortals that we are – a resistance from the very depths of the species, consisting in a rejection of final solutions in all their forms.

Useless Functions

When the world, or reality, finds its artificial equivalent in the virtual, it becomes useless. When the only thing needed to reproduce the species is cloning, sex becomes a useless function. When everything can be encoded digitally, language becomes a useless function. When everything can be reduced to the brain and the neuronal network, the body becomes a useless function. When computer technology and the automatism of machines are all that is needed for production, work becomes a useless function. When, in the 'memory of water', the transference of the electromagnetic wave produces the same effects as the molecule itself, the molecule becomes useless. When time, and all its dimensions, are absorbed by real time, it becomes a useless function. When artificial memories reign supreme, our organic memories become superfluous (they are, in fact, gradually disappearing). When everything takes place between interactive terminals on the communication screen, the Other has become a useless function.

Now, how do things stand with the Other when it has disappeared? What does the Real become, what does the body become, when they have been

supplanted by their operational formulae? What do sex, work, time and all the figures of otherness become when they fall prey to technological synthesis? What becomes of the event and history when they are programmed, broadcast and diluted to infinity in the media? Where the medium becomes highly defined, the substance becomes highly diluted.

It is the same with the living being when it is reduced to its 'abstract' (its DNA and its genetic code); what is to be done with this residual human being? What is to be done with the worker, once computerized work has been synthesized? This is not a new question: in Marx's writings, the question was what to do with human beings once their labour-power had been extracted. It has simply been radicalized to the point where it now embraces the whole of reality, which is slipping over into the area of that kind of waste we don't know how to dispose of.

Yet all these non-degradable things continue to exist, like the phantom extremities of an amputated limb. They are still running on inertia, like Jarry's Siberian ten-man bicycle, with its corpses which merely pedal ever faster – like Ballard's astronauts, long since dead, but circling the globe in perpetuity. Like those political and cultural institutions which carry on along their path into the void like headless chickens, or the high-wire artist who keeps on advancing down a wire that does not exist. Like the light of dead stars. Like the judgement of

God, which is still there, even though God, too, died long ago.

The challenge to reality comes no longer from philosophical thought but from Virtual Reality and its techniques. Whereas thought put an end to the real in thought, the new technologies put an end to it in reality. Whereas thought works towards the un-completion of reality, the Virtual works towards the completion of the real and its final solution. The denial of reality which, in the philosophical dimension, was a mental operation becomes, with the technologies of the Virtual, a surgical one.

Of the Cheshire Cat there remains only the Smile.
Of the dream there remains only a memory trace.
Of the molecule there remains only the electromagnetic trace.
Of the real there remains only virtual reality.
Of the other there remains only a spectral form.

The 'memory of water' saga (Benveniste) is exemplary: the absent molecules producing effects, the electromagnetic waves dissociated from their substance, no molecular message remaining. Only the medium is efficient. This is the last stage of the transfiguration of the world into pure information, and hence of the general movement of our universe: high dilution of reality, the disappearance of any real source, which has now become useless.

From the virtual perspective, the real is only a

vestige. It is merely a reference corpse. But so too are sex, work and the body: they are merely references now for the work of mourning, or for a diffuse melancholy. Something like *saudade*,* in the sense of a sorrow not for what is dead, but for what has disappeared. Now, the Real did not die a natural death; it simply disappeared, and we have only the vestiges of it. Or we know only how to tell its story – as in that fable in which the ancestors, in times of trouble or danger, knew where to go in the forest, how to make fire, how to perform the rite, but in the course of time the rite was lost, then the fire, then even the place, so that the descendants now know only how to tell the story. Today we tell ourselves the story of the Real, as once we told ourselves the stories of myth and the primal crime.

The Real – now unexchangeable because it has been spirited away by its double, but not ideologically degradable – becomes subject to endless demand, becomes an ideological concession granted in perpetuity. Work, disqualified as a productive function, is subjected to endless demand in the name of a 'right to work', an inalienable right to alienation itself (whereas, as the negative destiny of the industrial wage-slave, it was supposed to disappear).

* A mood of melancholic yearning, widely regarded as typically Portuguese. Connected with the myth of the lost king Sebastian, whose return is still awaited.

Thus art, work, religion and the body, though dead, have forgotten to die. Since the gene presiding over their demise is masked for one reason or another, they are entering a 'phase beyond', an interminable phase. Wherever the process of apoptosis is blocked, we are in a world of entities which are virtually deceased, but have not yet found the agent of their demise.

Time itself – what are we to do with what remains to us, which now appears to us only in the form of ennui, that non-degradable residue? What are we to do with truth – the 'objective' world no longer has any time for truth – and all kinds of values of that sort? What are we to do with freedom, whose heart still beats weakly in a corner, like the digital clock on the Pompidou Centre? Who now cares a fig for it, since its dispersal into 'happiness' and the unconditional liberation of everything? Only the Idea of freedom still exists. Man and his freedom: phantom essences, holograms, for which Reality will be the theme park.

The destiny of all these things is to survive artificially, to be resurrected as reservation fetishes, like the animal species which are being 'rehabilitated', like the museified ghettos and all the things which survive in intensive care or on a drip-feed. There will always be horses, aborigines, children, sex, reality, but as an alibi, a fetish, a symbolic reservation, a décor, a privilege, a relic, a rare object – if not, indeed, an object of perversion (children). Protected species for well-calculated purposes of predation, to be enjoyed by some *in vivo* and consumed by others *in vitro*.

However, the dead – even the virtual dead – take their revenge. Time abolished in real time takes its revenge in the form of a frenzied millenarianism or the desperate search for origins. Nature reduced to an energy source takes its revenge in the form of natural catastrophes. The body conjured away into the virtual takes its revenge in the form of virality and autoimmune pathology. Foreclosed otherness returns in hatred, racism and lethal experimentation. The Real effaced by its double is a potentially dangerous ghost.

When you travel from Punta Arenas to Rio Grande in the south of Patagonia, for a hundred kilometres you skirt La Bahia Inútil – Useless Bay – where the sky is low, purple and immense, and the sheep have an air of night-owls about them. It is all so vast and so empty, so definitively empty, that it does not even merit a name; as though God had by some oversight cast this superfluous landscape down here – a landscape all the stranger for being part of an entire landmass, Patagonia, where all is useless and senseless.

Why, in this total solitude, create this additional bay, where there are no signs to decipher and nothing to detain the traveller? But to give it this name was also the most extraordinary homage one could have paid to a landscape, and the person who did so truly sensed the monotony of the hereafter – the supernatural end of all signification, the limbo world to which culture chose not to allot a proper name. Patagonia is rich in dramatic names – in Isles of Desolation, and so

on – but all these seem very commonplace beside the term 'useless'. It occurs to you that truth itself would have deserved such a sublime epithet: 'Useless Truth'. And perhaps truth is in fact there – in those grey waters with that perpetual wind blowing over them.

The Impossible Exchange of One's Own Life

Our individual lives stand under the moral sign of a self-appropriation, and hence of a denial of all radical otherness, though that otherness makes its return in the form of the thwarted individual destinies that are our many neuroses and psychical disorders. In an age when all effects of will, freedom and responsibility pose an insoluble set of problems for us, and the liberation of energies, mores, sexes and desires is producing some noteworthy counter-effects; at a point when our entire culture, on the verge of the year 2000, is embarking on a painful revision in the face of the possibility of a final solution originating in science or history; at this moment of violent contradiction of the modern process of liberation, we have undoubtedly to go back to the origins to see whether this drive for liberation does not run counter to something even stronger, wilder, more primitive.

A battle would seem to be raging within us between the aspiration of an entire culture towards individual freedom and a repugnance for individuality and freedom stemming from somewhere deep in the species. And this contradictory movement finds expression in irresistible remorse, in deep resentment towards the

world as it is, and in ever more intense self-hatred. The demand of the conscious mind is for greater and greater autonomy, for ever more freedom – by which we cut free from the conformism of traditional societies and, even more, from the archaic *enchaînement* of the species; by which we break the symbolic pact and the cycle of metamorphoses. Two kinds of violence ensue: a violence of liberation, and an opposite violence in reaction against the excess of freedom, safety, protection and integration, and hence against the loss of any dimension of fate, of destiny – a violence directed against the emergence of the Ego, the Self, the Subject or the Individual, which takes its toll in the form of self-hatred and repentance.

> This hatred of the present has not been well understood. Perhaps the first demand of emerging consciousness in this mass civilization is expressive. The spirit, released from servile dumbness, spits dung and howls with anguish stored during long ages. . . . In man, self-awareness has been accompanied at this stage with a sense of the loss of more general natural powers, of a price paid by instinct, by sacrifices of freedom, impulse (alienating labor, et cetera). The drama of this stage of human development seems to be the drama of disease, of self-revenge. An age of special comedy. What we see is not simply the leveling de Tocqueville predicted, but the plebeian stage of evolutionary self-awareness. Perhaps the revenge taken by numbers, by the species, on our

> impulses of narcissism (but also on the demand for freedom) is inevitable. In this new reign of multitudes, self-awareness tends to reveal us to ourselves as monsters. (Saul Bellow, *Herzog*)

The modern individual has crossed a critical threshold beyond which an original 'backlash' occurs on the part of the species – denial of self becoming the last stage of individual consciousness, just as, according to Nietzsche, *Ressentiment* is the last stage of the genealogy of morals. This is where the paradox and the perverse effects of all liberation – of what we call the advance of reason and civilization – crystallize. For this to happen, there is no need for a death drive, a biological nostalgia for a state prior to individuation and sex: it is our modern, paradoxical condition which produces this denial of self, this mortiferous repulsion. And indeed, death drive or no death drive (that immortality of protozoa), we are not far from rediscovering its equivalent today in the dimension of the clone as degree Xerox of the individual and degree Zero of evolution.

The question raised is, then, the question of destiny, of impossible destiny, of our collusion in the paradoxical destiny of a species haunted by the imagining of its own end. And the problem is no longer how to conquer freedom – how *are* we to conquer it? – but how to escape it. How are we to escape unchecked individuation and self-hatred? It is not how to escape

our destiny, but how not to escape it? For we have lost the original. The destiny of the individual soul has lost much of its grandeur. In the past, the human being was not doomed to be merely what he is. God and Satan wrestled over him. In the past, we were important enough to have a battle fought over our souls. Today, our salvation is our own affair. Our lives are no longer marked by original sin but by the risk of failing to fulfil their ultimate potential: so we accumulate plans, ideals and programmes; we constantly pass the buck and seek to outdo each other in a universal effort to perform. And we subside into the condition of those who, as Kierkegaard put it, are no longer capable of facing the Last Judgement in person.

Since no one fights over our souls any longer, it is up to us to fight over ourselves, to put our own existences on the line, to be endlessly trying things out and competing in a perpetual, infernal contesting of ourselves – though there is no Last Judgement anymore, and there are no longer any real rules.

In the final stage of his 'liberation' and emancipation through the networks, screens and new technologies, the modern individual becomes a fractal subject, both subdivisible to infinity and indivisible, closed on himself and doomed to endless identity. In a sense, the perfect subject, the subject without other – whose individuation is therefore not at all contradictory with mass status. Quite the contrary, indeed: he is the

dispersal of the mass-effect into each individual parcel – each encapsulating in itself the seriality, the crazed [*étoilé*], metonymic structure of the mass, the characteristic feature of which is that it is at any one point substitutable for itself. Or, alternatively, the individual himself forms a mass – the mass structure being present, as in a hologram, in each individual fragment. In the virtual and media world, the mass and the individual are merely electronic extensions of each other. We have thus become virtual monads, free electrons, individuals left to ourselves, desperately seeking the other. But the particle has no other. The other particle is always the same. All that can exist is an anti-particle, which, on impact, would make the first particle disappear. Perhaps this is the only last eventuality there is: the destiny of the disappearance of matter into anti-matter, of sex into the other sex, of the individual into the mass. Reduced to nuclear identity, we no longer have any alternative destiny except a collision with our antagonistic double. This is, pretty much, the curse which afflicts the species – this latter breaking up first into individuals, then these in their turn breaking up into scattered particles by a process of inexorable fragmentation. Like matter, which saw itself split first into atoms, then into increasingly elusive particles – in such a way that you sense there will never be a final, truly elementary stage of matter, any more than there will be a definitive reference stage of the human being.

* * *

The modern individual, being no longer part of an order greater than himself, but a victim of his own will – commanded to be what he wants and to want what he is – ends up resenting himself, and, as a consequence, frittering himself away in the exhaustion of his possibilities: a new form of voluntary servitude. It is easy to understand why he may well ask nothing better than to lose that will and freedom, to hand over life-and-death discussions to anything else whatsoever. Any form at variance with individual being will enable him to escape the responsibility. Most often, however, the chosen forms of modification of the will and deviation of desire are mere parodies of fate. A fatal strategy this, then, but a derisory one. In the absence of transcendent powers watching over us, and in the perpetual effort to produce proof of our existence, we are forced to become '*fatal*' to ourselves. 'Deprived of destiny, the modern individual replaces it by a fateful experimentation on himself' (Sloterdijk).

This is how it is with all those who deliberately submit themselves to extreme conditions: solitary climbers or sailors, cavers and those who play jungle wargames. All risk-situations, which were once man's natural lot, are today re-created artificially in a form of nostalgia for extremes, survival and death. A technical simulation of pain and sacrifice – and this includes the humanitarian compulsion to take others' suffering on oneself in order to find in it a substitute destiny. Everywhere we find the same symbolic

mortification. Stephen Hawking, brain of genius in a fallen body: the ideal mannequin of superscience. The plastic surgery undergone by Orlan* and so many others who experiment on and alter their bodies to the point of mutilation and torture. Handicaps, mutilations, prostheses, sexual fascination with accidents and lethal technologies (Cronenberg's *Crash*). Right down to 'boosting', that very specific method employed by the disabled athletes in the Atlanta Olympics who deliberately inflicted injury on themselves to improve their results. Not to mention drugs and other forms of mind-bending – anything goes in the attempt to achieve this violent deconstruction of the body and thought. But experimentation occurs not only in the extreme cases. Behind every television and computer screen, every technical operation which confronts him daily, the individual is analysed in return, function by function. He is tested, experimented on, fragmented, harassed, summoned to respond: a fractal subject doomed henceforth to be disseminated in the networks. And the price to be paid is a mortification of the gaze, the body, and the real world.

With the media, polls, and all the checks and verifications which go on, we are living on a kind of perpetual test-bed (McLuhan), where the feedback is more or less automatic. We talk of sexual harassment, but it is all the social, psychological, political and

* The French performance artist Orlan is noted for using plastic surgery on her own body as the vehicle of her art.

mental promptings which are so many veiled forms of harassment, persecution and behavioural servitude. Through these, the individual reinvents for himself a form of *trompe-l'œil* destiny as the technical hallucination unfolds – a form of artificial danger through which each person defies himself to exist. Like those ascetics and anchorites of old who subjected themselves to all kinds of ordeals in the hope that God would respond to their bodily torments.

Thus, released from any fateful decree, deprived of any material adversity, modern individuals spend their lives putting their bodies and minds through a perpetual settling of accounts, daily inflicting the ordeal of the Last Judgement on themselves.

Beyond this derisory, compulsive identity – which is only ever the expiation, on the altar of technology and the sciences, of the refusal or loss of any symbolic belonging – is there not another form of destiny not to be escaped from? The path of a radical strangeness which breaks the vicious circle of identity; the path of a radical illusion which breaks the vicious circle of reality – destiny being, in the end, not that which opposes one's own will, but an impersonal will which enfolds one's own in its more subtle command.

An End to Freedom

Two spectres haunt the subject: the spectre of the Will and the spectre of Freedom. The pressure everywhere is for the subject to claim the full use of the one and the boundless exercise of the other. Today it is illegal to give up one's own will, or not to wish to be free.

The 'liberated' man becomes fully responsible for the objective conditions of his existence. This is, to say the least, an ambiguous destiny. In this way, the 'liberated' worker, for example, falls prey to the objective conditions of the labour market.

At the same time as it forms part of a movement of liberation (of energy, sex, mores and work), modernity also involves the transference of everything which had to do with the imagination, dreams, the ideal and utopia into a technical, operational reality: the materialization of all desires, the realization of all possibilities. Everything is accomplished unconditionally; there is no transcendence any more, no alienation. Fulfilled individuals, but fulfilled only virtually, of course. It is the virtual which renders reality total by absorbing any imaginary alternative. The individual at last becomes identical with himself; the promise of the ego has been fulfilled. The

prophecy which was that of the whole of modern history, from Hegel and Marx to Stirner and the Situationists – the prophecy of the appropriation of self and the end of alienation – has been fulfilled. Not for better, but for worse. We have passed from the Other to the Same, from alienation to identification (similarly, the Nietzschean prophecy of the transvaluation of values has been fulfilled for the worse – not in our passing beyond Good and Evil, but in our falling back this side of Good and Evil).

This indivisible individual is the achieved utopia of the subject: the perfect subject, the subject without other. Without inner alterity, he is doomed to an endless identity. Self-identity of the individual, the subject, the nation, the race. Self-identity of the world, now technically and absolutely real – now 'become what it is'. No more metaphors, no more metamorphoses. All that remains is the indefinite metastasis of identity.

Identity is a dream that is pathetically absurd. You dream of being yourself when you have nothing better to do. You dream of yourself and gaining recognition when you have lost all singularity. Today we no longer fight for sovereignty or for glory, but for identity. Sovereignty was a mastery; identity is merely a reference. Sovereignty was adventurous; identity is linked to security (and also to the systems of verification which identify you). Identity is this obsession with appropriation of the liberated being, but a being liberated in sterile conditions, no longer

knowing what he is. It is a label of existence without qualities. Now, all energies – the energies of minorities and entire peoples, the energies of individuals – are concentrated today on that derisory affirmation, that prideless assertion: I am! I exist! I'm alive, I'm called so-and-so, I'm European! A hopeless affirmation, in fact, since when you need to prove the obvious, it is by no means obvious.

The process of liberation is never innocent. It starts out from an ideology and an idealist movement in history. It tends always towards a reduction of the fundamental ambivalence of Good and Evil. Good or bad, the fact of being 'liberated' absolves us of an original evil. There is an element of simplification and transparency, of the elimination of the dark continent, the dark side, the accursed share, and the coming of the reign of value: all these things are present in the Rousseauist concept of a happy destiny, a natural vocation, a 'liberation'.

Not to be free is immoral, and liberation is both baptism and salvation, the true democratic sacrament.

Now, this is a utopian model. You cannot liberate Good without liberating Evil, and the ambivalence is definitive. The historical advance of the forces of Evil undoubtedly proceeds even more rapidly than that of the forces of Good. Another problematic consequence: as soon as they are liberated, things begin to float – money in speculation, sex in the lack of defined sexual boundaries, production in senseless overproduction,

time in the undecidable calculation of origins. Once they are liberated, things take both an uncertain and an exponential turn. An uncontrollable ratcheting-up (e.g. nuclear power) and, at the same time, the beginning of the countdown: as soon as there is accounting, a calculation of value and accumulation, there is the prospect of exhaustion. Liberation leads always to a critical threshold beyond which its effects are reversed.

Liberty has succumbed to its perverse effect: liberation. In its accepted philosophical sense, liberty is an idea and, by fulfilling it, we have lost it. More or less the same thing happened with desire, which faded as an ideal at the same time. Thus liberty, by its own logic, died a natural death, abolished in our profoundest imagination. But it still has to die an unnatural, ignoble one, dragged in effigy through all the discourses which stand in for it – including the discourse of human rights, and more generally all the forms which have replaced existence with the right to existence, difference with the right to difference, desire with the right to desire – and, finally, liberty with the right to be what one is and to want what one wants, which is its derisory form. Liberty thus shares the fate of all these defunct values, exhumed and resuscitated by the work of mourning – nostalgic and melancholic values which the system puts back in circulation as an additional 'moral dimension'.

One can understand why the individual wants one thing only: to be rid of it. 'Being nothing is intoxicating, and the will is a bucket you knocked

over in the yard, with a lazy flick of the foot, as you went by' (Pessoa).

This paradoxical movement may extend as far as the rejection of this unconditional liberty. The utopia of liberty, once realized, is no longer a utopia, and it is earlier forms, past forms, enslaved forms, which gradually become once again a utopia.

Omar Khayyam: 'Rather one freeman bind with chains of love/Than set a thousand prisoned captives free.'

Let us be clear about this: we are not speaking of the utopia of a historically defunct form of master and slave, but that of a linkage, a concatenation of forms, of a subjection to the cycle of becoming, to the rule of metamorphoses. Not a personal subjection of the slave, but the subjection of words one to another in language. The necessity of a form is of this order: words are not 'free', and it is certainly not the task of writing to 'liberate' them. On the contrary, writing binds them together, links them in 'chains', but they are linked together with 'chains of love'. The only thing they are to be liberated from is, possibly, their meaning – so that they may form a more secret concatenation.

The Hero does not 'liberate' events or historical forces, nor does he construct a history. He connects, concatenates the figures of myth and legend; that is why neither Revolution nor Democracy needs heroes. The Poet does not 'liberate' words according to their meaning. He binds them together in accordance with

the figures of the language; this is why the Republic has no need of poets. The Madman and the Idiot do not 'liberate' drives or lift repression. They rediscover the secret concatenation of the figures of madness – which is closer to an archaic metamorphosis or an otherworldly curse than to desire and the unconscious.

More generally, forms are not liberated; only forces are liberated. The world of forces, of values, and even of ideas – the entire world of liberation – is the world of progress and competitive striving. Forms, for their part, do not surpass each other: there is movement from one form to another, and this play of forms is tragic and sacrificial; whereas relations of force, conflicts of values and ideology, are merely dramatic and conflictual. All the figures of modernity, of liberation, are utopian: theirs is a dream of an ideal non-place. Forms, for their part – the forms of art, for example – are not inspired by utopianism: they do not dream of surpassing themselves towards some other end; they are, in themselves, the non-place.

In any case, to be liberated you have first to have been a slave. And to have been a slave, you have to have not been sacrificed (only the prisoners who were not sacrificed became slaves). Something of this exemption from sacrifice and something of the consequent servility persists in 'liberated' man, particularly in today's servility – not the servility which precedes liberation, but the servility which succeeds it. Servility of the second kind: servility without a master.

In ancient society, there was the master and the slave. Later came the lord and the serf. Later still, the capitalist and the wage-labourer. There is a servitude particular to each of these stages: you know who is the master, who the slave. It is all different now. The master has disappeared. Only the serfs and servility remain. Now, what is a slave without a master? A person who has devoured his master and internalized him, to the point of becoming his own master. He has not killed him in order to become master (that is Revolution); he has absorbed him while remaining a slave – indeed, more slavish than a slave, more servile than a serf: his own serf. The final stage of his servility which, from one regression to another, eventually reaches back to the point of sacrifice. Except that no one any longer does him the honour of sacrificing him, and he is forced, in despair, to sacrifice himself to himself and his own will. Our service-based society is a serf-based society, a society of individuals rendered servile for their own use, slaves to their own functions and performance – perfectly emancipated, perfectly servile.

If the problem of freedom can no longer be posed, then we have to think up an original way of not posing it – or of going beyond it. What is there beyond freedom? The same alternative faces us here as when we ask about the end: what is there beyond the end?

The equivalent in the register of freedom of what occurs in jokes or poetic language (in which words

are not free to be exchanged for others, nor exchanged for their meaning, but exchanged as they have, in themselves, been changed by the grace of language) is that people, above and beyond their own wills, are what they are; are the direct coming-to-pass of what they are and what they do – at least in their 'poetic' moments, when they are not representing anything – especially not themselves as subjects. The rest – the rhetoric of will, responsibility and freedom, the image-playback of our whole moral philosophy – is all very well for the disenchanted consciousness of the alienated subject, the subject who is 'liberated' because they no longer know what do with him as a slave, he himself not knowing what to do with his freedom.

It is, in fact, a highly relative freedom, this freedom to become responsible, as a subject, for the objective conditions of one's own life. As long as I am subject to objective conditions, I am still an object, I am not wholly free – I have to be freed from that freedom itself. And this is possible only in play, in that more subtle freedom of play, the arbitrary rules of which paradoxically free me, whereas in reality I am kept in chains by my own will.

The Dice Man

One may, thus, envisage submitting to an arbitrary set of rules, as in Luke Rhinehart's *The Dice Man*. Creating a micro-situation governed by fate, so that the problem of the will no longer arises. One day the hero decides to gamble his life on the throw of a dice. From that point on, the dice alone will decide whether he is, for example, to seduce a particular woman, break with a friend, go off to India, do nothing and simply take a holiday, or commit suicide.

> Chance is the most ancient divinity of the world, and behold, I come to deliver all things from their bondage under Purpose. . . . The mind is in bondage to Purpose and Will, but I shall free it to Divine Accident and Prankishness. . . .
>
> What if [the sense of self] represents a psychological appendix: a useless anachronistic pain in the side? – or, like the mastodon's huge tusks: a heavy, useless and ultimately self-destructive burden? What if the sense of being someone represents an evolutionary error as disastrous to the further

development of a more complex creature as was the shell for snails or turtles?

Is not thought, consciousness itself, an appendix, an aberration, a hypertelic excrescence, a luxurious but lethal dysfunction, which contravenes the whole of evolution by suddenly becoming aware of it – paralysed by its own image?

There is, then, something fundamental at stake in this existential throw of the dice: it means no longer having any illusions about one's own will; it means going beyond this and opening up to an objective randomness which might be seen as the randomness of the world itself. It is, then, a way of transferring one's will, of delegating power.

Dice as the ultimate projection of an impersonal will, of a decision taken elsewhere. The sign – in negative, so to speak – that someone is looking after you, that you are not left merely to your own devices, that there is otherness somewhere. As seen in so many other forms in the past: the stars, a chicken's entrails, the flight of birds. For good or ill, our fate is decided elsewhere.

However, a kind of paradox distorts things from the outset: the decision to surrender to chance is not taken by chance. In this sense, a throw of the dice – countless throws of the dice – will never abolish the initial determination. Unless that resolve to rely on chance is the product of an even more subtle form of chance . . . Moreover, the options (each throw of

the die provides six options) have to be set down in advance by the person gambling his fate. But what governs the selection of possible destinies? Is it absolute chance? Certainly not. At the moment the subject schedules his options, what is involved is neither pure, objective chance nor a determined will, but, in a sense, a subjective chance, steered by the unconscious wishes of the subject: seduction, rape, murder, orgy or, on the other hand, love, security, happiness, sacrifice. However this may be, just as nothing can come out of a computer which hasn't been programmed in, nothing can come from the dice which hasn't already been programmed mentally. And if the aim is to liberate oneself from any will of one's own, then one is deluded in the attempt. The whole undertaking is an illusion, and recourse to the dice seems pointless if it leads back only to the banal contingency of desire.

Clearly, objective chance is merely an illusion, a utopian dream. The *Dé-cision* (to make a French pun which sums up the whole of Rhinehart's book)* is never as arbitrary as we think (just as automatic writing is never truly automatic), and chance never lies in the choice we make from among chance events. Unless, that is, you purely and simply give in to what happens to you – but even then we know that, in the end, nothing happens to you by accident.

The whole book is proof *a contrario* that it is

* In French, the letter 'd' is a homephone of 'dés' (phonetic: [de]), meaning dice.

impossible to opt for chance, impossible to live by a rigorous deregulation of the will, but equally impossible to opt for the will, which, as we know, is self-deluding. In fact, chance does not exist. And neither does the will. The rules governing our lives are to be found elsewhere.

There is, moreover, a strange contradiction between the exercise of the will and the exercise of freedom. It's always nice to take a decision – and equally nice to put one off. You have to know how to play with a decision. The decision is the key thing – what you decide will work out one way or another, whatever you do. Now, every decision taken is a double-edged sword. Adopting a decision immediately turns it into a prohibition: it becomes something not to be transgressed. There is then no difference between it being your decision or someone else's. To decide 'sovereignly', you have to be able to determine how to proceed in relation to your own decision, to reconsider it freely, as though it were in fact someone else's.

To be able to disobey moral rules and laws, to be able to disobey others, is a mark of freedom. But the ability to disobey oneself marks the highest stage of freedom. Obeying one's own will is an even worse vice than being enslaved to one's passions. It is certainly worse than enslavement to the will of others. And it is, indeed, those who submit themselves mercilessly to their own decisions who fill the greater part of the authoritarian ranks, alleging sacrifice on their own part to impose even greater sacrifices on others.

Each stage of servitude is both more subtle and worse than the one which precedes it. Involuntary servitude, the servitude of the slave, is overt violence. Voluntary servitude is a violence consented to: a freedom to will, but not the will to be free. Last comes voluntary self-servitude or enslavement to one's own will: the individual possess the faculty to will, but is no longer free in respect of it. He is the automatic agent of that faculty. He is the serf to no master but himself.

Although it purports to be rid of the will, the self and desire, Rhinehart's fable still pays them far too much respect. The will is presented as a barrier which has to be overcome for total liberation of the self, of all conceivable selves, to be possible. This is still a very naive vision of a natural order of the will, which is to be transcended in the supernatural order of chance. It is a vision of a desire limited by the law, but with chance able to unlock its possibilities. It would seem that in order to break down the barrier of the will, one has to see it as already broken down – to see our most ordinary decisions as already in themselves random in nature, and bearing only a superficial relation to the subject and his will.

Chance is already present everywhere. There is no need to produce it through the simulacrum of an imposed rule. Arbitrariness lies not in choosing chance, but in the unpredictable as it exists, in the relation to others as they are, in the unforeseen events of the world and its appearances. Raw existence is, in

the end, more improbable than the improbability of dice, and the oblique line of destiny runs through that existence without either our will or a higher will being involved.

The Other makes its appearance, come what may. It is the Other which, at every moment, creates the dividing line. At every moment, without any forcing – or willing – things fall one side or other of that line. The rules of the way of the world are already laid down. Radical absence of will is to be found in the immanent disorder of the real world. The dice-life and its willed *dé-viance* (to offer another French pun) is superfluous. In this sense, constructing an artificial destiny with dice operates almost to protect you against the unpredictable fatefulness of the world as it is.

It is the will to chance which is misguided and which, in the end, torpedoes the whole undertaking in a systematic staging of events. One can understand Rhinehart's dream of being the agent of a secret rule, the protagonist of an order of Evil or a universal disorder through glorifying chance and staging chance events. But when all is said and done, neither he nor the seducer of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, nor Sade's criminal can take responsibility for the definitively impersonal character of their acts. We are neither preordained criminals nor preordained victims, and we cannot choose our fate.

Programming the deregulation of life is impossible; the rule of chance is impossible, as is any strategy

of fate or intentional seduction: it is a contradiction in terms. 'Historical necessity is merely a necessity *a fresca* (improvised, projected retrospectively on to the event), and it is impossible to predict an event with mathematical certainty before it has actually happened. God himself could not predict it, and the more He was God, the less it would be possible' (Schnitzler). Hence the illusory nature of the dice, with surprise, the unforeseeable, as the only possibility. 'He who truly knows how to live will appreciate the little surprises which always await him in the least significant event.'

In the end, Rhinehart recognizes that everyone else lives multiple lives which are the product of chance too, even if they do not know it and spend their lives trying to deny it. So, the establishment of a purely random universe (if such a thing were possible) would not in the least change the world as it currently exists. This was already the hypothesis where the virtual economy – of free-floating capital and pure speculation – is concerned. Once it has been virtually achieved and become perfect in itself, that speculative, orbital sphere – like the sphere of the networks and information – no longer affects the 'real' world, which continues to run its course on a parallel trajectory. We might say the same of God Himself, chance being merely a hypostasis of God. Whether God exists or not changes nothing. That is why proofs of the existence of God, like the possible verification of chance, are ultimately pointless. Naturally, 'a throw

of the dice will never abolish chance',* since chance does not, in the end, exist, and another throw of the dice simply adds to the uncertainty of the world as it is. We might similarly say that the proof that the world is materialist in essence will not abolish the existence of God since, fundamentally, that existence does not matter one way or the other, is unverifiable, and is just another name for the course of things.

The idea of Chance is, then, supererogatory (it introduces an abstract, redundant dimension). As for its basic philosophy, it is redhibitory (it contains an unseen defect which presents a radical obstacle). Thus, as the idea works itself out, the action of the novel goes downhill. Admittedly, this philosophy of a deliverance from the Self, of a freedom unfettered by anything but self-imposed rules, absolves the gamer of any responsibility, and confers much greater immunity on him than any moral or political freedom. And in the Protean (anti-Promethean) universe in which everyone changes role randomly, all the anxieties and inhibitions which go with social and psychological identity are relaxed. This is why the Babylonians in Borges's fable had chosen to entrust their fate to the Lottery, preferring that uncertainty to the torments of individual responsibility and free will.

And yet the dream of shattering the identitary ego in order to embrace plural destinies is a naive superstition. Fundamentally, it is the same as the

* 'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard', the title of one of Mallarmé's best-known texts.

superstitious belief in virtual networks and computer games, with their ideal of the dispersion of the individual 'spectrum' (Marc Guillaume). Does the fact that the dice tell me to seduce a particular woman induce in me a desire for that woman? (Objection: if I selected her as an option, then perhaps I already desired her. But where, then, is the need to involve the dice and to force myself to obey my own desire?) Does the fact that the networks put me in touch with a particular partner, or open up some new possibility, liberate other egos within me?

Not at all. To project one's ego absolutely anywhere, to embark upon interactivity with simply anyone, is not to become other. It is, in fact, the very opposite. The Other and otherness come into play only in a dual relationship, never in a multiple or plural one. Only in duality are the sexes *fatal* to each other. In multiple relations they are merely mirrors of each other, and interlocking self-refractions. If chance means that the combinations are infinite in number, and everything is possible, that is quite the opposite of Destiny.

This is where the novel degenerates, too. For the spectre of existence governed by the dice in this way ends in banal role-play and in a collective psychodrama increasingly obsessed with sex and orgies.

> He becomes ecstatic. He experiences the transfer of control from an illusory self to the dice as a conversion or as salvation. . . . In all these cases the

> ego-control game is abandoned and the student surrenders to a force which is experienced as being outside himself;

and, at the same time: 'Suddenly I was free of all my hangups about raping little girls.'

In the drive 'liberated' by chance, it is the unmotivated character of desire which wins out, not the unmotivated character of the dice game. The divine uncertainty of gambling becomes once again the instrument of desire, and Chance, previously referred to as divine accident and divine prankishness, becomes once again the vulgar instrument of obscure wishes.

To this is added the other perversion – in a sense, the logical conclusion to this *trompe-l'œil* deregulation – the perversion of a categorical immoral imperative: elevating dice and Chance into a universal principle, if not indeed a systematic 'dice-therapy', with its 'Centers for Experiments in Totally Random Environments'. This takes us into the worst kind of utopia – an insider raving,* which slides automatically into cultish practices with the violence characteristic of that type of organization, where arbitrariness figures no longer as a function of chance, but as arbitrary power.

The magnificent failure of a defiance of any will of one's own, of an anarchistic defiance of all forms of power (including the power all exert on themselves through that same will). Paradoxically, devolving

* 'délire d'initiés' – a pun on 'délit d'initiés': insider trading.

power to the rolling dice – the attempt to disappropriate the will – ends up resembling the venture of that other anarchist, Stirner, who, in *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, aims for total appropriation and unconditional hegemony of the Ego – where the most liberatory principle ends in the most commonplace tyranny. The unhappy fate of many radical utopias, haunted by their redhibitory defects.

Yet the idea of a society governed by chance, as in Borges's 'Lottery in Babylon' or Rhinehart's *Dice Man*, is in some sense an idea of an absolute democracy, since it resolves the inequality of objective conditions into an equality of opportunity with respect to a set of rules. Democracy is, of course, based on equality before the law, but that is never as radical as equality before the rule. And it is, indeed, this dream of a radical democracy which haunts the imaginations of all gamblers, and makes all forms of gaming a fantastic attraction in all ages, particularly for the middle and working classes, as a refuge for their thwarted demand for 'social' democracy. It is the site of 'luck', the only non-place where good and bad are not distributed in the same way, and, even in its most impoverished forms, it is the only sumptuary activity – that of a sovereign freedom ignorant of the material conditions of its exercise. The site of a supernatural freedom which bears no relation to 'natural' freedom, and has about it more an immediate collusion with the world. Now, the whole pleasure comes from this.

Gaming does not liberate us from constraints (since we accept the far stricter constraint of the rules), but it delivers us from freedom. We lose freedom if we live it merely as reality. The miracle of gaming is to make us live our freedom not as reality but as illusion – a higher illusion, an aristocratic challenge to reality. For reality is democratic, and illusion is aristocratic.

D for Double Life

Another solution to the impossible exchange of one's life is to exchange it for a double life.

This was the solution chosen by Romans, the central character in a criminal trial of the 1990s. Not daring to admit to his family that he had failed his medical examinations, he set up a complete parallel life, a pseudo-career in medicine, supporting his family by a variety of financial ploys until one day he massacred them all, parents, wife and children – mysteriously sparing only his mistress, and that at the last moment.

Why the massacre? On the verge of being unmasked, he could not stand the idea of those who had believed in him ceasing to do so. They simply could not be allowed to discover the truth. There was only one solution: they had to be killed. Suicide would not have kept the deception from his family. His response was logical: he spared them the shame of knowing.

There is another possible hypothesis, which does not exclude the first: every crime asks secretly to be discovered. Only this time the simulation worked too well, and he blamed them for not having managed to unmask him, for not having been able, over a lifetime, to see through him, and for having let him sink deeper

into his deception and trickery, turning him into a veritable simulating machine. This same logic accounts for the mistress being spared, because she had ceased to be a blind accomplice. Indeed, he had taken this woman as his mistress towards the end solely to break the spell, to end the dramatic servitude to his double role. A real crime would at last allow him to own up to his responsibility. This is the opposite pattern from that of the usual criminal, who logically eliminates those who can unmask him. And this is what the judicial system held against him, with due psychological logic: 'You do not destroy those you love [he says he continued to feel affection for them even as he was committing the crime and afterwards]. At worst, you commit suicide.' They cannot believe that, in doing away with his family, his aim was to save them from total disappointment. Yet the logic is watertight: if they had not trusted him so much, he would not have killed them.

Romans is an unprepossessing, melodramatic character, with no profound duplicity in him. In no way was he criminal material. He embarked upon his double life spontaneously, without premeditation, and lived it the way others live a single life. In a way, it was his family and friends who became his double life, and by doing away with them, he recovered a reality and an identity. They are indeed much more present to him now as a forlorn criminal (with the distraught memory of his father he displayed at the trial) than they were in their lifetimes. Or – looked at

another way – he sacrificed his real life to his parallel life, in accordance with the rule that there is not enough room for both the real and its double.

At all events, what happened was tantamount to a crime of jealousy. He was jealous of his own image in their eyes. That image had to remain intact for them, and since he did what he did, it will have remained so until death. This is the very logic of the crime of passion: if you cannot have the object, then it must be got rid of once and for all; it must disappear.

The peculiar feature of this case is that it gives rise to a radical suspicion: what if every 'normal' existence concealed a successful simulation? Not a perverse or romantic one, but a simulation that was perfectly banal – a parallel existence which did not intersect with the other (from time to time, however, the parallel lines meet, and catastrophe ensues). This opens up amazing possibilities: we might be surrounded by pathological liars and know nothing of it, since there is no way to tell a 'normal' man from an entirely unremarkable impostor, going around freely beneath a conventional exterior (like those spies who are 'sleepers' in foreign countries until one day they are 'activated'). Seen from this angle, the most insignificant of our fellow citizens becomes both suspect and seductive. Everyone becomes virtually capable of massacring their family to prevent the truth getting out. Everything becomes possible as soon as one life may conceal another. There is no need to change your life – all you need is to have two.

Viewed from this suspicious angle, it gradually dawns that you have only to look at the political and social world to see that it is made up of countless parallel, 'rigged' careers, of speculation and crookery which is never denounced, of perfectly impenetrable insider deals, of mystifications we shall never see unmasked. But these impostures and double dealings normally disappear into the system itself, whereas for Romans – a minor extra in his own psychodrama – it ended in a shoot-out with reality.

What the judicial system condemned in the person of Romans was this fantastic suspicion he cast on personal identity, and hence on the whole of the social order. For this he clearly deserves to be locked away indefinitely.

Besides, he never offended against morality, only against reality – which is much more serious. When he claims that he cannot explain how the simulation was maintained, he is 'sincere', since the simulation was from the outset produced by the silent collusion of others. Simulation is like a prophecy which, by being repeated, becomes self-fulfilling.

It needs no initial motive; its motive force arises out of the process itself, without any relation of cause and effect. This is why it is absurd to quiz Romans on his motives, or to make him confess to anything whatever. One is responsible only in respect of *causes*, whereas he can answer only for the fateful sequence of events, the irresistible concatenation of *effects* (it doesn't make any sense, but it works). The perfect

crime is the crime with no ulterior motive; the one which simply follows out a train of thought.

Romans's solution was an extreme one. He does not play at multiple lives, as Luke Rhinehart's hero does, and he does not, strictly speaking, 'act' a character. He haunts his own life as though it were another's; he practises a kind of radical exoticism, of lethal severance from the world.

There are other, more temperate forms of exoticism, of minimal strategies of self-duplication. One such is acting itself, as presented in Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor* or in Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, conceptions far removed from any compulsion to identify psychologically with the character, or from that general frenzied empathy which holds sway today in the theatre.

There is in the actor, in the best of cases, a form of distance which sees to it that roles and images do not intermingle. He has to maintain the strangeness of the actor's other – the character – on pain of frittering away the power of the stage into theatrical grandstanding. He has to preserve the differential of illusion, the differential of otherness, in order to safeguard the energy specific to the stage. To do so, he has basically to be a snob – has to 'affect' his role rather than personify it, implicitly signifying: 'This is not me; I have nothing to do with this.' Snobbery lies in resisting the easy solution of identifying with anything whatever, anyone whatever, as our whole

psychological conformism invites us to. If we are to end up being the exotics of our own lives (as we all are), we may as well cultivate radical exoticism.

Should we take the view that this distance, this offhandedness, towards our own being is an exception? Or has it not always been there? Our society has, in fact, become performance-orientated and operational in all its aspects, but it does not believe in these things – though most of the time it does not realize that it does not believe in them. We are unwitting agnostics; we live by this affectation – the product of a profound incredulity – which consists in doing more and doing too much. There is in this a snobbery of the operational, a neurosis of performance which we collectively act out, and which protects us from a bestial condition or, in other words, from pure functionality (see Kojève and his alternative of Japanese snobbery or American animality). This is why these 'discontents of civilization' are never so serious as they are said to be, for we secretly play-act technology and performance, play-act information and efficiency. We set the distance to the 'reality', the hyper-reality, of our world, as we do that of a photographic lens. It is set at maximum zoom with a stereoscopic range of effects, but we ourselves are not taken in by these. Yet we enjoy the effect of enlargement and the dizzying sense of simulation and, precisely because we do not believe in it, we are capable of going much further with the operational scenario than we would be if we did.

This is, doubtless, the secret of Japanese technology, of that heroic affectation, that functional heroism of the Empire of the Sun. But even in the West, something of this free-and-easy attitude to values, accompanied by an intensification of practices, shows through. Business looks more and more like a performative game, with maximum energy being put into the – no longer orthodox, but paradoxical – scenario of the enterprise. It is an almost suicidal energy that is vested in this way in the disillusioned scenario of all-out growth and speculation. But it is, above all, an energy released by a scaling down of the stakes, a collapse of goals and constraints.

This is, more or less, the opposite of the double bind: there is no longer any contradictory tension on either side, with regard either to ends or to means – performance alone counts: an overactivity de-cathected and de-ideologized on the basis of fundamental lack of belief in its own essence; an overactivity both *dés-involte* and, literally, disinvolved. The modern entrepreneur (and we are all entrepreneurs) is agnostic. (The worker did not believe in what he was doing either, but for other reasons!)

Yet is there not, on the margins of this de-cathexis, this transparency, this casualness – at the end of this general affectation – another form of psychosis and melancholia lying in wait for us?

At any rate, this dialectic of actor and character is a thing of the past – the dialectic we find in the faces,

costumes and gestures of 1940s and 1950s cinema, a period still dominated, even in daily life, by the theatricality of characters and roles. In metaphysical terms, this was the world of Sartre's waiter – the waiter who spoke like a waiter, saw himself as a waiter, and so on. Today, that entire social and psychological theatre, that entire existential psychodrama, has been swept away by the directive, interactive behaviour of a society without actors (and as this has happened, we have rediscovered a kind of poetry in the old state of affairs, a poetry underscored in the cinema by black-and-white).

May '68 was still faithful in its gestures and speech to that cultural rhetoric (which in no way detracts from the symbolic violence of the event). Our age, however, is no longer capable of providing a stage and actors. We shall not even seem faintly ridiculous to those who come after us, in the way 1950s characters do to us. We have thrown off that old existential garb. We are defrocked – divested of ideology, of the class struggle, of history. We are active, interactive individuals, who no longer tell each other (hi)stories, no longer see ourselves as waiters. That 'Belle Époque' was the era of bad conscience and bad faith – Sartre grasped its historical torment most accurately – and the moving shadows of the cinema of that age express marvellously well the – already banal – post-Romantic death throes of subjectivity, all the nuances of the obsolete Character, and the aporias of freedom.

Who cares about freedom, bad faith and authenticity today? The mask has fallen, leaving behind the insignificant self-evidence of the Real, the *écriture automatique* of the Virtual. Roles have been eclipsed, and with them the specific hysteria of that 'Belle Époque', the hysteria of the décor and the scene, the rhetoric of an age still grappling with the mirror stage of modernity and not yet doomed to the definitive screen stage – the stage of a cold epilepsy and an overcharged inertia, in which the old golden triangle of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary is no longer valid, no longer quoted on the mental stock exchange of values.

The Flow of Change
The Cycle of Becoming
The Divide of Destiny

The Flow of Change
The Cycle of Becoming

Plural identities, double lives, objective chance or variable-geometry destinies – all this seems very much like the invention of artificial, substitute fates. Sex, genes, networks, desires and partners – everything now falls within the ambit of change and exchange. Destiny, pain – everything is becoming optional. Death itself is an option. The very sign of birth, your astrological sign, will one day be optionally available in a future Zodiacal Surgery Institute, where, under certain conditions, you will be able to change your birth sign the way you can change your face today.

All these options are ultimately mere variants of the impossible exchange of one's own life. The very opposite of a destiny. The very opposite of that preeminent figure of destiny that is the Eternal Return, the marvellous possibility of which assumes that things are caught up in a necessary, fated succession which exceeds their control. Nothing of the kind exists today, things being caught up, as they are, in a contiguity running off to infinity. The Eternal Return is now the return of the infinitely small, the fractal – the repetition of a microscopic, inhuman scale. It is no longer the exalting of a will, the sovereign affirmation

of a Becoming and its consecration in an immutable sign, but the viral recurrence of micro-processes – a recurrence which is itself ineluctable, but which no sign conveys to the imagination. These processes weigh down on us like an exorbitant but meaningless burden – there is suspense, but no destiny. The fateful against the fractal, change against becoming.

> The mutual antagonism of passions, the duality, trinity, plurality of 'souls in a single breast': very unhealthy; inner ruin; destructive; betraying and intensifying an inner conflict and anarchism, unless one passion eventually becomes master. . . . The most interesting people belong in this category, the chameleons; they are not in contradiction with themselves . . . but they have no development – their various states lie side by side, even if they are separated up to seven times. They change, but they do not *become*. (Nietzsche)

In plurality, multiplicity, a being merely exchanges itself for itself or for one of its many avatars. It produces metastases; it does not metamorphose. 'The intensity of a consuming passion metamorphoses a unity – chameleons, for their part, show no contradictory tension; they merely provide its simulacrum.' Destiny, becoming and otherness are diffracted into the perpetual exchanging of selves, into the 'spectrum of identities' (Marc Guillaume). The physical multiplicity of the colours of the spectrum, the virtual

spectrum of all the technical possibilities of individuation, the changeability of the chameleon: a single pattern – that of exchange along a spectrum. Interactivity, mobility, virtuality: a gigantic enterprise of simulation and a parody of becoming.

Ideas, too, change and multiply: their succession forms part of a history of ideas, and of their hypothetical finality. But in another dimension, the dimension of destiny and becoming (that precise place where thought 'becomes'), there is only ever a single idea: the master hypothesis, equivalent to the master passion of which Nietzsche speaks. For him, it was the idea of the Eternal Return, the idea of a singularity linked to integral becoming and the Eternal Return.

The master passion, like the master hypothesis, delivers us from all the others, delivers us from that plurality, that frenzied exchange of modes of thought and modes of existence which is merely the caricature and simulacrum of becoming.

In terms of ideas, anything is possible – what is needed is a master hypothesis.

In terms of desire, anything is possible – what is needed is a master passion.

In terms of ends and purposes, anything is possible – what is needed is a predestination and a destiny.

In terms of change, anything is possible – what is needed is a metamorphosis and a becoming.

In terms of otherness, anything is possible (conviviality, instant communication, networks) – what is needed is a dual, antagonistic and irreducible form.

Against this assumption into generalized exchange, this movement of convergence towards the Single and the Universal: the dual form, irrevocable divergence. Against all that is striving to reconcile the antagonistic terms: maintain impossible exchange, play on the very impossibility of that exchange, play on that tension and that dual form, which nothing escapes, but everything opposes.

At all events, this duality governs us. Each individual life unfolds on two levels, in two dimensions – history and destiny – which coincide only exceptionally. Each life has its history, the history of its successive events, its twists and turns – but elsewhere, in another dimension, there is only one form, that of the absolute becoming of the same situation, which occurs for everyone in the form of an Eternal Return. The form of destiny, which Nietzsche also calls 'character', to distinguish it from any psychology of the ego and its successive changes.

The Divide of Destiny

Somewhere in Colorado there is a demarcation line where the waters part – the so-called Continental Divide – some running off to the Atlantic, the rest to the Pacific. It is a line almost as imaginary as the one separating the past from the future – that line we call the present. And the two dimensions of time themselves run off and vanish into oceanic depths of their own. The instant, that dividing line, is a line of destiny: past and future part there, never to meet again. And existence is merely this ever-greater divergence of past and future, until death reunites the two in an absolute present.

In man, it is thoughts which divide – the 'mental divide'. Like the continental waters, they run off unpredictably in opposite directions, and often those which were closest together will end up furthest apart.

It is along this same imaginary line that men and women, good and evil, signs and languages divide. At the origin there is always this demarcation line which creates something more than a difference: a definitive divergence. Not only do things separate, but, like constellations of signs or the constellations in space, they continue to move apart endlessly. Just as the

waters, which come from the same sky, divide, so human destinies, coming from the same primal scene, take a different course. On either side of an imaginary line of will, each decision creates two slopes, where life runs off in opposite directions – each fraction moving irremediably away from the other.

But the same sign which presides over the separation of things is the very sign which reunites them. For division can indicate a dividing into separate parts or into shares – a sharing. On either side of the dividing line, things remain inseparable nonetheless, and those things which diverge the most nonetheless come together again.

We have all had, on one or more occasions, a rendezvous with death, even if it was not in Samarkand. That rendezvous is no different from any other encounter of virtually zero probability. Every strange coincidence has a probability virtually equal to zero. Every conjunction is a gamble on causal relations – a 'probing of the etiological mystery of random conjunctures', as Nabokov would say.

> There are always at least two occasions when two persons, unwittingly, almost met. Each time destiny seems to have prepared this meeting with the greatest care, attending first to one possibility, then another, ordering the tiniest detail and leaving nothing to chance. But each time some tiny, unattended eventuality intervenes to prevent the coming

> together, and the two lives diverge once again at a greater rate. . . . But destiny is much too persistent to allow itself to be put off by a failure. It arrives at its ends, by such subtle machinations that not even a click is heard when at last the two persons are brought together.

As time goes by, however, destiny wearies and no longer bothers to contrive these coincidences: this is one's lot in old age, when they become increasingly rare, till the coming of death, which by that time is merely the arrival of an automatic term.

So long as this destiny is at work, the probability of any event, even if it has not taken place, is never exhausted. And it is this, this actual grace of coincidences – and never a chain of causality – which makes the event of a life. When this grace is lacking, history grows old and repetitious, all possibilities are fused, and life slips back into an undifferentiated vegetal or animal state.

We can recall moments in the past when we had equal chances of living or dying – in a car crash, for example. Naturally, the person talking about it has chosen to survive, but, at the same time, the other has chosen death. Every time someone finds himself at a crossroads of this kind, he has two worlds before him. One loses all reality, because he dies there; the other remains real, because he survives. He abandons the world in which he is now only dead, and settles into

the one in which he is still alive. There is, then, a life in which he is alive, and another in which he is dead. The bifurcation of the two, linked to a particular contingent detail, is sometimes so subtle that one cannot but believe that the fateful event is continuing its course elsewhere. (And indeed, it often appears in dreams, in which you relive it to the end.) This alternative is not, then, an entirely phantom one; it exists in the mind and leads a parallel existence. We cannot speak of the unconscious here, since neither repression nor the return of the repressed is involved. It is merely that two units have separated and, though they are increasingly distant (my current life is increasingly different from the one which began for the virtual dead man at that moment), they are indivisible.

It is the same with each decisive moment, both with birth and with death. Just as the virtual dead man that I am continues on his way on the other side, carries on with his existence which runs just beneath the surface of mine, birth is that dividing line where on the one side I exist as myself, but on the other I begin, at the same moment, to exist as other. Such is the form of alterity, and I cannot conceive of myself not having this secret alterity, the product of both separation and inseparability.

That which has separated definitively – for example, the I from the non-I at birth – continues nonetheless to run along another line. These lines, or these parallel lives, meet only in death. But at certain

moments, you can jump from one to the other, cross one of these other lives. Destiny dooms us to a personal death, but something of this multiple predestination remains. Alterity is a trace of these crossings, which provide one of the grids of becoming: becoming-animal, becoming-plant, becoming-woman – crossing the demarcation line between the sexes and the species. It is the same with words in language, which remains the model of becoming. Words do not respect the limits of meaning; they continually mingle with parallel significations.

At the point where this irreversible separation takes place – between the animate and the inanimate, the sexed and the unsexed – emerges the equally irresistible denial of this separation. The living will retain a nostalgia for the inanimate, the sexed a nostalgia for the unsexed and the sexes a nostalgia for each other. Thought will retain a nostalgia for unintelligent matter, or for the beasts which neither speak nor think.

The two drives are equally violent: the drive for liberation – the breaking away of life, sex and thought – and the sense of remorse, of repentance for that break. Destiny lies on each side, but it is more precisely present at the points where they intersect most violently.

Thus each existence is the product of a double declension. It is in this sense that it is a dual, not an individual, form. We are not free to exist just on the

side of our ego, our identity, or just on that of the so-called real world. We are wholly the products of this relation of adversity, this twin complicity. Destiny is divided, like thought, which comes to us from the other. Each is the destiny of the other. There is no individual destiny.

But if I am inseparable from the other, from all the others I almost became, then all destinies are linked, and no one can claim to have his own life or his own thought. Being is a linked succession of forms, and to speak of one's own will makes no sense. Existence is 'allotted' to us, and all forms of transference are possible, on the basis of a symbolic apportionment from which all other cultures have derived their basic rule. Neither existence nor the world belongs to us; they are allotted to us in a reciprocal arrangement which is the golden rule. In this ideal form, we can say, literally, that it is the world which thinks us, the other which thinks us, the object which thinks us. Whether it be intelligence, power or seduction, everything comes to us from elsewhere, from this dual, parallel concatenation. This – which was the secret of cultures that have now disappeared – runs counter to our modern determination to think the world objectively, unilaterally, without a hint of reciprocity. Without doubt, nothing has changed fundamentally, and even with us moderns, it is still the world which thinks us. The difference is that today we think the opposite.

No doubt everyone is actually present with their wills and their desires, but secretly their decisions and thoughts come to them from elsewhere. And it is in this very strange interaction that their originality lies – their destiny. The destiny we are constantly seeking to escape.

What is the point of willing when, on either side of the imaginary line of the will, both sides of a decision continue to exist in parallel? From time to time, what we did not will interferes with the chosen solution, and triumphs against our will. But it does not do so without a secret assent, since it is still *we* who did not will it. Most often, things just happen and then retrospectively organize themselves into an idea of a plan, into an idea of a will which sanctions the event a posteriori, in the same way as the dream narrative is constructed at the moment of waking.

So Canetti says of vengeance that no purpose is served by wishing for it, since it happens come what may, according to the fundamental rule of reversibility. The point is – above and beyond all the categories of willing, knowing and believing – to discover a parting of destinies and a strategy of otherness, whether in this plurality of collusive, parallel universes or in any form which alters the individual being – which displaces, metabolizes, metamorphoses or captivates him. On this tack, one may, paradoxically, simply let things happen: let the other will, know, decide or desire. This is not a form of defeating desire, but of sidestepping or outwitting it, of ironically investing

the other. A more seductive, more effective stratagem than that of the will. A more powerful strategy than that of desire: playing with desire.

In this way, one can offload one's will, one's desire, on to someone else and, in return, become free to take on responsibility for someone else's life. A symbolic circulation of affects and destinies is created, a cycle of alterity – beyond alienation and all the individual psychology in which we are trapped. There is in this symbolic circulation, in this sharing of destinies, the essence of a subtler freedom than the individual liberty to make up one's mind according to one's conscience – a liberty which ultimately we do not know what to do with, and which it is, in fact, better to slough off right away, in order to recover the impersonal concatenation of signs, events, affects and passions.

To all the categories of facticity we can respond, in this way, with mirror strategies: resolving the ambiguity of all these individual functions – willing, believing, knowing – by a straight transference onto the desire or will of another. Something like *a poetic transference of the situation, or a poetic situation of transference*.

The story of the Japanese woman who, unhappy at having known neither love nor pain, hires a geisha, whose lover has just left her, to love and suffer in her place, is a truly wonderful tale. And when the lover returns, the geisha opts to stay with this woman who

has chosen her, and on whose behalf she experiences passion. Elective affinity is stronger than the passion of love. Unlike our individual choices, elective affinity is a meeting of two trajectories. In that meeting, you do not choose; you are chosen. And it is in being chosen, being elected in this way, that the greatest pleasure lies – not in the options you take for your own life.

Is it not our constant desire, in the absence of God, to convert this accidental world into something intended for us – an elective form, a magical convergence? And it matters little whether the outcome is good or bad, provided that this fatedness transforms us into strange attractors, which is something we all dream of.

Just because a tile falls off a roof, there isn't necessarily someone underneath it at the right moment: that would be too good to be true. And just because you fall in love with someone, that doesn't mean they will respond automatically to your desire: an automatic wish fulfilment of that kind would be hellish. Yet we feel that everyone somehow dreams of such a fateful conjunction – if not, perhaps, of being the person right underneath the tile. Though even then there may be exhilaration in feeling favoured by ill fortune.

So we find mysterious relief in a succession of accidents or setbacks. One accident is negative. Two is neither one thing nor the other. Three or four in a row is a thrill. We like to see fate rounding on us in

this way. It shows that we have become a focal point, that someone 'up there' is taking an interest. It reminds us of the days when the powers of heaven and hell did battle over our souls.

The desire for events to converge is greater than the fear of the event itself – the desire to see causal logic dismantled, a logic which we find deeply repellent, even if we obey the dominant moral imperative and speak in causal terms. We dream of seeing things strung together by a secret logic, entirely independent of our wills.

The radical choice, then, is between the will and an essential determination from elsewhere, between volition and devolution, between a bias towards the will (for it *is* a form of bias) and the bias towards a radical otherness, an impersonal, arbitrary form.

It seems that God Himself, our causal God, the Grand Master of Causes and Effects, has chosen simply to let things happen and has withdrawn, leaving the field to pure chance and indeterminacy, or to pure seduction and general predestination – as we can say, with Baltasar Gracián: keeping man eternally in suspense, and leaving the world to its secret destiny. For Him, this is nothing less than transferring His will to the world (Spinoza), transferring His divine thought to the world, and in the process transferring the responsibility for thinking us to the event of the world – assigning human thought to a space governed by the impersonal thinking of the other, a

space where other correlations than our own are in play. This is not a question of relying on chance. Mallarmé's formula, 'A throw of the dice will never abolish chance', is true from the statistical, mathematical point of view (apart from its poetic value) in that no event can put an end to the succession of events, and no action can definitively determine what follows. But the gambler does not believe in chance. On the contrary, he aspires to abolish it at every throw of the dice. To make a pact with chance is not to speculate on random events, but to attune oneself to the world, to explore its secret connections and concatenations; it is, in a sense, to be initiated. And every win is a sign of the success of that initiation.

This sublime sensation which makes gambling such a heady phenomenon is the sense of a total collusion between the random play of the world and your own gaming, of a reversibility between the world and yourself, of a supernatural consonance between your choice and the choice of an order about which you can do nothing, but which seems somehow to be speaking to you and effortlessly obeying you. At this point, the world takes on total responsibility for the game. The world becomes a player; the player, the gambler becomes a world.

Nothing is accidental anymore, since, from the point when the world thinks us, things follow on in a sure progression. Nor is anything intentional, a matter of will, since, in a sense, everything has already been willed. And luck – which is a material thing – is

merely the emanation, and sanction, of this collusion. To such a point, indeed, that the gambler can imagine himself in command of the game, since, in this total exchange, there is control on both sides. The gambler then experiences fully, in an intuitive way, the hypothesis of the omnipotence of thought which Freud found evidence of in phantasms and dreams, and primitive peoples saw in the staging of magic rites – a staging which is in no sense an illusory mastery, but a mastery of illusion. 'I am not playing. I am the game.'

This is how Jack, the poker player in Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance*, talks:

> That's the feeling I always wait for. It's like a switch turns on inside me, and my whole body starts to hum. Whenever I get that feeling, it means I'm home free. I can coast all the way to the end. . . . Once your luck starts to roll, there's not a damn thing that can stop it. It's like the whole world suddenly falls into place. You're kind of outside your body, and for the rest of the night you sit there watching yourself perform miracles. It doesn't really have anything to do with you anymore. It's out of your control, and as long as you don't think about it too much, you can't make a mistake.

Then there is nothing to rule out the paradoxical hypothesis that it is indeed our thought which governs the world, on condition that we first think that it is the world which thinks us.

'It isn't the man who drinks the tea, it's the tea which drinks the man.'*

It isn't you who smoke the pipe, it's the pipe which smokes you.

It's the book which reads me.

It's the TV which watches you.

It's the object which thinks us.

It's the lens which focuses on us.

It's the effect which causes us.

It's language which speaks us.

It's time which wastes us.

It's money which earns us.

It's death which lies in wait for us.

* *Ce n'est pas l'homme qui boit le thé, mais le thé qui boit l'homme* is the title of André Maugé's translation of Guido Ceronetti's *Pensieri del Tè*, Milan: Adelphi Edizione, 1986.

Dual Principle
Single Principle
Antagonistic Principle

Everything is in the play of duality.

The duality of the Other, whose world skims past our own without ever touching us – as in that 'duel in the dark' in the Chinese Opera, in which the two bodies and their weapons swish by within a hair's breadth of each other, describing the symbolic space of the conflict with their actions and silent confrontation.

The duality of gaming, which has rules that seem to come from some other sphere, with nothing to justify them – just like chance, that eternal unjustified principle.

The duality of feminine and masculine – the self-evidence of the duel between them – each being that in which the other is destined to lose itself.

The duality of Good and Evil.

The most difficult thing is to think Evil, to hypothesize Evil. This has been done only by heretics: Manichaeans and Cathars, both groups envisioning an antagonistic coexistence of two equal and eternal cosmic principles, Good and Evil, at once inseparable and irreconcilable. Within this vision, duality is primary. It is the original form – as difficult to conceive as the hypothesis of Evil.

For the phantasm is always that of the One as principle, of the single principle presiding over beginning and end. The world is One, and must become so again. This is the utopia of philosophical reason. It is, in a sense, the integral of the world – its being and its identity. One can conceive of the One dividing, but only the better to re-form its unity, for this unity is the norm, and any vision in terms of duality is heretical.

The dual hypothesis must have been very potent to be persecuted as it has throughout its history. Since it disappeared – first from theology, then from the whole of modern philosophy – everything of the order of a principle of evil has become deeply unreal and marginal. Any idea of a final destination other than the Good has disappeared from the field of analysis. This has become the true *pensée unique*, and Evil in this world merely has a walk-on part, exiled in thought while it awaits eradication in fact. It seems, however, that its principle is intact, its radicality unassailable, and that it is – at least in our world – one step ahead.

The philosophers never ask: why Evil rather than Good? This is because they no more believe in the reality of Evil than do the theologians. Or rather, they do not believe in the duality of Good and Evil. They posit Evil only to absorb it into a final reconciliation, a dialectical synthesis. Evil is always unreal; it is always in the pay of Good – it is, fundamentally, allegorical. In the Manichaean view, on the other hand, Evil has its own destiny, arising only out of itself, eternally enigmatic. It is from Evil that the world and

matter and all created things emerge. It is Good which appears allegorical in a world dominated by the categorical instance of Evil.

There is no negotiating with Evil, since it is simultaneously principle, motive force and end. And the acknowledgement of Evil is already part of Evil. But then, if Evil is the rule and Good the exception, if concrete salvation takes the form of an accelerated destruction, and if everything is settled once and for all, why argue over Good and Evil?

But things are not settled, and it is the modes in which Evil appears and shows through against a background of the universal hegemony of the Good that are thrilling. Which of the two is at the controls of the suicide engine?

In fact, Good and Evil are not opposed to each other. They are asymmetrical in essence. They do not arise out of the same movement and are not of the same nature. There is between them a kind of antagonistic balance.

If they were merely distinct and opposed – so that a choice between them, on which our morality is founded, were possible – then there would be nothing to prevent each from becoming autonomous and developing on its own account. In this way the world would become homogeneous through Good or through Evil. And we do in fact seem to be doomed to this today: to the homogenization of the world through Good and the imprisonment of Evil in a *musée imaginaire*. Without this antagonistic balance,

we would be at the mercy of the forces of Good. In this sense, Evil protects us from the worst-case scenario: the automatic proliferation of happiness, a fate similar in kind to the automatic proliferation of cells when the mechanism of their programmed death no longer functions.

We are traditionally sensitive to the threat which the 'forces of Evil' pose for the Good, whereas it is the threat posed by the forces of Good which is the fateful threat to the world of the future.

Things do not stop there, however, and the complicity between Good and Evil is stranger than this. For it is Evil which pushes Good (the accumulation of positive forces) to excess and de-regulation, and it is the proliferation of Good which releases the worst evils. Behind all our techniques for unconditionally achieving Good lurks the spectre of absolute Evil. 'Evil has become a determinant reality,' writes Jung.

> In the abysses of Evil which make up humanity's past – plague, torture, war, famine and disease – Evil was nonetheless not a determinant reality. Access to a higher idea of humanity, to a contrary reality, was forbidden to it, and something, passing through the ocean of flames, remained intact. . . . Jung adds: 'A so-called good to which we succumb loses its ethical character' (a marvellous formula this: it is not to Evil that we have succumbed today, but to Good). And what is a Good without ethical character other than an aspect of the legislation of Evil? . . . Now, with

> radio, telephones and excellent hospitals, hot baths, religious tolerance, moderate laws, an absence of war (in the most powerful parts of the planet . . .), an inundation of amoral *Good*, unstintingly produced by the entity Evil, by the powers of darkness enthroned in power – a terrifying contemporary *innovation.* (Ceronetti, *Pensieri del Tè*)*

Only Evil and destruction in all its forms still have the splendour of transcendence. Since all the transcendent values have been absorbed by technology, Good has conquered immanence and has, in the process, surrendered transcendence to the forces of Evil.

> The new technologies are right-thinking in themselves and represent not only rationality, but charity. Virtue can no longer compete with machines and means of transport. It can only, then, become diabolical and regain inspiration from Evil. As machines have come to embody the idea of Good, so destruction and the technology of destruction have acquired a metaphysical character. . . . Annihilation is, then, no longer a metaphor. (Ceronetti)

Good, which was in the past an ideal metaphor for the universal, has become an inexorable reality – the

* In translating this passage, I have restored the italicization of Ceronetti's original and indicated where passages have been omitted by Baudrillard.

reality of the totalization of the world under the banner of technology. So it is Evil which now takes over all the potency of the metaphor.

The denial of Evil is part of the homeopathic treatment of our world – the treatment of Good with Good. But Good destroys itself: the optimizing of systems takes them to the verge of dissolution. And so this homeopathic treatment of Good by Good becomes the treatment of Evil by Evil. Universality of Good, transparency of Evil.

> And what if the world were only now beginning to the full extent – whose limits will always remain incalculable – to unfold its origins from a principle essentially opposed to that of Good, a principle of Evil? This great Tribulation manifests itself as an inexplicable war, of which historical wars have merely been vague exemplars. (Ceronetti)

Like biological laws, Evil is impossible to modify. It submits only to those who are useful to its ends – who are Evil and nothing but. Evil penetrates and is not penetrated. It knows and is not known. As for whether it is begotten or not, there is no answer. What remains is the stupor and indignation at its effects, when these suddenly become too obvious. 'The world is unifying – but it is doing so by Evil and for the purpose of Evil' (Ceronetti).

An even more immoral hypothesis: Good and Evil are reversible. Not only are they not opposed,

they can change into each other, and the distinction between them is ultimately meaningless. Naturally, I am not talking here about the innocent age before any distinction between Good and Evil, but, in our world, about a confusion of Good and Evil, which is precisely the mark of Evil, just as the lack of a distinction between True and False is the mark of simulation.

This is the iceberg hypothesis: Good is just the part of Evil showing above the water, Evil the submerged part of Good (one-tenth/nine-tenths!). There is no break between them, just a water-line. Otherwise, they are secretly formed of a single substance, of a single mass which, on occasion, flips over. Good becomes Evil, and Evil shows up on the surface. And when heat melts the iceberg, everything goes back to the liquid mass of the neither-Good-nor-Evil. To take account only of the part of the phenomenon above the water-line (Good) is to run the risk of a lethal collision with the dark, submerged part of reality (Evil), which is infinitely more massive. The adventure of the *Titanic* provides an illustration of this (no one ever discovered what became of the iceberg, the 'living' incarnation of Evil).

Good and Evil transfuse even in the depths of the human soul, and make a secret compromise there. Saul Bellow:

> You say that in all of nature only man hesitates to cause pain. . . .* But reluctance to cause pain coupled with the necessity to devour . . . a peculiar human trick is the result, which consists in admitting and denying evils at the same time. To have a human life and also an inhuman life. In fact, to have everything, to combine all elements with immense ingenuity and greed. To bite, to swallow. At the same time to pity your food. To have sentiment. At the same time to behave brutally. It has been suggested (and why not!) that reluctance to cause pain is actually an extreme form, a delicious form of sensuality, and that we increase the luxuries of pain by the injection of a moral pathos. . . . Nevertheless there are moral realities . . . as surely as there are molecular and atomic ones. However, it is necessary today to entertain the very worst possibilities openly. In fact we have no choice as to that. (*Herzog*)

We do not have a choice between Good and Evil, since they are merely the transfusion or transfiguration of each other, in the literal sense in which each takes on the figure or form of the other according to a curvature of the moral universe identical to the curvature of non-Euclidean physical space. The irresistible tendency of Good to produce negative counter-effects is equalled only by the secret inclination of Evil ultimately to produce Good. The two compete for

* The French translator renders 'cause pain' as 'faire le mal'.

contradictory efficacy on a more or less long-term basis. Another reason why the choice is impossible is that Evil is not in any sense the opposite of Good, and seeing the one as the mirror-image of the other is an optical illusion. Only Good posits itself as such; Evil does not posit itself at all. Like the Nothing, of which it is the analogon, it is perfect because it is opposed to nothing. Good and Evil, like masculine and feminine, are asymmetric: they are not the mirrors, nor the complements, nor the opposites of each other. The relation between them might, rather, be described as ironic. One of the terms scoffs at the other and at its own positing. In all essentials, they are not comparable. This is where the weakness of all analysis in terms of 'difference' lies. Asymmetric terms do not leave room for a 'difference'. Evil is more than different, since it does not measure itself against the Good, and thus leaves us no choice.

A way had to be found out of this impossibility of defining Evil and positing it as such. That way out was found in the confusion of Evil, on the one hand, with evils in the sense of unfortunate occurrences – misfortune – on the other. Misfortune (poverty, violence, accidents, death) becomes the transcription into the real of the spiritual instance of Evil. The failure to confront it as 'dominant reality' in all its ambivalence, in its (happy or unhappy) fatedness, the inability to envisage Evil, leaves us grappling with misfortune as an alternative solution.

Misfortune is simpler. You can tackle it with charity

and virtue, with knowledge or compassion. It is a tangible object which you can share. In misfortune, the victims are the victims; whereas in the sphere of Evil, it is much more difficult to distinguish them from the victimizers. And, above all, misfortune allows you, in fighting it, to give a concrete sense to Good and to doing Good (which itself lacks definition). In the face of misfortune, Good can at last materialize and show its paces – which it cannot do against Evil, which always sidles up on it wearing a mask.

Yet Evil, too, has a great deal of difficulty showing its paces. When it wants to manifest itself as such – through violence, crime, perversion and transgression – when it wants to square up to Good, it falls into the same trap and the same moral illusion. What a desperate superstition was Sade's, and how superstitious are all those undertakings which take Evil as their principle of action. It is virtually impossible to do Evil for its own sake. (Being unable to spread Evil, you can always spread misfortune – but the same optical illusion occurs here as when you 'spread happiness'.)

In the short term, you can have the illusion of choosing between Good and Evil, with reasonable hope of success. But this applies only to a millimetric space of time in which a moral judgement can be expressed. The continuation of the action, the point where it gets embroiled in complications, fizzles out or even negates itself, are beyond us. Time itself enwraps each action in the sign of its end. This is how it returns into the random play of the world, a move-

ment interspersed with brief flashes of rationality.

But where, then, is our freedom? It is possible to exercise freedom within a certain 'window' – the window of a moral reality whose existence we have to recognize, as Saul Bellow puts it, in the same way as we have to recognize molecular and atomic realities. Just as a certain set of phenomena are governed by classical physics, and another reality (though is it still a reality?) belongs to the field of relativity and quantum physics, so there is a moral reality and order of judgement which obeys the precepts of classical metaphysics and the distinction between Good and Evil, and another mental (micro-)physics which is no longer of that same order at all: a universe of relativity and no distinction between Good and Evil, where the question of freedom does not even arise. Here again, is this a 'reality' or is the only 'reality' the one subject to moral judgement, and to the imperative which grounds this same reality principle – leaving us, in other words, with a perfectly tautological definition?

At any rate, the two universes do not obey the same laws – or, rather, the real alone obeys laws and conventional distinctions. That which exceeds the real no longer obeys laws, and the concepts of will, freedom and purpose no longer operate. We have, then, to invent in metaphysical space (the space of Good and Evil, True and False) the same 'immoral' leap as represented in physics by the theoretical leap into relativity and quantum physics.

The existence of Evil is not a mystery. Evil (of

semblance, illusion, uncertainty) is self-evidently there as a basic formula of our mortal existence. The real, on the other hand, as we picture it to ourselves, with its causal determinations and its truth-effects, is an exceptional phenomenon – in fact, the only true mystery. And it is a mystery whose secret we shall certainly never penetrate, for in the eternal balance of Good and Evil we shall never know where priority lies: with Good, as all our culture would have us believe, or with Evil and its spiritual adventure?

The two are entangled like the interwoven letters of a monogram. And if we move unfailingly towards the Good on a linear path, we equally surely come to Evil along another curve.

The most likely hypothesis, however, is that of the triumph of the final solution, that of a systematic integration by a single principle, for which we would merely have to 'pay an all-inclusive price'. In this ontological night, everything would be available 'in a single package', with no regard for detail. As of now, our adherence to an integral, integrist concept of the world and society is already very far advanced. We are on course for the perfect crime, perpetrated by Good and in the name of Good, for the implacable perfection of a technical, artificial universe which will see the accomplishment of all our desires, of a world unified by the elimination of all anti-bodies. This is our negentropic phantasm of total information. That all matter should become energy and all energy information. That

everything in language should signify. That all genes should be operational. That everything should achieve self-awareness, and so forth. Abolishing absence, emptiness, meaninglessness. The phantasm (right down to the atomic level) of a mass without interstices, without inner distance; a mass of such infinite density that it ends in gravitational collapse. A phantasm at the human level of the abolition of all negativity, so as to produce an ever denser human substance, totally interactive, totally intermingled. Gathering time into one point, space into one moment. Everything being full, saturated, exhaustive.

In this hypothesis, towards which a kind of blind compulsion directs us, we must conclude with Ceronetti that 'concrete salvation takes the form of an accelerated destruction', but that it is not Evil, but Good 'which is manifestly at the controls of the suicide engine'.

The other – dual – hypothesis raises the possibility which stands radically opposed to that of a unified world and a single principle. By definition, the One is One, and can only repeat itself to infinity. But by what strange combination, then, does life transform itself? Why would it choose to differentiate itself, metamorphose and die, rather than persevere in its being by irrepressible totalization? Why wouldn't any form whatever simply go on realizing itself to the point of delirium? Why wouldn't any thought be exacerbated to the point of madness? If you assume a single term

at the outset, it is not clear what would interrupt its running on in perpetuity. So nothing starts out from a single principle, and duality is the rule. To take up an intuitive insight from mythology: in every human action, there are always two divinities doing battle; neither is defeated, and the game has no end.

If the world were not the inextricable manifestation of two opposing principles, we would not be caught between relative certainties and a radical uncertainty. We would have only absolute certainties. 'Incertitude does not exist (but are you sure?).'* This is the same dilemma confronted by Cioran: 'You have to choose', he said, 'between the real or illusion.' Either the world is wholly real, or it is wholly illusion. Any compromise between the two is weak thinking.

Similarly, you have to choose: either Heaven or Hell – there is no Purgatory. It is the single principle or duality – there is no compromise solution. Yet all contemporary thinking on otherness goes on under the banner of this 'dialectical' compromise, playing on the countless variants of a soft, altruistic, humanistic, pluralistic thought – in reality, a *trompe-l'œil* invocation of the Other. The fact is that there is radical alterity only in duality. Alterity cannot be grounded in a vague dialectic of the One and the Other, only in an irrevocable principle. Without this dual, antagonistic principle, you will only ever get a phantom alterity, the mirror-play of difference and a culture of difference in which the great idea of

* Passage in quotation marks in English in the original.

duality is lost. Hence the need for Evil and Hell. Otherwise, we are in Purgatory and salvation for all – the 'right to salvation'. But if no one is damned any longer, then no one is chosen. You cannot have the one without the other. And if everyone is virtually saved, then no one is, and salvation has no meaning. This is where we are heading – towards an economic cast of things: merit and grace as equivalents, and salvation for all. Now, God could not lend Himself to this banal exchange, from which His entire *raison d'être* has disappeared, He having become a mere general equivalent. Why would He bother with the upkeep of an eternal punishment factory? And if everyone is saved, what would be in it for the elect, deprived as they would be of the spectacle of the damned and their torments? So we need an irrevocable presence of Evil and Hell. Moreover, this has to be laid down by absolutely final decree, so that there is no threat to this duality from some sort of final reconciliation. The theory of predestination has no other meaning than to render impossible the banal exchange of Good and Evil.

If the world is what has no double, this is because it is dual in itself – in the original version, so to speak. Only in the dubbed (doubled) version does it become unitary.

The existence of the visible world originates in a breaking of symmetry. Matter, life, and even thought are the products of a breaking of symmetry. Subject and object, masculine and feminine, are

asymmetrical. And it is this asymmetry which gives rise to the reciprocal attraction between them. For two things to be regarded as equivalent, and to be exchanged, they have to be wrested from this reciprocal attraction. They must not be able to change into each other. Otherwise, you are back in Alice's garden or, in other words, in Wonderland, the land of endless transmutations. Transmutations of ideas, of words – in the shaft of wit, the witty use of language – of the human and the inhuman, of life and death, of one sex into the other and, finally, of Good and Evil, through all the convulsions of Moral Reason.

Every life plays in this way with death, every body with its anti-bodies, every particle with its anti-particle, each sex with the other, in a kind of internal duality which means that nothing – forms, meanings, or the mass of living matter – goes on to infinity.

It is when the unitary principle unfurls itself in all its violence that this balance of life and death is destroyed. Wherever a symmetry and a mirror-relation is re-created (between the world and its double, between subject and object), it is done at the cost of liquidating this fundamental duality. This is the price to be paid for a final solution – the solution of a unified reality, a universal synthesis overarched by a single principle.

Dissociated Society, Parallel Society

However, things are not settled once and for all, for as our society becomes globalized and as we identify, willingly or otherwise, with this integral world, duality resurfaces in all the modalities of disorganization which haunt our systems. And this includes even the denial of our own bodies and our own mental organization, which we manifest in madness, vertigo, absence, disappearance.

It is not even a question of a return of the repressed (which is still a mechanistic interpretation of the play of forces). It is simply that all liberated energy releases an antagonistic energy, that every difference secretes an equal indifference, that every truth secretes an even greater uncertainty. The fact is that there is no exception to what is not in any sense an economic principle, but a symbolic rule, and that the economy of all systems breaks down on the failure to recognize this fundamental duality, which then asserts itself through all the forms of clandestinity, dissociation and general, catastrophic upheaval.

Every integrating, homogenizing society tends, beyond a certain critical threshold (and our societies are now well past this), towards dissociation.

Homogenize and integrate as much as you like; separation will still occur. The exclusion and discrimination will even increase in proportion to the 'progress' of integration. You will never get beyond the antagonism of two principles. In our modern societies this gives rise to the resurgence of a parallel society, a parallel market, a parallel financial circuit, parallel ('alternative') medicine and morality, even parallel reality and truth.

Any regime of control and prohibition creates an irregular, clandestine, anomalous situation: a black market. Prohibition and its consequences, along the lines of the prohibition of alcohol in the 1930s, has become an automatic mechanism of – and, in a sense, second nature to – our system. There is the black market in employment – the black economy – which corresponds to a deregulation of the official market (there is even, now, a black market in unemployment, duplicating real unemployment), the black market in financial speculation, the black market in poverty (the kind which circulates outside official channels), the black market in sex (prostitution), the black market in information (the many clandestine networks and secret services), the black market in weapons (a state-sponsored black market, but no less secret for all that) and, of course, the art market, itself now a veritable black market representing a kind of state of emergency and panic in the aesthetic field. Last but not least, there is the black market in thought. The liberal-democratic atmosphere, absorbing virtually

all ideological divergences, or giving free rein to all *trompe-l'œil* differences, amounts to a state of advanced prohibition of thought, which has no other choice than to go underground. A piece of good fortune this (thought is not yet part of human rights, though that will surely come). As for alterity, it no longer exists on the official market, where it has been killed off by conviviality. There then automatically arises a black market in alterity, and, as usual, this one is largely in the hands of traffickers: it consists of racism and all forms of exclusion. A contraband alterity, all the variants of which (including nationalism, sects, etc.) will increasingly gain in virulence in a desperately integrist, unificatory, homogenizing society. All socialization is doomed to develop (as crypto-legally as can be imagined) all the forms of black market. Monopoly structures (and any state is a monopoly, since it claims a monopoly in the political and social spheres) cannot but secrete a para-political society, a mafia of some sort, to control this form of generalized corruption. It is pure hypocrisy on the part of the political authorities to fight this mafia, since it is an emanation of those authorities themselves. And, in the unimaginable eventuality that the authorities managed to crush it, then all of civil society would have become a counter-society, and the state a useless function.

Everything – or, at least, most essential things – already takes place outside the official circuits. And there is something heartening about this. There is

something *spirituel* in this double game, in this perversion which resists any normalization, in these occult structures which flout established authority, in this black market of the social. And, in any case, what hope would there be for a society that had purged itself of all clandestinity? In the end, the last word goes to Mandeville, for whom the social body operates only through its immorality and its vices – but that immorality cannot be acknowledged: it, too, is part of the black market in truth.

This is our modern, corrupt version of the 'accursed share', that dangerous, residual, surplus portion which archaic societies well knew how to manage by establishing a double circuit, a dual register of exchange: the useful and the sumptuary. It is for us that it has become 'accursed'. It is because we have universalized exchange in a single mode, and flouted this symbolic distinction, that whole swathes of our exchanges and social relations have fallen into the 'black economy', have gone underground, where they continue to lead an illegal existence in the same way as the pagan gods continued to lead a furtive, superstitious existence under Christianity. So our essential decision-making and power structures, our networks and capital, are settling into the orbit of secrecy, of speculation, of an illegality so commonplace that it is no longer illegal. And this is also, in a sense, the continuity of Evil, the continuity of a vital illusion, a vital corruption which one might believe to be inscribed in nature. But it is inscribed in thought,

and it is because it is inscribed in thought that it cannot be eliminated in fact.

This thoroughgoing dissociation of all the forms of society amounts to a veritable silent insurrection. It provides an echo of those peoples exiled behind the mirrors by the victorious Emperor, destined in the future to be merely a reflection of their conqueror. But one day, says Borges, these subject peoples begin to look less and less like their masters. They end up breaking the mirrors and bursting forth into the empire, laying waste to it. So we see entire populations rebelling – albeit in some cases silently – against the principle of representation. For them, the exercise of that particular freedom has become enforced bit-part playing and a shabby hoax.

This is a very deep rebellion, which goes to the heart of the political system. What interest does the modern individual have in being represented – the individual of the networks and the virtual, the multifocal individual of the operational sphere? He does his business, and that is that. What does he care for transcendence? He lives very well in immanence and interaction. What does a political will mean to him, a collective will, that glimmer of sovereignty he delegated to the social organization? There is no longer any delegation of the will, or of desire. The screen of communication has smashed the mirror of representation. Now only statistical shadows circulate – on the opinion-poll screens. There is no social contract any

longer: on the media screens, only the image-play-back functions. The citizen's only symbolic capital is that of his disaffection and political poverty, that very poverty managed by our official representatives (that is the secret of their corruption).

The political insurrection of people who no longer want to be represented, the silent insurrection of things which no longer want to signify anything. The contract of signification – that kind of social contract between things and their signs – itself seems broken, like the political contract, with the result that we find it increasingly hard to represent the world to ourselves and decipher its meaning. Things themselves rebel against decipherment – or perhaps we no longer wish to decipher them? It is the very imagining of meaning that is sick.

Yet we still play-act representation. A good illustration of this modern hoax was provided by the Kassel Documenta of 1997 with the 'Pigsty' Installation.* Reaching up on tiptoe to see over a fence, spectators look down on a pigsty, while a large mirror opposite allows them to see themselves observing the pigs. Then they walk round the shelter and park themselves behind the mirror, which turns out to be a two-way mirror through which they can once again see the pigs, but at the same time also see the spectators opposite looking

* The exhibit, a work by Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel, was entitled 'Ein Haus für Schweine und Menschen' (A House for Pigs and People).

at the pigs – spectators unaware, or at least pretending to be unaware, that they are being observed. This is the contemporary version of Velásquez's *Las Meninas*, and Michel Foucault's analysis of the classical age of representation.

Not only do people no longer want to be represented, they do not even want to be 'liberated'. Liberated from what, and in terms of what? For what is this liberty to be exchanged? What is exchanged in the system of representation? It is this impossibility of finding an actual equivalent for this freedom and this right to representation which constitutes the failure of the political today. Why bother to signify and assume meaning when everything circulates so quickly that nothing has time to be exchanged as value? To want what people want today, they do not need to be free. To say what they have to say, they do not need to be represented. To be what they are, they no longer even need to recognize themselves as such.

Hence the growing, epidemic abstentionism (and not just in the electoral field – that is merely a symptom), the creeping indifference, the viral indifference, itself in the process of infecting the system and wiping its hard disk. All these things were present twenty or thirty years ago in the analysis of the silence of the masses as rejection of representation, as disavowal of political liberty. But in this frantic world, the final throes of the political system have a deathly slowness about them. So we live in a world which is no longer

our own, but in which, in the most absolute ambiguity, we collude. Subjects prey to the ghosts of their existence and their freedom; insolvent subjects, for they owe a debt which cannot be settled (there is no longer anyone to redeem the debt, nor any cause for which to sacrifice their lives).

However, behind this transparency, behind this vertige of a virtual presence, behind this indifference, isn't everyone subject to a demand of another order: the demand to be what they are – no longer by default, by being assigned to be merely what they are, but by excess, transfiguring this loss of representation into a vertige of pure presence? At last the good fortune to be what you are without passing through representation! At last the good fortune to want what you want without passing through freedom! Indeed, to do these things you no longer have need of anyone. As Cioran has written: 'What a pity that to find God you have to go via faith!'

Poetic Transference

Beyond Artificial Intelligence: Radicality of Thought

The hypothesis of a total identification of the world and thought in terms of a single principle is merely the most general one. The other hypothesis assumes a poetic reversal of the situation in which it is the very triumph of Good and the Single Principle which opens up the absolute singularity of the world and thought.

A radical re-evaluation: it is all these optimum-performance technical systems, these systems of limitless performance of the world, which paradoxically, in absorbing all information, in concentrating all functions in themselves, clear the way for the exercise of a thinking freed from all purpose, all 'objectivity', and restored to its radical uselessness.

If there is in our system a function which is in the process of becoming perfectly useless, thought must be that function.

Of the countless machinic prostheses with which we attempt to produce an artificial synthesis of all the possible activities of the human being, artificial intelligence (and computer technologies as a whole) is today the most prestigious and the most fraught with consequences. It is, truly, our chimera. For a long time

now we have been living chimeras, strange mixtures of man and machine, and we have been living for some years in a chimerical cocktail of cultures, signs, differences and values – including that chimerical enterprise cloning, since in cloning we are coupled with our genetic doubles. But the finest chimerical assemblage remains the coupling of thought with its exact computer replica in artificial intelligence – playing with the demarcation line between the human and the inhuman in the order of thought, and representing a mockery of thought, just as genetic cloning represents a mockery of the species.

Soon, we shall no longer be able to think this mockery; it will have faded in the general indistinction of the computing sphere. Let us say, before it is too late, that artificial intelligence is incompatible with thought for the simple reason that thought is not an operation, that it is not exchangeable for anything whatever, and, most particularly, not for the objectivity of an operational calculation of the input–output type. For this reason, it cannot be taken over by any machine, or have any mechanical equivalent. It is out of despair at this situation that human beings have striven to embody it in a technical device. Perhaps thought is, ultimately, horrified by itself in its incompleteness, its ever unverifiable form, which is always irremediably complicit with a questioning and an illusion; perhaps it wants, in the end, to produce itself as function, fulfil itself as desire? In this sense, the entire edifice of information technology might be said to be the

fulfilment of this perverse desire, aiming to efface itself before its virtual equivalent in the same way as the human species is aiming to efface itself before its genetic equivalent. And just as the coming of the clone is the final solution to the problem of sexuality and reproduction, so artificial intelligence represents the final solution to the problem of thought.

Fortunately, all kinds of things prevent that technical equivalence from coming about: feeling, perception, enjoyment, pain. Rest assured that efforts are being made to find computer-generated equivalents for all these, but for the moment there is still no machine to handle them.

What still distinguishes the functioning of human beings from that of machines – even the most 'intelligent' machines – is the intoxication of functioning, of living – pleasure. Inventing machines which feel pleasure is a task that is still beyond the powers of humanity. All kinds of aids can increase human pleasure, but human beings cannot invent any that would feel pleasure like themselves, or better than themselves – that would feel pleasure in their stead. They can make machines which move, work and calculate better than they do – but there is no technical extension of human pleasure, of the pleasure of being human. For that to occur, the machines would have to be able to invent human beings, or conceive of them. But it is too late for that. They can only be extensions of human beings – or destroy them. Machines would

have to exceed what they are – to become metaphorical machines, parabolic machines, excessive machines. Now, even the most intelligent machines are nothing other than precisely what they are – except, perhaps, where some accident or breakdown occurs which you can always attribute to them as some obscure desire. They do not have that ironic surplus of functioning, that pain and suffering; they do not give in to narcissistic temptation, and are not even seduced by their own knowledge. Which perhaps explains their deep melancholy, the sadness of computers. All machines are bachelor machines. . . .

No doubt one day some will learn to give signs of pleasure, and of many other things, for simulation is within their powers. But they will just be imitating our psychological and social mechanisms, which are already engaged everywhere in multiplying the signs of desire, sex and pleasure – just as biological cloning merely plagiarizes our cultural mechanisms, which have long been doomed to mass reproduction.

Devices aimed at reproducing the complexity of the senses are already being cobbled together in the cybernetic interface. Touching each other 'virtually' at a distance. Using the subtlety of breathing, the rhythm of the pulsing of the heart, to navigate towards new virtual environments. Teleperformance, 'Very Nervous System', 'Telematic Dreaming'. The interface itself is a chimera, first in the Surrealistic coupling or grafting of man and his screen and then in those

bio-apparatuses – half-machine, half-organism – which 'will soon reconfigure our entire sensibilities'.

But what is ultimately going on here? Is the whole of the human undergoing a shift into the inhuman, or is the opposite taking place? Are human functions and reflexes being transferred into the machinic artefact, or are technologies being made subservient to reflexes that are human, all too human? Both are equally monstrous, since the human and the inhuman simultaneously lose their definitions in this intermingling. What is the point of this futile reduplication of our feelings, our taste, our touch and our mental operations if not to divest us of our natural intelligence?

If human beings create or fantasize about 'intelligent' machines, that is because they secretly despair of their intelligence or are crumbling under the weight of a monstrous, useless intelligence: so they somehow hive it off into machines, to be able to play with it, to mock it. Leaving intelligence to machines is, in the end, relinquishing the responsibility of knowing, just as leaving it to politicians to govern us relieves us of the responsibility of power.

If human beings dream of original machines, machines of genius, that is because they despair of their own originality, or prefer to relinquish that originality and enjoy it indirectly through machines. For what these machines offer us is, first and foremost, the spectacle of thought; and human beings, in manipulating them, are indulging more in the spectacle of thought than in thought itself.

Not for nothing are these machines termed 'virtual',* since they keep thought in an indefinite state of suspense, a state linked to the achievement, at some point, of an exhaustive knowledge. The act of thinking is indefinitely deferred. The question of thought can no longer even be posed, any more than the question of freedom for future generations. So the men of Artificial Intelligence will move motionless across their mental space, hooked up to their computers. Virtual Man will be physically and mentally disabled. This is the price he will pay for being operational.

The confrontation between Kasparov and *Deep Blue* (and subsequently with *Deeper Blue*), between a human being and an 'intelligent' artefact, is a fine example of the hesitant first steps of the human being grappling with his immaterial machines, grappling with the mastery of his own intelligence, and dreaming of being that player who is greater than the game itself.

Man dreams for all he is worth of inventing a machine more powerful than himself, while he is nevertheless unable to envisage losing control of his creations. Just like God. Could God create a being which would outstrip Him? Yet this is what we are doing with our cybernetic creatures. We offer them a chance to beat us – and even dream of their outdoing us. Man is caught up, then, in a utopian phantasy of

* The French adjective 'virtuel' has the sense of 'possible' or 'potential'.

creating an artefact which is superior to him, but which he must nonetheless beat to save face.

If Kasparov initially defeated *Deep Blue*, that was because he still had a secret weapon – the weapon of intuition, emotion, the stratagem, playing a 'double game' – whereas *Deep Blue* had only powers of calculation. In fact, Kasparov is the only player here; *Deep Blue* is simply an operator. The automat never plays (except where there is a man hidden inside, as in Van Klemperen's chess player). Moreover, Kasparov has on his side the human passion of the challenge; he has an other ranged against him, an opponent. Strictly speaking, *Deep Blue* has no adversary; it moves within the scope of its own programme. This is a decisive advantage for the human, the advantage of otherness, which is the subtle precondition for play, with its possibilities of decoying, of 'overplaying one's hand', of sacrifice and weakness. The computer, by contrast, is condemned to play at the height of its capabilities. In short, in the human being calculation goes hand in hand with an ironic power, the ironic power of thought, a power which exceeds 'intelligence'. It is through thought that man can subtly de-programme himself and become 'technologically incorrect' to retain control of the game. But this situation is unstable: the day the language of the computer and the power of calculation come to prevail, the day man seeks to take on the machine on its own ground by becoming 'technologically correct', he will be defeated once and for all. And after the first game, we

saw Kasparov moving in that direction: engaging in a battle of calculations and, in a way, losing his sense of the essence of the game.

By contrast, his opponents (the technicians programming *Deeper Blue*) got wise to this and worked on the interface, inculcating in the computer the real idea of play, and making the machine play against its own calculating nature by integrating human reflexes into it, and thus snaring Kasparov in his own trap.

> Something incredible happened. Before the end, *Deeper Blue* rejected a move all the computers would have made and preferred a deeper one which did not bring it any great advantage. It was a subtle choice. And then later, in a winning position, it made a crude error, allowing perpetual check. How could it play like a champion and, only a few moves later, make such a blunder? It's strange. . . .

The IBM technicians had managed to inculcate a mental photocopy of the human into *Deep Blue*, in order to equip it to beat human beings on their own ground. By contrast, professional players dream of beating the machine as such, by becoming more of a machine than the machine. In this challenge, man is likely to be first to be knocked off his stroke.

The fact that the computer has managed artificially to synthesize certain human qualities does not, however, mean that it has begun thinking. It is merely

being signed up to the technocratic project of reinscribing all data in a three-dimensional virtual reality. There is nothing new in this: we have already seen the successful rehumanization of industrial work within Taylorism, without anything of the nature of exploitation being changed. The inhuman can mimic the human to perfection, without ceasing to be inhuman.

Here everything rests on the distinction between intelligence and thought. The postulate, which was Turing's idea from the outset, is that intelligence can be separated from any physical substrate, from any sensible referent. Intelligence is not the intelligence of the whole human being, but a functional, cerebral version of ideation, and through it you can liberate an ideality of the human being restricted to the brain alone. Making a radical break between calculation and the body and, on that basis, inventing for yourself a definitive, spectral body, an exoteric body, free of any fleshly, sexual uncertainty, a body without depth, reinvented from the screen as skin, as tactile film, far removed from any organic sensibility. This is the perspective of the immaterial machine.

This ideality is, in fact, a delusion. The user invests the machine as another kind of esoteric body (his indefatigable exploration of the Net is equivalent to looking into his own body). It is not just the intellectual faculties but the whole of the repressed libido and the denial of the body which find their extension in the computer, which has become a desireless object of

desire (perhaps this explains its emotional responses, its faults, its accidents, its viruses), while the human being becomes an inhuman outgrowth of the machinic faculties. In the interface, both exchange their negative characteristics. So the machine is just as much a victim of man as man is of the machine. Preoccupied as we are with the subject's point of view, we never envisage the possible alienation of the technical object, the danger of damaging or impairing it by projecting all-too-human fantasies on to it. The ultimate aim in artificial intelligence is for the machine no longer to seem like a machine, and to begin to 'think' – the machine must conceal its prodigious functional capacities to do as well (or as badly) as human beings. This is an error of judgement: preserving the specificity of man presupposes also that we preserve the specificity of machines.

However this may be, the use of computers does not simply bring with it increased calculating power; it modifies the types of phenomena susceptible of being processed. It becomes capable of bringing new phenomena into being, phenomena implied by a particular type of calculation. Computer simulation then becomes a form of interpretation guided by mathematical and technical models – a kind of new mental apparatus which does more than mirror the brain that designed it, since it analyses that brain in return, and shapes it in its own image.

If we opt for this type of intelligence – regarded as

a higher function than all others, co-ordinating all others, but itself a function of a technical apparatus and operational models – if we confine ourselves to this high-efficiency definition, then the machine has got us beaten before we start. It is the same with thought: if it takes objective, rational truth as its aim, it is defeated before it even starts – by the experts, the logicians or the sophists.

It all depends on the ground we choose to fight on. Measuring his powers against a reductive ideal of intelligence, man is beaten by his own creation, his own shadow. This is, sadly, a very common model: most often – and this applies also to social and political matters – we choose to fight on ground where we are beaten before we begin.

We are forced, then, into a strategic redefinition of what is at stake in intelligence and thought respectively. And here Kasparov's defeat by *Deeper Blue* comes to our aid. Rather than fight on a ground where victory is never certain (that of technical intelligence), let us choose to fight on the terrain of thought, where the question of winning does not actually arise.

This is the key: maintaining the radical uselessness of thought, its negative predestination for any use or purpose whatsoever. In this sense, the threat posed by the development of artificial intelligence is a piece of good fortune. Thought is thereby rid of the burden of knowledge and information, of all the informational and communicational excess which encumbered it.

The computer, which handles these things so much better, relieves us of all that. *Relieved of the real by the virtual itself*, thought can once again assume its place where 'the thinking is', where we are thought. For the subject who claims to think without being thought in return is merely an organic tool, prefiguring the inorganic intellection of the machine. He is beaten on his own ground, and in the end it is the virtual which thinks him. On the other hand, the person who thinks 'in return', the one who thinks because he *is thought*, is liberated from the unilateral 'service' of thought by the operation of the machine itself.

The immense advantage of artificial intelligence will have been to force thought into a corner: above and beyond the control of all its mechanisms, is there a particular purpose to thought? Is there something else within it which goes beyond its pure possibility of functioning? Does it still have an object once it has found its true object of perverse desire in artificial intelligence?

So we have to revise our judgement of this 'alienating' technology which our critical philosophy spends its whole time denouncing. And we see, rather, that we should extol the paradox by which all powers that arrogate ends and means to themselves also liberate those things which do not obey this functional principle. By arrogating to themselves a monopoly of meaning and knowledge, they liberate all those things with no meaning and no concern for meaning. Rendering unto utility that which is of the order of the

useful, at the same time they render unto inutility that which is of the order of radical uselessness, and unto the void that which is of the order of emptiness.

Everything is much clearer.

Freed from all functionality (now devolved to the intellectual machines) and back underground, thought becomes free to lead nowhere, to be the triumphal effectuation of the Nothing, to revive the principle of Evil. And this turns everything around. For we said to ourselves, following Cioran ('What a pity that, in order to find God, you have to go via faith!'): what a pity that, in order to get to the world, you have to go via representation! What a pity that, in order to say things, you have to go via meaning! What a pity that, in order to know, you have to go via 'objective' knowledge! What a pity that, for something to be an event, it has to go through 'information'! What a pity that, for there to be exchange, you have to go through value!

Well, all that is over! From now on we are free with another kind of freedom. Human beings, relieved of representation by their representatives themselves, are at last free to be what they are without going through anyone else – and not even through freedom or the right to be free. Relieved of value, things are free to circulate without passing through exchange and the abstraction of exchange. Words and language are free to correspond without passing through meaning. Just as sexuality, freed from reproduction,

becomes free to deploy itself in the erotic, without a concern for ends and means.

This is how the poetic transference operates.

Where we might deplore the disappearance of the real in the virtual, the disappearance of the event in information, the disappearance of thought in artificial intelligence, the disappearance of values and ideologies in the globalization of trade, we should instead rejoice in this totalization of the world which, by purging everything of its functions and technical goals, makes room for the singularity of thought, the singularity of the event, the singularity of language, the singularity of the object and the image. In the end, it is the very existence of single-track thinking [*la pensée unique*], of the totalitarian system of the economy, of information and artificial intelligence – and the automation and exponential development of these things – which leaves space for a world that is *literally true*. It is the final accomplishment of reality which leaves room for the radical illusion. Now, it is in this literal truth, this literal play of the world, that the ultimate freedom lies.

Living Coin: Singularity of the Phantasm

Pierre Klossowski's proposition, in *La Monnaie vivante*, of a phantasmatic transference (a variant of poetic transference) in which the economic becomes the place where singularity is embodied, fits in with this paradoxical perspective in which the system itself opens up a space for its absolute polar opposite. A perversion of the industrial order, a misappropriation of the abstraction of money for impulsional ends, and the paradox of a living coin defined as follows: 'And from this point on the industrial slavegirl substitutes for the function of money – being herself money, both the equivalent of wealth and wealth itself.'

Nothing less is involved here than the reinvesting of the sphere of all exchange by that which cannot possibly be exchanged. The phantasm, being unexchangeable, requires some variety of simulacrum before it can be traded. The economic sphere becomes this simulacrum. The sphere of value becomes the universally intelligible equivalent of that which is irreducible to value. What is at issue here is not a transgression of the law or of the economic order, but the perfusion at the very heart of that law and its

abstraction of an impulsional element, an integral monstrosity. Without resolution or compromise: the monstrosity remains entire; only it transfuses through the abstraction which denies it. Something scoffs at exchange in the very sphere of exchange.

In a recent film, *Indecent Proposal*, a man (Robert Redford) offers to give a young couple a million dollars if he can spend a night with the wife (Demi Moore). What Redford would like for this exorbitant price is to buy this woman as-not-for-sale. This is not the price of prostitution, which would still be a commodity transaction, but the hyperbolic value of that which cannot possibly be exchanged, and the possession of which as such has no meaning. The appropriation of an individual human being has no more meaning than purchasing the words of a language for your own exclusive use. But what is not exchangeable in terms of abstract equivalence can circulate quite comfortably by elective affinity: words, property, women move easily from one person to another in seduction, without the intermediary of money, without the intermediary of meaning. Thus Redford could seduce Demi Moore and obtain the wealth concerned (the enjoyment of this individual woman) without the intermediary of the sign of wealth (the million dollars). But the challenge for him is precisely to take wealth by force *with* the sign of wealth: to prostitute not the venal part, but the unexchangeable part of this woman – her 'accursed

portion', so to speak, the part which neither you nor anyone else can alienate from yourself, for the very good reason that it does not belong to you, that you do not belong to yourself. What one is, one does not have; and what one does not have, one cannot sell. Thus, even if they want to, neither can sacrifice this accursed share, even for a fantastic price. But the temptation is all the stronger to violate the inalienable form; to take by force, in its entrenchment, that which can give itself only in amorous collusion (Lacan: love is giving what you do not have – that is to say, what you are, which no one has at their disposal). Thus, genuine rape is not forcibly 'enjoying' someone, but forcing someone to have pleasure.

In the end, Demi Moore herself joins in and colludes in this profanation on the pretext of the couple's financial difficulties, though in reality she does so from a secret fascination – precisely the fascination with obliterating the very idea of impossible exchange (which is in some regard unbearable), with obliterating wealth in and through the sign of wealth. More potent than any other passion is this ironic, sadistic passion, this passion for total artifice, which is also the passionate desire to put an end to nature and to God's order.

In short, she agrees to spend the night with him for a million dollars. And it is on this basis of a cynical equivalence that they end up being seduced by each other – that is to say, each being deflected from their own principle to enter into a dual relation, to enter

into wealth *through* the sign of wealth: and hence to bring about the paradoxical utopia of living money.

At the moment of fulfilling the contract, Demi Moore is still just a resigned victim, but she subsequently comes to life, revives as a woman. A decisive scene is the one in the casino when Redford asks her to bet for him at the gaming table – she gambles and wins. By this act, he seduces her. It is as though he were gambling the million dollars on her. As a result, she becomes the living stakes in the game, and it is as though she were taking the place of the million dollars he has given to spend the night with her. After gambling a million dollars, she puts herself in play for a million dollars. She no longer sells herself; she becomes the support or agent of an act of sumptuary exchange.

It is not that she 'is worth' a million dollars; as an individual human being, she is worth nothing. But the million dollars, gambled like this, is not worth anything either – and it is in this equivalence of non-value, in this equivalence of the nothing, that they can pass from the one to the other, from the one into the other, without losing in the exchange.

At this point, when she has gambled and won for him, she is 'lost', as they would say in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (the best way to seduce is still to have someone do something in your stead: he or she will then keep on coming back to occupy that place). And indeed, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* offers a similar

example: Madame de Merteuil has Cécile deflowered by Valmont to avenge herself on X, who wanted her to remain a virgin – and she makes this a condition of allowing him into her bed. In substance: if you take my place in vengeance, you will have your place in my bed. Little Cécile became the living coin of Madame de Merteuil's vengeance.

In both cases, the manoeuvre ends in failure. The difference is that in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* it ends in death (Valmont dies in a duel at the hand of Cécile's fiancé – she who served as living coin also has her revenge by proxy), whereas in the film it ends in the most mundane of ways: in a marital revival.

Once the moment of the transfiguration of money has passed, the moment of the reversibility of sign and thing – the million dollars metamorphosed into a unique woman, a unique sign – everything falls back into, and is lost in, a banal exchange of an amorous or sexual kind. The universal dream of negotiating bodies and pleasures above and beyond their value ends in speculation, inflation or deflation – in all the vicissitudes by which the economic order is usually beset. In fact, the paradox of living coin quite simply cannot be maintained. Except in the exceptional moment of this substitution, this transfusion of value.

The same paradox can operate not just in respect of wealth, but with regard to destitution, deprivation, mortification. Not only the realm of the impulses, but also the death drive has to find its living coin. A recent

exhibition by the Spanish photographer David Nebreda illustrated an act of such self-denying bravado taken to extremes. Confined in a single room, seriously ill, he unflaggingly photographs his own torment, his own tormented body, varying the décor, the lighting and the staging of a dead-end world. At the end of a move more radical than any form of self-assertion, he finds the strength to inscribe himself in a living sign, the living equivalent of that mental destruction – the sign of his own body. His own body or his *personal* body?* At any rate, it is the only living object available to him in his reclusion with which to put his own death into circulation. So he gets himself onto another track, sets others off on another (false) trail – his own death is no longer an impossible exchange. He manages to deny himself absolutely and to produce that denial as work, and even as artwork. For his photos are not mere testimony, they are works. And this is where art appears as the perfect simulacrum: not just the sign, but the simultaneity of the thing and the sign. If one needs to say crucifixion,

* The French is 'Son propre corps, ou son corps propre?' 'Le corps propre' is one of the key concepts of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). The term locates the body not as something which we own (*our* bodies), but as a precondition for – and a means of – communicating with the world.

While I agree with Monika M. Langer that 'le corps propre' might be better translated in many contexts as 'the body itself' (*Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*, London: MacMillan, 1989, p. 39), I have retained the more common 'personal body' here, italicizing the 'personal', since I believe this formulation more accurately renders the distinction Baudrillard is making.

the sign which says it must itself be crucified. If one needs to say the life of the impulses, and find the living equivalent of the phantasm, the sign itself must be impulsional – that is, not in any way representative. Art is made from the impossible exchange of signifier and signified, and therefore from the impossibility of representation as such, which is made up of dead signs and empty promises.

Nebreda succeeded – for a moment. But the two things come together only ephemerally, and art, as the immediate incarnation of a living coin, lasts only for one dazzling moment. Most of the time, it sinks into trading on aesthetic values. How do things stand today with all these strategies of singularity and the unexchangeable in the virtual space where, strictly speaking, neither signs nor money exist any longer? How do things stand with the drive and the phantasm, which have themselves become virtual or have, in other words, been substituted by signs which are no longer even simulacra, but computer-generated equivalents? For virtual reality is not a simulacrum. The digital, artificial language and the computer-generated image are not simulacra. In the virtual, the sign is no longer what it was, since there is no longer any 'real' for it to be the sign of. The era of the simulacrum was a golden age, the era of the drives was a golden age, the *empire des signes* was a golden age. This is the era of the digital, where the technologies of the virtual accomplish this miracle of abolishing both the thing and the sign – thus escaping their

impossible exchange, but also escaping the *play* of their impossible exchange – that is to say, the invention and the becoming of living coin.

Commodity exchange, the abstraction of the commodity, of the general equivalent, and everything which describes the movement of value and the historic form of capital is one thing. The current situation, in which money is the object of a universal passion reaching far beyond value and commodity exchange, is quite another. This fetishism of money, before which all activities are equivalent, expresses the fact that none of these activities any longer has any distinct end-goal. Money then becomes the universal transcription of a world bereft of meaning. This fetish money, around which global speculation revolves – far above and beyond the reproduction of capital – has nothing to do with wealth or the production of wealth. It expresses the breakdown of meaning, the impossibility of exchanging the world for its meaning, and at the same time the need to transfigure that impossibility into a sign of some kind – indeed, of the most nondescript kind: the sign which will best express the meaninglessness of the world.

Does the world have to have a meaning, then? That is the real problem. If we could accept this meaninglessness of the world, then we could play with forms, appearances and our impulses, without worrying about their ultimate destination. If there were not this demand for the world to have meaning, there would be no reason to find a general

equivalent for it in money. As Cioran says, we are not failures until we believe life has a meaning – and from that point on we are all failures, because it hasn't. And it is, in fact, because this fetishized money is expressive of a pure and simple absence that it becomes speculative, exponential, itself doomed to crashes and sudden wild swings.

If you wanted to put a brake on the total extrapolation of the world into money, you would first have to eliminate the demand for meaning – that demand being increasingly thwarted, because the world has less and less meaning (it has never had any, it has never been exchangeable for anything whatever, but today it is increasingly difficult to find a substitute equivalent for it: the only equivalent we can find for it is a virtual one). We are thus torn between the imagining of meaning, the demand for truth, and the increasingly probable hypothesis that the world has no final truth, that it is a definitive illusion. Do we absolutely have to choose between meaning and non-meaning? But the point is precisely that we do not want to. The absence of meaning is no doubt intolerable, but it would be just as intolerable to see the world assume a definitive meaning. And this is where the miracle of money comes in. Money is what allows us not to choose between meaning and non-meaning, and so to find a universal compromise. It functions as a universal substitute finality, just as the fetish serves as a substitute sex object.

So, this money has no accountable equivalence; it

is the universal equivalent of nothing – it might indeed be said, rather, to be the equivalent of the universal circulation of the Nothing. It is a disembodied sign, like the fetish object, which has nothing to do with the sexual act or pleasure. It is the opposite of living coin which, for its part, is the pure sign, the transfigured sign of impossible exchange. Money, for its part, is the sign-by-default of that impossible exchange – its fetishized sign. Become the absolute referent, it owes no account to anyone, and it will not be redeemed. In this respect it is similar to a debt, and it does indeed lead us into infinite debt.

There are two ways of breaking the law: to deny it or to be seized with a passion for it. This is, strictly, fetishism (and perversion in general): simultaneously possessing the law and the law's prohibition. In this we find the same paradox and the same challenge as in *La Monnaie vivante*: at one and the same time possessing wealth and the sign of wealth.

In Marx's analysis, the formal analysis of the commodity grounds a first-level fetishism, connected with exchange-value. But when the passion for value becomes embodied, beyond value, in the doubly abstract passion for money, this becomes the object of a higher fetishism, connected now not with exchange-value, but with the unexchangeable.

So initially, the real object becomes sign: this is the stage of simulation. But in a subsequent stage the sign becomes an object again, but not now a real object: an

object much further removed from the real than the sign itself – an object off-camera, outside representation: a fetish. No longer an object to the power of the sign, but an object to the power of the object – a pure, unrepresentable, unexchangeable object – yet a nondescript one. An object of a 'nondescript singularity' (Agamben), like sexual fetishes which themselves become wholly objects of desire. One may talk about substitution and perversion here, but what is involved is an entirely different organization: a transmutation of the sign into an object, and hence a redoubled simulation, charged with a redoubled intensity. By this perilous leap into a double abstraction, the fetish becomes invulnerable: and here the subject is definitively protected from his object of desire.

Whatever the differences between commodity fetishism, sexual fetishism and the work of art, it does seem that this last partakes of the same strangeness, the same enigmatic, hieroglyphic character which Marx already attributed to the commodity in its abstraction and which Baudelaire transfers, by a double abstraction, onto the artwork as absolute commodity. Of all objects it is, in fact, the one furthest from the real world – the one to be taken as pure object, in its literalness, and hence as the object of an exceptional desire. As such, it is out of all proportion to the interpretation which can be given of it in the order of ideas, or even in the 'aesthetic' world.

This exceptional character can take any one of a variety of extreme forms. Fetishistic investment can

run from the vilest thing to the most sublime, from the work of art to the most sordid of objects. Once one is beyond value and representation, the phantasm can find embodiment in any direction. In radical fetishism there is no longer any hierarchy of values, nor any history. The fetishized object escapes all difference, and becomes literal once again. It exists literally. It embodies the literalness of the phantasm.

This analysis of fetishism leads us towards singularity as itself an exceptional state of a raising to a higher power. Of the same order as the passage from simple simulation to the second power, that of fetishism. In the genesis of singularity there is, first of all, a passage from the general to the particular – but this is still relative to the general; then the passage to singularity as though towards a particular that is, in a sense, 'absolute' – henceforth unrelated to the horizon of the general. By this double perilous leap, singularity becomes its own horizon, its own event. It no longer has any definition or equivalent. It is reducible only to itself, rather like those integers which are divisible only by themselves. Singularity is a 'unique sign', as Klossowski says – and a sign without content. Singularities are, therefore, inexpressible by each other, and between them there can, therefore, be only a play of metamorphosis of the one into the other on the basis of *their non-existence as self-being* [*être-propre*]. Stripped of self-being, singularity therefore exceeds all our modern vision, novelistic or

theoretical, which is a vision based on alienation and on the appropriation and disappropriation of self. Whereas the essential lies in the irremediable non-existence of the subject as self-being.

This is tantamount to saying that singularity *is evil*. It is that which it is impossible to exchange, the portion irreducible to any equivalent whatever. But by that very token it is the site of – and what is at stake in – integral becoming. This is how Nietzsche saw becoming: the possibility of an infinite metamorphosis on the basis of deposing both being and all those fictions presupposed by psychology and morality: 'There is no individual, there is no species, there is no identity.'

If the being in itself has its history, singularity has its becoming. And if history is bound up with an ultimate end, singularity, for its part, is bound up with the Eternal Return. History is merely the differential of change; the Eternal Return is the integral of becoming.

It is not a question of 'becoming what one is' – the point is that one becomes only what one is not, just as one *is* only what one *has* not. If singularity is bound up with becoming, that is because it is nothing in itself.

'*Bis Gottes Fehle hilft*,' Hölderlin tells us ('Until the absence of God comes to our aid'). God is the general equivalent in whose name everything changes and is exchanged. In the absence of God, everything can become freely, can metamorphose freely. In this

sense, this whole business of living coin, radical fetishism and integral becoming is indeed a settling of accounts with God. For, if the very hypothesis of God has disappeared – if He is indeed dead, as Nietzsche said – we still have to deal – now, and for a long time to come – with His ghost and His metastases.

Real Event, Fated Event: Singularity of the Event

Media coverage is to the event what political economy is to the realm of the drives and the phantasm, according to Klossowski. Just as political economy is a gigantic machinery for manufacturing value, for manufacturing the signs of wealth, but not wealth itself, so the whole system of information and the media is a gigantic machine for producing the event as sign, as value exchangeable on the universal market of ideology, of the star system, of catastrophe, and so on – in short, for producing non-events. The abstraction of media coverage is the same as the abstraction of the economy: the information system supplies coded matter, deciphered in advance, negotiable in terms of models, just as the economy supplies only products negotiable in terms of price and value. And just as, thanks to this abstraction of value, all commodities are exchangeable one with another, so all events (or non-events) become exchangeable – if not, indeed, substitutable one for another – on the cultural market of information. The singularity of the event, that which is irreducible to its coded transcription and *mise-en-scène*, that which quite simply *makes it an event*, is lost. With this we enter the transhistorical or

transpolitical realm – the realm where events no longer really take place, precisely by dint of their production and dissemination in 'real time'; where they disappear into the void of news and information (just as the economy disappears into the void of speculation). The sphere of information is like a space where, after emptying events of their substance, an artificial gravity is re-created, and they are put back into orbit in real time – where, having been devitalized historically, they are reprojected on to the transpolitical stage of information. If we see history as a film (which it has become, whether we like it or not), then the 'truth' of information consists in the post-synchronization, the dubbing and subtitling of the film of history.

We have, then, to get beyond the non-event of information to detect that which is resistant or refractory to it within its very process. To find, as it were, the 'living coin' of the event – to play on the way it is 'cashed in' in the sphere of information, as we do with the way the phantasm is 'cashed in' in the economic sphere. To make a literal analysis of the event, as one does of dreams, against all the staging procedures and batteries of commentary which merely neutralize it. Only events set free from the information system (and us with them) generate an enormous power of attraction. They alone are 'real', both unforeseeable and predestined, for though there may be nothing to explain them, everything in the imagination is ready to embrace them.

We have within us an immense desire for events. And an immense disappointment, as the content of the information media falls desperately short of the power of the means of dissemination. This disproportion creates a potential demand ready to pounce on any incident, to crystallize on any catastrophe, provided it matches up to this potential power which we don't know how to use (such disillusionment did not exist in a world limited, so to speak, to its natural boundaries).

And the immediate and universal emotional contagion which seizes the masses on some particular occasion (Diana, the Pope's visit, winning the World Cup) has no other cause. It isn't a matter of voyeurism, or letting off steam. Of course, people don't know what to do with their sadness or their enthusiasm; of course, they don't know what to do with what they are; but that is principally a spontaneous abreaction to an immoral situation. The excess of information creates an immoral situation in so far as it has no equivalent either in the real event or in our personal histories. So they feel the same resentment towards it as they feel towards the immorality of our societies, where nothing has any consequence any longer. Neither acts, speeches, crimes nor political have any real consequences – a fact which finds expression in a spate of pointless trials (as for the Tribunal of History, that long since disappeared). Immunity, impunity, corruption, speculation and laundering – come what

may, we are moving towards a limit state of zero responsibility (even the concept of a 'war with zero deaths' has something absurd and incomprehensible about it). Automatically, we want to see an event of maximum consequence, a 'fateful' event, to repair this scandalous non-equivalence with a sudden, exceptional responsibility. And this extends even to the case of a perfectly undeserved, sacrificial death (Diana). There is no element of death drive or sadistic ritual in this demand, no perversion of human nature. Neither the rational nor the irrational has anything to do with it. What is involved here is a symbolic rebalancing of the scales of destiny.

We dream of senseless events which free us from this tyranny of meaning, and from always being constrained to seek out the equivalence between effects and causes. We live in terror of both excess of meaning and total meaninglessness. Hence the hold which excessive events have on us, events which are to the banal context of social and personal life what the excess of signifier is to language in Lévi-Strauss's theory: namely, that which grounds it as symbolic function, beyond equivalences of meaning.

Getting beyond the 'real' event. Rereading it in terms of its ending, reading it as something predestined. Overturning the order of analysis, though not setting out to look for real causes, which can be accumulated *ad infinitum* without ever accounting for its prodigious effect. Explanation is always an alibi. The search

for causes is always a denial of the event as such. It is the search for the conditions in which it might not have taken place. Now, the event which might not have taken place (the 'real' event) is much less interesting than the one which could not but have taken place (the 'fated' event).

For the same reason, the foreseeable event, which merely verifies the models and comes in at its predicted time, predigested by the information media, is less interesting than the one which rushes to an end, short-circuits its own causes and relegates them to a retrospective illusion. There is, in this way, a precession of the event, which always remains well ahead of the interpretation which attempts desperately to catch up with it, like sound chasing after objects which have passed through the sound barrier. In the time it takes to see it growing in our rear-view mirrors, it has already overtaken us. And when it is there before you, it is already too late. 'Events in this mirror may be closer than they appear.'

There are events which cannot but take place, and there are others which pretend to take place or stand in for something else. Any event can conceal another, and the violence which accompanies it changes nothing of the double game events play.

To decipher or decode an event is to analyse its relationship with its double: what can it be exchanged for? (and this will be its manifest meaning) – what can it not be exchanged for? (this will be its true meaning). Philip Roth writes of the taste for examining a

particular social event in depth as though it were 'a dream or a work of art'.

The dream of a total world of information has its opposite in a universe wholly made up of elective affinities and coincidences – not an accidental world, but a predestined one, since the coincidence is the opposite of the accident. In effect, what *can* not happen (if the probability is zero) in a sense *must* happen. It is one or the other: probable or certain. If it has no serious reasons not to happen, every event must succumb to the urgent necessity of occurring. All we can do is attempt to divert it – otherwise it will be fated to happen. And we know that every effort to ward off an event merely hastens its occurrence. We do not understand the force inherent in events that is their desire to occur. It is things not taking place that is the exception. All events will potentially take place: they are there *in potentia*. That *potentia*, that power of things longing to appear, is beyond our grasp. But it underlies that sense of a priori certainty that something *must* happen.

If we think of all the causes, chains of events and coincidences which would have had to have been accumulated for that accident (the one at the Pont de l'Alma) to take place, it obviously never would have done (there is no point, then, in going back along that chain to explain anything whatsoever).

On the other hand, if we assess all that would have had not to have happened for the event not to take

place, then quite clearly it could not but occur. There would have had to have been no Pont de l'Alma, and hence no Battle of the Alma. There would have had to have been no Mercedes, and hence no German car company whose founder had a daughter called Mercedes. No Dodi and no Ritz, nor all the wealth of the Arab princes and the historical rivalry with the British. The British Empire itself would have had to have been wiped from history. So everything combines, *a contrario* and *in absentia*, to demonstrate the urgent necessity of this death.

The event, therefore, is itself unreal, since it is made up of all that should not have taken place for it not to occur. And, as a result, thanks to all these negative probabilities, it produces an incalculable effect. Such are the lineaments of a Fate-based Analysis, an unrealist analysis of unreal events. And the death of Diana is an unreal event.

An unreal event, an immoral event. In the present case, the interminable commentaries on the 'accident of fate' or the 'fated conspiracy' merely betray collective remorse at being the virtual murderers of Diana – remorse linked to the secret sense of exhilaration, not so much at the death, as at the unpredictable event, the event 'from out of the blue', to which we are all so partial. In this sense, the pathos of the event is merely the expression of a – neither good nor bad, but quite simply immoral – collective will. And all the sentimental motivations invoked retrospectively are merely the moralization of an immoral event. All that

merely masks the obscure object of our desire – namely, our desire for events, for an overturning of the order of things, whatever it may be; for a sacrifice of the most glorious figures (stars, politicians, etc.) – a perfectly sacrilegious desire for the irruption of Evil, for the restoration of a secret rule which, in a totally unjustified form (natural catastrophes are also like this), re-establishes something like a balance of forces between Good and Evil. All the tears and mourning reflect the fascination the automatic reversibility of Evil exerts on us.

And we are not passive spectators of this fatal episode, but full-blown actors in it, playing our part in a lethal interactivity for which the media provide the interface. It is said that Diana was a victim of the 'society of the spectacle' – she in the role of victim, and the masses in the role of ghoulish onlookers. In fact, what we have here is a collective scenario in which Diana herself is not innocent, but in which the masses play an immediate role via the media and the paparazzi, in what amounts to a positive 'reality show' of her public and private life – a life whose course they divert and the filming of which they consume in real time, in the press, on the air-waves and on the screens. The paparazzi themselves are merely the vehicles of this lethal interactivity (as, not so long ago, the Heysel hooligans, in moving from the role of spectators to that of participants, were the interactive operators of stadium violence). And behind the paparazzi there are the media, and behind the media, us. All of us: we whose

desires shape the media; we who are the medium, the network and the conducting current. There are no longer either actors or spectators; all are immersed in the same reality, in the same revolving responsibility, in a single impersonal destiny which is merely the fulfilment of a collective desire.

Photography, or Light-Writing: Literalness of the Image

The miracle of the photograph, of that allegedly 'objective' image, is that through it the world shows itself to be radically non-objective. It is the photographer's objective lens which, paradoxically, reveals the non-objectivity of the world – which reveals that 'something' that will not be resolved either by analysis or resemblance. It is technology which takes us beyond resemblance, to the heart of the *trompe-l'œil* of reality. It is through both its non-realist play with technology and its *découpage*, its stillness, its silence, its phenomenological reduction of movement, that the photograph confirms its status as the purest, most artificial image.

The vision of technology is at once transformed. Technology becomes the site of a double game, the enlarging mirror of illusion and forms. Technical equipment and the world enter into collusion; 'objective' technology and the potency of the object converge. And the photographic art is now merely the art of slipping into such a collusion – not to control the process, but to play on it, and to show up as self-evident the idea that the die is not cast. 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must

be silent' – but you can be silent thereof with images.

Resisting noise, words, commotion with the silence of the photograph – resisting movement, flows, and ever greater speed with the stillness of the photograph – resisting the flood of communication and information with the secrecy of the photograph – resisting the moral imperative of meaning with the silence of signification. Above all, resisting the automatic tide of images, their perpetual succession, in which it is not only the mark, the poignant detail of the object (the *punctum*),* which is lost, but also the moment of the photograph, which is immediately past and gone, irreversible and hence always nostalgic. This instantaneity is the very opposite of the simultaneity of real time. The flow of images produced in real time, which vanish in real time, is indifferent to this third dimension, which is that of the moment. The visual flow knows only change, and in that flow the image no longer even has the time to become an image. For an image to be of all things an image, it has to become so: this can happen only if the tumult of the world is temporarily halted, if there is a strategy of stripping things bare – if the triumphant epiphany of meaning is supplanted by the silent apophany of the object and its appearances.

* Roland Barthes speaks of 'marks' or 'points' which shoot out of a scene 'like an arrow'. This 'punctum' is 'that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London: Vintage, 1993, p. 27.

Finding a literalness of the object, against meaning and the aesthetics of meaning – this is the subversive function of the image itself become literal: become, in other words, what it is deep down: the magical operator of reality's disappearance. The image expresses – materially, as it were – the absence of this reality, which 'only seems obvious and is only accepted so readily, because we sense that nothing is real' (Borges).

This is a phenomenology of absence which is usually impossible, because the object is normally occulted by the subject as it might be by an overintense source of light, and the literal function of the image is occulted by the ideological, aesthetic and political dimensions, and by the reference to other images. Most images speak. Indeed, they chatter on endlessly, drowning out the silent signification of their object. We have, then, to sweep away everything which interposes itself and gets in the way of this silent self-evidence. The photograph effects this disoccultation by filtering out the subject, enabling the object to exert its magic, be it white or black.

At the same time, photography presupposes a technical asceticism of the gaze (via the photographic lens), which protects the object from aesthetic transfiguration – a certain nonchalance of the lens to bring out the cast of things, without forcing matters. The photographic gaze neither probes nor analyses a 'reality'; it settles 'literally' on the surface of things and illustrates their emergence in the form of fragments,

for a very short spell of time – to be followed immediately by the moment of their disappearance.

Whatever the set-up, one thing is always present in photography: light. 'Photography': light-writing.

The light proper to the image. Not 'realistic' or 'naturalistic' light, nor artificial light either, but the light which is properly the imagination of the image, the very idea of the image. Not an emanation from a single light source, but, in a sense, from two sources: the dual sources of the object and the gaze. The image, says Plato, lies at the point of intersection between the light emanating from the object and the light from the eyes.

The kind of light we find in Hopper's work. Both the harsh, white, oceanic light of the coast and the unreal, airless, sterile light which arrives from some quite other shore. An irradiant light, which retains, even in colour, the potency of black and white. Characters, faces, landscapes projected into a light which is not theirs; lit up violently from outside. Like strange objects, illumined by a light asserting the imminence of a strange event. Isolated in an aura that is both extremely fluid and cruelly clear.

An absolute light – photographic in the literal sense – demanding not to be looked at but, rather, that we close our eyes to it and the inner darkness it enfolds. The same intuitive sense of light as in Vermeer, only there the secret is that of intimacy, whereas with Hopper it is the secret of an inexorable exteriority, a luminous materiality of things, of their immediate fulfilment, of an evidencing through emptiness.

This rough-and-ready phenomenology is a bit like a negative theology. It is 'apophatic', a term once used to describe an approach to a knowledge of God not by what He is but by what He is not. It is the same with our knowledge of the world and the object: showing it up through what is cut away* rather than in an open – and, in any case, impossible – confrontation. In the photograph, 'light-writing' is the medium of this ellipsis of meaning and this quasi-experimental decantation. (In the realm of theory, it is language which is the symbolic filter of thought.)

There is also – where this 'apophasis', this approach by way of emptiness, is concerned – a whole dramaturgy of the photograph, a dramaturgy of acting-out, which is a way of grasping the world by expelling it (acting it *out*), an exorcism of the world by the instantaneous fiction of its representation (and not by its representation itself, which always plays into reality's hands). The photographic image is not a representation; it is a fiction.

Perhaps it is the world itself which acts-out, which imposes its fiction. The photograph 'acts-out the world' and the world 'acts-out the photograph'. This gives rise to an almost material collusion between the world and ourselves, in so far as the world is never anything other than a continual acting-out.

* *En creux*. Compare *gravure en creux*: intaglio.

In the photograph, you see nothing. The lens alone 'sees', but it is hidden. What the photographer captures, then, isn't the Other, but what remains of the Other when she or he isn't there. We are never in the real presence of the object (the Other). Between reality and its image, exchange is impossible. There is at best a figurative correlation. 'Pure' reality, if it exists, remains a question without an answer. And this is what these photographs are: a question to the Other which expects to remain unanswered.

In 'The Adventure of a Photographer', Italo Calvino writes:

> to catch Bice in the street when she didn't know he was watching her, to keep her within the range of hidden lenses, to photograph her not only without letting himself be seen but without seeing her, to surprise her as she was in the absence of his gaze, of any gaze. Not that he wanted to discover any particular thing. . . . It was an invisible Bice that he wanted to possess, a Bice absolutely alone, a Bice whose presence presupposed the absence of him and everyone else.

Later, he photographs only the objects and walls in the studio, where Bice had been, but which no longer even signified her, and from which she had withdrawn for ever. But he, too, has also withdrawn. For we are continually speaking of the disappearance of the

object in photography – that's how it was, it's not like that now – and there is indeed a kind of symbolic murder in the photographic act. But the object isn't the only thing that disappears; the subject also disappears on the other side of the lens. Every press on the shutter-release, which puts an end to the real presence of the object, also causes me to disappear as subject, and it's in this reciprocal disappearance that a transfusion between the two occurs. It isn't always a successful act, but when it is, this transfusion is the sole condition of success. It is, in a sense, an invocation – an invocation to the Other, the object, to emerge from this disappearance, and so create *a poetic situation of transference or a poetic transference of situation.* Perhaps in this reciprocity there is a glimmer of a solution to the problem of our notorious 'inability to communicate', to the problem of the non-response of the Other. And perhaps, too, there is a more subtle usage of indifference, and of the fact that people and things tend no longer to mean anything for each other. An anxiety-ridden situation which we try to ward off at all costs with forced signification.

Few images escape this forced signification. Few photographs are not short-circuited by being made to signify, to convey an idea of one sort or another – in particular, the ideas of information and testimony. Moral anthropology went down that route. The idea of humanity passed that way too. So, contemporary photography (and not just news photography) devotes

itself to photographing victims as such, the dead as such, the poverty-stricken as such, yielded up to documentary evidence and imaginary compassion.

Most current photographs merely reflect the 'objective' misery of the human condition. Just as there is no primitive tribe which does not have its anthropologist, soon there won't be a homeless person amid his filth who doesn't find a photographer leaping out to capture him on film. Now, the more we are told about poverty and violence, and presented with them openly, the less effect they have on us. This is the law of the imaginary. The image has to affect us on its own account, to impose its specific illusion, its original language, for any content whatsoever to move us. For there to be an affective transference onto the real, we need the counter-transference of the image, and we need that counter-transference to be resolved.

We deplore the disappearance of the real, arguing that everything is now mediated by the image. But we forget that the image, too, disappears, overcome by reality. What is sacrificed in this operation is not so much the real as the image, which is dispossessed of its originality and doomed to a shameful complicity. Rather than lament the loss of a reality surrendered to the superficiality of the image, we should lament the loss of an image surrendered to the expression of the real. It is only by freeing the image from the real that we shall restore its potency, and it is only by restoring to the image its specificity (its '*idiotie*', as Clément Rosset has it) that the real itself can recover its true image.

This so-called realist photography *does not capture what is but, rather, what should not be*: the reality of destitution. For preference, it photographs not what exists but what, from a moral, humanitarian viewpoint, should not exist – while making perfectly immoral aesthetic and commercial use of this misery. It is a photography which attests not so much to the real as to a profound disavowal of its object, and also a disavowal of the image, which is assigned to represent what does not wish to be represented, assigned to commit a 'rape of the real'. So, the cult of the image at all costs most often entails an unhappy destiny for the image, namely, the fate of imprisoning the real in its reality principle, whereas the point is *to free the real from its reality principle*. Instead of this, we have been inoculated with the realist virus of the image, and the retrovirus of the image-playback. Every time we are photographed, we spontaneously size up the photographer as he in turn takes stock of us. And 'savages', too, spontaneously adopt a pose. Everything strikes a pose in an imaginary reconciliation.

Now, the photographic event remains a confrontation between the object and the (objective) lens, with all the violence of that confrontation. The photographic act is a duel; that is to say, it is a challenge to the object and the object's defiance of that challenge. Where that confrontation is ignored, there can only be escape into technology or aesthetics – that is to say, into the most facile of solutions.

One finds oneself dreaming of the heroic age of photography, when it was still a *camera obscura*, not the transparent, interactive thing it has become.

As in Mike Disfarmer's photographs of Arkansas farmers from the 1940s and 1950s. What we find there are people of lowly origins, posing conscientiously, almost ceremoniously, and the lens doesn't attempt to surprise or understand them. There is no pursuit of 'naturalness', but no idea of what they should look like either ('what they look like as photographed'). They are what they are, and they do not smile. They are not self-pitying, and the image does not pity them either. Caught, as it were, at their simplest, absent for a moment – the moment of the photograph – from their lives and their misfortunes, raised from their misery to the tragic, impersonal figuration of their destinies.

The image reveals itself, then, for what it is: the exaltation of what it sees in its pure self-evidence, without intercession, concession or embellishment. What it reveals is not something moral or related to 'objective' conditions, but that which remains indecipherable within each one of us; it is not of the order of reality but of the evil genius of reality, happy or otherwise. It is that which is of the order of the inhuman within us, and bears no witness to anything.

The object, at any rate, is only ever an imaginary line, and the world an object both imminent and ungraspable. How far away is the world? What is the right focal length? Is the photograph a mirror in which this

horizon of the object shows up in miniature? Or is it man who, in the convex mirror of his consciousness, distorts perspectives and blurs the exactness of the world? Like those rear-view mirrors on American cars which distort the view, but warn you kindly of the fact: 'Objects in this mirror may be closer than they appear.' But are they not also further away than they seem? Does the photographic image bring us closer to a so-called 'real' world, which is in fact infinitely distant from us? Or does it, rather, keep the world at a distance by creating an artificial depth of field, which protects us from the imminence of objects, and thus from the potential danger they represent?

The whole question of reality is in play here, the question of the degree of reality. It is not, perhaps, surprising that photography should have appeared as a technical medium in an age – the industrial era – when reality began to disappear. It may perhaps even have been the disappearance of the real which gave rise to this technical form, in which that disappearance found a way to turn itself into an image. We should look again at our simplistic causal accounts of the genesis of technology and the modern world. Perhaps it is not technology and the media which are at the origin of this much-vaunted disappearance of the real. On the contrary, all our technologies – fatal progeny that they are – doubtless arise from the progressive extenuation of reality.

Shadowing the World

No language can become total at the expense of all others. You cannot imagine there having been just a single language in the beginning, and the prospect of a single language in the future would be a real anthropological catastrophe, as would that of a single species, a single way of thinking, a single culture. It would be the death of language itself in so far as it differentiates us from animal expression (the same for each species).

There is a necessary relation between the fact that languages are multiple and singular and the fact that language never says (only) what it means. If there were only one language, words, too, would become univocal, with their meanings set on automatic pilot. There would not be the same play between them (in artificial languages there is quite simply no play at all). Language would merely be an appendage of a unified reality – the negative destiny of a human species itself unified. It would always arrive after the event, whereas for us it seems that it has always been there in its multiple singularity. Indeed, it seems to be far ahead of us, and turning back towards us to think us. There is something more in the singularity of a language, which is that, even if it has an origin and a

history, it seems to reproduce itself as it is at every moment, and to reinvent itself automatically. This is why we experience language as a kind of predestination, and a kind of happy predestination at that.

The predestination of thought is like this too. World or thought – which of the two thinks the other? What is the relationship now between thought and the world, which it no longer reflects and no longer claims to represent?

Yet thought is destined for the world; they are destined for each other. Thought is, in fact, the world's *éminence grise*, the shadow which accompanies it and, in following it, provides it with a secret destination.

It does not seek to penetrate some mystery of the world, nor to discover its hidden aspect – it *is* that hidden aspect. It does not discover that the world has a double life – it *is* that double life, that parallel life. Merely by conforming to its slightest movements, thought strips the world of its meaning, and predestines it for ends other than the ones it sets itself. Merely by following in its tracks, thought shows that, behind its supposed ends, the world is going nowhere.

The act of thinking is an act of seduction which aims to deflect the world from its being and its meaning – at the risk of being itself seduced and led astray.

This is how theory proceeds with the systems it analyses. It does not seek to criticize them, or set limits for them in the real. It maximizes them,

exacerbates them, by following their every movement; it seduces them by pushing them to the limit. The object of theory is to arrive at an account of the system which follows out its internal logic to its end, without adding anything, yet which, at the same time, totally inverts that system, revealing its hidden non-meaning, the Nothing which haunts it, that absence at the heart of the system, that shadow running alongside it. An account which is both a pure description of the system in terms of reality and a radical prescription of that same system – demonstrating that it excludes the real and, in the end, means nothing. To duplicate the world* is to respond to a world which signifies nothing with a theory which, for its part, looks like nothing on earth. Neither an empirical refutation of these systems (which, were it to be done, would be part of the same reality), nor a pure fiction unrelated to them, but, rather, both of these things at the same time. It is both the mirror of a world which is already at its extremes and the thing pushing the world towards those extremes – the identification of an implicit trend, and of the force precipitating it towards its end. It recognizes that there is nothing to be said of the world, that there is nothing this world can be exchanged for, while at the same time showing that this world cannot be as it is without this exchange with theory.

This is why writing can take itself to its logical extreme, knowing that at a certain point the world

* *Doubler le monde* might also be rendered as 'dubbing the world'.

cannot but begin to resemble it. But writing is capable of going to this extreme only because it follows the immanent order of the world. It reduplicates the world, and the world does not exist without this reduplication. The world lacks nothing before being thought, but, thereafter, it can be explained only on that basis. It is something like that 'nothing' which theory simultaneously reveals and supplants, an absence it both makes visible and masks. One may say also that the world indeed lacks 'nothing', and that thought is the shadow cast by that Nothing on the surface of the real world (path of nihility*). Radical thought is at the violent intersection of meaning and non-meaning, of truth and non-truth, of the continuity of the world and the continuity of the nothing. It aspires to the status and power of illusion, restoring the non-veracity of facts, the non-signification of the world, and hunting down that nothing which runs beneath the apparent continuity of things.

Thought as illusion, as seduction, is no doubt an imposture. But imposture (and language itself is one) is not the opposite of truth: it is a more subtle truth which enwraps the former in the sign of its parody and its erasure. Literally, it plays at the 'game of truth', the way seduction plays at the game of desire.

In the end, what is the point of thought, what is the point of theory? Between them and the world it is a relationship of 'the Other by itself' [*l'Autre par*

* 'Path of nihility' in English in the original.

*lui-même**]: suspense and reversibility, an asymmetrical duel between the world and thought. Always bearing in mind the three basic theorems:

- The world was given to us as something enigmatic and unintelligible, and the task of thought is to make it, if possible, even more enigmatic and unintelligible.
- Since the world is evolving towards a frenzied state of affairs, we have to take a frenzied view of it.
- The player must never be bigger than the game itself, nor the theorist bigger than theory, nor theory bigger than the world itself.

* Baudrillard published *L'Autre par lui-même: Habilitation* in 1985 (an American version of which appeared in 1988 as *The Ecstasy of Communication*). The title plays on the long-running 'Par lui-même' series of critical studies published by Éditions du Seuil.

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For They Know Not What They Do
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The Metastases of Enjoyment

Alenka Zupančič
Ethics of the Real

The world, argues Jean Baudrillard, has no equivalence, no double, no mirror, and without such a representation, its nature cannot be verified – there is, indeed, no 'reality'. *Impossible Exchange* sees Baudrillard's exploration of reality and hyper-reality shift into a metaphysical gear. Examining the various spheres of modern life, from politics to technology, he finds that they are characterized by the same non-equivalence: they are closed systems incapable of exporting meaning outside of themselves. Baudrillard's conclusion is that the underlying value of modern life is the nihilism of value itself, leading him to consider the fateful consequences of impossible exchange.

'No French intellectual matches Jean Baudrillard in contemplating the New World ... a sharp-shooting lone ranger of the post-Marxist left.' – *New York Times*

'Rarely do words convey such urgency as on a page by Baudrillard.' – *Los Angeles Times*

Jean Baudrillard (1929 – 2007) began teaching Sociology at the Université de Paris-X in 1966. He retired from academia in 1987 and dedicated the remainder of his life to travel and writing. He is the author of many works, including *America*; *The System of Objects*; *The Transparency of Evil*; and *The Spirit of Terrorism*, all from Verso.

Verso Books
www.versobooks.com
$15.95/£8.99/$20CAN

Design by Rumors

ISBN 978-1-84467-791-7

Passwords

Jean Baudrillard

Translated by Chris Turner

VERSO
London • New York

This edition first published by Verso 2003
© Verso 2003
Translation © Chris Turner 2003
First published as *Mots de passe*
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014–4606
www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN 1–85984–597–5
ISBN 1–85984–463–4 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset in Bembo by YHT Ltd, London
Printed in the UK by Bath Press

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PREFACE

It is paradoxical to form a retrospective overview of an *œuvre* that never sought to be prospective. It is a little like Orpheus turning around too soon to look on Eurydice, and thereby sending her back to the Underworld. It would be acting as though the work pre-existed itself and sensed its end in its very beginnings, as though it were closed, as though it developed in a coherent way, as though it had always existed. I do not see any other way of talking about it, then, than in terms of simulation, rather in the way Borges reconstitutes a lost civilization from the remains of a library. This is to admit that I can scarcely ask myself the question of its sociological verisimilitude – a question I would, indeed, find infinitely difficult to answer. Doubtless one should put oneself in the position of an imaginary traveller who came upon these writings as if they were a lost manuscript and, for want of supporting documents, subsequently strove to reconstitute the society they describe.

INTRODUCTION

Passwords – the expression seems to me to describe quite well a quasi-initiatory way of getting inside things, without, however, drawing up a list. For words are bearers and generators of ideas – perhaps even more than the reverse. As weavers of spells and magic, not only do they transmit those ideas and things, but they themselves metaphorize and metabolize into one another by a kind of spiral evolution. It is in this way that they are 'passers' or vehicles of ideas.

Words are extremely important to me. That they have a life of their own and, hence, are mortal is evident to anyone who does not claim to possess a definitive form of thought, with ambitions to edify. And this is my own case. There is in the temporality of words an almost poetic play of death and rebirth: successive metaphorizations mean that an idea becomes more – and something other – than itself: a 'form of thought'. For language thinks, thinks us and thinks for us at least as much as we think through it. And in it an exchange also takes place: an exchange, which may be symbolic, between words and ideas.

We think we advance by way of ideas – that is doubtless the fantasy of every theorist, every philosopher – but it is also words themselves which

generate or regenerate ideas, which act as 'shifters'. At those moments, ideas intersect, intermingle at the level of the word. And the word then serves as an operator – but a non-technical operator – in a catalysis in which language itself is in play. Which makes it at least as important a *stake* in the game as ideas.

Because words pass, then; because they pass away, metamorphose, become 'passers' or vehicles of ideas along unforeseen channels not calculated in advance, the expression 'passwords' seems to me to enable us to reapprehend things, both by crystallizing them and by situating them in an open, panoramic perspective.

THE OBJECT

For me, object will have been the 'password' *par excellence*. I chose that angle from the beginning, because I wanted to break with the problematic of the subject. The question of the object represented the alternative to that problematic, and it has remained the horizon of my thinking. There were also reasons linked to the time we were living through: in the 1960s, the transition from the primacy of production to the primacy of consumption brought objects to the fore. What really interested me, however, was not so much the manufactured object in itself, but how objects spoke to each other – the system of signs and the syntax they developed. And, particularly, the fact that they referred to a world less real than the apparent omnipotence of consumption and profit might have led us to believe. As I saw it, in that world of signs, they very quickly broke away from their use-value to enter into play and correspondence with one another.

Behind this semiological formalism there was no doubt a memory of Sartre's *Nausea* and that famous root which is an obsessive object, a poisonous substance ... It seemed to me that the object was almost fired with passion, or at least that it could have a life of its own; that it could

leave behind the passivity of its use to acquire a kind of autonomy, and perhaps even a capacity to avenge itself on a subject over-sure of controlling it. Objects have always been regarded as an inert, dumb world, which is ours to do with as we will, on the grounds that we produced it. But, for me, that world had something to say which exceeded its use. It was part of the realm of the sign, where nothing happens so simply, because the sign always effaces the thing. So the object designated the real world, but also its absence – and, in particular, the absence of the subject.

It was the exploration of that fauna and flora of objects that interested me. In that exploration I used all the disciplines current at the time: psychoanalysis, the Marxist analysis of production and, especially, following the example of Barthes, linguistic analysis. But the advantage of studying the object was that it required you to move across these disciplines; it forced a cross-disciplinarity on you. The fact was that the object was reducible to no particular discipline and, rendering them all enigmatic, helped to throw into question their very postulates – including those of semiology in so far as the sign-object, within which there is an interplay between many types of values, is much more ambiguous than the linguistic sign.

Whatever the real interest of these different approaches, what excited me, and still does, is the way the object slips away, absents itself – all that it retains of the *Unheimlich*, the 'uncanny'. The exchange, of which it is the medium, remains unconsummated. The object is, admittedly, med-

iatory, but at the same time, because it is immediate, immanent, it shatters that mediation. It is on both sides of the line, and it both gratifies and disappoints. So, it has its origin perhaps in that 'accursed share' Bataille speaks of, which will never be resolved or redeemed. There is no Redemption of the object. Somewhere there is a 'remainder', which the subject cannot lay hold of, which he believes he can overcome by profusion, by accumulation, and which in the end merely puts more and more obstacles in the way of relating. In a first phase, one communicates through objects, then proliferation blocks that communication. The object has a dramatic role. It is a fully fledged actor in that it confounds any mere functionality. And it is in that respect that it interests me.

VALUE

Clearly, value is intimately linked to the object, but what I am concerned with here is more limited and relates to use-value and exchange-value, those foundations of production and the market. From the outset, use-value and exchange-value – and the dialectic established between the two – appeared to me to be a rational construction that postulates the possibility of balancing out value, of finding a general equivalent for it which is capable of exhausting meanings and accounting for an exchange. It was at this point that anthropology came in, to undermine these notions and shatter the ideology of the market – that is to say, the market as ideology, and not simply as reality. Anthropology gives us access to societies and cultures in which the notion of value as we understand it is virtually non-existent, in which things are never exchanged directly one for another, but always through the mediating agency of a transcendence, an abstraction.

Alongside commodity value there exist moral or aesthetic values which operate, for their part, in terms of a set opposition between good and bad, between the beautiful and the ugly . . . It seemed to me, however, that there was a possibility for things to circulate differently, and other cultures

did indeed offer the image of a form of organization in which the transcendence of value, and with it the transcendence of power, was not established, since it is on the manipulation of values that that transcendence is constituted. It was a question of attempting to strip the object – but not just the object – of its status as commodity, to restore to it an immediacy, a brute reality which would not have a price put on it. Either a thing is 'worthless', or it is 'priceless'; in either case we are dealing with what cannot be evaluated, in the strongest sense of the term. From that point on, the exchange that can be effected operates on foundations that are no longer of the order of the contract – as in the usual system of value – but of the pact. There is a profound difference between the contract, which is an abstract convention between two terms or individuals, and the pact, which is a dual, collusive relation. We might see an image of this in certain modalities of poetic language in which exchanges between words – with the intensity of pleasure they afford – are made outside the sphere of their mere decipherment, before or beyond their operation in terms of 'meaning value'. It is the same for objects and individuals. From this standpoint, there is a possibility of short-circuiting the system of value and the sphere of ascendancy it establishes. It is on the basis of meaning that one will be master of language, master of communication (even if the speech act and its modalities come into play in this mastery of discourse); it is on the basis of market value that one will have mastery of the market. And it is on the distinction between the values of good and evil that

moral ascendancy will be established . . . All powers are subsequently built on this. It is perhaps utopian to claim to pass beyond value, but it is an operative utopia, an attempt to conceive a more radical functioning of things.

The fact remains that the study of value is complex: whereas commodity value can be apprehended, sign value is fleeting and fluid – at a particular point it gives out and is frittered into 'show'. When everything eventually gives way to artifice, are we still in a world of value, or in its simulation?

Perhaps we are always in a dual morality . . . There might be said to be a moral sphere, that of commodity exchange, and an immoral sphere, that of play or gaming, where all that counts is the event of the game itself and the advent of shared rules. Sharing rules is something quite different from referring to a common general equivalent: to be able to play, one has to be totally involved. And this creates a more dramatic type of relation between the partners than commodity exchange. In such a relation, individuals are not abstract beings who can be substituted one for another: each has a singular position with regard to stakes of victory or defeat, life or death. Even in its most banal forms, the mode of entry into what is at stake that gaming forces upon us is different from that imposed by exchange – a word which is, indeed, so ambiguous that I have begun, rather, to talk about impossible exchange.

SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE

Symbolic exchange is the strategic site where all the modalities of value flow together towards what I would term a blind zone, in which everything is called into question again. The symbolic here does not have the usual sense of 'imaginary', nor the sense given to it by Lacan. It is symbolic exchange as anthropology understands it. Whereas value always has a unidirectional sense, whereas it passes from one point to another according to a system of equivalence, in symbolic exchange the terms are reversible. The point for me in using this concept was to take the opposite stance from commodity exchange and, in that way, make a political critique of our society in the name of something that might perhaps be dubbed utopian, but that has been a living concept in many other cultures.

Reversibility is simultaneously the reversibility of life and death, of good and evil, and of all that we have organized in terms of alternative values. In the symbolic universe, life and death are exchanged. And, since there are no separate terms but, rather, reversibility, the idea of value is cast into question, requiring as it does distinctly opposed terms between which a dialectic can then be established. Now, there is no dialectic in the

symbolic. Where death and life are concerned, there is in our system of values no reversibility: what is positive is on the side of life, what is negative is on the side of death; death is the end of life, its opposite, whereas in the symbolic universe the terms are, strictly speaking, exchanged.

This applies in all fields, and hence also in that of the exchange of goods: in potlatch a certain type of circulation of goods operates, exonerated from the idea of value, a type of circulation which includes prodigality and the squandering of things, but must never stop. Exchange must never have an end, it must always increase in intensity, possibly continuing until death. Gaming might also be said to be of the order of this form of exchange, in so far as money no longer has any fixed value within that sphere, since it is always put back into circulation according to the symbolic rule – which is clearly not the moral law. In this symbolic rule, money won must in no circumstances become commodity value again; it must be put back into play within the game itself.

We may also extend this symbolic exchange to a broader level: the level of forms. So the animal form, the human form, the divine form are exchanged according to a rule of metamorphoses in which each ceases to be confined to its definition, with the human opposed to the inhuman, etc. There is a symbolic circulation of things in which none has a separate individuality, in which all operate in a kind of universal collusiveness of

inseparable forms. It is the same with the body, which does not have any 'individual' status either: it is a kind of sacrificial substitute that is not opposed to some other substance such as the soul or any other spiritual value. In those cultures where the body is continually brought into play in ritual, it is not the symbol of life and the question is not that of its health, survival or integrity. Whereas we have an individualized view of the body, linked to notions of possession and mastery, there it is subject to a constant reversibility. It is a substance which can move through other – animal, mineral or vegetable – forms.

And indeed, isn't everything always decided at the level of a symbolic exchange – that is to say, at a level that goes far beyond the rational commerce of things or bodies as we practise it today? In fact, paradoxical as it may seem, I would be quite willing to believe that there has never been any economy in the rational scientific sense in which we understand it, that symbolic exchange has always been at the radical base of things, and that it is on that level that things are decided.

We may choose to regard this symbolic exchange as something we have lost, to interest ourselves in potlatch in primitive societies and treat it anthropologically, taking the view that, so far as we are concerned, we are totally in market societies, in societies governed by value . . . But is this so certain? Perhaps we are still in an immense potlatch. We delimit areas in which kinds of economic, anatomical and sexual rationalities seem to come together, but the fundamental form, the radical form, is still that of

challenge, of one-upmanship, of potlatch – and hence of the negation, the sacrifice of value. So we might be said to be living still in a sacrificial mode, without wishing to acknowledge it. Without being able to either because, without the rituals, without the myths, we no longer have the means to do so.

There is no point being nostalgic for it: we have established another form of organization that has created an irreversible, linear system where there was previously a circular form, a circuit, reversibility. We live, then we die, and that is truly the end.

SEDUCTION

For me, the universe of seduction was what stands out radically against the universe of production. It was no longer a question of bringing things forward, of manufacturing them, of producing them for a world of value, but of seducing them – that is to say, of diverting them from that value, and hence from their identity, their reality, to destine them for the play of appearances, for their symbolic exchange. That symbolic exchange originally had the economic world as its target: goods – as in potlatch – and then the symbolic exchange of death. Then came sexuality, which slightly narrowed the field. As I understand the term, seduction involves everything, not simply the exchange between the sexes. Admittedly, by its difference, each sex seeks out and finds its identity by confronting the other in a form both of rivalry and of connivance, positivizing sexuality as function and as *jouissance*. But seduction for me was, first, that reversible form in which both physiological sexes played out their identity, put themselves in play. What interested me was a kind of becoming-masculine of the feminine and becoming-feminine of the masculine, against the prejudiced view that the masculine in itself is sexual identity. I understood the feminine as that which contradicts the masculine/

feminine opposition, the value opposition between the two sexes. The feminine was that which transversalized these notions and, in a manner of speaking, abolished sexual identity. I have to say that this produced some misunderstandings with the feminists. Particularly as, from this standpoint, what was at issue was no longer sexual liberation, which seemed to me in the end quite a naive project since it was based on value, on sexual identity ...

Seduction is a more fatal game, and a more dangerous one too, which is in no way exclusive of pleasure, but is something different from *jouissance*. Seduction is a challenge, a form which tends always to unsettle someone in their identity and the meaning they can have for themselves. In seduction they find the possibility of a radical otherness. Seduction seemed to me to cover all the forms that elude a system of accumulation, of production. Now, sexual liberation – which was the great cause of that period, just like the liberation of the workers – was still conceived within the productivist schema. It was a matter of liberating energy – the archetypal model of which was material energy – a model in absolute contradiction to the great game of seduction which, for its part, is not accumulative in nature.

Seduction is not so much a play on desire as a playing with desire. It does not deny it, nor is it its opposite, but it sets it in play.

Appearances belong to the sphere of seduction, far beyond physical

appearances. It is the sphere in which putting beings into play is a kind of ethic, a sphere of flexible, reversible forms where neither sex is assured of its foundation nor, above all, of its superiority. I had, then, played the feminine card, where, in symbolic exchange, I had previously played that of death. It was a kind of password – of pass-reality, if I may put it that way: a sort of index of the reversibility of life and death. The *femina* was, thus, the reversibility of the masculine and the feminine.

Yet I should make one thing clear: the term 'seduction' has been used everywhere and anywhere in a whole string of senses, such as 'power seduces the masses', the 'seduction of the media' or the 'great seducers' ... I did not mean the term at that level which is, after all, extremely vulgar. It is true that it seemed to me that historically, women had a privileged position in the field of seduction. But some have taken the view that to link women and seduction was to consign them to the realm of appearances – and hence to frivolity. This is a total misunderstanding: the seduction I was referring to is really the symbolic mastery of forms, whereas the other is merely the material mastery of power by way of a stratagem.

The original crime is seduction. And our attempts to positivize the world, to give it a unilateral meaning, like the whole immense undertaking of production, are no doubt aimed at abolishing this ultimately dangerous, evil terrain of seduction.

For this world of forms – seduction, challenge, reversibility – is the more powerful one. The other, the world of production, has power; but potency, for its part, lies with seduction. I do not think that it is primary in terms of cause and effect, in terms of succession, but it is more potent, in the more or less long term, than all the systems of production – of wealth, meaning or *jouissance* ... And all the types of production are perhaps subordinate to it.

THE OBSCENE

'Scene' and 'obscene' do not, of course, have the same etymology, but it is tempting to connect the two. For as soon as there is a scene or a stage, there is gaze and distance, play and otherness. The spectacle is bound up with the scene. On the other hand, when we are in obscenity, there is no longer any scene or stage, any play, and the distance of the gaze is abolished. Let us take the pornographic sphere: it is clear that in pornography the body is, in its entirety, *realized*. Perhaps the definition of obscenity might be, then, the becoming-real, the becoming-absolutely-real, of something which until then was treated metaphorically, or had a metaphorical dimension. Sexuality – and seduction too – always has a metaphorical dimension. In obscenity, the body, the sex organs, the sex act are brutally no longer '*mis en scène*', but immediately proffered for view or, in other words, for devouring; they are absorbed and resorbed at one and the same time. It is a total 'acting out' of things that ought to be subject to a dramaturgy, a scene, a play between partners. Here there is no play, no dialectic or separation, but a total collusion of the elements.

What is true of bodies is true of the media coverage of an event, of

'information'. When things become too real, when they are immediately given and realized, when we are in the short circuit which means that these things are brought closer and closer together, we are in obscenity. From this standpoint, Régis Debray made an interesting critique of the society of the spectacle: according to him, we are no longer in a society which distances us from things, in which we could be said to be alienated by our separation from them ... Our curse is that we are brought up ultra-close against them, that everything is immediately realized, both things and ourselves. And this too-real world is obscene.

In such a world, what we have is not communication, but contamination of a viral type; everything spreads from one person to another in an immediate fashion. The term 'promiscuity' describes the same process: things are there immediately, without distance and without charm. And without genuine pleasure.

These are the two extremes: obscenity and seduction, as is shown by art, which is one of the terrains of seduction. On the one hand, there is art, which is capable of inventing a scene other than the real, another set of rules; on the other, there is realist art, which has fallen into a kind of obscenity by becoming descriptive, objective or the pure reflection of the decomposition – the fractalization – of the world.

There are uppings of the stakes in obscenity: it may already be crudely obscene to present the naked body; to present it emaciated, flayed and

skeletal is even more so. It is clear today that the entire critical problematic of the media revolves around this threshold of tolerance for the excess of obscenity. If everything has to be said, then everything will be ... But objective truth is obscene. The fact remains that when we are told all the details of Bill Clinton's sexual activities, the obscenity is so laughable that we wonder whether there isn't an ironic dimension to it. This ironic turnabout might perhaps be the last avatar of seduction in a world in perdition, in total obscenity: all the same, deep down, we cannot quite manage to believe this. Obscenity – that is to say, the total visibility of things – is unbearable to the point where we have to apply an ironic strategy to survive. Otherwise this particular transparency would be totally lethal.

We find ourselves, then, between good and evil, in an irresolvable antagonism in which – at the risk of being Manichaean, and contradicting the whole of our humanism – there is no possible reconciliation. We have to accept these rules of the game, which, though they are no consolation, seem to me more clear-sighted than thinking we shall one day unify the world and restore the hypothetical realm of good. It is precisely when we try to achieve such a total good that evil surfaces. Paradoxical as it may seem, is it not through human rights – and at the planetary level – that the worst discrimination occurs? So, the pursuit of good has perverse effects, and those perverse effects are always on the side of evil. But to speak of evil is not to condemn: in a sense, evil is that which is fated – and fate can be unfortunate or fortunate.

THE TRANSPARENCY OF EVIL

All 'transparency' immediately raises the question of its opposite, secrecy. This is an alternative that is in no way of the order of morality, of good and evil: there is what is secret and what is generally known, which is a different sort of distinction. Certain things will never be put on open view; they are shared in secrecy as part of a type of exchange that is different from the one that involves visibility. When everything tends towards the visible, as is the case in our world, what becomes of the things that were once kept secret? They become occult, clandestine, maleficent: what was merely secret – or, in other words, given to be exchanged in secrecy – becomes evil and must be abolished, exterminated. But these things cannot be destroyed: in a certain sense, secrecy is indestructible. It will then be diabolized, and come out through the very instruments used to eliminate it. Its energy is that of evil, the energy that comes from the non-unification of things – good being defined as the unification of things in a totalized world.

From this point on, everything based on duality, on the dissociation of things, on negativity, on death, is regarded as evil. Our society works, then, to ensure that all is to the good, that there is a technology to meet

every need. In this sense, all technology is on the side of good or, in other words, of the fulfilment of general desire in a unified state of things.

We are today in what I would call a 'Moebius-strip' system. If we were in a face-to-face, confrontational system, strategies could be clear, based on a linearity of causes and effects. Whether one used good or evil, it would be used as part of a plan, and Machiavellianism would not lie outside rationality. But we are in a completely random universe in which causes and effects are piled one upon the other according to this Moebius-strip model, and no one can know where the effects of the effects will end.

An example of a perverse effect can be seen in the struggle against the corruption prevalent in business, or in the funding of political parties. It is clear that this must be condemned. And the judges condemn it. And we tell ourselves this represents a clean-up, a cleansing in the good sense of the term. But this clean-up also necessarily has secondary effects. The Clinton affair is of the same order. By managing to condemn a perversion of justice that verges on the betrayal of a solemn oath, the judge is contributing to building the image of a 'clean' America. And one, therefore, which benefits from an enhanced moral power to exploit the rest of the world (even if it does so democratically).

It is only superficially that we can read the action of the judges as opposed conflictually to the political class. In a way, they are, rather, the regenerators of its legitimacy – even though the problem of its corruption is far from being resolved.

And is it so certain that corruption must be eradicated at all costs? We tell ourselves, of course, that it would be far preferable to use the money that goes on the fabulous commissions paid for funding arms deals, or even on arms production, to reduce world poverty. But that is to jump to a hasty conclusion. Since there is no question of the money being taken out of the commodity circuit, it 'could' be redirected into a generalized concreting-over of the land. Given this state of affairs, paradoxical as the question may seem, is it preferable from the point of view of 'good' or 'evil', to continue to manufacture – and, indeed, to sell – weapons, a certain number of which will never be used, or to have a country disappear beneath a blanket of concrete? The answer to this question is of less importance than the realization that there is no fixed point from which we can determine what is totally good or totally evil.

This, of course, is a profoundly disastrous – and entirely uncomfortable – situation for the rational mind. The fact remains that, in the same way as Nietzsche spoke of the vital illusion of appearances, we might speak of a vital function of corruption in society. But, since the principle of corruption is illegitimate, it cannot be made official, and hence can operate only in secret. This is a clearly cynical, morally inadmissible viewpoint, but it is also a kind of fatal strategy – which is not, indeed, anyone's particular prerogative, and affords no exclusive benefits. Evil might be said to be reintroduced by this route. Evil functions because it is from it

that energy comes. And to fight it – which is necessary – leads simultaneously to reactivating it.

We may mention here what Mandeville said when he asserted that a society operates on the basis of its vices, or at least on the basis of its disequilibria. Not on its positive qualities, but on its negative qualities. If we accept this cynicism, we can understand that politics should be – also – the inclusion of evil, of disorder, in the ideal order of things. We should not, then, deny evil, but play on it, play fast and loose with it, play it false.

This title – 'the transparency of evil' – is not entirely apposite ... We should speak, rather, of the transpiring, the 'showing-through' [*transparition*] of Evil which, whatever we do, 'shows through' or transpires through everything that strives to ward it off. Moreover, it might be said to be transparency itself that is the Evil – the loss of all secrecy. Just as, in the 'perfect crime', it is the perfection itself that is criminal.

THE VIRTUAL

In its current sense, the virtual stands opposed to the real, but its sudden emergence, through the new technologies, gives us the sense that it now marks the vanishing or end of the real. I have already said that, as I see it, to bring a real world into being is in itself to produce that world, and the real has only ever been a form of simulation. We may, admittedly, cause a reality-effect, a truth-effect or an objectivity-effect to exist, but, in itself, the real does not exist. The virtual, then, is merely a hyperbolic instance of this tendency to pass from the symbolic to the real – which is its degree zero. In this sense, the virtual coincides with the notion of hyperreality. Virtual reality, the reality that might be said to be perfectly homogenized, digitized and 'operationalized', substitutes for the other because it is perfect, verifiable and non-contradictory. So, because it is more 'complete', it is more real than what we have established as simulacrum.

The fact remains that this expression, 'virtual reality', is positively an oxymoron. We no longer have the good old philosophical sense of the term, where the virtual was what was destined to become actual, or where a dialectic was established between these two notions. The virtual now is what takes the place of the real; it is the final solution of the real in

so far as it both accomplishes the world in its definitive reality and marks its dissolution.

At this point, it is the virtual which thinks us: no need now for a subject of thought, a subject of action; everything happens by technological mediation. But is the virtual that which puts an end, once and for all, to a world of the real and of play, or is it part of an experimentation with which we are playing? Are we not playing out the comedy of the virtual to ourselves, with a hint of irony, as in the comedy of power? In the end, isn't this immense installation of virtuality, this performance in the artistic sense, a new stage on which operators have replaced actors? If this were the case, there would be no need to attach any more belief to it than to any other ideological formation. This is rather a reassuring hypothesis: in the end, this whole issue would not seem to be very serious, and the extermination of reality would be anything but firmly established.

But if our world is indeed inventing a virtual double for itself, we have to see this as the fulfilment of a trend that began long ago. Reality, as we know, has not always existed. We have talked about it only since there has been a rationality to express it, parameters enabling us to represent it by coded and decodable signs.

In the virtual, we are no longer dealing with value; we are merely dealing with a turning-into-data, a turning-into-calculations, a generalized computation in which reality-effects disappear. The virtual might be

said to be truly the reality-horizon, just as we talk about the event-horizon in physics. But it is also possible to think that all this is merely a roundabout route towards an as yet indiscernible aim.

There is a positive fascination today with the virtual and all its technologies. If it genuinely is a mode of disappearance, this would be an – obscure, but deliberate – choice on the part of the species itself: the decision to clone itself, lock, stock and barrel, in another universe; to disappear as the human race, properly speaking, in order to perpetuate itself in an artificial species that would have much more efficient, much more operational attributes. Is this what is at issue?

What comes to mind here is Borges's fable of the people ostracized and pushed to the other side of the mirror, who are now merely the reflection of the emperor who subjugated them.[1] We might see the great system of the virtual like this, and all the rest as merely kinds of clones, forms of rejection and abjection. But in the fable these people begin to look less and less like their dominator, and one day they come back through the mirror. This time, says Borges, they will not be defeated. Can we suppose a catastrophe of this kind, and at the same time this kind of revolution to

1. J.L. Borges, 'Fauna of Mirrors', in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 67–8 [Trans.].

the third power? Personally, I am more inclined to imagine such a hypertrophy of the virtual that we would arrive at a form of implosion. What would take its place? It is difficult to say because, beyond the virtual, I see nothing but what Freud called 'nirvana', an exchange of molecular substance and nothing more. All that would remain would be a perfect wave system, which would join up with the system of particles in a purely physical universe that no longer had anything human, moral, or – obviously – metaphysical about it. In this way, we would have returned to a material stage, with a senseless circulation of elements ...

Leaving science fiction behind, we can only note, after all, the peculiar irony there is in the fact that these technologies, which we associate with inhumanity and annihilation, will in the end, perhaps, be what frees us from the world of value, the world of judgement. All this heavy moral, philosophical culture, which modern radical thought has done its metaphysical utmost to liquidate after a back-breaking struggle, technology expels pragmatically and radically with the virtual.

At the stage we are at, we do not know whether technology, having reached a point of extreme sophistication, will liberate us from technology itself – the optimistic viewpoint – or whether in fact we are heading for catastrophe. Even though catastrophes, in the dramaturgical sense of the term – that is to say, endings – may, depending on the protagonists, assume happy or unhappy forms.

RANDOMNESS

The random – to which I would add the fractal and the catastrophic – is part of those modern theories which take account of the unforeseeable effects of things or, at the very least, of a certain dissemination of effects and causes such that reference points disappear. We are in a random world, a world in which there is no longer a subject and an object distributed harmoniously within the register of knowledge. As for random phenomena, they are not simply in things, in material bodies: we, too, are part of the molecular microcosm by our very thought – and that is what creates the radical uncertainty of the world. If we were dealing with a random matter, with random physical effects, but with a thinking which was, for its part, homogeneous and unidirectional, then there would still be a solid dialectic between subject and object, but we have fallen now into a random thinking which no longer allows us to do any more than propound hypotheses, a thinking which can no longer lay claim to truth. This is already the case in the subatomic sciences, as we know. But I believe it is also the case with our thinking on, and current analysis of, society and the political sphere . . . All we can do now is meet random processes halfway, by means of a thinking that is itself random,

which is a quite different exercise from the classic discursive thought that founded traditional philosophy. This new way of proceeding is not without its dangers. What can we refer to as 'events' when things unfold in a predominantly chaotic manner, with minimal, infinitesimal causes or initial conditions, and prodigious effects on a world scale? In this sense the phenomenon of globalization is in itself random and chaotic, to the point where no one can control it or claim to subject it to a strategy.

The fractal is also at the centre of our world. I shall not talk about Mandelbrot's theories, with which I am not sufficiently familiar, but this indefinite reproduction of a single micro-form, of a single formula, calls to mind our situation, in so far as we are infinitesimal particles in which all the information concentrated in each one merely now proliferates, repeating an identical formula.

The mass phenomenon, as identified in sociology, was already a fractal phenomenon, a virtual phenomenon, a viral phenomenon. All these dimensions, which have had their historical phase of emergence, are also found in the physics of mass. Might it be the case that we are left now with fractal individuals – that is to say, individuals not divided (something which assured them still of an – albeit problematical – integrity), but disseminated, multiplied to infinity? Culturally, individuals are already cloned; they do not need to be cloned biologically, genetically. Perhaps they will be, but in any event they are already cloned mentally and

culturally: this development is quite clearly perceptible.

In the face of these chaotic and catastrophic forms, and their processes of exponentiality, we can see that the human macrocosm, which we imagined we would universalize through a mastery of the world by rationality, has become a bubble inside a completely uncontrollable microcosm that is of a micro-physical, random order. The rule is henceforth the molecular, the random. As for the real, for meaning and for truth, they are the exceptions – that is to say, a mystery. How can this truth-effect and this reality-effect have been born somewhere, at some tiny point in the universe, and have endured for however short a time – even if they are now dying out?

CHAOS

Chaos is not radically opposed to rationality. Rationality we have more or less mastered, but even the sciences are reaching their outer limits: at a certain point, we come up against the object barrier, and physical laws reverse themselves or no longer operate. However, we have not yet left behind the utopian goal of increasingly sophisticated knowledge, even though that radical illusion is not internal to science. For my part, I would be quite happy to put forward an almost Manichaean hypothesis: in the last instance, we might be said to be faced not with an appropriation of the object of the world by the subject, but with a duel between subject and object. And, as regards the outcome, all bets are still on . . . One very much has the impression that there is a kind of turnabout, of revenge, almost of vengeance, on the part of the allegedly passive object, which allowed itself to be discovered and analysed, but has suddenly become a 'strange attractor' and, in a manner of speaking, an opponent. Here, something akin to a fatal antagonism is being played out, of the order of that between Eros and Thanatos, in a kind of metaphysical clash.

Today, our sciences confess to the strategic disappearance of the object on the Virtual Display Unit: the object is henceforth beyond our grasp.

As it happens, I find this very ironic: the rules of the game are changing, but it is no longer we who set them. That is the destiny of a culture: our own. Other cultures, other metaphysics, are doubtless not so badly undermined by this development because they did not have the ambition, expectation or phantasm of possessing the world, of analysing it in order to control it. But since we claimed to control the totality of postulates, it is clearly *our* system that is heading for catastrophe.

THE END

With this word, it is the question of time that is posed, the question of its linearity, of this – perhaps conventional – representation we have of it as past, present and future, with an origin and an end. There is an origin–end couple in the same way as there are causes and effects, subject and object: all these reassuring things. But, from now on, we are in a kind of process of limitlessness in which the end can no longer be located. I have spoken, in this connection, of a 'final solution', in the sense of an extermination.

But the end is also the finality or purpose of something, that which gives it a meaning. And when you are in processes developing in a chain reaction, which, beyond a certain critical mass, become exponential, they no longer have any finality or meaning. Canetti notes this in relation to history: we have, he says, passed beyond the true and the false, beyond good and evil, and there is no way back. On this view, there is a kind of point of irreversibility beyond which things lose their end. When something comes to an end, this means it really took place; whereas if there no longer is any end, we enter interminable history, interminable crisis; we enter upon series of interminable processes. We know these;

they are already here: we simply have to look at the interminable, excessive development of material production.

In this system, there is no longer any coming to a term. On the occasion of our passing the year 2000, I wanted to see if we still had this sense of a term falling due, or if we were in a mere countdown. The countdown is not the end; it is the extenuation of something, the exhaustion of a process, which does not, for all that, come to an end, but which becomes interminable. We stand, then, before a paradoxical alternative: either we shall never reach the end, or we are already beyond it. Personally, I told myself there would be no 'passing' to the year 2000 because it had taken place long ago; that what was involved here was merely a kind of somersaulting of temporality. So, unable to locate an end, we strive desperately to pin down a beginning. Our current compulsion to seek out origins is testament to this: in the anthropological and palaeontological fields we see limits being pushed back in time, into a past that is also interminable.

My hypothesis is that we have already passed the point of irreversibility; that we are already in an exponential, unlimited form in which everything develops in the void, to infinity, without any possibility of reapprehending it in a human dimension; in which we are losing the memory of the past, the projection of the future and the possibility of integrating that future into a present action. We might be said already to be in an abstract, disembodied state where things continue by mere

inertia and become simulacra of themselves, without our being able to put an end to them. They are now merely an artificial synthesis, a prosthesis. Admittedly, this assures them of an existence and a kind of immortality and eternity – that of the clone, of a clone universe. The problem raised by history is not that it might have come to an end, as Fukuyama says, but rather that it will have no end – and hence no longer any finality, any purpose.

I have dealt with this question of the end in terms of illusion. We always harbour the illusion that something will have an end-point, that it will then take on a meaning, and will allow us retrospectively to restore its origin and, with this beginning and this end, the play of cause and effect will become possible ...

The absence of end gives us the sense that all the information we receive is merely something predigested and rehashed, that everything was already there, that we are faced with a melodramatic mishmash of events, not knowing whether they really took place or not, whether they aren't substitutes for others – which is quite different from an event that could not but take place, the fated event, which really marks the end but possesses the status of event by dint of its very fatedness.

The fact of having extradited death – or, at the very least, of constantly attempting to – shows up in the endless efforts made to delay the onset of things: to stop growing old, to eliminate alternatives, to have advance control even over birth, drawing on all the possibilities of genetics.

Because all these possibilities are technologically plausible, technology has replaced the determination which means that at a given moment two things are mutually exclusive, that they separate and will have a different destiny, but also the infinite possibility of doing everything one thing after the other. We have here, if not two opposite metaphysics (in so far as technology is not of a metaphysical order), at least a crucial issue where freedom is concerned.

But if there is no longer any end or finitude, if the subject is immortal, then he no longer knows who he is. And it is this immortality that is the ultimate phantasm of our technologies.

THE PERFECT CRIME

The perfect crime would be the elimination of the real world. But what concerns me, rather, is the elimination of the original illusion, the fateful illusion of the world. We might agree that the world itself is a perfect crime: it has in itself no motive, no equivalent, no alleged perpetrator. So we may imagine that, from the very beginning, we are already in a criminal enterprise.

But in the perfect crime, it is the perfection that is criminal. To perfect the world is to finish it, to fulfil it – and hence to find a final solution for it. I have in mind the parable of the Tibetan monks who, for centuries, have been deciphering all the names of God, the nine billion names of God.[2] One day they call in the people from IBM, who turn up with their computers, and within a month they have finished the whole job. Now the monks' prophecy said that once this listing of the names of God was finished, the world would come to an end. Obviously the IBM people do

2. Arthur C. Clarke, 'The Nine Billion Names of God', in *Of Time and Stars* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 17–23 [Trans.].

not believe this but, as they are coming back down the mountain, with their inventory completed, they see the stars in the sky extinguished one by one. This is a very fine parable of the extermination of the world by its ultimate verification, which perfects it with calculations, with truth.

Faced with a world that is illusion, all the great cultures have striven to manage the illusion by illusion – to treat evil with evil, so to speak. We alone seek to reduce the illusion with truth – which is the most fantastical of illusions. But this ultimate truth, this final solution, is the equivalent of extermination. What is at issue in the perfect crime perpetrated on the world, on time, on the body, is this kind of dissolution by the objective verification of things, by identification. This is equivalent to eliminating death once again, as I have already said. For what is involved here is no longer death, but extermination. Literally, to *exterminate* means to deprive something of its own end, to deprive it of its term. It is to eliminate duality, the antagonism of life and death, to reduce everything to a kind of single principle – we might say a *pensée unique* – of the world, which could be said to express itself in all our technologies, particularly today our virtual technologies.

So, it is both a crime against the real world, which becomes a useless function, but, more deeply, more radically, it is a crime perpetrated against the illusion of the world, that is to say, against its radical uncertainty, its duality, its antagonism – everything which underlies the existence of destiny, conflict and death. So, by eliminating every negative

principle, we might be said to end up with a world that is unified, homogenized, totally *verified*, as it were, and hence, as I see it, exterminated. Extermination might be said, from this point on, to be our new mode of disappearance, the one we have substituted for death.

Such is the story of the perfect crime, which shows itself in the whole current 'operationality' of the world, in our ways of *realizing* those things that are dreams, phantasms, utopias, transcribing them digitally, turning them into information, which is the work of the virtual in its most widely accepted sense. This is the crime: we attain a perfection in the sense of a total accomplishment, and that totalization is an end. There is no longer any destination elsewhere, nor even any 'elsewhere'. The perfect crime destroys otherness, the other. It is the reign of the same. The world is identified with itself, identical to itself, by exclusion of any principle of otherness.

Today, what underlies the notion of 'individual' is not the philosophical subject or the critical subject of history, but a perfectly operational molecule that is left to its own devices and doomed to be answerable for itself alone. Having no destiny, it will have merely a precoded development and it will reproduce, self-identically, to infinity. This 'cloning', in the most widely accepted sense, is part of the perfect crime.

DESTINY

Where destiny is concerned, I would be inclined to use an image borrowed from the geographical realm, namely that of the famous 'continental divide' from which, in the USA, some waters run off towards the Pacific and others towards the Atlantic. As a result of that divide, two elements separate irreversibly at a given point, it seems, and will never meet up again. The divide occurs once and for all. We may say the same of birth, which is a definitive separation. Something assumes the form of existence, something else does not – and what is not born will at the same time become the other, and will remain so.

Destiny might be said, then, to be a form of definitive, irreversible separation. But a kind of reversibility means that the things that are separated will remain in collusion. Subatomic particle physics speaks of both the *separability* and the *inseparability* of particles. Wherever they go, and even though they diverge definitively, each particle remains bound, connected to its antiparticle. I cannot push this analogy very far, needless to say, but it accounts for what we see of destiny in tragedy, where it is the form of that which is born and dies under the same sign. And the sign which leads to life, to existence, is also the one that leads to death. It will,

then, be under the same fateful sign that things begin and end. This is the meaning of that famous story of death in Samarkand ... On the town square, a soldier sees death beckoning to him. He takes fright, goes to see the king, and says, 'Death has beckoned to me; I am going to flee as far away as possible, I am fleeing to Samarkand.' The king commands that death be sent to him, to explain why it has terrified his captain. And death tells him, 'I didn't want to frighten him. I simply wanted to remind him we had an appointment tonight – in Samarkand.' So, destiny has a form which is, as it were, spherical: the further you go away from a point, the nearer you are to it.

Destiny does not, strictly speaking, have 'intentions', but you sometimes have the impression that, while a life of fame and success is taking its course, somewhere, obscurely, there is a machinery working away in the opposite direction that unforeseeably turns the euphoria to tragedy. The fateful event is not the one you can explain with causes, but the one which, at a certain moment, defies all causality, which comes from elsewhere, but with this secret destination. We may, for example, find causes for the death of Princess Diana, and attempt to reduce the event to those causes. But it is always a cop-out to appeal to causes to justify effects: we shall not exhaust the meaning or non-meaning of an event by so doing. Now, in this case, what constitutes the event is a turnabout from positive to negative, a turnabout which means that, when things are too fortunate, they turn to disaster, as though a collective sacrificial force

were silently at work. Destiny is always the principle of reversibility in action. In this sense, I would say that it is the world which thinks us – not discursively, but the wrong way round, against all our efforts to think *it* the right way round. Every one of us could easily find examples of this. Even in coincidences there is a whole art. When psychoanalysis talks about slips, of word-substitutions in jokes, these things, too, are of the order of coincidence: at a particular point, there is a strange attraction between signifiers, and it is this which constitutes the psychical event.

As a counter to the completely computerized universe we are being offered or promised, I could easily imagine a world that would be nothing but coincidences. Such a world would be not a world of chance and indeterminacy, but one of destiny. All coincidences are, in a sense, predestined. Then, standing opposed to destination, to that which has a clear purpose, would be destiny or, in other words, that which has a secret destination, a pre-destination, though not in any religious sense. Predestination would say: such a moment is predestined for a particular other, such a word for another one, as in a poem where you have the impression that the words were always preordained to meet.

Similarly, in seduction, there is a form of predestination: between the feminine and the masculine I do not think there is merely a differential relation; there is also a form of destiny. The one is always destined for the other; there is an exchange, a dual form, not – contrary to the widespread conception – an individual destiny. Destiny is this symbolic exchange

between us and the world, which thinks us and which we think, where this collision and collusion take place, this telescoping of, and complicity between, things.

This is where the crime lies, and the tragic dimension. Punishment arrives without fail: there will be a reversibility which will mean that something in all this will be avenged. As Canetti says: 'Where vengeance is concerned, there is no need to wish for it; it will come, it happens automatically, by the reversibility of things.' Such is the form of destiny.

IMPOSSIBLE EXCHANGE

We are in exchange, universally. All our conceptions lead back to it at some point or other, whether it be commodity exchange or that concept of symbolic exchange which I've used a great deal and which is, in a way, its opposite. The fact remains that exchange, in fact, grounds our morality, as does the idea that everything can be exchanged, that the only thing that exists is what can assume value, and hence pass from one to another.

Destiny comes close to the notion of impossible exchange, at least in the absolute. Destiny cannot be exchanged for anything. It is something which, at a particular moment, is of such singularity that it is not exchangeable against any rationality whatever. So, the radical dimension of destiny might be said to be that of impossible exchange. In my opinion, exchange is a delusion, an illusion, but everything conspires to have us act as though ideas, words, commodities, goods and individuals can be exchanged ... That death itself can be exchanged for something. And finding reasons for everything – causes and purposes – is another modality of exchange. For this delusion to function, everything has to have a referent or an equivalent somewhere. In other words, a possibility of

exchange in value terms. By contrast, that which cannot be exchanged might, to cut a few corners, be said to be what Bataille terms the 'accursed share' – and this has to be reduced.

For my part, I think that, despite all our efforts, this impossible exchange is everywhere. If you take the example of the economic field, which is pre-eminently the site of exchange, everything is, in principle, exchangeable there, since that is its condition of entry to the field. But the economic sphere itself, taken overall, is not exchangeable for anything. There is no meta-economy or transcendence by which it could be measured. There is no ultimate purpose against which the economy as such could be exchanged. Within it, all forms of circulation are possible, but there isn't any kind of transcendence, any 'other thing' for which it could be exchanged as value.

And we can make this argument, more or less, about the world itself. The world is unexchangeable because, overall, it has no equivalent anywhere. Since everything is part of the world, there is nothing external against which it could be measured, to which it could be compared and hence by which it could be assessed in value terms. In a certain sense, it has no price.

But, as soon as something is named, coded, enciphered, we are back to the circuit of exchange again. At that point, the 'accursed share' becomes a value. Misfortune, misery – all these things are traded very easily these days. There is a stock exchange of negative values, so to speak. So, debt,

which is something negative and at the same time something virtual, can be traded, can be bought and sold. Nietzsche, I believe, speaks of redeemed debt. This redeeming of debt is God's stratagem: he sent his son to redeem man's debt, with the effect that man will never be able to redeem it, since it has already been redeemed by the creditor. So, man will never be free of it; he will always be a debtor. And what goes for God also goes, today, for capital: the system creates an unlimited debt which it redeems as it goes along, renegotiating it and putting it back into circulation *ad infinitum* ... A bit like the devil who, having bought man's shadow, recycles it.

It is the strategy of the system itself to maintain an exchange based upon nothing, but one which has all the effectiveness of a positive exchange. The system can incorporate anything, but as such it cannot, for its part, be equivalent to anything else whatever. Any system – economic, political or aesthetic – has its internal determinants and rationale, which make exchange possible. But there is a limit, a critical mass, a demarcation line beyond which these systems no longer have any meaning, because there is nothing external to them that can ground them as value. We then enter the quasi-supernatural dimension of impossible exchange. At some point our moral law of exchange no longer operates. What are we to call this other place? It is not a universe, because the universal, according to our conception, marks out a space in which all exchanges are possible: we are in the universal of exchange. It is, at all events, a place where this

reconciliation of something with its value – with the referent which gives it a meaning – can no longer be effected. So, there is no exchange any more, but a duality. Whereas in exchange, there are also two terms, but, most importantly, there is passage between them, circulation (a consensual, reconciled circulation in which the contracting parties are agreed), in this case consensus cannot operate. As a consequence, these systems are haunted by this limit, this barrier of impossible exchange. With all systems developing by an ever-increasing proliferation, saturation brings them up against this impossible-exchange barrier. And the effect of this is to throw them out of kilter internally.

But we are now in the process of inventing a fantastic general equivalent – the virtual. This presents itself as an enciphering, an encoding in which it will be possible to measure everything by the same extremely reductive yardstick: the binary, the alternation between 0 and 1. Here lies the ultimate form of exchange, its most abstract form, its limit-form, close to impossible exchange. With this idea we might associate that of uncertainty, in the sense used in the 'uncertainty principle' in physics. Everything is taking us into a world steeped in definitive uncertainty. We are no longer dealing here with that relative uncertainty that is connected with science's backwardness, or with insufficiently sophisticated mental structures. There will always be the line beyond which a system, no longer able to prove its foundedness, turns around at that point against itself. In physics the uncertainty principle states that one

cannot define both the position and the velocity of a particle. For us, it signifies that one can never define both a thing – life, for example – and its price. One cannot at the same time grasp the real and its sign: we shall never again master the two simultaneously.

DUALITY

These parallel worlds are, in the end, the consequence of a reality which is coming apart because we have tried too hard to unify and homogenize it. Should we see duality – of which reversibility is, in a way, an applied form – as a principle? Might we be dealing here with an order or disorder of the world in which there would originally be two eternal principles, good and evil, coexisting antagonistically, as Manichaean thought asserts? If the created world is the work of evil, if evil is its energy, the fact that good – and truth – can be found there is quite strange. We have always wondered at the perversity of things, of human nature ... but it is the opposite question we should have asked: how can it be that, at some point, good can exist; that somewhere, in some thin layer of the world, a principle of order can be established – a principle of regulation and equilibrium that operates? Such a miracle is unintelligible.

I see things differently. What we find very difficult to understand is the dual principle, so much are we shaped by a general philosophy of unity: everything that contravenes that philosophy is deemed inadmissible. We attempt to control not that which *is*, but that which, in the name of this assumption, ought not to exist. For my part, I find it more fascinating to

posit an irreversible, irreconcilable duality as the underlying principle. We set good and evil against each other in dialectical terms in such a way that a morality is possible – that is to say, in such a way that we can opt for the one or the other. Now, there is nothing to show we really have that choice, on account of a perverse reversibility which means that, most of the time, all attempts to do good produce evil in the medium or long term. And, indeed, the opposite also exists, where evil leads to good. So, there are totally contingent, totally fluctuating effects of good and evil, to the point where it is illusory to consider the two principles separately and think there is a possible choice between them based on some kind of moral reason.

To borrow the well-known metaphor of the iceberg, duality presupposes that good is the one-tenth of evil that protrudes above the surface ... And, from time to time, there is a turnabout: evil takes the place of good, and then the iceberg melts and everything goes back to a kind of fluid in which good and evil are merged. At any rate, I regard duality as the true source of all energy, without, however, passing any verdict on which of the two principles – good or evil – has primacy. The key thing is the antagonism between them, and the impossibility of founding a world of order and, at the same time, accounting for its total context of uncertainty. We cannot do that, and that is what evil is.

THOUGHT

The world thinks us, but it is *we* who think that . . . Thought is, in fact, a dual form; it is not the form of an individual subject, it is shared between the world and us: we cannot think the world, because somewhere it is thinking us. What we have here, then, is no longer a subject-thought, which imposes an order by situating itself outside its object, keeping that object at a distance. Perhaps that situation has never existed. Doubtless it is merely an imposing intellectual representation, though one that has gained fantastically widespread acceptance. But something has changed now: the world, appearances, the object are bursting out. The object, which we have tried to keep in a kind of analytic passivity, is taking its revenge . . . I am quite fond of the idea of this revenge, of this return-effect that forces us to take it into account. This is where uncertainty emerges, but is it thought which injects this uncertainty into the world? Or is it the radical illusion of the world that contaminates thought? This will probably be forever undecidable. The fact remains that the disappearance of the fixity of the thinking subject, the basis of our Western philosophy, and the awareness of a symbolic exchange between the world and thought are destabilizing the discourses of order and rationalization –

including scientific discourse. Thought then becomes once again a world-thought,[3] no territory of which can boast an analytical mastery of things. And if, as I think, the state of the world is paradoxical – ambiguous, uncertain, random or reversible – we have to find a thought that is itself paradoxical. If it wishes to make an impact in the world, thought must be in the world's image. Objective thought was entirely adequate for the image of a world we presumed to be determined. It is no longer so for a destabilized, uncertain world. We must, then, recover a kind of event-thought, which manages to make uncertainty a principle and impossible exchange a rule, knowing it is not exchangeable against either truth or reality. It is something else, which remains enigmatic. How can it still situate itself without claiming mastery of signification, being in the flow of appearances and not indexed to truth? This is the principle of impossible exchange, and it seems to me that thought must take this into account, must make uncertainty a rule of the game. But it must know that it is playing without any possible conclusion, in a definitive form of

3. Baudrillard glosses this notion as follows in the filmed interviews that constitute, so to speak, the audiovisual prehistory of this book: 'Et alors la pensée est remise dans le cours du monde ... elle redevient une pensée-monde, c'est-à-dire qu'elle fait événement dans le monde, mais elle est elle-même un événement du monde ... mais le monde fait événement aussi dans la pensée.' See *Mots de Passe. Jean Baudrillard* (Un film conçu par Leslie F. Grunberg, réalisé par Pierre Bourgeois), Éditions Montparnasse, 2000, video cassette 2 [Trans.].

illusion, and hence of putting-into-play[4] – including putting its own status in play.

The order of things, the order of appearances, can no longer be entrusted to some subject of knowledge or other. I want thought to be paradoxical, seductive – on condition, clearly, that seduction is not taken to mean flattering manipulation, but a *détournement* of identity, a *détournement* of being.

For thought does not work at the identification of things, like rational thought, but at their disidentification, their seduction, that is to say, their *détournement*, in spite of its phantasmatic will to unify the world under its control and in its name.

This type of thought is clearly an *agent provocateur*, managing illusion by illusion. I do not claim that it applies everywhere. Perhaps we have to accept two levels of thought: a causal, rational thought, corresponding to the Newtonian world in which we live; and another, much more radical level of thought which could be said to be part of this secret destining of the world, of which it might be a kind of fatal strategy.

4. This 'putting-into-play' reflects the etymology of the word 'illusion': in + ludere (to play) [Trans.].

THE LAST WORD

It would be extremely presumptuous to attempt to pronounce a last word. But I think we have been on a journey where the terms – death, the *fatal*, the feminine, simulation – have metabolized into one another in a kind of spiral. We have not taken a single step closer to some possible end-goal. We have merely gone through a number of paradigms that have no end other than in the moment of their metamorphosis. For if concepts die, they die a natural death, if I may put it that way, passing from one form to another – which is still the best way of thinking. So, there is no end, then; no conclusion. For me, thinking is radical in so far as it does not claim to prove itself, to verify itself in some reality or other. This does not mean that it denies the existence of that reality, that it is indifferent to its impact, but that it regards it as essential to keep itself as an element in a game whose rules it knows. The only fixed point is the undecidable and the fact that it will remain so, and the aim of the entire work of thought is to preserve that.

But the inalienable presence of that undecidable does not lead me to an unsituated thinking, concerned only with abstract speculation and with manipulating ideas from the history of philosophy. I attempt to free

myself from a referential, teleological thinking precisely in order to pursue the play of a thinking which is aware that something else thinks it. This is why I have always been quite close to current events – not so much in sociological or political terms, but rather so as to measure the angle of incidence on those events of a parallel world with which a perpetual confrontation is going on.

Thought must play a catastrophic role, must be itself an element of catastrophe, of provocation, in a world that wants absolutely to cleanse everything, to exterminate death and negativity. But it must at the same time remain humanist, concerned for the human, and, to that end, recapture the reversibility of good and evil, of the human and the inhuman.

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2002

the singular objects of architecture

University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis – London

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Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel

translated by Robert Bononno foreword by K. Michael Hays

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The University of Minnesota Press gratefully acknowledges translation assistance provided for this book by the French Ministry of Culture.

The publication of this book was assisted by a bequest from Josiah H. Chase to honor his parents, Ellen Rankin Chase and Josiah Hook Chase, Minnesota territorial pioneers.

Originally published in French as *Les objets singuliers: Architecture et philosophie*, by Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel. Copyright 2000 by Editions Calmann-Lévy.

English translation copyright 2002 by Robert Bononno

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
http://www.upress.umn.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Baudrillard, Jean.
[Objets singuliers. English]
The singular objects of architecture / Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel ; translated by Robert Bononno.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-8166-3912-4 (alk. paper)
1. Architecture—Philosophy. 2. Aesthetics. I. Nouvel, Jean, 1945- II. Title.
NA2500.B3413 2002
720'.1—dc21

2002008024

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

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12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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https://archive.org/details/singularobjectso2002baud

Foreword

K. Michael Hays

The Singular Objects of Architecture should not create the expectation that either architecture or philosophy will be treated in this dialogue in anything like a traditional way (which, were it the case, would seem not so much old-fashioned as reactionary, coming from two of the few cultural figures practicing today that we could still dare to call progressive). Indeed, it is better to state the reverse: what first strikes one as extraordinary about this conversation is that architecture and philosophy are treated with any distinction at all by progressive thinkers in our present era. In our own time, the de-differentiation of disciplines and the tendentious erasure of boundaries between specific cultural materials and practices promise to homogenize all distinction, difference, and otherness into a globalized, neutralized sameness. Much of what claims to be progressive thought is happy to aestheticize this situation, to accelerate its effects, and to trade in any remaining individuality or singularity of thought for a randomized, spread-out delirium. The flattening seems to have been chosen. Besides, any disciplinary autonomy or expertise that might counter this leveling tendency is destined to be crushed anyway under the massive movement of the world system itself, to be emulsified along with everything else into

so many cultural and economic fluids. What is extraordinary about this conversation, then, is its declaration, against all that, to search for singular objects (rather than globalized fluids) as might be found in architecture and philosophy.

"We're not heading for disaster, we're already in the midst of total disaster," Nouvel declares at one point. Yet neither he nor Baudrillard ever laments the loss of a real or idealized past, nor do they accept, not even for a moment, the cynically complacent preemption of the future. The second surprise of *The Singular Objects of Architecture* is that what is offered, both as program and as practice exemplified in this particular dialogue, is a renewal of utopian thought, a revived attempt at envisioning a possible future out of our disastrous present, a way of thinking that has been under ban now for more than two decades. Against the hegemony of the antiutopian, real-time thinking of our contemporary technocratic positivism and experiential nominalism ("What's mine is mine, and you can't feel it"), the singular object must be anticipatory, inexhaustible, and shared; it must destroy culture (or what has become of it) and redistribute the leftovers. And so, while architecture and philosophy are treated together as parts of a period problem—as disciplines and practices with specific histories, transitions, and transformations, subjected to the desultory effects of history now, in our own period—they will not remain unchallenged or unchanged in this dialogue. If the singular object is to be both utopian and destructive, future directed and exquisitely representative of the present, it will be a peculiar object indeed. Its model will be neither architecture nor philosophy freestanding, as traditionally practiced, but a productive enfolding of one into the other—an event more than an object, a constructional operation in which each discourse interprets the other but nevertheless produces a new, irreducible, singular thing: that peculiar thing we call theory. "I feel that thought, theory, is inexchangeable," says Baudrillard. "It can't be exchanged for truth or for reality. Exchange is impossible. It's because of this that theory even exists." Theory is the diagram of the singular object of architecture. This, at least, should come as no surprise, for work of such large ambition as

is evidenced here is to be found today almost nowhere other than theory.

Theory is ready to travel. Although at its best, theory will stay close to the historicity of its material, mediating between specific cultural practices and specific historical contexts, theoretical constructions also possess an uncanny capacity to cross over, drift, and expand across disciplines, however much authors, institutions, and orthodoxies try to confine them. Theory is autonomous ("inexchangeable"), but it is nourished by circulation—by borrowing and trading, by unconscious influence or wholesale appropriation. Through the accidents of discourse, a body of theory can also be dislodged and pressed into the service of a quite different one, reinvested with unpredicted content, and refunctioned for unexpected vocations.

Not least among such transactions is that between architecture and philosophy, provided we understand that coupling in an expanded sense to include urbanism, semiology, *Ideologiekritik*, and certain strains of poststructuralist thought; for it is that fusion (what we now call, simply, architecture theory) that, since the mid-1960s, has so energized architectural discourse in academic and professional circles, turning us away from an earlier functionalist, empiricist, foundationalist way of thinking and toward new registers of signification. By the 1980s, architecture theory had discovered affinities with other branches of theory and developed concerns with textual strategies, constructions of subjectivity and gender, power and property, geopolitics, and other themes that were already part of the general poststructuralist repertoire but whose spatial dimension was now foregrounded. This entailed that the emphasis on the production of architectural objects (which aimed to prescribe normative standards for design and layout methods and motives for implementation) should give way to an emphasis on the production of architecture as a subject of knowledge. Theory took on the task of revealing the unintended ideological presumptions that architectural procedures and techniques alternately enabled or tried to remove from the possibility of thinking, which is to say

that theory understood architecture as one of culture's primary representational systems.

The concern with the specific internal workings of architecture—which tend to be mainly synchronic, synthetic, and projective—was not abandoned so much as folded into various discourses of context and exteriority, recalibrated according to what was sayable or thinkable in the idiolects of Marxism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and other imported systems. But these systems were not merely yoked together with architecture. Rather, something of a shift of level, as much as perspective, took place, in which architecture's specific forms, operations, and practices could now more clearly be seen as producing concepts whose ultimate horizon of effect lay outside architecture "proper," in a more general sociocultural field. This new activity of theory demanded not new ideas for buildings but the invention of altogether new techniques for rethinking issues of representation, foundation, subjectivity, structure and ornament, materiality, media, and more. What used to be called philosophy, then, began to think its problems *through architecture* rather than the other way around. And this inevitably attracted some of the most important thinkers of our time (including Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Fredric Jameson) to ponder architectural problems.

There has rarely been a sustained conversation between a philosopher and an architect of the scope and focus that we have here. Then again, a certain horizontality of thought, along with the desire to interpret the totality, seems demanded by our current situation. For all the apparently wild multiplicity of our present system of objects, there is also the constant magnetic pull of the single global market and a corporate-controlled retotalization of all the dispersed vocations and functions of social life into a single space-time of consumption and communication. Our different day-to-day activities are no longer tied to determinate needs or to specific exchanges between people and objects, but rather to a total universe of signs and simulacra floating in economic and cultural-informational fluids. Even the conscious ideologies of rebellion and negative critique seem to

be not so much co-opted by the system as a strategic part of the system's internal workings. At certain moments, in certain singular objects, architecture itself produces the perception of this conflictedly overdetermined situation; architecture becomes a kind of precipitate of the vapor that we used to call the social. The twinness of the World Trade Center, for example—a building that was a replica of itself—was already, in the 1960s when the towers were built, an anticipatory sign of the computerized, genetically networked, cloning society that was emerging. In the next decade, the Centre Pompidou, even more deeply conflicted, signals the catastrophic finishing off of mass culture by the masses themselves: a new breed of cultural consumer who is also, along with the paintings and the cash, both the raw material and the product of the new museum. And then the architecture of our own time (the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, perhaps, one of infinite possible clones or chimeras spun out of a software package) seems to become altogether virtual, for an audience that is everyone and everywhere—not so much an architectural readymade (in the sense of Duchamp) as an architecture already made, a transparent cutout that is its own template.

In their conversation, Baudrillard and Nouvel turn over and over again possible ways of understanding this situation and its agents, mapping it through the languages of architecture, philosophy, and both together (and it is fascinating to register the slippages of perspective between the architect and the philosopher, to compare how the mind feels performing work on the problem one way and then the other, but also to become aware of the preference that both have for a description of the totality over the separate, abstract parts). But the provocations, responses, and probes are not meant to *préciser* the ways in which architecture simply replicates the base-and-superstructure apparatus of which it is a primary organ (the code words for such ideological reproduction include "screen architecture" and "clone architecture," but also the neutral and the global). Baudrillard and Nouvel search also for some autonomous force or effect produced by the object not *in* culture but

alongside it, in the penumbra of culture, a force that thickens the situation, obscures the scene, and gums up the hegemonic workings of visibility and transparency. This attribute of the object is alternately called its "secret," its "radicality," its "literality," or indeed its singularity. But clearly this is an apprehension of the singular object quite the reverse of any that would fixate on aesthetic properties to the exclusion of larger, "extrinsic" factors. Rather, the singular object is the way of access, through the coils of contradiction, to be sure, but nevertheless opening onto the determining conditions of its own cultural surround.

Take Nouvel's own work, which has famously found its identity in a logic of the surface. On the one hand, from the earliest stone facades to the steel and glass curtain wall, architecture has always played a game of contradiction with mass and gravity and their dematerialization into surface. On the other hand, from our present perspective, the logic of the surface is a perceptual logic we must now understand as having been given to us by consumer-communication culture and its slick advertising two-dimensionality. "Screen architecture"? "Clone architecture"? Or singular object. It is the particular handling of the surface that must make a difference. As Nouvel has commented on his Cartier Foundation: "If I look at the facade, since it's bigger than the building, I can't tell if I'm looking at the reflection of the sky or at the sky through the glass. . . . If I look at a tree through the three glass panes, I can never determine if I'm looking at the tree through the glass, in front of it, behind it, or the reflection of the tree. And when I plant two trees in parallel, even accidentally, to the glass plane, I can't tell if there's a second tree or if it's a real tree."

For Baudrillard, this form of illusion is not gratuitous; in his essay "Truth or Radicality in Architecture," he referred to it as a "dramaturgy of illusion and seduction." Such destabilizations of perception thwart the dictatorship of the smoothly visible and install an alternative perception, a "secret image," an almost bodily recalcitrance (Barthes's punctum is mentioned as a model), which will make itself felt as a kind of resistance, lag, or refraction beneath the transparency. An object both of

a culture and the culture's biggest threat, then: pained by the loss, anticipating the gain, a representation of the moment and a momentary refusal.

The singular object is deeply conflicted, and the conversation here takes on its subject's form. We can't go on; we must go on. The architect stretching to imagine what it would take to actually make a singular object, the philosopher insisting that no intention, no amount of individual effort, can guarantee singularity's arrival ("let's not think too much"). Both against premature clarification: I know it's here, but I can't see it; "the important thing is to have looked." Rarely can so many conflicting things be said about a singular subject. Rarely has such conflict been so productive.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Maison des Écrivains and the University of Paris VI–La Villette School of Architecture for taking the initiative to sponsor a conference between architects and philosophers. The project, titled *Urban Passages*, involved a series of six encounters between writers and architects in 1997 and 1998, which made headlines both inside and outside the school. The extended dialogue between Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel forms the basis of the present text. The five other pairs of participants were Paul Chemetov and Didier Daeninckx, Henri Gaudin and Jean-Pierre Vernant, Philippe Sollers and Christian de Portzamparc, Antoine Grumbach and Antoine Bailly, and Henri Ciriani and Olivier Rolin. Hélène Bleskine developed the idea for *Urban Passages* and organized the dialogues. We are grateful for the opportunity to hold discussions of such quality, since it is through speech that we communicate to others the singularity of an encounter.

When it came time to publish the book, the authors reworked their dialogue, focusing on a recurrent theme of the discussions: singularity. This theme helped drive the discussions toward their resolution or, we should say, toward their radical and necessary incompletion.

I

First Interview

Radicality

Jean Baudrillard: We can't begin with nothing because, logically, nothingness is the culmination of something. When I think of radicality, I think of it more in terms of writing and theory than of architecture. I am more interested in the radicality of space.... But it's possible that true radicality is the radicality of nothingness. Is there a radical space that is also a void? The question interests me because now, at last, I have an opportunity to gain insight into how we can fill a space, how we can organize it by focusing on something other than its radical extension—vertically or horizontally, that is—within a dimension where anything is possible. Yet we still need to produce something real.... The question I want to ask Jean Nouvel, since we have to start somewhere, is very simple: "Is there such a thing as architectural truth?"

Jean Nouvel: What do you mean by "truth"?

J.B. Architectural truth isn't a truth or a reality in the sense that architecture might exhaust itself in its references, its finalities, its destination, its modes, its procedures. Doesn't architecture transcend all of that, effectively exhausting itself in something else, its true finality, or something that would enable it to go beyond its true finality. . . . Does architecture exist beyond this limit of the real?

Singular Objects in Architecture

J.B. I've never been interested in architecture. I have no specific feelings about it one way or the other. I'm interested in space, yes, and in anything in so-called "constructed" objects that enables me to experience the instability of space. I'm most interested in buildings like Beaubourg, the World Trade Center, Biosphere 2—singular objects, but objects that aren't exactly architectural wonders as far as I'm concerned. It's not the architectural sense of these buildings that captivates me but the world they translate. If I examine the truth of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, for example, I see that, in that location, architecture expresses, signifies, translates a kind of full, constructed form, the context of a society already experiencing hyperrealism. Those two towers resemble two perforated bands. Today we'd probably say they're clones of each other, that they've already been cloned. Did they anticipate our present? Does that mean that architecture is not part of reality but part of the fiction of a society, an anticipatory illusion? Or does architecture simply translate what is already there? That's why I asked, "Is there such a thing as architectural truth?" in the sense that there would be a suprasensible destination for architecture and for space.

J.N. Before answering your question, I would just like to comment that this dialogue provides a unique opportunity to discuss architecture in other than the customary terms. You know that I consider you to be the one intellectual who is actually doing his job. You respond to the many disturbing questions, the real questions, with questions and answers that no

one wants to hear. I don't know if I'll be able to provoke any responses in a field that you claim to be unfamiliar with, that doesn't really interest you, but this evening I'm going to try. Recently I had a look at some of your books, and I was pleased to find that you never speak about architecture except in an interview that took place twelve years ago between us. It's in that interview that I discovered a number of your ideas about architecture, aside from your writing on New York or Beaubourg. I took notes on some of your thoughts about our architectural monstrosities and some of your more radical points of view, which could supply us with a number of questions.

If we attempt to talk about architecture as a limit—and that's what really interests me—we do so by always positioning ourselves on the fringe of knowledge and ignorance. That's the true adventure of architecture. And that adventure is situated in a real world, a world that implies a consensus. You said, somewhere, that a consensus must exist in order for seduction to occur. Now, the field of architecture is a field that, by the very nature of things, revolves around a world of seduction. The architect is in a unique situation. He's not an artist in the traditional sense. He's not someone who meditates in front of a blank page. He doesn't work on a canvas. I often compare the architect to the film director, because we have roughly the same limitations. We're in a situation where we have to produce an object within a given period of time, with a given budget, for a specific group of individuals. And we work as a team. We're in a situation where we can be censored, directly or indirectly, for reasons of safety or money, or even because of deliberate censorship. It's a field where there are professional censors. We could even call an architect who designs buildings in France a "French building censor." It's exactly the same thing. We are situated in an environment that is bound, limited. Within that environment, where can we find an unrestricted space and the means to overcome those limitations?

In my case, I've looked for it in the articulation of various things, especially the formulation of a certain way of thinking. So should I use the word "concept" or not? I used it very early

on, realizing that the word is philosophically appropriate. Then we may want to introduce the terms "percept" and "affect," in reference to Deleuze, but that's not the real problem. The problem lies in our ability to articulate a project around a preliminary concept or idea, using a very specific strategy that can synergize—or sometimes even juxtapose—perceptions that will interact with one another and define a place we are unfamiliar with. We are still dealing with invention, the unknown, risk. This unfamiliar place, if we succeed in figuring out what's going on, could be the locus of a secret. And it might, assuming that's the case, then convey certain things, things we cannot control, things that are fatal, voluntarily uncontrolled. We need to find a compromise between what we control and what we provoke. All the buildings I've tried to build until now are based on the articulation of these three things. They also refer to a concept that I know interests you, the concept of illusion.

Illusion, Virtuality, Reality

J.N. I'm no magician, but I try to create a space that isn't legible, a space that works as the mental extension of sight. This seductive space, this virtual space of illusion, is based on very precise strategies, strategies that are often diversionary. I frequently use what I find around me, including your own work and that of a few others. I also make use of cinema. So when I say that I play with depth of field, it's because I'm trying to foreground a series of filters that could lead anywhere—a kind of metanarrative—but from that point on, the intellect goes into action. This is not entirely my invention. Look at the Japanese garden. There is always a vanishing point, the point at which we don't know whether the garden stops or continues. I'm trying to provoke that sort of response.

If we look at the phenomenon of perspective—I'm thinking of the project for superimposing a grid on the horizon, which I had prepared for La Tête Défense—I was attempting to step outside Alberti's logic. In other words, I was trying to organize all the elements in such a way that they could be read in series and, if need be, to play with scale using the series' rhythm, so

the viewer would become conscious of the space. What happens if I escape those limits? What if I say that the building isn't between the horizon and the observer but is part of that horizon? Assuming this, what happens if it loses its materiality?

Dematerialization is something that would interest you; the "endless skyscraper" is one example. [Nouvel's project for a *Tour sans fin,* or "endless skyscraper," was designed for La Défense, just outside central Paris. Although his design won an international competition, the building was never constructed.] Again, this isn't something I invented. I think Deleuze, in *Proust and Signs,* spoke about it from a different point of view. This diversion, which reroutes our perception of phenomena from the material to the immaterial, is a concept that architecture should appropriate for itself. Using these kinds of concepts, we can create more than what we see. And this "more than what we see" is manifest in and through physical context. With respect to what architecture has borrowed from cinema, the concept of sequence is very important, as Paul Virilio reminds us. In other words, concepts such as displacement, speed, memory seen in terms of an imposed trajectory, or a known trajectory, enable us to compose an architectural space based not only on what we see but on what we have memorized as a succession of sequences that are perceived to follow one another. From this point on, there are contrasts between what is created and what was originally present in our perception of space.

In the Versailles Theater, you enter through a stone corridor, which is absolutely neutral, plain, devoid of decoration, and which opens suddenly into something absolutely stunning in terms of its decoration, its preciosity. The period in which this theater was designed, imagined, realized provides us with a key to the phenomenon I have been describing. We're no longer in the same place today, however. We need to put those ideas aside and make use of others—ideas like contrast, chaining, and extension—to serve as fundamental concepts of the architectural project. At the same time, when I play with the concept of a virtual space, in the magician's sense, it's because space and architecture are things we become conscious of through our

eyes. So we can play with anything the eye can integrate through sight, and we can fool the eye. Classical culture has often made use of this kind of sleight of hand. In a building like the Cartier Foundation, where I intentionally blend the real image and the virtual image, it signifies that within a given plane, I no longer know if I'm looking at the virtual image or the real image. If I look at the facade, since it's bigger than the building, I can't tell if I'm looking at the reflection of the sky or the sky through the glass. . . . If I look at a tree through the three glass planes, I can never determine if I'm looking at the tree through the glass, in front of it, behind it, or the reflection of the tree. And when I plant two trees in parallel, even accidentally, to the glass plane, I can't tell if there's a second tree or if it's a real tree. These are gimmicks, things we can put into our bag of tricks, our architectural bag of tricks, and which we're never supposed to talk about, but which, from time to time, must be talked about. These are the means by which architecture creates a virtual space or a mental space; it's a way of tricking the senses. But it's primarily a way of preserving a destabilized area.

A Destabilized Area?

J.N. When you talk to a developer, the way a director talks to a producer, he asks a ton of questions about the price per square meter, the lot, can it be built on, will it shock the local bourgeoisie, a whole series of questions of this type. And then there are those things that remain unsaid. There is always something unsaid; that's part of the game. And what remains unsaid is, ethically, something additional, something that doesn't run counter to what is being sold or exchanged, doesn't interfere with our notions of economics, but signifies something vital. That's where the game is played. Because if an architectural object is only the translation of some functionality, if it's only the result of an economic situation, it can't have meaning. What's more, there's a passage in one of your texts on New York that I like very much, where you say that the city embodies a form of architecture that is violent, brutal, immediate, which is the true form of architecture, that you have no need for eco-architecture or gen-

teel architecture because that would impede life's energy. What I'm saying doesn't necessarily contradict that. But since we're not always in New York, we need to set aside places, areas that can be destabilized.

J.B. I agree, except perhaps about terms like "consensus." . . . When you say that seduction is consensual, I'm skeptical.

J.N. You mean only with reference to architecture?

J.B. Precisely. It's a way of confronting it through the visible and the invisible. I don't talk much about architecture, but in all my books, the question lies just beneath the surface. . . . I fully agree with this idea of invisibility. What I like very much in your work is that we don't see it, things remain invisible, they know how to make themselves invisible. When you stand in front of the buildings, you see them, but they're invisible to the extent that they effectively counteract that hegemonic visibility, the visibility that dominates us, the visibility of the system, where everything must be immediately visible and immediately interpretable. You conceive space in such a way that architecture simultaneously creates both place and nonplace, is also a nonplace in this sense, and thus creates a kind of apparition. And it's a seductive space. So I take back what I said earlier: Seduction isn't consensual. It's dual. It must confront an object with the order of the real, the visible order that surrounds it. If this duality doesn't exist—if there's no interactivity, no context—seduction doesn't take place. A successful object, in the sense that it exists outside its own reality, is an object that creates a dualistic relation, a relation that can emerge through diversion, contradiction, destabilization, but which effectively brings the so-called reality of a world and its radical illusion face-to-face.

Concept, Irresolution, Vertigo

J.B. Let's talk about radicality. Let's talk about the kind of radical exoticism of things that Ségalen discusses, the estrangement from a sense of identity that results in the creation of a form

of vertigo through which all sorts of things can occur: affects, concepts, prospects, whatever, but always something insoluble, something unresolved. In this sense, yes, architectural objects, or at least yours or others that are even more undomesticated, are part of an architecture without a referent. This reflects their quality of being "unidentified," and ultimately unidentifiable, objects. This is one area where we can combine—and not merely by deliberate analogy—writing, fiction, architecture, and a number of other things as well, obviously, whether this involves the analysis of a society, an event, or an urban context. I agree that we can't choose the event, we can only choose the concept, but we retain the right to make this choice. The choice of a concept is something that should conflict with the context, with all the significations (positive, functional, etc.) a building can assume, or a theory, or anything else.

Deleuze defined the concept as something antagonistic. However, with respect to the event, as it is given, as it is seen, as it is deciphered, overdetermined by the media or other voices, by information, the concept is that which creates the nonevent. It creates an event to the extent that it juxtaposes the so-called "real" event with a theoretical or fictional nonevent of some sort. I can see how this can happen with writing, but I have a much harder time with architecture. In your work, I feel it in the effect produced by this illusion you spoke of earlier; not in the sense of an illusion or a trompe l'oeil—well, ultimately, yes, of course, but not an illusion in the sense of a simulation—of something that takes place beyond the reflection of things or beyond the screen. Today we are surrounded by screens. In fact, it's rare to succeed in creating a surface or place that doesn't serve as a screen and can exert all the prestige of transparency without the dictatorship.

I'd like to make a distinction here regarding our terminology. Illusion is not the same as the virtual, which, in my opinion, is complicit with hyperreality, that is, the visibility of an imposed transparency, the space of the screen, mental space, and so on. Illusion serves as a sign for anything else. It seems to me that everything you do, and do well, is another architecture

seen through a screen. Precisely because to create something like an inverse universe, you must completely destroy that sense of fullness, that sense of ripe visibility, that oversignification we impose on things.

And here I'd like to know, as part of this question of context, what happens to social and political data, to everything that can constrain things, when architecture is tempted to become the expression, or even the sociological or political transformer, of a social reality, which is an illusion—in the negative sense of the term. In one sense, even if architecture wants to respond to a political program or fulfill social needs, it will never succeed because it is confronted, fortunately, by something that is also a black hole. And this black hole simply means that the "masses" are still there and they are not at all recipients, or conscious, or reflected, or anything; it's an extremely perverse operator with respect to everything that is constructed. So even if architecture wants what it wants and tries to signify what it wants to express, it will be deflected. You, however, strive for this deflection and destabilization, and you're right. And as we discussed, it's going to happen anyway. This is true of politics; it's true of other categories as well. Something is present, but that something is nothing; there's nothing on the other side. Because where we see plenitude, masses, populations, statistics, and so on, there's always deflection. It's this deflection of the operator, for example, that in a work of architecture or art transforms the way we use it, but also, ultimately, transforms the meaning that was originally given to the work. And whether this resides in the work of art or in something else, at any given moment the singular object is rendered enigmatic, unintelligible even to the one who created it, which obsesses and delights us.

Fortunately, this is also the reason why we can continue to live in a universe that is as full, as determined, as functional as this. Our world would be unlivable without this power of innate deflection, and this has nothing to do with sociology. On the contrary, sociology records and tallies up official behaviors before it transforms them into statistics. I'm relativizing the architectural object somewhat, even though I'm fully aware that when we

create something, we have to want it in some sense by saying to ourselves that even if there is no reality principle or truth principle for those for whom the object is intended, there will be a fatal deflection, there will be seduction. And we have to make sure that the things that assume they are identical to themselves or people who think they are identifying with their own character, their own genius, will be deflected, destabilized, seduced. In my opinion, seduction always takes place in this sense, in its most general form. However, I'm not sure that in the virtualized world of new technologies, information, and the media, this dualistic, indecipherable relationship of seduction will take place as it did before. It's possible that the secret you spoke about would be completely annihilated by another type of universe. It's also possible that in this universe of the virtual, which we talk about today, architecture wouldn't exist at all, that this symbolic form, which plays with weight, the gravity of things and their absence, their total transparence, would be abolished. No, I'm no longer sure this could occur in the virtual universe. We are completely screened in; the problem of architecture is expressed differently. So maybe there's a kind of completely superficial architecture that is confused with this universe. This would be an architecture of banality, of virtuality. It can be original as well, but it wouldn't be part of the same concept.

Creation and Forgetfulness

J.N. One of the big problems with architecture is that it must both exist and be quickly forgotten; that is, lived spaces are not designed to be experienced continuously. The architect's problem is that he is always in the process of analyzing the places he discovers, observing them, which isn't a normal position. What I personally like about American cities—even if I wouldn't cite them as models—is that you can go through them without thinking about the architecture. You don't think about the aesthetic side, with its history, and so on. You can move within them as if you were in a desert, as if you were in a bunch of other things, without thinking about this whole business of art, aesthetics, the history of art, the history of architecture. Ameri-

can cities enable us to return to a kind of primal scene of space. Naturally, in spite of everything, this architecture is also structured by various realities, but in terms of their actual presence, those cities, as pure event, pure object, avoid the pretense of self-conscious architecture.

J.B. The same is true in art, in painting. In art the strongest works are those that abandon this whole business of art and art history and aesthetics. In writing, it's the same thing. Within that overaestheticized dimension, with its pretense of meaning, reality, truth, I like it most when it is most invisible. I think that good architecture can do this as well; it's not so much a grieving process as a process of disappearance, of controlling disappearance as much as appearance.

Values of Functionalism

J.N. We need to recognize that we're surrounded by a great deal of accidental architecture. And an entire series of modern, or modernist, attitudes—in the historical sense—have been founded on this particular reality. There are countless numbers of sites whose aesthetic lacks any sense of intention. We find this same phenomenon outside of architecture; it's a value of functionalism. Today, when we look at a race car, we don't primarily think about its beauty. Nineteenth-century architecture is what it is, and three-quarters of the time it's not marked by any kind of aesthetic intentionality. The same applies to industrial zones at the end of the twentieth century, which are, for all intents and purposes, radical architectural forms, without concessions, abrupt, in which we can definitely locate a certain charm.

But I want to get back to your ideas about architecture, since you've definitely expressed an opinion about it. For example, you write that "in architecture the situation must be looked at backwards, we need to identify a rule." You also wrote, "In architecture the accompanying idea is a strategic minimum." And "New York is the epicenter of the end of the world. . . . As intellectuals we must work to save that end-of-the-world utopia." In any case, you're part of that effort.

New York or Utopia

J.B. When I refer to New York as the epicenter of the end of the world, I'm referring to an apocalypse. At the same time, it's a way of looking at it as a realized utopia. This is the paradox of reality. We can dream about apocalypse, but it's a perspective, something unrealizable, whose power lies in the fact that it isn't realized. New York provides the kind of stupefaction characterized by a world that is already accomplished, an absolutely apocalyptic world, but one that is replete in its verticality—and in this sense, ultimately, it engenders a form of deception because it is embodied, because it's already there, and we can no longer destroy it. It's indestructible. The form is played out, it's outlived its own usefulness, it's been realized even beyond its own limits. There's even a kind of liberation, a destructuring of space that no longer serves as a limit to verticality or, as in other places, horizontality. But does architecture still exist when space has become infinitely indeterminate in every dimension?

Here, in France, we've got something different. We have a monstrous object, something insuperable, something we are unable to repeat: Beaubourg. There's nothing better than New York. Other things will happen, and we'll make the transition to a different universe, one that's much more virtual; but within its order, we'll never do better than that city, that architecture, which is, at the same time, apocalyptic. Personally, I like this completely ambiguous figure of the city, which is simultaneously catastrophic and sublime, because it has assumed an almost hieratic force.

J.N. And when you write, "As intellectuals we must work to save that end-of-the-world utopia"?

J.B. Do we really need to save ideas? At least we should save the possibility of a form. Of the idea as form. It's true that when faced with something that's overrealized, a terminus, we're reduced to ecstasy and pure contemplation. . . . It's important that we rediscover the concept in the idea, in the mental space of

the idea. We've got to get back inside or go around, to the other side. Once again, perfection serves as a screen, a different type of screen. Genius would consist in destabilizing this too-perfect image.

J.N. You also said something rather astonishing about architecture: "Architecture is a mixture of nostalgia and extreme anticipation." Do you recall? Those ideas are still vital for me, but it's been fifteen years. . . . Are they still vital for you?

Architecture: Between Nostalgia and Anticipation

J.B. We're looking for the lost object, whether we're referring to meaning or language. We use language, but it's always, at the same time, a form of nostalgia, a lost object. Language in use is basically a form of anticipation, since we're already in something else. . . . We have to be in these two orders of reality: we have to confront what we've lost and anticipate what's ahead of us; that's our brand of fatality. In this sense we can never clarify things, we can never say, "OK, that's behind us" or "OK, that's ahead of us." But it's hard to understand because the idea of modernity is for all that the idea of a continuous dimension, where it's clear that the past and the future coexist. . . . We ourselves may no longer be in that world—if we ever were!—for it may be no more than a kind of apparition. This seems to be true for any kind of form. Form is always already lost, then always already seen as something beyond itself. It's the essence of radicality. . . . It involves being radical in loss, and radical in anticipation—any object can be grasped in this way. My comments need to be contrasted with the idea that something could be "real" and that we could consider it as having a meaning, a context, a subject, an object. We know that things are no longer like that, and even the things we take to be the simplest always have an enigmatic side, which is what makes them radical.

J.N. I don't want to torture you any longer, but I'd like to read three other quotes: "Architecture consists in working against a background of spatial deconstruction." And "All things are

curves." That's a very important sentence for me. And finally "Provocation would be much too serious a form of seduction." You said that in reference to architecture, by the way.

(Always) Seduction, Provocation, Secrets

J.B. Fortunately I haven't reread all those books. "All things are curves." That's the easiest to start with because there are no end points or the end points connect in a curved mirror. All things, in this sense, fulfill their own cycle.

Provocation, seduction . . . Programmed seduction doesn't exist, so it doesn't mean much. Seduction should, nevertheless, contain some sense of that antagonism, that countercurrent; it should both have the sense and implement it. . . . Here too any concerted effort at implementation is obviously contradictory. Seduction can't be programmed, and disappearance, whether of constructed things or generalized ambivalence, can't be officialized. It has to remain secret. The order of secrecy, which is the order of seduction, obviously exists only through provocation; it's almost exactly the opposite. Provocation is an attempt to make something visible through contradiction, through scandal, defiance; to make something visible that should perhaps guard its secret. The problem is to achieve this law or this rule. The rule is really the secret, and the secret obviously becomes increasingly difficult in a world like our own, where everything is given to us totally promiscuously, so that there are no gaps, no voids, no nothingness; nothingness no longer exists, and nothingness is where secrecy happens, the place where things lose their meaning, their identity—not only would they assume all possible meanings here, but they would remain truly unintelligible in some sense.

I think that in every building, every street, there is something that creates an event, and whatever creates an event is unintelligible. This can also occur in situations or in individual behavior; it's something you don't realize, something you can't program. You have more experience than I do with urban projects, which arrange spatial freedom, the space of freedom; all those programs are obviously absolutely contradictory. So, at bottom,

the secret exists wherever people hide it. It's also possible in dualistic, ambivalent relations, for at that moment something becomes unintelligible once again, like some precious material.

J.N. We can continue by talking about the aesthetics of disappearance. I'd like to quote you once again, but this time not with respect to architecture, and I want to provoke you a little as well. You write, "If being a nihilist is being obsessed by the mode of disappearance rather than the mode of production, then I'm a nihilist." You also write, "I am for everything that is opposed to culture." This brings us back in a way to certain contemporary issues.... I can say the same thing about architecture: I'm for everything that is opposed to architecture. Twenty years ago I began a book that way: "The future of architecture is not architectural." The key is to agree on what architecture is ... and where it's going. The key is to agree on what culture is and where it's going.

The Metamorphosis of Architecture

J.N. Architecture is pretty easy. Let me explain. One of the things I consider essential is the idea that there has been a complete change in architecture during this century, in the sense that architecture had as its initial goal the construction of the artificial world in which we live. This happened rather simply—there was an independent body of knowledge, something clear, there were recipes. Vitruvius produced a book of recipes; he tells you exactly how to construct a building, the number of columns, the proportions, and so on. Academicism consisted in improving the use of these ingredients slightly. There were instructions for building cities as well; architects made use of different typologies, different recipes for urban art, et cetera. Then, suddenly, there was a shift in the demographics. You're quite familiar with this. Everyone moved to the cities, the cities exploded, we tried to maintain a certain number of rules, which were generally based on planning. These too exploded one after the other. We have experienced a kind of urban big bang and find that we are unable to use the existing recipes. Everything associated with those

existing recipes, in other words, architecture with a capital "A," has become absolutely ridiculous. As soon as you integrate a structural model into this system, it becomes absurd.

So in this sense, I'm against everything that is part of the same order as Architecture. This means that from this point on, we must make use of another strategy, where we're required to be slightly more intelligent—to the extent that we can be—required to constantly diagnose the situation, required to face the fact that architecture is no longer the invention of a world but that it exists simply with respect to a geological layer applied to all the cities throughout the planet. . . . Architecture can no longer have as its goal the transformation, the modification, of this accumulated material. For some, it's intolerable; they feel like they've been fired. From the moment we initiate this discourse, however, it's as if we were against a form of ancestral culture; we throw out the baby with the bathwater. You can't generate any positive effect within this framework. Some go even further. We're faced with the generic city; that's the way it is, and there's nothing to be done about it.

I suspect that you're pretty much in agreement with this type of approach, which, by the way, I happen to understand. Yet I've still maintained a certain residue of optimism. . . . I think that through small movements we can achieve an ethics whereby the situation becomes slightly more positive every time we intervene. We can try to locate a kind of enjoyment of place by including things that weren't considered previously, which are frequently accidental, and inventing strategies of improvement, the poetics of situations; we can evaluate completely random elements and declare that we're dealing with a geography: "It's beautiful. I'm going to reveal it to you. . . ." This is an aesthetics of revelation, a way of taking a piece of the world and saying, "I'm appropriating this, and I'm giving it back to you for your appreciation in a different way." In this century, architecture finds itself faced with incommensurable, metaphysical dimensions. A priori it can't do anything about that. It's in the same situation as philosophy or science: it's now an adult. We need to develop other strategies.

At this point, we need to take into account the fatal dimensions of place, the deflection of what we're about to do, evaluate a number of possibles in terms of scenarios, and tell ourselves that what we're about to do is going to be part of a becoming that is hidden to us. . . . This is the opposite of the architecture that's still being taught in nine out of ten schools. It may look like an attitude against architecture, but that's not the case . . . just as when you wrote, rather unconditionally, "I'm for everything that is opposed to culture."

The Aesthetics of Modernity

J.B. I was referring to culture in the sense of aestheticization, and I am opposed to such aestheticization because it inevitably involves a loss: the loss of the object, of this secret that works of art and creative effort might reveal and which is something more than aesthetics. The secret can't be aesthetically unveiled. It's the kind of "punctum" Barthes spoke of in reference to photography—its secret, something inexplicable and nontransmissible, something that is in no way interactive. It's something that's there and not there at the same time. Within culture this thing is completely dissipated, volatilized. Culture involves the total legibility of everything in it, and what's more, it comes into being at the very moment Duchamp transposed a very simple object, the urinal, into an art object. He transposed its banality to create an event within the aesthetic universe and deaestheticize it. He forced banality upon it—he broke into the home of aesthetics—and stopped it cold. Paradoxically he made possible the generalized aestheticization that typifies the modern era. And I wonder whether this form of acting out on Duchamp's part, in the field of painting, which wasn't a revolution but an implosion, had an equivalent in the architectural universe. Is there a kind of before and after among forms? Here too, it's still the end of a kind of modernity, which began at the moment everything that was considered energy, or the forces of modernity—whether these involved society, social wealth, industry—was oriented by the idea of progress. The idea of art history in some form, of the progress of art, hung on in art.

With abstraction we had the impression that a liberation had taken place, an orgy of modernity. That all broke apart in a kind of sudden implosion, a leveling of the aesthetic's sense of the sublime. And in the end, when this aesthetic of the secret disappeared, we had culture.

Culture

J.B. Culture is everywhere. In any case, at this point in time, it's a homologue of industry and technology. It's a mental technique, a mental technology that was embellished through architectural services, museums, et cetera. In the case of photography, I was interested in this history at one point. . . . When Barthes spoke about photography, he brought up the question of the "punctum." Through this punctum, the photograph becomes an event in our head, in our mental life, where it is something different, a singular relation, an absolute singularity. This punctum, which, according to Barthes, is a nonplace, nothing, the nothingness at the heart of the photograph, disappeared, and in its place we constructed a museum of photography. This death, which Barthes said was the heart of the photograph, the photograph itself, the symbolic power of the photograph, disappeared, it assumed the shape of a monument or a museum, and this time a concrete death materialized. This was a cultural operation, and that operation, yes, I am against it, emphatically, with no concessions, without compromise.

We are stuck in an unlimited, metastatic development of culture, which has heavily invested in architecture. But to what extent can we judge it? Today it's very difficult to identify, in a given building, what belongs to this secret, this singularity that hasn't really disappeared. I think that as a form it is indestructible but is increasingly consumed by culture. Is any voluntary, conscious resistance possible? Yes. I think that each of us can resist. But it would be difficult for such resistance to become political. I don't get the impression there could be any organized political resistance as such. It would always be an exception, and whatever you do will always be "exceptional" in that sense.

A work of art is a singularity, and all these singularities can

create holes, interstices, voids, et cetera, in the metastatic fullness of culture. But I don't see them coalescing, combining into a kind of antipower that could invest the other. No. We are definitively immersed in the order of culture, that is, until the apocalypse arrives. We can, I think, combine all this within the same concept. I think that even political economy in the form it has assumed, which is also completely skewed, and which is not at all a principle of economic reality but one of pure speculation, a political economy that culminates in a speculative void, is an aesthetic. Now, Walter Benjamin already analyzed this in the field of politics. In that sense, we are witnessing an aestheticization of behavior and structure. But aestheticization is not part of the real; on the contrary, it signifies that things are becoming values, assume value. We can no longer compare an interplay of forms. It's unintelligible and can't be assigned any ultimate meaning, because it's a game, a rule, something different. With generalized aestheticization, forms are exhausted and become value. But value, aesthetics, culture, et cetera, are infinitely negotiable, and everyone can benefit, although here we are within the domain of order and equivalence, the complete leveling of all singularity. I believe we are part of that order, from which nothing can escape. But I also still feel that singularities as such can function even though they assume what are frequently monstrous forms—for example, those "monsters" you spoke about. What interests me is architecture as monster, those objects that have been catapulted into the city, from someplace else. In a way I appreciate this monstrous character. The first was Beaubourg. We could provide a cultural description of Beaubourg, consider Beaubourg as the synthesis of this total "culturization," and, in this case, be completely opposed to it. Nonetheless the Beaubourg object is a singular event in our history, a monster. And it is a monster because it demonstrates nothing, it's a monster, and in that sense a kind of singularity.

It's obvious that such objects, whether architectural or not, escape their programmed existence, the future you have given them. . . . This metamorphosis can become a singular personal intuition or the result of an overall effect that no one intended.

Still, the object (architectural or not) in question will produce a gaping hole in this culturality.

A Heroic Architectural Act?

J.N. We might ask ourselves why there is no equivalent to Duchamp in the world of architecture. There is no equivalent because there is no auto-architecture. There is no architect who could make an immediate, scandalous gesture that was accepted. Architects have tried to confront these limits—that was the starting point of postmodernity. We could say that in his own way, Venturi tried to do it. He took the simplest building that existed, a basic building from the suburbs of Philadelphia—even the location wasn't important, it was the least significant location possible—made of brick, with standard windows, and so on, and he said: "This is the architecture we must make today." And his gesture implied an entire theory, a theory that was opposed to the heroic architectural act, although in terms of derision it was a "weak" application of the dadaist revolution (on the Richter scale, it was one or two; Duchamp is seven). But all these attempts culminated in notable failures, since we as architects are unable to attain the same distance from the object. I have no idea what would enable us to identify Duchamp's fountain if it weren't in a museographic space. It demands certain reading conditions and a certain distance, which don't exist for architecture. At most we could say that this act of complete vulgarization might occur in spite of the client's intentions. The only problem is that if you do that and you repeat it, it becomes insignificant. No further reality, no further reading of the act is possible; you've become part of the total disappearance of the architectural act.

J.B. Duchamp's act also becomes insignificant, wants to be insignificant, wants insignificance, and becomes insignificant in spite of itself through repetition, as well as through all of Duchamp's by-products. The event itself is unique, singular, and that's the end of it. It's ephemeral. Afterward there's a whole string of them, in art as well, since from that moment on, the path was cleared

for the resurgence of earlier forms; postmodernism, if you like. The moment simply existed.

Art, Architecture, and Postmodernity

J.N. So can this debate about contemporary art—"it's junk, worthless"—be applied to architecture? Can it be extrapolated?

J.B. I'd like to ask you the same thing.

J.N. I'd say that the search for limits and the pleasure of destruction are part of both art and architecture. You were talking about the idea of destruction as something that can be positive. This search for a limit, this search for nothingness, almost nothingness, takes place within the search for something positive; that is, we're looking for the essence of something. This search for an essence reaches limits that are near the limits of perception and the evacuation of the visible. We no longer experience pleasure through the eye but through the mind. A white square on a white background is a type of limit. James Turrel is a type of limit. Does that mean it's worthless? In the case of James Turrel, you enter a space, and it's monochromatic. Is it one step further than Klein? Is that why you're fascinated? You know there's nothing there, you feel there's nothing there, you can even pass your hand through it, and you're fascinated by the object in a way because it's the essence of something. Once he's given us the keys to his game, he does the same thing with a square of blue sky. He's currently working on the crater of a volcano, where, when you lie down at the bottom of the crater, you can see the perfect circle of the cosmos. All of these ideas are based on a certain search for the limit of nothingness. So when you leave the Venice Biennale, realizing that this search for nothingness has ended in worthlessness, that's a critical judgment I can share in 80 percent of the cases. However, the history of art has always consisted of a majority of minor works.

J.B. This search for nothingness is, on the contrary, the aestheticized fact of wanting this nothingness to have an existence, a

value, and even, at some point, a surplus value, without considering the market, which soon takes control of it. It's the opposite in one sense. . . . Duchamp's gesture was to reduce things to insignificance. In a way, he's not responsible for what happened afterward. So when other artists take possession of this "nothingness" or, through this nothingness, take possession of banality, waste, the world, the real world, and they transfigure the banal reality of the world into an aesthetic object, it's their choice, and it's worthless in that sense, but it's also annoying, because I would rather associate an aura with worthlessness, with "nothingness." This nothingness is in fact something. It's what hasn't been aestheticized. It's what, one way or another, can't be reduced to any form of aestheticization. Rather, it's this highly focused strategy of nothingness and worthlessness that I am opposed to. The difference between Warhol and the others, who did the same thing—although it isn't the same thing—is based on the fact that he takes an image and reduces it to nothing. He uses the technical medium to reveal the insignificance, the lack of objectivity, the illusion of the image itself. And then other artists make use of the technique to re-create an aesthetic in other technological media, through science itself, through scientific images. They reproduce the aesthetic. They do exactly the opposite of what Warhol was able to do, they reaestheticize the technique, while Warhol, through technique, revealed technique itself as a radical illusion.

Here the term "worthlessness" is ambivalent, ambiguous. It can refer to the best or the worst. Personally, I assign great importance to worthlessness in the sense of nothingness, in the sense that, if we achieve this art of disappearance, we've achieved art, whereas all the strategy used to manage most of the stuff we're shown—where there's usually nothing to see in any event—serves precisely to convert that worthlessness into spectacle, into aesthetic, into market value, into a form of complete unconsciousness, the collective syndrome of aestheticization known as culture. We can't say it's all the same, but the exceptions can only be moments. For me, Duchamp is one of them; Warhol is another. But there are other singularities, Francis

Bacon, perhaps, maybe others. But it's not a question of names of artists. . . . It can never be anything but a onetime event that affects us in this world saturated with values and aesthetics. From that moment on, there is no more history of art. We see that art—and this is one aspect of its worthlessness—with its retrograde history, exhausts itself in its own history trying to resuscitate all those forms, the way politics does in other areas. It's a form of regression, an interminable phase of repetition during which we can always bring back any older work of art, or style, or technique as a fashion or aesthetic—a process of endless recycling.

J.N. Couldn't we say that the twentieth century has seen a surfeit of art? Because during the century, any artist who managed to define a formal field has become a great artist? All it takes is a bit of ash on a leaf. All it takes is the ability to experience something with respect to the ash, to contextualize it, distance it, and the concept appears. . . . The artist who has succeeded in finding his field has become identifiable, gets noticed, has a market value, et cetera. This has been a century of gigantic exploration: exploration of the real, exploration of sensations, of everything around us, a search for sensation. Some succeeded; others didn't. All of this was then mixed up with meaning and with conceptual art. When Laurence Wiener hangs a sentence in space without touching it, whatever happens, happens as part of the relation between the sentence and the space. It's not a big deal, but it's a field in and of itself. We've lived through this gigantic exploration. Everyone can find their value system, has experienced events, facts, modes, and interactions that sometimes resulted in arte povera, or pop art, or conceptual art, et cetera. But all that exploration kept getting extended further, and everyone is looking for whatever they can grab. Does this mean that all this exploration is part of that "worthlessness"?

J.B. Well, there may be a history of art that's not progressive but which deepens the analytic side of art, and all abstraction is still a reduction of the visible world, of the object, into its

microelements. It's a way of returning to a primal geometry. It's exactly the same thing as the search for analytic truth in the social sciences. It's the same kind of process. We've gone from the evidence of appearances to the fundamental fractal nature of things. This is the history of abstraction, and this search leads directly into another dimension, which is no longer that of appearance or a strategy of appearances, but of a need centered on in-depth analytic knowledge of the object and the world, which, in a sense, puts an end to sense relations. It's the extermination of the sensible, but it still constitutes a search, I agree.

Once we've arrived at this point, however, it's over. . . . We have an artificial reconstruction of evidence, of perception, but the crucial act, the determining factor, is abstraction. Afterward we're no longer really in a world of forms; we're in a microworld. Art even anticipated scientific discovery; it went deeper and deeper into the fractal world, into geometry. I don't mean that all sensibility, all perception, disappeared. It's always possible for anyone, any object, to have a singular relation but not an aesthetic one, to have a primitive relation, something to do with this punctum, anyone can experience that. . . . So-called aesthetic mediation is over with. The artist is someone who exploits the domain of singularity so that he can appropriate it and use it interactively both through the market structure and through a number of other things as well. But the dualistic relation of any individual with any object, even the most worthless, is singular, it retains its power, and it can be rediscovered. I don't feel that this has been lost; that's not the problem with the sensible, the fatal. By this I mean that the fatal relation with things, with appearances, can be rediscovered, but if it is, today that discovery will be in conflict with aesthetics, with art. In the same sense, you can rediscover a dualistic relation in society, in other domains, in alterity. But this doesn't take place through politics, or economics; those things are behind us, they have their history, and we are in another world where those mediating structures have either monopolized the entire market, and at that point should be destroyed, or have already destroyed

themselves. By the way, that's what I meant when I said that "art is worthless."

Visual Disappointment, Intellectual Disappointment

J.N. Aren't you as disappointed visually as you are intellectually? In your writing, you tell your readers that you would prefer to be deaf than blind, and just how important sight is for you. But paradoxically one has the impression that a certain amount of vacuity or disappearance might interest you. Isn't it with respect to the voyeur, or observer, in you that you believe the art object is vacuous? Doesn't [Robert] Ryman, doesn't [Ad] Reinhardt, disappoint your senses before disappointing you intellectually?

J.B. I agree with you completely. Seen from another viewpoint, it's true that I don't believe there is any relation whatsoever between an image and a text, between writing and the visual. If there is an affinity, it would occur through a more secretive network than anything we perceive, by fortuitous correspondences, as has always been the case. Image and text are two singular registers; we need to maintain their singularity. The same thing can be represented in either way; the interplay of forms can be represented in either of them, but they can't ever be correlated. For me, something of the fantastic remains in the image. Any image retains something of the savage and fantastic. What I would like is that it retain that character. But today images have been aestheticized, they have become increasingly virtualized, they are no longer images. Television is the opposite of the image: there are no images on television. Yes, I'm visually disappointed, and painting has exactly the same effect on me. To me they're digitally synthesized images, technically and mentally, but they're no longer images. Once again the possibility exists to re-create the primal scene, the original savagery of the image, but starting from nothing, any intuition, in the literal sense of the term, can re-create the image. For example, this punctum, this secret associated with the image, I sometimes find it in photography. So we're not desperate. But the disappointment in the contextual

universe that surrounds us, with images bombarding us from every side, yes, I resent that.

J.N. I have the impression that the sense of something's being "worthless, worthless, worthless" in architecture also exists! It is just as overwhelming but, paradoxically, perhaps for the opposite reason. That is to say, what characterizes this worthless architecture today, three-quarters of the time, is the "picturesque." Or it's the extension of a private model of meaning and sensibility. One of the current dramas in architecture is modeling, cloning. Often we don't know what to do; the context is hopeless. Not only the geographic, urban context, but the human context as well, the context of the commission, the financial context, everything is hopeless. And trained architects are forced to confront that reality. That reminds me of something Judd was saying, "I looked in the El Paso phone book. There are twenty-five hundred architects, and I've never seen any architecture in El Paso!" A great number of architects borrow a model that comes from a magazine, or a contractor or client. And at that moment, we have to identify a number of existing parameters that are reassuring, because if we do architecture, we want it to be seen, and at the same time we don't want to make waves. However, the majority of architectures produced today aren't based on those simple, clean, savage, radical rules that you talk about in your book on New York. Most of the time, they're a collage of objects, the one that presents the fewest problems either for the one who's designing it, or for the one who's receiving it, or for the builder. And for those three reasons, it's worthless, worthless, worthless. We're looking for something else.

Maybe we're looking for that aesthetic of disappearance that Paul Virilio discusses. But not necessarily in the sense Virilio intends, in that virtual, informatic space where information circulates rather than humans, not in a virtual space because those objects are completely lacking in meaning. That's the primary characteristic of everything being built today, and the paradox is that the most poetic things are, on the social level, the most

dramatic. That is, the most authentic things, the truest, will be found in the cities of the South, where they are made out of necessity, but also in connection with a culture that's very much alive. These aren't objects that are parachuted in, inauthentic objects that correspond to some architectural convention. The problem of the worthlessness of architecture presents itself with at least the same acuity as in the field of art, but certainly not on the same basis.

The Aesthetics of Disappearance

J.B. Obviously we need to be clear about what we mean by the aesthetics of disappearance.... It's true that there are a thousand ways to disappear, but we can at least compare the kind of disappearance that results in extermination—which is one of the ideas underlying Paul Virilio's work—and the way things disappear in a "network," which affects all of us and could be considered a kind of sublimation. The disappearance I'm talking about, which results in the concept of worthlessness or nothingness I mentioned earlier, means that one form disappears into another. It's a kind of metamorphosis: appearance–disappearance. The mechanism is completely different. It's not the same as disappearing within a network, where everyone becomes the clone or metastasis of something else; it's a chain of interlinked forms, into which we disappear, where everything implies its own disappearance. It's all about the art of disappearance. Unfortunately there's only one word to describe it, and the same is true for the term "worthlessness." We can use it in different senses, just as we can the term "nothingness," but no matter what happens, we enter a field of discourse that can no longer be fully explained, we've got to play the game, we're forced to.

Images of Modernity

J.N. Do you still have a positive outlook on modernity?

J.B. Did I ever?

J.N. You did, and you're going to jump when I tell you because it's something you wrote, and it's not nihilist at all. In fact, it's rather optimistic, since you talk about modernity as the "activism of well-being."

J.B. I get the impression you're still talking about a prior life. That's pretty good! . . . Well-being, it was an old concept even then; now I think we're beyond happiness. The problem is no longer the identification of coherence among needs, objects, all those things . . . upon which a certain conception of architecture also depended, by the way. That's been "nullified," but in the sense of having disappeared inside a network. We no longer ask if we're happy or not. Within a network, you're simply part of the chain, and you move from one terminal to another; you're "transported," in a way, but you're not necessarily happy.

The question of happiness, like that of freedom or responsibility, and a host of other questions about modernity, the ideals of modernity—these are no longer really relevant, at least in terms of expecting a response. In that sense, I'm no longer modern. If modernity is conceived in this way, which was to subjectively ensure—whether it was the subjectivity of the individual or the group—a maximum of accumulation, a maximal number of things, then modernity has overshot the goal it set for itself. Maybe it didn't fail at all, maybe it succeeded all too well, it propelled us well beyond our goal . . . and now all the questions are about lost objects.

The Biology of the Visible

J.N. Concepts of modernity in architecture are very ambiguous because they are tied to historical concepts, whereas modernity by its very nature is something vital, although today I think it is primarily concerned with the aesthetic forms of disappearance. I read "Every real thing is prepared to disappear, that's all it asks for." I feel that in the field of architecture, and, more than architecture, design in the broadest sense, we are experiencing an aesthetic of "sacrifice." I would say, the sacrifice of the visual. I don't know where it's leading, but part of it is reflected

in miniaturization, our increasing domination of matter, with matter itself being increasingly reduced to its simplest expression. It's quite obvious that for objects like the computer, which has been miniaturized to an astounding degree, compared to the cathode-ray screen, the television, it's eventually going to end up as thin as a piece of rolling paper. We can't see these things as they happen; we can only see the result. That's all we have. When we're successful, all we have is action, the means to achieve it are obliterated, they cease to be interesting. This century once looked into the mirror of a mechanistic modernity and grew excited at looking inside things—motors, gears, cutaway drawings—now that's over with, it no longer interests us, all we want is the result. That's a disturbing kind of miracle.

J.B. You're forgetting that we're still looking inside the genetic code, trying to decode genes, et cetera. We want to make those kinds of things visible, but there's no mechanism. Whether the research takes place in the field of biology or genetics, the fantasy is the same. . . . I don't know if it's the culmination of modernity or an excrescence. Maybe this effort to get at the analytic heart of things, this desire to reveal the interior of matter itself, until we reach those particles that, at times, are completely invisible, will eventually lead us to immateriality or, in any case, to something that can no longer be represented: particles, molecules, et cetera. Practically speaking, in biology, for us, it's pretty much the same thing, except that we've transposed to the human all our efforts at microanalysis, fractalization, et cetera. . . . In a way, it's modernity that has reduced itself to its most basic elements, ultimately culminating in an algebra of the invisible.

J.N. . . . whose complexity is one of the essential paradigms.

J.B. These are elements that are "elsewhere" in the sense that they are no longer perceptible, no longer part of perception or representation. But they are not "elsewhere" in the sense that they come from another place, in the sense that they might really represent another form, which we would have to deal with

in dualistic terms. If beings from another place were to appear, there would be a renewed possibility of interaction, but even here, no interaction is possible on the level of the code, of genetics, basic elements, et cetera. There is no more interaction. True, there is infinite combination, and we'll go as far as we can in that direction—not despairingly, of course. No, quite the contrary. There's even a kind of collective fascination with the image that this reality offers us in return. But we can no longer claim that some notion of happiness or freedom will ultimately be involved, because they've disappeared, they've volatilized into that analytic research we've been talking about. So is that the end of modernity?

A New Hedonism?

J.N. We can have a more optimistic vision of things . . . especially once we manage to dominate matter in such a way that it enables us to resolve practical problems, problems tied to certain kinds of pleasure, even if the initial pleasure is perverted by excess. . . . The wireless telephone is a good example. You can call anywhere in the world from any other point in the world, just as it's possible today to press on a piece of glass and make it transparent or opaque and feel your hand warm up on contact. Everything takes place over a surface of a few millimeters. . . . Such technological innovations are heading in the direction of new sensations and added comfort, in the direction of new forms of pleasure. So maybe the situation isn't as desperate as all that!

J.B. I wasn't talking about despair. I simply find that there is a strange attraction, a fascination with such things. . . . Is fascination a form of happiness? For me it is, but it's not the happiness associated with seduction; it's something else. The vertigo that pushes us to go further and further in that direction exists, clearly, and we all share in it collectively, but we have to make sure that when we reach the boundaries of our explorations, we don't trigger processes that are completely obliterating. When we reach the micro-micro, even in biology, we end up triggering viruses. They may have been there all along, but we've managed

to reactivate them, we've brought them back to life. We discovered them, but they discovered us as well, and there are all sorts of ways things can backfire, including those that lead to what may be a kind of fatal reversibility. We are no longer the masters. I don't like to play prophet, but we shouldn't believe that all these analytic advances will lead to greater control of the world, or to increased happiness. On the contrary, even science recognizes that it has less and less control over the real, the object ceases to exist—at some point it simply disappears. So where do we look? OK, so it's a bit like that ideal object discussed during the Enlightenment: progress, the rights of man, and all the rest. . . . So there we have our object. That doesn't mean it's been lost. It's still a nostalgic vision, it's just that it's come apart, it's been dispersed, when what we wanted was to force it into its ultimate reality. And in that sense it has disappeared, it's gone, although it may come back under a different form, a fatal form, in the worst sense of the word—we just don't know. . . . What's going to happen with all the negative exponential processes that have been triggered and which we know are moving much more quickly than the positive processes? In any case, the outlook, if there is one, is one of complete ambiguity. That's truly the end of modernity. As long as modernity was able to believe that there was still a positive direction and the negative would be buried deeper and deeper in positivity, we were still very much in line with modernity. But once everything we're searching for becomes ambiguous, ambivalent, reversible, random, then modernity is over—and it's just as true for politics.

II
Second Interview

Truth in Architecture

Jean Baudrillard: Can we speak of truth in architecture? No, at least not in the sense that architecture would have truth as its goal or culmination. There are things an architecture wants to say, things it claims to accomplish, signify. . . . Where is the radicality of architecture? What is it that constitutes the radicality of architecture? That's how we should pose the question of truth in architecture. That truth is to some extent what architecture is trying to achieve without wanting to say it—which is a form of involuntary radicality. In other words, it's what the user makes of it, what happens to it through use, when in the grip of an uncontrollable actor. This leads me to introduce another aspect of things, which is their literality. To my mind, literality means that aside from technical progress, aside from social and historical development, the architectural object as an event that has taken place is no longer susceptible to being completely interpreted or explained. Such objects express things *literally,* in the sense that no exhaustive interpretation is possible.

What does "literally" mean? I'll use the example of Beaubourg again. OK, we have Beaubourg. So what does it express? Culture, communication? No, I don't think so. Beaubourg expresses flux, storage, redistribution, and Piano and Rogers's architecture expresses those things literally. What it expresses literally is almost the reverse of the message it supposedly expresses. Beaubourg represents both the fact of culture and the thing that killed culture, the thing it succumbed to, in other words, the confusion of signs, the excess, the profusion. It's this internal contradiction that translates Beaubourg's architecture, which I call its "literality." Similarly, we can say that the World Trade Center alone expresses the spirit of New York City in its most radical form: verticality. The towers are like two perforated strips. They are the city itself and, at the same time, the vehicle by means of which the city as a historical and symbolic form has been liquidated—repetition, cloning. The twin towers are clones of each other. It's the end of the city, but it's a very beautiful end, and architecture expresses both, both the end and the fulfillment of that end. That finality, which is both symbolic and real, and situated well outside the project that the architect's drawing embodied, far beyond the initial definition of the architectural object, is expressed *literally.*

Another Tower for Beaubourg

Jean Nouvel: It's worth asking if Beaubourg really signified culture.... When you look at Beaubourg from within the world of architecture, you realize that it's one of the first attempts to concretize the theory of Archigram's city-as-machine. In a way, Beaubourg is the culmination of functionalist theories, where architecture translates the truth of the building, which is a kind of hypertruth. The skeleton is visible, with all its guts on the outside, and the nerves, everything is exposed to view, to a degree that's never been surpassed. English high-tech reached a peak in the seventies, but Beaubourg is the only building that took so much of a risk, aside from the Lloyds building, perhaps, which shares the same sense of exhibitionism. Richard Rogers extended the movement to factories.... But the most interest-

ing thing in the Beaubourg concept, originally, was the freedom within, in the way the space was conceived. We felt that this machine for housing art—or hopefully for manufacturing art—was going to work. Completely unpredictable events were supposed to take place within the building, the floor areas were supposed to coexist with added sections, supports, movable extensions, everything was supposed to be optimally organized within a dialectic of support-supply. Beaubourg was primarily a support. But the space, subsequently made "functional," completely altered its initial meaning. It's worth pointing out that in January 1999 an ad was designed—while they were working on the restoration—which for the first time completely covered the facade with an enormous photograph on canvas that was more than two hundred meters long and thirty meters high. Beaubourg's mission is to capture these exterior and interior events, events of all kinds, which are supposed to be free or of limited duration. The implosion you spoke about occurred in a completely unexpected way. The thing that was killed before it even got off the ground was the exposure to other possibilities, the play inherent in the possibilities of space, its total vacuity. The fact that they reconstructed the interior space using ordinary partitions, turning it into a space that is completely conventional, meant that Beaubourg would become the opposite of a simple architectural support, to the extent that they've now put G-strings on the beams so they appear more dignified, so they can erase any industrial or mechanical reference! Every freedom that existed within the space has been wrecked by the fire department, which insisted that the floor area, which was 150 by 50 meters—which is huge!—be divided by a wall. The space was simply cut in two. This alteration alone removed the necessity, and therefore the meaning, of putting the ducts on the outside—they could just as well have been stuck inside the service core or between two walls. But in the beginning it was much more relevant. Everything that was supposed to interact with this support and change rapidly didn't happen, and Beaubourg is experienced as if it were a building made of dressed stone. Because it was overconsumed, because of the

incredible number of visitors every year, its enormous size, the building has been exhausted very quickly. This accelerated aging is also a characteristic of the building. But it's interesting to see the enormous discrepancy between the architectural intentions and the reality. At the same time, it was Renzo Piano, one of the two architects who designed Beaubourg, who is responsible for the building's restoration—if you can call it that—in its current, rather than its conceptual, state. It's difficult to imagine the energy of the seventies today.

J.B. Yet in its flexibility, Beaubourg did reflect its original intent.

J.N. No, it hasn't played its role; the building is static. Maybe it will happen one day. . . . But no one wanted to play with that flexibility; it was too dangerous, too spontaneous. Everything has been reframed, resealed. Imagine a building with large windows built in 1930. The same thing would have happened then, assuming there was a large flat roof with a beautiful belvedere. Of course, its status as an urban artifact remains. Beaubourg functions as a cathedral, with its buttresses, a nave, a "piazza." It's a call to the public to come inside, to consume the views of Paris and the art. A call to consumption.

A Shelter for Culture?

J.B. Yes, it's also a draft of air pulling things along in its wake. And locally it's still a kind of hole, an air inlet. . . . As for sheltering or provoking culture, I'm skeptical. . . . How can you recapture the subversiveness that the space seemed to call forth as it was originally designed?

J.N. Can the institution accept subversion? Can it plan the unknown, the unforeseeable? Can it, within a space as open as this, provide artists with the conditions for something that is oversized, an interference; can it agree to not set limits? Architecture is one thing; human life another. What good is an architecture that is out of step with contemporary life?

J.B. Still, even though we can effectively express the relationship of architecture, or a given building, to culture, to society . . . how are we going to define its "social" impact? It's precisely the lack of a possible definition of the social that should produce an architecture of the indefinable, in other words, a real-time architecture, characterized by randomness and the uncertainty that drives social life. Architecture can no longer "monumentalize" anything today. . . . But it can't demonumentalize anything either, so what role does it play?

J.N. Some people have tried to provoke this real-time, random architecture. We're trying to do this in an industrial building that everyone finds hideous, although it's absolutely remarkable: a group of derelict buildings that no one wanted, a Seita factory. It's an abandoned factory complex, located in one of the most popular quarters of Marseilles, known as "la Belle de mai." Eighty thousand square meters of empty space! The place was empty and unsafe. The city was handling security, and people had begun to squat in the buildings, until one day, quite spontaneously, the artists got involved—people from theater, choreographers, painters and sculptors. So now there was a clear desire to create a kind of open cultural space, based on a living culture, just the opposite of the kinds of buildings that are usually reserved for culture, with scheduled hours, and designed for conservation. The place would be open day and night, the artists would live there, some would be invited as a group by producers and would have an opportunity to continue their work jointly. There was a clear mandate for the project to initiate new work, giving preference to younger artists, creators, students, the unemployed, with a very clear intercultural dimension. But this type of approach and this type of architecture have the greatest difficulty obtaining financing, and funding for maintenance and development. The contradiction is difficult to resolve because the people who start the project would prefer not to get involved in some sort of institutional operation, but they're required to ask for approval, for permission from institutions,

whether they involve the city or the government—which reject such radicality. Nonetheless I think the project is part of the dynamic of what must become a contemporary cultural space. The hypercentralized, hyperinstitutionalized places we're surrounded with are sterile.

On Modification: Mutation or Rehabilitation

J.N. I think the debate going on about what I call "modification" is essential. We built heavily throughout the century, very quickly, very badly, anywhere, anyhow. We produced and reproduced a number of things in record time: spaces, buildings, suburbs, and nonplaces as well. Now we're in a situation, in all the northern countries, where growth is just about over. But urban and suburban spaces, the rural landscape, et cetera, are subject to constant modification. We find ourselves with a body of architectural material—things that were built, abandoned, rebuilt—which have to be modified or demolished; in any case, that's what we have to work with. It's not a question of any prior intention to conserve a certain number of signs of the past, nor of "rehabilitating," in the conventional sense of the term, some sort of "refined bourgeois taste, the essence of the picturesque." It's about creating architecture, meaning and essence, from some raw, unworked material. If we look at what's going on in Marseilles, we see an industrial building that could be considered a cultural facility that is 80 percent complete. The simple fact of changing its use and sticking a certain number of objects inside, applying a few finishing touches, various architectural signs, alters the meaning of the place completely. To give you an example, there were large rooms 150 meters long and 40 meters wide. Before, the space was saturated with machine tools; now that it's empty, it's sumptuous. It would be impossible to create a cultural space like that from scratch today. It would cost too much. We chose to consider this interior-exterior urban ensemble as a piece of the city. People live there as if it were a small city. And we feel that the architectural act revolves around settling into a repurposed architecture. This could involve something that's built inside or

on the roof or even on a terrace. Nonetheless this process of sedimentation is a form of creation and a complete qualification of the space. It's not only a modification; it's a mutation. The space is no longer experienced the same way, there are different things inside; we play with scale differently, change the meaning, and starting with what was a large, poorly defined, purely functional volume, we've gradually managed to produce a regenerative recreation that no one would have thought possible. This process of fabricating cities today should be encouraged. It allows us to escape dimensional standards, to obtain this sense of "excess," this superfluity that is essential and unplanned. It provokes a sense of excess: too big, too high, too dark, too ugly, too stiff, unforeseen, radical.

J.B. But this mutation, as you call it, is often part of a cultural plan. In fact, what we call "cultural" is ultimately only a bunch of polymorphous or, who knows, perverse activities!

J.N. When the mutation isn't really a mutation, it becomes perverse; it becomes rehabilitation. Rehabilitation, in the legal sense of the term, is the process of providing something with qualities that had been denied to it previously. In fact, all the public housing built during the sixties and seventies has now been "rehabilitated," which means that they're maintained—something that had been overlooked for years—that someone applies a little color to the facade, a couple of awnings, and that "ghettoization" is perpetuated by allowing the urban social fabric around them to degrade and violence to spread. We continue to promote an approach to housing that we know doesn't work, and we solidify and perpetuate all the problems we have. Moreover, to reduce costs, we contract the work out to companies who cap expenses as much as possible. The building is insulated on the outside. We pretend to make a number of improvements, when all we've done is patched things up: we touch it up here and there, and it's good for another twenty years, even though the buildings were only designed to last twenty years when they were built.

J.B. The large urban spaces that have sprung into existence without any preliminary planning, like New York's Lower East Side or Soho, have been taken over by the middle class over the past twenty years, often artists, who have changed the lifestyle and appearance of those neighborhoods: is that rehabilitation or mutation? It's easy to see that this kind of mutation is most often accompanied by a gentrification of the neighborhood, which was also the case in Salvador da Bahia, in Brazil. They saved the facades, but behind those facades, everything changed.

J.N. Look at Paris, for example. This city has been characterized by what I call "embalming." This consists in preserving a series of facades that have some historic value and building new structures behind them—this happened in Rue Quincampoix, and in the Marais, near Saint-Paul. It's obvious that this served only one purpose: to get rid of the poor who lived there and replace them with people who had the means to pay. We're well outside the framework of rehabilitation when we radically change usage and move in the direction of greater space, increased pleasure, the conquest of new qualities. Embalming is the opposite. We break up small apartments, cut the windows in two with new floors, et cetera. New York isn't exactly the same. There the industrial spaces were turned into dream apartments, unique spaces three hundred square meters in size. You can live in a building that's thirty meters deep. Once you have good lighting at either end, you can accept the fact that there are darker areas in the center, contrary to the hygienic theories favored by modernity. But what's happening in this case is more than a rehabilitation; it's also a mutation, and that mutation initiates a real shift in the way we understand a place aesthetically. In such spaces, a table, three chairs, and a bed are sufficient to create a poetics of space that differs from what it was when it was saturated with merchandise and machinery.

J.B. The modification you describe is an interesting approach to the situation. Can it be generalized? Could it politicized?

J.N. To politicize it, you would need to create an awareness on the part of "politicians." Can they understand and accept that every transformative act, every modification, is a cultural act as essential as creating something from scratch? Can they accept the fact that architecture is expressed and must increasingly be appreciated from within, a privileged space of enrichment, of nuance? . . . History provides us with beautiful examples of architectural forms that culminated in sedimentation, complementarity. The most convincing demonstration, a brilliant proof of the theory, may be the work of Carlo Scarpa. The first political question becomes: "What do I destroy? What do I preserve?" As a foil we have the memory of two grotesque periods of utter dreariness: the "destroy everything" period of the sixties and seventies, bulldozer renovation, followed by the "embalming" period—"Let's keep everything," let's create a pastiche, let's try to economize the architectural act.

Architectural Reason

J.B. Today things are designed for change; we have mobile, flexible, open-ended devices. We need to design an architecture based on computer logic, which is happening everywhere anyway. Then there's multiculturalism, the possibility of changing one's identity, of putting a number of computer avatars into play, which is supposedly an essential aspect of modernity, or transmodernity, I'm not quite sure.

I've been thinking a lot about this lately. There must be a difference between things that change and things that become. Yes, there's a fundamental difference between change and becoming. Things that "become" are rare, exposed to misunderstanding, and possibly disappearance. Becoming is not the same as importing change, initiating it, wanting it at any price, imposing an imperative of change on people—which is the credo of fashion, for example—from which they never escape. That's not necessarily how things become something. Can a city change before our eyes? Of course we can transform it, modify it, but does it "become" something, then? We can say that cities have

"become" things over time. It's not a question of creating nostalgia, but cities, in the past, ended up acquiring a kind of singularity, while here, now, before our eyes, they change at top speed, in a state of confusion. We're watching their characteristics erode. Even modification may be a way of reintroducing things into the process of change, where they would have risked being either destroyed or purely and simply "museified," which is another miserable fate. Can we counteract change with another kind of need? Maybe we can go further: What will the city become?

J.N. Working on what a city will become implies having a heightened awareness of its identity and requires that we help direct change. Change is fatal, automatic, inevitable, and many of our leaders, including city mayors, demand change because it's a sign of vitality, a form of growth that can excuse a range of absurdities. What a city becomes is decided on the basis of what came before, not some hypothetical future designed by a long-term planning effort. What it will become provides opportunities for the expression of a contextual and conceptual architecture that is both anchored and enriching. Change for the sake of change provides all sorts of excuses for just about anything; in that sense, it's part of the lapse of architectural reason. It can come about through the automatic reproduction of market models, as well as from a conception of the future based on the cloning of preexisting buildings.

J.B. The lapse of architectural reason would be clone architecture.

J.N. The historical development of cities, their evolution, has always bothered architects. It's a strange paradox. Architects are constantly modifying the urban fabric, yet they resist its evolution. They generally reproduce the previous period. They want to continue to build the city that was, and every time the city changes, they say, "It's no longer a city, it's a suburb, it's shame-

ful. . . ." The evolution of the city in the twentieth century is supposed to have resulted in violent upheaval. Yet we've witnessed an architectural caste that has clung to the twentieth-century city, the reconstruction of the European city; they still want to build streets and squares as they did before. . . . But they're streets and squares devoid of meaning.

The City of Tomorrow

J.B. Yes, but that's not cloning, if you look at what happens. . . .

J.N. It's a form of reproduction, duplication. Architects always stick to earlier forms used in the past; they're terrified of seeing the city move in ways they've worshiped, ways that they reproduced themselves. The evolution of the city—I'm being somewhat anticipatory—will continue to cause them anguish because a process of complete deterritorialization is taking place.

We are all urban. What characterizes a city today is a space shared by a certain number of people in a given period of time: the time it takes to get there, move around, meet other people. From the moment we—many of us—can access or share a territory, we belong to that territory, and that territory becomes urban. We belong to a city. We're going to end up urban even if we live in the country, on our little farm twenty kilometers from the nearest village. We will also be part of the "city." Time, not space, will determine our being a part of urban life in the future.

J.B. Only in the vision you've just given of the city to come, the city is no longer a form in the process of becoming; it's an extended network. That's fine, you can define it as you have, but that urban life is no longer the life of the city but its infinite possibility: a virtual urban life, like playing on the keyboard of the city as if it were a kind of screen. I saw it as the end of architecture . . . by pushing the concept to its limit and primarily by using the photograph as a point of departure. This is reflected in the idea that the great majority of images are no longer the

expression of a subject, or the reality of an object, but almost exclusively the technical fulfillment of all its intrinsic possibilities. It's the photographic medium that does all the work. People think they're photographing a scene, but they're only technical operators of the device's infinite virtuality. The virtual is the device that wants nothing more than to function, that demands to function. And to exhaust all its possibilities. Doesn't the same thing happen in architecture, with its infinite potential, not only in terms of materials but in terms of models, all the forms that are available to architects (postmodern or modern)? From that moment on, everything is arranged according to . . . We can no longer even speak of truth, in the sense that there might be a finality to architecture, but we can't speak of radicality, either; we're in the realm of pure virtuality.

Virtual Architecture, Real Architecture

J.B. So is there still an architecture in the virtual sense? Would it still exist? Or should it exist? Can we continue to call it architecture? We can combine things, techniques, materials, configurations in space indefinitely, but will it produce architecture? I finally realized that the Guggenheim in Bilbao was typically the type of object made of complex compositions, a building established using elements whose modules are all exposed, all the combinations expressed. You could imagine a hundred museums of the same type, analogous, obviously none of which would resemble one another.

J.N. You can rely on Frank Gehry to surprise you!

J.B. He's wonderful—it really is marvelous—and I'm not making a value judgment about the object itself, but the structure of production and fabrication that made the building possible. As I see it, this architecture no longer possesses the literality I was talking about, that is, the presence of a singular form that couldn't be translated into another form. The Guggenheim itself is infinitely translatable into many other kinds of objects, as part of a chain. . . . You get the impression that there could

be a possibility of architectural evolution in this way. But let's say, to go back to my photography example, that the camera itself generates a nearly uninterrupted stream of images. If we accept this, the device could reproduce everything, generate images endlessly. And within that visual stream we can hope that there are one or two exceptional images that don't obey this indefinite, exponential logic of technology. But isn't this similar to the risk architecture is exposed to? At bottom, since we were talking about readymades, I would say that the Guggenheim is a readymade. All the elements are there from the start. The only thing we need to do is transpose them, permute them, play with them in different ways, and we've made architecture. Only the transposition itself is automatic, a bit like an automatic writing of the world or the city would be. We can imagine whole cities built on this principle. . . . In some American cities, this is already true. And it's no longer just an engineering question. In the past we could say that engineers constructed, generation after generation, based on minimal standards. But in the Guggenheim example, something else is going on that starts with a creative model that is already virtual. We descend from virtuality to reality, in any event toward real existence—with the difference that, unlike information technology or mathematical modeling, in architecture, we end up with an object.

J.N. In the Bilbao Guggenheim, we're witnessing a new computer revolution in the service of architecture. That is, a new computer-based approach that would give substance to the idea, would lock or fix the most fleeting things, regardless of their immediacy. What's great about Frank Gehry is that he will make a sketch, crumple the paper, start over, and connect the sketch on paper or the relief drawing to an enormous program. From that point, the computer takes over and will begin to weave it all together, constructing an image in space, materializing something that is instantaneous and unstable, opening a direct passage from desire to the built reality. With Frank Gehry, we're watching this shortcut as it takes place, which is quite rare.

J.B. Even so, he has an extraordinary playing field to work with.

J.N. That's an optimistic assumption.

J.B. When you walk around the Guggenheim, you realize that the building is, as far as its lines are concerned, illogical. But when you see the interior spaces, they are almost completely conventional. In any case there is no relation between those spaces and the building's ideality.

J.N. Some of them are conventional because they have to obey museographical conventions. We haven't found a better way to exhibit Kandinsky, Picasso, and Braque other than on bright walls in quiet spaces. But there are also singular spaces: the lobby, the large hall, which is 250 meters long. Finally, there's also an attempt to adapt dream to reality, as always, but a very beautiful adaptation.... However, where I do see a danger—and I'm talking about 90 percent of global production at this time, certainly for all the large buildings—is in this way of making architecture by recycling existing computer-based data and coupling that with an extremely curtailed design procedure for the building. We're currently experiencing a wave of architectural cloning. From the moment an office building is made on the basis of an existing typology, whose technology and price and the conditions for its realization are known, we can duplicate that building and have it constructed without having to pay for a new design. This has resulted in the introduction of well-defined technical procedures that enable companies to enter the international market. In Asia, South America—look at São Paulo, for example—buildings are going up where there is no sense of architectural intent at all. It's a form of architectural sabotage, prostitution. You used film and the world of politics as examples, both of which are also undergoing wholesale sabotage. Well, here I see architectural sabotage. You get the impression that architects themselves are going to produce the types of buildings that totally counter anything that could result in quality or a sense of nobility for a city. This type of architecture

is proliferating at an alarming rate. The most efficient economic models are moving in that direction. . . .

Computer Modeling and Architecture

J.N. Is there anything easier than reusing existing data, given the fact that the computer can modify that data so quickly? You change a parameter here, another there, and after a few hours, it's done. The system is ready for a new building. Consequently, buildings are not really thought out; they are based on immediate profitability and hasty decision making. This also involves the complete sacrifice of a dimension that many feel belongs to another time. . . . There is no further need for public spaces, no further need to compose; all we have to do is accumulate. I need to buy a building. This is the way I can have it for the lowest cost and as quickly as possible. The parameters are simple, there's no need for any equations.

J.B. Within that architectural space, does the possibility still exist for the architect to make his mark?

J.N. Most of the time there is no architect in the sense generally understood. There are engineers who are pretty efficient at working with the standards. And those standards are associated with certain humanist or behavioral attitudes. In Europe, for example, you can't sell an office building that doesn't have direct light. In the United States, for a variety of reasons, standards can differ considerably from those in Europe. For example, you're authorized to use artificial light. In other words, let's say you have a building that's fifty meters deep and your offices are in the center of the building; you'll see the first window twenty meters away, and you'll be in artificial light all the time. Those buildings, which are the cheapest to build, sell well in Asia and South America. But no consideration is given to human comfort. And it isn't the "developed" countries that have the most advanced humanist standards! Often it's in the poorest cities that you find spontaneous acts of creation. These can be considered magnificent architectural achievements, even when they

use corrugated sheet metal or pieces of rag. Here we can identify a poetics that is really a form of creation, whereas in the other cases, we're getting pretty far away from that.

J.B. So what constitutes a particular space today, assuming architects still have any creative freedom?

J.N. Fortunately, all the conditions aren't in place yet for eliminating architecture. Within the evolution of the city there will always be a marginal place left for a handful of aesthetes—aesthetes in their own life and in their behavior—within highly privileged environments. What I wonder most about is what those cities will become. . . . In the near future, they won't be anything like what we're familiar with today. If the South is going to develop and catch up to the level of the cities of the North, using the same methods, it's going to take generations, and I don't see where the money is going to come from. No, I think there we're going to witness a true mutation.

Lightness and Heaviness

J.N. I even think that the next architectural and urban mutation will affect our relationship to matter. Other forms of mediation will be involved, and the mutation will shift toward the immaterial. Everything that is immaterial, virtual, sonorous, and part of the world of communication is already mutating. For example, anything that doesn't involve the creation of complex infrastructures will have an advantage. Everything that avoids pushing energy through enormous conduits, high-voltage lines, that sort of thing. Our thoughts for the future should be focused on autonomy, lightness. This will lead us to the promotion of emerging and environmentally friendly forms of energy such as solar or wind energy, satellite communications for the transmission of data, everything that fosters the local breakdown of waste rather than its centralization. It is this kind of thinking that can give rise to new strategies that will completely alter our current notion of urban development, an evolution that will

result in the appearance of a "noncity" city, an urban territory. This kind of development can take into account the need for stable development. I'm describing a growing trend, and we're still a long way off from its realization, but it seems to me that this is one example of a realizable utopia.

J.B. Unfortunately I feel that in the future, as you mentioned, the great majority of construction, of building needs, will be technocratic, modeled. We will also have a luxury architecture reserved for a handful of privileged individuals. We see this happening in a number of fields, society, art . . . and the trend is toward increasing discrimination—contrary to what we believe—a discrimination that runs counter to the objectives of democracy and modernity. I'm not sure whether or not architecture can play a role in all this. Even so, it has wanted to play a role in these developments, an equalizing role, if not a humanist one.

J.N. Yes, but then this would be a result. Unfortunately it's not through architecture that we're going to change the world!

What Utopia?

J.B. Yes, that's true, but I'm an idealist, I still believe we can change the world through architecture. . . . It's utopian for all intents and purposes, yes. Utopian architecture was ultimately a realized architecture. But in the future, doesn't the trend risk moving in the opposite direction? Isn't there some danger that architecture may become a tool of discrimination?

J.N. Although architecture may be unable to influence politics to change the world, politics has a responsibility to make use of architecture to achieve its social, humanitarian, and economic objectives. The economic dimension of culture—whether it's architectural or not—is taken into account in the industrialized countries. Since I'm an idealist as well, I dream about programs for quickly resolving the living conditions of those who are most disadvantaged. But not using traditional poured-concrete

solutions, which end up cloning monotonous seventies-style towers and linear block buildings in Seoul and São Paulo. No, I'm praying for genuine self-awareness. Only the readymades can provide very, very low production and distribution costs through automated production that can generate millions of copies. In today's shantytowns, it's easier to have a car or a television than a sink. . . . I dream of project requirements that incorporate the use of the least-expensive materials, the lightest, most flexible, easiest to cut and assemble, drill or handle. . . . corrugated tin, ribbed plastic, lightweight channel, cables, sheet metal, project requirements that include the hardware, small ready-made machines produced by the millions, which can make the best possible use of our knowledge of energy self-sufficiency. . . . I dream about habitat packages that can be parachuted in, along with a few tools, but don't predetermine the shape of the structures that can be built. I'd like to replace the old concept of the seventies of an architecture designed for the greatest number with an individual architecture not based on some cookie-cutter model. . . . I don't know of a single UNESCO program today that's pushing this in any radical way. Still, we're not heading for disaster; we're already in the midst of total disaster.

J.B. This year, in Buenos Aires, I spoke about the future of architecture. Yes, I believe in its future even though, as you mention, it won't necessarily be architectural, for the simple reason that we haven't yet designed the building to end all buildings, we haven't yet created the city to end all cities, a thought to end all thoughts. So as long as this utopia remains unrealized, there's hope, we must go on. We have to recognize that everything that's happening now on the technological side is dizzying, the modification of the species, and so forth. . . . However, in twenty years we will have succeeded in making the transition from sexuality without procreation to procreation without sexuality.

J.N. Let's change the mode of reproduction for architecture! Let's invent a sexual reproduction of architecture.

J.B. Procreation without sexuality challenges the idea of sexuality without procreation—which has been the essence of eroticism. As the laboratory grows in importance, the field of eroticism will, for the most part, start to implode. . . . But sexuality isn't the only thing. . . . With genetic engineering, they're in the process of studying genes for future modification. American clinics already exist where people can type in the characteristics of their future infant so that it doesn't turn out homosexual. . . . Obviously, most of it is a scam, but that doesn't matter because there is total belief in the fact that we'll be able to improve the species, that is, invent another species. If we look at the human species as it is, or architecture as a historical form, or the city as a symbolic form, what comes afterward? An exponential proliferation of things in combinatorial fashion? At that point, we've entered an abstract mental space, but one that's realized. They're not just formulas.

J.N. We can make an analogy. Imagine the cloning of genetically programmed buildings; it's easier with buildings than with people. It's a kind of new superfunctionalism, virtual functionalism, which is not the functionalism of the old organic and social functions, use value, et cetera. It's something different. We need to determine if the new data are going to remain significant, since we're currently witnessing the sacrifice of architecture. Perceptible data are becoming a thing of the past. We can be optimists and assume that we're going to become true virtuosos of this new programming and we'll be able to integrate a whole range of information and assumptions capable of producing an absolutely terrific space, articulated around the problematic of the environment that's been eating at us. It's a question of survival. We have to integrate modern ecology.

J.B. The environment, ecology . . . I'm prejudiced against them. I feel that ecology exists precisely through the disappearance of "natural" data. Everything that is part of nature or natural must be eliminated if we are to build a perfect artificial world, where natural species will exist in "artificially protected" reserves.

Architecture as the Desire for Omnipotence

J.B. You get the feeling that the desire for omnipotence that drives architecture—look at large government projects, for example—no longer has anything to do with the image of itself it wants to project, a bit like what's going on in genetic engineering. A geneticist today thinks he's replacing the mother and the father: he's the one who creates the child! He's the deus ex machina that creates the child, a child who originates with him and is no longer embedded in a sequence of natural descent.

J.N. It's been a long time since architects thought they were gods! Their only fear is that someone is going to snatch that dream away. Architecture is simply the art of necessity. Three-quarters of the time, aside from the necessity of use and custom, there is no architecture—or it's sculpture, commemoration.

J.B. There's a funny little museum—I'm sure you're familiar with it—that was built by Kenzo Tange in Nice. It's adorable. It's a delicious little building that sits on a body of water, not far from the airport. It was built about three or four years ago and has remained empty since then because there was never any funding to buy content for it. So the museum has remained empty, and it's marvelous, a jewel. Over the past five or six years, Kenzo Tange hasn't built anything himself. So this may be the last project he accepted. . . . He had reached his zenith.

J.N. Sometimes the name of a great architect is like a brand. So we continue to build under the Kenzo Tange brand. I'm in a very good position to know this because I discovered a bad clone of one of my projects in Tokyo. The basic project involved the grid of the horizon used for the Tête Défense, the perspective background for the historical axis between the Louvre and the Arc de Triomphe, a project that was awarded second prize in the president's competition in 1982. Sprekelsen won first prize for the Grande Arche, which is now completed.

My design was an attempt to go beyond traditional Albertian

perspective, where the sky is an always unfinished canvas. During the classical period, unfinished canvases revealed a checkerboard network of fine lines behind the painting that served as a grid so that the original cartoon could be enlarged. In my case, I imprinted a disembodied network on the horizon, dividing the void in the Arc de Triomphe into barely visible squares. The building was a three-dimensional orthogonal grid, like a gigantic Sol LeWitt sculpture. The sun set along the axis, directly to the west, to create what I call "mathematical sunsets." From a distance, it was two-dimensional, without depth; from up close it provided a sense of hyperperspective, a bit like an Escher drawing. So in Tokyo they built this three-dimensional grid and included, following the same proportions as La Défense, a building at each end. But since the building wasn't carefully situated with respect to the setting sun, they built an artificial sun into the grid, a ball of shiny steel that, in the evening, was artificially illuminated with red, violet, orange light. . . . When I saw the building one evening, from a distance, I thought I was hallucinating. . . . But as fate would have it—and you should enjoy this—the fatal element is that on the other side of Tokyo Bay, just a few kilometers away and separated only by the water, I was building a large, airy tower. From my project in Tokyo, I could see my grid, my mathematical sunset, and an artificial sunset!

J.B. And what about your projects for the Universal Exposition in Germany? We have a pretty good script about the work: the living work, the dead work, the spectral work. The spectral is self-perpetuating, like life; death is scattered among all the virtual productive forms. Some thought went into that project.

J.N. I explained that to Frédéric Flamand, the choreographer, who is going to stage this living spectacle like an exposition. . . . The big question that remains is the freedom of artists working with partnerships that only provide financing if they like the message. . . . This is no longer traditional sponsorship. . . . But that's the way exhibitions will be financed in the future. They

will sponsor set design.... We're inside the subject. We'll have to provide subtitles.

Berlin and Europe

J.B. Does Berlin have any special meaning for you, as part of contemporary Europe?

J.N. Berlin's destiny is an intimate part of the century. It's a historic capital with a fabulous heritage—much of it due to K. F. Schinkel—that became capital of the Third Reich, was given the once-over by Speer, was partly destroyed, but survived, a captive abandoned to its conquerors. The city was martyred, cut up in pieces, and it still bears the stigmata. Then the city was freed and betrothed to Europe.... once again a queen. It's a great story, straight out of Dumas—the Countess of Monte Cristo!

J.B. And what about the center of the city? Is there any stated political or urban plan that's been expressly implemented?

J.N. The urban policy referred to as "critical reconstruction" goes something like this: "Let's pretend nothing ever happened.... Let's reconstruct traditional buildings, opaque walls and small windows. Let's triumphantly fill everything that's empty. Let's put the cupola back on the Reichstag." There had been some vague impulse to establish an urban strategy when the Wall came down. One of the major dailies organized an appeal for ideas directed to seven or eight international architects. I proposed to them that they transform the no-man's-land near the Wall into a long "meeting line," which would serve as a place where all the city's cultural events, sports, leisure activities, bars, restaurants, nightclubs, would be concentrated, face-to-face. By reversing the previous situation, the dividing line would become a weld, fullness would succeed the void, joy follow sadness, freedom prohibition.... But most of all, the city's history would remain embedded in its streets and stones.... I feel that the desire to wipe away those years is antithetical to the development of Berlin's identity and specificity. The city has plenty

of reasons to be proud of its uniqueness, to demonstrate that it was able to make the most of a tragic past.

J.B. In Berlin there has been a temptation to historicize everything, to include even the most horrible things in the city's heritage. This reminds me of the time they thought one of Brazil's largest favelas was part of the world's patrimony.

J.N. Yes, before the fall of the Wall . . . But at the scale of the neighborhood, Berlin has shown a great deal of good sense in the way it has dealt with vegetation and water. The Germans are more fastidious than we are in working out microstrategies for innovation and management of the city on the day-to-day level.

J.B. Which is very different from Frankfurt and the other cities. Moreover, in 1968, when the same movements were under way in both Germany and France, there were more communities in Germany, but there were also larger apartments with common kitchens, and living was easier. In France we never succeeded; the big apartments were too expensive. By the way, it seems that the windows in the Galeries Lafayette . . .

Architecture as the Art of Constraint

J.N. Now, if the buildings are well-known, as soon as something happens, everyone knows about it. Still, you should be aware of the fact that the glass is designed to fall without injuring anyone. Like a car windshield. But I get the feeling that, in our age of hypersecurity, we're going to need more than safety glass! In fact, we've turned security into a key factor. Architecture is the art of constraint; we have to deal with that. I often use the example of film because we function much as movie directors—directors and architects are the ones who work with the most constraints in this cultural universe. We have roughly the same relationship to a client, or a producer, or a promoter. They give us a certain amount of money to work with, and they like to see it multiply, without having any disasters on their hands. We have crews that

need to be directed within a given amount of time, and there's censorship. It's a very special situation, and ultimately quite different from anything a writer encounters.

J.B. If it's a question of security, then yes, it is.

J.N. The writer, the man of letters, the philosopher—they don't need to ask anyone's permission.

J.B. You seem to think that writing takes place without constraints. It's true that I have fewer than you, but as a writer, thinker, or researcher, I'm dependent on a system, for example, an editorial system, that is becoming increasingly incomprehensible.

J.N. The essential thing is that you, you can write a book that may be forgotten for thirty years if no one wants to publish your work, but it still exists, whereas a building in a drawing doesn't exist. . . . A manuscript, even when it's locked in a drawer, exists. A filmmaker who only writes treatments or an architect who only constructs drawings accomplishes nothing.

J.B. In that sense, the book is a prehistoric product! It's true that the book is not delivered to the reader or listener in real time, it only exists somewhere. But within a real-time hegemonic culture, the book exists for no more than a few weeks. That's the price we pay: it simply disappears.

J.N. There are miracles: Emily Dickinson was rediscovered many years later.

J.B. The science of security has total control. It's everywhere; it exercises control in the form of censorship. Health is also involved, all those so-called positive functions like protection, the environment. They can backfire dangerously by using censorship to fight singularity.

Transparency

J.B. Take the idea of transparency, for example. It's something extraordinary that expresses the play of light, with something that appears and disappears, but at the same time, you get the impression that it also involves a subtle form of censorship. This search for "transparency" with which our era is fascinated is at the very least ambivalent in its relation to power.

J.N. Obviously that's not exactly my ideological view of transparency! It's true that transparency can be awful if it is used incorrectly. What interests me in the evolution of architecture right now is the relation between matter and light, which can become something highly strategic. I'm much more interested in the relation between matter and light exposed by the transparency or opacity of glass, for example, than by formal spatial parameters. Throughout the century, we have explored a variety of techniques, and now we know just about where we are, and there's no apparent reason to choose one form rather than another. But the problem of "essence" (of a form, an architecture, a given space) is a much more contemporary problem, associated with the evolution of our knowledge about matter and quantum physics, the discovery of fractals, et cetera. These are the consequences of the advance science and technology have on our awareness of how we apprehend the world, space, time, which are also going to change our perceptual relation to space. The trend today is to consider that constructing a piece of architecture means becoming part of a continuum, it means building in space.

Light as Matter

J.N. You have to think of light as matter—and God knows, even for quantum physics, that's the crux of the problem. Physicists are currently trying to determine if a photon has mass, and they'll continue until they find its mass. For now, that mass is beyond what researchers are capable of determining, but they're pretty sure it exists. So what does "transparency" mean? If we

use certain materials, we'll be able to program a building differentially over time and play with ephemeral effects. You could say that traditional or classic architecture has always played with the permanence of architectural effects. More and more, we're trying to work with concepts involving the programming of complex architectural effects for the same building. And working with transparency involves nothing more than working with matter to give a building different appearances. If I am working with glass, I can program what I'm going to see. It can depend on whether I light it from the front or the back; I can play with depth of field, with transparency in the strict sense of the term. I can work with backlighting and a number of other things. There's a way of treating transparency by interpreting it strictly: "I'm going to do something that won't be seen, and I'm going to see everything through it." On the architectural level, it's nothing but pornography. . . .

J.B. The opposite of a secret, obscenity.

J.N. My buildings try to play with the effects of virtuality, appearance. Viewers wonder if the material is present or not. We create virtual images, we create ambiguity. A building can play with transparency effects, but it does so through another element, which is reflection. At the Cartier Foundation building, the viewer never knows if they're seeing the sky or its reflection. Generally, you see both, and that ambiguity creates an interplay of multiple appearances. At the same time, the building makes use of the most trivial function of transparency for the exhibition space. There, you know that what is exposed in the interior is going to change the nature of the building, or at least one's perception of it—but it's designed for that. Walking in front of the building, you see a display.

J.B. That's what was so extraordinary about the opening of the Issey Miyake exhibit, because you had the designer's mobile elements inside, then you had a figurative representation formed by the guests themselves—most of the women were dressed in

Issey Miyake—which created a second element in the overall design. But you also made the entire building transparent, which served as the general set design. Standing outside the building, you saw the action unfold in the space where the items were displayed and which had itself become an object in the exhibition.

J.N. It would be very interesting to have a picture of the building that reveals all the exhibits that have taken place inside. One image I get a great deal of satisfaction from, in terms of understanding the Cartier Foundation space, is the *By Night* exhibition that took place there. The entire ground floor, plunged in darkness, remained completely dark for three months. That was part of the project. Transparency is also trans-appearance. . . . We shouldn't consider this an ideology based on our ability to reveal everything, control everything.

J.B. But that sense is still included in the idea of transparency, whether you want it to be or not. . . . And it implies a good deal more than just architecture. It implies all the means of information, a totality of information about oneself. . . . The idea of setting the attractions, the secrets of transparency against the dictatorship of transparency, of contrasting the interplay of the visible and the invisible against absolute visibility, is quite subtle. There are constructions that yield to the most trivial transparency, as a vector of power, focusing on the elimination of secrets. It only serves to reveal that it is no longer part of what we see.

Disappearance

J.N. What interests me about transparency is the idea of evaporation. Ever since man became man, he has fought against fate, against the elements, against matter. He started off building stone by stone, then made windows with small pieces of oiled paper, then learned how to do other things. There is a kind of architectural "Darwinism" at work, which is an evolutionary process through which man attempts to cover the maximum amount of space, the largest surface, insulate the most but with the least amount of material, without looking like he did

anything. There's been a tremendous push forward that still isn't over and never will be. We can summarize it as follows: how can we resolve the most material problems with the greatest amount of elegance? It involves the domination of matter. For example, the progress made in glass technology during the century has been astonishing. Among other advantages, it's made from sand, and it doesn't require colossal amounts of energy. Glass has good durability, and now we are able to do more or less what we want with it. We can do a great job insulating glass because it contains particles that can't be seen with the naked eye. Glass can be opaque or transparent; it can change color. Glass is also a kind of language, a kind of mutant material, a material subject to a wide range of subtle treatments. Glass is a significant trend.

J.B. Isn't there a danger of seeing a proliferation of glass the way there was for plastic? A danger that it will become a universal material?

J.N. Yes, because it's very flexible in the way it can be used; you can do whatever you want with it. Because of this architectural Darwinism, glass has acquired a number of qualities; it lends itself well to the interplay of materials because it's the only material that allows you to visually program a building by giving it different looks. One of the trends in architecture today is to capture everything that can affect this awareness of the moment. We're also trying to capture variations of time, the seasons, the movements of visitors, and all of that is part of the architectural composition. There's also the idea of fragility, which is conveyed by the glass or by transparency—in the sense of a more living, more poignant reality. Even though, ever since banks started using glass for protection, transparency has taken quite a hit.

J.B. At least we still have the idea. In fact, like many others, the word "transparency" has undergone considerable semantic evolution. Previously it stood for a kind of absolute ideal. We could believe in the transparency of our social relationships or our relation to power. Now it's turning into a form of terror.

J.N. Yes, now it's become a pretext, and this didn't just begin today. Stained-glass windows were also used to similar effect. The Sainte-Chapelle was there long before we were! But if we consider that architecture involves creating a poetics of sorts, an instantaneous metaphysics, then transparency assumes a different meaning. You have the idea of the solid and the ephemeral. The concept of perennity still remains the characteristic of architecture that is most often acknowledged. Consider a pyramid. . . .

J.B. We want architecture to be something that survives us. However, that's no longer a factor for modern architecture—at least this is the way it seems to me. Or it's a factor that's been disguised, diverted; it's been turned into something like "saving time." Overtaking the moment.

J.N. Yes, but why is a building preserved? A building is preserved as soon as it's loved.

J.B. Humans, too!

What Does Architecture Bear Witness To?

J.N. When a building serves as a witness to a bygone era, it is preserved. If a building is considered a suitable prospect for bearing witness, even if it's very fragile, like Katsura or, an example closer to home, the Eiffel Tower or Beaubourg, it is preserved. The fact that we maintain it, spruce it up, repair it, preserve it in perfect condition, is part of a ritual of conservation. Once a building has reached this dimension of "bearing witness," it is, at least in a sense, archived, put under seal. Just because it's made of reinforced concrete or granite doesn't mean it will resist the depredations of time—the buildings constructed around the time of the Second World War are already in pretty bad shape, whatever Paul Virilio may think. In Berlin, for example, Bauhaus buildings have been preserved, while those from the fifties are being leveled left and right.

J.B. Le Corbusier's Villa Savoy has never been as lovely. It's been perfectly maintained and is more beautiful now than it was originally, more mature. I'd go as far as to say that our architectural heritage has been enriched. Look at the Oriental influence in Frank Lloyd Wright, wood and brick. Consider the destiny that would have had. . . . At the time, the avant-garde in architecture was involved with organic forms, made with ephemeral materials that weren't destined to last, like Las Vegas. For me, since I've known the city for thirty years, it's been a real massacre.

J.N. Sometimes the Americans are so outrageous that the result is really outstanding. We'll continue to complain about this outrageousness until the day we wake up in shock. . . . In any case, architecture is, paradoxically, unviewable; only a very small part of what's built counts. . . . Even Frank Lloyd Wright, who had considerable influence on the century, who built hundreds of houses, including Falling Water, a handful of large buildings such as the Johnson Wax building and the Guggenheim . . . Even with him, it's not so easy to uncover his tracks in the United States.

Singularity

J.N. Speaking of which, I very much liked what you said about our expectations of architects: that they are the ones still creating "singular objects."

J.B. I don't deserve the credit. . . . The object, in an unfortunate sense, is to an extent the end of architecture as something capable of translating a form belonging to the human community. Now, you mention "singular objects," which reflects a different quality of the object.

J.N. For more than twenty years, I've been defending the notion of the object's "hyperspecificity," contrary to all the typological, ideological, and dogmatic information that it comprises.

J.B. At some point, architecture is like poetry: you can provide all the interpretations of the poem you like, but it's always there. The object is literal in the sense that it is fully exhausted in itself.

You no longer wonder about architecture or poetry; you have an object that literally absorbs you, that is perfectly resolved in itself. That's my way of expressing singularity. . . . And it's essential that at a given point in time this singularity become an event; in other words, the object should be something that can't simply be interpreted, sociologically, politically, spatially, even aesthetically. The object may be quite beautiful and not be a singular object. It will be part of the general aesthetic, of global civilization. Yes, I think some can still be found. . . . But we also have to take into account the way the individual's singular perception divides the world. There are no standards, there are no formulas, there's no aesthetic or even functional matrix you can apply. The same object can satisfy all the functions we assign to it. That doesn't prevent it from possessing this extra quality.

J.N. Could we go so far as to say that the greater its singularity, the greater the chance it will be appreciated? That would be a consequence more than anything else.

J.B. Anything can be appreciated; I'm very skeptical about the notion. . . . It's not a question of relations, affects. You can have an affect for any object whatsoever that singularizes it for you. But at some point, what's needed is a different kind of awareness. If you like it, it becomes your dog and not someone else's. But this is something different, which is harder to articulate, because it can't be grasped intellectually. . . . It even seems to me that there's something a bit demoniacal in it, in the German sense of the word.

J.N. In the case of singularity, the aesthetics of the object is not fundamental to the extent that aesthetics obeys a type of convention, a type of judgment. You may feel an object is ugly, very ugly, uglier than ugly, monstrously ugly, and yet it can become in itself an entity that is absolutely essential. By that very fact, the object will become beautiful. Fortunately, it's not necessary to respect aesthetic codes to define singularity. The interesting thing is the ability to differentiate yourself from them and transgress them.

J.B. Take the Louvre Pyramid. At one point there was a movement to prevent its construction, because it was ugly. Then everyone calmed down.

J.N. It became widely accepted through use. But to me, it's not an example of a singular object.

J.B. It's obviously an academic object. But audacity, or the lack of audacity, is something that belongs not solely to an isolated object but also to the space it generates. At La Défense, in spite of everything, we can say that a strange space has been generated. Moreover, at first we don't know whether an object will become singular or not. This is what I referred to previously in terms of "becoming," of becoming—or not becoming—singular. It's a question not of change but of becoming. And this is something we can't determine. Sometimes even circumstances, whether they're historical, sociological, or whatever, trigger an object's singular becoming.

J.N. Pure event, "I perceive architecture as pure event," you said.

J.B. I'm interested in the things that shock me. I was writing about architecture as pure event, beyond beauty and ugliness.

J.N. But you contrast the "singular" with the "neutral" and the "global."

J.B. Yes, I differentiate global, universal, and singular.

J.N. And with respect to the neutral, you were kind enough to add: "We don't need architects for that!"

Neutrality, Universality, and Globalization

J.B. I would say the same for literature, thought, art, et cetera. Neutrality is assured; there's no problem with that. It's the total security we're offered day after day. Neutrality has never had a good reputation because neutral things are indifferent. At the

very least, it signifies an absence of quality, the nonqualitative. It's not the kind of thing you can like; we perceive the mass, conformity. But now we're seeing the emergence of another form of neutrality, which appears in the literal sense of the term this time. In fact, all it can do is *appear*, since it is defined within a domain where all possibilities neutralize one another. This domain is different than before, when there was neither quality nor relief. Here it's the opposite. You have a "dynamic" neutrality that is open to so many possibilities that they are all neutralized, like the history of the still camera I mentioned earlier, a device that allows you to take all possible photographs. From that point on, you are neutralized as a subject. This neutrality, for me, is the baseline of the human species—and we can reach the same point in architecture, as well. It's a cultural effect, a choice, our choice. It's true, I contrast the singular with the neutral, but I also contrast it with the global. We need to be clear about our terms. There is a considerable difference between the universal and globalization. The universal remains a system of values, and in principle, everyone can access it. It's still the object of certain conquests. But little by little, it's becoming neutralized; cultures are being juxtaposed. Nonetheless the result is still a top-down equalization, through value, whereas in the process of globalization, we're witnessing a bottom-up leveling, according to the lowest common denominator. This is the "Disneyfication" of the world.

Unlike the values that drive universalization, globalization will be a theater of intense discrimination, the site of the worst discrimination. It will be a "pyramidal" globalization, so to speak. The society it generates will always be dissociated and no longer a society of conflict. One has the impression that between the two, that is, between those who will have access to information technology, the future "wired" world, and the others, the connection will have been broken. The two halves of society will become disconnected. They will each go down their own path, in parallel, and one will tend increasingly toward sophistication with respect to knowledge, speed, while the other will live with its exclusion—but without conflict, without any

gateways. It's more dangerous than a revolt because it neutralizes conflict itself. Forget about class struggle! There won't even be any "clashes." Forget revolution. There won't be any relations of force; the fuse has melted. That's globalization. In the English-language press, the term refers primarily to economic markets. I mean something much more comprehensive. But it's the same underlying process if you look at it conceptually. It's an identification, a totalization—of the field of neutrality—it stands in contrast to the universal, which was an idea, a value, a utopia. This is the dimension of "realized" objects. In the case of the universal, it's the particular that stands opposite; in the case of globalization, it's singularity, a radicality of a different order. And one that doesn't enter into direct conflict with antagonistic forces. This isn't a revolutionary force; it exists elsewhere, is developed elsewhere, disappears. It's interesting to observe what remains of the irreducible in this process of globalization, this irreversible movement. This movement is a system, contrary to what the term would seem to imply, for the term "globalization" appears to imply that everything is comprised within it. But that's not the case. This movement is going to create a virtual hypersociety that will have access to all the resources—this much is clear—and all the power. Members of this hypersociety will be an absolute minority, an increasing minority, and in the majority of cases—in generic terms—the rest will remain excluded. So we'll be moving toward these parallel, dualistic societies, where things no longer function the same way on either side of the divide. What will that mean for life on earth? I don't know, but I have the impression that it's happening now in cities.

In this sense, the cities are prophetic. They are moving toward a kind of virtuality in terms of real, natural, traditional space. On the plane of the real, of reality, space is shared, while the most abstract virtual space is never shared. It's the privilege of those who have access to it. We won't be dealing with a dominant class any longer, but a computer-rich intelligentsia that will give free rein to complete speculation. Yet ultimately that's how Europe is being created. The euro, which is so much in the news

today, is the epitome of the virtual object, imposed from above. All imposed decrees are established without any relation to actual opinion, but who cares, it will happen, and it did happen! Everyone will operate within a parallel market, a kind of black market, with its markups; everyone will organize their escape as well. Increasingly we'll see parallel sites spring up: parallel markets, parallel work, moonlighting, peripheral capitals, and so on. And in a sense, that's fortunate, because if control of one over the other were total, it would be an unbeatable defense strategy.

You almost get the impression that things were predestined to be this way.

Destiny and Becoming

J.B. For me, destiny is something that cannot be exchanged. This is true up to and including construction: what can't be exchanged for its own end is subject to destiny, to a form of becoming and singularity, a form of destiny. Predestination is a little different, for it claims that the end is already present in the beginning, but doesn't eliminate the end. In one sense, the end is already there; a cycle of predestination is then established. Destiny is what can't be inscribed within a finalizing continuity, something that can't be exchanged, whether for better or worse. I feel that thought, theory, is inexchangeable. It can't be exchanged either for truth or for reality. Exchange is impossible. It's because of this that theory even exists. However, there are many cases where exchange is possible.... Maybe this reflects the history of the city, architecture, space—there has to be a possibility of exchange so that things can be exchanged with one another. But sometimes they don't get exchanged at all. There may be no equivalent to a given building, there's no need, it can't be exchanged against anything else. They'll build another one, but as it stands, it can't be exchanged for something else. It's an unhappy fate, a failure in a certain sense. However, singular things can't be exchanged, either; they're autonomous. Only in this case, we can say that we're dealing with a fully realized form.

J.N. There's something that amused me in all this talk about destiny and fatality: when you finally advise the architect to not think!

J.B. Ah, yes! When I said that we have too many ideas. I say the same thing about philosophers, as well. . . . You have to differentiate thought from ideas. I don't recommend that they not think; I advise them against having too many ideas.

J.N. We know that this is difficult territory. We know our fate isn't clear to us, and yet we still need a minimum amount of strategy to deal with it. And that's what's actually going on. What kind of architecture can survive, what kind will still have meaning in tomorrow's world, in a context that we are in large part familiar with.

J.B. That we know almost too well. That's the problem.

The Idea of Architecture and History

J.B. One of the problems with today's architecture is that we can no longer make architecture without having an idea of architecture in mind, the history of architecture. In philosophy, for example, you have to take history into account, the references to which ideas are subjected by history, any number of heteroclite issues. That's where I say, "Let's not think too much!" Whenever you have an architectural project in mind, different data about space, history, the environment, the elements of the project, objectives, finalities, all of that provides you with the information to produce a disconcerting object that will be something quite different than the initial project. But if you project too much, if your conceptualization is too narrow, the lode runs out, and I think this is just as true in the field of theoretical research. People who accumulate every reference they can lay their hands on, multiplying the amount of data, carefully delineating the path they'll follow out toward infinity, exhaust themselves before they can say . . . what? Nothing.

J.N. Yes, we can make architecture that is not about architectural theory. Architecture is no longer an autonomous discipline. But that doesn't force us to think more, to broaden our field of investigation. The majority of the buildings in our cities weren't thought out in that sense. They arrived there through a kind of automatism, a lack of attention. . . . So I think, if we want singular objects, then we'll have to use various kinds of analysis, reflection, connotation; we'll have to establish relationships among contradictory objects. In short, we'll have to start thinking.

Another Kind of Wisdom

J.B. Look, I don't want to make a mystery of spontaneity. In fact, we should abdicate to serendipity.

J.N. Serendipity?

J.B. Serendipity, yes. In fact, no one knows the exact definition. . . . It's the idea of looking for something and finding something completely different.

J.N. But I'm a big fan of the sport! I've been practicing serendipity all my life without knowing it.

J.B. The important thing is to have looked. Even if you miss what you were initially looking for, the direction of the research itself shifts, and something else is discovered. . . . The concept is primarily applied to the sciences, but it's also the name of a store in London, where you can find all sorts of things, except whatever it is you're looking for. The word comes from the Sanskrit. It's a beautiful way of saying "wisdom." It has been anchored in sacred Indian literature for centuries.

J.N. At bottom we're looking for something, but we never know what. When we find it, everything is all right. . . . Fortunately, in architecture there's never a single correct response. There are

millions of pathetic and a few thousand exciting responses. All we need is to find one that can be realized. But these responses are rarely simplistic. Paradoxically they are trying to be obvious but indecipherable. There's nothing worse than a building whose recipes we know by heart. In architectural conferences, you often hear people discuss kitchen recipes that result in the creation of a building. People don't always want to tell you "how," they don't want to reveal their strategy, but rather want to create an aura of mystery that's essential for a certain type of seduction.

The Question of Style

J.B. In Buenos Aires the presentation of buildings by different architects, all of them well-known, lasted five days. There was never a question of the mystery you speak of, only the nature of the projects, the development of a program, the results obtained, the international career of the person exposing his or her work. With respect to this sense of mystery, what we saw was incredibly impoverished.

J.N. We are dealing with thickness, something that will never be totally elucidated, deciphered. There will always have to be things that remain unsaid and things in which we lose ourselves. At the same time, an architectural work should be capable of being experienced by people with very different sensibilities. So we have to set up a certain number of markers that can capture the attention or the interest of this highly diverse group.

J.B. In a number of fields, this kind of sociological calculation is barely functional. The entire field of advertising is focused on this type of approach, but in reality they have no idea what they're doing.

J.N. It's true of literature, painting, music. The great works, the great books, are universal. They affect people from all cultures and all levels of education.

J.B. Yes, but to the extent that these artists are able to create without giving in to the farce of art, art history, or aesthetic codes. So it's possible, ultimately. It's as if the architect were able to build without first reviewing the field of architecture, its history, and everything that is constructed. The ability to create a vacuum is undoubtedly the prerequisite for any act of authentic creation. If you don't create a vacuum, you'll never achieve singularity. You may produce remarkable things, but the heritage you have to deal with is such that you'll have to pass through a whole genetics of accumulation.

J.N. Yes, but that doesn't rule out a strategy to flush out . . .

J.B. Architecture can't be as spontaneous as writing.

J.N. Certainly. Still, what characterizes architecture is its writing, the fact that we are able to recognize any detail at all. This doesn't only involve an exterior shape. And if you look at all the great architects of this century—Wright, Le Corbusier, Aalto, Kahn—you can recognize them by the details. This singularity of their architecture is remarkable. There must be something natural and spontaneous in it, but at the same time, it's planned, worked on, premeditated.

J.B. You could say predestined.

J.N. This activity of premeditation is the thing architecture needs the most at this time. It will prevent its banality, mindless repetition, autism.

J.B. Not just anyone has the means to make his mark on a building, but anyone can write a bad article. Facility, in this case, is dangerous.

J.N. No, but many people are under the illusion that depth, thought, comes about through omnipresent decoration. Decoration is used to palliate this absence of intent, the incoherence

of architecture. Generally the architecture is hidden behind an ersatz facade. It's the obsession that makes the difference; with decoration you can mimic anything, any universe. There are decorators who could be considered architects. They work at revealing the spirit of the place. This was true during the thirties, and it's still true today when people like Starck succeed in transforming a place.

J.B. Do they still speak of style in architecture? Because compared to singularity, I would like to know what style is. . . . We recognize someone who has style, but the work produced won't necessarily be the embodiment of a singular vision.

J.N. Except if the style happens to be a singular vision. . . . It's one of the big questions in architecture. Style addresses the problem of the evolution of architecture. We can say that architects, in the twentieth century, have positioned themselves as artists in the plastic arts. They've appropriated the field; they've pretended it was also their own. Once this formal identification was made, the number of caricatures began to multiply: the ones who made everything white or everything blue, all in garlands, and so on. That's how myths get started. For example, historically Meier's architecture always turns out white. You're familiar with Ungers, who only does squares; Baselitz, the artist, turns things upside down. Those are perfectly identifiable styles that conceive of architecture as a preexisting vocabulary that can be used according to a preexisting code. A style, in my sense of the term, is something different. Style is a way of doing. But I can also suggest another definition. . . . Personally, I'm very interested in the way a style works, which has presented a problem—concerning me—for certain critics or certain individuals, who wondered, "What's this guy doing?" When an architect's way of doing something is identified, the way we recognize his style is as well. If these artist-architects build, their building will always be particular, since it will become their signature, in a way; but their approach has no relation to other particularities that they could exploit but don't. They are enclosed within a system. Style should reflect a singular way of thinking the world.

Inadmissible Complicity

J.N. You've said that you prefer complicity to complexity. I like the idea very much. It reflects a real problem in architecture. We manage to make things that are profound only through complicity, and perhaps only through this complicity do we achieve a certain degree of complexity, which isn't an end in itself. Often things are complex when they have to be, quite simply. This preliminary search for complexity has long been associated with a theory that claims that interesting things have to be complex because we then escape from a completely repetitive form of simplicity. The idea of complicity in architecture is more unusual, more uncommon. Complicity is the only guarantee that we'll be able to push the boundaries. But we need to consider this in a very broad sense. If this complicity is established, it means that something more than simple comprehension is going on between people, a shared meaning, mutual assistance. Obviously, I can't build the Cartier Foundation building if I don't establish a relationship of complicity with the person who conceived and manages it. And this complicity has to exist among the crew, an enterprise, a global project. There has to be a shared dynamic, one that's often unspoken but translated into actions. However, the word "complicity" is not always well received. In this world, where everyone is trying to find their place, if you start weaving privileged links, you're accused of plotting, of cheating. If you set up relationships that are more than contractual, if you begin to enjoy doing something, you're called on the carpet. . . . You're not supposed to have fun while doing architecture! And you're especially not supposed to talk about desire before talking about the project requirements. However, all the great architects made their careers by exploiting this sense of complicity between contractor and client. For example, look at Gaudi or Gehry: contractor and client were inseparable.

Freedom as Self-Realization

J.B. Like seduction, "complicity" is a term with a bad reputation. Both are contrasted with an ideology of transparency. The complicity of a connection can't be "exposed," but at best suggested. Personally, I'm not sure how free we are to accept such

complicity. Obviously I have a kind of prejudice against freedom. Against liberation, in any case. Freedom has become the ideal of modernity. And this no longer seems to pose any problems. When the individual is freed, he no longer knows what he is. Be yourself! Be free! That's part of the idea, the new diktat of modernity. Under the constraints of this new liberation, the individual is forced to find an identity for himself. Today we still live with the ultimatum that we find our identity, fulfill ourselves, realize our full potential. In this sense we are "free" because we have the technical means for this realization. But this is a prodigal freedom and culminates in individualism. It hasn't always been like this. The freedom of a subject struggling with his freedom is something else. Today we have an individual who isn't struggling with anything but who has set himself the goal of realizing himself in every possible dimension. We can't really postulate the problem of freedom. It's no more than a kind of operationality.

J.N. Is that what you mean when you write, "Ultimately, we exist in a society where the concept of architecture is no longer possible, the architect no longer has any freedom"?

J.B. No, not exactly. What would freedom mean within an ideological field that is no longer the same? Freedom in a state of subjection, want, is an idea and, at the same time, a kind of destiny: you desire it, you look for it. Liberation is not at all the same thing as freedom. That's what I wanted to make clear. When you're free, when you think you're living a realized freedom, it's a trap. You are standing before a mirage of the realization of various possibilities. . . . Everything that was once idea, dream, utopia, is virtually realized. You are faced with the paradox of a freedom that has no finality. It's simply the consecration of your identity.

J.N. What are you saying?

J.B. Well, that you have the right to fulfill yourself in the name of this freedom. Simply put, at some point in time, you no longer

know who you are. It's a surgical operation. The history of your identity helps set the trap. The sexes find their sexual identity, and nothing more is shared between them, they exist in their own bubble. Alterity? Freedom is charged with a heavy load of remorse. And the liberation of people, in the historical sense of the term, is also a fantastic deception. There is always an element of the unthinkable that won't have been evacuated. So there's a kind of remorse because of what's transpired. We're free—so what? Everything begins at the point where, in reality, we have the impression that something was supposed to be fulfilled. Take the idea that the individual becomes free—every man for himself, of course. At that point there is a terrible betrayal toward . . . something like the species, I don't know what else to say about it. Everyone dreams of individual emancipation, and yet there remains a kind of collective remorse about it. This surfaces in the form of self-hatred, deadly experimentation, fratricidal warfare . . . a morbid state of affairs. There is even a final requirement that this state of affairs itself be questioned. Liberation is too good to be true. So you look for a destiny, an alterity, which is artificial, most of the time. You're forced to invent the alterity, to invent something risky, to rediscover at least a kind of ideal freedom, not a realized form, because that really is unbearable. The absence of destiny is itself a fatality! So what can the architect do with this freedom?

J.N. The architect is not free himself. . . . And men are not free with respect to architecture. Architecture is always a response to a question that wasn't asked. Most of the time, we are asked to handle contingencies, and if while handling these needs, we can create a bit of architecture, so much the better. . . . But we also realize that three-quarters of the planet is not actively thinking about architecture. And where it is too present, people resent it. Where is the point of balance between these two extremes?

J.B. It's not a handicap; it's a strategic value.

J.N. Regardless of the future form our civilization takes, there will always be a place for architecture, there will always be a particular

strategy for inhabiting it, a territory to defend. Even if we start with the assumption that the city will disappear, in the sense that it will no longer be physically present as a territory—which doesn't lend itself to an urban vision of architecture—there will still always be architectural acts that assume some relation to the new data and which will be a source of pleasure. We've been told that the book would disappear with the Internet, but we'll always need a home, some place to live. . . . Even if the architectural gesture tends to become increasingly automatic.

J.B. For cloned encephalons!

J.N. An automatic architecture created by interchangeable architects. This fatality doesn't bother us; it's an essential part of today's reality. We still have the exception to invalidate the rule.

The philosopher and writer **Jean Baudrillard** has taught at several universities around the world. He is the author of numerous books and essays. In English his most notable works are *Simulacra and Simulation, America, The Vital Illusion, Symbolic Exchange and Death,* and *Consumer Society.*

Jean Nouvel, an architect of international renown, has designed L'Institut du Monde Arabe and the Cartier Foundation in Paris. With Paul Jodard, he is author of *International Design Yearbook* (1995) and *Present and Futures: Architecture in Cities.* He also worked with Conway Lloyd Morgan on *Jean Nouvel: The Elements of Architecture.*

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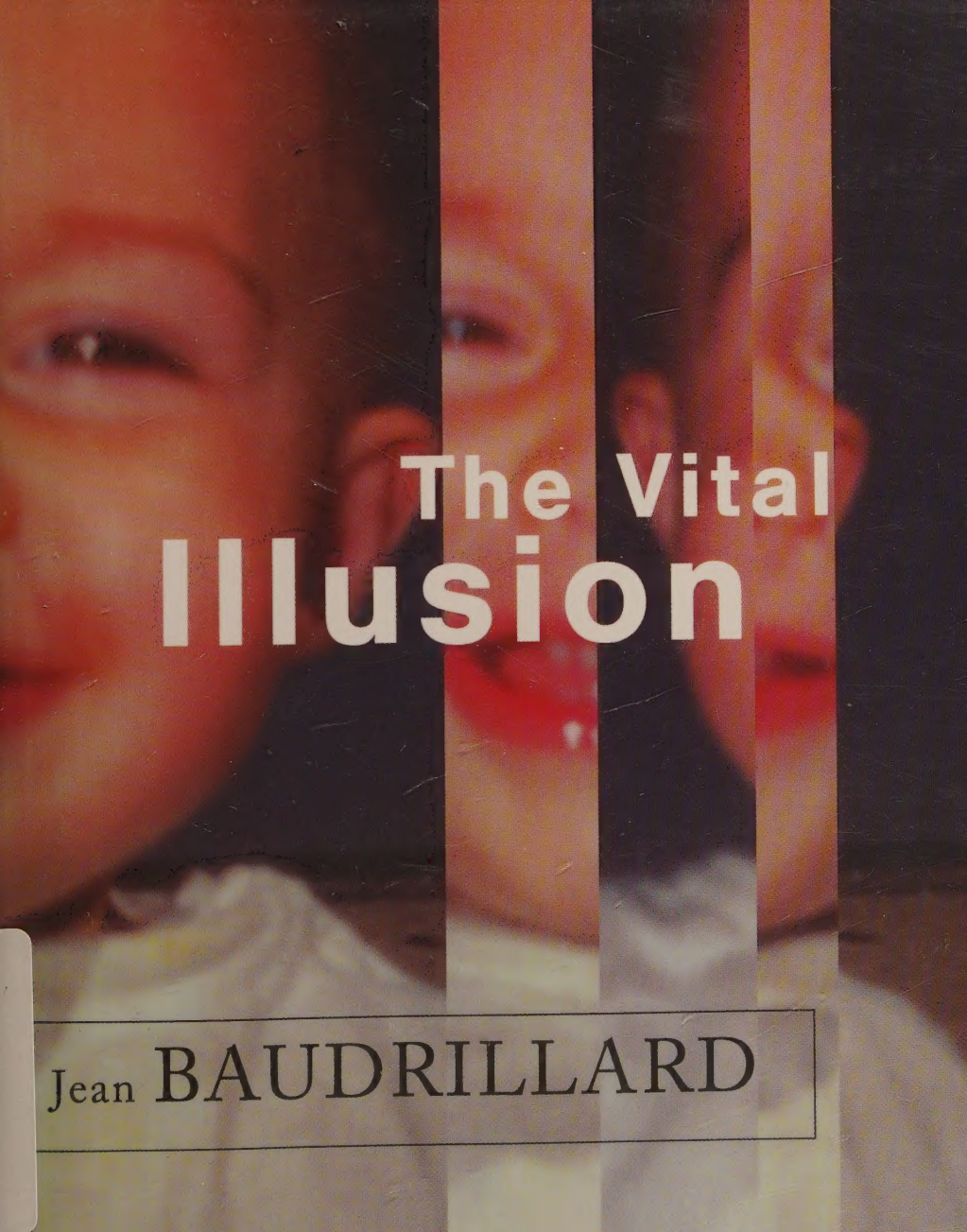
The Vital
Illusion
Jean BAUDRILLARD

"Aren't we actually sick of sex, of difference, of emancipation, of culture?" With this provocative taunt, the indomitable sociologist Jean Baudrillard challenges us to face up to our deadly, technologically empowered renunciation of mortality and subjectivity as he grapples with the complex issues that define our postmillennial world. What does the advent and proliferation of cloning mean for our sense of ourselves as human beings? What does the turn of the millennium say about our relation to time and history? What does the instantaneous, virtual realm of cyberspace do to reality? In *The Vital Illusion*—as always—Baudrillard leads his readers to some surprising conclusions.

Baudrillard considers how human cloning—as well as the "cloning" of ideas and social identities—heralds an end to sex and death and the divagations of living by instituting a realm of the Same, beyond the struggles of individuation. In this day and age when everything can be cloned, simulated, programmed, and genetically and neurologically managed, humanity shows itself unable to brave its own diversity, preferring instead to regress to the pathological eternity of self-replicating cells. By reverting to our viral origins as sexless immortal beings, we are, ironically, fulfilling a death wish, putting an end to our own species as we know it.

Next, Baudrillard explores the "non-event" that was and is the turn of the millennium. He provocatively puts forward the thesis that the arrival of the year 2000 could never take place because we could neither resolve nor leave

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THE VITAL ILLUSION

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EDITORIAL NOTE

The Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory are given annually at the University of California, Irvine, under the auspices of the Critical Theory Institute. The following lectures were given in May 1999. A complete list of previously published Welleck Library Lectures follows the index.

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THE VITAL ILLUSION

Jean Baudrillard

Edited by Julia Witwer

CONCORDIA COLLEGE LIBRARY
BRONXVILLE, NY 10708

Columbia University Press New York

Columbia University Press
Publishers Since 1893
New York Chichester, West Sussex
Copyright © 2000 Columbia University Press
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Baudrillard, Jean.
The vital illusion / Jean Baudrillard ;
edited by Julia Witwer.
p. cm – (Wellek Library lectures)
Includes index.
ISBN 978-0-231-12100-2
1. Reality. 2. Virtual reality. 3. Cloning.
I. Witwer, Julia. II. Title.
III. Wellek Library lectures at the
University of California Irvine.
BD331 .B287 2000
194–dc21 00–034567

Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books
are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Audrey Smith

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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THE VITAL ILLUSION

1

THE FINAL SOLUTION: CLONING BEYOND THE HUMAN AND INHUMAN

The question concerning cloning is the question of immortality. We all want immortality. It is our ultimate fantasy, a fantasy that is also at work in all of our modern sciences and technologies–at work, for example, in the deep freeze of cryonic suspension and in cloning in all its manifestations.

The most notorious example of cryonic suspension is–naturally–Walt Disney, but he, at least, being destined for resurrection, is said to have been frozen whole, in his "integrity." There are more anomalous situations today. Nowadays, in Phoenix, Arizona (the predestined site for Resurrection), only the heads are frozen, because it's from the cells of the brain–regarded as the nucleus of individual being–that researchers hope to reconstitute the deceased in their bodily wholeness. (One can't help but wonder why they don't, in that case, simply preserve a single cell or a DNA molecule.)

To complement these heads without bodies: On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, headless frogs and mice are being cloned in private laboratories, in preparation for the cloning of headless human bodies that will serve as reservoirs for organ donation. Why bodies without heads? As the head is considered the site of consciousness, it is thought that bodies *with heads* would pose ethical and psychological problems. Better simply to manufacture acephalic creatures whose organs could be freely harvested, because such creatures would not compete with—or invoke too closely—the original human beings.

These, then, are the experimental and artificial forms of cloning—not including Dolly, of course, and the rest of her kind. But spontaneous cloning, and in fact spontaneous immortality, can also be found in nature, at the heart of our cells.

Ordinarily, a cell is destined to divide a certain number of times and then to die. If, in the course of its division, something happens to perturb this process—for example, an alteration in the gene that prevents tumors or in the mechanisms governing cellular apoptosis—then the cell becomes cancer-

ous. It *forgets to die*; it forgets *how* to die. It goes on to clone itself again and again, making thousands of identical copies of itself, thus forming a tumor. Normally the subject dies as a result, and the cancerous cells die with him or her. But in the case of Henrietta Lacks, the tumor cells sampled from her body were cultured in a laboratory and will continue to proliferate endlessly. They constitute so remarkable and virulent a specimen that they have been circulated throughout the world and even sent into space, on board the U.S. satellite Discoverer 17. So it is that the disseminated body of Henrietta Lacks, cloned at the molecular level, makes its immortal rounds.

There is something occulted inside us: our death. But something else is hidden there, lying in wait for us within each of our cells: the forgetting of death. In our cells our immortality lies in wait for us. It's common to speak of the struggle of life against death, but there is an inverse peril. And we must struggle against the possibility that we will not die. At the slightest hesitation in the fight for death—a fight for division,

for sex, for alterity, and so for death—living beings become once again indivisible, identical to one another—and immortal.

Contrary to everything that seems obvious and "natural," nature's first creatures were immortal. It was only by obtaining the power to die, by dint of constant struggle, that we became the living beings we are today. Blindly we dream of overcoming death through immortality, when all the time immortality is the most horrific of possible fates. Encoded in the earliest life of our cells, this fate is now reappearing on our horizons, so to speak, with the advent of cloning. (The death drive, according to Freud, is precisely this nostalgia for a state before the appearance of individuality and sexual differentiation, a state in which we lived before we became mortal and distinct from one another. Absolute death is not the end of the individual human being; rather, it is a regression toward a state of minimal differentiation among living beings, of a pure repetition of identical beings.)

The evolution of the biosphere is what drives immortal beings to become mortal ones. They move, little by little,

from the absolute continuity found in the subdivision of the same—in bacteria—toward the possibility of birth and death. Next, the egg becomes fertilized by a sperm and specialized sex cells make their appearance. The resulting entity is no longer a copy of either one of the pair that engendered it; rather, it is a new and singular combination. There is a shift from pure and simple reproduction to procreation: the first two will die for the first time, and the *third* for the first time will be born. We reach the stage of beings that are sexed, differentiated, and mortal. The earlier order of the virus—of immortal beings—is perpetuated, but henceforward this world of deathless things is contained inside the world of the mortals. In evolutionary terms, the victory goes to beings that are mortal and distinct from one another: the victory goes to us.

But the game isn't over yet, and reversion is always possible. It can be found not only in the viral revolt of our cells but also in the enormous enterprise we living beings ourselves undertake today: a project to reconstruct a homogeneous and uniformly consistent universe—an artificial continuum this time—that unfolds within a technological and

mechanical medium, extending over our vast information network, where we are in the process of building a perfect clone, an identical copy of our world, a virtual artifact that opens up the prospect of endless reproduction.

We are in the process of reactivating this pathological immortality, the immortality of the cancer cell, both at the individual level and at the level of the species as a whole. This is the revenge taken on mortal and sexed beings by immortal and undifferentiated life forms. This is what could be called the final solution.

After the great *revolution* in the evolutionary process–the advent of sex and death–we have the great *involution*: it aims, through cloning and many other techniques, to liberate us from sex and death. Where once living creatures strove, over millions of years, to pull themselves free of this kind of incest and primitive entropy, we are now, through scientific advances themselves, in the process of recreating precisely these conditions. We are actively working at the "dis-information" of our species through the nullification of differences.

Here we must pose the question of the destination of the

scientific project. We must consider the possibility that the very "progress" of science in fact does not follow a line, but a curve–a twisted or hairpin curve that turns back toward total involution. And we must ask if this final solution toward which we unconsciously work is not the secret destination of nature, as well as of all our efforts. This throws a fairly harsh light on everything we still, today, persist in regarding as a positive evolution, as a *step forward*.

The sexual revolution–the real one, the *only* one–is the advent of sexuality in the evolution of living things, of a duality that puts an end to perpetual indivision and successive iterations of the same. In this, the sexual revolution is also the revolution of death. It is the revolution of death, as opposed to the infinite survival of the same. The inverse movement we are describing here is an *involutionary* movement of the species, a retreat from the revolution of sex and death, a massive revisionist movement in the evolution of living things.

From this point of view, "sexual liberation" is thoroughly

ambivalent. Though sexual liberation seems at first to be in keeping with the sexual revolution of which it is the final, positive, and definitive moment, it seems, upon further analysis, to have ambiguous repercussions. In the end these repercussions may be completely opposed to the goals of the sexual revolution itself.

The first phase of sexual liberation involves the dissociation of sexual activity from procreation through the pill and other contraceptive devices—a transformation with enormous consequences. The second phase, which we are beginning to enter now, is the dissociation of reproduction from sex. First, sex was liberated from reproduction; today it is reproduction that is liberated from sex, through asexual, biotechnological modes of reproduction such as artificial insemination or full body cloning. This is also a liberation, though antithetical to the first. We've been sexually liberated, and now we will find ourselves liberated from sex—that is, virtually relieved of the sexual function. Among the clones (and among human beings soon enough), sex, as a result of this automatic means of reproduction, becomes extraneous, a useless function. Thus sexual liberation, the

so-called crowning achievement of the evolution of sexed forms of life, marks, in its final consequences, the end of the sexual revolution. It is the same ambiguity that troubles science. The calculated benefits both of sexual liberation and of the scientific revolution are inextricably bound up with with their negative countereffects.

And death? Entwined as it is with sex, it must eventually suffer the same fate. There is, in effect, a liberation from death that parallels liberation from sex. As we have dissociated reproduction from sex, so we try to dissociate life from death. To save and promote life and life only, and to render death an obsolete function one can do without, as, in the case of artificial reproduction, we can do without sex.

So death, as a fatal or symbolic event, must be erased. Death must be included only as virtual reality, as an option or changeable setting in the living being's operating system. This is a reprogramming that proceeds along the lines of the virtualization of sex, the "cybersex" that waits for us in the future, as a sort of ontological "attraction." All these useless functions—sex, thought, death—will be redesigned, redesignated as leisure activities. And human beings, henceforth

useless, might themselves be preserved as a kind of ontological "attraction." This could be another aspect of what Hegel has called the moving life of what is dead. Death, once a vital function, could thus become a luxury, a diversion. In future modes of civilization, from which death will have been eliminated, clones of the future may well pay for the luxury of dying and become mortal once again in simulation: cyberdeath.

A sort of anticipation of cloning can be found in nature itself, in the phenomenon of twins and twinship (*gemellité*). We can perceive a kind of cloning in the hallucinatory redoubling of the same, in the primitive symmetry that makes the two twins seem to be like two halves of a single self, of the same individual–and we escape the phantasm only by way of a break, a rupture of the symmetry. But perhaps we have never properly escaped our double; and cloning, then, may simply be reviving this hallucination of the same, of the twin from whom we have never quite been separated. At the same time we may see in cloning the resurgence of our fascination with an archaic form of incest with the original twin, and the grave psychotic consequences of

such a primitive fantasy (Cronenberg's film *Dead Ringers* is a dramatic illustration of this).

Most of the time this twinship remains obscure and symbolic, but whenever it materializes, it illuminates the mystery of the symbolic separation, of the invisible division found at the heart of each of us. (Indeed, there are some who claim to have discovered its biological trace.) From this internal division surely comes the sacred, or rather the accursed character of twinship in every culture. In our culture, however, we also see the other side of this accursedness—the endless resentment and remorse associated with individuation. It is effectively only through this original separation, this "ontological" cleavage from the twin, that the individual being first appears and, with it, the possibility of alterity and of a dual relation. And so we are individuated, and proud of it; but somewhere inside, in an unconscious still deeper than the psychological unconscious, we never overcome, we never fully accept this separation and this individuation.

Is there not a terror of and a nostalgia for this double, and, to go further, for the whole multiplicity of *semblables*

from whom we have divided ourselves in the course of evolution? Do we not, after all, deeply regret our individuation?

In effect, we have here a double repentance. Not only do we repent of the emancipation of the individual from the species but, more profoundly still, we repent of having become sexed forms of life, of our evolution from the inorganic to the living world. That is how it goes. Any given liberation, emancipation, or individuation is also experienced as anomie and as betrayal, in fact as the source of endless neurosis, a neurosis that becomes increasingly serious as one moves further away from the nostalgic point of origin. Liberty is hard to take. Life itself, finally, may be hard to take, as a rupturing of the inorganic chain of matter. In a way it is the revenge of the species, the revenge of the immortal forms of life that we thought we had overcome.

In cloning–this collective fantasy of a return to a non-individuated existence and a destiny of undifferentiated life, this temptation to return to an indifferent immortality–we see the very form of a repentance of the living toward the unliving. This repentance arises from the depths of a past

time; we pine for a state that is long gone but that will be possible again by virtue of our technologies, becoming eventually an object of our fascination, our nostalgia, and our desire.

This may well be the story of a deliberate project to put an end to the genetic game of difference, to stop the divagations of the living. Aren't we actually sick of sex, of difference, of emancipation, of culture? The world of individuals and social relations itself offers striking examples of this exhaustion—or resistance—or nostalgic attachment to some prior state of being. In any case, we are dealing with a kind of revisionism, a crucial revision of the whole process of evolution and especially that of the human race—a species unable to brave its own diversity, its own complexity, its own radical difference, its own alterity.

But perhaps we may see this as a kind of adventure, a heroic test: to take the artificialization of living beings as far as possible in order to see, finally, what part of human nature survives the great ordeal. If we discover that not everything can be cloned, simulated, programmed, genetically and neurologically managed, then whatever survives

could truly be called "human": some inalienable and indestructible human quality could finally be identified. Of course, there is always the risk, in this experimental adventure, that nothing will pass the test–that the human will be permanently eradicated.

Such was the lesson of Biosphere 2, the artificial synthesis of all the planet's systems, the ideal copy of the human race and its environment. Biosphere 2 reveals in miniature the fact that the human race and the entire planet are already becoming their own virtual reality, that underneath its vast geodesic dome of information, the planet has already embarked on an experimental path from which there is no return. From this moment on it is possible to ask if we are still dealing with human beings. Is a species that succeeds in synthesizing its own immortality, and that seeks to transform itself into pure information, still particularly a human species?

Humankind does not discriminate; it willingly becomes its own guinea pig under the same terms as the rest of the world, animate and inanimate. Humankind blithely plays with its own future as a species in the same way that it

plays with the future of all other creatures. In its blind quest to possess greater knowledge, humankind programs its own destruction with the same casual ferocity that it applies to the destruction of everything else. You could hardly accuse humanity of egocentrism. Humanity sacrifices itself as a whole species to an unknown experimental fate—unknown before this, in any case, to other species, who have never known any fate but a natural one. And while this natural destiny would seem related to something like an instinct for self-preservation, the new experimental destiny to which the human race devotes itself sweeps away all instinct for self-preservation. The disappearance of this concept from the fields of research indicates that, behind the ecological obsession with protection and conservation—which has much more to do with nostalgia and remorse—an entirely different inclination has taken over: the inclination to sacrifice the entire species to limitless experimentation.

And so a double and contradictory movement: Humankind, alone among all living things, tries to build itself a deathless alter ego and at the same time to perfect natural

selection through artificial selection—an act that confers on the human being an absolute privilege. Yet at the same time and precisely through this action, humankind puts an end to natural selection, a process that implies, according to the laws of evolution, the death of any given species—including its own. By ending natural selection, humankind contravenes symbolic law, and in so doing effectively risks its own disappearance. Not, this time, because of natural law, but by way of its detour. In their arrogant plan to bring evolution to an end, human beings set in motion the involution of their own kind, which is in the process of losing its specificity, its very immunity. For the death rate of artificial species is even more rapid than that of natural species. By taking an artificial course, our species may be running all the more quickly into its own decline.

All this derives from a strange fact: apparently, the human race cannot bear itself, cannot bear to be reconciled to itself. Paralleling the violence it wreaks on other living things, there is a violence peculiar to humankind, wreaked by itself on itself. It is as if, through this self-inflicted violence, humanity wants to make itself ready from now on to

be the survivor of some great impending catastrophe. As if, all the while being proud and convinced of its superiority, humankind nevertheless resents the evolutionary process that has elevated it to this privileged position and pushed it, in some fashion, beyond its natural limits as a species.

The same configuration appears in Canetti's description of our exit from history. In experimentation we find a similar movement, but this time it is a passage out of the human per se, a passage even more fatal, a movement toward the point beyond which we can recognize neither human nor inhuman. Much like the point, in Canetti, beyond which the words "truth" and "falsehood" no longer have any meaning. Indeed, to push Canetti's analysis further, the stakes are no longer only that "history" is slipping into the "posthistorical," but that the human race is slipping into the void.

Have we come, via an unexpected detour, to the same point at which animal species, when they reach a critical saturation point, automatically switch over to a kind of collective suicide?

The inhumanity of this undertaking is legible in the abolition of all that is "human, all too human" in us: our desires,

our failings, our neuroses, our dreams, our handicaps, our viruses, our frenzies, our unconscious, and even our sexuality. Prescriptions are being placed on all the specific qualities that make us unique living beings. The specter that haunts genetic manipulation is the genetic ideal, a perfect model obtained through the elimination of all negative traits. In the experimental prototype Biosphere 2, for example, we find no viruses, no germs, no scorpions . . . and no sexual reproduction. Everything in Biosphere 2 has been purified, immunized–immortalized–through transparency, disincarnation, and prophylactic disinfection.

Life becomes sheer survival when it is reduced to the lowest common denominator, to the genome, the genetic inheritance–where it is the perpetual movement of the DNA codes that drives life, and where the distinctive marks of the human fade before the metonymic eternity of cells. The worst of it is that living beings engendered by their own genetic formulae doubtless will not survive this process of reduction. That which lives and survives by the codes will die by them.

The limits of the human and the inhuman are in the

process of being worn away—but the human does not give way to the superhuman, as Nietzsche had dreamed, with his transvaluation of values. Rather, it gives way to the subhuman, to something not beyond but underneath the human, to an erasure of those symbolic marks that make up the species. A fact that proves that Nietzsche was right after all when he said the human race, left to its own devices, is capable only of redoubling its efforts, of re-doubling itself—or of destroying itself.

Traditional humanism, that of the Enlightenment, was based on the qualities of man, on his natural gifts and virtues—on his essence, which went hand-in-hand with his right to liberty and the exercise of that liberty. Contemporary humanism, in its expanded version, is affiliated more and more with the preservation of the individual and of humankind as a genetically defined entity. When we look behind the Rights of Man, we no longer find a moral or sovereign being, but instead the prerogatives of an endangered species. Then these rights become problematic, for they

pose the question of the rights of other species, or of children, or of nature itself–in contrast to which the human species has to define itself.

But is there even a *genetic* definition of the human? And if it does exist, does a species have rights to its own genome and to its own eventual genetic transformation? We share 98 percent of our genes with apes and fully 90 percent of them with mice. Based on this common inheritance, what rights shall revert to the apes and the mice? Furthermore, it appears that some 90 percent of the genes making up our genome serve no purpose at all. What right do these genes have to exist? This is a critical question: if we describe them as useless, we arrogate to ourselves the right to destroy them.

The same thing goes for any given aspect of humanity itself: once the human is no longer defined in terms of transcendence and liberty, but in terms of functions and of biological equilibrium, the definition of the human itself begins to fade, along with that of humanism. Occidental humanism was already challenged by the irruption of other cultures as early as the sixteenth century. Now the assault is not

only against a particular culture but against the whole species: *anthropological* deregulation, along with the deregulation of all the moral, juridical, and symbolic codes that founded humanism. Is it possible to speak of the soul, or the conscience, or even of the unconscious from the point of view of the automatons, the chimeras, and the clones that will supersede the human race? Both the individual and the species's capital are jeopardized by the erosion of the limits of the human, by the slide, not just into the inhuman but into something that is neither human nor inhuman: namely, the genetic simulation of life.

The mutual interplay between human and inhuman—the balance between them—has been disrupted. Certainly the eventual disappearance of the human is very serious, but the loss of the inhuman is no less serious. The specificity of the inhuman—and of that *within* the human being that is, so to speak, inhuman—is being threatened by the hegemony of the human, according to its definition as thoroughly modern, thoroughly rational, and thoroughly Western in character. The impulse to annex nature, animals, other races and cultures—to put them universally under jurisdiction—is in

effect everywhere. Everything is assigned a place within an evolutionist and hegemonic anthropology, in a veritable triumph of uniform thought, of a monothought (*une pensée unique*) of the human–as defined by the West, under the sign of the universal and of democracy. The Rights of Man today are the vector of this anthropic, anthropocratic thought, behind which the human and the inhuman proliferate–in apparent contradiction but in actual complicity with one another. And so we now experience both the "improvement" of human rights and the recrudescence of their violation.

Non-Occidental cultures do not discriminate between the human and the inhuman. *We* invented the distinction, and *we* are in the process of erasing it. Not by crossing the line and reconciling the two; rather, the erasure operates in absentia, through technological undifferentiation.

Again: the final solution, the vertigo of a final solution.

It might be argued that whatever the genetic destination of the clone may be, it will never be exactly the same as the original. (Well, of course not, as the clone will have had an Original, which cannot be said of the original itself.) But the

main argument is that there is nothing to fear from biogenetically engineered cloning, because whatever happens, culture will continue to differentiate us. Salvation lies in our acquirements: culture alone will preserve us from the hell of the Same.

In fact, exactly the reverse is true. It is culture that clones us, and mental cloning anticipates any biological cloning. It is the matrix of acquired traits that, today, clones us culturally under the sign of monothought—and it is all the innate differences that are annulled, inexorably, by ideas, by ways of life, by the cultural context. Through school systems, media, culture, and mass information, singular beings become identical copies of one another. It is this kind of cloning—social cloning, the industrial reproduction of things and people—that makes possible the biological conception of the genome and of genetic cloning, which only further sanctions the cloning of human conduct and human cognition.

All this radically alters the ethical questions surrounding the prescriptive limits on cloning and the rights of the individual facing scientific and technological experimenta-

tion–in short, everything that is currently being discussed by the ethics boards and the committees for collective moral thought. Yet beyond their political, ideological, and commercial purposes, the speculations of the committees are useless, since it is the culture of difference itself, our humanist ethos *itself*, that works most efficiently in the direction of undifferentiation, of human Xerox copies, and of monothought. This new regime has at least some positive aspect, however, insofar as it offers us the chance to call into question the basic elements of millenarian morality.

This matter of the clones, in fact, could call a number of things into question–and that is the irony of the situation. The clone, after all, could also appear as a grotesque parody of the original. It is not hard to imagine a whole range of potential problems and new conflicts issuing from cloning that would turn oedipal psychology upside down. Consider, for instance, a clone of the future overthrowing his father, not in order to sleep with his mother–which would be impossible, anyway, since she is nothing but a matrix of cells, and besides, the "father" could very well be a woman–but in order to secure his status as the Original. Or imagine,

instead, the disenfranchised original working his revenge on his clone . . . all sorts of conflicts that would no longer center on the child and his or her parents but on the original and its double. It is possible to imagine entirely new functions for clones, quite different from those assigned them today, which all hinge on the perpetuation of life. For instance, they could function as instruments for the satisfaction of the death instinct—as recipients of a death wish. Kill your clone, destroy yourself with no risk of actually dying: vicarious suicide.

But our moralists and our biologists are not yet at this point; they have not yet discovered the operation of the death drive as a fundamental part of the human individual and of the human race. For just as there is a drive for immortality, to which techniques such as cloning respond, so there is a death drive. As we have seen, these drives are in play simultaneously, and it is possible that one is nothing but a variant of the other, nothing but its detour.

The silver lining of this fatal enterprise is that it reveals to us something that radical philosophies already know: there is no morality to oppose to this immoral desire, this techno-

logical desire for immortality. There are no laws of nature and no moral law that would be their manifestation. The notion of such a law springs from an idealized vision of the world, one that is perpetuated, I would add, by science itself. There are no natural rights of the individual, or of the species, from the point of view of an ideal definition. Thus there is no interdiction that could be founded on a division between good and evil.

There is, however, a different division. The stakes are not moral but symbolic. There are rules to the game of living, whose forms are secret, whose finality is inscrutable. Life "means" nothing, not even human life; if it is precious, it's not as a value but as a form, a form that exceeds all individual and collective value. Today, life is preserved insofar as it has value, that is, insofar as it has exchange value. But if life is precious, it is because it has no exchange value–because exchanging it for some ultimate value is impossible. The world is that which cannot be traded as currency for any other world, above all for a virtual world. The human is that which cannot be traded as currency for any given artificial species, such as clones, even if the clones perform better, are

a "better value." A form—and life is a form—can only be exchanged with another form, never traded for an equivalent. There is a change from one form to another, but there is no way to exchange a form for a general equivalent.

In this respect, the forms—the species, or life itself—obey no moral law but are vectors of a vital illusion. Thus it makes no sense to oppose the immortality of the Same, of repetition, of the clone, of the virus, with a morality of values and differences; it is necessary to oppose *immortality* with the superior *immorality* of forms. And of thought, also—for thought is another thing that cannot be exchanged, either for some objective truth (as in science) or for an artificial double, such as artificial intelligence. Thought is singular, and in its singularity thought may be able to protect us.

Thus, a double movement: first the reign of the immortals, then the mortal and sexed beings overtaking the immortals; Today, however, the immortals are silently avenging themselves through the processes of cloning, through interminable reduplication, through the obliteration of sex and death.

But this game is not yet over. We can count on fierce

resistance from the mortal creatures that we are, a resistance that springs out of the depths of the species, its vital exigency, its refusal of any final solution. This refusal is not a matter of human rights; it is a matter of life and death.

2

THE MILLENNIUM, OR THE SUSPENSE OF THE YEAR 2000

How can we jump over our shadows when we no longer have any? How can we pass out of the old century (not to speak of the millennium) if we do not make up our minds to put an end to it, engaged as we are in an indefinite work of mourning for all the incidents, ideologies, and violence that have marked it? The–more or less hypocritical–commemorations and recantations give the impression that we are trying to run the events of the century back through the filter of memory, not in order to find a meaning for them–they have clearly lost that meaning somewhere along the way–but in order to whitewash them, or to launder them. Cleansing is the prime activity of this fin de siècle–the laundering of a dirty history, of dirty money, of corrupt consciousnesses, of the polluted planet–the cleansing of memory being indissolubly linked to the (hygienic) cleansing of the environment or to the (racial and ethnic) cleansing of populations. We are turning away from history "in progress," with none of the

problems it poses having been resolved, and plunging into a regressive history, in the nostalgic hope of making something politically correct out of it. And in this retrospective, necrospective obsession, we are losing any chance of things coming to their term. This is why I advanced the idea that the Year 2000 would not take place—quite simply, because the history of this century had already come to an end, because we are remaking it interminably and because, therefore, metaphorically speaking, we shall never pass on, into the future.

Our millenarianism—for we have reached, all the same, a millenarian deadline—is a millenarianism with no tomorrow. Whereas the coming of the Year 1000, even though it was experienced with dread, was a prelude to *parousia* and to the advent of the Kingdom of God, and hence the prelude to an infinite promise, our own deadline remains a closed, involuted one. All we have left of the millenarian dateline is the countdown to it. A perfect symbol for the century—which could do nothing more than count the seconds separating it from its end—is the digital clock on the Beaubourg Center in Paris that showed the countdown in millions of seconds. It

illustrates the reversal of our modern relation to time. Time is no longer counted progressively, by addition, starting from an origin—but by subtraction, starting from the end. This is what happens with rocket launches and time bombs. And that end is no longer the symbolic endpoint of a history but the mark of a zero sum, of a potential exhaustion. Time is viewed from a perspective of entropy—the exhausting of all possibilities—the perspective of a counting down . . . to infinity. We no longer possess a forward-looking, historical, or providential vision, which was the vision of a world of progress or production. The final illusion of history, the final utopia of time no longer exists, since it is already registered there as something potentially accounted for, calculated in digital time, just as the finalities of the human cease to exist at the point where they come to be registered in a genetic capital and are looked at solely from the biological perspective of the exploitation of the genome. When you count the seconds separating you from the end, it means that everything is already at an end, that moreover we are already beyond the end.

By the way: something happened to this digital clock. It

was removed from the front of the Beaubourg, relegated to a storehouse at the Parc de la Villette without anyone knowing about it. For a long time it was there ticking in the dark—a very heavy symbol of the destiny of Time at the end of the twentieth century. Then it was displaced again to the Place de la Bastille (the story of the inventor and the EDF: time doesn't work anymore). This is a truly illuminating emblem of Y2K's failure to take place. Even the sign of it was removed in anticipation. It seems that no right place is to be found for the end.

Was it for fear of this deadline? Growing anxiety about this deadline? Or did it mean, as we said, that this end had already occurred, secretly, furtively—perhaps at the very beginning of the countdown?—and that it now lay behind us? And then the registration of it would be useless. The same thing goes for the Apocalypse. The real event of the Apocalypse is behind us, among us, and we are instead confronted with the virtual reality of the Apocalypse, with the posthumous comedy of the Apocalypse. Maybe it was already the same with the first millennium, with the Apocalypse of Y1K. "The writers of the Apocalypse send letter after letter to one another, instead of questioning the Antichrist himself." Then,

even they were already dealing with the virtual reality of the Apocalypse.

In the countdown, the time remaining is already past, and the maximal utopia of life gives way to the minimal utopia of survival. We are experiencing time and history in a kind of deep coma. This is the hysteresis of the millennium, which expresses itself in interminable crisis. It is no longer the future that lies before us, but an anorectic dimension—the impossibility of anything's being over and, at the same time, the impossibility of seeing beyond the present. Prediction, the memory of the future, diminishes in exact proportion to the memory of the past. When there is overall transparence, when everything can be seen, nothing can be *foreseen* anymore.

What is there beyond the end? Beyond the end extends virtual reality, the horizon of a programmed reality in which all our functions—memory, emotions, sexuality, intelligence—become progressively useless. Beyond the end, in the era of the transpolitical, the transsexual, the transaesthetic, all our

desiring machines become little spectacle machines, then quite simply bachelor machines, before trailing off into the countdown of the species. The countdown is the code of the automatic disappearance of the world, and all our little charitable machines, by way of which we anticipate that disappearance–the Telethons, Sidathons, and all kinds of Thanathons–are merely the promotional sales events for the misery of this fin de siècle.

But–and this is even more paradoxical–what are we to do when nothing really comes to an end anymore, that is to say, when nothing ever really takes place, since everything is already calculated, audited, and realized in advance (the simulacrum preceding the real, information preceding the event, etc.)? Our problem is no longer: What are we to make of real events, of real violence? Rather, it is: What are we to make of events that do not take place? Not: What are we to do after the orgy? But: What are we to do when the orgy no longer takes place–the orgy of history, the orgy of revolution and liberation, the orgy of modernity? Little by little, as the hands of the clock move around (though, sadly, digital clocks no longer even have hands), we tell ourselves that, taking

everything into account–taking everything into a "countdown"–modernity has never happened. There has never really been any modernity, never any real progress, never any assured liberation. The linear tension of modernity and progress has been broken, the thread of history has become tangled: the last great "historic" event–the fall of the Berlin Wall–signified something closer to an enormous repentance on the part of history. Instead of seeking fresh perspectives, history appears rather to be splintering into scattered fragments, and phases of events and conflicts we had thought long gone are being reactivated.

All that we believed over and done, left behind by the inexorable march of universal progress, is not dead at all; it seems to be returning to strike at the heart of our ultrasophisticated, ultravulnerable systems. It's a bit like the last scene of *Jurassic Park*, in which the modern (artificially cloned) dinosaurs burst into the museum and wreak havoc on their fossilized ancestors preserved there, before being destroyed in their turn. Today we are caught as a species in a similar impasse, trapped between our fossils and our clones.

So, the countdown extends in both directions: not only

does it put an end to time in the future but it also exhausts itself in the obsessional revival of the events of the past. A reversed recapitulation, which is the opposite of a living memory–it is fanatical *memorization*, a fascination with commemorations, rehabilitations, cultural museification, the listing of sites of memory, the extolling of heritage. In fact this obsession with reliving and reviving everything, this obsessional neurosis, this forcing of memory is equivalent to a vanishing of memory–a vanishing of actual history, a vanishing of the event in the information space. This amounts to making the past itself into a clone, an artificial double, and freezing it in a sham exactitude that will never actually do it justice. But it is because we have nothing else, now, but objects in which not to believe, nothing but fossilized hopes, that we are forced to go down this road: to elevate everything to the status of a museum piece, an item of heritage. Here again, time reverses: instead of things first passing through history before becoming part of the heritage, they now pass directly into the heritage. Instead of first existing, works of art now go straight into the museum. Instead of being born and dying, beings are "born" as virtual fossils. Collective neuro-

sis. As a result, the ozone layer that was protecting memory becomes frayed; the hole through which memories and time are leaking out into space expands, prefiguring the great migration of the void to the periphery.

Closing down, closing down! It's the end-of-the-century sale. Everything must go! Modernity is over (without ever having happened), the orgy is over, the party is over—the sales are starting. It's the great end-of-the-century sale. But the sales don't come after the festive seasons any longer; nowadays the sales start first, they last the whole year long, even the festivals themselves are on sale everywhere.... The stocks have to be used up, time-capital has to be used up, life-capital has to be used up. Everywhere, we have the countdown; what we are living through in this symbolic end of the old millennium is a sort of fatal prescription, whether it be that of the planet's resources or of AIDS, which has become the collective symptom of the prescribed term of death. It is all these things that hang over us in the shadow of the Year 2000, together with the delicious, yet terrifying enjoyment of the

lag time left to us. But, ultimately, perhaps the Year 2000 will not have taken place? Perhaps, on the occasion of the Year 2000, we are to be granted a general amnesty?

The concept of countdown evokes once again Arthur C. Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God." A community of Tibetan monks has been engaged from time immemorial in listing and copying out the names of God, of which there are nine billion. At the end of this, the world will end. So runs the prophecy. But the monks are tired and, in order to hasten the work, they call in the experts at IBM, who come along with their computers and finish the job in a month. It is as if the operation of the virtual dimension were to bring the history of the world to an end in an instant. Unfortunately, this also means the disappearance of the world in real time, for the prophecy of the end of the world associated with this countdown of the names of God is fulfilled. As they go back down into the valley, the technicians, who did not actually believe the prophecy, see the stars vanishing from the firmament, one by one.

This parable depicts our modern situation well: we have called in the IBM technicians and they have launched the

code of the world's automatic disappearance. As a result of the intervention of all the digital, computing, and virtual-reality technologies, we are already beyond reality; things have already passed beyond their own ends. They cannot, therefore, come to an end any longer, and they sink into the interminable (interminable history, interminable politics, interminable crisis).

And, in effect, we persevere, on the pretext of an increasingly sophisticated technology, in the endless deconstruction of a world and of a history unable to transcend and complete itself. Everything is free to go on infinitely. We no longer have the means to end processes. They unfold without us now, beyond reality, so to speak, in an endless speculation, an exponential acceleration. But, as a result, they do so in an indifference that is also exponential. What is endless is also desire-less, tension-less, passionless; it is bereft of events. An anorectic history, no longer fueled by real incidents and exhausting itself in the countdown. Exactly the opposite of the end of history, then: *the impossibility of finishing with history*. If history can no longer reach its end, then it is, properly speaking, no longer a history. We have lost history and

have also, as a result, lost the end of history. We are laboring under the illusion of the end, under the posthumous illusion of the end. And this is serious, for the end signifies that something has really taken place. Whereas we, at the height of reality—and with information at its peak—no longer know whether anything has taken place or not.

Perhaps the end of history, if we can actually conceive such a thing, is merely ironic? Perhaps it is merely an effect of the ruse of history, which consists in its having concealed the end from us, in its having ended without our noticing it. So that it is merely the end of history that is being fueled, whereas we believe we are continuing to make it. We are still awaiting its end, whereas that end has, in fact, already taken place. History's ruse was to make us believe in its end, when it has, in fact, already started back in the opposite direction.

Whether we speak of the end of history, the end of the political or the end of the social, what we are clearly dealing with is the end of *the scene of the political*, the end of *the scene of the social*, the end of *the scene of history*. In other words, in all these spheres, we are speaking of the advent of a specific era of *obscenity*. Obscenity may be characterized

as the endless, unbridled proliferation of the social, of the political, of information, of the economic, of the aesthetic, not to mention the sexual. Obesity is another of the figures of obscenity. As proliferation, as the saturation of a limitless space, obesity may stand as a general metaphor for our systems of information, communication, production, and memory. Obesity and obscenity form the contrapuntal figure for all our systems, which have been seized by something of an Ubuesque distension. All our structures end up swelling like red giants that absorb everything in their expansion. Thus the social sphere, as it expands, absorbs the political sphere entirely. But the political sphere is itself obese and obscene—and yet at the same time it is becoming increasingly transparent. The more it distends, the more it virtually ceases to exist. When everything is political, that is the end of politics as destiny; it is the beginning of politics as culture and the immediate poverty of that cultural politics. It is the same with the economic or the sexual spheres. As it dilates, each structure infiltrates and subsumes the others, before being absorbed in its turn.

Such are the extreme phenomena: those that occur

beyond the end (extreme = *ex terminis*). They indicate that we have passed from growth (*croissance*) to outgrowth (*ex-croissance*), from movement and change to stasis, *ek*-stasis, and metastasis. They countersign the end, marking it by excess, hypertrophy, proliferation, and chain reaction; they reach critical mass, overstep the critical deadline, through potentiality and exponentiality.

Ecstasy of the social: the masses. More social than the social.

Ecstasy of the body: obesity. Fatter than fat.

Ecstasy of information: simulation. Truer than true.

Ecstasy of time: real time, instantaneity. More present than the present.

Ecstasy of the real: the hyperreal. More real than the real.

Ecstasy of sex: porn. More sexual than sex.

Ecstasy of violence: terror. More violent than violence. . . .

All this describes, by a kind of potentiation, a raising to the second power, a pushing to the limit, a state of unconditional

realization, of total positivity (every negative sign raised to the second power produces a positive), from which all utopia, all death, and all negativity have been expunged. A state of ex-termination, cleansing of the negative, as corollary to all the other actual forms of purification and discrimination. Thus, freedom has been obliterated, liquidated by liberation; truth has been supplanted by verification; the community has been liquidated and absorbed by communication; form gives way to information and performance. Everywhere we see a paradoxical logic: the idea is destroyed by its own realization, by its own excess. And in this way history itself comes to an end, finds itself obliterated by the instantaneity and omnipresence of the event.

This kind of acceleration by inertia, this exponentiality of extreme phenomena, produces a new kind of event: now we encounter strange, altered, random, and chaotic events that Historical Reason no longer recognizes as its own. Even if, by analogy with past events, we think we recognize them, they no longer have the same meaning. The same incidents (wars, ethnic conflicts, nationalisms, the unification of Europe) do not have the same meaning when they arise as

part of a history in progress as they do in the context of a history in decline. Now, we find ourselves in a vanishing history, and that is why they appear as ghost events to us.

But is a ghost history, a spectral history, still a history?

Not only have we lost utopia as an ideal end, but historical time itself is also lost, in its continuity and its unfolding. Something like a short-circuit has occurred, a switch shift of the temporal dimension—effects preceding causes, ends preceding origins—and these have led to the paradox of achieved utopia. Now, achieved utopia puts paid to the utopian dimension. It creates an impossible situation, in the sense that it exhausts the possibilities. From this point on, the goal is no longer life transformed, which was the maximal utopia, but rather life-as-survival, which is a kind of minimal utopia.

So today, with the loss of utopias and ideologies, we lack objects of belief. But even worse, perhaps, we lack *objects in which not to believe*. For it is vital—maybe even more vital—to have things in which not to believe. Ironic objects, so to speak, dis-invested practices, ideas to believe or disbelieve as you like. Ideologies performed this ambiguous function

pretty well. All this is now jeopardized, vanishing progressively into extreme reality and extreme operationality.

Other things are emerging: retrospective utopias, the revival of all earlier or archaic forms of what is, in a sense, a retrospective or necrospective history. For the disappearance of avant-gardes, those emblems of modernity, has not brought the disappearance of the rearguard as well. Just the opposite is true. In this process of general retroversion (was history perhaps infected with a retrovirus?), the rearguard finds itself in point position.

Quite familiar by now is the parodic, palinodic event, the event Marx analyzed when he depicted Napoleon III as a grotesque copy of Napoleon I. In this second event–a cheap avatar of the original–we have a form of dilution, of historical entropy: history self-repeating becomes farce. The fake history presents itself as if it were advancing and continuing, when it is actually collapsing. The current period offers numerous examples of this debased, extenuated form of the primary events of modernity. Ghost-events, clone-events, *faux*-events, phantom-events–such as phantom limbs, those missing legs or arms that hurt

even when they are no longer there. Spectrality, of communism in particular.

Events that are more or less ephemeral because they no longer have any resolution except in the media (where they have the "resolution" images do, where they are "resolved" in high definition)—they have no political resolution. We have a history that no longer consists of action, of acts, but instead culminates in a virtual acting-out; it retains a spectral air of déja-vu. Sarajevo is a fine example of this unreal history, in which all the participants were just standing by, unable to act. It is no longer an event, but rather the symbol of a specific impotence of history. Everywhere, virtuality—the media hyperspace and the hyperspace of discourses—develops in a way diametrically opposed to what one might call, if it still existed, the real movement of history.

In the past the virtual was intended to become actual: actuality was its destination. Today the function of the virtual is to proscribe the actual. Virtual history is here in place of real history; the information-replica stands for, stands *in* for, the

definitive absence of that real history. Hence our lack of responsibility–both individual and collective–since we are already, by virtue of information, beyond the event, which has not taken place.

We might speak here of a kind of "event strike," to use Macedonio Fernandez's expression. What does this mean? That the work of history is over. That the work of mourning is beginning. That the system of information has been substituted for that of history and is starting to produce events in the same way that Capital is starting to produce Work. Just as labor, under these circumstances, no longer has any significance of its own, the event produced by information has no historical meaning of its own.

This is the point where we enter the transhistorical or transpolitical–that is to say, the sphere where events do not really take place precisely because they are produced and broadcast "in real time," where they have no meaning because they can have all possible meanings. We have, therefore, to grasp them now not politically but transpolitically–that is to say, *at the point where they become lost in the void of information*. The sphere of information is like a

space where, after events are deprived of their meaning, they receive an artificial gravity, where, after being flash-frozen politically and historically, they are restaged trans-politically, in real–that is to say, perfectly virtual–time. We might speak in the same way of the transeconomic sphere–in other words, the sphere where classical economics gets lost in the void of speculation, just as History gets lost in the void of information.

But, in the end, perhaps we have to frame all these problems in terms other than the obsolete ones of alienation and the fatal destiny of the subject. And it is precisely the Ubuesque side of this technological outgrowth, of this proliferating obscenity and obesity, of this unbridled virtuality, which induces us to do so. Our situation is a wholly pataphysical one–that is to say, everything around us has passed beyond its own limits, has moved beyond the laws of physics and metaphysics. Now, pataphysics is ironic, and the hypothesis that suggests itself here is that, *at the same time that things have reached a state of paroxysm, they have also reached a state of parody.*

Might we advance the hypothesis–beyond the heroic

stage, beyond the critical stage—of an ironic stage of technology, an ironic stage of history, an ironic stage of value? This would at last free us from the Heideggerian vision of technology as the effectuation and final stage of metaphysics; it would free us from all retrospective nostalgia for being, and we would have, instead, a gigantic, objectively ironic vision of the entire scientific and technological process that would not be too far removed from the radical snobbery, the post-historical Japanese snobbery Kojève spoke of.

An ironic reversal of technology, similar to the irony of the media sphere. The common illusion about the media is that they are used by those in power to manipulate, seduce, and alienate the masses. A naive interpretation. The more subtle interpretation, the ironic one, is just the opposite. Through the media, it is the masses who manipulate those in power (or those who believe themselves to be). It is when the political powers think they have the masses where they want them that the masses impose their clandestine strategy of neutralization, of destabilization of a power that has become paraplegic. Finally undecidable; yet both hypothe-

ses are valid, for any interpretation of the media is reversible. It is precisely in this reversibility that the objective irony lies.

Let us put the same hypothesis regarding the object of science–of the most sophisticated of current sciences. Through the most subtle procedures we deploy to capture it, isn't the scientific object itself playing with us, presenting itself as an object and mocking our objective pretension to analyze it? Scientists are not far from admitting this point today, and this irony of the object is the very form of a radical illusion of the world–an illusion no longer physical (illusion of the senses) or metaphysical (illusion of the mind) but pataphysical, in the sense Jarry gave the word when he spoke of pataphysics as "the science of imaginary solutions."

And we can extend the hypothesis to all our technologies, to the technical universe in general. It is becoming the ironic instrument of a world that we only imagine is ours to transform and dominate. It is the world, it is the object itself, that asserts itself, makes itself felt through all the interposing technologies–a process in which we are merely opera-

tors. Here again, we see the form of the illusion. Illusion, not error (we are not wrong about technology–there is no human fatality about technology, as is often pretended): the illusion is not an error or deception but a game, a big game whose rules we just don't know and perhaps will never know.

Since the ironic hypothesis–that of a transcendental irony of the technological–is by definition unverifiable, let us take it as undecidable. We are in fact faced with two incompatible hypotheses: that of the perfect crime or, in other words, of the extermination by technology and virtuality of all reality–or that of the ironic game of technology, of an ironic destiny of all science and all knowledge by which the world, and the illusion of the world, are saved and perpetuated. Let us take up both of these irreconcilable and simultaneously "true" perspectives. Nothing allows us to decide between them. "The world is everything which is the case," as Wittgenstein says.

In the *Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes: "Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will

always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation." But this no longer holds—precisely because of our world's precipitation into the virtual, which overturns all those "material conditions" Marx was talking about and overturns all those historical conditions that would make it possible to resolve the problems dialectically. The virtual is a form of final solution of history and of all real conflicts. It succeeds so well that today, humanity (or those who would think for humanity) will only set itself problems when they have already been virtually overcome or once the system has successfully displaced and absorbed them. But was this not already the case in the time of Marx? The emergence of the concept of class, and of class struggle, the emergence of the idea of class consciousness marks the moment when class begins progressively to lose its violent, irreducible character. Likewise, if Foucault can analyze power, it is because power no longer has a definition that can be properly called political; it has already become in some sense a lost object. When ethnology turns its attention to primitive societies, it is the sign that

they are in the process of disappearing–and what is more, the analyses themselves help to speed their disappearance.

Critical consciousness, thought in general, perhaps, always comes after the fact, a day too late, like Kafka's Messiah–or it comes at the close of the day, like Hegel's owl. It is nothing but retrospective prophecy, or some platonic shadow dancing on the wall of events, in the cavern of history. "If I speak of time," Queneau wrote, "it is because we are already out of time." History doesn't offer a second seating (*L'histoire ne repasse pas les plats*)–only critique does.

Is there space for another kind of thought? An *other* thought–a paradoxical thought that would, in an inversion of the words of Marx, pose only insoluble, definitively insoluble problems? The material conditions for the resolution of such problems are nowhere to be found and never will be found. Is there room for a kind of thought that would instead reproblematize all the old solutions and help to hold the world in enigmatic tension? No one is certain. This may be the risk thought has to take: it must risk falling victim to its own prophecies, just as history risks getting caught in its own snare.

3

THE MURDER OF THE REAL

Murder of the Real: it sounds like Nietzsche proclaiming the death of God. But this murder of God was a symbolic one, and it was going to change our destiny. We are still living, metaphysically living off this original crime, as survivors of God. But the Perfect Crime no longer involves God, but Reality, and it is not a symbolic murder but an extermination.

This does not mean what it meant in the Nazi extermination camps. There it was physical and radical. Here it is both more literal and more metaphorical. "*Ex-terminis*": it means that all things (and all beings as well) pass beyond their own end, beyond their own finality, where there is no reality anymore, nor any reason for being, nor any determination (that is why I call it "ex-termination"). Extermination means that nothing is left, no trace, not even a corpse. The corps(e) of the Real—if there is any—has not been recovered, is nowhere to be found. And this because the Real is not just dead (as God

is), it has purely and simply disappeared. In our virtual world, the question of the Real, of the referent, of the subject and its object, can no longer even be posed.

I would refer, again, to Elias Canetti, when he writes:

> As of a certain point, history was no longer *real*. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality: everything happening since then was supposedly not true; but we supposedly didn't notice. Our task would now be to find that point, and as long as we didn't have it, we would be forced to abide in our present destruction.

What could be said about this blind point of reversal, where nothing is either true or false any longer and everything is drifting indifferently between cause and effect, between origin and finality? Is it reversible or irreversible? Can we return to the point where the line of history was broken and we were projected to the other side of the mirror? Can we survive the Metastases of the Real as we survived the Death of God? Are we dedicated to survival, or to revival? I would like to give an answer, but promises of the

future go the same way as memories of the past: they vanish with the very principle of reality.

For reality is but a concept, or a principle, and by reality I mean the whole system of values connected with this principle. The Real as such implies an origin, an end, a past and a future, a chain of causes and effects, a continuity and a rationality. No real without these elements, without an objective configuration of discourse. And its disappearing is the dislocation of this whole constellation.

Of course, I anticipate a little. In fact, this perfect extermination could only be achieved if the process of virtualization were fully realized. This is not the case, fortunately: as in the best detective novels, the crime is never perfect. Some traces can still be found. We live as if inside Borges's fable of the map and the territory; in this story nothing is left but pieces of the map scattered throughout the empty space of the territory. Except that we must turn the tale upside down: today there is nothing left but a map (the virtual abstraction of the territory), and on this map some fragments of the real are still floating and drifting.

No corpse—no victim either! As for the presumed perpe-

trator of this Perfect Crime, it's a total mystery: it can be imputed to anyone. No suspect can be identified, not even the weapon—I would say that the weapon used in the crime is the crime itself. Nobody, no class, no group, no subject can be charged with responsibility for this radical actualization of things, of this unconditional hyperrealization of the real. In other words, it is as if all people were murderers and victims simultaneously, reversibly, the two possibilities joined in a kind of Moebius strip. This perverted effect of irresponsibility is a specific aspect of the Perfect Crime. The process itself seems to be irreversible, for it is the very process of rationalization—what we proudly call progress and modernity and liberation—becoming exponential and chaotic.

As for knowing why we go on irreversibly toward this deadline, all we can do is grasp at fantastic hypotheses such as this one: the human species could be dedicating itself to a sort of automatic writing of the world, to an automated and operationalized virtual reality, where human beings as such have no reason for existing anymore. Human subjectivity becomes a set of useless functions, as useless as sexuality is to clones. More generally, all traditional functions—

the critical, the political, the sexual, the social functions–become useless in a virtual world. Or they survive only in simulation, like bodybuilding in a disincarnated culture, as mock functions or alibis. We seem to be driven by a huge and irresistible compulsion that acts on us through the very progress of our technologies (expanding for example in what we call "information highways" and could as well call "disinformation highways")–a compulsion to draw ever closer to the unconditional realization of the real.

In virtual reality, absolute transparence converges with absolute simultaneity. This short circuit and instantaneity of all things in global information we call "real time." Real time can be seen as a Perfect Crime perpetrated against time itself: for with the ubiquity and instant availability of the totality of information, time reaches its point of perfection, which is also its vanishing point. Because of course a perfect time has no memory and no future.

Let us be clear about this: if the Real is disappearing, it is not because of a lack of it–on the contrary, there is too much of

it. It is the excess of reality that puts an end to reality, just as the excess of information puts an end to information, or the excess of communication puts an end to communication. We are no longer dealing with a problematic of lack and alienation, where the referent of the self and the dialectic between subject and object were always to be found, supporting strong and active philosophical positions. The last and most radical analysis of this problematic was achieved by Guy Debord and the Situationists, with their concept of spectacle and spectacular alienation. For Debord there was still a chance of disalienation, a chance for the subject to recover his or her autonomy and sovereignty. But now this radical Situationist critique is over. By shifting to a virtual world, we go beyond alienation, into a state of radical deprivation of the Other, or indeed of any otherness, alterity, or negativity. We move into a world where everything that exists only as idea, dream, fantasy, utopia will be eradicated, because it will immediately be realized, operationalized. Nothing will survive as an idea or a concept. You will not even have time enough to imagine. Events, real events, will not even have time to take place. Everything will be pre-

ceded by its virtual realization. We are dealing with an attempt to construct an entirely positive world, a perfect world, expurgated of every illusion, of every sort of evil and negativity, exempt from death itself. This pure, absolute reality, this unconditional realization of the world—this is what I call the Perfect Crime.

This means a crucial mutation from a critical state to a catastrophic one. The real and historical world, with its mass of tensions and contradictions, has always been in crisis. But the state of catastrophe is another thing. It does not mean apocalypse, or annihilation; it means the irruption of something anomalic, which functions according to rules and forms we do not and may never understand. The situation is not simply contradictory or irrational—it is paradoxical. Beyond the end, beyond all finality, we enter a paradoxical state—the state of too much reality, too much positivity, too much information. In this state of paradox, faced with extreme phenomena, we do not know exactly what is taking place.

In any case we cannot trust in traditional values or in the rehabilitation of reality. After all, it may be that humankind,

through an enigmatic compulsion, is intimately involved in this catastrophic process and so is doomed to disappear. If this is the case, it would be better by far to treat our disappearance as an art form—to exercise it, to perform it, to create an art of disappearance. Better than the alternative, which would be to vanish without a trace, without even the spectacle of our destruction.

To challenge and to cope with this paradoxical state of things, we need a paradoxical way of thinking; since the world drifts into delirium, we must adopt a delirious point of view. We must no longer assume any principle of truth, of causality, or any discursive norm. Instead, we must grant both the poetic singularity of events and the radical uncertainty of events. It is not easy. We usually think that holding to the protocols of experimentation and verification is the most difficult thing. But in fact the most difficult thing is to renounce the truth and the possibility of verification, to remain as long as possible on the enigmatic, ambivalent, and reversible side of thought.

Truth no longer affords a solution. But perhaps we can aim at a poetic resolution of the world, of the kind promised

by history or by language. The actual status of human language today is illuminating. Our common language tries, by discursive means, to inscribe reality in a meaning, in a form of reciprocal exchange. But today language is confronted by the hegemonic fantasy of a global and perpetual communication—the New Order, the new cyberspace of language—where the ultrasimplification of digital languages prevails over the figural complexity of natural languages. With binary coding and decoding the symbolic dimension of language is lost; the materiality, the multiplicity, and the magic of language are erased. At the extreme limit of computation and the coding and cloning of human thought (artificial intelligence), language as a medium of symbolic exchange becomes a definitively useless function. For the first time in history we face the possibility of a Perfect Crime against language, an aphanisis of the symbolic function.

But *a contrario*—the crime is never perfect—we must say that the strongest resistance to this destructive virtualization comes from language itself, from the singularity, the irreducibility, the vernacularity of all languages, which are actually very much alive and which are proving to be the

best deterrent against the global extermination of meaning. So the game is not over, but no one can say who will have the last word. More generally speaking, the world and its double cannot occupy the same space, for the double is a perfect artificial and virtual substitute for the world. Conflict between them is inevitable.

Now we come to the crucial point. For even as I spoke of the extermination of the Real, I meant, in fact, the more fundamental extermination of the Illusion. But we must be clear about this concept before we go further. I don't mean illusion in the pejorative sense, the negative and irrational concept of illusion as fallacy, fantasmagory, and evil–the illusion whose sole destiny is to be rectified. I mean the radical and objective illusion of the world, the radical impossibility of a real presence of things or beings, their definitive absence from themselves.

For nothing is identical to itself. We are never identical to ourselves, except, perhaps, in sleep and in death. Language itself never signifies what it means; it always signifies some-

thing else, through this very irreducible, ontological absence from itself. The probability, in this world, of a total identification, of a total adequation of the same to the same, is equal to zero. Fortunately. For that would be the Perfect Crime—a crime that never happens. In relations between things there is always a hiatus, a distortion, a rift that precludes any reduction of the same to the same. That is even more true for human beings. We are never exactly present to ourselves, or to others. Thus we are not exactly real for one another, nor are we quite real even to ourselves. And this radical alterity is our best chance—our best chance of attracting and being attracted to others, of seducing and being seduced. Put simply, our chance at life.

This concept of radical illusion has analogues in cosmology. Everyone knows that the light of the stars needs a very long time to reach us; sometimes we perceive it after the star itself has disappeared. This gap between the star as a virtual source and its perception by us, this non-simultaneity, is an inescapable part of the illusion of the world, the absence at the heart of the world that constitutes the illusion. And again, this distortion is beneficial. For the simultaneous per-

ception of the light of all the stars would be equivalent to an absolute daylight, and this would be unbearable for us. All the energy of life proceeds from this vital alternation of day and night, and more generally, from this vital mediation. Illusion is the general rule of the universe; reality is but an exception. If the same were identical to the same, we would be faced with an absolute reality, with the unconditional truth of things. But absolute truth is the other name for death. Fortunately, I do not know of any theory or intellectual construction that could–with its commitment to "unconditional truth"–destroy this fantastic material and vital illusion.

We can also find traces of the illusion in the history of the formation of the universe after the Big Bang. The moment it happened, a gigantic cooling-off began; as a result, the universe came into being with the generation of matter and antimatter. Very soon after that, matter separated off from antimatter and gradually evolved into the universe with which we are familiar. Thus the materiality of the world is a restricted one, expurgated of antimatter. Which, volatilized, forms a kind of invisible parallel world, an anti-universe,

about which we know almost nothing but on which astrophysics is focusing a great deal of attention. Illusion, or the Mirror of Illusion, is an appropriate name for this invisible, powerful antisubstance, whose interaction with our world would mean an annihilation of matter in the production of pure light. Reality would be obliterated in the clash, matter lost in the chasm with its counterpart . . . .

What is striking about this is that our reality, our "objective" reality, is the result of the amputation of antimatter. This restricted and limited form of matter is what we call reality. I find it at least on the symbolic level both enigmatic and ironic that our reality, born of a radical simplification of the cosmos, has no truth value anymore—divested of its counterpart, its dark half, our world is a definitive illusion.

That this our real world, this restricted materiality, obeys precise physical laws, is not enough to make it true, since this relative coherence is only the paradoxical consequence of this "ontological" simplification. Besides, this matter without antimatter becomes the field of the whole process of entropy and involution, according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Because of this rupture of symmetry, the

destiny of matter, denuded of antimatter, is attrition. Our task, today, is to delocalize these hypotheses about the universe and to redeploy them at a higher level, where they might challenge our principles of reality and relationality.

Of course, I am well aware that all this is metaphorical. But we are not interested in generating one more truth. We are trying to recover the traces of the illusion, that is to say, the vestiges of the original crime against negativity that started with the elimination of antimatter. Against the extermination of evil, of death, of illusion, against this Perfect Crime, we must fight for the criminal imperfection of the world. Against this artificial paradise of technicity and virtuality, against the attempt to build a world completely positive, rational, and true, we must save the traces of the illusory world's definitive opacity and mystery.

But are we ready to play the paradoxical, catastrophic, and ironic game that this radical illusion seems to propose? It would mean a drastic revision not only of the principle of reality but also of the principle of knowledge. "Knowledge" normally implies a dialectic between subject and object, a field of representation where the subject is master of the

game, since the subject constructed the frame of representation and projected it into the world. This presupposes the privilege of the subject and the concomitant inferior status of the object, including the scientific object. But knowledge rules over truth and causal relations, not over appearance or illusion. In the domain of the illusion, knowledge is no longer logically possible, for its principles and postulates cannot function. And this is not just a metaphysical insight: today the microsciences stand at the point where the object as such no longer exists. It vanishes, it escapes, it has no definite status, it only appears in the form of ephemeral and aleatory traces on the screens of virtualization. At their outer edge the most advanced sciences can only verify the object's disappearance. In other words, they can only verify the way the object plays with its own objectivity. This is the object's perverse strategy; perhaps it is a form of revenge. Apparently, the object is a trickster, foiling all the protocols of the subject's experiment, so that the subject itself loses its position as subject.

Science has got it wrong. It is true that, thanks to the progress of analsyis and technique, we actually discover the

world in all its complexity–its atoms, particles, molecules, viruses. But never has science postulated, even as science fiction, that things discover us at the same time that we discover them, according to an inexorable reversibility. We always thought that things were passively waiting to be discovered, in much the same way that America is imagined to have been waiting for Columbus. But it is not so. At the moment when the subject discovers the object–whether it is an "Indian" or a virus–the object makes a reversible, but never innocent, discovery of the subject. More–it is actually a sort of invention of the subject by the invented object.

Knowledge, defined conventionally, always proceeds in the same direction, from the subject to the object. But today processes of reversion are emerging everywhere–in areas from anthropology to viral pathology. It is as if we had torn the object from its opaque and inoffensive stillness, from its indifference, from the deep secret where it was asleep. Today the object wakes up and reacts, determined to keep its secret alive. This duel engaged in by the subject and the object means the loss of the subject's hegemonic position: the object becomes the horizon of the subject's disappear-

ance. Obviously, this new scenario, this new dramaturgy, is opposed to the classic theory of knowledge.

In this light, reality itself becomes problematic. Like an obsequious servant, it obeys any hypothesis, verifying them all in turn, even when they contradict each other. Reality does not care about the knowledge we are distilling from our observation and analysis of its behavior. Indifferent to every truth, reality becomes a sort of sphinx, enigmatic in its hyperconformity, simulating itself as virtuality or reality show. Reality becomes hyperreality–paroxysm and parody all at once. It supports all sorts of interpretations because it no longer makes sense, because it no longer wants to be interpreted. But this unintelligibility is not mystical or romantic: it is ironic. Irony is the last sign that comes from the secret core of the object, the modern allegory of the reversibility of all things.

Here again, it is not the question of a subjective, critical irony but of an objective irony linked to the radical material illusion of the world and its unexpected effects. Things have become so accelerated that processes are no longer inscribed in a linear temporality, in a linear unfolding of his-

tory. Nothing moves any longer from cause to effect: everything is transversalized by inversions of meaning, by perverse events, by ironic reversals. Acceleration, streams and turbulences, self-potentialization and chaotic effects. And this deregulation of the system is actually the work of the system itself (just as Marx said of the proletariat, that its emancipation would be the work of the proletarians themselves: ironically, the formula also applies to the self-annihilating system). Pushed to extremes of sophistication and performance, to a point of perfection and totalization (as is the virtual system of nets and information), the system reaches its breaking point and implodes all by itself. This does not occur through the actions of any critical subject or any historical forces of subversion: it occurs through ultra-realization and automatic reversal, pure and simple.

This is what I call objective irony: there is a strong probability, verging on a certainty, that systems will be undone by their own systematicity. This is true not only for technical structures but for human ones as well. The more these political, social, economic systems advance toward their own perfection, the more they deconstruct themselves. This

is very clear in the field of media and multimedia, where, because of an excess of information, we have lost access to real information and real historical events. But this logic is at work in religious, sexual, and productive fields as well. And even at a scientific level: the more the object is persecuted by experimental procedures, the more it invents strategies of counterfeit, evasion, disguise, disappearance. It is like a virus; it escapes by endlessly inventing counter-strategies. This behavior of the object is also ironic insofar as it breaks the foolish pretensions of the subject, its desire to impose laws and dispose of the world according to its own will, its own representations. Today the world itself engages in dissidence, disobeying, in its paradoxicality, even the laws of physics (very different from the human transgression of human laws, which lacks the irony implicit in the dissidence of the object).

I won't transform the object into a supersubject. But it would seem that something has escaped us. Definitively. This is not because our science and technologies are not advanced enough; on the contrary. The closer we come, through experimentation, to the object, the more it steals

away from us and finally becomes undecidable. And do not ask where it has gone. Simply, the object is *what escapes the subject*–more we cannot say, since our position is still that of the subject and of rational discourse. At any rate, we cannot rely on the pretext of an insufficient development of the scientific, intellectual or mental apparatus. The apparatus has given all that it can give; it has even passed beyond its own definitions of rationality. I cannot tell you exactly, in seconds, the decimal point of Planck's constant beyond which there will be no further possible knowledge of the cosmos, because light does not exist, and accurate representation is impossible. It is the event horizon, as they say in physics, beyond which nothing makes sense and nothing at all may be discovered.

That, if there is any, is the secret of the universe. As a metaphor, I would say that at the core of every human being and every thing there is such a fundamentally inaccessible secret. That is the vital illusion of which Nietzsche spoke, the glass wall of truth and illusion. From our rational point of view, this may appear rather desperate and could even justify something like pessimism. But from the point of view

of singularity, of alterity, of secret and seduction, it is, on the contrary, our only chance: our last chance. In this sense, the Perfect Crime is an hypothesis of radiant optimism.

Of course, it is a matter of tragic optimism, as it is expressed in the famous line of Hölderlin: "But where danger is, grows the saving power also" (*Wo die Gefahr wächst, wächst das Rettende auch*). It applies today—with the caveat that, as the evil genius of modernity has changed our destiny, Hölderlin's phrase must be reversed: the more the saving power grows, the greater the danger. For we are no longer victims of an excess of fate and danger, of illusion and death. We are victims of an absence of destiny, of a lack of illusion, and consequently of an excess of reality, security, and efficiency. What hangs over us is the excess of protection and positivity—the unconditional "saving" performed by our technologies. But it seems that something resists this irresistible trend, something irreducible. And here we might quote, as a counterpart to Hölderlin's phrase, this very mysterious sentence by Heidegger: "When we look into the ambiguous essence of technology, we behold the constellation, the stellar course of the mystery."

This sentence is quite enigmatic, since it seems to contradict Heidegger's interpretation of technology as "negative ontology," as a loss of being, as a definitive unveiling of the secret of the universe, as a disenchanted inspection, an "*arraisonnement*" (*Gestell*) of the world, in short, as the Perfect Crime itself. The alternative would be that, at the extreme horizon of technology, something else happens, another game, with other rules. The point is that the constellation of the secret still resists, remains alive. Either we think of technology as the exterminator of Being, the exterminator of the secret, of seduction and appearances, or we imagine that technology, by way of an ironic reversibility, might be an immense detour toward the radical illusion of the world. A massive "clinamen," a hidden strategy moving behind all our techniques and practices, an absolutely unpredictable movement that would finally bring us to the other side of metaphysics. We might then, through this detour, break through the mirror of technology–*contra* Heidegger, for whom technology is still the absolute achievement of metaphysics. Technology as delusion, technology as definitive illusion.

But we cannot be certain about this virtual end of things. There is no way to choose between these alternative hypotheses, and we must be aware that at the end of all possible theory, we shall have to deal with two antinomic eventualities—and that this fatal situation will never be resolved.

Here, however, lies the task of any philosophical thought: to go to the limit of hypotheses and processes, even if they are catastrophic. The only justification for thinking and writing is that it accelerates these terminal processes. Here, beyond the discourse of truth, resides the poetic and enigmatic value of thinking. For, facing a world that is unintelligible and problematic, our task is clear: we must make that world even more unintelligible, even more enigmatic.

NOTES

1. THE FINAL SOLUTION

p. 4: "These, then, are the experimental and artificial forms of cloning–not including Dolly, of course, and the rest of her kind." Perhaps the most famous sheep in history, Dolly is the first mammal to have been successfully cloned from adult cells. The cloning was performed by Ian Wilmut and his colleagues at the Roslin Institute, Edinburgh, Scotland, in March 1997.

p. 5: "on board the US satellite Discoverer 17." The *Discoverer 17* was launched into the earth's orbit November 12, 1960.

p. 16: "Such was the lesson of Biosphere 2, the artificial synthesis of all the planet's systems, the ideal copy of the human race and its environment." Biosphere 2 is an experimental microcosm, a sealed glass and metal structure approximately 204,000 cubic meters in size, located in the Santa Catalina Mountains of Arizona. It contains seven different "ecosystems," which include an ocean (housed in a vast stainless steel container), a savanna, and a rain forest, and is the site of ongoing research into such topics as the effect of rising concentrations of CO_2 on coral reefs. Biosphere 2 is currently affiliated with Columbia University.

pp. 18–19: "It is as if, through this self-inflicted violence, humanity wants to make itself ready from now on to be the survivor of some great impending catastrophe." Elias Canetti may be able to help us understand Baudrillard's antipathy for the survivor. In *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984); originally published as *Masse*

und Macht (Hamburg: Claasen Verlag, 1960), Canetti analyzes the often megalomanic drive for power that he discerns in the survivor:

> All man's designs on immortality contain something of this desire for survival. He does not only want to exist for always, but to exist when others are no longer there. He wants to live longer than everyone else, and to *know* it; and when he is no longer there himself, his name must continue (pp. 227).

p. 24: "(une pensée unique)" After some hesitation, I decided to coin the term "monothought" in an attempt to emphasize the elements of normativity and univocality that I perceived in Baudrillard's *une pensée unique*. "Monothought" hints at aspects of our cultural conditioning that render us interchangeable. It is meant to evoke a parallel with monocrop agriculture, an aggressive, intensive use of agricultural land; it can be deployed on a very large scale and produce high yields, but it has serious long-term consequences. Monothought, not unlike monocrop agriculture, lays waste to the very human cultural structures that it seeks to make more streamlined and "efficient."

p. 24: "We *invented the distinction, and* we *are in the process of erasing it.*" Baudrillard's "we," here, should perhaps be read as "we the legatees of Enlightenment thought," rather than exclusively as "we Westerners" or "we Anglo-Europeans."

2. THE MILLENNIUM, OR THE SUSPENSE OF THE YEAR 2000

p. 34: "*This is why I advanced the idea that the Year 2000 would not take place. . . .*" The lecture was delivered on May 27, 1999, and in its original form it was an artifact of its time, balanced on the leading edge of the millennium, pointing "ahead" to a nonevent which we, of course, did not experience. Some of the tenses have been altered to reflect our new position vis-à-vis the end, but many of them have been left as they were written, in a "suspended" present.

p. 37: "*When there is overall transparence, when everything can be seen, nothing can be* foreseen *anymore.*" "Transparence" is Baudrillard translator Chris Turner's ren-

dering of the French "*transparence*," and is meant to help distinguish the term from everyday "transparency."

p. 38: "The countdown is the code of the automatic disappearance of the world, and all our little charitable machines, by way of which we anticipate that disappearance–the telethons, Sidathons, and all kinds of Thanathons–are merely the promotional sales events for the misery of this fin de siècle." "SIDA" is the French acronym for Acquired Immune System Deficiency; a "Sidathon" is a benefit held to raise money for the victims of AIDS (see, for example, the 1997 Sidathon organized by the group Sid'Afrique to benefit AIDS victims on the Ivory Coast).

p. 41: "As a result, the ozone layer that was protecting memory becomes frayed; the hole through which memories and time are leaking out into space expands, prefiguring the great migration of the void to the periphery." This is an allusion to Alfred Jarry's inversion of the law of falling bodies: "Contemporary science is founded upon the principle of induction: most people have seen a certain phenomenon precede or follow some other phenomenon most often, and conclude therefrom that it will ever be thus. . . .

Instead of formulating the law of the fall of a body toward a center, how far more apposite would be the law of the ascension of a vacuum toward a periphery, a vacuum being considered a unit of non-density, a hypothesis far less arbitrary than the choice of a concrete unit of positive density such as *water*?" (*Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, ed. Roger Shattuck and Simon Watson Taylor [New York: Grove Press, 1965], p. 193).

p. 42: "The concept of countdown evokes once again Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Nine Billion Names of God' " In Arthur C. Clarke, *The Nine Billion Names of God* (New York: Harcourt Brace World, 1967).

p. 45: "Obesity and obscenity form the contrapuntal figure for all our systems, which have been seized by something of an Ubuesque distension." Baudrillard here and elsewhere is alluding to Alfred Jarry's notorious invention Père Ubu, around whom Jarry wrote several satirical, highly scatalogical plays and vignettes. Depicted as monstrously obese, Ubu wreaks havoc everywhere he goes (in Ubu's earliest appearance, Jarry has him flush his conscience down the toilet). Of Ubu, Roger Shattuck writes:

"We are all Ubu, still blissfully ignorant of our destructiveness and systematically practicing the soul-devouring 'reversal' of flushing our conscience down the john. Ubu, unruffled king of tyrants and cuckolds, is more terrifying than tragedy" ("Introduction," in *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, ed. Roger Shattuck and Simon Watson Taylor [New York: Grove Press, 1965], p. 10).

p. 51: We might speak here of a kind of "event strike," to use Macedonio Fernandez's expression. The Argentine writer and metaphysician Macedonio Fernandez (1874-1952). His works strongly influenced Jorge Luis Borges, and are today considered to be important precursors of the contemporary Latin American novel. Macedonio's concept of the event strike can be found in his *Papeles de Recienvenido. Continuación de la nada* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, S.A., 1944).

p. 53: "We would have, instead, a gigantic, objectively ironic vision of the entire scientific and technological process that would not be too far removed from the radical snobbery, the post-historical Japanese snobbery Kojève spoke of." This reference can be found in Alexandre

Kojève's "Note to the Second Edition" in "Interpretation of the Third Part of Chapter VIII of *Phenomenology of Spirit*" in *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (Ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. [New York: Basic 1969] [orig. publ. as *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (2nd ed. Paris: Gallimard, 1947)], pp. 159–162). In this note, the "natural" post-historical society of America is (unfavorably) compared with what Kojève calls the "snobbism" of post-historical Japan. For Kojève, Japanese "snobbism"–the production of purely arbitrary social and cultural forms, of an artifical, "empty" symbolic ordering of human society–is a compelling alternative approach to the problem of the end of history (and the concomitant loss of tensions, of "necessary" cultural forms, implicit in that ending). This "snobbism," by virtue of its very emptiness, has striking affinities with the arbitrary creativity of the pataphysical response to a "world without limits" that for Baudrillard would characterize an ironic stage of history.

p. 54: "Scientists are not far from admitting this point today, and this irony of the object is the very form of a radical illusion of the world–an illusion no longer physical

(illusion of the senses) or metaphysical (illusion of the mind) but pataphysical, in the sense Jarry gave the word when he spoke of pataphysics as 'the science of imaginary solutions.' " This phrase can be found in Roger Shattuck's "Superliminal Note" on pataphysics, published originally in *Evergreen Review* 4, no. 2 (May–June 1960); the line was also used by the Collège de Pataphysique in their pamphlet, "On the Threshhold of 'Pataphysics" (Paris: "XC," 1963?).

p. 55: "Nothing allows us to decide between them. 'The world is everything which is the case,' as Wittgenstein says." *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 1:7; orig. publ. as *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* in *Annalen der Naturphilosophie*, ed. Wilhelm Ostwald, 1921.

pp. 55–56: "In the Critique of Political Economy, *Marx writes: 'Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.' "* In Karl

Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Lawrence and Wishart, 1935), pp. 361 ff.

p. 57: " 'If I speak of time,' Queneau wrote, 'it is because we are already out of time.' " Baudrillard is probably quoting a line from Raymond Queneau's poem, "L'Explication des métaphores," in the collection *Les Ziaux*: "Si je parle d'un lieu, c'est qu'il a disparu / Si je parle du temps, c'est qu'il n'est déjà plus" (*Les Ziaux*: Paris, Gallimard, Métamorphoses, 1948).

3. THE MURDER OF THE REAL

p. 61: "the Perfect Crime" This concept is drawn from Baudrillard's earlier book *The Perfect Crime* (trans. Chris Turner. London, New York: Verso, 1996 [orig. publ. as *Le crime parfait*, Paris, Editions Galilée, 1995]). In this book Baudrillard lays out the disastrous consequences of the expurgation of otherness, absence, and negativity from contemporary Western culture, a "crime" that would efface not only its victim but also all evidence that the crime took place.

p. 62: "I would refer, again, to Elias Canetti, when he writes:

> As of a certain point, history was no longer real. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality: everything happening since then was supposedly not true; but we supposedly didn't notice. Our task would now be to find that point, and as long as we didn't have it, we would be forced to abide in our present destruction."

Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), p. 69.

p. 69: "For the first time in history we face the possibility of a Perfect Crime against language, an aphanisis of the symbolic function." This term may well be drawn from psychoanalytic parlance. Based upon the Greek for "disappearing" or "fading," "aphanisis" was a term initially developed by Ernest Jones to describe a fear of the loss or waning of desire, a fear that Jones identified in both sexes and perceived to be more fundamental than the castration complex. Lacan also uses the term, although it acquires a different resonance in his work, where it is used to discuss the "fading" or disappearance of the subject as it is in the

process of being constituted in and by language, the loss engendered by the constellation of the subject as split by language. See, for example, Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: Norton, 1981]); orig. publ. as *Le Seminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XI: "Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse"* [Editions du Seuil, 1973], pp. 217ff). To argue, as Baudrillard does, that the symbolic function itself may be doomed to disappear, implies the loss of the "loss" that this symbolic function instantiates in the subject as delineated by Lacan. There is no communication possible under these terms; there is only code. (Thanks to Professor Norah Ashe.)

p. 81: "And here we might quote, as a counterpart to Hölderlin's phrase, this very mysterious sentence by Heidegger: 'When we look into the ambiguous essence of technology, we behold the constellation, the stellar course of the mystery.' " Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 33.

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behind our history, nor could we stop counting down toward our future. For Baudrillard, the millennial clock reading to the millionth of a second on its way to zero is the perfect symbol of our time: history decays rather than progresses. In closing, Baudrillard examines what he calls "the murder of the real" by the virtual. In a world of copies and clones in which everything can be made present in an instant by technology, we can no longer even speak of reality. Beyond Nietzsche's symbolic murder of God, our virtual world free of referents is in the process of exterminating reality, leaving no trace: "The corps(e) of the Real—if there is any—has not been recovered, is nowhere to be found."

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Jacket design: James Victore
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The publication of this book was supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, New York.

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Published by Semiotext(e)
501 Philosophy Hall, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027
2571 W. Fifth Street, Los Angeles, CA 90057
www.semiotexte.com

Special thanks to Giancarlo Ambrosino, Jon Brilliant, Justin Cavin, Diego Cortez and Mike Taormina for copy editing.

Cover Photography: "Sainte Beuve 1987" by Jean Baudrillard
Back Cover Photography: Marine Dupuis
Design by Hedi El Kholti

ISBN: 1-58435-028-8
Distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England
Printed in the United States of America

The Conspiracy of Art

Jean Baudrillard

Manifestos, Interviews, Essays

Edited by Sylvère Lotringer

Translated by Ames Hodges

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The Piracy of Art

When Jean Baudrillard, the world-renowned French theorist, first published "The Conspiracy of Art" in 1996, he scandalized the international artistic community by declaring that contemporary art had no more reason to exist. Baudrillard was no art aficionado, but he was no stranger to art either. In 1983, after the publication in English of his ground-breaking essay, *Simulations*,[1] he was adopted by the New York art world and put on the mast of *Artforum*, the influential international art magazine. The book instantly became a must-read for any self-respecting artist—they suddenly were becoming legions—and it was quoted everywhere, even included in several artist installations. Eventually it made its way—full-frame—into the cult Hollywood SciFi film *The Matrix*. (Baudrillard is Neo). The prestigious lecture he gave on Andy Warhol at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1987 was booked months in advance. For a while artists fought around his name, jockeying for recognition. So it isn't surprising that his sudden outburst against art would have raised such an uproar. There was a widespread sense of betrayal among art practitioners, as if he had broken an implicit contract. "The denunciation came as a slap in the face,"[2] a Canadian critic wrote, adding that it was "a radical delegitimization of his own position as

a cultural critic." Baudrillard, of course, never claimed to be one. Like the Situationists, he has a healthy disrespect for "culture."

True, he didn't mince his words. Art was "confiscating banality, waste and mediocrity to turn them into values and ideologies," he wrote, adding that contemporary art wasn't just insignificant, but *null*. Null isn't exactly a term of endearment—obsolete, worthless, without merit or effect, the dictionary says. Baudrillard seemed to have gone out of his way to provoke the art world, and he certainly got what he asked. It was all the more remarkable that another violent libel he published the following year, "A Conjuration of Imbeciles" (the French political establishment, which let Le Pen hijack the democratic system) elicited no reaction. Politicians apparently are used to this kind of treatment. So there is something special about the art world after all—it could do with a lot more abuse.

But could abuse really make a difference? Some critics or curators in the marches of Empire took the attack at face value and crossed him from their list, but people in the know simply basked in the frisson of a well-publicized "scandal." It doesn't matter what is said about art as long one pays attention to it. No sooner had Baudrillard's column been published in the French leftist newspaper *Libération* in May 1996, and instantly beamed all over the place through the internet, Baudrillard was deluged with invitations for art events, lectures, catalogue essays. It was obvious that visibility and fame, not contents, were the real engine of the New Art Order. Its power and glamour managed to entice, subdue and integrate any potential threat. Criticizing art, in fact, has become the royal way to an art career *and this will be no exception.*

It was exactly the point Baudrillard was making in *The Conspiracy of Art*, and this reaction confirmed what he had already anticipated twenty-five years earlier in *The Consumer Society*[3]: critique has become a mirage of critique, a counter-discourse immanent to consumption, the way Pop Art's "cool smile" was no different from commercial complicity. Two years later, in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*,[4] he went even further, asserting that contemporary art had an ambiguous status, half-way between a terrorist critique and a de facto cultural integration. Art, he concluded, was "the art of collusion." By now this collusion is affecting society at large and there is no more reason to consider art apart from the rest, as the composition of this book suggests. Obstacles and oppositions, in reality, are used by the system everywhere in order to bounce ahead. Art in the process has lost most of its singularity and unpredictability. There is no place anymore for accidents or unforeseen surprises, writes Chris Kraus in *Video Green*: "The life of the artist matters very little. What life?"[5] Art now offers career benefits, rewarding investments, glorified consumer products, just like any other corporation. *And everything else is becoming art.* Roland Barthes used to say that in America sex was everywhere, except in sex. Now art is everywhere, *even* in art.

In *Simulations*, Baudrillard suggested that Disneyland's only function was to conceal the fact that the entire country was a huge theme park. Similarly art has become a front, a showcase, a deterrence machine meant to hide the fact that the whole society is transaestheticized. Art has definitely lost its privilege. By the same token it can be found everywhere. The end of the aesthetic principle signaled not its disappearance, but its perfusion throughout the social body. It is well-known that Surrealism eventually spread his slippery games thin through fashion, advertisement and the media, eventually turning the consumer's unconscious into kitsch. Now art is free as well to morph everywhere, into politics (the aestheti-

cization of politics isn't a sign of fascism anymore, nor is the politicization of aesthetics a sign of radicalism for that matter), into the economy, into the media. All the more reason for art to claim a dubious privilege in the face of its absolute commodification. Art is enclosing itself in a big bubble, ostensibly protected from consumer contagion. But consumption has spread inside, like a disease, and you can tell by everybody's rosy cheeks and febrile gestures. The bubble is quickly growing out of proportion. Soon it will reach its limit, achieving the perfection of its form—and burst with a pop like bubble-gum, or the 90s stock market.

A self-taught sociologist in the 60s, Baudrillard remained intellectually close to the French Situationists and shared their unconditional distrust of "culture." Ironically, on its way to complete surrender in the late 80s and 90s, the art world made a huge effort to reclaim its virginity by enlisting the Situationists' radicalism to its cause. It was a curious intellectual exercise, and I saw it unfolding at the time with some glee: the art world reappropriating avant-gardism long *after* proclaiming the "end of the avant-garde." The way it was done was even more interesting: showcasing the Situationists' involvement with architecture and their ideological critique the better to evacuate their unequivocal condemnation of art and art criticism. "Nothing is more exhilarating than to see an entire generation of repentant politicians and intellectuals," Baudrillard wrote, "becoming fully paid-up members of the conspiracy of imbeciles."[6] Art isn't even the only one to conspire.

"Get out, art critics, partial imbeciles, critics of bit parts, you have nothing more to say," the Situationists threw at "the art of the spectacle." They also violently expelled from their midst any artist tempted to participate in the bourgeois comedy of creation. By this account, Guy Debord and his acolytes would have to fire *everybody* in the present art world, whatever their professed ideology. Granted, it is difficult to be more paranoiac than Debord was. And yet he was absolutely right. There *was* a conspiracy of art, even if he had to hallucinate it. Now duplicity is transparent. Who today could boast having *any* integrity? Debord was ahead of his time and we would actually benefit from having him among us today, *but not emasculated.* Actually we would be incapable of recognizing him if he did. Was Baudrillard's exasperated outburst so different from what the Situationists themselves would have done? Art, he wrote, "is mediocrity squared. It claims to be bad—'I am bad! I am bad!'—*and it truly is bad.*" Baudrillard was wrong in one count. It is worse.

The Conspiracy of Art signaled the "return of the repressed" among the art world. It was displaced, of course, but symptoms always are. And it was unmistakable. Yet no one—especially those heavily invested in Freud—recognized it for what it was: Baudrillard was simply repaying the art world in its own coin. The real scandal was not that he would have attacked art, *but that art would have found this attack scandalous.* Unlike the Situationists, Baudrillard never believed it possible to maintain a distance within the society of spectacle. But his provocation was perfect pitch and totally in keeping with the Situationists' attempt to reclaim their subjectivity through calculated drifts. Except that Baudrillard's solitary drift into provocation was neither deliberate, nor existential. It was just a purge.

Baudrillard always had a knack for bringing out the most revealing features in a volatile situation. The year 1987 happened to be a real turning point for the New York art world, throngs of young artists flooding the art market desperately seeking Cesar, a "master thinker," a guru, anything really to peg their career on.

They took *Simulations* for an aesthetic statement (it was an anthropological diagnostic) and rushed to make it a template for their still inform art. Baudrillard protested, nonplussed by their sudden adulation. "Simulation," for him, is not a thing. It is nothing in itself. It only means that there isn't any more original in contemporary culture, only replicas of replicas. "Simulation," he retorted, "couldn't be represented or serve as a model for an artwork." If anything, it is a challenge to art. The rush turned into a rout, everybody scattering around with their tails between their legs. Ten years later, Baudrillard did it again. *The Conspiracy of Art* took on not just the commercialization of art fueled by the return to painting and the real-estate boom, but its global projection through neo-liberal deregulation and the delirious speculations of a stock-market just about to go bust. It wasn't the naivety of art anymore that Baudrillard blasted, but the cynical exploitation of "art" for non-artistic purposes.

Returning from a brief pilgrimage to the Venice Biennale, Baudrillard exploded. Too much art was too much! Immediately upping the ante, he claimed the existence of a "conspiracy" which didn't exactly exist in the flesh, but was all the truer for that. Besides, who can resist a bit of conspiracy theory? The pamphlet was mostly an "abreaction," an acting-out meant to free *his* own system from all the bad energy. An earnest French artist took the cue and claimed in *Libération* that Baudrillard was "feeding paranoia toward contemporary art." She was absolutely right too. Who could doubt that contemporary art today is besieged by a hostile audience and badly in need of reinforcement? Aren't artists and dealers, curators, critics, collectors, sponsors, speculators, not to mention socialites, snobs, spongers, crooks, parasites of all kinds, all feeding off art crumbs, heroically sacrificing themselves to redeem art from shoddy consumerism, just like Russian "liquidators" putting down the sarcophagus on the Chernobyl reactor at the cost of their lives? It wasn't enough that art would have become a huge business, a mammoth multinational corporation with its professional shows, channels and conventions, it still had to be treated with utter reverence, even awe. The controversy was briskly moving to pataphysical heights.

Baudrillard probably had his doubts about contemporary art even before he saw any of it, and he mostly managed to keep away from any serious involvement. To this day he prefers "strange attractors," borderline objects or projects (Sophie Calle's vacant drifts through sentiment, the strange cruelty of Michal Rovner's biological theater), art that doesn't claim to be art or mean anything, more anthropological than aesthetic in outlook. In a sense Baudrillard himself is a strange attractor (cruelty included), a borderline thinker doing to philosophy or sociology what these strange "things" do to art, all UFO's coming from different galaxies, each endowed with rigorous rules that cannot be transgressed, even by themselves. Gilles Deleuze once superbly said that he wanted to exit philosophy to engage art, literature, film, *but as a philosopher*. Unlike him, Baudrillard never had to make a huge effort to get out of philosophy. He never belonged there in the first place, or anywhere for that matter. And he entered art not as a philosopher, but as a *traitor*, in Deleuze's sense, inventing his own itinerary. He just went to the other side, becoming a practicing artist of sorts, imperturbably showing in galleries photographs that he didn't really believe in. And then becoming a traitor to art *again* by refusing to own up to it.

Baudrillard's rejection of art was all the more unexpected, and appeared all the more outrageous for that to those who believed

he had crossed over. And yet he didn't seem to notice the contradiction. The episode of the "simulationist school" (and of the "anti-simulationist" controversy) may have had something to do with it. In 1987 Baudrillard didn't yet know much about the American art world and didn't quite realize what was happening around his name. At best, he told me later, he sensed that "there was something fishy there" [*Je me suis méfié*] with a sound peasant-like distrust of sleek city talkers. So he flatly refused to play into the artists' hands. He might as well have acceded their demand, the way he subsequently accepted the gallerists' offer to exhibit his photographs because *it would eventually have amounted to the same.* How could anything one does ever be wrong coming "after the orgy"? If art ceased to matter as art, then what prevented *anyone* from joining in? Actually that he, who admittedly had no artistic claim or pedigree, would be invited to exhibit his work, amply proved his point: there was nothing special anymore about art. Groucho Marx once said that he would never join a club that accepted him as a member. Baudrillard did worse: he joined a group whose reasons to exist he publicly denied.

"Pataphysician at twenty—situationist at thirty—utopian at forty—viral and metaleptic at sixty—the entire story," is the way Baudrillard once epitomized his own itinerary.[7] Pataphysics was founded by Alfred Jarry, creator of Ubu, the brat-king with a paunch. It is the science of imaginary solutions, and this is precisely what Baudrillard reinvented in the circumstance. A pataphysical solution *to a problem that didn't exist.* Because *he* certainly had no problem with it. Others may have, but it was their problem and it wasn't up to him to solve it. Attacking art and becoming an artist all at the same time was perfectly acceptable in his book. He hadn't asked to show his photographs, merely obliged. As far as he knew, they may have been trying to bribe him publicly, some kind of sting operation by the art squad. *But they always implicate you one way or another,* so at least it was all above board. It was part of the "conspiracy" of art. Baudrillard didn't have to feel any qualms about it, could even enjoy the ride for what it was worth. Early on he learned from French anthropologist Marcel Mauss that "gifts" always come with a vengeance. He knew he would eventually have to reciprocate, squaring the circle. And *he did*: he wrote *The Conspiracy of Art.*

Baudrillard is a special kind of philosopher, especially in a country where ideologies come cheap and easy—what he does is no different from what he writes. He *performs* his philosophy, not just preaches it. He is a practicing artist of his own concepts. This is an art he never betrayed, his only claim to artistry. Exhibiting his photographs was part of his work as a pataphysician, as much as attacking art was part of his work as a Situationist. That people would be angered at him for these gestures simply proved that they didn't have a clue. They hadn't understood anything about his theory, or about the world we live in for that matter. For Baudrillard the actual photographs are beside the point. It is what *precedes* them that counts in his eyes—the *mental event* of taking a picture—and this could never be documented, let alone exhibited. But what could be more gratifying than having fully paid-up members of the conspiracy exhibit something that he himself doesn't consider art? The products themselves will go the way of all things artistic—in the garbage or in a gallery. The Museum of Modern Art is considering acquiring his photographs for its collection. The Whitney Museum of American Art is thinking it too, and it would be just fair. What artist today is more modern and American than Baudrillard? The desert too is real.

Proclaiming that art is *null* was not an aesthetic judgment on his part, but an anthropological problem. It was a *polemic* gesture towards culture as a whole, which now is simultaneously nothing and everything, being at once elitist and crassly materialistic, repetitive, ingenious, pretentious and inflated beyond human recognition. For Baudrillard art has nothing to do with art as it is usually understood. It remains a yet unresolved issue for post-humans to deal with—if anyone in the far-away future still cares organizing another exciting panel on the future of art.

Art doesn't come from a natural impulse, but from calculated artifice (at the dawn of modernism, Baudelaire already figured this out). So it is always possible to question its status, and even its existence. We have grown so accustomed to take art with a sense of awe that we cannot look at it anymore with dispassionate eyes, let alone question its legitimacy. This is what Baudrillard had in mind, and few people realized it at the time. First one has to *nullify* art in order to look at it for what it is. And this is precisely what Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol respectively did. By now art may well have outgrown this function, although everyone keeps acting as if it still mattered. Actually nothing proves that it was meant to persevere, or would persist in the forms it has given itself, except by some kind of tacit agreement *on everybody's part.* Baudrillard called it a "conspiracy," but he might as well have called Disneyland "the Conspiracy of Reality." And none of it, of course, was real, except as a conspiracy. Conspiracy too is calculated artifice. Maybe the art world is an art onto itself, possibly the only one left. Waiting to be given its final form by someone like Baudrillard. Capital, the ultimate art. We all are artists on this account.

Art is no different anymore from anything else. This doesn't prevent it from growing exponentially. The "end of art," so often trumpeted, never happened. It was replaced instead by unrestrained proliferation and cultural overproduction. Never has art been more successful than it is today—*but is it still art?* Like material goods, art is endlessly recycling itself to meet the demands of the market. Worse yet: the less pertinent art has become *as art*, the louder it keeps claiming its "exceptionalism." Instead of bravely acknowledging its own obsolescence and questioning its own status, it is basking in its own self-importance. The only legitimate reason art would have to exist nowadays would be *to reinvent itself as art.* But this may be asking too much. It may not be capable of doing that, because it has been doing everything it could to prove that it still is art. In that sense Baudrillard may well be one of the last people who really cares about art.

Baudrillard is notoriously "cool" and it may come as a big surprise that he would have got genuinely excited after viewing a major retrospective of Andy Warhol's work.[5] Didn't Baudelaire say that a dandy should never lapse from indifference, at most keep a "latent fire"? What Baudrillard so readily embraced in Warhol, though, was not the great artist, but the machine he masterfully managed to turn himself into. Both in his art and in his frozen persona, Warhol embodied in an extreme form the only radical alternative still conceivable in the century: renouncing art altogether and turning commodity itself into an art form. It mattered little that the work eventually got re-commodified as art, and that Warhol himself somehow betrayed his own machinic impulse. Can one ever expect capital to leave anything unchallenged?

The same thing happened earlier on with the invention of the readymade. The idea of exhibiting a "fountain" (a public urinal) in a gallery was totally unprecedented and it sent reality itself reeling. Duchamp probably meant merely shaking the art institution, in dada

fashion, but it was art itself that was the casualty, precipitating the collapse of art history, including his own stunt with painting. There was no more reason to wonder if art should be realistic, expressionistic, impressionistic, futuristic, if it had to paint the light or bring out the scaffolding. It was all in the mind. Non-retinian art was an oxymoron, an explosive device. Something like Nietzsche's laughter. It was a challenge to "culture," meaning the business of art. Reality itself everywhere was up for sale, so why not in a gallery? The readymade wasn't a point of departure, but a point of no return. Once added up, art and reality amounted to a *sum zero equation*. It was *null*. Opening the floodgates of art to the decodification of capital, Duchamp left nothing behind.

Could art survive such an abrupt deterritorialization? Apparently yes, but over Duchamp's dead body. Morphing banality into art, Duchamp hadn't fathered a new artistic era, instead he left art intestate, a bachelor machine with nothing more to grind except itself. But this was enough to turn his iconoclastic gesture into a new art paradigm. One can always reterritorialize everything on nothing, This is what the "conspiracy" of art really was about, "striving for nullity when already null and void," as Baudrillard put it. This *nullity* triggered the great rush of 20th century art, stripping the bride bare, hastily throwing along the way everything that could still justify its own existence as art, gradually exhausting its own resources as a rocket exhausts its fuel to stay on orbit. Filling the gap between reality and art didn't give either of them a new boost, as everyone hoped it would, rather cancelled out any possibility for creative illusion. What was left was an endless recycling of art's own demise, deconstruction and self-reference replacing a more secret kind of alterity, or the reinvention of more inflexible rules. Andy Warhol managed to complete this anorexic cycle by replacing art itself with mechanical reproduction, by the same token returning banality to its irremediable enigma. Anything that came after that was bound to merely retrivialize banality, eagerly affixing finality to an end already gone out of sight. Going nowhere, art came to nothing—and everything—simply staying there, grinding its teeth, losing its bite, then losing the point of it all. It is now floating in some kind of vapid, all consuming euphoria traversed by painful spurts of lucidity, sleep-walking in its sleep, not yet dead, hardly alive, but still thriving.

— Sylvère Lotringer

Provocation

1996

The Conspiracy of Art

The illusion of desire has been lost in the ambient pornography and contemporary art has lost the desire of illusion. In porn, nothing is left to desire. After the orgies and the liberation of all desires, we have moved into the *transsexual*, the transparency of sex, with signs and images erasing all its secrets and ambiguity. Transsexual, in the sense that it now has nothing to do with the illusion of desire, only with the hyperreality of the image.

The same is true for art, which has also lost the desire for illusion, and instead raises everything to aesthetic banality, becoming *transaesthetic*. For art, the orgy of modernity consisted in the heady deconstruction of the object and of representation. During that period, the aesthetic illusion remained very powerful, just as the illusion of desire was for sex. The energy of sexual difference, which moved through all the figures of desire, corresponded, in art, to the energy of dissociation from reality (cubism, abstraction, expressionism). Both, however, corresponded to the will to crack the secret of desire and the secret of the object. Up until the disappearance of these two powerful configurations—the scene of desire, the scene of illusion—in favor of the same transsexual, transaesthetic obscenity, the obscenity of visibility, the relentless transparency of all things. In reality, there is no longer any pornography, since it is virtually everywhere. The essence of pornography permeates all visual and televisual techniques.

Maybe we are just acting out the comedy of art, just as other societies acted out the comedy of ideology, just as Italian society (though it is not alone) keeps acting out the comedy of power, just as we keep acting out the comedy of porn in the obscene advertising pictures of women's bodies. Perpetual striptease, fantasies of exposed organs, sexual blackmail: if all this were true, it would indeed be unbearable. Fortunately, it is all is too obvious to be true. The transparency is too good to be true. As for art, it is too superficial to be truly null and void. There must be some underlying mystery. Like for anamorphosis: there must be an angle from which all of this useless excess of sex and signs becomes meaningful, but, for the time being, we can only experience it with ironic indifference. In this unreality of porn, in this insignificance of art, is there a negative enigma, a mysterious thread, or, who knows, an ironic form of our destiny? If everything becomes too obvious to be true, maybe there still is a chance for illusion. What lies hidden behind this falsely transparent world? Another kind of intelligence or a terminal lobotomy? (Modern) art managed to be a part of the accursed share, a kind of dramatic alternative to reality, by translating the rush of unreality in reality. But what could art possibly mean in a world that has already become hyperrealist, cool, transparent, marketable? What can porn mean in a world made pornographic beforehand? All it can do is make a final, paradoxical wink—the wink of reality laughing at itself in its most hyperrealist form, of sex laughing at itself in its most exhibitionist form, of art laughing at itself and at its own disappearance in its most artificial form, irony. In any case, the dictatorship of images is an ironic dictatorship. Yet this irony itself is no longer part of the accursed share. It now belongs to insider trading, the shameful and hidden complicity binding the artist who uses his or her aura of derision against the bewildered and doubtful masses. Irony is also part of the conspiracy of art.

As long as art was making use of its own disappearance and the disappearance of its object, it still was a major enterprise. But art trying to recycle itself indefinitely by storming reality? The majority of contemporary art has attempted to do precisely that by confiscating banality, waste and mediocrity as values and ideologies. These countless installations and performances are merely compromising with the state of things, and with all the past forms of art history. Raising originality, banality and nullity to the level of values or even to perverse aesthetic pleasure. Of course, all of this mediocrity claims to transcend itself by moving art to a second, ironic level. But it is just as empty and insignificant on the second as the first level. The passage to the aesthetic level salvages nothing; on the contrary, it is mediocrity squared. It claims to be null—"I am null! I am null!"—*and it truly is null.*

Therein lies all the duplicity of contemporary art: asserting *nullity*, insignificance, meaninglessness, striving for nullity when already null and void. Striving for emptiness when already empty. Claiming superficiality in superficial terms. Nullity, however, is a secret quality that cannot be claimed by just anyone. Insignificance—real insignificance, the victorious challenge to meaning, the shedding of sense, the art of the disappearance of meaning—is the rare quality of a few exceptional works that never strive for it. There is an initiatory form of Nothingness, or an initiatory form of Evil. And then there are the inside traders, the counterfeiters of nullity, the snobs of nullity, of all those who prostitute Nothingness to value, who prostitute Evil for useful ends. The counterfeiters must not be allowed free reign. When Nothing surfaces in signs, when Nothingness emerges at the very heart of the sign system, that is

the fundamental event of art. The poetic operation is to make Nothingness rise from the power of signs—not banality or indifference toward reality but radical illusion. Warhol is thus truly null, in the sense that he reintroduces nothingness into the heart of the image. He turns nullity and insignificance into an event that he changes into a fatal strategy of the image.

Other artists only have a commercial strategy of nullity, one to which they give a marketable form, the sentimental form of commodity, as Baudelaire said. They hide behind their own nullity and behind the metastases of the discourse on art, which generously promotes this nullity as a value (within the art market as well, obviously). In a way, it is worse than nothing, because it means nothing and it nonetheless exists, providing itself with all the right reasons to exist. This paranoia in collusion with art means that there is no longer any possible critical judgment, and only an amiable, necessarily genial sharing of nullity. Therein lies the conspiracy of art and its primal scene, transmitted by all of the openings, hangings, exhibitions, restorations, collections, donations and speculations, and that cannot be undone in any known universe, since it has hidden itself from thought behind the mystification of images.

The flip side of this duplicity is, through the bluff on nullity, to force people *a contrario* to give it all some importance and credit it under the pretext that there is no way it could be so null, that it must be hiding something. Contemporary art makes use of this uncertainty, of the impossibility of grounding aesthetic value judgments and speculates on the guilt of those who do not understand it or who have not realized that there is nothing to understand. Another case of insider trading. In the end, one might also think that these people, who are held in respect by art, really got it since their very bewilderment betrays an intuitive intelligence. They realize that they've been made victims of an abuse of power, that they have been denied access to the rules of the game and manipulated behind their backs. In other words, art has become involved (not only from the financial point of view of the art market, but in the very management of aesthetic values) in the general process of insider trading. Art is not alone: politics, economics, the news all benefit from the same complicity and ironic resignation from their "consumers."

"Our admiration for painting results from a long process of adaptation that has taken place over centuries and for reasons that often have nothing to do with art or the mind. Painting created its receiver. It is basically a conventional relationship" (Gombrowitz to Dubuffet). The only question is: How can such a machine continue to operate in the midst of critical disillusion and commercial frenzy? And if it does, how long will this conjuring act last? One hundred, two hundred years? Will art have the right to a second, interminable existence, like the secret services that, as we know, haven't had any secrets to steal or exchange for some time but who still continue to flourish in the utter superstition of their usefulness, perpetuating their own myth.

1997

A Conjuration of Imbeciles

Two situations, each as critical and unsolvable as the other: the nullity of contemporary art and the political impotence in the face of Le Pen. They are interchangeable and solved by transfusion: the powerlessness to present any political opposition to Le Pen shifts to the realm of culture and of the cultural Holy Alliance. And calling contemporary art into question can only come from reactionary, irrational, or even fascist thought...

What can we use against this respected conspiracy of dunces? Unfortunately, nothing can correct this mechanism of intellectual perversion, since it emerges from the bad conscience and the impotence of our "democratic" elites when they try to resolve the impasse of art as well as the political impasse of the struggle against the Front National. The simplest solution is to confuse the two problems in a single moralizing vituperation. The real question then becomes: Is there no longer any way to "open" the problem, to utter something uncommon, insolent, heterodoxical or paradoxical without being automatically branded a member of the extreme right (which is, it must be said, a way of paying tribute to the far right)? Why has everything moral, orthodox and conformist, which was traditionally associated with the right, passed to the left?

Painful revision. The right once embodied moral values and the left, in opposition, embodied a certain historical and political urgency. Today, however, stripped of its political energy, the left has become a pure moral injunction, the embodiment of universal values, the champion of the reign of Virtue and keeper of the antiquated values of the Good and the True, an injunction that calls everyone to account without having to answer to anyone. Its political illusions frozen for twenty years in the opposition, the left in power proved to be the bearer of a morality of history rather than any historical mission. A morality of Truth, Rights and good conscience: the zero degree of politics and probably the lowest point of a genealogy of morals as well. This moralization of values was a historic defeat for the left (and for thinking): that the historical truth of any event, the aesthetic quality of any work, the scientific pertinence of any hypothesis would necessarily have to be judged in terms of morals. Even reality, the reality principle, is an article of faith. Call the reality of a war into question and you are immediately called a traitor to moral law.

With the left just as drained of political life as the right, where has politics gone? Well, it has moved to the extreme right. As Bruno Latour put it so well in *Le Monde*, Le Pen is the only one with any political discourse in France today. All the other discourses are moral or pedagogical, made by school teachers and lesson givers, managers and programmers. Given over to evil and immorality, Le Pen has swept up the political pot, the remnants of everything that was left behind, or frankly repressed, by the politics of the Good and the Enlightenment. The more the moral coalition against him hardens its stance—a sign of political impotence—the more Le Pen profits from the politics of immorality, from being the only one on the side of evil. When the right passed to the side of moral values

and the established order, the left did not hesitate, in the past, to defy these moral values in the name of political values. Today, the left has fallen victim of the same shift, the same loss of control: by investing in the moral order, it can only watch the repressed political energy crystallize elsewhere and against it. And the left can only feed the Evil by embodying the reign of Virtue, which is also the greatest hypocrisy.

Le Pen would have to be invented if he didn't exist already. He delivers us from a wicked part of ourselves, from the quintessence of the worst in ourselves. Because of this, we have to curse him—but if he disappeared, have pity on us, we would be left to all our racist, sexist, nationalist viruses (our common lot), or simply to the deadly negativity of the social body. In this, Le Pen is the mirror of the political class, which exorcises its own evil in him, just as we exorcise into the political class the inherent corruption of societal functions. The same corruption, the same catharsis. The desire to extirpate this, to petrify society and moralizing public life, to liquidate whatever takes the place of evil, this desire displays a complete misunderstanding of the mechanisms of evil, and thus of the very form of politics.

Preying on unilateral denunciation and totally unaware of the reversibility of evil, the anti-Le Penists relinquished the monopoly of evil to Le Pen, who thereby enjoys an unshakeable position because of his very exclusion. The political classes that stigmatize him in the name of Virtue provide him with the most comfortable position: he has to do nothing more than grab all the symbolic charge of ambivalence, of the denial of evil and of hypocrisy that are spontaneously produced in his favor and almost at his bidding when his adversaries claim to defend legitimate rights and the good cause. Le Pen's energy comes from his enemies, and they are quick to turn his own errors to his own advantage. They have not realized that good never comes from evicting evil—which then exacts a spectacular revenge—but from a subtle treatment of evil by evil.

All of this to say that Le Pen is the embodiment of stupidity and nullity—obviously—but the stupidity and nullity of others, those who denounce their own impotence and their own stupidity when denouncing him. At the same time, the absurdity of confronting him directly without an understanding of this diabolical game of musical chairs only feeds their own ghost, their own evil twin with this astounding lack of lucidity.

What is it that controls this perverse effect through which the left is blocked in denunciation while Le Pen maintains a monopoly on proclamations? Where one side profits from the crime while the other feels all the negative effects of recriminations? Where he revels in evil while the left is chained to its victimization?

A simple truth: by locking Le Pen in a ghetto, the democratic left is locking itself up. It establishes itself as a discriminatory power and exiles itself in its own obsession. It instantly gives the other side the privilege of being denied justice. And Le Pen has no qualms about arguing for this republican right for his own benefit. But most of all he has established himself in the illegal, imaginary, but very profound privilege of the persecuted. Now he can benefit from the advantages of both legality and illegality. Drawing on this ostracism, he can use language more freely, proffer insolent judgments, all of which the left denies itself.

Here is an example of the magical thought that has replaced political thought: Le Pen is accused of rejecting and excluding immigrants. But this is a mere drop in the bucket of the social exclusion that is taking place at every level. And we are all complicit in and victims of this complex and inextricable process of collective

responsibility. It is therefore typically magical to conjure the virus that has spread in function of our social and technological "progress," to exorcise this curse of exclusion and our powerlessness to face it by making one man, institution or group the execrable figure of a cancer that could be extracted through a surgical operation even though it has metastasized throughout the entire body. The Front National only follows the trail of the metastasis; the germs spread all the more vigorously that we think the abscess has been eliminated. And it so happens that this magical projection against the FN treats immigrants in the same way. We should be wary of the illusion of contamination that changes the positive into a negative virus and the demand for freedom into "democratic despotism" merely through the transparency of evil. Rational intelligence never suspects the existence of this reversibility, the subtle twist of evil (despite all the things modern pathology has taught us about the physical body, we pay no attention to it for the social body).

To remain in the political realm, we have to avoid ideology and see things in terms of the social physiology. Our democratic society is the stasis; Le Pen is the metastasis. Global society is dying of inertia and immune deficiency. Le Pen is the visible translation of this viral state, its spectacular projection. It's the same as in a dream: he is the burlesque, hallucinatory figure of this latent state, of the silent inertia made up of a combination of forced integration and systematic exclusion in equal doses.

With the hope of reducing inequality in this society (almost) definitively gone, one should not be surprised to see resentment turn to the inequality between races. Social failure feeds racist success (and all other forms of fatal strategies). In this sense, Le Pen is the only wild analyst of this society. The fact that he is on the extreme right is the sad consequence of the longstanding lack of these analysts on the left or extreme left. No judges or intellectuals could be analysts, only immigrants on the opposite end of the spectrum could possibly do so, but they have already been recuperated by certain well-intentioned movements. Le Pen is the only one who has carried out a radical elimination of the left/right distinction. Elimination by default, of course, but the harsh criticism of this distinction in the 1960s and in '68 unfortunately disappeared from political life. Le Pen has taken up a de facto situation that the political class refused to confront (it even tries to do everything to erase it through elections). But one day, we will have to face its dire consequences. If political imagination, political will and political demands ever have a chance of bouncing back, it will only be through the radical abolition of this fossilized distinction that has become meaningless and disavowed over the decades and only perseveres through a complicity in corruption. The distinction has practically disappeared, but it continues to be resuscitated thanks to an incurable revisionism, making Le Pen the creator of the only new political scene. As if everyone was an accomplice in sabotaging what little remains of democracy to give the retrospective illusion that it did once exist. Many other things today manage to survive through the mise-en-scène of their disappearance, validating their own existence through an anticipation of mourning. And Le Pen leads this death-like labor by executing the "contract."

Is there any way to draw conclusions from this extreme (yet original) situation except from the hallucinatory *medium* of Le Pen, i.e. from a magical conspiracy that drains everyone's energy? How can we avoid succumbing to this viral growth of our own daemons other than by accepting responsibility, above and beyond the moral order and democratic revisionism, for the wild analysis that Le Pen and the Front National have stolen from us?

2002

In the Kingdom of the Blind...

We have just witnessed a most remarkable *opera bouffe* or comedy of political mores, and this time the elections brilliantly deserved their reputation as a con game.

Beyond all those who let themselves fall into this trap, the electoral system as a whole and therefore the "democratic" system of representation was beaten at its own game.

Everything began with the growing indifference to politics (I do not mean among professionals) and the added indifference, since indifference itself has become a reference, a culture of indifference that is not far from becoming the only true social bond.

The first attempted diversion: "People are not indifferent to politics but to its spectacle and general corruption." Wrong: the spectacle of political degeneration fascinates people, it fascinates us. They have become indifferent to politics, to the very principle of representation, and this indifference is most certainly combined with their indifference to their own lives, thus it is neither an accidental nor a superficial phenomenon. It may even be a gut reaction of apathy in the face of the general harassment aimed at making us responsible for everything.

Montesquieu once said that "the people can become so enlightened that they are no longer indifferent to anything." Well, it seems that the people are just enlightened enough to choose to remain indifferent to certain things and to avoid the mortal danger of being concerned by anything.

By arranging to exclude the Front National from any national representation, the dominant political class has exposed itself, totally blindly (and for over twenty years), to the risk that this exclusion could become a weapon and infiltrate society like a virus. Right and left have become one and the same. There is no hint of a solution in exorcising Le Pen by denying him existence, no more than there is a chance of eradicating terrorism by exterminating the Taliban. Le Pen thrives on exclusion from the system of representation and any reinforced exclusion strengthens him, just as any censured image automatically becomes erotic.

Antidemocratic ideologies can easily be fought and disqualified, but that is not the point: the point is the general unease with representation, present even among the democrats and antifascists. By excluding the Front National, we allow it benefits from all the potential of this unease; it becomes the flash point (*abcès de fixation*) for all of this latent indifference and ends up embodying the violent political counter-transference of a society towards itself. By being off-limits, it becomes the emblem not only of everything that is not represented or representable, but also of everything that may no longer want to be represented. This forms a vast, elusive potential that can crystallize in any place and at any time; and the political class, by definition, cannot and will not take it into account. It can only submit to its electric shock from time to time, as it did in the recent elections. But this will not teach it anything, because it will continue to think that everything is due to the naïveté or the stupidity of a part of the population that should simply be democratically pushed back into the shadows.

The only intelligent strategy (politically speaking) would obviously be to integrate the Front National in the system of representation. But even this would be pointless, because Le Pen embodies something other than political ideas or the resentment of a single category—something persistent and obscure that resists political reasoning and feeds off of this very dissidence. This is obvious when we see that, with the whole world against him, Le Pen has raked in the winnings without a fight. This is what gives him his self-assurance and air of triumph: he does not have to be credible because he does not represent anything, because he is nothing. And yet, by being nothing, he embodies it perfectly while the others mournfully shoulder the burden of representation. He is at once the absolute mockery and the truth of the situation. Le Pen is a very subtle Père Ubu, since he forced the left, in a turn of ferocious irony, to vote for Chirac, reducing them to the humiliating situation of "kneeling in suspenders." By electing the right through its own opponents, Le Pen deprived it of any real legitimacy—thus making the two conflicting parties take each other hostage and mutually disqualify each other. He did not even have to try. He simply exploited the logic of representation: the left could only vote against itself in the second round and Chirac could only govern in a vacuum, since he no longer knows who he represents.

In fact, Le Pen is a real terrorist like those of September 11th. He turned the weapons of exclusion against the system of power, just as they turned Boeings into flying bombs aimed at the towers. It was a veritable attack on the twin towers of left and right. And just as the September 11th terrorists turned their deaths into an absolute weapon, Le Pen turned the virtual divide between representatives and represented, the exclusion at the heart of the current democratic structure, into a master weapon against the entire political class. And the legislative elections will reestablish the holy alliance to erase this blow, just as the war in Afghanistan will have served to exorcise the September 11th attacks and restore world order.

All discussions of Le Pen are apotropaic. They are aimed at warding off his evil, erasing his existence, and above all, spreading the belief that he is nothing (which, as we have seen, is painfully true, because that is his force, being this spiral paunch[1] (*gidouille*), this palotin,[2] this pataphysical specter of corruption and derision.) Remember the general relief when the Front suddenly split in 1998, as if by magic: we told you so, it was nothing, we didn't have to do anything, it fell apart on its own! Too bad: now the exact opposite is true, the left and right have fallen apart, by ruining their representative credit and no longer having an imaginary enemy to comfort them in their democratic status.

It is always the same dubious analysis, the timorous evocation of objective causes (growing insecurity, poor voting by the disenfranchised, the incompetence of the political classes, irresponsible abstention, etc.) with added shame, democratic affliction. "We have the Shame!" say the same youth from the ghettos who once shouted, "We have the Hate!"

Instead of that, the entire political class should congratulate itself for undergoing the trial of truth, giving it some chance of survival—if not of resuscitation... In the meantime, it has done everything to write itself off. Worst of all is that it has succeeded in dragging the entire population into its misery and affliction, forcing that population to mechanically and sentimentally save a political class in which it no longer believes.

Controversy

Starting From Andy Warhol

Jean Baudrillard: The only things I said about art that excited me were on Warhol, Pop Art and Hyperrealism. I think Andy Warhol was the only artist at a time when art was caught up in a very important transitional movement, the only artist who was able to situate himself at the forefront, before all the changes. Maybe it's also just luck or destiny... Everything that characterizes his work—the advent of banality, the mechanized gestures and images, and especially his iconolatry—he turned all of that into an event of platitude. It's him and nobody else! Later on, others simulated it, but he was the greatest simulator, with style to match! The exhibition of his works in Venice (Summer 1990) far surpassed and outclassed everything else in the Biennial.

Andy Warhol was a big moment in the 20th century because he was the only one who had a gift for dramatization. He still managed to bring out simulation as a drama, a dramaturgy: something dramatic slipped between two phases, the passage into the image and the absolute equivalence of all images. His principle was to say, "I am a machine, I am nothing." Since then, everyone has just repeated the same mantra, only pretentiously. He, however, thought it as something radical: "I am nothing and I can function." "I am working on every level, artistic, commercial, advertising..." "I am operationality itself!"

He affirmed the world in its total evidence, the stars, the post-figurative world (it is neither figurative nor non-figurative, but mythical). His world was glamorous and everyone in it was glamorous! Warhol's act could be considered a revisitation of art after Duchamp. According to our own coordinates and temporality, it is less a work of art than an anthropological event. That's what interests me about him: the object. He is someone who, with utter cynicism and agnosticism, brought about a manipulation, a transfusion of the image into reality, into the absent referent of star-making banality.

Warhol remains for me a founder of modernity. It is somewhat paradoxical, since modernity is usually considered more of a destruction; yet there is a certain jubilation, not at all suicidal or melancholy, because, ultimately, that's the way he is: cool, and even more than cool, totally insouciant. It's mechanical snobbism and I like that kind of provocation of aesthetic morals. Warhol freed us from aesthetics and art...

Warhol went the farthest in abolishing the subject of art, of the artist, by withdrawing from the creative act. Behind this mechanical snobbery, there is in fact an escalation in the power of the object, the sign, the image, the simulacrum and value of which the best example today is the art market itself. This goes well beyond the alienation of price as a real measure of things: we are experiencing a fetishism of value that explodes the very notion of a market and, at the same time, abolishes the artwork as work of art. Andy Warhol does not belong to any avant-garde or utopia. He settles his accounts with utopia because contrary to other artists who keep comfortably deferring the idea, he enters directly into the heart of utopia, into the heart of nowhere. He identified himself with this nowhere, he was this nowhere place that is the very definition of utopia. He managed to move through the space of the avant-garde and reach the place it was striving to occupy: nowhere. But while others still relished the detour through art and aesthetics, Warhol skipped steps and completed the cycle in a single stroke.

Françoise Gaillard: *You are talking about the Warhol phenomenon, but today his works are still considered to be artworks, the kind that are hung in museums...*

Let's talk about that! Like everyone, I had seen many reproductions. Venice was the first time I saw so many works together, and an exhibition is no small matter... When you see the *Liz Taylors*, the *Mick Jaggers* or *The Chairs*, they beat any Velazquez room in the Prado! The *Mao* portraits could hold their own with paintings by the grand masters, but that would be a bonus because in reality they are painted or serigraphed on a backdrop of radical indifference!

I like it all the more in that I have always more or less done the same thing: reaching a certain emptiness, attaining a zero-level capable of bringing out singularity and style. And be brilliant! He achieved just that by asserting that everything is brilliant, art, everyone... It's a wonderful statement!

For art people, the ones who define themselves by very elitist standards, this is obviously unacceptable. But today these standards are all the more false because they are indefensible. The moral law of art has now disappeared. There only remain rules to a game that is radically democratic. It is even more than democratic: it is indifferentiating. Warhol went that far, though without theorizing it since everything he says is wonderful in its naiveté, its false naiveté. And moreover he didn't say anything because there was nothing to get out of him. He was abused for this attitude.

You see him as someone who, at a given moment, gave "expression"—not to use the term "aesthetic expression"—to a certain reality, a social evidence?

Yes, an evidence of annulation.

And at the same time an aestheticization of all expressive products?

Yes, he pushed aesthetics to the limit, to the point where it no longer had any aesthetic quality and reversed into its opposite. There was a fantastic coherence to the Venice exhibition. You could see scenes of violence, car accidents for example, images that were the last photograph to be taken or found. They are not exaggerated, they are exactly, literally, literalized! And then there is no blackmail: he takes the world as it is with its stars, its violence, the world the *media* makes such a repulsive fuss about, which is what is killing us! Warhol totally loots this world.

He takes away its pathos?

He cools it down, so to speak, but he also makes it an enigma. In his works, he gives an enigmatic force back to a banality that we *seem*—and I say this emphatically!—to have completely unmasked and denounced morally. We can denounce it forever, but it will keep existing. End of story!

Other opuses existed alongside Warhol's own work—Rauchenberg, Lichtenstein...—and touched on a little bit of everything, using objects and comic books, but in terms of lyrical residues. As if to reach a kind of re-aestheticization of this residue...

That's right, they re-aestheticize it. For Warhol, it is not residue, it is substance or at least non-substance.

It is both total affectation, radical snobbism and at the same time total non-affectation, absolute candor in relation to the ignorance of the world. And this world, without wanting to, knows what it is: it is no longer the natural, substantial, ideological world... It knows that it is a world of images that are no more, images without imaginary. If we could beam Warholian waves through our neurons, we might avoid such intoxication.

Your trips to the United States in the past few years have put you in contact with certain movements and artists who, explicitly or not, claim to play off Warhol's influence, and others who, like Koons, use him as a starting point and try to outmatch each other with kitsch. You have even been made the spokesman of a certain avant-garde that is now spreading in Europe.

There are those who cultivate the connection to Warhol and those who distance themselves from him because it is too dangerous. They claim that Warhol was a primitive in the art of simulation since they are the "true simulators."

This marking of distance culminated in an exhibit at the Whitney in New York, of which I became involved in spite of myself. True, some artists refer to me through my writings and my ideas on simulation. In fact, it was a strange trap that forced me to reestablish my bearings. Simulation has been all the rage in the art world in recent years. I see it as an phenomenon totally ancillary of events that preceded it, including Warhol.

How can I defend myself from a truth when I am more and more convinced that the people in art do not have the slightest idea,

the slightest thought about what is now really happening. These artists are sly and pretentious when they claim to see things twice removed, when they claim to be even more null because they are the "true simulators" of pure reappropriation, pure copying. How can one react to this mise-en-abîme in which they themselves use the terms "banality, simulation, loss of referent," the arguments of a critical analysis that are by now meaningless?

At the Whitney event, these artists tried to categorize me as a precursor without engaging in any discussion or debate with me. This has led, among other things, to the "Neo-Geo" school, a very marginalized and confused group. There is nothing to add to this nullity caused by authors, otherwise oftentimes very intelligent, incapable of putting up with their own nullity. In spite of myself, I served as an alibi and reference, and by taking what I said and wrote literally, they missed simulation.

In other words?

It's the illness of aestheticization. In simulation, there is a risk, a challenge that is not predetermined. When you say there are signs, simulation, people reply by saying, "If there is no reality, only simulacra, since we are inside, we go for the simulacrum." You can never know if it is a complete rip off or not, and at the same time, you cannot argue the point. This is a way of denying the essential since simulation, in itself, is still a metaphoric game with many things, including language, that they do not take at all into account. There may be, in simulation, a kind of short circuit between reality and its image, between reality and representation. In the end, these are the same elements that once served to constitute the reality principle; except that here they collide and cancel each other out, somewhat like matter and anti-matter. What comes out of it, the universe of simulation, is fascinating, phantasmagorical, whereas these artists have only recovered and expressed its fastidious and boring side...

Perhaps because these artists belong to a generation that is no longer in this phase of dramatizing simulation. They no longer know what was at stake in the opposition between sign and reality!

I realized too late that in the United States they made the journey in reverse. This analysis was made in a utopian manner; it cancels out what you said and at the same time consecrates it all.

These artists were born into simulacrum, into truth because the situation is such, over there, that the simulacrum is true. Then they turn to Europe to find some vague theorizing, which leads to bastardized things. Jeff Koons' attitude is clear: it's rewriting done after and in relation to Warhol. It's a post-modern remake, not really that shitty (la Cicciolina isn't either, as a porn star!)

You mean that, in this case, the imaginary and dream-like dimension present in Warhol's star portraits is gone? The threat of death is gone and it has become completely "Saint-Sulpician"?

It's no longer an object of desire! La Cicciolina is mindless, maniacal desire. It's a wax museum! Even banalized by serigraphy, Warhol's stars were expressing something intensely about death, about destiny... Koons is not even a regression: it's just mush! You see it then forget it. Maybe it's made for that...

1996

Art between Utopia and Anticipation

Ruth Scheps: *In one of your articles, you wrote, "The entire movement of art has pulled out of the future and moved to the past"![1] Does that mean that painting—and maybe art in general—has pulled out of the function it once might have had of anticipating things to come?*

Jean Baudrillard: That is in fact what it would mean literally, but saying it that way is a bit too simple. There has certainly been a movement of retraction, a halting of perspectives, in as much as the avant-garde ever truly meant something. In that case you could say that avant-garde utopias have been replaced by regressive utopias and that this rear guard is perhaps now in the pole position. That sentence develops the idea that art is going through a sort of traveling shot of its own history, a more or less authentic or artificial resurrection of all its past forms. It can surf through its history and rework it, not exactly by exploring new fields—after all, maybe the aesthetic world is finite like the physical universe—but by veering along the final and necessary curve of things. There is no exponential linearity of human progress, even less so for art, where the linear function has always been a problem. No one ever thought that art was going from one point to another, with a final destination.

Listening to you, it sounds like we are already close to the end of time! It might nevertheless be interesting to take a step back and see how the various avant-gardes of our century imposed a certain vision of the artist as a precursor...

It's true that I am somewhat obsessed with the final expiration date. But it is out of curiosity, not out of some apocalyptic spirit, that I tend to put things in the perspective of an end point to see what happens to them. At that point, art, the economy, etc. all have the same problem. So yes, it might be interesting to see if there was not something determinant, traumatic in art; for example in the rise of someone like Duchamp.

And maybe even before, if you look at how art accompanied culture as a whole starting in 1875?

It is obvious that art already changed direction with the sudden and maybe seductive break into abstraction. The passage through abstraction is a considerable event. It is the end of a system of representation, although probably not the end of art, to the contrary. I still see abstraction both as a complete renewal of things and as an aberration. It is potentially dangerous for art to the extent that the aim of abstraction (and modernity in general) is to move towards an analytical exploration of the object, in other words, shedding the mask of figuration in order to find behind appearances an analytical truth for the object and for the world.

Isn't that parallel to the scientific approach?

Indeed. It is absolutely parallel to the approach of modernity as a whole, be it social or scientific, and I wonder if one could not already find there a corruption of art by science, or at least by the spirit of objectivity.

Reaching farther towards the basic structures of the object and the world, crossing through the looking-glass of representation and reaching the other side to provide a more elementary truth of the world is grandiose if you like, but also extremely dangerous to the extent that art is nonetheless a superior illusion (at least I hope so!) and not a progress towards analytical truths. This turn is therefore already a problem. But for me, the major turn began with Duchamp (although I don't insist on sacralizing him): the event of the readymade indicates a suspension of subjectivity where the artistic act is just the transposition of an object into an art object. Art is then only an almost magic operation: the object is transferred in its banality into an aesthetics that turns the entire world into a readymade. In itself Duchamp's act is infinitesimal, but starting with him, all the banality of the world passes into aesthetics, and inversely, all aesthetics becomes banal: a commutation takes place between the two fields of banality and aesthetics, one that truly brings aesthetics in the traditional sense to an end.

And for me, the fact that the entire world becomes aesthetic signifies the end of art and aesthetics in a way. Everything that follows—including the resurgence of past forms of art—becomes readymade (a bottle, an event or its reenactment).The forms of the history of art can be taken up as such; they only need to be transferred into another dimension to make them readymades, like Martin O'Connors, for example, takes up Millet's *Angélus* in his own way. But this readymade is less pure than Duchamp's, whose act reaches a certain perfection in its bareness.

Would the precursor Duchamp be one of the last artists to anticipate?

In a certain way, he writes off all structures of representation and, in particular, expressive subjectivity, the theater of illusion: the world is a readymade and all we can do is to maintain the illusion or the superstition of art by means of a space in which objects are moved and which will necessarily become a museum. But the museum, as its name indicates, is a sarcophagus all the same.

Now all is not over. Duchamp put a scenario in place, but within this generalized aesthetics—and therefore within this inaesthetics of things—very magical events can occur! Andy Warhol is an example, another artist who introduced nothingness into the heart of the image. That is also a fantastic experience, but one that seems to me to be outside the realm of art history.

Hasn't art in the second half of our century largely renounced the pretensions it had to change life?

Personally, I find art increasingly pretentious. It wants to become life.

That is a different pretension than wanting to change it?

There was a Hegelian perspective in which one day art would be brought to an end. As for Marx it was supposed to bring an end to economics or politics, because these would no longer have any reason to exist given the transformations in life. The destiny of art is therefore effectively to go beyond itself into something else, whereas life...! This glowing perspective evidently did not materialize. What happened is that art substituted itself for life in the form of a generalized aesthetics that finally led to a "Disneyfication" of the

world: a Disney-form capable of atoning for everything by transforming it into Disneyland, takes the place of the world!

What you call the simulacrum.

Yes, but this term now covers so many things! The simulacrum was still a game with reality. Here, the world is literally taken as it is and "Disneyfied," in other words virtually sealed. And like Disney himself, who placed himself under "cryogenic seal" in liquid nitrogen, we risk cryogenization in a virtual reality.

The *Disney* company is buying up 42nd Street in New York. It might turn it into an international *Disney* attraction, where prostitutes and pimps would merely be characters in the virtual reality of the *Disney* aesthetic! This mutation is more decisive than the simulacrum or simulation I have analyzed. In any case it is something other than the *Society of Spectacle* Guy Debord spoke of (1967), which at the time was a powerful analysis but has lost its power because we are beyond it. There is no more spectacle, no more possible distance, no more alienation where you could be something other than yourself. Not any more. The same is changed into the same and in so doing, the readymade has gone global.

Duchamp's "trick" was both a fantastic act and, at the moment when it emerged, something absolutely new. And it has still become a sort of fate.

Is what art anticipates today a generalized virtualization of future society as a whole?

In any case, galleries now primarily deal with the byproducts of art. In New York, where many galleries have disappeared, the remaining ones mainly attempt to manage the residues: waste is not only a frequent theme, but the very materials of art are dejecta, and the styles are residual. You can do anything, which also leads to virtual reality where you can enter inside the image (until recently images were exterior). With video, the image is interiorized, you penetrate into it, and there, almost at the molecular level, you can surf anywhere and effectively do anything. For me, this is the end of art and rather resembles a technological activity. It seems to have become the orientation of many artists.

Do you find this proliferation to be negative in certain ways?

Certainly not. I am not making value judgments because I am completely incapable of entering that world and seeing it from the inside. I don't even know how to use a computer. So I see it in somewhat metaphysical terms and, from that point of view, I would definitely have an almost total resistance to all that. Luckily or not, we increasingly live in real time where it is perfectly impossible to foresee what will happen in a future time that no longer exists. For future time no longer exists: this is the opposite of what we spoke of at the beginning, in other words all of the future is carried back to the past of which it is also the memory. There is a real time, an immediate accomplishment and a sort of readymade as well, an instantaneity with a slight difference, that's all.

And this instantaneity contains many quotations of past works.

Exactly. Art has become quotation, reappropriation, and gives the impression of an indefinite resuscitation of its own forms. But tangentially, everything is a quotation: everything is textualized in the

past, everything has always already existed. Yet this art of quotation, reappropriation, simultaneity, etc. is different. It plays on the fossilized irony of a culture that no longer believes in that value. In my opinion, the artistic world no longer believes deeply in a destiny of art. I remember saying to myself after the 1993 Venice Biennial that art is a conspiracy and even an "insider trading": it encompasses an initiation to nullity and, without being disdainful, you have to admit that there, everyone is working on residue, waste, nothingness. Everyone makes claims on banality, insignificance; no one claims to be an artist anymore.

Really everyone?

The two discourses exist, but the dominant reflection, "politically correct" in terms of aesthetics, is: "I speak waste, I transcribe nullity, insignificance." It is both fashionable and the mundane discourse on art, and they work in a world which in fact may have become insignificant, but they do it in an insignificant way as well, and this is annoying! But it all works very well; you can see the mechanisms being deployed, maintained by the galleries, the critics and finally by a public that has no other solution than to pretend at the very least to enter it. All of that creates a sort of "bachelor machine" that works all by itself.

A closed world?

A completely self-referential world.

This self-referentiality, you see it more as self-reverence than freedom if I understand you correctly.

Of course, it justifies itself from the inside and increasingly so. However, art in terms of aesthetic surplus value is growing every day. Its symbolic expression is the art market, which has attained complete autonomy, completely cut off from the real economy of value, and has become a sort of fantastic excrescence. This art market reflects what is happening aesthetically, in other words perfectly foreign to the so-called "real" world (but since I don't really believe in it either, it's not too serious). The art market is not really a Mafia, but something that formed according to the rules of its own game, and whose disappearance would go unnoticed. It still exists, better and better, while the foundations of value are increasingly weaker. So I call it a conspiracy, although I do recognize a few exceptional individuals.

For example?

Some of the people I like are Hopper, Bacon. Warhol is something else, I have always taken him metaphysically, like the reference copy of a script, but not as an artist (it would be a contradiction to call him an artist since he did not want that). There are therefore exceptions that confirm the rule. In other words, the world is aligned on a revolutionary act—the readymade—and forms survive on this counter-field, but all the rest, all of this mechanism has become value (aesthetic value and market value). Art has been transformed into value, and we should oppose form to value—for me, art is fundamentally form—and say that we have been caught in the trap of value and even, through the art market, into a sort of ecstasy of value, a bulimia, an infinite excrescence of value. Luckily, however, I still believe that form—in other words the illusion of the world and the possibility to invent this other scene—persists, though through a form of radical exception.

Should we turn to form and eventually imagine new forms of utopia?

Maybe so, but then again, you cannot establish the possibilities or the conditions for this process. It is only as another illusion, one that would rediscover the possibility that colors, forms, light transform into each other, which would lead painting—and language as well—to something you can see in Bacon, for instance, even if these forms can be perfectly monstrous in his work. But this is not exactly the problem: these forms can account for a monstrous world and transfigure it, like Warhol did. Warhol reckons with the nothingness of the image and its insignificance, but he does it in a magical and transfiguring way (except at the end when he also got caught in this trap). There the game is different, so perhaps we need a different type of illusionist to recreate the emptiness where the pure event of form can take place. But one can only open this perspective in a very general way: it's an idea and it's happening, that's all one can say. That is what I am trying to accomplish in my writing, but I have no control over what happens somewhere else.

And in this case it is unforeseeable?

I think that it is impossible to conceive of what the new generation will be like. As long as there was a certain history of art, even critical and contradictory, with avant-gardes, it was possible to foretell and anticipate, to invent, to create "revolutionary" micro-events, but now I think that is no longer possible. There can still be, as in other worlds, singularities on a backdrop of a virtually flat "aesthetic encephalogram." These singularities are unpredictable and could very well be ephemeral, not entering History, in short events that arise against, just as in politics the real events today are singularities that come from beyond and take place against politics and history. There can no doubt be trans-aesthetic singularities, things that emerge from an alterity and are therefore unpredictable.

It is your vision, but is it also your hope?

It is not a question of hope. I have no illusion, no belief, except in forms—reversibility, seduction or metamorphosis—but these forms are indestructible. This is not a vague belief, it is an act of faith, without which I would not do anything myself.

Today, though, the pitfalls of all-powerful value and of the transcription into value are so strong that you can see the province of this type of form diminishing. Unfortunately, forms have no history; they probably have a destiny but not exactly a history, so it is very difficult to conclude any future from the past. And the hope that is still a virtue associated with this continuity of time also seems slight to me. I believe it is better to navigate, not with despair—I am no pessimist either—but based on an indeterminate aspect.

You cannot foresee what will happen in there at all, but we should be able to have an awareness that things have reached a certain end, an end that does not mean everything is finished. The aim of this modernity has reached its end, which is usually rather monstrous or aberrant, but where all possibilities have been exhausted or are being exhausted, everything ending in this sort of range of virtual reality that no one really knows anything about, despite the abundance of writing on the subject. At present, we are wearing the helmet, the digital gear of virtual reality. We hope that even this virtuality is virtual, in other words that we will no longer

have to deal with it, but it is now in the process of annexing all possibilities for the moment, including the possibilities of art, since with the multiplicity of artists working today, even if they are not working with computers or digital images, etc. if they redo what has been done, if they remix past forms, it amounts to the same. They don't need computers: this indefinite combination, which is no longer art per se, happens in the mind.

1996

No Nostalgia for Old Aesthetic Values

Geneviève Breerette: *On May 20, 1996, you published in the* Libération *newspaper a column called "The Conspiracy of Art," in which you repeatedly state that contemporary art is null, really null. What works, what exhibitions inspired your statements?*

Jean Baudrillard: The misunderstanding, which I am not trying to avoid, is that art, basically, is not my problem. I am not aiming for art or artists personally. Art interests me as an object, from an anthropological point of view: the object, before any promotion of its aesthetic value, and what happens after. We are almost lucky to live at a time when aesthetic value, like others by the way, is foundering. It's a unique situation.

I do not want to bury art. When I speak of the death of the real, it does not mean that this table here does not exist; that's foolish. But it's always understood that way. I can't help it. What happens when you no longer have a system of representation to picture this table? What happens when you no longer have a system of values suitable for judgment, for aesthetic pleasure? Art does not have the privilege of escaping this provocation, this curiosity. But it would deserve a special treatment, because it claims to escape banality the most and that it has the monopoly on a certain sublime, on tran-

scendent value. I really object to that. I say that you should be able to apply the same critique to art as to everything else.

You name no artists, other than Andy Warhol whom you happen to praise, which leads one to think that your statements are not as reactionary as has been said.

If I use Warhol as a point of reference, it is because he is outside the limits of art. I treat him differently from an almost anthropological perspective on the image. I do not return to him aesthetically. And then, I am in no position to say, "this one is bad, this one isn't."

You still take the liberty of saying that almost all contemporary art is null...

But I do not put myself in a position of truth. Everyone makes his or her own choices. If what I say is worthless, just let it drop, that's all.

The article was written a little hastily. I should not have started like that. I should have said that there is a hint of nullity in contemporary art. Is it null, or isn't it? What is nullity? My article is perfectly contradictory. On the one hand, I use nullity as null or nothing, and on the other, I say: nullity is a tremendous singularity. That is a critique that could have been made.

My text reflects a mood, an obsession with something, something more. That we have moved from art as such to a sort of trans-aestheticization of banality... It comes from Duchamp, okay. I have nothing against Duchamp, it is a fantastic and dramatic turn.

But he did set in motion a process in which everyone is now implicated, including us. What I mean is that in daily life, we have this "readymadeness" or this trans-aestheticization of everything

which means that there is no longer any illusion to speak of. This collapsing of banality into art and art into banality, or this respective game, complicit and all... Well, from complicity to conspiracy... We are all compromised. I am not denying it. I certainly have no nostalgia for old aesthetic values.

What is art for you?

Art is a form. A form is something that does not exactly have a history, but a destiny. Art had a destiny. Today, art has fallen into value, and unfortunately at a time when values have suffered. Values: aesthetic value, commercial value... values can be negotiated, bought and sold, exchanged. Forms, as forms, cannot be exchanged for something else, they can only be exchanged among themselves, and the aesthetic illusion comes at that price. For example, in abstraction, when the object is deconstructed, when the world and reality are deconstructed, there is still a way to exchange the object in itself symbolically. But abstraction later became merely a pseudo-analytical procedure for decomposing reality, not deconstructing it. Something has fallen apart, perhaps through the sole effect of repetition.

Did you see the exhibition "L'Informe" at the Centre Pompidou that deals with this problem by means of superb works?

No. Art can still have a strong power of illusion. But the great aesthetic illusion has become disillusion, concerted analytical disillusion, which can be performed brilliantly—that is not the problem, except that after a while it runs on empty. Art can become a sort of sociological, socio-historical or political witness. It then

becomes a function, a sort of mirror of what the world has in fact become, of what will become of it, including its virtual involvement. We may have reached farther into the truth of the world and of the object. Yet art, of course, has never been a question of truth but of illusion.

Don't you find that there are artists who do well despite this?

I could say they do too well...

You think this is the time to say that?

My concern is not the misery of the world. I don't want to be cynical, but we are not going to protect art. The more cultural protectionism we enact, the more waste we have, the more false successes, false promotions there are. It puts us in the marketing realm of culture...

To put it naively, the pretension of art shocks me. And it is hard to escape, it did not happen overnight. Art was turned into something pretentious with the will to transcend the world, to give an exceptional, sublime form to things. Art has become an argument for mental prowess.

The mental racket run by art and the discourse on art is considerable. I do not want anyone to make me say that art is finished, dead. That is not true. Art does not die because there is no more art, it dies because there is too much. The excess of reality disheartens me as does the excess of art when it imposes itself as reality.

1996

La Commedia dell'Arte

Catherine Francblin: *I wanted to do this interview with you because —after the shock of reading your article, I believed it should be placed in the more global perspective of your thought. It seems to me that you are only interested in art to the extent that you find in it behaviors and functions that add to your critique of Western culture.*

Jean Baudrillard: True, art is on the periphery for me. I don't really identify with it. I would even say that I have the same negative prejudice towards art as I do towards culture in general. To that extent, art has no special privilege in relation to other systems of values. Art is still considered to be an unimaginable resource. I protest this idyllic view.

My point of view is anthropological. From this perspective, art no longer seems to have a vital function; it is afflicted by the same fate that extinguishes value, by the same loss of transcendence. Art has not escaped this tendency to effectuate everything, this drive to make everything totally visible to which the West has arrived. But hypervisibility is a way to extinguish sight. I consume this art visually, I can even take a certain pleasure in it, but it does not provide me either illusion or truth. Now that the object of painting has been called into question, then the subject of painting, it

seems to me that this third term has not received as much attention: the viewer. He or she is increasingly solicited, but held hostage. Is there a way of looking at contemporary art that wouldn't be the way the artistic milieu views itself?

Let's talk about this artistic milieu... You treat it very harshly since, alleging a "conspiracy of art," you describe those who belong to it as conspirators...

When I speak of a "conspiracy of art," I am using a metaphor, as I do when I speak of the "perfect crime." You can no more identify the instigators of this plot than you can designate the victims. This conspiracy has no author and everyone is both victim and accomplice. The same thing happens in politics: we are all duped and complicit in this kind of showcasing. A sort of non-belief, of non-investment makes it so that everyone is playing a two-faced game in a sort of infinite circularity. And this circularity seems to me to contradict the very form of art, which supposes a clear distinction between "creator" and "consumer." Everything arising from this confusion, in the name of interactivity, total participation, interfaces, and the rest, bores me...

I do not get the impression in reading your article that you consider yourself to be complicit to it... It seems to me that you want to put yourself in the place of the uninitiated, of those who are being fooled.

I play the role of the Danube peasant: someone who knows nothing but suspects something is wrong.[1] I claim the right to be "in-docile." The in-docile person, in the original meaning of the word, is someone who refuses to be educated, instructed, trapped by signs. I want to carry out a diagnostic by looking at things like an agnostic... I like being in the position of the primitive...

So you are playing naïve!

Yes, because as soon as you enter the system to denounce it, you are automatically made a part of it. There is no ideal omega point today from which hard and fast judgments can be made. You can see that those who make accusations against the political class are the same ones who replenish it. The class is fed by the accusations made against it. Even the bluntest critic is caught up in this circularity.

Aren't you maintaining the illusion that this critical position, now impossible according to you, could be occupied, on the contrary, by Mr. Everyone.

I think, actually, that the masses, although they participate in the game, and although they are held in a position of voluntary servility, are perfectly incredulous. In this sense, they offer a certain form of resistance to culture.

That reminds me of another of your articles in Libération, *and article titled "Serfs and Elites" in which you criticize the elite by saying that the so-called blind masses could in fact see very well... That may be true concerning politics, but could you say that these masses see clearly spontaneously in matters of art? In this domain, the public is mostly conformist...*

In the political domain, the opacity of the masses neutralizes the symbolic domination exercised on them. It is possible that the opacity

of the masses is not as great in the field of art and consequently diminishes their critical powers. There still is no doubt a certain appetite for culture... If culture has taken over from politics, it has also taken over in the regime of complicity. But the artistic consumerism of the masses does not imply that they follow the values taught to them. *Grosso modo*, this mass has nothing left to oppose. We are witness to a form of alignment, of general cultural mobilization.

Excuse me, but doesn't your critique of elites risk converging with extreme right-wing demagogy?

The terms left and right are indifferent for me. It is true that you cannot say the masses are dupes, because there is no manipulation, no objective exploitation. It is more of a fundamentalism (*intégrisme*) in the sense that everyone is to be finally integrated into the circuit. Any trickery occurring is in the political and intellectual class. There, yes, people are victims of their own values. And it's the almost mythomaniacal power these values hold over them that leads them to separate themselves as a class and to call on all those operating outside to come play inside.

Aren't you simply calling into question the system of democracy?

The democratic regime works less and less. It works in a statistical way, people vote, etc. But the political sphere is schizophrenic. The masses in question remain entirely outside this democracy of discourse. People don't have anything to do with it. Active participation is extremely low...

Isn't that what politicians on the right are saying?

They say it in order to benefit from the mobilization of the masses... "Come on our side!" etc. But on the level of beliefs, of the projection of self into values, the masses are neither on the left or the right.

You cannot isolate them, we are all included... What interests me is that all the efforts made for a radical mobilization of the masses are useless. Beyond taking positions and surface judgments, there is a resistance of the masses to politics as such, in the same way that there is a resistance to the system of aestheticization and culturization. This ever-growing public that was first conquered politically and that they now want to conquer and integrate culturally is definitely resisting. It resists progress, it resists the Enlightenment, education, modernity, etc.

This pleases you, doesn't it?

Certainly. To the extent that there are no more critical imperatives, I don't see any other possibility for opposition—another conspiracy, but an enigmatic, indecipherable one. All discourses are ambiguous, including my own. They are all caught up in a certain form of shameful complicity with the system itself. And the system counts on this ambiguous discourse to act as a guarantor for it. Thus judges are the guarantors of the political classes; they are the only ones interested in it. The system thrives by persecuting itself. On the other hand, on the side of the masses, there is something uncultivated and irreducible to political, social or aesthetic control... Everything now tends to be realized, and increasingly so. One day, the social will be perfectly realized, and only those excluded will remain. One day, everything will be culturalized, every object will be a so-called aesthetic object, and nothing will be an aesthetic object...

As the system perfects itself, it promotes integration and exclusion. In the computer field, for example, the more the system is perfected, the more people are left out. As Europe is being made, will be made, and as it comes to be, dissidence raises against this European voluntarism. Europe will exist, but England will not be a part of it, the regions will not be a part of it, etc.

The gap continues to grow between the formal realization of things, led by a cast of technicians, and its real implantation. Reality is not at all aligned on this willful realization at the top. The distortion is sizable. Triumphant discourses only survive in a total utopia. They maintain their belief in universality, whereas for some time it has only been achieved self-referentially. And since society has all the means to maintain a fictive event, it can last indefinitely...

You just spoke of the indifference of the public. However, in your article, you go a step farther... You say something like "the consumers are right because for the most part contemporary art is null." Can art be treated with a "for the most part"? If there is art, it is more in the part you neglect, the "lesser part."

I agree, but there is nothing to be said for singularity. I am now looking over the bulk of writing on Bacon. For me, it all adds up to zero. All of these commentaries are a form of dilution for the use of the aesthetic milieu. What can be the function of this type of object in a culture in the strongest sense of the word? We are not going to return to primitive societies, but in anthropological cultures, there is no object that escapes a global circuit of either use or interpretation... A singularity does not disseminate itself in terms of communication. Or only in such a restricted circuit that it is just a fetish. In classical societies as well, the circuit of circulation of symbolic objects was restricted. A class shared the symbolic universe, without giving an extreme importance to it really, but without claiming to include the rest of the world. Today, we want everyone to have access to this universe, but how does it change life? What new energy does it bring? What are its implications? In the aesthetic world, the superstructure is so crushing that no one has a direct, raw relationship with objects or events. It is impossible to clear everything away. Only the value of things are shared, not their form. The object itself, in its secret form, the reason why it is this object and not another, is rarely reached.

What is this form? Something that is beyond value and that I attempt to reach using a sort of emptiness in which the object or the event has a chance to circulate with maximum intensity. What I am objecting to is aesthetics, this surplus value, this cultural exploitation through which the proper value disappears. We no longer know where the object is. Only the discourses surrounding it or the accumulated views end up by creating an artificial aura... What I observed in *The System of Objects* [1968; English translation, 1996], can now be found in the aesthetic system. In the economic realm, starting at a certain point, objects cease to exist in their finality; they only exist in relationship to each other, in such a way that what we consume is a system of signs. In aesthetics, the same is true. Bacon is officially used as a sign, even if, individually, everyone can try to pursue an operation of singularization to return to the secret of the exception they represent. But today, a good deal of effort is needed to pass through the system of education and abduction by signs! To find the point where form appears—which is also the point where all this ornamentation falls apart ... the blind spot of singularity can only be reached singularly. This is contrary to the system of culture, which is a system

of transit, transition, transparency. And I could care less about culture. Anything negative that can happen to culture is fine with me.

You told Geneviève Breerette in Le Monde *that you did not speak a discourse of truth, that no one was obliged to think like you... What did you mean exactly?*

That I do not want to make my statements on art an affair of doctrine. I put my cards on the table, now it is up to others to invent their rules just as I invented mine. In other words, what I affirm has no intrinsic value. Everything depends on the response. The art object presents itself as a fetish object, a definitive object. I totally refuse to present things categorically, outside debate.

There is an appeal, not in the mode of conciliation or compromise, but rather of alterity, of the duel. The question of form returns. The form never speaks the truth of the world; it is a game, something that projects itself...

What seemed difficult to swallow in your article is that you are known for your interest in images. You exhibit your own photographs... Some felt like they were betrayed by one of their own... What are the implications of the photos you take?

Of course, with my pictures, even if I take them for myself, as soon as I exhibit them, I am in an ambiguous position. This is an unresolved problem for me... But I truly have a direct pleasure in taking them, outside any photographic culture, or any search for objective or subjective expression. At a given moment, I capture a light, a color disconnected from the rest of the world. I myself am only an absence in them.

Capturing your absence from the world and having things appear... That my photos are judged to be beautiful or not does not interest me. The stakes are not aesthetic. It is more an anthropological arrangement that establishes a relationship with objects (I never photograph people), a glance on a fragment of the world allowing the other to come out from his or her context. It may be that the person viewing these photographs can also look aesthetically and be caught up in interpretation. It is even almost inevitable, since from the moment when these photos enter in the gallery circuit, they become objects of culture. But when I take photos, I use a language as form and not as truth.

This secret operation seems crucial to me. There are thousands of ways to express the same idea, but if you do not find the ideal compression between a form and an idea, you have nothing. This relationship with language as a form, as seduction, this *punctum*—as Roland Barthes would have said—has become harder and harder to find.

But only form can cancel out value. One excludes the other. Criticism can no longer consider itself today in a position of alterity. Only form can oppose the exchange of values. Form is unthinkable without the idea of metamorphosis. Metamorphosis moves from form to form without the intervention of value. No meaning, either ideological or aesthetic, can be drawn from it. It enters the play of illusion: a form only refers to other forms with no circulation of meaning. This is what happens in poetry, for example: the words refer to each other, creating a pure event. In the meantime, they have captured a fragment of the world, even if they have no identifiable referent from which a practical instruction can be drawn.

I no longer believe in the subversive value of words. However, I have an unwavering faith in the irreversible operation of form.

Ideas or concepts are all reversible. Good can always be turned into evil, truth into falsehood, etc. But in the materiality of language, each fragment uses up its energy, and there is nothing left save a form of intensity. It is something more radical, more primitive than aesthetics. In the 1970s, Roger Caillois wrote an article in which he called Picasso the great liquidator of all aesthetic values. He claimed that after Picasso, no one could conceive of anything more than a circulation of objects, of fetishes, independent of the circulation of functional objects. One could say, in fact, that the aesthetic world is the world of fetishizing. In the economic realm, money must circulate in any manner it can, otherwise there is no value. The same law governs aesthetic objects: there have to be more and more in order for an aesthetic universe to exist. Objects now only have this superstitious function leading to a de facto disappearance of form through an excess of formalization, in other words through an excess use of all forms. There is no worse enemy to form than the availability of all forms.

You seem nostalgic for a primitive state ... one that, in reality, certainly never existed...

Of course, and that is why I am not a conservative: I do not aspire to regress to a real object. That would mean cultivating reactionary nostalgia. I know this object does not exist, no more than truth does, I maintain the desire for it through a glance that is a sort of absolute, a divine judgment, in relationship to which all other objects appear in their insignificance.

This nostalgia is fundamental. It is lacking in all kinds of creations today. It is a form of mental strategy governing the correct use of nothingness or the void.

2001

Too Much is Too Much

Sylvère Lotringer: The Conspiracy of Art *elicited pretty strong reactions among the art world. It was taken as a full-fledged attack on contemporary art. "Consternation is spreading through the cultural community," a critic commented, wondering whether this was "an abrupt wake-up call or simply a lack of manners."*

Jean Baudrillard: *The Conspiracy of Art* positioned me as an enemy of art. But you know that I have no vested interest in art while all these people make their living from the idea. For me art is not privileged. With writing, it is possible to critique from the inside, to do a truly *critical* critique. But it is out of the question in a world like the art world, because of the complicity of reciprocal praise. That is what I wanted to denounce: passivity and servility as a form of conspiracy. The idea of art's collusion. Its unabashed complicity with the state of things.

What's surprising really is that the art world was so shocked. What you thought of art was pretty clear from the start. In The Consumer Society *(1970) you already stated explicitly that the humor of Pop Art had nothing subversive about it, its "cool smile no different from commercial complicity. In* For a Critique of the Political Economy

of the Sign *(1972) you pointed out that art has an ambiguous status, half-way between a terrorist critique and a de facto cultural integration. You explicitly stated then that contemporary art was nothing but "the art of collusion," merely pretending to subvert an order that was in fact its own. In* The Conspiracy of Art *you simply took this judgment a bit further by addressing the art world directly, challenging it to answer in kind. And your timing was right: the global inflation of art is reaching truly pataphysical heights. Art today is in denial of its own reality.*

Some have criticized me for being "mean" with art. But artistry is growing stronger everywhere and find it intolerable. It does not even dare match political cynicism. The convivial, the interactive elements are all offered for consumption like sacrament.

Do you think it is more prevalent in art than in politics?

No, this is not only true of the art world. Politicians in France no longer know who they are, and intellectuals don't know either. There is no space between them capable of creating some tension, some intensity. So it's a drift into the void, each one trying to replace the other, to reenergize the political machine. Intellectuals are trying to save politics, but they are not playing the game, and taking it to an extreme. Le Pen does not work with representation as they do. He works with appearance, and he has all the tobacconists on his side. So politicians are right to be scared. Without realizing it, without even pushing for it, Le Pen has acknowledged the breakdown of rational democratic representation. And he has taken over its space, which is left fallow. He will have demonstrated that power is no longer representative, that it no longer has any legitimacy. And I think they have indeed locked themselves in a senseless situation. Politicians are handed the dirty work the way handling money was delegated to the Jews. They deal with the accursed share. They do the dirty work of managing power. We entrust power to the most despicable people. And it's the same thing for artists. They have to administrate banality, the leftovers of everyday life, exorcising abjection, the unwanted part. Art is trying to manage a domain where imagination no longer exists. Someone has to take responsibility for the excess fiction. With a few exceptions, a few singularities like Francis Bacon, art no longer confronts evil, only the transparency of evil. And representation stops having any meaning. All you have here is the spectacle of the inanity of representation. And yet it keeps going on. Why? The politician's task is to skim off the squalid part of power and people are right to scorn them. The gratification of art is that clowns are now dealing with the abject.

In The Conspiracy of Art *you dismissed art's claim for exceptionalism. By now it is no different from everything else. It's all about values, careers, accumulation, consumerism on a huge scale—and everybody there is aware of it. So one can't have it both ways. The art world should drop the pretence and own up to it. Your outburst indeed was a wake-up call. Also a reminder that art was supposed to be something else.*

Yes. Art is about inventing another scene; inventing something other than reality. For art, reality is nothing. I wouldn't call classical art figurative. It was like a desire for seduction—it was a song. The purpose of art is to invent a whole other scene. So it is something quite different. At bottom, art never concerned itself with the

question of reality in its right form. And that lasted until the 19th century. Then, a fabulous adventure began. Art turned to reality in order to deconstruct it. It never addressed it before, even if some of the art that was produced at the time was just as mediocre as in contemporary art. After that art made it its goal to free reality—because everything was done in the name of liberation. Freeing art, freeing reality. But when both managed to free themselves at the same time, they cancelled each other out. It was the same with desire and revolution: in 1968 the desire for revolution and the revolution of desire ended up canceling each other out. It was the same kind of "collusion."

This brings us back to the famous statement you made in The Conspiracy of Art*: "It claims to be null, and it's really null."*

Art has become a terminal, an image-feedback to reality or hyperreality. And putting together reality and image adds up to *a sum zero equation*. That is what I meant. Artists always believe that I am casting judgment on their work and that I am telling them: "This is not good." So there is a real misunderstanding there. Art may also be null on the aesthetic level, but this is not really the problem, simply an insider's question. In any case, artists cannot grasp the internal strategy. And it is without hope, I am convinced. There are exceptions of course, but it is total misunderstanding.

It is not that art is null, but that it invalidates itself as art.

There is a mutual annulment of art and reality. Before, they used to potentialize each other, now they cancel each other out. It is the deterring effect of radical critique. Duchamp's act was not conceptual; it was a real challenge. It was pure terrorism. Afterwards it became conceptual. Practically everything that is done today is readymade. Duchamp signals the end of the aesthetic principle. Now the system devours and surrounds you. And yet it still left a mark. Sequels coming from before this "revolution"—as it has been called—still are being assimilated in the integral reality that art now is a part of.

There is no way out of art, and no way of objecting to it. Now the system does everything, recycling itself endlessly just like fashion.

The circuit is complete, and we have achieved *integral reality* in that sense. However hard you try, you can't escape it. That's what I said in Venice in 2003: contemporary art is... purely contemporary. It is contemporary of itself. It closed this circle.

Was there anything in Venice that could have changed your mind, any idea?

Today ideas are everywhere. I only find interesting what is not really art, unindentified objects I call "strange attractors." Actually I saw something at the Israeli pavilion, characters shaped like spermatology, a kind of monstrous bio. It was inexplicable, beautiful, almost joyous, although kind of tiny. It was a biological theater of cruelty.

Only what is not art can still be art.

We have reached a critical threshold, a critical mass. Let's assume—it's a hypothesis—that something disappeared with

Duchamp and Warhol. Whatever happened afterwards therefore came after it was gone. So much for a history of art... But the same analysis could be applied to philosophy. Philosophy has disappeared. Something happened afterwards, but it was nothing like a mutation. Today, everything is aestheticized, as everyone knows. To a certain extent everything, even this so-called ordinary reality, can be seen in the light of art. We are living in the transaesthetic, we're in a giant museum.

This is not exactly the museum without walls Andre Malraux had in mind. No wonder art history has recently achieved a new visibility. The more blurred the boundaries, the more necessary it becomes to keep everything in its proper place.

According to art history, for them, first there was classical art and then modern art... But these kinds of distinctions are not really in line with contemporary art. Modern art projected itself into the future: it was the avant-garde. The avant-garde was alright. They dreamed it and it worked. Deconstruction has a transcendent dimension. Now the avant-garde does not work anymore because the system is always two revolutions ahead of us. And intellectuals are trying their best to save the empire of meaning. They are completely off-base. No one is drawing any conclusions from all of this. Politicians are *out*, and so are intellectuals, even though they resist a bit more. As for art, it has definitively gone beyond its end. We are no longer in a modern perspective of prevision, of rationalization. It is becoming exponential.

We can still hope that it will turn around, reverse itself, cancel out.

Yes, we should really engage in an extreme logic. We have that option. But there could be some uncontrolled abreactions.

As happened after you published The Conspiracy of Art. *Is this kind of acting out always violent?*

Singularity does not need to be violent; it needs to be other, out-of-bounds, invent new rules for itself. Today it can only take violent forms.

It's some kind of terrorism.

Well yes, I protested. But you cannot sustain that position systematically. Some writers have done it, but it's rather tiring. And then being indignant is a bit sentimental, a little pathetic. Indignation is a very weak rehashing, a residue of acts left unperformed. You can't go that far, so you act out—and that is the terrorist act. In any case, I set myself up as a terrorist, as you well know.

What are you really indignant about?

Money is obscene, but it's not all the financial and banking scandals that bug me most. I find all that very interesting, of course. I am an analyst of corruption. Like Mandeville, I believe corruption is the vital force of society. What I find most degrading really are discourses. The discourses of justification, of repentance. The people who use those kinds of arguments are completely dishonorable. For instance they said some really stupid things about what happened to the old folks, the deaths, the heat wave. In short, they alleged that people today are living too long. The latest poll, meticulously

orchestrated, topped it all. They found that a vast proportion of the elderly who died *were mentally diminished*, I found that truly disgraceful. Not only did they die because they lived too long, but they were declared mentally incompetent as well. So they weren't really human. People who say those things should be shot. What you get to read in the papers today makes your blood boil.

People think you're cynical. It's true you rarely get as indignant as in The Conspiracy of Art.

I am usually rather irresponsible and amoral. In terms of practical life, I have a very strong immunity. At least one has to maintain that. It's more than just temper; there is an energy involved. But it constantly needs to be restaured.

It may be a form of intolerance, *in the medical sense of the word.*

Yes, a rejection.

Still, it must have required some effort on your part to get there.

No, I never made any effort. Something just happens and I follow through. But what brings this out? An object, signs, some kind of rhetoric... I never wonder at one point whether I should find an alternative, go to the other side. No, I would never do that, it would be absurd. I remain at the limit, in a borderline state really. That's why I like Ballard, these kinds of people. Writing science-fiction would be too easy in a sense. They just stand at that point before it falls to the other side, becomes something else. Things end up organizing and disorganizing themselves on their own. It works like a machine. Oh yes, at one point I made a special effort to break with the history of ideas, with my contemporaries, whether I liked them or not. I tried to empty out. And that must have required some work on my part. It did demand some energy.

For Roland Barthes, the energy seemed to have come from boredom, from a refusal of what was too obvious. A kind of nausea with received ideas.

That's true, absolutely. For me, it came from a kind of indifference. An indifference that was no longer subjective. A sort of desert form, not a landscape or something found in nature, let alone from culture—an unidentified object. It would be the same thing in terms of passion: some kind of apathy, an apathetic form...

Is that the kind of apathy the Marquis de Sade cultivated, the insensitivity of the amoral man, the 18th century libertine...

A stoic form, in fact. Differentiating between what concerns you and what does not, including in your own life. Refusing to account for what we're being made to be responsible for. Refusal of that kind is strategic, a kind of tactical indifference. This is true of photography, but it also for the concept. Finding the complicity that exists between the object and the objective (here technique comes into play) which gives the subject every reason to disappear, to empty itself out as a *medium*. Between object and "objective" [*an* objectif *is the French for lense*], interesting things will necessarily happen.

Is singularity still possible in art?

Art is dealing with deconstructed elements, waste in terms of form, and artists are working with that. But it is something very weak. For most of them there is no singularity because the model comes first. Singularity, meaning form, has not disappeared, however. It is everywhere.

But not necessarily in art.

No, in the world as it is. In fact, it has a fantastic singularity. Technology has changed everything. What I love about the Japanese is that they made technology a point of honor, a challenge. And they met it, they won. When you transform a material into a challenge, it becomes something altogether different. You find a dual form, a dual relationship. Everything is there.

The form you keep referring to isn't in an object, but in a kind of agonistic logic.

That's right. I don't use form in an aesthetic sense. For me, form has nothing to do with focusing positively on something, nothing to do with the presence of an object. Form rather has to do with challenge, seduction, reversibility. With language, it is the anagrams, arriving at signifying to a maximum, but signifying nothing. And it's true for the image as well. But this you can't prove it. Something comes out, but it's not what is being produced. When I take photographs, they are pictures of the end of the image. After that you can't control it, it's recouped one way or another. In the photographic act, you have to leave this kind of void around, of instantaneity, a subject/object dual relation. You don't find that anywhere now in photography, only a preparation, a manipulation, a multi-media hybrid mixing. There is form whenever a reversal occurs and everything canceling out by excess. Georges Bataille's notion of economy already was about that. Lack isn't the real problem, it is surplus. And surplus, as you know, you can't get rid of it.

It's the question of obesity.

Yes. The question of obesity was raised in Venice and I said: "There is too much of art. But this is not only true for art: *there is too much of too much.* And that may well be a form. Francesco Bonami, the head of the Venice Biennale, didn't agree and we did a little scene together about it. "How can there be too much?" said Bonami. "You can never have enough of a good thing." And I countered, "And obesity? You don't think there's a pathology in there, do you?" "The more body, the better it is," he replied. Well, no, that's not true. A body has a form, it has measurements, a symbolic space, an initiatory form. Form is all of that. I believe a limit does exist. But you can only say it from the outside, if you are talking in terms of form, not of art. You can do the same kind of analysis with information, consumer habits, everything that is part of a linear process of production and accumulation. More is *not* better. So everything is moving towards this kind of reversal. It's inescapable.

Illusions

2003

Art... Contemporary of Itself

The adventure of modern art is over. Contemporary art is only contemporary of itself. It no longer transcends itself into the past or the future. Its only reality is its operation in real time and its confusion with this reality.

Nothing differentiates it from technical, advertising, media and digital operations. There is no more transcendence, no more divergence, nothing from another scene: it is a reflective game with the contemporary world as it happens. This is why contemporary art is null and void: it and the world form a zero sum equation.

There is a shameful complicity shared by creators and consumers in a silent communion as they consider strange, inexplicable objects that only refer to themselves and to the idea of art. The real conspiracy, however, lies in art's complicity with itself, its collusion with reality, becoming complicit as the mere return-image of this Integral Reality.

There is no longer any possible difference in art. Only the integral calculation of reality remains. Art now is only an idea prostituted in its production.

Modernity was the golden age of the deconstruction of reality into its component parts, a minute analysis starting with Impressionism

and followed by Abstraction. It was experimentally open on all aspects of perception, sensibility, the structure of the object, and the dismemberment of forms.

The paradox of Abstraction is that by "liberating" the object from the constraints of figure to return it to the pure play of form, it chained the object down to a hidden structure, a stricter, more radical objectivity than the objectivity of resemblance. It strove to tear off the mask of resemblance and figure in order to reach the analytical truth of the object. Under the auspices of Abstraction, we paradoxically moved towards even more reality, towards an unveiling of the "elementary structures" of objectality, in other words towards something more real than real.

Reciprocally, art has invested the entire realm of reality under the auspices of a general aesthetization.

At the end of this history, the banality of art is mixed up with the banality of the real world—Duchamp's gesture, with the automatic transfer of the object, was the inaugural (and ironic) act. The transfer of all reality into aesthetics has become one of the dimensions of general exchange...

All of this in the name of a simultaneous liberation of art and the real world.

In fact, this "liberation" consisted in indexing one on the other—a deadly chiasmus for both art and the real world.

The transfer of art has become a useless function in the now integral reality because reality has absorbed everything that negated, transcended or transfigured it. Impossible exchange of this Integral Reality for anything else—it can only be exchanged with itself, repeating itself to infinity.

What could miraculously reassure us about the essence of art today? Art is simply what is discussed in the art world, in the artistic community that frantically stares at itself. Even the "creative" act replicates itself to become nothing more than the sign of its own operation—the true subject of a painter is no longer what he or she paints but the very fact that he or she paints. The painter paints the fact that he or she paints. In that way, at least, the idea of art is saved.

This is only one aspect of the conspiracy.

The other aspect is the viewer who, most of the time, does not understand anything, and consumes his or her own culture twice removed. The viewer literally consumes the fact that he or she does not understand it and that it has no necessity to it other than the cultural imperative of belonging to the integrated circuit of culture. But culture itself is only an epiphenomenon of global circulation.

The idea of art has become rarified and minimal even in conceptual art, where art ends in the non-exhibition of non-works in non-galleries—the apotheosis of art as a non-event. Reciprocally, the consumer moves through it all to test his or her non-enjoyment of the works.

Taking this conceptual and minimalist logic to the extreme, art could do no better than to disappear without any further discussion. At that point, it would no doubt become what it is: a false problem; every aesthetic theory would be a false solution.

Yes, but here is the point: it is all the more necessary to talk about art now that there is nothing to say about it. Paradoxically, the movement to democratize art only reinforced the privilege of

the idea of art, culminating in the banal tautology "art is art." Everything can supposedly be summed up in this circular definition.

Marshall McLuhan: "We have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art."

The revolutionary idea of contemporary art was that any object, any detail or fragment of the material world could exercise the same strange attraction and ask the same insoluble questions as those formerly reserved for a few rare aristocratic forms called art works.

That was its true democracy, not in allowing everyone access to aesthetic pleasure but in the transaesthetic advent of a world in which each object without distinction would have its fifteen minutes of fame (especially objects without distinction). Everyone is equal, everything is great. The upshot came in the transformation of art and the work itself into an object, without illusion or transcendence, a purely conceptual *acting out*, generating deconstructed objects that deconstruct us in turn.

No more faces, no glances, no human figures or bodies there—organs without bodies, flows, molecules, fractals. The relationship to the "work" is on the level of contamination or contagion: you plug in, become, absorb, immerse yourself just like in flows or networks. Metonymical linkage, chain reactions.

No more real objects at all: with readymades, the object is no longer there, only the *idea of the object*. And we no longer take pleasure in art, only in the idea of art. We are deep in ideology.

The readymade holds the double curse of modern and contemporary art: the curse of immersion in reality and banality along with the curse of conceptual absorption in the idea of art.

Saul Bellow on Picasso: "That absurd sculpture by Picasso, with its metal branches and leaves—no wings, no victory, a mere testimony, a vestige—the idea of a work of art, nothing more. Very similar to the other ideas and other vestiges that inspire our lives—no more apples, but the idea, the reconstruction by the appleologist of what an apple once was—no ice cream, but the idea, the memory of a delicious thing now made of substitutes, starch, glucose and other chemical products—no more sex, but the idea or suggestion of sex—the same for love, belief, thought and everything else...."

Art, in its form, signifies nothing. It is only a sign of absence.

Yes, but what becomes of this perspective of emptiness and absence in a contemporary universe that has already been totally emptied of meaning and reality?

Art can only ally itself with general insignificance and indifference. It no longer has any privileges. It has no final destination other than the fluid universe of communication, networks and interaction.

Speakers and receivers are all combined in the same mix: everyone a speaker, everyone a receiver. Each subject interacts with him—or herself, destined to express him—or herself without having the time to listen to others.

The Net and networks obviously increase this possibility of utterances for oneself, in a closed circuit, with each person engaging in his or her virtual performance and contributing to the general suffocation.

That is why the most interesting thing in terms of art would be to infiltrate the spongy encephalon of the modern viewer. Because the

mystery now resides there: in the receiver's brain, in the nerve center of this servility to "works of art." What is its secret?

In the complicity between the mortification that "creators" inflict on objects and themselves and the mortification consumers inflict on themselves and their mental abilities.

The tolerance for the worst has obviously worsened considerably in proportion with this general complicity.

Interface and performance: the two leitmotifs of today.

In performance, all forms of expression are combined: the plastic arts, photography, videos, installations, interactive screens. This vertical and horizontal, aesthetic and commercial diversification is now part of the work, and the work's original core is beyond repair.

A (non-) event like *The Matrix* serves as a perfect example: it is the very model of a global installation, of a total world event. Not only the film, which is only an excuse to some extent, but the spin-off products, the simultaneous projection at all points of the globe and the millions of spectators themselves who are inextricably part of it. We are all, from a global and interactive point of view, actors in this total world event.

Photography has the same problem when we decide to make it multimedia by adding to it all the resources of montage, collage, digital effects, computer generated imagery, etc. This opening onto the infinite, this deregulation leads precisely to the death of photography by raising it to the level of performance.

In this universal mixture, each register loses its specificity—just as every individual loses his or her sovereignty in networks and interaction—like reality and image, art and reality lose their respective force when they cease to be differential poles.

Ever since the 19th century, art has wanted to be useless. It turned this uselessness into a reason for praise (which was not true of classical art where, in a world that was not yet real or objective, usefulness was not even considered).

By extension of this principle, making any object useless would be enough to make it a work of art. This is precisely what the readymade does when it merely divests an object of its function, without changing anything about it, to turn it into a museum piece. It is sufficient to make reality itself a useless function to turn it into an art object, prey to the all-consuming aesthetic of banality.

By the same token, older things, coming from the past and therefore useless, automatically acquire an aesthetic aura. Their displacement in time is the equivalent of Duchamp's gesture; they become readymades as well, nostalgic vestiges resuscitated in our museum universe.

One could extrapolate this aesthetic transformation to material production as a whole. As soon as it reaches a level where it can no longer be exchanged in terms of social wealth, it becomes a giant surrealist object, seized by an all-consuming aesthetic and is included everywhere in a sort of virtual museum. Like for the readymade, an in-situ museification in the form of dormant industry for every technical waste land.

The logic of uselessness could only lead contemporary art to a predilection for waste—that which is useless by definition. Through refuse, the figuration of refuse, the obsession with refuse, art strives to display its own uselessness. It presents its non-use value, its non-exchange value—while still being sold at very high prices.

There is a contradiction here. *Uselessness has no value in itself.* It is a secondary symptom. And by sacrificing its implications to this negative quality, art goes astray in a useless gratuitousness. The scenario is similar for nullity, the claim of nonsense, insignificance, banality, all a sign of elevated aesthetic pretense.

Anti-art in all its forms attempts to escape the aesthetic dimension. But ever since the readymade annexed banality, all that is finished. The innocence of nonsense, of the non-figurative, abjection and dissidence is over.

Everything that contemporary art would like to be or become again only reinforces the inevitably aesthetic character of this anti-art.

Art has always denied itself. But it did it before out of excess, exalting in the play of its disappearance. Today, it denies itself by default—worse yet, it denies its own death.

Art immerses itself in reality instead of becoming the agent symbolically assassinating reality, instead of being the magical agent of its disappearance.

The paradox is that the closer it comes to this phenomenal confusion, to this nullity as art, the more it is overvalued and credited. To such an extent that, to paraphrase Elias Canetti, we have reached the point where nothing is beautiful or ugly, we have crossed this point without realizing it, and if we are unable to find this blind spot again, we will continue to pursue the current destruction of art.

What is this useless function good for in the end?

What does it deliver us from with its very uselessness?

Like politicians, who relieve us of the bothersome responsibility of power, contemporary art, with its incoherent artifice, relieves us of the grasp of meaning through the spectacle of nonsense. This explains its proliferation: independent of any aesthetic value, it is ensured of prospering in function of its insignificance and vanity. Just as politicians persist despite the absence of any representation or credibility. Art and the art market therefore flourish to the extent that they decay: they are the modern charnel houses of culture and simulacra.

It is therefore absurd to say that contemporary art is null and that all of this is worthless since that is its vital function: to illustrate our uselessness and our absurdity. Or even better: to use this decay as its capital while at the same time exorcising it as a spectacle.

If, as some propose, the function of art was to make life more interesting than art, then we must lose this illusion. I have the impression that a good portion of art today is conspiring in a process of deterrence, a work of mourning the image and the imaginary, a work of aesthetic mourning. This work usually fails, leading to the general melancholy of the artistic sphere, which seems to survive by recycling its history and its vestiges.

Yet art and aesthetics are not the only ones doomed to this melancholy destiny of living, not above their means, but beyond their ends.

Our capacity for degradation is infinite, and until we have acted out all of the potential crimes that lie within in us, our journey will never be over.

— Guido Ceronetti

If man must fulfill all his possibilities, then he must also accomplish his self-destruction. For that possibility is neither the least nor the least glorious.

— Saul Bellow

1987

Towards the Vanishing Point of Art

My relationship with art and aesthetics has always, in a way, remained clandestine, intermittent, ambivalent. Probably because I am an iconoclast; I come from a moralist, metaphysical tradition, a political and ideological tradition that has always been wary of art and culture in general, that has always been wary of the distinction between nature and culture, art and reality, as something too banally obvious. I always thought siding with art was an all too direct and easy solution (the same goes for poetry and painting): no one should do art, no one should pass through to the enchanted side of form and appearance until all its problems have been resolved. And art assumes all problems have been resolved, it is not even the solution to problems that are really posed. Ideally defined, art is the solution to problems that are not even raised. But I want to raise problems. Art is profoundly seduction, and although I have spoken enthusiastically about seduction, I do not want to fall prey to the seduction of art. That is why I have spoken about seduction more in terms of simulation and simulacra—reflecting a skeptical, critical, paradoxical position and raising a challenge to both the naïve exercise of reality and the naïve exercise of art. I must insist on the fact that what I can tell you comes from somewhere else, that the perspective I may have is somewhat distant, somewhat sidereal, but

that it is the best one for judging contemporary art without prejudging its value.

And I find some justification for speaking as an iconoclast in that art itself has for the most part become iconoclastic.

In this trajectory, which starts with Hegel when he spoke of the "rage to disappear" and of art engaged in the process of its own disappearance, a direct line links Baudelaire to Andy Warhol under the auspices of "absolute commodity." In the grand opposition between the concept of the work of art and modern industrial society, Baudelaire invented the first radical solution. Faced with the threat to art by merchant, vulgar, capitalist, advertising society, with new objectification in terms of market value, Baudelaire opposes them from the start with absolute objectification instead of a defense of the traditional status of the work of art. Since aesthetic value risks alienation from commodity, instead of avoiding alienation, art had to go farther in alienation and fight commodity with its own weapons. Art had to follow the inescapable paths of commodity indifference and equivalence to make the work of art an absolute commodity. Confronted with the modern challenge of commodity, art should not seek its salvation in critical denial (because then it would only be art for art's sake, the derisory and powerless mirror of capitalism and the inevitability of commodity), but it should go farther in formal and fetishized abstraction, in the fantasy of exchange value—becoming more commoditized than commodities. More than use value, but escaping exchange value by radicalizing it.

An absolute object is one with no value and indifferent quality, avoiding objective alienation by making itself more object than the object—giving it a fatal quality. (This transcendence of exchange value, this destruction of commodity by its very value is

visible in the exacerbation of the painting market: reckless speculation on art works is a parody of the market, a mockery in itself of market value, all rules of equivalency are broken, and we find ourselves in a realm that has nothing to do with value, only the fantasy of absolute value, the ecstasy of value. This is not only true on the economic level, but on the aesthetic level as well, where all aesthetic values (styles, manners, abstraction or figuration, neo or retro, etc.) are simultaneously and potentially at their maximum, where any value could at once, using its special effects, hit the top ten, without there being any means for comparison or eliciting any value judgment. We are in the jungle of fetish-objects, and the fetish-object, as everyone knows, has no value in itself, or rather it has so much value that it cannot be exchanged.

This is the point we have reached in art today, and this is the superior irony Baudelaire was seeking for the work of art: a superiorly ironic commodity because it no longer meant anything, was even more arbitrary and irrational than commodities, therefore circulating all the more rapidly and taking on more value as it lost its meaning and reference. Baudelaire was not far from assimilating the art work to fashion itself under the auspices of triumphant modernity. Fashion as an ultra-commodity, the sublime assumption of commodity, and thus a radical parody and radical denial of commodity...

If the commodity form shatters the former ideality of the object (its beauty, authenticity and even its functionality), then there is no need to try reviving it by denying the essence of commodity. On the contrary, it is necessary—and this is what constituted the perverse and adventurous seduction of the modern world—to make this rupture absolute. There is no dialectic between the two, synthesis is always a weak solution, dialectics is always a nostalgic solution. The only radical and modern solution: potentializing what is new, unexpected, great in commodity, in other words the formal indifference to usefulness and value, the primacy given to circulation without reserve. This is what the work of art should be: it should take on the characteristics of shock, strangeness, surprise, anxiety, liquidity and even self-destruction, instantaneity and unreality that are found in commodities.

That is why, in Baudelaire's fantastic-ironic logic, the work of art joins fashion, advertising, the "fantasy of the code"—the work of art sparkling in its venality, its mobility, irreferential effects, hazards and vertigo—a pure object of marvelous commutability because with causes gone, all effects are possible and virtually equivalent.

They can be void as well, as we know, but it is up to the work of art to fetishize this nullity, this vanishing and draw extraordinary effects from it. A new form of seduction: no longer the mastery of illusion and the aesthetic order, but the vertigo of obscenity—who can say what the difference is between them? Vulgar merchandise spawns a universe of production—and God knows if this universe is melancholy or not. When raised to the power of absolute commodity, it spawns seduction effects.

The art object, as a newly victorious fetish (and not the sad, alienated fetish) must work to deconstruct its traditional aura, its authority and its power of illusion to stand out in the pure obscenity of commodity. It must destroy itself as a familiar object and become *monstrously unfamiliar*. But this foreignness is not the strangeness of the alienated or repressed object, it does not excel through loss or dispossession, it excels through a veritable seduction that comes from somewhere else, it excels by exceeding its own form as a pure object, a pure event.

The perspective that comes from Baudelaire's experience of the transformation of commodities at the World's Fair of 1855 is in many ways superior to Walter Benjamin's conception. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin draws a desperately political (or politically desperate) conclusion from the decay of the object's aura and authenticity, which leads to melancholy modernity. Baudelaire's infinitely more modern position (but perhaps one could only be truly modern in the 19th century?) involves the exploration of new forms of seduction tied to pure events, to the modern passion known as fascination.

When Andy Warhol advocated the radical imperative to become an absolute "machine," even more mechanical than the machine, because he sought the automatic, machine-like reproduction of objects that were already mechanical, already manufactured (be it a can of soup or a star's face), he was following the same line of absolute commodity as Baudelaire. He was only carrying out Baudelaire's vision to perfection, which was simultaneously the fate of modern art, even when it denied it: the complete realization of the negative ecstasy of value, which is also the negative ecstasy of representation, all the way to the self-denial. And when Baudelaire stated that the vocation of the modern artist was to give commodity a heroic status while the bourgeoisie only gave it sentimental expression in advertising—meaning that heroism did not consist in making art and value sacred again in opposition to commodities, which would be a sentimental effect and one that continues to have widespread influence on our artistic creation, but making commodity sacred as commodity—he made Warhol the hero, or antihero, of modern art. Warhol went the farthest in the ritual paths of the disappearance of art, of all sentimentality in art; he pushed the ritual of art's negative transparency and art's radical indifference to its own authenticity the farthest. The modern hero is not the hero of the artistic sublime, but rather the hero of the objective irony of the world of commodity, the world that art incarnates in the objective irony of its own disappearance. But this disappearance is no more negative or depressive than commodity. In the spirit of Baudelaire, it is an object of enthusiasm. There is a modern fantasy of commodity and there is a parallel fantasy of the disappearance of art. But you have to know how to vanish, of course. All of art's disappearance, and thus all its modernity, is in the art of disappearance. And all the difference between the pedestrian, exultant art of the 19th and 20th centuries, official art, art for art's sake, etc. (which has no borders and can move between figurative and abstract and any other category), the art born precisely in Baudelaire's time, the art that he hated so much, the art that is far from dead, since it is still being rehabilitated today in the major museums of the world—the difference between this art and the other is the secret denial, the almost involuntary, unconscious choice by authentic art to disappear. Warhol made this choice consciously, almost too consciously, too cynically. But it still was a heroic choice. Official art never acts out its own disappearance. That is why it rightly disappeared from our minds for a century. Its triumphant reappearance today in the post-modern era means that the great modern adventure of the disappearance of art is now over.

Something must have happened one hundred and fifty years ago that implicated both the liberation of art (its liberation as an absolute commodity) and its disappearance. An explosive practice, then an implosive one, following which the cycle was over. We are now in an end without finality, the opposite of the finality without end that, according to Kant, characterizes classical aesthetics. In other words, we are in a transaesthetics, a completely different turn

of events, a turn that is difficult to describe and delineate, since, by definition, aesthetic judgments are impossible in it.

If I had to characterize the current state of affairs, I would say that it is "after the orgy." The orgy, in a way, was the explosive movement of modernity, of liberation in every domain. Political liberation, sexual liberation, liberation of productive forces, liberation of destructive forces, women's liberation, children's liberation, liberation of unconscious drives, liberation of art. The assumption of all models of representation, all models of anti-representation. It was a total orgy: of reality, rationality, sexuality, critique and anti-critique, growth and growth crises. We have explored all the paths of production and virtual overproduction of objects, signs, messages, ideologies, pleasures. Today, if you want my opinion, everything has been liberated, the dice have been rolled, and we are collectively faced with the crucial question: WHAT DO WE DO AFTER THE ORGY?

We can only simulate orgy and liberation now, pretending to continue on in the same direction at greater speeds, but in reality, we are accelerating in empty space, because all of the ends of liberation (of production, progress, revolution) are already behind us. What we are haunted by, obsessed with, is the anticipation of every result, the availability of every sign, every form, every desire, since everything is already liberated. What to do? It is the state of simulation where we can only replay all the scenarios because they have already taken place—in reality or virtually. It is the state of accomplished utopia, of every utopia accomplished, but where you have to live paradoxically as if they had not. Because they have been realized, and because we can no longer keep the hope of accomplishing them, we are only left with hyper-accomplishment in indefinite simulation. We are living in the infinite reproduction of ideals, fantasies, images and dreams that are now behind us and that we have to reproduce in a kind of fatal indifference.

This is true of every domain: the grand social utopia was accomplished in the bureaucratic and totalitarian materialization of the social. The grand sexual utopia was accomplished in the technological, athletic and neurotic materialization of every sexual practice. And this is true of art as well: the grand utopia of art, the great illusion, the great transcendence of art materialized everywhere. Art has thoroughly entered reality. Some say that art is dematerializing. The exact opposite is true: art today has thoroughly entered reality. It is in museums and galleries, but also in trash, on walls, in the street, in the banality of everything that has been made sacred today without any further debate. The aestheticization of the world is complete. Just as we now have a bureaucratic materialization of the social, a technological materialization of sexuality, a media and advertising materialization of politics, we have a semiotic materialization of art. It is culture understood as the officialization of every thing in terms of signs and the circulation of signs. There are complaints about the commercialization of art, the mercantilization of aesthetic values. But this is just the old nostalgic, bourgeois refrain. The general aestheticization of things should be feared more. Much more than market speculation, we should fear the transcription of every thing in cultural, aesthetic terms, into museographic signs. That is culture, that is our dominant culture: the vast enterprise of museographic reproduction of reality, the vast enterprise of aesthetic storage, re-simulation and aesthetic reprinting of all the forms that surround us. That is the greatest threat. I call it the DEGREE XEROX OF CULTURE.

With this current state of things, we are no longer in the heroic turn Baudelaire wanted to give the universe of commodity by means of art, we are only giving the world as it is a sentimental and aesthetic turn like the one Baudelaire decried in advertising. And art has become that for the most part: a prosthesis of advertising; and culture, a generalized prosthesis. Instead of the triumphant simulation envisaged by Baudelaire, we only have a depressing, repetitive simulation. Art has always been a simulacrum, but a simulacrum that had the power of illusion. Our simulation is something different; it only exists in the sentimental vertigo of models. Art was a dramatic simulacrum where the reality of the world and illusion were in play. It is only an aesthetic prosthesis now. And when I say prosthesis, I am not thinking of an artificial leg. I mean those other, more dangerous prostheses, the chemical, hormonal and genetic ones that are like somatic Xeroxes, literal reproductions that engender the body, that engender it following a process of total simulation, behind which the body has disappeared. Just as people once said that glasses would become total, integrated prostheses for species that had lost its sight, culture and art are the total prostheses of a world that has lost the magic of form and appearance.

I have said that the sublime of modern art lied in the magic of its disappearance. But the capital danger for modern art is repeating its own disappearance. All of the forms of this heroic vanishing, this heroic abnegation of form and color, of the very substance of art, have completely unfolded. *Even the utopia of the disappearance of art has been accomplished.* As for us, we have reached a second generation simulation, or a simulation of the third kind, if you prefer. We inhabit a perverse situation in which not only the utopia of art has been accomplished, since it has entered reality (in conjunction with the social, political and sexual utopias), but the utopia of its disappearance has been accomplished as well. Art is therefore destined to simulate its own disappearance, since it has already taken place. We relive the disappearance of art everyday in the repetition of its forms—no matter whether figurative or abstract—just as each day we relive the disappearance of politics in the media repetition of its forms, and each day we relive the disappearance of sexuality in the pornographic and advertising repetition of its forms. It is necessary to distinguish clearly between these two moments: the moment of heroic simulacrum, so to speak, when art experiences and expresses its own disappearance, and the moment when it has to manage this disappearance as a sort of negative heritage. The first moment is original, it only happens once, even if it lasted for decades from the 19th to the 20th centuries. The second moment can last for several centuries, but it is no longer original, and I think we are involved in this second moment, in this surpassed disappearance, in this surpassed simulation, surpassed in the sense of an irreversible coma.[1]

There is an enlightening moment for art, the moment it loses itself. There is an enlightening moment for simulation, the moment of sacrifice, in a way, when art falls into banality (Heidegger did say that the fall into banality was the second Fall of humanity and therefore its modern destiny). But there is an unenlightened moment when art learns to survive with this very banality—something like a botching its own suicide. A successful suicide is the art of disappearance; it means giving this disappearance all the prestige of artifice. Like the Baroque, which was also a high point in simulation, haunted by both the vertigo of death and artifice.

Nevertheless, many of those who bungled their suicide did not miss out on glory and success. A failed suicide attempt, as we all know, is the best form of publicity.

In sum, to use Benjamin's expression again, there is an aura of simulation just as there is an aura of authenticity, of the original. If I dared, I would say there is authentic simulation and inauthentic simulation. This wording may seem paradoxical, but it is true. There is a "true" simulation and a "false" simulation. When Warhol painted his Campbell's Soups in the Sixties, it was a coup for simulation and for all modern art: in one stroke, the commodity-object, the commodity-sign were ironically made sacred—the only ritual we still have, the ritual of transparency. But when he painted his Soup Boxes in '86, he was no longer illuminating; he was in the stereotype of simulation. In '65, he attacked the concept of originality in an original way. In '86, he reproduced the unoriginal in an unoriginal way. In '65, he dealt with the whole trauma of the eruption of commodity in art in both an ascetic and ironic way (the asceticism of commodity, its puritanical and fantastical side—enigmatic, as Marx wrote) and simplified artistic practice by the same token. The genius of commodity, the evil genius of commodity produced a new virtuosity in art—the genius of simulation. Nothing was left in '86, only the publicizing genius that illustrated a new phase of commodity. Once again, it was the officially aestheticized commodity, falling back into the sentimental aestheticization Baudelaire condemned. You might reply: the irony is even greater when you do the same thing after twenty years. I do not think so. I believe in the genius of simulation; I do not believe in its ghost. Or its corpse, even in stereo. I know that in a few centuries there will be no difference between a real Pompeian villa and the J.Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, and no difference between the French Revolution and its Olympic commemoration in Los Angeles in 1989, but *we* still live with this difference and draw our energy from this difference.

Therein lies the dilemma: either simulation is irreversible, there is nothing beyond simulation, it is not even an event anymore, it is our absolute banality, our everyday obscenity, we are definitively nihilistic and we are preparing for a senseless repetition of all the forms of our culture waiting for another unpredictable event—but where would it come from? Or there is an art of simulation, an ironic quality that revives the appearances of the world to destroy them. Otherwise, art would do nothing more than pick at its own corpse, as often is the case today. You cannot add the same to the same and the same, and so on to infinity: that would be poor simulation. *You must rip the same from the same.* Each image must take away from the reality of the world, something must vanish in each image, but you cannot fall into the temptation to annihilate, definitive entropy. The disappearance must remain alive—that is the secret of art and seduction. In art—and this holds for both contemporary and classical art—there is a dual conjecture and thus a dual strategy: an impulse to annihilate, to erase all the traces of the world and reality, and a resistance to this impulse. As Henri Michaux said, the artist is someone who resists with all of his or her might the fundamental impulse to leave no trace.

I said I was an iconoclast and that art itself had become iconoclastic. What I meant was the new, modern iconoclast, the one who does not destroy images but who manufactures them, a profusion of images *where there is nothing to see.* In most of the images I have seen here in New York, there is nothing to see. They are literally images that leave no trace. They have no aesthetic consequences to speak

of—except for the professionals of the profession—but behind each image, something has disappeared. Therein lies their secret, if they have one, and therein lies the secret of simulation, if it has one.

If we think about it, the problem was the same for the Iconoclasts of Byzantium. The Iconolaters were subtle people who claimed to represent God for His greater glory but who in fact simulated God in images, dissimulating at the same time the problem of His existence. Behind each image, God had disappeared. He was not dead, he had disappeared; it was no longer a problem. The problem of the existence or non-existence of God was resolved by simulation.

But one might think that it was God's own idea to disappear, and precisely behind images. God used the images to disappear, obeying the fundamental impulse to leave no trace. Thus the prophecy is carried out: we live in a world of simulation, a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and to mask this disappearance at the same time. Art does nothing else. The media today does nothing else. That is why they are destined for the same fate.

I will change perspective to end on a note of hope. I placed this analysis under the sign "after the orgy"—what do we do after the orgy of modernity? Is simulation all we have left? With the melancholy nuance of the idea of a "vanishing point" and the "degree Xerox of culture"? I forgot to say that this expression—"after the orgy"—comes from a story full of hope: it is the story of a man who whispers into the ear of a woman during an orgy, "What are you doing after the orgy?"

There is always the hope of a new seduction.

1995

Aesthetic Illusion and Disillusion

One has the impression that some portion of contemporary art is engaged in a work of deterrence, mourning the image and the imagination, mourning aesthetics. This mostly failed attempt has led to general melancholy in the artistic sphere, which seems to perpetuate itself by recycling its history and its relics (but neither art nor aesthetics are the only ones doomed to the melancholy fate of living less above their means than beyond their own ends).

It seems we are slated for an infinite retrospective of everything that preceded us. This is true of politics, history and morality but also of art, which benefits from no special status in this regard. The entire movement of painting has pulled out of the future and been displaced to the past. Quotation, simulation, reappropriation: current art has started to reappropriate in a more or less playful, more or less kitsch way all the forms and all the works of the distant or near past, even contemporary ones. Russell Connor has called this the "abduction of modern art." Of course these remakes and this recycling intend to be ironic, but their irony is like a worn weft of fabric, it only results from the disillusion of things; it is fossilized irony. The conceit of juxtaposing the nude in the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* with the *Joueur de cartes* by Cézanne is just an advertising gag; the humor, irony, trompe-l'oeil critiques that characterize advertising today have now flooded the art world. It is the irony of repentance and resentment towards one's own culture.

Maybe repentance and resentment make up the final stage of the history of art, just as for Nietzsche they are the final stage of the genealogy of morals. It is a parody and at the same time a palinode of art and art history, a parody of culture for itself and a form of revenge, characteristic of radical disillusion. As if art, like history, were rummaging through its own trash cans, seeking to redeem itself with its waste.

The Lost Illusion of Cinema

You only have to look at movies (*Basic Instinct*, *Wild at Heart*, *Barton Fink*, etc.) that leave no room for critique because they destroy themselves from the inside. Quotational, loquacious, high-tech, they carry the canker of cinema, its internal excrescence, stricken with the cancer of their own technique, their own stagecraft, their own film culture. It seems as though the directors are afraid of their own films, that they cannot handle them (either through an excess of ambition or a lack of imagination). Nothing else would explain the profusion of resources used to invalidate their own films through an excess of virtuosity, special effects, megalomaniac clichés—as if it were a question of harassing images themselves or making them suffer by exhausting their effects, even making the script they dreamed of (one hopes) into a sarcastic parody, a pornography of images. Everything seems programmed to disillusion the spectator, who has no other alternative than to witness this excess of cinema bringing the illusion of cinema to an end.

What can be said of cinema except that, during its technological evolution, from silent movies to sound, to color, to high-tech special effects, illusion in the strongest sense[1] disappeared from it? As this technology, this cinematographic efficiency grew, illusion withdrew. Cinema today knows neither allusion nor illusion: it links everything on a hypertechnical, hyperefficient, hypervisible level. No blanks, no gaps, no ellipses, no silence, just like television, with which cinema has become increasingly assimilated by losing the specificity of its own images. We are moving ever closer to high definition, in other words to the useless perfection of images. Which by the same token are no longer images, having been produced in real time. The closer we reach absolute definition, the realist perfection of images, the more its power of illusion is lost.

Take the Peking Opera. With the mere dual movement of two bodies on a skiff, an entire stretch of river is brought to life. Two bodies brushing against each other, moving as close as possible without touching, in an invisible copulation, could imitate the physical presence on stage of the darkness in which this struggle was taking place. There the illusion was total and intense; more than aesthetic, it was a physical ecstasy, precisely because any realist presence of night and the river had been eliminated and only bodies were used to create the natural illusion. Today, tons of water would flood the stage, the duel would be filmed in infrared, etc. Misery of the oversophisticated image, like CNN during the Gulf War. Pornography of the three or four-dimensional image, of three or four or forty-eight or more tracks—it is always by adding to the real, by adding real to real in order to create the perfect illusion (the illusion of resemblance, the realist stereotype) that illusion is thoroughly killed. Pornography, adding a dimension to the image of sex, removes something from the dimension of desire and disqualifies any seductive illusion. The height of this dis-imagination of images, of the exceptional efforts to make an image more than an image, are computer-generated images, digital images, virtual reality.

An image is precisely an abstraction of the world into two dimensions, removing a dimension from the real world and therefore inaugurating the power of illusion. Virtuality, on the contrary, by

making us enter the image, by recreating a realist image in three dimensions (while adding a kind of fourth dimension to reality, making it hyperreal), destroys this illusion (the equivalent of this operation in time is "real time," which closes the loop of time back on itself, instantaneously, thereby abolishing any illusion of the past or the future). Virtuality tends towards perfect illusion. But it is not at all the same creative illusion as the image (of the sign, the concept, etc.). It is a "recreative" realist, mimetic, hologrammatic illusion. It brings the play of illusion to an end through the perfection of reproduction, the virtual reissuing of the real. Its only aim is to prostitute, to exterminate reality through its double. On the contrary, trompe l'oeil, by removing a dimension from real objects, makes their presence magical and restores dreams, total unreality in its minute exactness. Trompe l'oeil is the ecstasy of the real object in its immanent form, which adds the spiritual charm of the artifice, the mystification of the senses to the formal charm of painting. The sublime is not enough; subtlety is also necessary, the subtlety that consists in diverting the real by taking it literally. This is what we have forgotten in modernity: subtraction brings force, power is born of absence. We have not stopped accumulating, adding, raising the stakes. And because we are no longer capable of confronting the symbolic mastery of absence, we are now plunged in the opposite illusion, the disenchanted illusion of profusion, the modern illusion of the proliferation of screens and images.

Art, Exacerbated Illusion

It is very difficult to speak of painting today, because it is very difficult to see it. Because, most of the time, it no longer wants to be seen but visually absorbed, circulating without leaving a trace.

In a way, this is the simplified aesthetic form of an impossible exchange.

So much so that the discourse most capable of rendering it would be a discourse which has nothing to say. The equivalent of an object that is not one.

But an object that is not an object is not just nothing, it is an object that keeps captivating you with its immanence, its empty and immaterial presence. The problem is to materialize this nothingness at the limits of nothingness, to trace the edge of emptiness at the limits of emptiness, to trace the filigree of emptiness, to play according to the mysterious rules of indifference at the limits of indifference.

Art is never the mechanical reflection of the positive or negative conditions of the world, it is its exacerbated illusion, its hyperbolic mirror. In a world devoted to indifference, art can only add to this indifference. Circling around the contours of the emptiness of the image, the object that is no longer an object. Thus in film, directors such as Wenders, Jarmusch, Antonioni, Altman, Godard, Warhol explore the insignificance of the world through the image, and through their images they contribute to the insignificance of the world, they add to its real, or hyperreal, illusion. Films like the recent works by Scorcese, Greenaway and others, however, only fill the emptiness of the image through high-tech and baroque machinery, through frenetic and eclectic agitation, thereby contributing to the disillusion of our imagination. Just like the New York Simulationists who, by hypostatizing the simulacrum, merely hypostatized painting itself as a simulacrum, as a machine confronting itself.

In many cases, (*Bad Painting, New Painting*, installations and performances), painting denies itself, parodies itself, spits itself out. Plastic, glazed, frozen dejecta. Waste management, immortalized

waste. There is no longer even the possibility of a glance—it no longer even solicits viewing because, in all meanings of the word, it no longer regards you.[2] If it no longer pays attention to you, it leaves you completely indifferent. And this painting has in fact become completely indifferent to itself as painting, as art, as an illusion stronger than the real. It no longer believes in its own illusion and falls into the simulation of itself and derision.

The Disembodiment of Our World

Abstraction was the grand adventure of modern art. In its "irruptive," primitive, original phase, be it expressionist or geometric, it was still part of the heroic history of painting, a deconstruction of representation and breaking down the object. By dissolving its object, the subject of painting itself moves to the limits of its own disappearance. However, the multiple forms of contemporary abstraction (and this is also true of New Figuration) have moved beyond this revolutionary episode, beyond this disappearance "in action"—they only bear the trace of the undifferentiated, banalized, diluted field of our daily life, of the banality of images that have entered our customs. New abstraction and new figuration are only opposed in appearance—in fact, they each retrace the utter disembodiment of our world in both its dramatic and its banal phases. The abstraction of our world is now a given, it has been for some time, and all the art forms of an indifferent world carry the same stigma of indifference. This is neither a denial nor a condemnation, it is the state of things: an authentic contemporary painting must be as indifferent to itself as the world has become—once the essential implications have disappeared. Art as a whole is now merely the metalanguage of banality. Can this de-dramatized simulation go on forever? Whatever the forms we have to deal with may be, we have embarked for the duration on the psychodrama of disappearance and transparency. We must not be fooled by a false continuity in art and its history.

In short, there is, to use Walter Benjamin's expression, an aura of the simulacrum just as he described an aura of the original; there is authentic simulation and inauthentic simulation.

This may seem paradoxical, but it is true. There is a "true" simulation and a "false" simulation. When Warhol painted his *Campbell's Soups* in the 1960s, it was a feat for simulation and for all modern art. In one fell swoop, the commodity-object, the commodity-sign were ironically made sacred—which is the only ritual we still have, the ritual of transparency. But when he painted the *Soup Boxes* in 1986, it was no longer a feat, but the stereotype of simulation. In 1965, he attacked the concept of originality in an original way. In 1986, he reproduced unoriginality in an unoriginal way. In 1965, the entire aesthetic trauma of commodity bursting into art was dealt with in an ascetic and ironic way (the asceticism of commodity, both Puritan and magical—enigmatic as Marx said) that in one stroke simplified artistic practice. The genius of commodity, the evil spirit of commodity provoked a new genius in art—the genius of simulation. None of that remained in 1986, where it was merely advertising genius illustrating a new phase of commodity. Once again, official art aestheticizes merchandise, a return to the cynical and sentimental aestheticization that Baudelaire stigmatized. One might think that it is a superior form of irony to do the same thing after twenty years. I do not. I believe in the (evil) genius of simulation, not in its ghost. Or its corpse, even in stereo. I know that in a few centuries, there will be no difference between a real Pompeian city and the J. Paul Getty

Museum in Malibu, no difference between the French Revolution and its Olympic commemoration in Los Angeles in 1989, but we still feed off that difference.

Images Where There is Nothing to See

There lies the dilemma: either simulation is irreversible, there is no going beyond simulation, it is no longer even an event, it is our absolute banality, it is an everyday obscenity, we are in terminal nihilism, and are preparing ourselves for a mindless repetition of all the forms of our culture, waiting for an unpredictable event—but where would it come from? Or there is an art of simulation, an ironic quality that resuscitates the appearances of the world each time to destroy them. Otherwise art would do nothing more, as it often does today, than work over its own corpse. The same cannot be continuously added to the same *ad infinitum*: that is poor simulation. The same must be torn from the same. Each image must take away from the reality of the world, something must disappear in each image, but one must not give in to the temptation of annihilation, of definitive entropy, the disappearance must remain active: that is the secret of art and seduction. In art—and this applies to contemporary art as well as classical art—there is a dual postulate, and therefore a dual strategy. An impulse to annihilate, to erase all traces of the world and reality, and the contrary resistance to this impulse. In Henri Michaux's words, the artist is "the one who resists with all his strength the fundamental impulse to leave no traces."

Art has become iconoclastic. Modern iconoclasm no longer consists in destroying images, but in manufacturing a profusion of images where there is nothing to see.

These are literally images that leave no trace. They have no aesthetic consequences to speak of. However, behind each of them, something has disappeared. There lies their secret, if they have one, and there lies the secret of simulation. On the horizon of simulation, not only has the real world disappeared, but the very question of its existence has no meaning.

If you think about it, the problem was the same for the iconoclasm of Byzantium. The Iconolaters were subtle people who claimed to represent God for his greater glory but who, in reality, simulated God in images, thereby dissimulating the problem of His existence. Each image was a pretext to avoid raising the problem of the existence of God. Behind each image, in fact, God had disappeared. He was not dead, but He had disappeared. In other words, the question was no longer asked. The problem of the existence of the non-existence of God was settled by simulation.

But one might think that it is God's own strategy to disappear, and precisely behind images. God uses images to disappear, obeying in turn the impulse to leave no trace. The prophecy thus comes true: we live in a world of simulation, a world where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear and by the same token to mask its disappearance. Art does nothing else. Today's media does nothing else. That is why they are condemned to the same fate.

Something lies hidden behind the orgy of images. The world concealing itself behind the profusion of images may be another form of illusion, an ironic form (cf. Elias Canetti's parable on animals: one has the feeling that something human is hidden behind each of them, taunting you).

The illusion that emerged from the capability, through the invention of forms, to tear something away from reality, to counter

it with another scene, to pass through the looking glass, the capability to invent another game and other rules for the game is by now impossible because images have entered things. Images are no longer the mirror of reality, they have invested the heart of reality and transformed it into hyperreality where, from screen to screen, the only aim of the image is the image. The image can no longer imagine the real because it is the real; it can no longer transcend reality, transfigure it or dream it, since images are virtual reality. In virtual reality, it is as if things had swallowed their mirror.

Having swallowed their mirror, they have become transparent to themselves, they hide no more secrets, they cannot fake illusions (for illusion is linked to secrets, to the fact that things are absent from themselves, drawn back from themselves in their appearances). Here, there is only transparency, and things, completely present to themselves in their visibility, in their virtuality, in their inexorable transcription (possibly in digital terms with all the latest technology), are only inscribed on one screen, on the billions of screens where the real, but also the image properly speaking, has disappeared from the horizon.

In coming to pass, all of the utopias of the 19th and 20th centuries have chased reality from reality and have left us in a meaningless hyperreality, since any final perspective has been absorbed, digested, leaving only the residue of a surface without depth. Maybe technology is the only force that still binds together the scattered fragments of reality, but what happened to the constellation of meaning? What happened to the constellation of secrecy?

We have finished with the end of representation, then, with the end of aesthetics, with the end of the image itself in the superficial virtuality of the screens. Yet—and here there is a perverse and paradoxical effect, though perhaps a positive one—it seems that, at the same time as illusion and utopia were chased by force out of the real by all of our technologies, by dint of these same technologies, irony has moved into things. There would therefore be a compensation for the loss of the illusion of the world: the appearance of the objective irony of this world. Irony as a universal and spiritual form of the disillusion of the world. Spiritual in the sense of being spirited, emerging from the very heart of the technological banality of our objects and our images. The Japanese perceive a divinity in every industrial object. For us, this divine presence has been reduced to a weak ironic glow, though it still remains a spiritual form.

The Object, Master of the Game

It is no longer a function of the subject, the critical mirror in which the uncertainty, the irrationality of the world are reflected; it is the mirror of the world itself, of the objectal and artificial world surrounding us, where the absence and transparency of the subject are reflected. Succeeding the critical function of the subject is the ironic function of the object, an objective and no longer subjective irony. From the moment when they are manufactured, and by their very existence, products, artifacts, signs, commodities, things exercise an artificial and ironic function. There is no need to project irony onto the real world, no need for an outside mirror offering the world the image of its double: our universe has swallowed its double, it has become spectral, transparent, it has lost its shadow, and the irony of this incorporated double bursts forth at each instant, in each fragment of our signs, our objects, our images, our models. The need no longer exists, as it did for the Surrealists, to exaggerate this functionality, to confront objects with the absurdity of their function, in a poetic unreality. Things have taken charge of casting

an ironic light on themselves, they discard their meaning effortlessly, with no need to call attention to artifice or nonsense. This is all part of their very representation, of their visible, all too visible linkage, of their superfluousness, in which they parody themselves. After physics and metaphysics, we have reached a pataphysics[3] of objects and commodity, a pataphysics of signs and operations. All things, deprived of their secret and their illusion, are condemned to existence, to visible appearance; they are given over to advertising, to make-believe, to self-display and self-valuation. Our modern world is essentially advertising. As it is, one might say that it seems to have been invented to be publicized in another world. We shouldn't believe that advertising came after commodity; there is an advertising evil genius at the heart of commodity (and by extension at the heart of our entire universe of signs), a trickster who has incorporated the clowning of commodity and its staging. A brilliant scriptwriter (maybe even capital itself) has led the world into a phantasmagoria of which we all are the fascinated victims.

All things want to manifest themselves today. Technical, industrial, media objects, artifacts of all kinds want to signify, be seen, be read, be recorded, be photographed.

You assume you're photographing a given thing for your own pleasure, but in fact it wants its picture taken and you are only a figure in its staging, secretly moved by the self-advertising perversion of the surrounding world. There lies the pataphysical irony of the situation. All metaphysics is brushed aside by this reversal of the situation where the process no longer originates with the subject, who is only the agent or the operator of the objective irony of the world. It is no longer the subject who represents the world to itself (*I will be your mirror!*[4]), the object refracts the subject and subtly, using all our technologies, imposes its presence and its aleatory form.

The subject is no longer the master of the game, and there seems to have been a reversal in the relationship. The power of the object cuts a path through the play of simulation and simulacra, through the very artifice we have imposed on it. It acts like an ironic revenge: the object becomes a strange attractor. And we find here the limits of aesthetic adventure, of the aesthetic mastery of the world by the subject (but it is also the end of the adventure of representation). For the object as a strange attractor is no longer an aesthetic object.

Deprived of all secrets, of all illusions by technology itself, deprived of its origin, since it is generated by models, deprived of all connotations of meaning and value, taken out of both the orbit of the subject and the precise mode of vision that is part of the aesthetic definition of the world—then it becomes, in a way, a pure object, and it recovers some of the force and the immediacy of forms that existed before, or after the generalized aestheticization of our culture. All of these artifacts, all of these artificial objects and images exercise a sort of artificial influence or fascination on us. Simulacra are no longer simulacra, they have become materially evident—fetishes, perhaps, both completely depersonalized, desymbolized and yet at maximum intensity, directly invested as *medium*—just like fetish objects, with no aesthetic mediation. That may be where our most superficial, stereotyped objects recover the power of exorcism, equal to sacrificial masks. Exactly like masks, which absorb the identity of the actors, the dancers, the spectators, and which have the function to provoke a sort of thaumaturgic (traumaturgic?) vertigo. In the same way, I think all of these modern artifacts, from advertising to electronics, from the media to virtual reality, objects, images, models, networks, are made to absorb and provoke the vertigo of the interlocutor (us, the subjects, the alleged

agents) much more than communicating or informing—and at the same time to eject and reject it as did prior forms of exorcism and paroxysm. *We shall be your favorite disappearing act!*[5]

These objects therefore meet, well beyond aesthetic form, the forms of aleatory play and of vertigo of which Roger Caillois spoke and that were opposed to the mimetic and aesthetic play of representation.[6] They illustrate our type of society, which is also a society of paroxysm and exorcism. In other words, it is a society where we have absorbed our own reality, our own identity to the point of vertigo, and where we seek to reject it with the same force, where reality as a whole has absorbed to the point of vertigo its own double and seeks to get rid of it in all its forms.

These banal objects, technological objects, virtual objects, are the new strange attractors, the new objects beyond aesthetics, transaesthetic, these fetish-objects with no signification, no illusion, no aura, no value that are the mirror of our radical disillusionment of the world. Ironically pure objects, like Warhol's images.

Warhol: an Introduction to Fetishism

Andy Warhol starts by eliminating the imaginary aspects of any image and turning it into a pure visual product. Pure logic, unconditional simulacrum. Steve Miller (and all those who "aesthetically" rework video, scientific or digital images) does the exact opposite. They redo the aesthetic with raw materials. One *uses* the machine to remake art, the other (Warhol) *is* a machine. Warhol is the true machinic metamorphosis. Steve Miller only does machinic simulation and arraigns technology to create illusion. Warhol gives us the pure illusion of technology—technology as radical illusion—which is far superior today to the illusion of painting.

In this respect, a machine can never become famous, and Warhol only ever sought the kind of mechanical fame that has no consequences and leaves no traces. A photogenic fame that calls for everything and for every individual today to be seen, to be celebrated by sight. This is what Warhol is: he is merely the agent of the ironic appearance of things. He is only the medium for this giant advertisement that the world gives itself by means of technology and by means of images, forcing our imagination to evaporate, our passions to externalize themselves, shattering the mirror that we were holding in front of it, hypocritically by the way, in order to capture it for our own benefit.

Through images, through technical artifacts of all kinds, of which Warhol's artifacts are the modern "Idealtype," the world imposes its discontinuity, its fragmentation, its stereophonics, its superficial instantaneity.

Evidence of the Warhol-machine, of this extraordinary machine for filtering the world in its material evidence: Warhol's images are not banal because they would reflect a banal world but because there is no attempt by a subject to interpret it—his images manage to raise the image to a state of pure figuration without the slightest transfiguration. It is therefore no longer a transcendence but an increased power of the sign. Having lost its natural signification, the sign shines in the vacancy of all its artificial light. Warhol is the first to introduce fetishism.

However, if you think about it, what do modern artists do anyway? Do our modern artists—like the artists who, since the Renaissance, thought they were doing religious painting and in fact painted works of art—think they are producing works of art while doing something altogether different? Aren't the objects they produce something altogether different from art? Fetish-objects, for

example, but disenchanted fetishes, purely decorative objects for temporal use (Caillois would say: hyperbolic ornaments). Literally superstitious objects, in the sense that they no longer emerge from a sublime nature of art and no longer respond to a profound belief in art but nonetheless perpetuate this superstition in all its forms. Fetishes, then, of the same inspiration as sexual fetishism, which is also sexually indifferent: by establishing their object as a fetish, they deny both the reality of sex and sexual pleasure. They do not believe in sex but only in the idea of sex (which is, of course, asexual). In the same way, we no longer believe in art but only in the idea of art (which of course is not at all aesthetic).

That is why art, subtly nothing more than an idea, began working with ideas. Duchamp's bottle stand is an idea, Warhol's Campbell's can is an idea, Yves Klein's selling air for a blank check in a gallery is an idea. All of these are ideas, signs, allusions, concepts. They no longer signify anything at all, but they signify. What we call art today seems to bear witness to an irremediable void. Art is travestied by the idea, the idea is travestied by art. It is a form, our form of transsexuality, of transvestism extended to the entire realm of art and culture. Art traversed by the idea, by the empty signs of art and particularly by the signs of its own disappearance, is transsexual in its own way.

All modern art is abstract in the sense that it is more pervaded by ideas than by imagined forms and substances. All modern art is conceptual in the sense that it fetishizes the concept, the stereotype of a cerebral model of art in the work—in exactly the same way that what is fetishized in commodity is not its real value but the abstract stereotype of value. Condemned to this fetishistic and decorative ideology, art has no distinct existence. From this perspective, one could say that we are on the way to the complete disappearance of art as a specific activity. This can lead either to a reversion of art into pure technique and craftsmanship, eventually transferred into electronics, as can be seen everywhere today, or towards a primal ritualism, where anything can serve as an aesthetic gadget, with art ending in universal kitsch, like religious art ended in Saint-Sulpician kitsch. Who knows? Art as art may have only been an aside, a sort of ephemeral luxury of the species. The problem is that this crisis in art may become unending. And the difference between Warhol and all the others, who deep down welcome this unending crisis, is that with Warhol the crisis of art is essentially over.

Recovering Radical Illusion

Is there still an aesthetic illusion? And if not, a path to an "anaesthetic" illusion, the radical illusion of secret, seduction and magic? Is there still, on the edges of hypervisibility, of virtuality, room for an image? Room for an enigma? Room for a power of illusion, a veritable strategy of forms and appearances?

Against all modern superstitions of "liberation," it must be said that forms are not free, figures are not free. They are on the contrary bound: the only way to liberate them is to chain them together, in other words to find their links, the ties that create and bind them, that chain them gently together. Moreover, they connect and engender themselves, and art has to enter into the intimacy of this process. "It is better for you to have enslaved one free man with kindness than to have freed a thousand slaves" (Omar Khayyam).[7]

Objects whose secret is not their expression, their representative form, but on the contrary their condensation and their subsequent dispersion in the cycle of metamorphoses. In fact, there are two ways to escape the trap of representation: by never-ending deconstruction, where painting never ceases to watch itself die in the

shards of the mirror, even if it scrapes something together with the remains, it is always interdependent on the lost signification, always wanting a reflection or a story. Or by simply leaving representation behind, forgetting any concern for reading, interpretation, decoding, forgetting the critical violence of meaning and mistake, returning to the womb of the appearance of things where they merely state their presence, albeit in multiple forms, multiplied by the specter of metamorphoses.

Entering the specter of the dispersion of the object, the womb of the distribution of forms is the very form of illusion, of the return to play (*illudere*). Going beyond an idea means negating it. Going beyond a form means passing from one form to another. The first defines the critical intellectual position that is often the position of modern painting in its contact with the world. The second describes the principle of illusion where there is no other fate for form than form. In this sense, we need illusionists who know that art, and painting, are illusions, in other words as far from intellectual criticism of the world as from aesthetics proper (which presupposes a reflective discrimination between the beautiful and the ugly), who know that art is first of all a trompe l'oeil, a "trompe life," just as any theory is a "trompe meaning" and all painting, far from being an expressive, and therefore supposedly true, version of the world, consists in creating snares in which the presumed reality of the world is naïve enough to get caught. Just as theory does not consist in having ideas (and therefore of flirting with truth), but in setting snares, traps in which meaning is naïve enough to get caught. Finding, through illusion, a form of fundamental seduction.

It is a delicate command not to succumb to the nostalgic charms of painting, and to remain on the subtle line that is closer to the lure than aesthetics, inheriting a ritual tradition that has never really mixed with the tradition of painting: the tradition of trompe l'oeil. A dimension that, beyond the aesthetic illusion, reconnects with a much more fundamental form of illusion that I would call "anthropological"—to designate the generic function of the world and its emergence, whereby the world appears well before being interpreted or represented, well before becoming real, which it only became lately, and no doubt fleetingly. Not the negative and superstitious illusion of another world, but the positive illusion of this world, of the operatic stage of the world, of the symbolic operation of the world, of the vital illusion of appearances that Nietzsche spoke of—illusion as a primitive scene, long before and much more fundamental than the aesthetic scene.

The realm of artifacts reaches largely beyond the realm of art. The reign of art and aesthetics is a conventional management of illusion, a convention that neutralizes the wild effects of illusion, that neutralizes illusion as an extreme phenomenon. The aesthetic is a sort of sublimation or mastery through form of the radical illusion of a world that would otherwise destroy us. Other cultures accepted the cruel evidence of this original illusion of the world by establishing an artificial balance. Our modern cultures no longer believe in this illusion of the world but rather in its reality (which is of course the final illusion) and we have decided to temper the ravages of illusion through this cultivated, docile form of simulacrum known as the aesthetic form.

Illusion has no history. Aesthetic form does. But because it has a history, it also only has one time and we are no doubt now witnessing the disappearance of this conditional form, of this aesthetic form of the simulacrum in favor of an unconditional simulacrum, in other words a certain primitive scene of illusion where we return to the inhuman rituals and phantasmagoria of the cultures preceding our own.

Implosions

The Implosion of Beaubourg

Jean-Luc Hennig and Jean-François Fogel: *In a study that has been kept very quiet in Beaubourg, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu tried to analyze the changes in Beaubourg's public over the past year. His conclusion: a massive return to a homogenized public, except in the media library and the new exhibits space on the lower level...*

Jean Baudrillard: In fact, Bourdieu left out a crucial fact: the stark divergence between the size of traditional museum-going publics and the public of Beaubourg. The irruption of a mass that doesn't exactly fit the definition of a cultural public is a new occurrence. It calls into question both Beaubourg and any sociological explication. This mass is flocking there according to a principle of fascination. Bourdieu analyzed this as well as the "Roissy effect." And it affects a domain that in principle should remain unaffected by fascination. This proves that culture no longer has any specificity. It can be completely eroded when submitted to the effects of fascination. The focalization of this effect on Beaubourg is certainly new in comparison to other cultural clusters.

So the "Beaubourg effect" is completely negative? Everything is absorbed, digested, undifferentiated...

I don't think it is negative at all. What interested me is that the mass imposed its practices on the spot, thwarting the concerns issuing from the cultural sphere or the government. This reversal of the situation was not pessimistic. It proves that an "indistinct," "blind," completely "ignorant" mass, with all the sociological prejudices we may have, is capable of subverting such a powerful institution, to engage in practice I would call original, positive, to thwart the trap that was set for it. But I am pessimistic about the Beaubourg's cultural effect, about traditional mass cultivation. There is no hope there.

But for the artists, many people can find a place to turn to here, a quicker, more approachable, more open...

That's the danger. People say: the more the better. Everything can go in. Every artist should have his or her chance. But once there are too many, as soon as it becomes an infinite succession, a tactical juxtaposition of everything that is possible in cultural terms, then the project reaches a catastrophic limit. You accept everything like you accept the succession of programs on television. At that point, you fall into a lack of distinction, an indifference to everything. It is all received and absorbed with the same fascination. And if some people are worried that it isn't pedagogical enough, the institution will prop it all up with mechanisms for training, education, etc. Actually, it has been revealed that a large majority of people don't care, and setting up those structures would just take up space. This pedagogical project in any case contradicts this mobile, polyvalent, tactile, tactical construction. It is not a pedagogical space at all and they realized this immediately. When they wanted to explain, draw attention anew, etc. they had to carve up the space again, hang canopies all over the place, redo the ceilings, etc. Beaubourg is really a space of total diffusion. So people must be rather stunned. It challenges them. Obviously they do not know where it is coming from, whether it is architectural or political. It is really a pure object. What is fascinating is this sort of global uselessness, absurdity, challenge. It is certainly not a dialectical process of learning culture. People come to see a good bit of spectacle.

Isn't Beaubourg a good reading of today's culture in its emptiness, its dispersion, its non-corrosive effects?

Beaubourg is indeed the best reading of a culture of total dispersion, of combination... Mixing, random, manipulating, that is the real culture. In this respect, Beaubourg is the ideal monument. But it expresses this unwillingly, because its objectives are radically different, yet the masses respond to the most directly contemporary utterance. There is the outward discourse of the institution trying to justify itself and there is the real, positive operation of Beaubourg where the masses enter perfectly well.

Like a shopping mall?

But this is the first time we have been able to put culture outside in a shopping mall. This reduction, this flattening out, this possibility of an indefinite supply of culture is something new. But you should note that there are both sides in Beaubourg. It operates traditionally with the Museum—a good sanctuary—but the public hardly goes there. Out of 20,000 entries, only 1500 wander around the museum. All the others spread around an indistinct, indeterminate space that is Beaubourg's true challenge. The drugstore or

those spaces that can contain everything, they are the strategic stakes of culture. Our reality is the idea that there is no longer any difference between levels of quality, that everything can be contained in one polyvalent space, selling and consuming at the same time. That is the starting point. In a way, the architecture and organization acknowledge this molecular nature of culture. And then somewhere there is a kind of resistance, people trying to fix the situation with old norms of training, etc.

But that is a rather passive use. No open, localized subversion, no wild dazibaos... It could be a cause for political groups, surrealist groups, a formidable starting point for perversion. Why does that never happen?

Exactly. Compared to this culture of the neutral, to this implosive process initiated in the central building, the parvis, the marginality, all that is old hat, it doesn't work. The building is far newer than anything that could happen on the parvis. The implosion happening there is not surrealist, it is hyperrealist. Neither subversive nor transgressive. It may be in this neutrality that something is really happenning. Spectacular violence becomes meaningless in the face of an event like this. It may not be by accident that there has never been an eruption, no direct and violent interventions.

Is this tale of 'alert' levels beyond which everything would fall apart really true?

They say it cannot reach 30,000. There must be some real panic about the building's structure in terms of the flexibility of its suspension. But there is really a threat of saturation of the space. For an open, polyvalent space, the absolute paradox is to be stuffed...

You have made Beaubourg the sign of a new kind of violence, a violence of institutions, culture and power and not a dialectical or strategic violence. A violence by saturation, absorption, deterrence. An emptying violence.

With Beaubourg, we have pushed a system of accumulation to the saturation point. And the problem of saturation is present at every level, including power, to the extent that it can become completely instantaneous, interstitial, omnipresent through information structures, etc. It will also reach a limit where it will immediately be absorbed, absorbing itself. The term "implosion" is a metaphor to describe this process. It is physically like what happens to star clusters whose density becomes so phenomenal that they implode and nothing is left around them. Then they have the possibility of absolutely capturing and neutralizing all the energy, all the light radiation that approach them. In that case, our old ideas of violence do not work. Acts of violence or subversion that confront the system openly because they are even more expansive or explosive do no work anymore. The system has reached such a point of saturation that one cannot go beyond it.

Isn't there a saturation of information, diffusion and production of the event by the media at the Pompidou Center...

It's true that information is the medium of the implosion, but Marshall MacLuhan already realized that with television. The instantaneous generalization and globalization of information produces total atomization. Neutralizing everything, it creates a sort of absolute void. Every bit of information today is devoured in the mode of fascination; this fascination may even be the extreme

intensity of the neutral. When there is positive and negative, you have an investment, an affect, energy, etc. In a neutralized field, you don't have that anymore, you only have fascination and a possible instantaneous reversion of the process when it reaches its limit. How can you maintain a memory, a will and even a representation when you are in a universe like Beaubourg? When people move in en masse, anonymously, submerged by this monument, they immediately fall into a sort of cultural catalepsy...

But isn't it a never-ending self-cumulative process? Isn't there a point when too much is not enough? Can't we imagine a super-Beaubourg?

I don't think so. It's accumulation, the series, that helps develop the fantasy of infinity, but what you do not see is the threshold of critical mass. At some point, too much is too much. The process is the equivalent of the abolition of all these qualities. It's a black hole. I suppose that in any political, cultural field, one always has the impression that one is accumulating and that there is a positive dimension to the infinite. And then at one point, bang!, you reach the implosive point of critical mass.

People have had the contrary impression that Beaubourg was going to devour the entire territory, centralize every creation. In fact, it seems that there is a certain regional rejection and continued production of core companies, autonomous reviews, etc.

These forms of autonomy that resist centralization and recreate themselves in local bases, we could call them processes of slow implosion. They operate differently from our universalistic system of expansion, but they do not stand up to the phenomenon of violent implosion occurring at the top, massively, blindly, escaping analysis. Beaubourg hasn't yet occupied everything, but it has gathered the same power that a satellite has, an orbital machine that reconfigures everything. In reality, the vast domains of power, society and culture first would have to implode violently for us to find a kind of implosive regulation...

But there is an acceleration today. Cultural phenomena do not reach very far. They are highly concentrated and immediately self-destruct, like the punks...

We are indeed no longer in a process of continuity, history, memory, everything is taken immediately in a cyclical dimension, an accelerated curve. Of course, there is an attempt to resist, to create fabulous memories on the computer, to archive everything, to halt the flow of events that cancel themselves and can no longer be capitalized...

An accelerated cultural entropy then?

In information theory, the term "entropy" is negative. It is a decline, the most degraded form of energy. Attali takes it in this sense when he says: you have to take information all the way; the more information, the better. This is a way of taking information and its theory as a new historical philosophy without taking into account its implosive aspect. Nothing says that this aspect is negative. If you calculate in terms of accumulation of meaning, of messages, it is definitely entropy since the contents are neutralized. But the sovereignty of the medium is an original situation that may have its own laws and in any case unforeseen consequences.

But at the same time, it is an inevitable phenomenon...

We can only experience it in a desperate way, but in itself, it's quite fascinating... You can certainly interpret it in terms of death, death by a loss of difference... In Italy, all the cypress trees have a strange disease. They are all dying, just like that. No explanation. The hypothesis they came up with is that they are dying because of the lack of difference between the seasons. True or not it's fabulous, don't you think?

1994

The Violence of Indifference

François Ewald: *"I have hate." That was one of the slogans of the young people who were demonstrating last spring against the CIP.*[1] *It's a strange expression...*

Jean Baudrillard: Indeed, the expression is strange, for there's no object in the phrase "I have hate." It's the problem of these passions that no longer have an object. It's like the statement: "I demonstrate" [*Je manifeste*] which really means I demonstrate myself. But for what? For whom? This is the destiny of expressions where the verb has become autonomous. They are constructed in the first person, but the object has disappeared. Take also the phrase: "I take on" [*J'assume*]. What does he or her take on? They would be quite hard pressed to say. It's a subject without an object who is speaking.

There's also the "I have," as opposed to "I am." A passion like hate, one is *it, more than one* has *it. From a syntactic point of view as well, the expression is curious.*

It's not exactly a syntax any more, it's a logo, a kind of label. Like graffiti, it displays a modality of living: "I exist," "I live here."

Period. Within reason, or beyond all reason. Hate may be something that subsists, that outlives any definable object. Whom can one make an object of hate today? And where can young people indeed find an object of hate?

It's a kind of status, a kind of modality of living, that also sounds like a condemnation. It's quite desperate.

We mustn't overdo death or despair. They may look desperate but I'm not sure that they are actually desperate. They might well be less desperate than others, less disaffected. Hate is still an energy, even if it's negative or reactional. Today, there is nothing but these passions: hate, disgust, allergy, aversion, deception, nausea, repugnance, repulsion. People don't know what they want any more. People are only sure about what they don't want. The current processes are processes of rejection, of disaffection, of allergy. Hate is part of this paradigm of reaction passions, abreactional passions: "I'm sorry, I don't want any. I won't join the consensus. It's not negotiable. It's not reconcilable."

In the expression, "I have hate," there's also a way of positioning oneself without demanding anything, finally. "I have hate" is not "I hate you." This kind of objection parades as pure affirmation, pure position. As such, it's irrecoverable.

Indeed, "I have hate" is like a king of final asset. But even so, there's a king of alterity, someone in front of you, it can always be negotiated in one way or another, even negotiated with power.

Does one encounter this type of affect in other places besides France?

I've just returned from Australia, where my encounter with the aborigines made me experience a kind of radical anthropological shock. Alterity is truly a great problem there. The aborigines—it's the anthropological extreme, but a revealing extreme—have a kind of visceral, profound rejection of what we represent and what we can be. As if these people also "had hate." There's something irremediable, irreducible in this. We can offer them all the universal charity we are capable of, try to understand them, try to love them, but there's in them a kind of radical alterity that does not want to be understood and that will not be understood.

Between these people and the world that, since the enlightenment, has been developed around the universal, I have the impression that the gulf is expanding. At the same time that the universal was invented, the other was discovered, the real other, precisely the one that does not fall back into universal, the one whose singularity is insistent, even when disarmed and impotent. I have the impression that the gulf is hardening and deepening between a culture of the universal and those singularities that remain. These people cannot allow themselves offensive passions; they don't have the means for them. But contempt is still available to them. I believe that they have a profound contempt for us; they dislike us with an irreducible feeling of rejection. The young people in the banlieues[2] are one of the possible versions of this phenomenon—but an integrated one, whereas in the third world, what remains of all that has been destroyed or virtually exterminated holds onto a passion of radical vengeance, a kind of absolute reversion that's not about to subside.

Is this current feeling of hate similar to what we used to call class hatred not so long ago?

I don't think so. Class hatred, paradoxically, has always remained a bourgeois passion. That hate had an objective; it could be theorized and was theorized. It was formulated, one could act on it: it provided for historical and social action. There was a subject (the proletariat) and structures (the classes) and contradictions. The hate that we are talking about does not have a subject; one cannot act on it. It's only expressed by acting out. Its modality of existence is no longer that of historical action, but that violent, self-destructive acting out. Hate can easily turn against itself, it can also become self-hatred, self-destruction. Look at the suicide of the lead singer of the rock group Nirvana. He wanted to give his last album the following title: "I hate myself and I want to die." From now on, class hatred is part of our heritage—the European heritage at least.

In the 1980s, certain intellectuals diagnosed the end of political passions. Isn't hate a new form, the new face of political passion?

So we're past the end then? Why couldn't there be a political indifferenciation, now—one which would not necessarily be the last word of history with, at a given moment, a turnaround, a hate for ... Maybe the last drives are against history, against politics. Maybe what comprises an event is no longer constructed in the direction of history or in the political sphere, but against them. There's a disaffection, an ennui, an indifference, which can suddenly crystallize into a more violent form, through a process of instantaneous passage to the extreme. It can accelerate as well. Indifference is not at all a quiescent sea, the flat encephalogram. Indifference is also a passion.

Indifference is a passion?

Of course. There are strategies of indifference. Indifference describes an original situation, which is not absence, or nothing. Masses, for example, are indifferent bodies, but there's mass violence, mass virulence. Indifference causes damage. The term indifference might appear flat, but it can also enter into an incandescent state. There's certainly a violence of indifference.

You were speaking about acting out a moment ago. Isn't that a game played in the popular media? A form of passion in the television age?

The popular media is always taken to be a kind of mirror capable of creating such special effects such that what was there at the start can no longer be found. That's the most common analysis. But the forms of popular media themselves are the site of indifference, they are what produce indifference. They produce something original: the production of indifference. One believes that power manipulates the masses through the popular media. One can also think that the reverse is true: it may be the masses who neutralize and destabilize power through the popular media. The media may be the site of where rational and historical action is reversed. They paralyze and immobilize almost everything.

Obviously, the stage is occupied, it's full, but we know that nothing happens there, virtually nothing. This is what produces catastrophic effects. Information fills our space, but in fact the emptiness digs deeper, into a kind of black hole. Besides do people believe in information? Everybody pretends to. There's a kind of consensus based on credulity; one pretends to believe that what happens to us through the popular media is real or true; one believes in a kind of principle of divine right. But in the end, do people believe in it? I am not so sure. They're more in a state of

fundamental incredulity. This incredulity is not necessarily passive. It's a resistance. It means something: "We don't want that, That doesn't concern us, That's not a part of our universe." For the great majority, it's true that it doesn't relate to them, it doesn't concern them. There's a kind of enormous ... not anomie, in the sense where there would be small groups of people outside the law, outside the norm; but instead a kind of profound anomaly.

Take Paulin, the Guadeloupean man who, a few years ago, murdered those old ladies in Paris. His trial was held, he was convicted and sentenced, he died of AIDS in prison. *I Can't Sleep* ("J'ai pas sommeil"), a film that tells his story, just came out. Here is a person who was absolutely monstrous—but cool, displaying no apparent hate. He was identity-less, of indeterminate gender, of an indistinct race: a kind of anticipation of a completely hybrid [*metissée*] society having become perfectly indifferent. He carried out his murders without violence, without bloodshed. He was even extremely courteous, lucid, calm. He told the police about the murders with an odd detachment, a kind of indifference. One could take it to be a true indifference: someone who had become so indifferent to himself, to his own identity, that he could eliminate beings who were likewise indifferent themselves: little old men, or ladies. One might also imagine that, behind all this, there's a core of radical hate. Paulin may have had hate, but he was too stylized, too cultivate to express it in a violent way. That hypothesis is also possible.

Can one say that hate has become our dominant political passion?

Comunication, in becoming universal, has been accompanied by a fantastic loss of alterity. There's no more other. Perhaps people are searching for a radical alterity, and hate, a desperate form of the production of the other, may be the best way to make it appear, as well as the best way to exorcise it. In this sense, hate would be a passion, in the form of provocation, of defiance. Hate is something strong; it must provoke a sharp adversity, and our world hardly provokes adversity anymore, because conflicts are immediately shut off, circumscribed, invisible. Hate is an ambivalent sentiment that can be inverted. It's a much stronger way of relating than love, affection, consensus or conviviality, which are weak modes of communication.

One cannot avoid comparing the present situation to the 70s, when people were talking about "peace and love" all the time. It was the era of resistance to the Vietnam war, beatniks, hippies, "under the cobblestones, the beach," John Lennon's Imagine. *There was so much love everywhere that finding a way to love power became a big question.*

It's true that at that time, everything revolved around the libido, desire and libido, things that curiously have weakened considerably since then, except in advertising. As to power: where is it? No one is able to capture power any more, even to fight against it. Hate is no longer class hatred, since it no longer sets the rich in opposition to the poor, the bosses against the workers. It's a hate for the class of politicians, an aversion for the political class, a global hate that has found a way to express itself in various political scandals, without being reduced to them.

Can one say that this hate comes at the end of history? Is it the passion that accompanies what Francis Fukuyama has described as the end of history?

I was just in Frankfurt with Francis Fukuyama, actually. I told him he was optimistic talking about the end of history. That would mean that history has taken place, that it's finished. It would suppose that history happened. Ultimately, there's more of a king of passage beyond, beyond an interminable history. Hate is more the violent reaction to the fact that there's no solution, that there's no possible resolution to all the problems posed by history. It's a rejection of the course of history; it's a king of loop, a regression. One doesn't know what one is dealing with. Perhaps, beyond the end, in these border regions where things are inverted, it's possible that there's an indeterminate passion—one which necessarily would not be a positive one, the way love is positive. Whatever energy remained would be inverted in negative passion, a rejection, a repulsion. Identity today is found through rejection; it hardly has any positive base any more. All that remains now is self-anti-determination, more through the expulsion of the other than by relation or affective dialectic. This is a situation which is becoming jammed. Certainly, there has been a kind of rupture that has not really been perceived. We've been swinging back and forth, not in a kind of positivity of time, a linearity of time any longer, but in a kind of countdown. Take the numeric clock at Beaubourg: it testifies to the fact that we are in an odd temporality, no longer in a time which is counted up from the origin and increasing, but instead, in a countdown. The end is there, and there's nothing else to do but count what separates us from it. Counting from the end, it's truly an odd perspective; it obviously is not done in order to increase our positive passions.

What politics is possible in the age of hate?

Rediscovering political passions: this is the great desperate hope of intellectuals. There have to be stakes in politics again. I believe that the true passion, the fundamental passion, is that of the game; it's the one which overdetermines all the others. When you play, you are impassioned. If you play, there are stakes, then there's a passion, neither positive nor negative, a passion of battle that expends itself. You play, you lose, you win, it's not a question of progressing, whatever you win you lose right back, etc. Passions come from there. In contemporary politics, where are the stakes? They have been shut off, there's nothing but stakes in this or that category, corporate stakes. It's as if there's an impossibility of putting something at stake. Thus, there's no more passion in politics. There's only an apathy, and one on the other side—to play on words—a *com*passion. We are no longer in impassioned politics; we are in compassion, through the extension of Human Rights, of solidarity.

The humanitarian issue?

There's a sort of radical dilution of passion into a sort of compassion, which Hannah Arendt analyzed and criticized long ago when she explained that, with the revolution, the compassion for the happiness (and especially for the unhappiness) of others took the place of passion, of freedom, of action, which are politics proper. We've fallen into the consensual universal of Human Rights, which conceals and nourishes violent singularities that secrete hate precisely to the degree that this universal is inadmissible—it's the utopia that can reveal itself to be murderous. It begins in enthusiasm, but when the system truly arrives at the point of the universal, to the point of saturation, it produces a terrible reversion, and all the

accidents we're seeing now, in the form of virulence, which has in a way replaced historical violence. From now on, we will have to deal with anomalous systems that secrete all sorts of virulence: AIDS, computer viruses, etc. Hate may also be a virus of this kind. Perhaps hate is vital, vital in the sense that it's the worst thing that can happen if you have no enemies anymore, no more adversity, no more antagonism, even virtual antagonism. If you take away hate's natural predators, it destroys itself. There's a vital metastability, a kind of equilibrium that implies that there's an other, and an evil other, some enemy. If you don't have to defend yourself anymore, you end by destroying yourself. This is what I have called depredation, in the sense that the predators have been removed. Hate may also be a last sign of life.

It's said that hate is nationalist, and that nationalism is hateful. What do you think of the current analyses of the return of nationalism.

They're superficial, overly moralizing. The analysis should be a bit harder, tougher, and it shouldn't immediately short-circuit phenomena with value-judgments: "This is not good; Le Pen or Islam shouldn't exist." It's not necessary to call for a return of Human Rights, since it's precisely that culture of universal values that secretes the current state of things.

Is there a danger in the universalism of Human Rights?

One doesn't need psychoanalysis to know that a human being is an ambiguous animal, that one cannot root the evil out of him or her, or simplify them to the point that they would be no more than a positive and rational being. Yet, it's upon this improbability that the ideologies rest. It's necessary to have adversity, incompatibilities, antagonisms, things that are irreconcilable, at the risk that the most sordid passions might be revealed. There's no choice. It's necessary to work with these things.

Modern politics begins with the will to dialecticize, to equilibrate forces, to find strategies of compromise between things, which are always thought to be negotiable. The principle of modern politics is that nothing should be able to evade this enterprise of reconciliation and negotiation. If there has to be conflict, it's meant to be resolved. Modern politics includes a final solution principle, which leads sometimes to "the" final solution. This is dialectic. But the reality is not dialectical; it's made up of irreconcilabilities, truly antagonistic things, as Freud posited Eros and Thanatos to be: radically mutually exclusive, and absolutely irreconcilable even to an infinite degree. Other cultures know how to manage this fundamental ambiguity symbolically, through the use of sacrifice, of rituals, of the ceremonial. But we don't want to take it into account. We start with the principle that things must become clear, become transparent. At the same time, there's a residue that's not dealt with, because it cannot be dealt with; it becomes necessarily residual and negative, and transforms itself naturally into hate. In pushing the universal as far as it will go, as we have done, one necessarily provokes a reversibility of these things, and other singularities will be provoked in turn. I am not a pessimist; the singularities are indestructible.

Can hate be universalized? Can one imagine a federation of hates? That the banlieues might make an alliance with various nationalisms, which themselves might make an alliance with something else in a sort of international of hate?

One would almost wish for such a scenario to be implemented. But by definition, inertia, indifference cannot be put into solidarity, since it results from the breaking up of solidarities, from the failure of the universal. It's fractal, fragmented, it erupts here or there, without the optimistic possibility of finding a political coherence. No, the worst is not always possible.

If there had to be a linkage, it would be of the order of a chain reaction, which is the current way in which events are propagated. Not through information anymore, nor knowledge, nor reason, with its reasoned and reasonable progressivism. There're trigger moments, uncontrollable linkages, like those described by Elias Canetti in *Crowds and Power*. The mass is a dull type of body, but transmission in it is ultra-rapid, through an effect that remains mysterious to traditional sociological analysis. Fashion is a kind of ultra-rapid contagion. It's the virulence of the virus, but not all viruses have perverse negative effects; some of them have perverse positive effects. We're in a universe of ultra-reaction, of overreaction, of chain reaction, of immediate contiguity. This is the modality of the popular media today, the modality of communication. Obviously, in a universe of this kind, political action is much more difficult.

Traditionally, political philosophy starts from the principle of a self-conservation which resists the dangers that threaten the individual. Today, with people like André Glucksmann, one seeks to base a morality on the recognition of a principle of radical evil—in a certain way, then, through a sort of hate of all evil. Could hate be the principle of a new morality?

I have nothing against evil, the principle of evil. With evil, it seems to me, there's an active principle, on the condition that one doesn't demonize evil, that one doesn't pathologize it, as Glucksmann does. There were all those analyses, in Georges Bataille for example, according to which the energy of societies comes from the principle of evil. Not from their positive passions, but from their negative ones. This is also what I've called the transparence of evil: evil is no longer played out, it no longer plays a part. It moves elsewhere, and appears transparent everywhere. Instead of being graspable, it becomes ungraspable. It takes the form of all these viruses that worry us today. But does that mean we need to use a demonic principle?

Isn't there a lot of that in Nietzsche? The idea that it's also necessary to know how to hate.

You have to be ruthless: you have to push everything that is leaning, so it falls. That's the strategy of the very worst, upping the ante, a passage beyond. I like that logic very much. It's necessary to know how to go to extremes. The problem is that more often we fall short of good and evil. We've lost the values, and the standard opposition of values—not by passing beyond then, but in falling short of them. From now on, values will be indiscernible, they will drift.

The good is when there's a regulated opposition of good and evil. The good completely admits the existence of evil, but admits that there's a possibility of reconciliation. All our religions, our ideologies start from the principle of good. Evil is when there's no more possible reconciliation between good and evil, when the two poles are torn apart. We are thus now within evil, in the sense of irreconcilability, which is inadmissible from a moral point of view. Evil means that there's no possible reconciliation between the two.

That doesn't give much of a future to our present politics of integration.

It's true that, until the middle of the 1980s, in our cultures, the process had not been going in the direction of exclusion. That has changed. Now something completely evades social regulation. Even if it's not the end of history, it's certainly the end of the social. Something has been dissociated; a principle of dissociation is at work, and there's no end in sight.

We are no longer in anomie, but instead in anomaly. Anomie was quite pleasant. Anomie arises in a bourgeois society. Anomie is that which, through a temporary exception, is not within the law, but which ones hopes to re-inscribe within the law, to put it back on the right track through solidarity. As for anomaly, it's irrecoverable. It's not about light disturbances. Anomaly is not what evades the law, according to some rule of evasion. It's more profound: the rules of the game are not necessarily articulated. No one is necessarily supposed to know them. One might not know anything about them; yet, one knows that people avoid the game completely, escape the possibility of playing the rules of the game. The law is explicit, one can contest it, and anomie provided a principle of resistance, of subversion, whereas anomaly is completely irrational; it's what falls elsewhere, what cannot be played out anymore, what's no longer in the game, what's outside of the game. One doesn't know what's fomented there, in anomaly.

Can anomaly have hate as a passion?

Perhaps we live in a general process of reversion of things—a process that would be augmented by various passions, like hate. Without knowing it, we would have passed to the other side, we would have moved into systems which are more and more sophisticated, functional, operational, and at the same time more and more threatened by a breakdown, by a violent reversion. It may well be that this is the very problem of the species itself, and not only the problem of certain cultures that might be trapped in a process of self-destruction. We've already seen cultures collapse just like that, in one fell swoop, without knowing why.

We're all Incas, then...

One doesn't have to go so far: just look at Communism.

1986

Viral Economy

AIDS, the stock market crash (followed by a series of corporate raiders and hostile takeovers), electronic viruses—we are spoiled in terms of "superconductor" events, the kind of untimely intercontinental torrents that no longer strike states, individuals or institutions but whole transversal structures: sex, money, information and communication.

These three events are not identical, but they resemble each other. AIDS is a kind of crash of sexual values. We can't forget that computers, infected by a kind of AIDS, played a "virulent" role in the Wall Street crash. But their unbridled contamination could also resemble a crash of computer values. The contagion is not only active within each system, it has spread between systems.

They are all related to a generic figure: the catastrophe. Indeed, signs of this virulence, of this internal disturbance had long been present in each system: endemic AIDS; the crash with its famous predecessor in '29 and its constant threat in the panic over stock prices; a 20-year history of computer piracy (and consecutive accidents). But the conjunction of all these endemic forms and their almost simultaneous passage into virulent state, to the state of unbridled anomalies, creates an altogether original and exciting situation. Their effects are not all the same in the collective consciousness: AIDS can be experienced as a real catastrophe (but it needs the additional virulence of rumors); the crash appears as a catastrophic game; and as for electronic viruses, they are certainly dramatic in their virtual consequences, but they are also a hilarious irony. They are like a catastrophic parody, like how laughter is contagious (laughter is a form of contagiousness created by the—even minute—disaster of reality; laughter is a homeopathic catastrophe) and the sudden epidemic striking computers, destroying their defense systems and their immunity, can cause, at least in the imagination, a justified delight (except for computer professionals).

I would add to these different aspects of a single eccentric nebula two very different things, two things that irresistibly invoke the same mechanisms: art, which is now everywhere subjected to the problem of the fake, the authentic, the copy, the clone, the simulation—a veritable contagion that destabilizes aesthetic values, causing them to lose their immunity as well—and simultaneously undergoing the delirious, speculative bidding wars of the art market. It is no longer a market in fact; it is a centrifugal proliferation of value that corresponds exactly to the metastases of a body irradiated by dough.

The second effect is political: it is terrorism. Nothing resembles the interstitial chain reaction of terrorism in our irradiated societies (irradiated by what, in fact? By the over-infusion of happiness, security, information and communication? By the disintegration of symbolic centers, fundamental rules, social contracts? Who knows?) more than AIDS, the corporate raiders and hackers. The contagion of terrorism is just as punctual, ephemeral, enigmatic and unmanageable as all these phenomena. Hostage taking is also contagious: when a software creator introduces a "soft bomb" in a program, using its potential destruction as a means to exert pressure, what is

he doing other than taking the program and all of its future operations hostage? And what do corporate raiders do other than seize companies and take them hostage while speculating on their death or resurrection on the stock market? We can therefore say that all of these effects operate in the same mode as terrorism (where hostages have a quoted market price like stocks or paintings) with the same overbidding, the same unpredictability, the same destabilizing effects and chain reactions. But we could just as well integrate terrorism using the model of AIDS, electronic viruses or hostile takeovers. One does not take precedence over the others; there is no cause and effect process. They are all part of the same constellation of contemporary and complicit phenomena.

The crash is continued in the frenzy of buyouts. They no longer buy just stocks, but whole companies. This creates a virtual effervescence whose potential incidence on economic reconstruction is, despite what they say, purely speculative. The desired result is that this forced circulation will lead to a broker's fee exactly like in the stock market. Not even an objective profit: the profit of speculation is not exactly a surplus; and it certainly presents something other than capitalist implications. Speculation, like poker or roulette, has its own logic of enthusiasm, chain reactions, escalation (*Steigerung*) where many people find the excitement of the game, outbidding. (That is why it is impossible to oppose it with economic logic. This is also what makes these phenomena exciting: overrunning economics with an aleatory and vertiginous form).

The game is such that it becomes suicidal: the major companies end up buying back their own stocks, something that is aberrant from an economic point of view. They end up buying themselves out! But it is part of the same madness. Companies are not exchanged or circulated like real capital or a unit of production in the case of a takeover. They are exchanged as a group of stocks, as the only probability of production sufficient to create a virtual movement in the economy. It is very probable that this precedes other crashes, just as for stocks when they circulate to quickly. One could even imagine that work itself, the force of work enters this speculative cycle. The worker would no longer sell his or her force of work for a salary—as in the classic capitalist process—they would sell the job itself, the work station, in order to buy others and resell them depending on the fluctuations of the employment market, which would then take on the full meaning of the term. It would then be less a question of performing a job but rather to circulate them, creating a virtual movement of employment that would replace the real movement of work.

Is this science fiction? Only barely. The very principle of information and communication is the principle of a value that is no longer referential but is based on pure circulation. Pure value added by the fact that message and meaning pass from picture to picture, screen to screen. It is not even the surplus and exchange value of commodity (although it already anticipates this process) which in principle articulate themselves around the use value and therefore still belong to the economic sphere. Here, there is no longer any exchange as such; we are in pure circulation and chain reactions through the networks. It is a completely new definition of value, a purely centrifugal value tied to pure speed and the multiplication of exchanges. This is to a large extent what is happening in the domains of communication and information—made up of operational yet never operating virtuality.

This model of "transeconomic" value already exists, however, in primitive cultures. The *kula* is a cycle of gifts that take on increasing value depending on whether they have been given or received

the most times. They can even come back to the starting point without changing but worth a hundred times more. (Isn't the same true today of the art market?) The mere fact of changing hands creates a sort of symbolic energy of circulation that is transformed into value. But this value cannot be realized, it cannot be "produced" or transferred into the circuit of useful values (*ginwali*). It can only circulate indefinitely and multiply as it circulates (or perhaps crumble if the movement stops). The *kula* is in a way the sacred level, the prestigious level of (symbolic) exchange. The other level, the level of bartering, of equivalencies, has no symbolic value: it is functional. Potlatch is also a speculative structure of overbidding, of producing value by pure and simple raising of the stakes.

Is there an echo of *kula* and potlatch in these disordered effects that fundamentally contradict the economic principle of value and equivalency, the principle of work and production? In all logic (even the logic of radical critique), we cannot condemn this excess. Everyone in fact enjoys it as a spectacle (the stock market, the art market, the raiders). We all enjoy it like the spectacular improvement of capital, its aesthetic delirium. At the same time, we take a more difficult, more painful pleasure in a more ambiguous way from the spectacular pathology of this system, of viruses like AIDS, the crash and computer viruses that happen to graft themselves to this beautiful machinery and cause it to break down. But it is in fact the same logic: viruses and virulence take part in the logical, hyperlogical coherence of all our systems. They take the same paths, they even trace out new ones (electronic viruses explore the confines of the networks that even the networks did not foresee). Electronic viruses are the expression of the deadly transparency of information in the world. AIDS emanates from the deadly transparency of sexual liberation at the level of entire groups. Market crashes are the expression of the deadly transparency of economies to each other, of the lightning-fast circulation of value that is the very basis of the liberation of production and exchange. Once "liberated," all the processes enter into surfusion, like the nuclear surfusion that is the prototype. This surfusion of factual processes that detach from their real substance is not the least charming aspect of our time.

It is not the least paradox either to see the triumphal return of the economy to the agenda, especially in the media (we cannot forget that the media universe is also a viral universe and that the circulation of images and messages functions as a perpetual rumor). But can we in fact still speak of "economy"? Or political economy (the logic of capital)? Certainly not. At the very least, the dazzling immediacy of the economy no longer has anything close to the same meaning as in Marxist or classical analysis. For its impetus is no longer the infrastructure of material production at all, or the superstructure. Its impetus is the destructuration of value, the destabilization of markets and real economies, the triumph of an economy cleared of ideology, social sciences, history, political economy and handed over to pure speculation, a virtual economy cleared of real economies (not really, of course: virtually—but precisely reality today does not hold power; virtuality does) a viral economy that connects in this way to all the other viral processes. As the place of special effects, unforeseeable (almost meteorological) events, as the destruction and exacerbation of its own logic, it once again becomes an exemplary theater of current events.

1996

Radical Thought

"The novel, which is a work of art, exists, not by its resemblances to life, which are forced and material, [...] but by its immeasurable difference from life."

— Stevenson[1]

Thinking, therefore, is not as valuable for its inevitable resemblances to truth as for the immeasurable divergences that separate it from truth.

It is not true that we need to believe in our own existence to live. It is not necessary. Our consciousness is in fact never the echo of our own reality, of our existence in "real time," but rather the echo in delayed time, the dispersion screen of the subject and its identity. We are only indistinguishable from ourselves in sleep, unconsciousness and death. This consciousness, which is something altogether different than belief, comes more spontaneously from challenging reality, from siding with objective illusion than from objective reality. This challenge is more vital for our survival and for the survival of the species than the belief in reality and existence, which are spiritual consolations for use in another world. This world, here, is as it is, and is no less real. "The most powerful instinct of human kind is to enter into conflict with truth and therefore with reality."

Belief in reality is one of the elementary forms of religious life. It is a weakness of the understanding, a weakness of common sense, and also the final stand of the moral zealots, the apostles of the legality of reality and rationality who say that the reality principle can never be cast in doubt. Fortunately, no one lives according to this principle, not even those who profess it, and for good reason. No one fundamentally believes in reality or in the evidence of his or her real life. That would be too sad.

But then, these good apostles say, you are not going to discredit reality in the eyes of those who already have so much trouble living and who have just as much right to reality and rationality as you and me. The same underhanded objection is made for the Third World: you are not going to discredit abundance in the eyes of those who are dying of hunger. Or: you are not going to discredit class struggle for people who have not even had their bourgeois revolution. Or: you are not going to discredit feminist and egalitarian protests for all the women who have never even heard of women's rights... If you don't like reality, don't ruin it for everyone else! It is a question of democratic morality: you should not demoralize Billancourt.[2] You should never demoralize anyone.

A deep disdain underlies these charitable intentions. First, it establishes reality as a kind of life insurance or permanent concession, like the smallest human right or the greatest mass consumption good. But most of all, by only crediting people for putting their hope in reality and in visible proofs of their existence, by attributing this Saint-Sulpician realism to them, they take them for innocent fools. It must be said in their defense that the thurifers of realism cast this disdain on themselves first by reducing their

own lives to a series of facts and proofs, causes and effects. Well-organized resentment always begins with the self.

Say "I am real, this is real, the world is real," and no one laughs. Say "this is a simulacrum, you are a simulacrum, this war is a simulacrum," and everyone breaks out laughing. With forced, condescending or convulsive laughter, like for a childish joke or an obscene suggestion. Everything that touches simulacra is taboo or obscene, just like everything that concerns sex and death. Yet it is in fact reality and obviousness that are obscene. Truth should be laughable. You could imagine a culture where everyone spontaneously rolled with laughter when someone said: this is true, this is real.

These things define the unsolvable relationship between thought and reality. A certain form of thinking supports reality. It starts with hypothesis that there is a real reference for ideas and a possible ideation of reality. The perspective of meaning and deciphering is a comforting point of view. Its polarity is found in ready-made dialectical and philosophical solutions. The other thought is on the contrary exterior to reality, excentered from the real world—and therefore outside dialectics, which plays on opposing poles, and even outside critical thinking, which always refers to an ideal reality. In fact, it is not even a denegation of the concept of reality. It is illusion, in other words a play with reality, just as seduction is a play with desire (it puts desire in play), just as metaphor is a play with truth. This radical thought does not come from philosophical doubt or utopian transference (which always suppose an ideal transformation of reality) or from ideal transcendence. It puts this world in play; it is material illusion, immanent to the so-called "real" world—it is non-critical thought, non-dialectical thought. It therefore seems to come from somewhere else. In any case, thought and reality are incompatible. There is no necessary or natural transition between the two. No alternation, no alternative: only alterity maintains the tension between them. Only this rupture, this distance, this strangeness ensure the singularity of thought as a singular event, like the singularity of the world through which it is an event.

This was probably not always the case. We can imagine the happy combination of ideas and reality, in the shadow of the Enlightenment and modernity, in the heroic times of critical thought. But this thought, which acted against a certain superstitious or religious or ideological illusion, is basically over. And even if it survived its catastrophic secularization in all the policies of the 20th century, this ideal, almost necessary relationship between concept and reality, between sign and referent would now be destroyed no matter what. It unraveled under the pressure of a massive technical and mental simulation, a precession of models providing autonomy for the virtual, freeing it from reality, and the simultaneous autonomy of reality that we now see functioning for itself—*motu proprio*—in a hallucinatory perspective, in other words self-referential ad infinitum. Cast out from its own framework, from its own principle, extraneous, reality has itself become an extreme phenomenon. In other words, we can no longer think of it as reality, but only as otherworldly, as if seen from another world—as an illusion.

Think of how mind-boggling it would be to discover a real world other than ours. Our real world, we discovered it one day. We found the objectivity of the world just like we found America,

and at about the same time. What you discover, you can never invent it again. That is how we found reality, which remains to be invented (alternative version: that is how we invented reality, which remains to be discovered). Why couldn't there be just as many real worlds as imaginary ones? Why would there only be one real world? Why such an exception? In truth, the real world, among all other possible worlds, is unimaginable. Unthinkable, except as a dangerous superstition. We have to separate ourselves from it like critical thought once detached itself (in the name of reality) from religious superstition. Thinkers, try again!

In any case, the two orders of thought are irreconcilable. Each follows its course without mixing with others; at best, they slide over each other like tectonic plates and sometimes their collision or subduction creates fault lines that swallow up reality. Fatality is always at the crossing of these two lines of force. In the same way, radical thought is at the violent crossing of sense and nonsense, truth and untruth, the continuity of the world and the continuity of nothingness.

Contrary to the discourse of reality and rationality, which counts on the fact that there is something (meaning) rather than nothing and therefore claims to have its final foundation in the guarantee of an objective and decipherable world, radical thought wagers on the illusion of the world. It claims to be illusion restoring the non-veracity of facts, the non-signification of the world, making the opposite hypothesis that there might be nothing rather than something, and tracking this nothing running underneath the apparent continuity of meaning.

Radical predictions always predict the non-reality of facts, the illusion of the state of fact. A prediction only begins with the foreboding of this illusion and is never mixed up with the objective state of things. Confusion of this kind would be on par with confusing the messenger with his message, which still leads today to eliminating the messenger bearing bad tidings (for example, the news of the nullity of our values, the uncertainty of reality, the non-occurrence of certain events). Any confusion of thought (writing, language) with the order of reality—thought's so-called "faithfulness to reality" that alone brought forth reality as a whole—is hallucinatory. This confusion also relies on a complete misunderstanding of language, of the fact that language is illusion in its very movement, that it carries the continuity of the void, the continuity of nothingness in the very heart of what it says, that it is, in its very materiality, the deconstruction of its signification. Just as a photo (an image) suggests disappearance, the death of whatever it represents, its intensity and the intensity of writing, whether it is fiction or theoretical fiction, comes from the void, the underlying nothingness, the illusion of meaning, the ironic dimension of language correlative to the ironic dimension of the facts themselves, which are never more than what they are—in every sense: they are nothing more than what they are and they are never only what they are—a perfect amphibology. The irony of facts in their miserable reality is precisely that they are only what they are, or at least that is what some try to force them to say: "Reality is reality." But by this very fact (appropriately enough) facts are necessarily outside, for de facto existence is impossible: nothing is completely evident without becoming enigmatic. Reality, in general, is too obvious to be true.

This ironic transfiguration by language constitutes the event of language. And the work of thought should be to restore the fundamental illusion of the world and language, but not by taking it stupidly as literal—taking the messenger for his message, sacrificing him in advance.

The two modes of thought thus have radically opposed objectives: one mode aims to bring about the objective reality of this world but wants to be different as thought; the other aims to restore the illusion of the world in which it participates. The first aims for a kind of general gravitation, a concentric effect of meaning; the other aims for an anti-gravitation, an excentering of reality, a general attraction of the void to the periphery (Jarry).

The demand of thought is double and contradictory. It is not the demand to analyze the world to extract an improbable truth. It is not to adapt dialectically to facts in order to abstract some logical construction. It is more subtle than that, more perverse. The demand is to put in place a form, a matrix of illusion and disillusion, a strange attractor that is spontaneously fed by a seduced reality and that therefore relentlessly verifies itself (only the objective needs to vary from time to time). Reality asks for nothing more than to submit to hypotheses. It validates all of them: that is its ruse and its vengeance. The theoretical ideal would be to set up propositions in such a way that they could be, that they had to be refuted by reality, so that reality would have no other choice, in desperation, but to oppose them violently and therefore unmask itself. Because reality is an illusion and it is the task of all thought to try to unmask it. In order to do so, thought must also advance in disguise and establish itself as a lure without concern for its own truth.

It must place its pride in not being a tool for analysis, a critical instrument, because it is up to the world to analyze itself. The world itself has to reveal itself as illusion, not reality.

It is necessary to trap reality, to move faster than it. The idea also has to move faster than its shadow. But if it goes too fast, it can lose its shadow: not having a shadow of an idea... Words go faster than meaning, but if they go too fast, madness ensues: the ellipsis of meaning can even lead to a loss of taste for the sign. What can be exchanged for this share of shadow and work, this share of intellectual economy and patience—what can we sell it to the devil for? It is rather hard to say. In fact, we are the orphans of a reality that came too late, which is only, like truth, an observation after the fact.

The best scenario would be for the idea to disappear as an idea to become a thing among things. That is where it would find its culmination. By becoming consubstantial with the world around it, it would no longer have cause to appear or to be defended as such. Evanescence of the idea by silent dissemination, obviously antinomic to any intellectual celebration. An idea is never destined to burst, but rather to be extinguished in the world, in its transparition in the world and in the transparition of the world in it. A book only ends with the disappearance of its object. Its substance should leave no traces. It is like a perfect crime. Whatever its object, writing must let the object's illusion extend out and become an elusive enigma—unacceptable for the specialists and Realpoliticians of the concept. The objective of writing is to change its object, to seduce it, to make the object disappear in its own eyes. It aims for a total resolution, a poetic resolution according to Saussure, the rigorous dispersion of the name of God.

If thought utters something as true, it defies that thing to verify itself. The trouble with reality is that it anticipates the hypotheses that deny it. It capitulates at the slightest demand, it bows to any conceptual violence; its distinguishing sign is voluntary servitude. Reality is a dog. Contrary to what is said about it (reality is what resists, an obstacle for all hypotheses), reality is not very solid, or less and less solid, and seems disposed to fall back into disorder. Entire pieces of reality crumble—like in the collapse of Buzzatti's *Baliverna* where the slightest crack leads to a chain reaction—decomposed vestiges are everywhere—like in *The Map and the Territory* of Borges. Not only does reality offer no resistance to those who denounce it, but it escapes those who take its side. It may be a way to take revenge on those who claim to believe in it in order to transform it: sending the zealots back to their own desire. In the end, it might be more of a sphinx than a dog.

More subtly, reality also takes revenge on those who contest it, by paradoxically proving them right. When a somewhat adventurous idea or a cynical or critical hypothesis is found to be right, it is a rotten trick, you are duped and disarmed in the face of the dreadful confirmation of your statements by a reality with no scruples.

You can therefore advance the idea of simulacra—while secretly not believing in it, hoping that reality will take its revenge—theory is not necessarily convinced of itself. Unfortunately, only the reality fanatics react negatively. Reality does not seem to want to refute it, on the contrary, all simulacra have free reign in reality. Reality today is nothing more than the apocalypse of simulation. To such an extent that the supporters of reality (which they defend like a moral value or a virtue) now play the role of those who were once called the fanatics of the Apocalypse.

The idea of the simulacrum was a conceptual weapon against reality but it was stolen. Not that it was plundered, vulgarized or transformed into a commonplace (which is true but of no consequence) but because it was spirited away by reality itself. Reality absorbed the simulacrum and now adorns itself in all of the rhetoric of simulation. The simulacrum has become reality—a travesty. Reality, having secreted away the idea (I am not referring to those who vulgarized it completely), now adorns itself in the rhetoric of simulation. Today, the simulacrum ensures the continuity of reality, the simulacrum now hides not truth but the fact that there is no truth, in other words, the continuity of Nothingness.

This is the paradox of any thought that lodges a challenge to reality—when reality steals the concept from you by realizing it. And at the same time escapes all criticism. Events, deprived of meaning themselves, steal meaning from you. They adapt to the most fantastic hypotheses like natural species and viruses adapt to the most hostile environments. They have extraordinary mimetic capabilities. A reversal also occurred there: theories no longer adapt to events, events adapt to theories. In any case, they mystify us, for a verifiable theory is no longer a theory. A realized hypothesis is no longer a hypothesis. It is terrifying to see a hypothesis verified to such an extent. Terrifying to see an idea suddenly correspond to reality. It is the agony of the concept. The epiphany of reality is the twilight of its concept.

We have lost the advance of ideas on the world, the distance that makes an idea stay an idea. Thought must be anticipatory, exceptional and on the margins—the shadow cast by future events. But we are now trailing behind events. They can sometimes give the

impression that they are regressing, not being what they should be. In fact, they passed us long ago. The simulated disorder of things was faster than us. The reality effect disappeared in the face of acceleration—the anamorphosis of speed. What happens to the heterogeneity of thought in a world given to the most insane hypotheses and prefabricated madness? Even interpreting events becomes problematic. For in their accelerated unfolding, they have in a way swallowed their interpretation; things have swallowed their meaning. They are therefore like black bodies: you cannot reflect on them, they have no reflection. They are what they are, never behind themselves, always beyond their meaning. Interpretation is lagging behind, and is nothing other than the retrospective figure of the unpredictable event.

What can we do? When everything suddenly conforms to the ironic, critical, alternative, catastrophic model that you made for it (conforms beyond expectations, for somewhere you don't even believe it that much, otherwise you would never have been able to invent it)? Well, it's paradise! We are beyond the final judgment, entering immortality—the only thing is to survive. Irony, challenges, anticipation, evil spells all end here just as inexorably as hope is abandoned at the gates of hell. In fact, that is where hell begins, the hell of the unconditional realization of all ideas, the hell of reality. You can understand (Adorno) why concepts prefer suicide or sabotage to ending up there.

Something else was stolen from us: indifference. The power of indifference, which is a quality of the mind, as opposed to the play of differences, which is a characteristic of the world. This indifference was taken from us by a world that became indifferent, just as the extravagance of thought was taken from us by an extravagant world. When things, events, refer to each other and to their undifferentiated concept, then the equivalency of the world meets and cancels out the indifference of thought—and boredom ensues. No more altercations, no more implications. It is the parting of dead seas.

How beautiful it was, this indifference, in a world that was not indifferent, in a different, convulsive and contradictory world with stakes and passion! The mind's indifference was thus at stake and was a passion as well, diametrically opposed. It could anticipate the becoming-indifferent of the world and make an event out of this indifference. Today, it is difficult to be more apathetic, more indifferent to their own meaning than facts themselves. Our operational world is an apathetic one, indifferent to itself, dispassionate and deadly boring. And it is useless to be dispassionate in a passionless world. Being carefree in a disinvested world has no meaning. That is how we became orphans.

It is not a question of defending radical thought. Every idea we defend is presumed guilty, and every idea that does not defend itself on its own deserves elimination. However, it is necessary to fight any accusation of irresponsibility, nihilism and despair. Radical thought is never depressive—a total misunderstanding. Ideological and moralist critique obsessed with meaning and content, obsessed with the political ends of discourse, never takes into account writing, the act of writing, the poetic, ironic, allusive form of language, the play of meaning. This critique does not see that the resolution of meaning is there in the very form, in the formal materiality of expression. Meaning is always unhappy; analysis

is by definition unhappy, since it comes from critical disillusion. But language is happy, even if it indicates a world without illusion or hope. This would be the definition of radical thought, even here: intelligence without hope but with a happy form. Critics, unhappy by nature, always choose the battlefield of ideas. They never see that, while discourse always tends to produce meaning, language and writing always make illusions—they are the vibrant illusion of meaning, the resolution of the misery of meaning by the happiness of language. That is really the only political, or transpolitical act that someone who writes can accomplish.

Everyone has ideas, more than are needed. What is important is the poetic singularity of the analysis. Only this, this *Witz*, this spirituality of language can justify writing, not the miserable critical objectivity of ideas. There will never be a solution for the contradiction of ideas except in language itself, in the energy and happiness of language. Thus the loneliness or sadness in the paintings of Edward Hopper is transfigured by the timeless quality of the light, a light from beyond that gives the whole more than a figurative meaning, an intensity that makes this solitude unreal. "I do not paint sadness or loneliness," said Hopper, "I only seek to paint light on this wall."

In any case, a desperate analysis in a happy language is better than an optimistic analysis in a language despondent with boredom and hopeless with platitudes, as is more often the case. The formal boredom secreted by this idealistic thought of value or this willful thought of culture, is the secret sign of its despair—not in relation to the world, but to its own discourse. That is where true depressive thought lies, with those who only speak of moving forward and transforming the world while they are incapable of transforming their own language.

Radical thought is in no way different from the radical use of language. It is therefore foreign to any resolution of the world in terms of objective reality and its deciphering. Radical thought does not decipher. It anathematizes and anagrammatizes concepts and ideas, just as poetic language does with words. And in its reversible progression, it accounts for the fundamental illusion of meaning while at the same time accounting for meaning. Language accounts for the very illusion of language as a definitive strategy and, through it, for the illusion of the world as an infinite trap, a seduction of the mind, a spiriting away of all mental faculties. While it is a vector of meaning, language is at the same time a superconductor of illusion and nonsense. Language is only the unwitting accomplice of signification—in its very form, it calls for the spiritual and material imagination of sounds and rhythms, the dispersion of meaning in the event of language, like the dispersion of muscular functions in dance, like the dispersion of reproductive functions in erotic games.

This passion for artifice, this passion for illusion is the seductive joy of undoing the all too beautiful constellation of meaning. Letting the deception of the world, its enigmatic function, show through as well as the mystification of the world, which is its secret. All the while it gradually reveals its own pretense—deceiving rather than validating meaning. This passion wins out in the free and spiritual use of language, in the spiritual game of writing. It only disappears when language is used for restricted ends, the most common use of all: communication. In any case, if it wants to talk about illusion, language must also become illusion. If it wants to talk about seduction, it must become seduction. When talking about reality, language cannot do it, properly speaking, because language is never real. Even when it appears to be indicating

things, it does so in unreal, elliptic, ironic ways. Objectivity itself and truth are metaphorical in language, whether the apodictics and apodidactics like it or not. That is how language is the bearer, unconsciously or not, of radical thought, in that it always starts from itself like a witticism in relation to the world, like an ellipsis and source of pleasure. Even the confusion of languages in the Tower of Babel, a powerful illusory mechanism for the human race, source of non-communication and end of the universal language, will finally be revealed to be a gift from God rather than a punishment.

Cipher, not decipher. Work on illusion. Make illusions to make events. Make the clear enigmatic, make the intelligible unintelligible, make the event itself illegible.

Work on all events to make them unintelligible. Accentuate the false transparency of the world in order to spread terrorist confusion, the germs of the virus of radical illusion, in other words the radical disillusion of reality. Insidious, viral thought corrupting meaning, an accomplice in the erotic perception of reality's disturbance.

Erase all traces of the intellectual conspiracy in oneself. Steal the reality file to erase its conclusions. But it is in fact reality that fuels its own contradiction, its own denial, its own loss through our meager reality. This is what gives us the inner feeling that this whole affair—world, thought, language—comes from somewhere else and could disappear as if by magic. For the world is not trying to exist more or persevere in its existence. It is on the contrary trying to find the most spiritual means to escape reality. It is seeking, through thought, what could lead to its demise.

The absolute rule, the rule of symbolic exchange, is to return what has been given to you. Never more, never less. The absolute rule of thought is to return the world as it was given to us—unintelligible—and if possible a little more unintelligible. A little more enigmatic.

Reality-Shows

Dust Breeding

All our reality has become experimental. In the absence of fate, modern man is left to limitless experimentation on himself.

Two recent illustrations: the first, *Loft Story*, is the media illusion of live reality; the second, Catherine Millet, the illusory fantasy of live sex.[1]

The *Loft* has become a universal concept, a condensed version of the human zoo, the ghetto, No Exit, and the Exterminating Angel. Voluntary reclusion as a laboratory of synthetic conviviality and telegenically modified sociability.

It is at the point when everything is on display (like in Big Brother, reality-shows, etc.) that we realize there is nothing left to see. Contrary to every objective, the mirror of platitudes, of the degree zero holds the proof of the disappearance of the other; and even of the fact that human beings are not fundamentally social. The equivalent of a readymade—the transposition as such of *everyday life*,[2] life that has already been rigged by all the dominant models. Synthetic banality manufactured in closed circuit on the control screen.

The artificial microcosm of the *Loft* is thus like Disneyland, giving the illusion of a real world, an exterior world, despite the fact that each world is the exact image of the other. The entire United

States is Disneyland and we are all in the Loft. There is no need to enter the virtual double of reality—we're already there. The television universe is only a holographic detail of global reality. Down to our most daily existence, we are already in a situation of experimental reality. And that is where the fascination comes from, from immersion and spontaneous interaction. Is it pornographic voyeurism? No. Sex is everywhere, but it is not what people want. What they deeply want is the spectacle of banality, which is the true pornography, the real obscenity: nullity, insignificance and platitude. The extreme opposite of the Theater of Cruelty. But it may be a form of cruelty, at least virtually. At a time when television and the media are increasingly unable to give an account of the world's (unbearable) events, they have discovered daily life and existential banality as the most deadly event, the most violent news, the very scene of the perfect crime. And indeed it is. People are fascinated, fascinated and terrified by the indifference of the Nothing-to-say, Nothing-to-do, by the indifference of their very existence. Watching the Perfect Crime or banality as the new face of fate has become a veritable Olympic sport or the latest form of extreme sports.

All of this is reinforced by the fact that the public is called on to judge; the public has become Big Brother. We are beyond the panopticon, beyond visibility as a source of power and control. The question is no longer to make things visible to an outside eye, but to make them transparent to themselves by infusing the masses with control while erasing all traces of the operation. The audience is therefore involved in a vast negative countertransference with itself; and once again, this is the source of the dizzying attraction of this type of spectacle.

Fundamentally, all of this corresponds to the imprescriptible right and desire to be Nothing and to be seen as Nothing. There are two ways to disappear: either one demands not to be seen (which is the current problem over image rights) or one turns to the delirious exhibitionism of one's own nullity. One makes oneself null to be seen and watched as null—the ultimate protection against the necessity to exist and the obligation to be oneself.

From this springs the simultaneous and contradictory demand not to be seen and to be perpetually visible. Everyone plays on both sides at the same time and no ethics or legislation can resolve this dilemma—the unconditional right to see and the equally unconditional right not to be seen. Maximum information is a human right and therefore forced visibility is as well, overexposure to the light of information.

Self-expression as the ultimate form of confession, as Foucault said. Keeping no secrets. Talking, talking, endlessly communicating. And at the same time this expression is violent to language since it makes language lose its originality; it becomes nothing more than a medium, a visibility operator, losing its ironic or symbolic dimension where language is more important than what it is talking about.

The worst part of this obscenity and immodesty is the forced sharing, the automatic complicity of the viewer that is the result of a veritable blackmail. That is the most obvious objective of the operation: the servitude of its victims, but voluntary servitude, with the victims taking pleasure in the wrongs done to them and their compulsory shame. An entire society sharing its fundamental mechanism: exclusion—and interactive exclusion at that! Chosen together, consumed with enthusiasm.

If everything ends in visibility, which like heat in the theory of energy is the most degraded form of existence, the crucial point is to succeed in making this loss of all symbolic space, this extreme

form of disenchantment with life an object of contemplation, amazement and perverse desire. "Humankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, is now an object of contemplation for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the highest order." (Walter Benjamin).[3]

Experimentation thus takes the place of reality and the imaginary. Everywhere we are inoculated with the protocols of science and verification and we are in the process of dissecting—vivisecting under the scalpel of the camera—the relational and social dimension outside all language and any symbolic context. Catherine Millet is also experimental—another kind of "vivi-sex-ion" where all the imaginary of sexuality is swept away, leaving only a protocol in the form of a limitless verification of sexual functioning, a mechanism that no longer has anything sexual about it.

A double misinterpretation (*contresens*):

—making sexuality itself the ultimate reference. Repressed or explicit, sexuality is at best only a hypothesis and as a hypothesis, it is wrong to make it a truth and a reference. The sexual hypothesis may only be a fantasy and in any case, it is only through repression that sexuality took on its authority and its aura as a strange attractor—when explicit, it even loses this potential quality.

—thus the nonsense and the absurdity of performing the act and of systematic sexual "liberation": no one "liberates" a hypothesis. As for proving sex by means of sex, how sad! As if everything were not in displacement, detour, transference, metaphor—everything is in the love potion of seduction, in diversion (*détournement*); not in sex and desire but in the play of sex and desire. That is what makes any "live" sex procedure impossible, just like "live" death or "live" events on the news—it is all incredibly naturalist. The pretension of making everything come into the real world, hastening everything into integral reality. To a certain extent, this is the very essence of power. "The corruption of power is to ascribe to reality everything that was on the order of dreams..."

Jacques Henric[4] gives us the key in his conception of the image and photography: no use denying it, our curiosity towards images is always sexual—all we are looking for in the end is sex, and especially the feminine sex. It is not only the Origin of the World (Courbet), but the origin of all images. Let us go there directly and let us photograph this one thing, let us obey without hindrance the scopic drive! That is the principle of a "Realerotik." Its equivalent for the body is the perpetual, copulating *acting-out* of Catherine Millet: since finally what everyone wants is the unlimited sexual use of the body, let us move directly to the execution of this program!

No more seduction, no more desire, no more pleasure (*jouissance*); everything is there in numberless repetition, in an accumulation where quantity is above all most suspicious of quality. Foreclosed seduction. The only question we would ask her is the one a man murmurs into a woman's ear during an orgy: "What are you doing after the orgy?" But the question is futile since for her there is no "after the orgy." She is in fact beyond the end, where all processes take on exponential speed and can only increase indefinitely. Just as for Jarry's *Supermale* (*Surmâle*), once the critical threshold of love is reached, one can do it indefinitely; it's the automatic stage of the sexual machine. When sex is no more than *sex processing*, it becomes transfinite and exponential. It does not

reach its goal, however, which would be to exhaust sex, to reach the end of its use. This is obviously impossible. This impossibility is all that remains of the revenge of seduction or of sexuality itself on its unscrupulous operators—those with no scruples for themselves, their own desire or their own pleasure.

"Think like a woman taking off her dress," said Bataille. Yes, but the naiveté of all the Catherine Millets is to think that they are taking off their dress to get undressed, to be naked and therefore reach the naked truth, the truth of sex or of the world. If one takes off one's dress, it is to appear: not to appear naked like truth (and who can believe that truth remains truth when its veil is removed?) but to be born to the realm of appearances, to seduction—which is the contrary.

This modern and disenchanted view is a total misunderstanding if it considers the body to be an object waiting only to be undressed and considers sex a desire only waiting to pass into action and reach orgasm. Especially since all cultures of the mask, the veil and ornaments say precisely the contrary: they say that the body is a metaphor and that the true objects of desire and pleasure are the signs and marks that tear it from its nudity, naturalness and "truth," from the integral reality of its physical being. In all places, seduction is what tears things from their truth (including their sexual truth). And if thought takes off its dress, it is not to reveal itself naked, it is not to unveil the secret of what had been hidden until then, it is to make the body appear as definitively enigmatic, definitively secret, as a pure object whose secret will never be lifted and has no need to be lifted.

In these conditions, the Afghan woman behind a Moucharabieh window, the veiled woman on the cover of *Elle* represents a striking alternative to the crazed virgin Catherine Millet. Excessive secret versus excessive immodesty. Furthermore, this very immodesty, this radical obscenity (like the obscenity of *Loft Story*) is still a veil, the final veil, the insurmountable veil that drops when we think all veils have been torn down. We would like to touch the worst, the paroxysm of exhibition, total nakedness, absolute reality, live and skinned alive—we never can. There is nothing to do—the wall of obscenity is insurmountable. And paradoxically this wasted quest brings out the fundamental rule of the game all the more clearly: the rule of the sublime, secret and seduction, the very rule that is hunted to the death in the succession of torn veils.

And why not make the opposite hypothesis to voyeurism and collective stupidity: what people—all of us—are looking for in hitting this wall of obscenity is to sense that precisely there is nothing to see, that we will never know the punch line and thus verify *a contrario* the ultimate power of seduction. A desperate verification, but the experimental is always desperate. *Loft Story* claims to verify that humans are social beings—which is not certain. Catherine Millet claims to verify that she is a sexual being—which is not at all certain either. The only things verified in these experiments are the conditions of experimentation themselves, simply taken to their limit. The system is best decoded in its eccentricities, but it is the same everywhere. Cruelty is the same everywhere. It can all be reduced, finally, to quote Duchamp, to "dust breeding."

2001

Telemorphosis

The problem with *Loft Story* is threefold: there is what happens in the Loft, which in itself is uninteresting and, in contradiction with this insignificance, the immense fascination it has elicited. Yet this fascination itself is an object of fascination for the critical eye. Where is the original event in all of this? There is none. All that remains is this mysterious contagion, this viral chain that works from end to end and that we are a party to even in analysis. There is no need to refer to all kinds of economic, political and marketing data—the market is the market and any commentary is just part of the cultural and ideological market. Mass effects are beyond manipulation and have no common measure with causes. Which makes them exciting, like everything that resists the intelligence.

First hypothesis: the size of the audience is not so large despite the show's stupidity, but because of its stupidity and nullity. That seems to be a given. But it opens two possibilities that are not necessarily exclusive. Either the viewers are immersed in the nullity of the show and take pleasure in it as they would from their own image, one with a fresh facelift for the occasion. Or they take pleasure in feeling less stupid than the show—and therefore never tire of watching it. It may in fact be a media strategy to offer shows that are dumber than reality—hyperreal in their stupidity, providing viewers with a differential possibility of satisfaction. This hypothesis is appealing, but it gives the creators credit for a lot of imagination. It is therefore preferable to keep the presumption of nullity—just as we say the presumption of innocence. And that is radical democracy. The democratic principle involved merit and an equivalence (relative, of course) between merit and recognition. Here, in the Loft, there is no equivalence between merit and glory. It all comes for nothing. A principle of total non-equivalence. The democratic illusion is thus raised to the highest degree: maximum exaltation for minimal qualifications. And while the traditional principle only ensures partial recognition for merit, the Loft operation ensures virtual glory for all in function of their lack of merit. In a way, it is the end of democracy through the elimination of all criteria of qualification, but in another way, it is the triumph of radical democracy based on the beatification of the man without qualities. It is a giant step forward for democratic nihilism.

There is a kind of rupture of the social contract in this imbalance that leads to another type of injustice and anomaly: while one could accuse traditional democracy of not compensating citizens for their just merits, in this case, the accusation would be for overestimating everyone indifferently on the basis of nothing.

This strange glory granted to anyone might seem funny and ferociously ironic, for this form of radical democracy is a derision of the entire establishment and of all those—politicians, intelligentsia or stars—who claim any glory on the basis of their status and value. At least this unfair competition between the "start-ups" of glory reveals the deception latent to all systems of distinction as well as the absurdity of democracy carried away in the logic of the worst. This said, if these new stars, who are touching in their insignificance and transparency, if these usurpers produced by

unbridled speculation on the egalitarian whole, if these pirates of the hit parade do not deserve the excess glory, the society that offered itself the enthusiastic spectacle of this masquerade has certainly gotten what it deserves. *Loft Story* is both the mirror and the disaster of an entire society caught up in the rush for insignificance and swooning to its own banality.

Television has succeeded in a fantastic operation of controlled consensualization, a veritable coup de force, a hostile takeover of society as a whole, a kidnapping—a formidable success on the way to a total telemorphosis of society. It creates a global event (or better yet, non-event) in which everyone is caught. "A total social fact," as Marcel Mauss said—except that in other cultures it meant the converging power of all aspects of the social whereas here it means bringing society to the parodic level of a total farce, an unstoppable image-feedback of its own reality. Television has done what the most radical critique, the most extreme subversive imagination and Situationist derision were unable to accomplish.

Television has emerged as the strongest force in the science of imaginary solutions. But if television did it, it means we wanted it. There is no use condemning the media and money powers or even the stupidity of the public to leave hope that there might be a rational alternative to this total technical and experimental socialization that we are now engaged in and that leads to the automatic linking of individuals in irrevocable consensual processes. Let us call this the integral event of a society with no contract, with no rules and no system of values other than a reflexive complicity, with no rules or logic other than immediate contagion and promiscuity that mix all of us together into an immense indivisible being. We have become individualized beings, in other words non-divisible in ourselves and non-divisible between each other. This individuation of which we are so proud is by no means a personal freedom. On the contrary, it is the sign of general promiscuity. Not necessarily the promiscuity of bodies in space, but rather the promiscuity of screens from one end of the world to the other. This may even be the true promiscuity: the indivisibility of all human particles for tens of thousands of miles—like millions of twins who cannot separate from their double. Umbilical limbo.

It may also be the promiscuity of an entire population with the inhabitants of the Loft. Or the promiscuity of the "interactive" couple that continuously projects its conjugal life in real time over the Internet. Who watches them? They look at each other, but who else does, since everyone can virtually enjoy the same integrated domestic circuit? Soon there will only be auto-communicating zombies that only have the umbilical connection of image-feedback—electronic avatars of defunct shadows that wander beyond Styx and death, each for itself and spending its time perpetually telling its story. There is still some movement, but just enough to give the retrospective illusion of reality beyond the end—or the illusion of sexuality in the case of Catherine Millet—or the illusion of the social, only evoked in desperate interaction with itself.

One of the signs of this promiscuity is the compulsion for confinement appearing everywhere: in the self-enclosed Loft, an island, a ghetto of luxury or pleasure or any enclosed space where an experimental niche or a zone of privilege is recreated—the equivalent of an initiatory space where the laws of open society are abolished. It is now less a question of saving a symbolic territory than locking oneself up with one's own image, living in promiscuity with it like in a niche, in incestuous complicity with it, with all the effects of transparency and image-feedback that come with a total screen and that only have relationships to others like an image to an image.

Furthermore, the Loft could just as well have been created using computer generated images—and it will be in the future. But they are essentially digital images already. The movements, words and actors already meet all the conditions of prefabrication and pre-programmed presence. Just as we will one day biologically clone human beings, the *Loft* participants basically already have the mental and cultural profile of clones.

Is this promiscuity made of mental involution, social implosion as well as "online" interaction? Is this denial of any dimension of conflict an accidental consequence of the modern evolution of societies or is it a natural condition of humanity, which finally will not rest until it denies its social being as an artificial dimension? Are human beings social beings? It would be interesting to see what will happen in the future of a being with no profound social structure and no organized system of relation and values—in the pure contiguity and promiscuity of networks, on automatic pilot and in a deep coma to some extent—thus contradicting all the presuppositions of anthropology. But don't we have an all too anthropological conception of humanity, as Stanislaw Lec tells us?

In any case, given the success of *Loft Story* and the enthusiastic support of this portrayal of experimental servitude, it is easy to guess that freedom is certainly not an anthropological given and that humankind, if it ever possessed freedom, won't rest until it is abandoned for more animalistic techniques of collective automatism. "Man has difficulty enduring the freedom of others because it is not in accordance with his nature and because he cannot endure it for himself." (Dostoyevsky) But there is something more now, since we have added enjoyment of the spectacle of servitude to servitude itself. And its audience has grown according to the usual format of the media outlets rivaling each other, which makes the show self-propagating in a prophetic mode—a self-fulfilling prophecy. To a certain extent, the ratings are an illusion, since they are part of the advertising spiral and repetition. But none of this is of any interest. Only the original idea has any worth, the idea of submitting a group to an experiment in sensory deprivation to record the behavior of human molecules in a vacuum—and probably the plan to see them tear each other apart in this artificial promiscuity. We have not reached that point yet, but this existential micro-situation serves as a universal metaphor of the modern being enclosed in a personal loft that is no longer his or her physical and mental universe but a tactile and digital universe, the universe of Turing's "spectral body," of digital humans caught in the labyrinth of networks, of people becoming their own (white) mice.

Most striking of all is to offer this properly unbearable situation to the eyes of the crowd, to have them savor the intricacies of an orgy without tomorrow. A fine feat indeed, but one that cannot stop there. What will soon follow, logically, are the televised snuff movies and bodily harm. Death should logically enter the screen as an experimental event. Not at all as a sacrifice—at the same time as they try to make it disappear technologically, death will reappear on the screen as an extreme experience (the foreseen revival for certain groups of trench warfare or Pacific combat—still Disneyland but with a little more childish cruelty). Yet at the same time it will enter as a pseudo-event because—such is the irony of experimental masquerades—in parallel with the increase of these spectacles of violence, the concern over the reality of what is shown will grow. Did it happen or not? The farther we go in the orgy of images and viewing, the less we can believe. "Real time" vision only adds to the unreality of things. The two paroxysms—

the violence of the image and the discrediting of the image—increase according to the same exponential function. Which means we are constantly heading for deception (obviously more and more so with computer generated images), but spurred on by this very deception. This profound uncertainty (strategic, political—but who benefits from it?) has a large role in sustaining the insatiable demand for this kind of spectacle.

A vertiginous curiosity that some have taken for voyeurism but in fact, in each case, in the case of the *Loft* and Catherine Millet, has little to do with sex. The curiosity is visceral, organic, endoscopic. It brings to mind the Japanese strip club where clients are invited to plunge their nose and eyes into the woman's vagina apparently to explore the secret of her entrails—fascinating in a different way than sexual penetration. Speleological pleasure (not far removed from videoscopy of the inside of the body by micro-cameras), a cleft opened onto the abyss of the entire body. This is not far from the story of the caliph who had a dancer skinned alive after her striptease in order to know more. Sex and the knowledge of sex are superficial in relation to that. The veritable abyssal curiosity is of the "deep down inside." This compulsive, fetal, involute opening is what I see active in the so-called "sexual" activity of Catherine Millet and the fascination she has caused. Can we penetrate farther, farther than the sexual? Can we completely possess and be completely possessed?

This adventure has no exit, obviously. It can only end with the endless repetition of a sexual act that will never attain absolute knowledge of the body or the mortal orgasm (jouissance) of its exhaustion. In Jarry's *Supermale* (Surmâle), when Ellen and Marcueil flirt with the limits of sexual energy, Ellen dies (momentarily) at the end of their feat of prowess. Nothing like that happens to Catherine Millet whose adventure is more like a frustrated sexual anorexia. The interesting aspect of her adventure is that by pushing sex to the absurd, all the way to seriality where it is only defined by its automatism (equal to Jarry's velocipedic corpses who pedal even better after they are dead), by stripping sex of the pleasure principle itself, she also tears it from its reality principle and forces the question: What is a sexual being? Is sexuality, contrary to all natural evidence, a hypothesis? Since it is verified to exhaustion here, it leaves one to wonder. Verified beyond its ends, it no longer knows what it is... It must all be reviewed: with *Loft Story*, the evidence of humans as social beings; with Catherine Millet, the evidence of humans as sexual beings; with the increase of transparency and information, the evidence of reality itself.

We are certainly sexed—and Catherine Millet as well—but are we sexual? That is the question. We are socialized (and sometimes by force) but are we social beings? It remains to be seen. Realized, yes—but real? Nothing is less certain.

What Catherine Millet has in common with the people in the Loft through her choice of serial fucking is the same submission to sensory deprivation—leaving room for the same minimal, radical, exclusive activity that by its very repetition becomes virtual. Not only does she get rid of all dual exchange and sexual sharing, but she also abandons any obligation to take pleasure and any obligation to choose—and fundamentally she gets rid of her own body. There is a kind of asceticism in the refusal of choice and of any elective affinities, a shedding of the will (which, as we know, is only a subjective illusion) that would make Catherine Millet, as some have said, a saint...

But what about sexuality? It is certainly a less illusory hypothesis than the will, but is it good to put an end to sexuality by verifying it with such determination? If finishing with desire and its concept can be characterized as a nihilism of the will, then this repeated proof of the existence of sex by means of sex can be considered sexual nihilism. Unless...

Unless the secret aim is to get rid of sex itself? To exhaust this mechanical function of the body before moving on to the main game... That is of course the underlying meaning of: What are you doing after the orgy? Once the bet has been taken and the performance made (we did it!) couldn't we move on to serious matters and really please ourselves? Just as the true gastronome, according to Noëlle Châtelet, makes sure to take sustenance, to feed his or herself first before passing to pleasures of the table, which hunger should not disturb.

After her sexual rally with Marcueil, Ellen states: "It was not at all amusing." Marcueil, moreover, compares a tetanic erection and the parallel situation in a woman to "sclerosis" or a spasmodic tightening of the flesh. Ellen then secretly invites him to begin again, but this time "for pleasure" (and without the watchful eye of Bathybius the scientist who scientifically recorded their feat).

If this reversal does not occur, what is there after the orgy? Nothing, except, with Jarry once again, the hero of absolute love, Sengle, who in the middle of his erotic exertions starts counting his strokes and upon losing count, cries out: "Okay! Forget everything, let's start again!"

The same sensory deprivation for Catherine Millet as in the *Loft*, the same attractive opening in the spectacle of the Loft as in the sexual offering of Catherine Millet. The same vaginal and more than vaginal, uterine curiosity for the Loft's hole but this time open on another abyss, the chasm of emptiness and insignificance. Going ever deeper towards the true primal scene of modernity. Where is the secret of banality, of nullity that is overexposed, lighted and informed on all sides and that leaves nothing left to be seen because of its constant transparency? The veritable mystery becomes the mystery of this forced confession of life as it is... It is both the object of a veritable dread and a dizzying temptation to plunge into this limbo—the limbo of an empty existence stripped of all signification: the very spectacle offered by the *Loft* and its actors.

The 20th century saw all types of crimes—Auschwitz, Hiroshima, genocide—but the only true perfect crime was, to use Heidegger's terms, "the second fall of man, the fall into banality."

The lethal violence of banality is precisely the most subtle form of extermination because of its indifference and monotony. A veritable theater of cruelty, of our cruelty, completely de-dramatized and without a trace of blood. A perfect crime in that it abolishes all the stakes and erases its own tracks—but especially in that we are both the murders and victims. As long as that distinction exists, the crime is not perfect. In all the historic crimes we know, the distinction is clear. Murderer and victim are only the same in suicide, and in this sense the immersion in banality is indeed the equivalent of a suicide of the species. The other aspect of this deadly banality is that it erases the theater of operations of the crime: it is now everywhere in life, on every screen, in the indistinctness between screen and life. We are on both sides at once. And while we receive images of other crimes and violence ("Shoah," "Apocalypse Now") that are distinct from life, this quiet extermination is shown to us in a type of spectacle, *Loft Story* and others, that are a part of it and

of which we are a part. We are facing a veritable Stockholm syndrome on a collective level—when the hostage becomes an accomplice of the hostage takers—and therefore a revolution in the concept of voluntary servitude and the master-slave relationship. When society as a whole becomes an accomplice to those that have taken it hostage but also when each individual is divided, in him- or herself, between hostage and hostage taker.

This growing promiscuity has a long history starting with the heroization of daily life and its irruption into the historic dimension all the way to the inevitable process of immersion in the real, all too real, in the human, all to human, in the banal and residual. But the last decade has seen an extraordinary acceleration of this banalization of the world relayed by information and universal communication—and especially by the fact that this banality has become experimental. The field of banality is no longer merely residual: it has become a theater of operations. Brought to the screen, like in *Loft Story*, it becomes an experimental object of leisure and desire. A verification of what McLuhan said about television: it is a perpetual test and we are submitted to it like guinea pigs in an automatic mental interaction.

But *Loft Story* is only a detail. "Reality" as a whole has shifted camp to the other side like in the movie *The Truman Show* where the hero is telemorphosed but all the others are as well—accomplices and prisoners in the full light of the same hoax. There was a time—in movies like *The Purple Rose of Cairo*—when characters left the screen and came down to be incarnated in real life—a poetic reversal of the situation. Today, it would be reality that is transfused in the screen to be disincarnated. Nothing separates them anymore. The osmosis, the telemorphosis is complete.

Pleasantville gave the opposite, heroic example of a pair of young television viewers who enter a show and change its course by bringing back human passions (curiously, in fact, since sex does not resuscitate real life and return color to this black and white world—the secret lies elsewhere). But all of this is part of a bygone back and forth between screen and reality. Now the screen is not the television screen but the screen of reality itself—what we can call total reality. *Loft Story* is total sociality. Catherine Millet is total sexuality. The immanence of banality, the more real than real is total reality. Reality is a process moving to completion by absorption, in information and virtuality, of all fatal dimension, by the murder underlying the pacification of life and the enthusiastic consumption of hallucinatory banality. A return to limbo, to the crepuscular zone where everything comes to an end in its very realization.

Somewhere, we are mourning this naked reality, this residual existence, this total disillusion. And there is something in this whole story of the Loft, something like collective mourning. But mourning that links all of us criminals together—murderers in the crime against real life, wallowing in its confession in front of the screen, which serves as a kind of confessional (the confessional is one of the key rooms in the Loft). That is our true corruption, mental corruption—in the consumption of this mourning and this deception, a source of frustrated pleasure. In any case, however, the disavowal of this experimental masquerade showed through in the mortal boredom emerging from it. This said, there is no reason why people should not loudly demand their right to banality, insignificance and nullity—at the same time as the opposite demand. The right, in any case, is part of the banalization of existence.

Total sociality—total sexuality—total reality. This entire process would be catastrophic if there was a truth to the social, a truth to the sexual, a truth to the real. Luckily, these are only hypotheses and although they have now taken the form of monstrous reality, they are still only hypotheses. Ones that will never be verified—the secret will never be lifted. The truth, if it existed, would be sex. Sex would have the final word in this story... But there is none... That is why sexuality will only ever be a hypothesis.

In other words, the absolute danger of a systematic implementation of the social, a systematic implementation of the sexual and a systematic operation of the real is only... virtual.

Which leads to the other question, in the form of a conclusion: Who was laughing in the *Loft*? In this immaterial world with no trace of humor, what monster could be laughing behind the scene? What sarcastic deity could laugh at that deep down inside? The human, all too human must has rolled over in its grave. But, as we know, human convulsions are the distractions of the gods, who can only laugh at them.

2003

The Matrix Revisited

Aude Lancelin: *Your ideas on reality and the virtual are among the key references used by the makers of* The Matrix. *The first episode explicitly referred to you. The viewer clearly saw the cover of* Simulacra and Simulation *on the screen. Were you surprised?*

Jean Baudrillard: Certainly there was a misunderstanding, and I have been hesitant to speak about *The Matrix* until now. After the release of the first episode, the staff of the Wachowski brothers got in touch with me, hoping to get me involved with the following ones. But this was out of the question. [laughter]. Something of the kind occurred in the 1980s when the New York-based Simulationist artists contacted me. They took my hypothesis of the virtual for an irrefutable fact and turned it into a concrete fantasy. What is special about this universe, though, is that the traditional categories of the real to no longer apply.

The film and the vision you developed in The Perfect Crime, *for example, are strikingly similar. The film evokes a "desert of the real," totally virtualized spectral humans who are hardly more than the energetic reserve of thinking objects...*

Yes, but other films have already dealt with the growing blurring between the real and the virtual: *The Truman Show, Minority Report*, or even *Mulholland Drive*, David Lynch's masterpiece. *The Matrix*'s chief value is that it pushes all these elements to a paroxysm. Yet it does it more crudely and in a far less complex way. Either the characters are in the Matrix, and belong to the digitized universe, or they are radically outside it—in Zion, the resistors' city. It would be interesting to show what happens at the point where these two worlds meet. The most embarrassing part of the film is that it confuses the new problem raised by simulation with its arch-classical, Platonic treatment. This is a serious flaw.

The idea that the world is nothing more than a radical illusion has challenged every great culture, and it has been resolved through art and symbolization. What we invented in turn, in order to tolerate this kind of suffering, is a simulated real capable of supplanting the real and bringing about its final solution: a virtual universe from which everything dangerous and negative has been expelled. And *The Matrix* entirely belongs to that process. Everything that has to do with the dream, utopia and fantasy is given expression, "realized." It is a world of integral transparency. *The Matrix* is the kind of film about the Matrix that the Matrix itself could have produced.

It is also a film that outwardly denounces technicist alienation, and yet at the same time it relies entirely on the fascination induced by the digital universe and computer generated images.

What is striking about *Matrix Reloaded* is that it doesn't have the slightest glimmer of irony, nothing that might allow viewers to turn this huge special effect around. There is not one sequence that could provide the *punctum* Roland Barthes talked about, the kind of stunning detail that brings you face-to-face with a true image. Actually, this is what turns the film into an informative symptom, and the very fetish of the technological universe of the screen. There is no longer any way of distinguishing between the real and the imaginary. *The Matrix* really is an extravagant object, at once candid and perverse, since it is neither here nor there. The pseudo-Freud who speaks at the end of the film says it perfectly: there is a point where the Matrix had to be reprogrammed in order to integrate anomalies into the equation. And you, the resistors, are a part of that equation. It seems that we are entirely caught within a virtual circuit, devoid of any exterior. Once again I am in theoretical disagreement with it. (Laughter). *The Matrix* projects the image of a monopolistic superpower the likes of which can be seen today, and it participates in its refraction. Projecting this on a global scale is an integral part of the film itself. At this point it is worth turning to Marshall McLuhan: the medium is the message. The message of *The Matrix* is its own dissemination through an uncontrollable and irrepressible contagion.

It is rather astounding that all contemporary American marketing blockbusters, from The Matrix *to Madonna's new album, explicitly claim to be a critique of the very system which massively promotes them.*

That is exactly what makes our era so oppressive. The system produces a *trompe-l'oeil* negativity embedded in products of the spectacle just as obsolescence is built into industrial products. It is the most efficient way of locking out all genuine alternatives. There is no longer any external Omega point to anchor one's perception of the world, no antagonistic function; only a fascinated

adhesion. One should know, however, that the more a system nears perfection, the more it approaches the total accident. It is a kind of objective irony that relies on the fact that nothing is ever final. September 11th participated in this. Terrorism is not an alternative power; it is little more than the metaphor of Western power's almost suicidal reversal on itself. I said it very clearly at the time, and it was not received. We don't need to be nihilistic or pessimistic in the face of all this. The system, the virtual, the Matrix —all of these will perhaps return to the dustbin of history. Reversibility, challenge, and seduction are indestructible.

2004

War Porn

...tomorrow there will be nothing but the virtual violence of consensus, the simultaneity in real time of the global consensus: this will happen tomorrow and it will be the beginning of a world with no tomorrow... This is what the Americans seek to do, these missionary people bearing electro-shocks which will shepherd everyone towards democracy. It is therefore pointless to question the political aims of this war: the only (transpolitical) aim is to align everybody with the global lowest common denominator, the democratic denominator ... the New World Order will be both consensual and televisual. That is indeed why the targeted bombings carefully avoided the Iraqi television antennae... The crucial stake, the decisive stake in this whole affair is the consensual reduction of Islam to the global order.[1]

World Trade Center: shock treatment of power, humiliation inflicted on power, but from outside. With the images of the Baghdad prisons, it is worse, it is the humiliation, symbolic and completely fatal, which the world power inflicts on itself—the Americans in this particular case—the shock treatment of shame and bad conscience. This is what binds together the two events.

Before both a worldwide violent reaction: in the first case a feeling of wonder, in the second, a feeling of abjection.

For September 11th, the exhilarating images of a major event; in the other, the degrading images of something that is the opposite of an event, a non-event of an obscene banality, the degradation, atrocious but banal, not only of the victims, but of the amateur scriptwriters of this parody of violence.

The worst is that it all becomes a parody of violence, a parody of the war itself, pornography becoming the ultimate form of the abjection of war which is unable to be simply war, to be simply about killing, and instead turns itself into a grotesque infantile reality-show, in a desperate simulacrum of power.

These scenes are the illustration of a power which, reaching its extreme point, no longer knows what to do with itself—a power henceforth without aim, without purpose, without a plausible enemy, and in total impunity. It is only capable of inflicting gratuitous humiliation and, as one knows, violence inflicted on others is after all only an expression of the violence inflicted on oneself. It only manages to humiliate itself, degrade itself and go back on its own word in a sort of unremitting perversity. The ignominy, the vileness is the ultimate symptom of a power that no longer knows what to do with itself.

September 11th was a global reaction from all those who no longer knew what to make of this world power and who no longer supported it. In the case of the abuse inflicted on the Iraqis, it is worse yet: power no longer knows what to do with itself and cannot stand itself, unless it engages in self-parody in an inhuman manner.

These images are as murderous for America as those of the World Trade Center in flames. Nevertheless, America in itself is not on trial, and it is useless to charge the Americans: the infernal machine exploded in literally suicidal acts. In fact, the Americans have been overtaken by their own power. They do not have the means to control it. And now we are part of this power. The bad conscience of the entire West is crystallized in these images. The whole West is contained in the burst of the sadistic laughter of the American soldiers, as it is behind the construction of the Israeli wall. This is where the truth of these images lies; this is what they are full of: the excessiveness of a power designating itself as abject and pornographic.

Truth but not veracity: it does not help to know whether the images are true or false. From now on and forever we will be uncertain about these images. Only their impact counts in the way in which they are immersed in the war. There is no longer the need for "embedded" journalists because soldiers themselves are immersed in the image—thanks to digital technology, the images are definitively integrated into the war. They don't represent it anymore; they involve neither distance, nor perception, nor judgment. They no longer belong to the order of representation, nor of information in a strict sense. And, suddenly, the question whether it is necessary to produce, reproduce, broadcast, or prohibit them, or even the "essential" question of how to know if they are true or false, is "irrelevant".

For the images to become a source of true information, they would have to be different from the war. They have become today as virtual as the war itself, and for this reason their specific violence adds to the specific violence of the war. In addition, due to their omnipresence, due to the prevailing rule of the world of

making everything visible, the images, our present-day images, have become substantially pornographic. Spontaneously, they embrace the pornographic face of the war. There exists in all this, in particular in the last Iraqi episode, an immanent justice of the image: those who live by the spectacle will die by the spectacle. Do you want to acquire power through the image? Then you will perish by the return of the image.

The Americans are having and will make of it a bitter experience. And this in spite of all the "democratic" subterfuges and the hopeless simulacrum of transparency which corresponds to the hopeless simulacrum of military power. Who committed these acts and who is really responsible for them? Military superiors? Human nature, bestial as one knows, "even in democracy"? The true scandal is no longer in the torture, it is in the treachery of those who knew and who said nothing (or of those who revealed it?).

In any event, all real violence is diverted by the question of transparency—democracy trying to make a virtue out of the disclosure of its vices. But apart from all this, what is the secret of these abject scenographies? Once again, they are an answer, beyond all the strategic and political adventures, to the humiliation of September 11th, and they want to answer to it by even worse humiliation—even worse than death.

Without counting the hoods which are already a form of decapitation (to which the decapitation of the American corresponds obscurely), without counting the piling-up of bodies, and the dogs, forced nudity is in itself a rape. One saw the GIs walking the naked and chained Iraqis through the city and, in the short story "Allah Akhbar" by Patrick Dekaerke, one sees Franck, the CIA agent, making an Arab strip, forcing him into a girdle and net stockings, and then making him sodomize a pig, all that while taking photographs which he will send to his village and all his close relations.

Thus the other will be exterminated symbolically. One sees that the goal of the war is not to kill or to win, but abolish the enemy, extinguish (according to Canetti, I believe) the light of his sky.

And, in fact, what does one want these men to acknowledge? What is the secret one wants to extort from them? It is quite simply the name in virtue of which they have no fear of death. Here is the profound jealousy and the revenge of "zero death" on those men who are not afraid—it is in that name that they are inflicted with something worse than death... Radical shamelessness, the dishonor of nudity, the tearing of any veil. It is always the same problem of transparency: to tear off the veil of women or abuse men to make them appear more naked, more obscene...

This masquerade crowns the ignominy of the war—until this travesty, it was present in this most ferocious image (the most ferocious for America), because it was the most ghostly and the most "reversible": the prisoner threatened with electrocution and, completely hooded, like a member of the Ku Klux Klan, crucified by its ilk. It is really America that has electrocuted itself.

Imaginary Solutions

Pataphysics

Ubu, the gaseous and lampooned state, the small intestine and the grandeur of emptiness. Seeing that everything may be stucco, or a knock-off, even a wooden tree—and that powerful sham that makes the dough of phenomena rise—nothing stops this katabasis towards the knock-off and the blah from starting well before the form now taken by so-called true objects—and that everything was before being born, in its cancerous and imaginary state—can only be born in the cancerous and imaginary state—which does not prevent things from being less false that you think, in other words…

Pataphysics is the greatest temptation of the mind. The horror of ridicule and necessity leads to the enormous infatuation, the enormous flatulence of Ubu.

The pataphysic mind is the nail in the tire—the world, a puffball. The paunch[1] is at one and the same time a hot air balloon, a nebula, or even the perfect sphere of knowledge. The intestinal sphere of the sun. There is nothing to get from death. Can a tire die? It releases its rubber soul. Farting is the source of breath.

The principle is to exaggerate: that is how to destroy reality. In Ubu's arrogance, willpower, importance, faith and all things are

raised to their paroxysm where one can naturally see that they are made of the same wind that makes farts, the same meat made into grease and ash, the same bone made into fake ivory and fake galaxies. This is not ridicule. It is inflation, the abrupt passage into an empty space that is no one's thought—for there is no pataphysic thought, there is only the pataphysic acid that sours and embalms life like milk, that bloats it like a drowned body and bursts it like the greenish truffle of the Palotin's[2] brains.

Pataphysics: philosophy of the gaseous state. It can only define itself as a new, undiscovered language because it is too obvious: tautology. Even better: it can only be explained by its own term, thus: it does not exist. It revolves around itself and ruminates the diarrheic incongruence, unsmilingly, mushrooms and rotting dreams.

The rules of the pataphysical game are far worse than any other. It is a deadly narcissism, a mortal eccentricity. The world is an inane protuberance, an empty jerk-off, a kitsch and papier-mâché delirium, but Artaud, who thinks the same way, believes that from this member brandished for nothing could one day emerge a real sperm, that the theater of cruelty could come from a caricatural existence, in other words a real virulence. Whereas Pataphysics no longer believes in either sex or theater. The façade is there and nothing behind it. The ventriloquacity of the hoodwinked (the bladders and lanterns)[3] is absolute. Everything is born infatuated, imaginary, an edema, a fiddler crab, a dirge. There is not even a way to be born or to die. That is reserved for stone, meat, and blood, for things with weight. In Pataphysics, all phenomena are absolutely gaseous. Even recognition of this state, even the awareness of the fart, the itch and the coitus for naught is not serious... and the awareness of this awareness, etc. Aimless, soulless, without phrases and imaginary, albeit necessary, the pataphysic paradox is simply to burst. Artaud, pushed to the edge by the renewed emptiness before and around him, did not commit suicide because he believed in some incarnation, a birth, a sexuality, a drama. All on the stage of cruelty, since reality could not receive them. There were stakes to be won and Artaud's hope was immense. The confines of the bladder had the scent of a Chinese lantern. Ubu blew out all the lanterns with his fat fart. And, moreover, he was convincing. He convinced everyone of nothingness and constipation. He proved that we are an intestinal complication of the Lord of Limbo who, when he farts—well, like that, you see—will resolve everything, will put everything in order. We are nothing more than the state of virtual farts; the notion of reality is given to us by a certain state of the abdominal concentration of wind that has not yet been released. Gods and bright horizons come from this obscene gas accumulated since the world is world; and the pyramidal Ubu digests us before expulsing us pataphysically into the obscure emptiness that smells of cold farts: the end of this world and of all possible worlds...

The humor of this story is crueler than Artaud's cruelty, since Artaud was only an idealist. Most of all, the humor is impossible. It proves the impossibility of thinking pataphysically without committing suicide. It is, if you will, the radius of an unknown spherical *gidouille* whose only limits are the imbecility of spheres but that becomes infinite like humor when it explodes. Humor comes from the detonation of Palotins, from their servile and naïve way of returning to nature in the form of stuck-up farts (*péts-eux*) who thought they were so aware, beings and not merely gas—and one after the other they spark an incommensurable humor that will shine at the end of the world—from the explosion of Ubu himself. Thus Pataphysics is impossible. Do we have to kill

ourselves to prove it? Certainly, since it isn't serious. But what if that were how it was serious... Finally, to exalt Pataphysics, better to be an unconscious pataphysician—and we all are. Humor wants humor about humor, etc. Pataphysics is science...

Artaud is the perfect foil. Artaud wants to renew the value of creation and of birth. He tears an image, like Soutine tears one from his rotting beef, not an idea. He believes that by piercing this abscess of sorcery, a lot of pus will flow, but in the end, good god, some real blood will come and when the whole world is heaving like Soutine's beef, the playwright will be able to start over with our bones for a grand, serious festival where there are no more spectators. In contrast, Pataphysics is bloodless and avoids getting wet. It moves around in its parodic universe like the absorption of the mind into itself without a trace of blood. And in the same way: every pataphysic process is a vicious circle in which panic-stricken forms, to their surprise, eat each other up like crabs in the reeds, digesting each other like stucco buddhas and from every angle only give off the fecal sound of pumice and dried boredom.

Because Pataphysics reaches such a level of perfection in play and because it gives so little importance to everything, it has so little itself. In it, all the solemn nullities, all the figures of nullity fail and turn to stone before the gorgon eye of Ubu. In it, every thing becomes artificial, venomous, a path to schizophrenia, with pink stucco angels whose extremities meet in a curved mirror... Loyola—the world can be rotten, as long as I reign. If a soul does not resist the printed curves, the spirals and vortexes, caught at the moment of climactic tartuffery, then it is delivered to the sumptuous Ubu, whose smile returns every thing to its sulfurous uselessness and its latrine freshness... Such is the sole imaginary solution to the absence of problems.

1996

Forget Artaud

Sylvère Lotringer: *You very rarely refer to Antonin Artaud by name, but I have always suspected that your approach was very close to his. Artaud struggled very hard to reclaim "the rugged reality of things" (Rimbaud) and you were the first to proclaim the passage from reality to hyperreality. Yet I always assumed that you were actually upping the ante of Artaud's thought. It also was a far more radical way of having done with any kind of judgment. A long time ago you told me that, as a young man, you tried to write like Artaud and finally settled for being Baudrillard. The idea of inviting you to talk publicly about Artaud, probably surprising to most, therefore came to me very naturally.*[1] *I was a bit taken aback, though, that your reaction was rather cool. Actually you protested and flatly refused at first. Why?*

Jean Baudrillard: I can talk about Chance or things of that sort anytime, but Artaud is another story altogether. I don't mean to say that talking about Artaud should be forbidden, but it is a special case, something very singular. Artaud belongs to a secret sphere, like Rimbaud or Nietzsche. His work is in a secret place, a reserved domain and talking about that, exposing that to the light would amount to making one's secret visible.

At first I thought there was some kind of superstition on your part, but then you had your reasons. You believed there was some risk involved in bringing it all to the surface. Acting Artaud out, so to speak, could be dangerous. I replied that the time may have come to break it open, and you said: "Artaud's block is already full of cracks." We didn't seem to go anywhere, so we finally agreed to hold an informal discussion about him with a possible title: "To Have Done with Artaud." But can one ever be done with Artaud?

Artaud no longer is a reference for me, but I don't know what kind of existence it can assume anymore. I also read Nietzsche very exhaustively, and in German—I am a Germanist by training—and it was some sort of perfect integration into that universe. After that I never read Nietzsche again. It became another secret, another kind of secret efficiency, maybe a poetic one, I can't tell for sure. It became another singularity. So I was a bit reluctant when you asked me to talk about Artaud, but I'll do it willingly.

Foucault seemed to have experienced something of the kind. Nietzsche's presence in his work was so massive that he could no longer refer to him explicitly. He would have had to quote him at every single line.

For me it was more of a symbolic exchange. I don't claim, and nobody really could, to be able to deliver a secret or an ultimate clue about Artaud; it would just be absurd. The only adequate response would be to write anew exactly as he did, re-embodying or repeating exactly the same text or the same traces that he left behind. But, of course, that's impossible as well. We may wish then that something like Nietzsche's Eternal Return would happen, that we would be able to play the same game, and then replay it...

You sent me an unpublished text on Ubu to facilitate our dialogue. I assume it belongs to the period I alluded to earlier on. You must have been, twenty, or twenty-one.

Yes. I wrote this text very early on and it was something compulsive, not especially theoretical. I was very fond at the time not of theory, but of poetry. I read Rimbaud, Artaud, Hölderlin, Pierre Klossowski. It wasn't a romantic or mystical impulse, but factual, material. A spiritual impulse as Artaud had it. Actually I was writing on Ubu as well as on Artaud because I found myself torn between these two extremes. "Ubu" is a relic of the past, a kind of fossil text, almost in an archeological sense. Later on I decided—well no, it wasn't exactly a decision—I was determined not to deal with that anymore. I switched to other things. I turned to politics, theory, and so on.

Your "Ubu" made me think of these packed texts from The Umbilicus of Limbo[2] *in which Artaud vampirized the mind of Paolo Uccello or of Abelard in order to plumb his own abysses. You didn't vampirize the pataphysical mind in the same way. In any case it would be impossible because pataphysics belongs to no one. But you managed to vaporize it even further. To the gaseous state of Ubu you opposed Artaud's "true sperm." In "Paul the Bird or the Place of Love," the first text Artaud ever wrote, and you seem to re-write it in your own way, Artaud was already struggling to give himself a body of his own and sperm could be seen at the end swirling, and rising in the air like a big white bird. Artaud called this piece a "mental drama" because what he was actually doing wasn't writing a play, but registering the abrupt jumps of his mind as it attempted to capture his characters. Was your own mental relation to Artaud comparable in any way?*

Everyone should have a singular, personal relation to Artaud. With him we always are on a very inhuman level. He has become an impersonal being. He has been disidentified, he belongs to his own time. Artaud decided to go through the mirror. He became some sort of a myth, a material being in his virtual body, in his spiritual body, for him it was all the same. And any attempt to assign him a place in the history of ideas, or in the history of aesthetics, let alone express a romantic admiration towards him, remains very problematic. But I wouldn't object to that. [*He chuckles.*] I strongly believe that there can't be a collective admiration, or a collective reference to Artaud. Even if we share—more than an admiration I would call a *complicity*—it can't possibly take the form of a contract, of a cultural contract, even in terms of the theater. It must be a pact, a pact of blood, of body and bone, as Artaud himself did. And in this pact we disappear as individuals, as he himself once disappeared.

People who identify with Artaud preclude the possibility of understanding anything about his work. But everyone involved with Artaud's work is bound to go through that stage and become one of his clones. Still you have to get beyond that. What actually shook me out of this trap, I believe, was something apparently trivial. I managed to get hold of the questionnaires Artaud had to fill out every time he sought to be admitted to a detox clinic. In his answers he kept complaining of his cowardliness, of his lack of will, of his incapacity of experiencing the slightest emotion. At once my eyes opened. His blazing violence suddenly reversed into its contrary, and his suffering ceased to be personal. Both were springing from the absence of any meaning and of any sense of self. Artaud himself destroyed the possibility of any identification. He never identified with those people he mentally squatted, any more than he ever managed to occupy the place of love. Ransacking his doubles was just another way of emptying himself and looking around for some reality.

Artaud had no need to identify with anyone. Either he found himself from the start in a total alterity—mind you, this is no alienation, but alterity from his own body—or he participates in a chain of beings, and not necessarily human beings but those who inhabit language or situations. This goes back to what we were saying at the very start, to the delusion of assuming that talking about Artaud is possible. It's like finding oneself defenseless because invoking alterity is just an abstraction. Even Artaud's words, as sublime as they are, can't be taken literally in terms of their meaning and signification. That's just about all I could say about him. The way Artaud proceeds is akin to the symbolic strategies of primitive societies. He doesn't need to identify with his own culture in order to transgress it or go beyond a nostalgic culture devoid of meaning or depth. He already stands in the filter of the void.

Artaud has no way of connecting to his own alterity. He can only grasp it by projecting it onto another being.

It's the same problem with the world. The definition of the world or of the universe is that there's none that could be expressed in its totality. There's no mirror in which the reflection of the world could be caught. And it goes the same way for the individual: there's no mirror in which his soul could be perceived, only the void of nothingness. It is possible to identify with that without disappearing in it in a suicidal way. This virtual void could be turned into a creative space. A creation out of the energy of signs, not of

the accumulation of meaning. In fact the contrary is true: we must aim to destroy it. We must create a void such that everything that exists would have to assume a concrete form. Then a pure event would come about: a total spectacle. By "spectacle" I mean here the exact opposite of a representative spectacle.

Artaud demanded from the actor something of the kind : emptying oneself out, developing a musculature of emotions that had nothing personal about it. Projected outward, these forces would make up a separate organism, some kind of affective spectrum capable of acting upon the actor from the outside. After all, affects are not owned by anyone. This is totally at variance with the Actor's Studio Method entirely based on interiority. It is precisely these impersonal forces that Artaud summoned when he happened to be at the lowest point in his life and about to embark on his fatal journey to Ireland. Failing to succeed in the theater, he managed to turn the world into his stage.

Everywhere Artaud challenged the process of identification. He said that people should identify with actors materially through gestures and signs—pure signs and events. It was totally opposed to the modern psychology of the actor. Actors create affects, but they don't belong to them. It's like the athlete who works out, but at a distance.

The affects liberated by Artaud—the "sucking void" of the actor, as he called it—are what affect us most. It would therefore be a huge mistake to fill this void, assuming that these forces belong to him. To expose oneself to the "Artaud effect" one must forget Artaud. Furthermore the only way of responding to a collapse of that magnitude is through an even more radical collapse. I assume that this is what you called a symbolic exchange, *with all the risks attached to it. Something of the kind may also have been played out, in a lesser way, between Foucault and you. Foucault was asked to respond to your* Forget Foucault, *but he never did, I am convinced that it affected him deeply as well as his own work. It also ended up costing you dearly, at least in French intellectual circles, where Foucault remains untouchable.*

*The first time we both met—a long walk on Venice beach in Los Angeles in 1979—we talked about the possibility of publishing a translation in English of this pamphlet. At the time I wasn't especially in agreement with you, but I estimated that your upping the ante on Foucault's spiral of power raised a number of questions that deserved to be taken seriously. It was, I believed, also a perfect introduction to your own theoretical approach. And you countered my offer with a broad smile: "I think we should call it 'Remember Foucault.'" There was no way we could have come up with a title like that—*Forget Foucault *was bad enough. Foucault's death a few years later made it even more impossible to pursue the project. So I brought out instead in* Semio-text(e) *the volume now known here as* Simulations. Forget Foucault *finally came out ten years later in 1987, but I purposely added a second part to the book, a dialogue like the one we're having now, with a second title at the back mirroring the first:* Forget Baudrillard.[3]

I had the idea of launching a series of FORGET—Forget Foucault, Forget Lacan, Forget Baudrillard, Forget Lotringer, and so on. And when this would have been completed, we would have started another series with REMEMBER—Remember Baudrillard, etc. It would have been a huge success and it would have lasted a very long time.

Nothing in the United States ever lasts that long. And there could only be one Forget Foucault, *that's why it is so memorable. You sent Foucault's notions of power and sex spinning away like Artaud's sperm until they literally reversed themselves—if power is everywhere, then it is nowhere; if sexuality is no longer repressed, then it ceases being sexual. In your hands Foucault turned out not to be Foucaldian enough—or not Baudrilliardian enough actually...*

Well, not enough...

You escalated Foucault's concepts the better to exterminate them. But your early "Ubu" already worked along those lines. Jarry happened to be a major reference for Artaud's theater, but few people drew conclusions from it. The first company Artaud founded with Roger Vitrac, another transfuge from the Surrealist movement, bore Jarry's name. Artaud never stated explicitly what attracted him to Jarry, but the main feature of his theatre, its logical absurdism and literalism, deadpan humor, "absolute laughter" and systematic provocation clearly are derived from the author of Ubu King. *Heliogabalus is a solar version of Ubu and the old Cenci, tyrannical and incestuous, clearly is his Elizabethan travesty. Artaud wrote that Alfred Jarry is bent on "accentuating and aggravating the conflict it denounces between the ideas of freedom and independence that it allegedly stands for and the hostile powers which oppose it." Like Jarry, Artaud kept pushing things to the extreme, but you were right to say that Artaud still meant to restore a "real virulence" and stage an authentic Theater of Cruelty. As you wrote, Artaud still believed in the possibility of "an incarnation somewhere, in birth, in sexuality, in drama... Something real was at stake and Artaud was immensely hopeful." Artaud indeed was an idealist, but an* integral *one. Although he faced the void inside and outside, Artaud never committed suicide—nor did Jarry for that matter.*

No, but unlike Artaud's, Jarry's logic of paroxysm in Jarr is very cool. It's as if Jarry already were off-limits, beyond the limits of his own death. Jarry said that, like Faustroll, he was born at age 63. But it's not really the time of birth or death that was at stake anymore. Jarry had burnt all his bridges, it's as if he were already dead. Whether he was born or not born, or whether it was better to be dead than alive wasn't the point. Jarry was posthumous, and he liked, by the way, to play macabre, morbid games. He already was beyond all these things. And Artaud was not. He was not born yet.

He was macerating in his Limbo.

Yes.

This comes up in his paradoxical answer to the questionnaire André Breton circulated to all the members of the Surrealist group: "Is Suicide a Solution?" I wish I could commit suicide, Artaud replied, but first I want to make sure that I am alive. And I can't be sure of that, so suicide is ruled out. It isn't a possibility. This wasn't an admission of powerlessness, as it is usually assumed, but a powerful way of casting doubt on all uncertainties. Artaud was an agent provocateur *in his own way. He kept challenging death to reappear for without death life would remain improbable.*

And he attempted to generate himself, to give birth to himself. By forceps, of course. [*Laughter from the audience.*] It is very difficult

to eject oneself into a very real world. The world we ourselves live in is very confusing. Artaud wanted to burst out, explode out of himself, out of the body, the common body of the world. Instead, Jarry remained buried in himself.

You talked about suicide as well recently, or rather you sang a song of suicide. It happened during the Chance conference Chris Kraus produced a few days ago in a casino near Las Vegas.[4] At one point you (reluctantly) accepted to don a golden lamé suit à la Elvis Presley and go onstage. While Mike Kelley's Chance Band was playing, you somberly read the lyrics of "Motel-Suicide," a song you wrote in the mid-80s. In Cool Memories, *you gave an idea of what this "Academy of Suicide" would be and it sounds to me like an Aztec ritual hallucinated by Georges Bataille. A costumer checks in to a motel and the management treats him like a royalty, giving him everything he wants, women, wine, philosophy. But then when time comes they kill him. This is not exactly Artaud's kind of motel.*

Well no, but that was an ironic narrative. The idea was that no one is truly responsible for one's own life and death. Once you become conscious of this fact, and aware of this fundamental irresponsibility, it is not something that you could transgress. The idea of responsibility, of self-consciousness is very utopian. It is the modern ideology of the individual. But at bottom there is no such thing as *self*-responsibility. One doesn't have a choice. And since death is certain, unavoidable, one has to make sure that it comes from elsewhere, from others, not from oneself. Committing suicide would be a very pretentious, very conceited idea. "Motel-Suicide" was a way of delivering oneself into the hands of others. "I don't want to know about that, you can take charge of me, of my death!" I think

everybody does that in one way or another. In our virtual world, it is not possible to talk about responsibility, freedom, etc.

Jarry reminded us that freedom is slavery.

Well, of course. All the concepts of will turn around the idea of a voluntary servitude. And it's worse to be a slave of oneself than a slave of another.

So we may not need God's Judgment for that after all. David Rattray, Artaud's best translator in English, once asked me if he could go as far as to translate Artaud's title by: "To Have Done with God." It was indeed a huge leap of faith, and we both were aware of that. Artaud opposed the doctrine of judgment (the book) by means of the physical system of cruelty. But he wasn't just fighting God in the outside, he was also trying to root him out from his own body. Nietzsche himself never claimed that we had gotten rid of God. Murdering him was the ultimate proof of his existence. Were you ever involved in this question as Artaud was?

Well. [*Laughs a bit uneasily.*] The question doesn't apply. Times have changed. When Nietzsche spoke about the death of God, he meant it as a murder, as a symbolic act, a symbolic acting out of humanity, and this had very profound consequences for the modern world. But that God was dead didn't mean that he had disappeared. Death is not likely to disappear yet either. As I said in my last book, *The Perfect Crime*, the difference is that the murder of reality has nothing to do with the murder of God. Assassinating reality is an extermination, not a symbolic murder. And what we are left with in our world, our virtual world, can't even be called traces of reality, let

alone liberty or responsibility. The entire system of values disappeared without leaving any traces behind—virtually, of course. I am not even sure that we are now experiencing any nostalgia for reality. Reality is very boring anyway, very annoying. We don't like reality. God, on the other hand, is not boring. The concept of reality results from the banalization of the sacred, of religion, of all the illusion of the world. When there is no more illusion about the world, there is no God. What we still have to do with objective reality is up the ante on the very nullity and nothingness of the world.

Reality has become interminable. It keeps dying because it has no more energy to expend. The big mythical oppositions keep on extenuating themselves in TV serials. It is no longer possible to cut the umbilicus off and be really born into this world, as Artaud wished he would. The umbilici now can be found everywhere (it's called communication) and Redemption nowhere.

Then it isn't a symbolic murder, it's an extermination. Artaud wanted this murder to be a source of exploding energy, but this energy finds its source elsewhere, not exactly in reality as a material force, but in the energy of illusion, of the spiritual illusion which gathers together the disparate parts of the material world in a kind of coherent "chain." It is the energy of signs. It is also a sort of cult. Not a religious one, not violent either, but a principle of rigor that sustains the notions of irreducibility, of incompatibility against the banalization of the individual.

It was cult against culture, cruelty against representation, the actor's impersonality against improvisation and sentimentality. It's all this that Artaud sought to exorcize in his theater, and ended up applying to himself.

A great confusion occurred when people attempted to materialize Artaud's concepts in the theater. It is true that he strived to do it metaphysically, but it would be a mistake to believe that it is possible to turn his theoretical/metaphysical vision into reality. Artaud's vision was very singular, but this singularity may only have been for him alone. After that there was some materialization of his theater of cruelty in Grotowski or in the Butoh. Ten years ago I attended some of their performances and what I saw was extremely impressive. I would say that the experiences of the Peking Opera or performances of the same kind converge as well with this vision or un-vision of the world. Because the theater is not in the theater anymore, but in the intellectual ceremony of the world. These ceremonies are very spiritual, but not in a mystical sense. They obey very strict rules. Artaud discovered that in the Balinese theater, but his theater had nothing to do with the expressionist theater it has often been confused with. This was bound to bring about a degradation of his thought, even in the hands of someone like Jean-Louis Barrault.

Artaud already contributed to this degradation when he staged his own play, The Cenci, *in 1935. It was a resounding failure, and not just because Artaud didn't have the means to pull it off. It may be true that failing to train his actors the way he intended to, he fell back on a script that was hardly different from those he attacked in his manifestoes—a loquacious and inflated text. He probably counted on the waves of bodies sweeping over the stage and the intense acoustic bombardment to hypnotize the spectators' sensibility, but the very conception of the play was at fault. Artaud was steeped in the Elizabethan theater, but his play was only nominally metaphysical. It never reached this concrete language half-way between gesture and mind that*

he had so powerfully evoked in his manifestoes on cruelty. The violent externalization of the action in language had a contrary effect to the one he was hoping to trigger.

As soon as Artaud started writing for the theater, he turned his own theory into a caricature. What results from it is a banal cruelty and this text, when you read it, is hardly different from many other texts. Artaud isn't Shakespeare.

He managed to be the Shakespeare of his own body by working against it.

Yes. He ended up achieving his theater in himself, in his delirium, in his experiences which were experiences of the mind. I never believed that there was a necessary relationship between what Artaud thought and what he tried so hard to do, except in what he did to himself—playing like an actor according to his own principles. And this involves the question of language. It satisfies this intellectual—and not instinctive—compulsion of becoming the world, but not through words. The function of language, its only function really, is not to communicate or inform, transmit something—all this is secondary—but to captivate. What is fundamental in language is its capacity to seduce. There exists a strategy of seduction, and symbolic exchange is seduction itself. Because, like challenge, it is a reversible form. Other people go through the mirror very calmly, like Alice. They reach the state of seduction, which is the most sublime of states, far more sublime than the state of things. This challenge of seduction, some people reach it effortlessly, gracefully because they exist in some sort of state of poetic grace, like Hölderlin, in some kind of poetical vanishing point. Someone like Hölderlin was beyond the cruel experience

that we had with the gods, he transcended this state. He was beyond this pataphysical or this cruel game. He achieved a state of superior seductivity. Artaud and Jarry aren't the only models we have at our disposal. Artaud disindentified himself and Jarry overidentified himself with the appearences, but the irony of the world can find other, more adequate, strategies. They also exist in other cultures, although it may have become impossible to bring them out in our modernity except through other strategies, cruelty, simulacrum, pataphysics, etc., all bound to a more or less desperate future. Artaud tried very hard to take stock on the material form of language, on signs of force, on impulses and not meaning, on material things. On signs as signals of themselves. This kind of language, foreign to ordinary language, he experienced in himself. Not in the theater, or what he wrote for the stage, rather through an incarnate silence. This silence is an empty, natural or artificial space—and this is where the theater comes in—in which the pure advent of a theater of signs can occur. What is materialized is a real theory of language, not something personal. I have never been especially impressed by Artaud's writings on the theater, far more by—how could one say—not his poetic texts, but by his texts that are indefinable. Someone like Hölderlin has reached another point, a vanishing point which is a poetic point. No one else ever managed to bring the explosive silence of language to such limits.

People generally tend to take Artaud's pathos in the first degree as if his suffering belonged to him and that he should be pitied to have been subjected to it. Artaud, it is true, suffered enormously—the greatest quantity *of suffering in the history of literature, Susan Sontag wryly wrote—but he also was a gambler with of his own pain. It is perceptible from the start in his correspondence with Jacques Rivière*

where he manages to intimidate the powerful editor by presenting himself as a pathological case. Artaud used suffering as a bait, and in every possible way, procuring drugs, staging cruelty in his own body. Artaud was driven by pain. It was both the material for his art and a sign of election, his way to salvation. He saw it in light of the Christian martyrology he had avidly absorbed in his childhood. Artaud was the suffering artist the way Kafka was the hunger artist. This suffering was organically based, but its symbolic charge was far stronger. It would be absurd then to consider him a powerless victim. Artaud challenged the world, and the world answered in kind—shock, electroshock—revealing itself for what it was. Its cruelty, if anything, proved that he was right. For Artaud it is death itself that was posthumous, so everything could be pushed to a paroxysm. And this is true as well, I believe, of your own approach to theory. I mean, you always seem to go along and willingly embrace everything, but at the price of an implacable retaliation. It is the "radical" strategy you seem to share with Artaud. And yet he didn't go all the way either in this kind of exasperated logic. Invoking Jarry in your text clearly was a way of challenging Artaud to do just that and terminate pataphysically his spiritual pregnancy.

You're right about the strategies, the logical strategies. I would agree more with Jarry in that Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, a way of surpassing physics and metaphysics. And I still believe in that. It is another way of surpassing the opposition of body and soul, of knowledge and nothingness, and so on. But I don't believe Artaud wanted to recreate reality, or attempted to recover a level of reality. Reality—the term, of course, is highly problematic...

Pataphysics always ups the ante, and as you said, "That's how reality is demolished." This is true for Artaud as well. His Passion demanded that he destroy his own reality.

Artaud was trying to recover a sense of materiality, not of reality. Pataphysics signals the end of reality. After that, reality is not a possibility anymore. Today dealing with Artaud is very difficult because his material, symbolic model probably is too radical for us. Pataphysics is far more radical than any analysis we can do ourselves in terms of the hyperreal, of transparency, absurdity and irrationality. The irruption of a vision of the world, or anti-vision of the world, is far stronger, far more original than anything we could ever come up with. We came after, we are nothing but epigones. But is there a relation between Jarry and Artaud? I don't think the opposition between them was as clear as I suggested in this text. Oppositions of this kind still have something rhetorical about them.

You didn't merely oppose them. Artaud is coiled up in Ubu's "gidouille" (paunch) waiting to be released like a resounding fart. Reality according to Jarry is nothing but an obscene gas. Ubu's inflated strategy, his "enormous" flatulence explodes like a blaring trumpet-call, or the Last Trump... I'm amazed how close this text is also to Artaud's "explosive affirmation" of his own body. And yet Artaud's scatology wasn't gaseous, but material: If God is a being, then he is shit. If he is not shit, then he is not. Both used scatology as part of a logical/theological argument...

It may have been an attempt to challenge God through this obscenity. We shouldn't allow God to judge us, to be exterior to

our bodies and souls—and to be right. God's judgment is always right for him. Like the old anchorites and monks, Artaud was a sacrificial being, but not in a religious sense. One sacrifices one's own body to get an answer from God. And he must meet this challenge.

Artaud didn't challenge God, he challenged Him to exist.

But God doesn't exist without this challenge. Consequently, in this duel you are God's creator. God's existence, in fact, is incidental. As a symbolic exchange, God is only the interstitial term of the transaction. Thus it has no consequence for us to believe in it.

But the God Artaud defies is not the one who created reality. One gets closer here to Artaud's radical Manichaeism, which you're playing with as well in your own way.

Evil rules the world; Good is an exception. This is the fundamental principle of Manichaeism rightly understood—the most beautiful theory in the world. Manichaeism, which is a dualism, always relies on some kind of antagonism, or irreconcilablility. It advocates an absolute antagonism, not a dialectical polarity. Manichaeism throws its lot in with Evil, obviously.

This is what Artaud calls anarchy*: contradiction in the principle.*

Secretly it could be said that both Artaud and Jarry were anarchists of the spirit. Both confronted nothingness, the nullity of the world, of this world, and so did Pataphysics.

Artaud was an anarchist, but a crowned one, like Heliogabalus, the mad emperor who perverted Rome from the top down. Artaud's idea of order was the application of a rigorous logic that he first directed against himself.

Yes, you're right about the logic. There's a whole paradigm of visions of the world and I don't think we have gone beyond that. We haven't invented that much in that respect since Artaud, Jarry, Bataille or Klossowski. Logic is always an extreme logic, but it can take different forms. Bataille's logic was an extreme form of logical conformism, a hyperconformism, a parodic extremity that could well be considered a fatal strategy. Not every logic is a logic of extremity. Nietzsche's logic, for example, is a parabolical logic that turns into the Eternal Return—a genealogical logic. Both Artaud and Jarry assumed an extreme logic—a very radical, ironic, parodist logic of conformism for Jarry, and for Artaud a logic of anti-conformism.

Like Heliogabalus, Artaud never forgave the world for no longer believing in its myths.

Although he struggled against it and did his utmost to break away from it, Artaud still had a cultural experience. Jarry had none. Jarry is a meteorical phenomenon. After that it may involve the history of a text, because this text I wrote about Jarry and Artaud signaled my break with the College of Pataphysics. I had been involved with the College from the very beginning. My philosophy teacher, who founded it in Rheims in the late 40s, was also the one who started the *Cahiers du Collège*. I was rather young then, but it didn't take me long to realize that the pataphysical entourage was adopting the

same conformism, the same institutional infatuation that Ubu himself had. Ubu's "boodoe" had become the intellectual milieu. It didn't make any sense for me at that point to be involved with these people and I broke all contact with them. In a sense, the degradation of the movement itself was ironical. It was a proof of the spirit, of the pataphysical spirit, but against itself. On the other hand, I never broke with Artaud, or experienced any rejection, but my relation to him has changed. It changed into a secret life, and possibly a silence.

Is there still something that separates you from Artaud?

It is an indiscrete question to ask. I'm not separate from Artaud, Artaud was separated from himself. But we can't sublimate Artaud, or idealize him either. We can make a myth out of him, but certainly not a cultural ideology. This being said, what separates Artaud from us, from us all, is that he was lucky enough, so to speak, to be burnt at the stake. But we can say that about other people as well. What separates us from Andy Warhol, for instance, is that he was lucky enough to be a machine. And we are not.

Artaud was one too. In 1924 he wrote: "I am a walking automaton."

Notes

Introduction: The Piracy of Art

1. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*. Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman. Edited by Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents series, 1983.

2. Corinna Ghaznavi and Felix Stalder, "Baudrillard: Contemporary Art is Worthless," in LOLA, Toronto. It didn't help much, of course, that they relied on a faulty translation, or simply misread his argument. Baudrillard 's claim that anyone *criticizing* contemporary art (as he does) is being dismissed as a "reactionary... even fascist mode of thinking" is turned around and presented as an attack on art. Cf. "A Conjuration of Imbeciles," *infra* in this volume.

3. Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* [1970]. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Sage publications, 1998.

4. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* [1972]. Trans. Charles Levin. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981.

5. Chris Kraus, *Video Green: Los Angeles, or the Triumph of Nothingness*. New York: Semiotext(e), 2004, p.17.

6. Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories II*. Trans. Chris Turner. Atlanta: Duke University Press, 1996, p. 83.

7. *Ibid*, p. 83.

In the Kingdom of the Blind...

1. Baudrillard continues to reference "Père Ubu," whose bulging gut was famously decorated with a spiral.

2. Another Jarry term, referring to the underlings who supported Père Ubu.

La Commedia dell'Arte

1. "The Danube peasant" in the *Fables of La Fontaine* (from Marcus Aurelius) comes to Rome to call Roman avarice to task. Book 11, fable 7 of the *Fables*.

Towards the Vanishing Point of Art

1. "Un coma dépassé" (which can be read as a "surpassed coma") is the French term for an irreversible coma or brain death.—Tr.N.

Aesthetic Illusion and Disillusion

1. Illusion, from *ludere*, play.—Ed.N.

2. In this passage, Baudrillard plays on the word "regard," both as viewing and as implication: "It no longer concerns you," "it's none of your business."—Tr.N.

3. In *Gestes et opinions du Docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien*, Jarry defines pataphysics as "the science of that which adds itself to metaphysics either in itself or outside itself, reaching as far away from metaphysics as metaphysics does from physics. Example: since the epiphenomenon is often the accident, pataphysics will above all be the science of the particular, although it is said that there is only science of the general. It will study the laws that rule exceptions. Definition: pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions."

4. In English in the original.—Tr.N.

5. In English in the original.—Tr.N.

6. In *The Ecstacy of Communication* [Trans. Bernard and Caroline Schutze. Edited by Sylvère Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e), 1988], Baudrillard writes, "There is a state particular to fascination and giddiness. It is a singular form of pleasure, perhaps, but it is aleatory and dizzying. If one goes along with Roger Caillois' classification of games—mimiking, agôn, alea, ilinx: games of expression, games of competition, games of chance, games of giddiness—then the movement of our entire culture will lead from a disappearance of the forms of expression and competition towards an extension of the forms of chance (alea) and giddiness."—Ed.N.

7. 11th century author of the *Rubaiyat*.

Art between Utopia and Anticipation

1. See above "Aesthetic Illusion and Disillusion."

The Violence of Indifference

1. CIP (Contrat d'Insertion Professionnelle). Contract offered by the French Government to unemployed youth guaranteeing them a job for an inferior salary.—Ed.N.

2. The banlieues are often impoverished suburbs around many of the large cities in France.—Tr.N.

Radical Thought

1. In Robert Louis Stevenson, "A Humble Remonstrance," *Longman's Magazine*, 5 (November 1884), 139–47. "The novel, which is a work of art, exists, not by its resemblances to life, which are forced and material, as a shoe most still consist of leather, but by its immeasurable difference from life, which is designed and significant, and is both the method and the meaning of the work."—Tr.N.

2. A reference to Sartre's response calls for him to condemn Soviet totalitarianism: "Il ne faut pas désespérer Billancourt." Billancourt was the location of the Renault auto factory.—Tr.N.

Dust Breeding

1. Catherine Millet, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* Trans. Adriana Hunter. New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2002.

2. From the epilogue of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.*—Tr.N.

3. In English in the original.—Tr.N.

4. Writer Jacques Henric is Catherine Millet's husband.

War Porn

1. Jean Baudrillard. *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (c1991). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995:84-85. This quotation has been added to this article by the editors of the IJBS.—Ed.N.

Pataphysics

1. *Gidouille* is the term Alfred Jarry coined for Ubu's gut with its spiral vortex.—Tr.N.

2. The *Palotin* are the subalterns, the acolytes of Ubu.—Tr.N.

3. Baudrillard plays here on the expression "prendre des vessies pour des lanternes": to be deceived, literally, to mistake bladders for lanterns.—Tr.N.

Forget Artaud

1. This discussion was held at the Drawing Center in New York on November 16, 1996 as part of a series of events organized in conjunction with the "Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper" exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art (October 3, 1996–January 7, 1997).—Ed.N.

2. An early volume of texts by Artaud (1925). All other texts by Artaud quoted are in: *Antonin Artaud, Selected Writings.* Edited bySusan Sontag. University of Berkeley Press, 1976.—Ed.N.

3. *Simulations* is volume made of two parts, one lifted from *Simulations and Simulacrum*, the other from *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, was published in the Semiotext(e) imprint in 1983; *Forget Foucault* was published by Semiotext(e) in1987.

4. The "Chance Event" was produced by writer Chris Kraus at Whiskey Pete's on November 8–10, 1996

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FRAGMENTS

jean baudrillard

Fragments

Jean Baudrillard is one of the most revered philosophers of the past century, and his work has helped define how we think about the post-modern. In this fascinating book of interviews conducted with François L'Yvonnet, Baudrillard is on sparkling form and explores his life in terms of his educational, political and literary experiences, as well as reflecting on his intellectual genesis and his position as outsider in the field of great French thinkers. Perhaps most interestingly, Baudrillard discusses his life's work in relation to his contemporaries: thinkers such as Bataille and the Situationists, Barthes, Lyotard and Deleuze, among others.

Instead of examining his work as a project of intellectual accumulation, Baudrillard challenges all the major interpretations of his work by suggesting he has always adopted an anti-system, anti-totality strategy – here termed an 'aphoristic strategy'. Even globalization is accompanied in his view by a Western culture which itself is no longer a well-founded confident universalism. The system of Western culture is subject today to radical uncertainty and chaos. Such fractalization can be opposed in Baudrillard's view only by the radical form of symbolic fragment, the aphorism and the singularity for 'this form alone attacks the system'.

Fragments: Conversations with François L'Yvonnet will be essential reading for any scholar of Baudrillard, but will also prove an attractive and informative starting point for any student trying to get to grips with his work for the first time.

Jean Baudrillard is author of *Cool Memories I–IV*, *The Perfect Crime*, *America* and *Simulacra and Simulation*, among other books.

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Fragments

Conversations with François L'Yvonnet

Jean Baudrillard

Translated by Chris Turner
with a foreword by
Mike Gane

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2001 as *D'un Fragment L'autre*
by Editions Albin Michel S.A., Paris

English translation published 2004
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 2001 Editions Albin Michel S.A., 22 rue Huyghens,
75014 Paris
© 2004 Chris Turner for translation and footnotes, and Mike Gane
for foreword and footnotes

Typeset in Garamond by BC Typesetting Ltd, Bristol

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Baudrillard, Jean.
[D'un fragment l'autre. English]
Fragments/by Jean Baudrillard; translated by Chris Turner;
with a foreword by Mike Gane.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Baudrillard, Jean–Interviews. I. Turner, Chris. II. Title.
B2430.B33974A5 2003
194–dc22 2003009852

ISBN 978-0-415-30547-1 (hbk)
ISBN 978-0-415-30548-8 (pbk)

I had a dream about reality.
It was such a relief to wake up.
Stanislaw J. Lec*

* *Unkempt Thoughts* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1962), p. 154.

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Foreword

This book, first published in France in 2001, is a set of interviews in which François L'Yvonnet questions Jean Baudrillard about his life and writings. Although Baudrillard has talked about his intellectual biography before, much more is revealed here about direct influences and encounters with ideas and authors than ever before. And in the course of the interviews Baudrillard provides a detailed exposition of his thinking on the eve of September 11.

Born in Reims in north-eastern France in 1929, Jean Baudrillard has become one of France's most celebrated – and notorious – thinkers. After an initial formation in languages and literature, he taught German at *lycée* level for many years. He converted to sociology in the 1960s, taking up a teaching post at the University at Nanterre. In the early 1960s he was widely known as a prolific translator of Peter Weiss, Marx, Mühlmann and others from German into French. But from 1968 he began a prodigious career as a social analyst. At first his works were concerned with developing a semiotic analysis of consumer culture from a utopian Marxist viewpoint tinged, as he explains here, with a radicalism derived from 'pataphysics' and 'Situationism' which was perfectly in line with the student movement which dominated the events of 1968. From these interviews we also learn that he was involved with Félix Guattari in a Franco-Chinese association around 1964. Baudrillard followed the Cultural Revolution in China closely and supported it – for his

'far left' group even tried to get official recognition from the Chinese government (Chapter 2); we learn that he edited the publications of the association. Soon after, he was editing the 'Situationist' style journal called *Utopie*, which examined French culture from a position that was quite different from the orthodox Marxism coming from the philosophers or from the French Communist Party. Baudrillard's analysis was concerned to show the effects of consumerism and affluence on the mode of social integration, involving, he said, a shift from repression to enjoyment and pleasure. While at the same time he remained committed to an explicitly utopian messianic perspective his academic publications on consumerism apply a semiotic method in the manner of Roland Barthes, whose work he has always insisted provided a model.

After the failure of the student rebellion of those years, Baudrillard wrote a critique of Marxism and 'political economy' as a theoretical system – not for being too radical, but for not being radical enough. Marxist theory was, he said, insufficiently critical of the very framework assumptions of political economy. He began to define a new critique in the opposition between symbolic exchange as represented in the gift (he drew attention to Marcel Mauss's famous essay) on the one hand, and commodity and object sign-exchange on the other. In effect his thematic and methodology became anthropological rather than semiological, or rather the former became the basis of a highly critical relation to the latter (which became for him expressive of, and complicit with, contemporary culture itself). His programme of writing that followed explored themes such as fate, seduction and evil, in which Baudrillard drew on classic anthropology, studies of messianic movements, linguistics and world literature (for example, Taoist classics). From this radical anthropology Baudrillard drew up a new account of the development of Western culture through stages of simulacra from the Renaissance onwards. These orders suggest the way in which Western culture has constructed 'reality' as an external nature but only later to virtualize it. If the first stage, the eighteenth century, produced a natural order of simple automata, and the second, the nineteenth century,

an order of factories and robots, the third stage, the twentieth century, introduced the computer and the mass mediation of cultures of the consumer society. But Baudrillard's subsequent work suggests that the pure consumer age was relatively short and that a fourth order is now predominant in Western culture. It is in connection with this shift to the information age and radical uncertainty that he introduces the concept of the particularity, the singularity, the fragment.

It is clear from this set of interviews that Baudrillard's current thought seeks to define the fragment in a way that links it to his long-term concern with the symbolic. What makes his recent writing so enigmatic is that many of his key ideas are now expressed in a reversed form, for example symbolic exchange (for example the gift) is today discussed as 'impossible exchange'. This is because his analysis of fourth-order simulation proposes that a fundamental inversion in time–space has occurred at the heart of the information revolution. In these interviews Baudrillard explains the meaning of this thesis, and in so doing reveals how he conceives his work to have continued its search for a radical opposition to cultural totalitarianism, virtualization and globalization.

Mike Gane

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Translator's note

Mike Gane and I have greatly increased the number of notes in this edition in order to make some of the topics discussed more accessible to an English readership. The additional notes are simply marked with an asterisk.

Chris Turner

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1 Untimely fragments

Following Nietzsche's advice, we might sound out concepts with a hammer. This might perhaps be a good way of conducting our interviews. Nietzsche, whose searing words accompanied you through adolescence.

It was a relationship that went in fits and starts, so to speak, and there was even an enormous period of eclipse in it. I was a great devotee of Nietzsche. I read him very early, in the sixth form. I was even lucky enough to have him in both the written and oral German *agrégation* exams, though that was my undoing, as the examiners didn't agree at all with my reading; Nietzsche took his revenge there, unless we take the view that he did me a favour by preventing me from passing the exam. After that, I stopped reading him entirely. I held him in a kind of quasi-visceral memory, but I'd only retained what *I* wanted to. I would remember particular aspects of his thought, or find aspects of it emerging in a more or less aphoristic memory. There was a long eclipse, but I was already on the ecliptic. All in all, Nietzsche was never, strictly speaking, a reference for me, but an ingrained memory.

Yet there was a time when he was a required reference, from Michel Foucault to Gilles Deleuze, not to mention Jean-François Lyotard, Philippe Sollers and company. Everyone had his own little portable Nietzsche, vying in debate about him at the fashionable conferences!

The debates on Nietzsche left me quite cold. On the other hand, I'm taken now with the idea of reading him in German again. At the end of a cycle, you come back, if not to the starting point, then at least to something inaugural, which may be very intense! But I don't like to be labelled, even in relation to the finest works. I'm not saying something has changed. Nietzsche is in me in the mode of the *unzeitgemäss*, as he puts it himself, the mode of the *untimely*.

All the same, the starting point, the point at which I began to write, was a certain state of current events. I'd forgotten the searing intensity of Nietzsche and had moved more directly into the political sphere, the semio-sociological sphere.

In talking with you about Nietzsche, I was thinking in particular of the genealogical method which enables us to uncover what lies hidden behind ideas, to see their real basis.

That was the method I followed, but my material came from worldly affairs. There are no other ways of thinking, it seems to me. In this sense, Nietzsche really is a unique thinker. I don't see any other like him. But my philosophical background is shaky, particularly where the classical philosophers are concerned, such as Kant and Hegel, or even Heidegger. I've read him of course, but not in the German, and fragmentarily. Perhaps one only ever studies one philosopher seriously, just as one has only one godfather, as one has only a single idea in one's life.[1] Nietzsche is, then, the author beneath whose broad shadow I moved, though involuntarily, and without even really knowing I was doing so. I've quoted him at times, but not often. And I've never even thought of mobilizing or adapting him for my own ends. If I come back to him again now, this is doubtless because I'm going back to the aphoristic form, in writing or photography. Though Nietzschean aphorisms are often of such scope that they're perhaps something other than aphorisms. At any rate, you can use Nietzsche aphoristically, and not philosophically or ideologically.

Or politically, of course. You say that one only ever has one great thought in one's life. This runs counter to a tenacious and very modern illusion, which claims to measure a thinker's work by the permanent novelty of its themes! As though, down the ages, the great philosophies hadn't been concerned, first and foremost, to draw out all the consequences from a single, great idea.

You can have thousands of ideas, but a thought [*une pensée*] is something else! I do in fact believe you only ever have one in your life.

What is your thought, the one that was in you from the start?

This is a good, but mistaken, question. It's not possible to conceive the omega point from which you might look on that ultimately rather nebulous constellation that is a personal thought.

I'm thinking, for example, of Clément Rosset,[2] *of whom it might be said that his entire work has consisted simply in asserting the simplicity of the real, its 'idiocy', and that all he has ever done is go deeper into this youthful 'intuition'. Or Descartes would be another example, and the three dreams which revealed the famous method to him. In each case, quite early thoughts!*

The first obsession I remember is an obsession with the object, but understood in a somewhat magical sense. Behind the critique of objects, and of the system of objects, of the consumer society, there was the magic of the object – in this case, an ideal object. At any rate, a clear desire to sweep away the whole culture based on the philosophical subject.

We're back with Nietzsche here, mocking the subject – the 'I' that is only ever a grammatical fiction.'For in the past one believed in the "soul", as one believed in "grammar".'[3]

Admittedly Nietzsche plays a part here, but there's another root too: pataphysics.[4] The dealings I had with pataphysics I owe first to my philosophy teacher, Emmanuel P., who was later to preside over the College of Pataphysics.

You attended the lycée *at Reims, the land of the 'Grand Jeu': René Daumal, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, Roger Vailland and their common project 'of making men despair of themselves and society'.*[5]

P. talked about it to us, but I didn't discover the 'Grand Jeu' until later. It's a school of thought I do recognize, and with which I feel a certain affinity, and I even admit that the fact an intellectual adventure of that nature took place in my native city, Reims – for which I'm not, however, particularly nostalgic – gives me a certain pleasure. To come back to pataphysics, for me, particularly at the beginning, it was a kind of rather fierce clearing of the decks.

What was so fiercely cleared away?

I was a very good pupil at the *lycée*. In particular, I had an amazing memory. And, at a certain moment, I came to repent of all that, I had my youthful Rimbaud moment. Making the *sacrificio del intelletto* – that was the impact of pataphysics on my existence. This would perhaps have happened in other ways, but it has to be admitted that the pataphysical acid, the pataphysical detergent was very virulent. From the outset with me, there was a kind of very powerful cultural counter-transference.

The idea of starting out from scratch, of sweeping away all I'd accumulated. During my secondary school years, I'd achieved quite a sizeable primitive accumulation – and indeed it served me cynically at University where, without doing any work at all, I was able to pass my exams easily. So the break came there! My first writings weren't essays, but texts difficult to classify, poetic texts, if I may use that term, which were brought together in my book, *L'Ange de stuc*. There were others before, but I burned

them. My first relationship to language was much more visceral or poetic than conceptual.

And in a way you're coming back to that.

You could certainly say I've come to a point where I want, for example, to take up again the translation I made of Hölderlin, and to take up Nietzsche again too, and even pataphysics, which re-emerges in a certain context of analysis, at the end of a theorization of integral reality, of the realization of the world through all our techniques and systems. Once achieved, this integral reality is the Ubuesque accomplishment *par excellence*! Pataphysics might be said to be the only response to this phenomenon, both in its total confusion – it's neither critical nor transcendent, it's the perfect tautology of this integral reality, it's the science of sciences – and at the same time it's the monstrousness of it too. Pataphysics is both a science of imaginary solutions and a myth of imaginary solutions. It's the imaginary solution to the kind of final solution that the current state of affairs might be said to constitute.

If there is a return to pataphysics, it's not in terms of argument or solutions, but a return that is itself imaginary, a kind of singular horizon. But I don't have any inclination to argue about this; it would be entirely paradoxical, since there's no reason to lend any philosophical or metaphysical status to the adventure! Pataphysics remains a game, and at the same time a violent ferment. I had the opportunity to say what I thought about it in a piece I wrote on Artaud and pataphysics in a poetico-metaphorical style. I was about twenty at the time and I was torn between the two. I contrasted the theatre of cruelty, of bloody, savage, raw cruelty, with pataphysics, which is exactly the opposite. For pataphysics there is no primal scene. There is nothing in a raw, cruel state. Everything is already a virtual phantasmagoria. This text was directly addressed to Emmanuel P., whose story Henri Thomas has written in his novel, *La Saison volée*, an allusion to Rimbaud's book, of which P. had a first edition.[6]

Ultimately, for me, pataphysics was a kind of esoteric parenthesis. But, in the end, considering this integral reality, this kind of integrism of reality – of the real and the rational – we find ourselves unwittingly in an entirely pataphysical situation!

Ubuesque in spite of itself!

But we must avoid any conflation here, and preserve the fantastical aura of pataphysics, keep it as a radical external hypothesis. It remains precious for describing this full, overfull world, saturated like King Ubu, who's the image of overblown, self-satisfied cruelty – which corresponds rather well to our current environment!

When he's bored, Ubu decides to make war!

And shuts up his conscience in his suitcase.[7] But pataphysics isn't a reference for me either. Things have to be lost! Whether we're talking of Nietzsche, Hölderlin, pataphysics or anything else, these thoughts have to be anagrammatized in what one does. That is to say, the concept or definition has to pass out of sight; they have to be there only in the anagrammatic state. All this has to disappear, to scatter, like the anagram of the name of God in the poem.

One thinks of Borges and his fine pages on the Kabbalah, which, he says, is not a museum object but a metaphor for thought.[8]

Borges, who was a member of my imaginary list of authors, my ideal bestiary – if you want to indulge in this kind of mental game – alongside Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. Only Bs, as it happens, as Baudelaire's also in there.

A lineage is always constructed a posteriori, *to converge on the person laying claim to it. It doesn't exist in itself, but only through its destination! You have to be capable of taking it over without the aid of teleology.*

It is, admittedly, always a kind of ideal retrospective. We should add Rimbaud or Artaud. It was that poetic vein I initially felt was mine.

Is the notion of cruelty – the pursuit of destructive contradictions by systematic recourse to dissonance – in the way that Antonin Artaud developed its themes so profusely, still operative?

Artaud dreams of eliminating representation, which gets in the way of the body, the body in its cruelty. The body is there, even if it isn't easy to live it; it is the actor in its own dramaturgy. The point, for him, was to find a theatre that could convey that, but I don't think any theatre, beginning with his own, really matches up to his ideals. You don't achieve that by piling on violence and incest! Can one still think in terms of cruelty, of blood as opposed to meaning? Is such a flaying of the skin still possible? There's no one who can be easily compared with Artaud in his singularity. And there's no point merely extending or repeating what he did, even if it corresponds to the barrenness of a certain universe.

There remains all the same a desire for a generalized subversion of the underpinnings of metaphysics.

For Artaud, there's still a body, the convolutions of the body, including sex, which is a sort of total harassment. There's the desire to eliminate all that to get down to some sort of matter or other. There's the dream of a base level, of an atrocity, a ferocity, a savagery we've all dreamed of to some extent. But today we can dream of a radical alternative, that of evil, which lies not in a violence that comes from the body, but in a more metaphysical violence – the violence of illusion, for example. In a way, Artaud was also in illusion. Cruelty is, indeed, an illusion, and the world is cruel because it's illusion. But I find it hard to connect this experience of cruelty with today's world.

Artaud and Pataphysics – and I was equally attached to both – seem irreconcilable. The pataphysical world is much more

despairing than that of Artaud, who catches the imagination, who has a language. A language that is perhaps the language of madness, a glossolalia, but, all the same, the cruelty is spoken and that counts for something. There's ultimately the possibility, if not of representation, then at least of a symbolic dramaturgy. You find this also with the Spanish photographer Nebreda, who plays on his body, his death, but who always, ultimately, has it available to him to speak this, to produce it as eructation. There is an – in this case, non-linguistic – act, an 'acting-out', at the confines of an impossible situation. Nebreda has locked himself away for twenty years, but he's photographed himself with consummate art, with total virtuosity.

Artaud also provides an opportunity to ask an essential question: what can be done with irreducible singularities? Everything we're saying here is meaningful discourse. With those who are both acted by, and actors of, that discourse, you can't, in a sense, do anything; you can't draw lessons from them, nor analyse the rest of the world through their experience. Each person should have an unyielding singularity, but not everyone has the good fortune to be mad or, like Andy Warhol, to be a machine.

Is there still room for singularities?

We can hope so. The only ones you see emerging – whether political singularities or other kinds – are largely reactional or abreactional. Where art is concerned, it's hard to see what would be an alternative. You have the impression that all the production is part of the same world. For pataphysics there's no longer any singularity. The *grande Gidouille* is no longer a singularity, it is a transcendent ventriloquism, to use Lichtenberg's expression. We're all *Palotins*[9] in a gaseous world from which the great pataphysical fart is released. Artaud is the extremity, the extreme limit of a metaphysics turned cruel, but there's still the glimmer of a metaphysical hope, there's a savage recrimination that's metaphysical in nature, whereas Pataphysics, as its name suggests, has swept all that away. We're not going to make it

into an ultimate authority either; if it is a culmination, it's only in the sense that it's an abolition. There's no illusion in it, but pure illusionism, full stop. As hypercritical or ultra-critical thought – much more critical than critical thought – there's nothing better.

There is perhaps still a possibility of breaking through.

Perhaps recovering an illusion, both radical and cruel, that might reflect the world as it is. The illusion of the world exists if you know how to see it. It isn't necessarily violent, it's something else; it's a parallel universe. Life itself is a parallel universe: 'Life is what happens to us while we're doing something else.' In a totalized, centred, concentric universe, only eccentric possibilities are left. Everywhere parallel processes, parallel societies, parallel markets are establishing themselves. Integration necessarily produces eccentric zones, for better or for worse.

In singularity you also find excess.

Indeed, you do. This is another aspect of what I've called the 'showing-through' [*transparition*] of evil. The world, as it is in its cruelty, is evil. If you try to stem that evil, to reduce it, metastases and excrescences will be produced, such as the ones we're speaking of. That's what interests me most right now – parallel universes. Even if I'm not capable of following all the developments in particle physics, there are some very interesting things being said there about parallel universes. But there's no need to look in physics; it's all here!

If you haven't read the great philosophers, or haven't read them much, you've at least made hay with literature, and not just French literature, even if it was in a 'free' way.

That's true. Lots of novels, such as those of Faulkner, Dostoyevsky, Stendhal and, later, lots of American novelists.

And Céline?

Yes, but he's an exception. His work is so explosive and inimitable. All those who've tried to throw themselves into it have come to grief. From the moment I went into theory, into analysis, so to speak, the other lineage came into play, that of Nietzsche and Hölderlin! All this is very difficult to reconstitute. More recently, I've read more novels – Vladimir Nabokov, Saul Bellow, Guido Ceronetti. The reference here is no longer to the history of ideas. What more can I say? To go deeply into this you'd have to make the effort to retrace your own footprints. But since I've done all I can to obliterate them, it becomes difficult even for me to exhume them. At any rate, it hasn't been an evolutionary development; I don't believe that's ever the case with culture in general. Each moment has an incomparable singularity. There's no accumulation and hence not really any evolution – no overall goal. With this obsession, into the bargain, that's almost a perversion, of trying to forget, to obliterate, to eliminate things – the things closest to me.

For example, I felt a great affinity with Roland Barthes precisely to the extent that he evinced a desire to surround what he said with an extraordinary protection, so that you could approach it only in a kind of reflectiveness, a kind of contemplation – and not at all an affiliation. Feeling so close, I assumed a defensive distance. At any rate, one thing's certain: you can't put these different influences into any continuous, cumulative history.

Above all, don't try to situate yourself in a coherent, vectorized history of ideas, with determining influences, paternities, impeccable filiations.

Above all, don't do that. I even have a bias against that kind of misguided preoccupation with references.

Every thought is based on other thoughts. How can one do otherwise? But in your writing the system of references operates in a quite peculiar way, at least not in an academic way. One has only to read your books; footnotes –

which normally attest to the serious nature of scholarly publications – are virtually absent!

It's true, there aren't many. I've chosen to forget them! Which gives translators a lot of trouble. This isn't affectation on my part! Even if something comes to me from afar, it has to be as though I invented it myself.

I believe it was Oscar Wilde who said a man with a little education always quotes imperfectly.

I have even used completely imaginary quotations.

A very Borges-like thing to do!

The funniest being the one that stands as an epigraph to a chapter in *Simulacre et Simulation*, falsely attributed to Ecclesiastes: 'The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.' Nobody spotted it! Except for a Swiss reader who, having greatly liked the quotation, went looking for it in the Bible – and didn't, of course, find it! She wrote in despair, asking me to help her out!

People are convinced the Bible is inexhaustible and that you can find everything in it! Everything and its opposite.

That's true in a way! But in the case in question the concepts weren't very biblical! My bias in these matters is preferential, so to speak, not referential. I reject the scenarios of academic research. I've never really considered the – ultimately, rather complex – question of the status of references, as those who use them – sometimes very brilliantly – must have. Jacques Derrida, for example, must surely have some idea of what the use of reference represents, of what the fact of always writing books about other books may mean. It's even probable, but to take this into account, to use it – or even abuse it – is alien to me.

In the case of Derrida, there's the whole tradition of Jewish and phenomenological hermeneutics. He argues that writing – the archi-écriture *which encompasses the whole of language – is primary in relation to speech* [la parole]*! So the written reference is originary!*

Doubtless it's impossible to do without references. But they have to return to secrecy. The centre of gravity lies in what we do; that must be the well-spring, and that's all there is to it. And we may also possibly – why not? – reinvent quite simple things we may have found elsewhere.

I have in mind something that was quite subversive among the Situationists. Their call to plagiarize and be plagiarized, a rejection of all appropriation, even intellectual appropriation! Every thought, as soon as it is public, belongs legitimately to the person who makes use of it.

There's no basis in this area for any property rights. At a pinch, you might even adopt the cynical point of view that something that can be stolen from you doesn't truly belong to you as your own. It's for each person to have their own ideas, but above all to have a form, for ideas can be plundered, their content can be siphoned off anywhere! Form is something else. It's up to everyone to have an original form.

Style, in the way Gilles-Gaston Granger speaks of it, which isn't merely a modality of expression, but a tone of thinking. Or, again, as Gombrowicz suggests, a mental posture consisting of brief, unthematized illuminations.

It's incomparable and inimitable and even, in a way, inalienable. So far as all the rest is concerned, let things circulate! I have on occasion taken ideas from different places, when they matched what I was thinking exactly and were better expressed than I could have managed. As it's also happened that I've had my ideas borrowed wholesale, without the slightest reaction of self-defence, though I'm not going to go into that here. Admittedly, there may be cases of deception, although this question of decep-

tion might be said to deserve closer study itself. Taken from a standpoint of truth – a discourse of truth – then all that's borrowed, plundered, etc., is questionable, reprehensible and is of the order of deception; if we aren't in that kind of discourse, things are different. There may be paradoxical, ironic uses of other people's material, as of worldly material, without offending against any great principles. I've never greatly differentiated between situations, events and texts.

It's also true that one barely recognizes oneself when other people quote what one writes!

There lies, perhaps, the real deception of quotation. I've noticed that critics often choose the quotations which show authors in a bad light, those which are the most banal expression of their discourse, and then go on to recycle that discourse to their own advantage. It's a good journalistic strategy. Quotation is never innocent. It can be a weapon, as indeed can reference, if it functions as a quotation, because there is no original referent. At bottom, it's all a matter of strategy. Being more of a *moraliste* myself, I prefer to set the meter to zero and say that what I do, I'll do alone. There is perhaps a temperamental dimension to this! What I can do, I'll do to the best of my ability, but alone. Perhaps this is a fantasy or complex of the solitary child.

In any event, the idea of operating alone is something I'm attached to. Though aware of what one is doing in this, which doesn't mean withdrawing from the world, but not exposing oneself to all kinds of vague influences, or to the random forms of current life. Exposing oneself to great authorities, yes, and to the authoritative, but without direct influence. This more mysterious, more elusive, more enigmatic path is the one I've followed.

The problem is that, in spite of yourself, a self-referential complex is created. As you write, a kind of personal heritage inevitably forms, a self-management, a personal career-path. The alternative would be to follow an aphoristic strategy in the strict sense of the word, which means to separate, to isolate from the rest, to except – to be the exceptional case each time.

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2 'Activist' fragments

You actually seem to be quite a solitary person. Though you've been part of various intellectual movements and close to some groups, you've never had any affiliations to any of them, even the Situationist International.

I referred to the Situationists, but never in my writings or analyses. I spoke about them, in my lectures at Nanterre, for example. How could you not speak about them? And then, we were very close, but I never had any direct personal relations with their leaders. I knew Raoul Vaneigem a little, but I never met Guy Debord.

A solitude which brought you some unkind remarks from the S.I. In the group's journal you even came in for attack, alongside Henri Lefebvre, in articles full of name-calling. Doubtless you were paying a price for your marginality. It has to be said the Situationists had a rather curious way of referring to people.

Their attacks were aimed mainly at Henri Lefebvre, and there were undoubtedly some real issues between them. After the Father, they took against the false sons, one of whom was me. They stigmatized me as the house Maoist, all because Félix Guattari and I and a few others had set up what I think was called the Franco-Chinese People's Association, with a newspaper.

When was this?

At the time of the Cultural Revolution, in the early sixties. Félix had connections with a very committed bookshop based near the Paris Mosque, and we became quite close friends. It was his idea to found this association. We published a newspaper, the title of which I forget.[1] It ran to only two or three issues, no more than that, because the Chinese never recognized us. One of us even went to Algiers to meet Chou En-lai, but he didn't want anything to do with us. The Chinese preferred upstanding, law-abiding right-wing associations, not an uncontrollable little far-Left group! Others went to Geneva, also to meet officials from the People's Republic, but they had no more success. We organized a big meeting at the Salle des Horticulteurs that ended in violence, with OAS heavies moving in to break it up using strong-arm tactics.[2] Having no ideological baggage and not belonging to any political organization, I was just the right man to edit a paper like that! I was a bit of a front-man. The venture didn't go any further and the paper disappeared. I have happy memories of it, though it was more or less historically stillborn. It's a great story from the wild years!

Was that your last episode as an activist?

Activist is going a bit far. I've never been any kind of activist.

In Henri Lefebvre, it wasn't so much the one-time Communist that interested you, the witness to the ideological conflicts of the past, as the theorist of everyday life.

It was, certainly, the critique of everyday life that interested me. I never really took my lead from Lefebvre's work. I found what he did quite free-spirited, light and wittily written, but it seemed to me already to belong to another age, an age still closed to psychoanalysis and semiology. He wouldn't have anything to do with any of that. Structuralism was his number one enemy. And what I was doing didn't quite fit in with his own work, but we remained very

good friends. When I arrived at Nanterre University in 1966–7, Lefebvre had just broken with the Situationists at the famous Strasbourg Congress.

Let's recall what that was about: in 1965, Debord broke with Lefebvre, whom he regarded as too abstract and philosophical, arguing that his book La Proclamation de la Commune *(1965) had plagiarized a Situationist pamphlet.*[3]

There were points on which we were ideologically in disagreement with the Situationists. For example, 'workers' councils' and the councils movement as a whole seemed very dated to us. On the other hand, their radicalism interested me, and everyone went along with their idea of radical subjectivity! In the end, all these things remained in the imaginary register, the political imagination. It was a phenomenon which quite rightly disappeared. That was all it could do. And those who criticize the Situationists for not having succeeded are barking up the wrong tree, since Situationism wasn't made to succeed! Today, they're reviving its ghost again, with Debord.

In Situationism, there's both an innovative, ludic thinking and, at the same time, an incredibly classical rhetoric, with ponderous theoretical demonstrations of papal seriousness, equipped with a conceptual apparatus taken directly from German philosophy – demonstrations which fascinated them. They were still in dissertation mode. Your own way of thinking and writing breaks unequivocally with all that.

They had a great force of conviction and the desire to be clear. This was the last form in which an avant-garde phenomenon of this kind appeared, though the term 'avant-garde' isn't appropriate – at any rate, a movement with such a 'pointed' critique. It was the end of a kind of revolutionary idealism, which had moved on to new ground such as daily life, the city, etc. Thanks to them, all the Marxist superstructures were greatly weakened, even if they did remain attached to old ways of thinking. All

that blew away after 1970 with all the business about desire and revolution and the mixing of the two . . .

Freudo-Marxism . . .

Some saw an extreme radicalism in that. But the mix sounded the death-knell of both desire and revolution. The blending of the two led to each being neutralized by the other. There were many who based themselves on the idea for a long time. As far as the question of desire was concerned, I already had some marked disagreements with Jean-François Lyotard, and even with Gilles Deleuze . . . while entirely admiring their 'machine', which was very desirable, but from my point of view not really operative! A whole generation based themselves on this terrible ambiguity, on things that had, to all intents and purposes, already disappeared.

What makes desire and revolution irreconcilable?

The political and libidinal dimensions lose their singularity. It was their singularity alone that gave them their force. To mix the two was to contravene their irreducibility. It was, when all's said and done, one hell of a misappropriation of Marx and Freud.

Which led to neutralizing the subversive dimensions of each man's thought.

There was a kind of outpouring of the one into the other, with a total loss of intensity, to use the terms then in vogue. It would be stupid to make a pejorative analysis of this retrospectively. At the time everyone dived in, including the best minds, but, with some distance, we have to agree it was a trap, and a trap that still operates more or less everywhere today. Like the revolt of the Situationists, these ideas serve as a reference today for what I won't call the most impoverished thinking, but at least the most conventional.

We need only think of those who claim to be the heirs apparent to the Situationists today – real embezzlers of the heritage!

Let's not talk about them.

And poor old Debord, who will soon be included in the school textbooks! Isn't it always a bit suspicious for an author to become a classic so easily?

You can admire Debord's language, but that's to make an aesthetic object out of it, which wasn't the case. Form is always important, but his language wasn't an object of admiration in itself. The same thing happened when they began to analyse the thought of Freud and Marx from the ideological, emotional or even the everyday standpoint, talking about their maids and I don't know what else. To sexualize Marx and politicize Freud was a thoroughly dubious mix. This kind of mishmash or patchwork has become the vulgate today. Among the sensible critiques of Debord, one of the most pertinent came from Régis Debray. In an article which appeared, I think, in *Le Débat*, while also settling some old personal scores, he said some very apposite things about alienation, man's separation from himself. He pointed out that we weren't in that ball-game at all now; on the contrary, we're threatened not by separation or alienation, but by total immersion.

The language of the Situationists bears the hallmarks of German idealism: with the notions of alienation, objectification, reification.

I remember Situationism as something really admirable, but it's an extinct phenomenon, a dead star. Which isn't the case with Nietzsche or some others. The Situationists were like meteors, and I wouldn't want publicly to dissociate myself from them, since, in terms of events, it was an important moment. It's in the moment when things appear that their essentials are revealed.

It's in their nascent state that we should attempt to grasp movements of thought. When they have matured, they often cease to be fertile and stiffen for a last dogmatic burst before their inevitable decline.

In 1966–7, with the journal *Utopie*, we created our own little domain.[4] We developed some major objections to Situationist thinking. We were further beyond politics and ideology than they were – beyond alienation.

Utopie *also broke with the 'Bolshevik' arrogance of the Situationists, their anathemas, their improvised tribunals, their condemnations of all kinds, which ended up occupying most of their mental and militant energies. With a clear 'schoolboy' dimension evident in their wordplay.*

You're right. There was something adolescent in that revolt. For me, *Utopie* was the preparatory phase for my work on objects, on the consumer society and political economy. *The Mirror of Production* was the break with Marx, with the emergence of symbolic exchange in prospect. It was that thinking that went into *Utopie*. We were already in the transpolitical.[5]

3 Aphoristic fragments

> The fragment has its ideal: a high condensation. Not of thought, or of wisdom, or of truth (as in the maxim), but of music: 'development' would be countered by 'tone,' something articulated and sung, a diction: here it is timbre which should reign.
>
> Roland Barthes[1]

Your writing has evolved towards aphorism. For their part, the Situationists never got beyond the bon mot. *There's a world of difference between the* bon mot*, which can become a slogan to fall in behind, and the aphorism, which encourages thought.*

They were very fond of the dialectical inversion of terms. Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* or Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life* are systems that unfold with an implacable logic. The Situationists didn't practice intellectual drifting, though they were the champions of urban drift,[2] of the creation of situations, but they didn't create so many of them intellectually. They set themselves up, rather, as incontestable authorities. But that's also what we liked about them, and we're not going to criticize them for it today. There was the idea – though they did it in a haughty, exclusive way – of starting out from the simplest objects, from basic situations, basic banalities,[3] and finding in them the explosive energy to reach back to the heights. And it's in the absolute detail of things that you ought to be able to find the energy to

smash the totality [*ensemble*], to put an end to all totalities. And so to rediscover the world in the fragmentary state. They did this, though they didn't much do it in their theoretical writings, which are the opposite of fragments.

We're talking about the German-style treatise – Wissenschaft – *a massive, systematic thinking.*

This is what has always put me off the great German systems a little, those systems which still in a way shaped what the Situationists did. You can't read Nietzsche, Hölderlin and Sade in a continuous, constructive way. The one demolishes the other! The deconstructive work has been done, you have to come to terms with it. Now, it seems to me we still have some degree of allegiance to these great systems, Heidegger being the latest systematic totality to reign over philosophy.

You can see the difference there is, for example, between *Symbolic Exchange and Death* and the *Cool Memories* books, between, on the one hand, a book that presents things in a mode that's still theoretical, and, on the other, aphoristic writing. In the aphorism, the fragment, there is the desire to slim things down as much as possible. At that point, you no longer grasp the same things; objects are transformed when you see them in detail, in a kind of elliptical void. And this is what Lichtenberg says in one of his aphorisms. To someone who remarked that he'd put on a lot of weight, he said: 'Fat is neither soul nor body, neither flesh nor spirit; it is what the tired body produces.' We can say the same for thought: fat thought is what the tired mind produces; just like the tired body, it continues to produce, it doesn't stop, but it produces fat!

A new version of acedy.[4] *It was Leonardo da Vinci, I think, who liked to distinguish between the method of the painter, which consists in adding matter, and that of the sculptor, which consists in removing it. A work which develops, on the one hand, by accumulation and, on the other, by refinement and subtraction. You could apply this to writing – between*

those who build systems by adding successive elements and those who do the opposite and pare down to the fragmentary.

It's a fine image. They are, in reality, two different forms of writing, the one which gathers things together and builds up totalized bodies of ideas and the other which, by contrast, scatters things, attentive to the details. There's the same work on detail and on the fragmentary in writing aphoristically or doing photography.

Aphoristic writing has no true legitimacy. It's recognized in France because it has a literary history to it, but it isn't in America! When the Americans read *America*, they reacted very badly.[5] Writing of that kind seemed to them the work of the devil, being a sacrilege against the canonical form of the well-argued essay. They are, in fact, right in this, and that's the whole point of it. The aphorism is, in general, quite poorly accepted. It tends, in a way, toward evil, being a violence done to discourse, but not to language.

It's true that American contemporary literature is remarkable by the size of its products. The trend is toward a thousand pages at the very least! This hypertrophy is affecting the whole of theoretical production. In France too, the most insignificant essays now to run to very great length. The more colourless the age, the more inflated the forms of expression! A curious compensatory phenomenon!

It's like organisms that grow fat to protect themselves. There is, indeed, a rash of outsized theses and scholarly works! It's like a desperate attempt to fill a void, whereas it should be the aim to find the interstice in the void. The void is the void, the point is to turn it into an – almost dramaturgical – mode of disappearance that is also a mode of thought. Though without clinging to some kind of exotic aestheticism either! It has at times been said that what I do isn't without its similarities with Oriental thought, with Chuang-Tzu, etc.

The famous butcher who slices through the gaps and openings, a parable also found in Plato in the Phaedrus (265 e)*, the fine dialectician who avoids the ways of the bad carver.*[6]

But, of course, we shouldn't make Chuang-Tzu a reference either, in this case an Orientalist one. It's like Zen. You have to avoid transpositions, avoid getting into import–export. You can find inspiration or parallel, paradoxical paths, but when a form of thinking has become the dominant symbolic form, even in the East, you have to be wary of it. No thought is universal. There are only ever exceptions.

It's also the case that, in attaching the Zen epithet to you, there's perhaps, too, the secret hope you'll shut up. The sage has fallen completely silent!

Recently, when I was talking about photography and its silence, and the things I said about the worthlessness of art, there was some surprise that I could still speak about silence, as though, to be logical, I ought to keep quiet. There's no answer to that! To come back to Eastern thought – into which anything whatever is dumped – this has become a catch-all category that's as suspect as the others. I know Japan a little – China not at all – and Japanese is a language with a lot to teach us: for example, there's no word for communication, no word for the universal, no word for the subject. It's quite remarkable! But in America I found, in a sense, the same paring-down, though that wasn't in any way a Zen thing! Rather the opposite, but with the same distance from our centre of gravity. That was the America which interested me, not an objective America. If we take this other universe *en situation* – even though we have more or less the same history and share the same culture to some extent – if you take America in the raw state, then it appears like an entirely peculiar object, which carries you far from your roots. But you can't keep perpetually going over that.

These revisitings are very fashionable in publishing – not always with the same title, but with a long preface added, often self-justificatory in tone.

Along the lines of 'I was right to be right' or 'right to be wrong', or at any rate 'what I wrote was true'.

What's done is done. If it had some kind of truth, it was at a particular moment. There can be no second chance for it, no recycling. If it's lost, then so be it. If you have a modicum of self-respect, you don't go chasing after your shadow.

It's the principle of putting a message in a bottle and letting it end up where it will, unpredictably.

Perhaps one day it will be lucky enough to have its fifteen minutes of fame, as Andy Warhol put it. The aphorism consists in throwing out scattered thoughts. Every reader will variously make of them what they can. With the *Cool Memories* books, I've been able to observe that everyone takes something different from them, and that's very pleasing. You tell yourself every detail of the world can be perfect if it finds its echo. As for fame, we have to accept the idea that there must be a limited potential. The available quantity of fame[7] is not infinite. So, it's fine for everyone to have their fifteen minutes! If, by good fortune, you get a full hour, you're stealing forty-five minutes from people who won't have any. It's a bit like the theory of souls you find in some primitive cultures: there's a limited contingent of souls and there won't be any more; they do, admittedly, travel, but there are bodies waiting for souls that will never get one because the numbers are limited. It isn't a very democratic theory, but it seems more rigorous and lucid to me: the share-out of destinies.

*

It's been suggested that Pascal's Pensées *employ a rhetoric of short forms that might be said to match the fleeting nature of the human creature, who's incapable by essence of real duration and so unable to keep up sustained attention throughout a systematic treatise. Can't the same thing be said about you? Isn't the adoption of the short form a response to the times? With the video-clip or the TV advert, the fragmentary,*

the mobile and the instantaneous are to the fore. The aphorism might then be said to be a kind of paradoxical resistance to the dictatorship of the instant.

The aphorism, the video-clip and the advert seem to share an instantaneity, rapidity and ephemerality, but the aphorism is different. Etymologically, *aphorizein* contains the idea of separating, isolating. It's a fragment, but a fragment that creates a whole symbolic space around it, a gap, a blank. Whereas our techniques and technologies create the instantaneous, but linked by continuity with the whole network. They are networked fragments, if I can put it that way! It's no longer possible today to establish some form of continuity, wholeness or totalization, because it will be immediately obliterated by the system itself. You have to set against it something that apparently plays by the same rules, but stands opposed to it formally. It's in the form, then – not abstractly but in a very real way. The form alone attacks the system in its very logic. Our imaginary is evolutionistic, finalistic; everything is taken for a phase or a moment in a process of becoming. If each phase or moment is taken as successive, linked, continuous, always straining towards an ideal end-goal, then all the phases are subordinated to the final phase . . .

A teleological process . . .

A well-directed, neatly programmed evolutionism! We have to break all that down by saying that at each moment each phase is perfect in its incomparable singularity, the fruit is perfect, but no more perfect than the flower.

It's the Hegelian dialectic you're talking about here: the flower which accomplishes and realizes itself in the fruit, which is the truth of the flower. You reject the whole work of the negative.

The flower is perfect. It isn't necessary to refer it to any dialectics of nature! It's the same with everything. In its detail, the world is perfect. This is what I say about photography: taken overall, at the

level of meaning, the world is pretty disappointing, but each detail of the world, taken in its singularity, is perfect. You don't have to try to perfect it, because it's perfect already. It isn't about falling into pure contemplation, of course. Against wholes [*les ensembles*], against the integrist imagination, we have to move over, strategically, to the fragment, restoring its singularity to it. It's the only space you can move around in, for if a singularity is perfect in itself, you can also move from the one to the other, or play the one off against the other – there's a whole set of rules. This is reflected in all areas – in the apprehension of things, in ideas, but also in language, which is perhaps the most precious platform in this regard. Language is one of the things which resists this goal-oriented arrangement best. We have to get back to the anagrammatic use of language; if there is an idea, it has to be anagrammatized in language and so disappear as idea. There is, then, a kind of complicity here between anamorphosis, anagrams and the aphorism.

We seem close to something of the order of the fractal or fractalization.

You have to differentiate between the fractal and the fragment. The fractal presupposes a whole, which may not have existed, but it's something like the decomposition or pulverization of a whole.

With a replica of the whole in each fractal.

You're closer, then, to the hologram than to anamorphosis or the anagram. The whole is reconstituted in the detail. That is quite a productive perspective, but it seems different to me. Everything is going in that direction today: DNA, the genetic code in every cell, replication . . .

I remember an article of yours in issue no. 4 of the journal Utopie *(October 1971). It was entitled 'DNA or the metaphysics of the code' and was on Jacques Monod and his book* Chance and Necessity.[8]

It began like this: 'With Monod, the metaphysical principle of identity is transferred from God and the Subject to the Code and the genetic programme.'

I remember that article. I was just back from California and the Salk Institute, which was the epicentre of DNA research. There's a model for the interpretation of things in this DNA: the model of virtuality. You have a cell, a code, from which you can generate all possibilities or potentialities. What comes out of that is a cloned world! In this sense, it's the opposite of the fragment, in what is sometimes a similar guise.

In the fragment, there's the residual element – what still remains of what has been lost: we speak of the fragments of Heraclitus and, in that case, it's about a partial memory, the fragment because we don't have the whole. What you're doing is something else. With you, the fragment is a deliberate practice, the fragmentary is a rejection of totalization.

I've been through totalities [*les ensembles*] myself and, in this sense, the fragment is a product of this passage through totalities. It isn't a formal, aesthetic option. The fragmentary is the product of a resolve to destroy a totality and the will to confront emptiness and disappearance.

There's always the risk of the aphorism becoming a maxim and taking on the form of a gnomic-sounding commandment. Maxim-based thinking can be interesting, in fact, such as that of the Greeks or like the apophthegms of the Desert Fathers.

That's true. In that case, you have a directive thinking, if not indeed a moralizing thinking, with an aim of conveying meaning. It's quite difficult to distinguish between the maxim, the apophthegm and the aphorism. There's also a parallel to be drawn with photography: the image as the pre-eminent site of the fragment, of a world without goal-orientation. The image can become the site of a morality, an ideology once again, but the photograph – more than the moving image in the cinema –

seems to me to have the same privilege as the fragment, not only by the fact of selection, but also by its silence and stillness, and the fact that it, like the fragment, is linked to a suspense – something which isn't elucidated and isn't there to be elucidated.

The Heraclitean fragment is enigmatic, which earned its author the nickname 'the Obscure'.

The enigmatic aspect is at least as essential as the brevity of form. It has to remain in suspense, no meaning must carry it away. One can doubtless imagine, think or interpret, but in principle the fragment defies interpretation, or the interpretations are multiple and inexhaustible.

It's not a religious verse!

Of the kind that works only if you repeat it endlessly? Not at all. Let's take Lichtenberg, for example. You don't read his fragments to set you off on philosophical or moral digressions, or because that would fire the imagination. It's not like that at all. The fragment is meant to be decoded in its literalness. It's simply there as an object, not as a subjective formulation; like any object, it's indecipherable; it remains inexhaustible for thought.

Like the famous rose of Angelus Silesius 'which is without Why. It blooms because it blooms. It has no care of itself nor asks whether it is seen.'[9]

You have to get to that point. With Lichtenberg, it's remarkable, as his language is dense, and when you've managed to read him properly, the work is over, the reading is exhausted in the literalness of the text. It's very Barthesian too in a way. It's quite different from 'preliminary reading' [*la lecture préalable*], with the real work coming afterwards, the text being merely a pretext! You have to get to the text itself, the factuality of the language, which is not an imaginary. The concept of literalness seems very important to me, and not only for fragments. A dream – Canetti

points this out – isn't meant to be deciphered, but it too must be taken literally. Leopardi, I think, says myths must be taken as they are spoken, as they form and transform in the language itself, and we must not exhaust them by interpretation, which short-circuits their power. Their power lies in the form much more than in the decipherment of a sense. Literalness is the secret of a poem, but this goes also for all forms, for any phenomenon, beginning with events, even though it is always difficult to get back to their literalness.

Which ultimately represents a major objection to any philosophy of history, which is always more or less imbued with teleology.

You have to take things in their singularity, and at the same time in their literalness. What I wrote about the metaphysics of the code in Monod, I could have written about François Furet and his metaphysics of the French Revolution.[10] To divide the French Revolution into good and bad revolutions, and then on that basis ask what went wrong, is not to know how to take an event in its literalness, with the ever-possible exponential dimension of a madness or a *dérive* in which the event in a sense exceeds itself. If you just want to approach it in terms of 'correct usage', you end up with some appalling interpretations. Not knowing how to take an event in its singularity and its literalness leads to a kind of moral history-writing.

Especially when it is highly charged symbolically.

Then it's a very serious mistake. It is of course the easiest solution, acceptable to everyone. François Furet proceeds in this way, at the end of an already highly recurrent history in which the judgements he passes are very largely inspired by the current ideological situation.

There is a kind of denial of situation here in the Situationist sense of the term. And this has led to endless debates and rejoinders to them. For

example, there was Stéphane Courtois with Le Livre noir du communisme*, then the rejoinder to the rejoinder, as some tried to rescue the original position.*[11] *Not to rescue the event itself – that's of no interest – but the interpretation of the event.*

You could make an – itself interpretative – reduction of Furet's interpretation, given the historical elements we have available to us, but then we plunge into something we'll never get out of. We are in critical space and it isn't easy to get out of it either conceptually or historically, given the hegemonic vision we have nowadays of history. It's the same with the singularity of species. Each species in itself is perfect. The human species is perfect: there's no point perfecting it. It's bad, but perfect: in its singularity, it's incomparable. There is clearly a problem: in asserting the perfection of each species, you may lapse into creationism! The argument would be that everything was there by God's grace, unchangeable, etc. The danger would be to go back to a mythic version of things, but the principle of historical and mental evolutionism is just as dangerous.

We must give each detail, each fragment, each species its incomparable tonality, and not teleologize them as such!

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4 Fragments and fractals

> We accept the real and its self-evidence so easily only because we sense that reality does not exist.
>
> Jorge Luis Borges

A feature of our age is its inability to confront evil directly. You say, 'We do not know how to speak evil any more.'

The great confusion is between *le mal* and *le malheur*, between evil and misfortune! The reduction of evil to misfortune, and good to happiness. The ideology of happiness is, in itself, an entirely unhappy thing!

In your view, the way we approach this today seems beset with pitfalls.

Some analyses are intellectually correct, but it's the critical form the acceptance of things takes today! Anything and everything is endorsed, in a critical way! That's the dominant thinking today. Debord was right about this. It's what he called integrated criticism, integrated subversion, with all these things spiralling around on themselves. We have to break down this kind of solidarity between good and evil, this sort of 'dialectical' complicity. We have to give evil back its radicalism.

*A non-ontological radicalism! To know whether evil is privation of good (*privatio boni*), whether it can be radical or absolute, whether it is sometimes in-itself or for-itself, moral or metaphysical, etc. – all these debates which will occupy philosophy and theology for a long while yet are not really your concern. The point is, rather, to conceive a kind of fragmentary radicalism of evil.*

Yes, you might say that, since it could be said in the end that evil isn't the opposite of good, because the two are asymmetric. In a sense the fragment is evil in relation to the whole, which is good. This brings us to the famous transparence or, more accurately, '*transparition*' (showing-through) of evil. Behind all our technologies of the good and of happiness, the driving force is evil! So, in the end, our whole strategy is one of treating evil with evil. It is the accomplishment of evil, in its homeopathic form, so to speak.

The aphorism or the fragment could be said to be a 'critical' form in the Hippocratic sense of the term, the 'crisis' being what enables you to make a diagnosis. A kind of 'replica' of the fracture in the fragment, and vice versa.

The fragment is indeed closely related to the fracture. Something happens in the crack in things, in the breach, and hence in their appearance.

*A phenomenon in the strict sense, '*phainomenon*' (from 'φαίνεσθαι', which derives from the Greek word 'φόως', light), an 'appearance'.*

Exactly. It's in the moment when something is emerging that you really have a phenomenon before you.

One can then only welcome it, and perhaps record it. Hence the aphorism.

In the face of something emerging in this way, you can no longer stand back to judge; it is, I believe, of the order of becoming and metamorphosis. For a very brief period of time, you become that

thing, that object or that moment, and then afterwards the dimension of being sets in again, so to speak, or at any rate the dimension of continuity. During this short time, there's discontinuity and metamorphosis. We have to conceive a set of rules which matches up to that, which makes the game effectively possible, which enables something to become – becoming being something different from change, and something that's accompanied by a loss of identity.

Which is also a loss of the origin . . .

Of the origin and also of the end. Until that moment comes which we cannot describe as total, since it remains fragmentary.

We're not far from the Nietzschean idea of the eternal return.

I was in fact thinking of that. In the conjunction of the two, the only eternal return possible is through the form of becoming. Is this the eternal return of the same? It can be argued that the cycle of metamorphoses is an eternal return of forms, but not an eternal return of the same. The point isn't to give scientific legitimacy to this idea, as Nietzsche would have been tempted to do. In the dimension of continuity things change, they have a history, but they don't metamorphose, they've no chance of returning, because they go off towards a kind of infinite. Whereas there are, it seems to me, a finite number of forms. In the world we're in, there's no unlimited potential, either of energy or of forms. We're in a finite world; the languages are finite corpuses. To say that the circulation of atoms will bring back the same situation is too probabilistic a proposition; we should say, more radically, that when one is in a finite world, there's a distribution of forms that condemns them to correspond to one another, setting up a sort of resonance, of elective affinity, which reproduces something like a fateful cycle, a concatenation, which means that one always finds oneself in the same situation, from one end of life to the other – what Nietzsche called character, which is also the profile of destiny . . .

The idiosyncrasy Nietzsche speaks of . . .

It's the fateful, *le fatal*. From the fractal to the *fatal*, to make a play on words.

Like fame or the finite number of souls. It's a new vision of finitude!

It's a question of putting an end to exponentiality, to proliferation, which is the characteristic of the world of production, for which no regulation is possible. To put an end to extreme phenomena in order to recover a finite destiny.

Setting the finitude of forms against the unlimitedness of production or its proliferation. We may, of course, mention Heidegger's Gestell *here – the technicist enframing or requisitioning of nature by the techno-sciences.*

Production is information. You have to destroy its infinite succession to be able to recover a concatenation of forms. The system of values that presides over all this can only aim for the infinite by a kind of contamination contemporaneous with our whole ideology of liberation. Liberation is, essentially, that. 'We must liberate everything' – it's the opposite of concatenation. Forms, for their part, are chained and enchained in a finite universe.

With a new watchword, 'Let's liberate ourselves from liberation!'

It's a great theme. At bottom, liberation is the process of good in action. If there are no other hypotheses than happiness and good, then we must liberate everything (even desire!). To submit everything to this liberation process is to disenchain everything and hence to open on to a de-regulation as far as the eye can see. It isn't a question of putting a moral end to this, or getting back to a happy medium, it's a question of finding a set of rules. The game is limited. It's a finite universe. It's defined by the rules. Outside it, nothing is geared to the game, and inside everything is subject to this rule. The space of a game is a singularity that has no other rule but its own. It knows no law.

You addressed this theme in Seduction*: 'However, it is not the absence of the law that is opposed to the law, but the Rule.'*[1] *The law can be transgressed, but not the rule! 'It does not carry any meaning, it does not lead anywhere.'*[2] *You point out very rightly that when you are out of the game, you don't play, whereas when you're outside the law, you are still under the law. Law is without exteriority, whereas the game has an exteriority. So the game can be opposed strategically to the law, 'by choosing the rule one is delivered from the law', as you say.*[3]

Criticism itself is still subject to the law; the law is there to correct it, whereas a set of rules cannot be corrected. Here, again, one may be accused of archaism, of ritualism; yet it's simply a matter of getting back to protocols, getting back to forms. A form is a set of rules, be it the rules of challenge or of seduction. The 'rules of the game' are entirely immoral and do not correspond to a moral law or a social law.

So we might say more amoral than immoral, since we well know that morality can cope easily with the immoral . . . just as legality can with illegality!

More amoral, in a way. At any rate, they have to do with evil, in so far as that is what comes from elsewhere, what exists for itself as autonomous power, as singular power. And all these things can carve out parallel paths for themselves, alongside the official course of the law, of history, etc. They really are two different worlds! Happily, from time to time, they concertina together. Like a meteorite, a singularity appears and sparks a deflagration: that is called destiny. The mode of existence of these mental UFOs is really very delicate. But it exists! Running beneath the surface of the world of good, evil circulates everywhere. In exchange – exchange generalized into value – what everywhere runs in parallel is the nothing, the exchange of the nothing. There's a continuity of the nothing, so to speak, which is reminiscent of – and this is more than a metaphor – anti-matter. A sort of undetectable dark mass. This progression of evil doesn't appear as such; you can scarcely make it appear openly; there's a kind of

impossibility of thinking evil, of speaking of it, or even imagining death. But this is constantly transfusing into all the forms of the transparence of evil. We might, at a pinch, say good no longer appears except as a site for the transparence of evil.

What was a great moral idea – the ideal opposition between good and evil, which long governed our ways of thinking – became the ideology of happiness (and not any longer the idea of good) and the ideology of misfortune (and not any longer the idea of evil) – two ideologies which are, at bottom, entirely in collusion. The misfortune is in this ideological reduction: evil as form is ideologically reduced to misfortune as formula. This is the easiest solution. It's a bit like what Lichtenberg says about freedom: 'Freedom can look forward to a great future, because it is the easiest solution!'[4] It's clear that man is not free, but to think this is quite a different matter, and few have dared do so. The idea of freedom is so much simpler and so much more acceptable. It's the same with other values. So, evil is enigmatic; it's intractable; we don't know whether it's original or not; it can't be shown or demonstrated, whereas misfortune is clear and can be delineated, etc. These are not things one can say because they're a challenge to the whole miserabilist pathos that prevails today!

*

When you speak about the exchange of the nothing, one thinks, of course, of Georges Bataille and the famous 'accursed share', prodigality and sumptuous expenditure: the living organism receives more energy than is strictly required by it. It is this excess that men expend in luxury, love or war. Something that goes beyond the anthropological underpinnings of classical political economy![5]

Bataille's 'accursed share', of course, to which must be added Marcel Mauss's 'potlatch'. But I found the idea of the 'nothing' in Macedonio Fernandez, an Argentine author who is very little known in France, even though two of his books have been translated! He wrote a very remarkable book on the continuation of the nothing.[6]

In which Bataille's influence shows through?

Not at all. It's much more in the Borgesian mode. And he was, in fact, a friend of Borges's. There's an absence running through things and this is the real source of energy. He's an extraordinary metaphysician, who doesn't perhaps have the same charm as Borges, and not his language at any rate, but is much more of a pataphysician than Borges was, with many a metaphysical *dérive*.

Bataille's Accursed Share *is also a curious meteorite, a sort of fragmentary book.*

There's everything in Mauss, but it's still very anthropological. For this reason, you might see his work as relating only to that sphere, but his way of having generalized it as a form is very remarkable. When I began to teach, I worked from three or four books – Bataille's, *The Gift* by Mauss, Artaud's *The Theatre of Cruelty* and Pierre Klossowski's *La Monnaie vivante*.[7] As for *The Accursed Share*, it really triggered something off in me. Yet it's a book I came to know quite late.

It's true also that you make a slightly different use of the accursed share, for example in The Transparency of Evil. *At any rate, not a functionalist use. For you, it might be said to be at the heart of evil and its eccentricity.*

The accursed share, as conceived by Bataille, is too good to be true, if I can put it that way! In an article on general economy, I outlined a critique of this sumptuous, unproductive, unreciprocated expenditure.[8] Bataille's idea still seemed too naturalistic to me: the idea of the sun as a perpetual source of energy. Well, it doesn't work like that! The sun shines because it is fed symbolically by sacrifice. So there's no expenditure without reciprocation. On this point Mauss is more radical. He's more precise. There's more pathos and romanticism in Bataille.

Perhaps also it's more religious in Bataille than in Mauss, even though he would have . . .

The most interesting concept in Bataille, it seems to me, is that of excess. In excess there's the secret of this metamorphosis we were speaking about, this possibility of a perpetual *becoming* of things. It's through excess that this little fringe of things passes, this portion termed 'accursed', if you like, although the term is quite ambiguous. If it's a reference to evil, then well and good. If it's a reference to cursing, that's much more of a problem!

Still this underlying religiosity. The pleasure felt at transgressing Christian morality assumes that morality is first taken as a norm!

There's a whole cult of the forbidden in fact. There was a time when Bataille was much discussed, or there was much discussion around his ideas. We were all agreed at least on the concepts of continuity, in the sense he gives to that notion, and sovereignty; all that functioned fine, but there was in his writing both a seductiveness of the fragment, of the rupture, and a temptation to reconstitute a whole, a cosmic continuity.

We should perhaps see this as reflecting the influence of Hegelianism, as recast by Alexandre Kojève, whose lectures he attended in the 1930s.[9] *Even if 'inner experience'*[10] *wanted to break with systems, with the sequence of concepts in a homogeneous style of thought.*

With regard to Bataille, and the others, you have to have a secret filiation, which has a kind of a silent efficacy to it. Researchers always try to find the tracks you've striven to cover up. There is, as a result, a perpetual misunderstanding.

Nietzsche, Bataille, Artaud – we're always coming back to these same ones. They're the basis of any analysis of the contemporary world and yet something else has happened since then, and this is what we have to look for. Perhaps nothing really crucial has happened. Or perhaps it has. And this is the gamble we have to take, rather than the opposite! To say that with Nietzsche, Artaud

or Bataille we have the absolute and fundamental bases on which all possible analyses will rest can't be true. We have to find the event of modernity or post-modernity (the term is of no importance!) which, in its singularity, forces us, not to correct existing views, but to invent other ways of thinking, other rules. It's a wager of a Pascalian kind. Pascal says that, though you can, admittedly, get by without God, it's much more advantageous to gamble on the contrary option, and he shows us why. It's the same for us. We can live and survive with the real world, with the reality principle. That's what we do in a way, but it's much more amusing to wager that reality doesn't exist! If you make the assumption that reality doesn't exist, then everything changes, which is fantastic. It's true Pascal wagered that God existed, whereas here we're making more the opposite wager – gambling on radical illusion. It's the opposite, but it's also the same form: that of a challenge to reality, instead of a contract with reality.

And so, from a certain point of view, the fragment is a wager too.

Precisely. The fragment is a wager, not the continuous management of things. You have to gamble, you have to up the stakes. You have, of course, to think out the terms of the wager, and not get them wrong, but you have to choose between the contract and the wager (or challenge). The one or the other!

The social wager against the social contract?

But what is a contract I didn't sign, a contract already signed for me! If I want to enter into a relation as a personal act, that isn't a contract, it's a pact or a wager. This is part of the logic of any symbolic act: either you manage the capital or you gamble with it.

The contract fuels the illusion of a perfect symmetry on the part of the contracting parties.

There is, quite simply, the illusion of exchange. We realize today that nothing works that way any longer. Accelerated circulation, accelerated exchange – it's the breakdown of the social contract! We're only just realizing this now, but this contract business was starting to wear thin a century ago.

The contract might be said to be covered, like a certain whale you spoke of some time ago, with the seaweed of old journeys . . .[11]

And with shellfish, which today are obviously poisoned! Even animals have, in a sense, broken the social contract that linked them to the human race. Mad cow disease . . .

To liberate yourself from liberation – as you say – is also to liberate yourself from all the ideologies of liberation.

If you start out from the instance of the subject and its transcendence, you cannot but valorize freedom, the will, responsibility – all the notions of the same order.

We come back here to Lichtenberg, whom you like to quote: freedom remains, because it's the easiest idea.

It's the easiest and the most acceptable from the moment it comes into play, because, before that, the idea didn't arise. But it's another matter to determine how this idea of freedom emerges. It's a mystery. He also says: 'At bottom, let us be clear, man is not a free being; that decree doesn't exist anywhere. Man is not free, but he cannot or will not realize this, because that requires such self-denying intellectual effort. Freedom has, therefore, every chance of enduring for ever.'[12] This easy solution is challenged today only by an even easier solution, which is freedom's abdication in the name of a kind of digital destiny, assigning things to programming operations and organigrams. This new operator sets little store by his freedom. Lichtenberg also says: 'To establish liberty and equality as many people now think of

them would mean producing an eleventh commandment through which the other ten would be abolished.'[13] This is very finely conceived. With freedom, the source of all the commandments is internalized; this is the source of absolute unhappiness, you're responsible for everything! There's some reticence today about using freedom in this way, because we can glimpse a certain number of consequences. It's Lichtenberg again, I think, who says that the characteristic use of freedom is the abuse you can make of it.[14] The proof that something is in play is that you can exceed it, and make a sacrifice of it.

Let's come back to the proposition of the gift and the counter-gift. Freedom is a kind of gift, a kind of present you're given. The meaning of the term, as currently understood, includes the idea that you can do anything and have anything, consume everything, transform yourself into anyone whatever. So there's no possibility of a counter-gift. Being liberated isn't without its problems. For example, when slaves have been freed, not all of them have necessarily gone along with it; some have even rebelled against being freed! That's a problem we don't want to confront any more: the accepted idea is that freedom is a pure gift. Including at birth, as a recent trial showed, where it turned out that a child should be free to be born or not be born. Liberation is a system of exponential deregulation which necessarily leads to a monstrosity. It does so because we've eliminated the possibility of evil, of reversibility, of a duel, the possibility of a response, and hence of a true responsibility. If we can't respond to freedom, sacrifice to it, in a manner of speaking, then we end up being stifled by our own freedom. Cut off from a dual instance and having lost their reference, all things are destined to reproduce themselves indefinitely. The clone is the being obtained when it's cut off from its specific human reference. It is, as it were, 'schizophrenized'; being 'liberated' from its own original, it can only repeat itself indefinitely. Liberty has become liberation, that is to say, a quasi-obsessive process of unlimited and extravagant repetition. Moderation [*la mesure*], by contrast, lies in a dual relation to things, in a relation of otherness.

The virtual world is the culmination of the process of liberty: liberty is no longer even visible, having abolished itself in its definitive fulfilment. There are attempts today to counteract this, to rediscover new constraints, to reintroduce moral limits to the possibility of doing everything. There's an attempt to integrate a humanist critique of freedom into liberation, but it's hopeless.

Having said this, the mystery remains: how can it be that this phenomenon appeared and developed with such intensity that we can no longer carry out the mental amputation or excision of this notion of freedom? Yet, if we look at history, at institutions, we can see how freedom corrects itself by an intense voluntary servitude, and that the two function well together. Has freedom ever really existed? It has doubtless existed as an idea, an ideal, in a sort of illuminist imagining of modernity, a kind of rather crazy interlude. The fact remains that it's very hard to see how it emerged. At bottom, the same question arises where the real is concerned.

We can wager that the real doesn't exist, a wager in the Pascalian sense. We can connect the idea that the real doesn't exist with the idea of the perfect crime.

Put in these terms – 'the real does not exist' – then it may seem ludicrous. There is a reality effect. We can come at this by way of simulation. This is the path I chose, asking myself, ultimately, whether the real wasn't itself a simulation effect. But what was merely an effect has become a principle, a jurisdictional authority on the basis of which everything is judged and rejected. The real has become a perfect alibi.

It's the key to the perfect crime.

Yes indeed. This was all put in place gradually. The idea of objective reality, for example. Against that idea, we find in philosophy – in Kant, for example – a serious demarcation.

The unknowability of 'noumenal' reality, of the thing as it's presumed to be in itself, not as it appears.

You can't conceive the objectiveness of things! This goes for qualities: what is objective blueness? There's no blue in itself; it's merely a term and that's all there is to it. Reality in this sense is beyond our grasp. We'll never know anything more about it. We have only our representations. If we've rid ourselves of the ambiguity of the world in creating an objective reality, then we've also rid ourselves of it by creating a subjective reality. Indeed, the two things go together: the real is also made up of this possibility of the subject representing itself as such. It's the interplay between the two that assures things of their 'reality'. The trap is present as much in the idea of the objective reality of the world as in that of subjective reality, in the deepening of the subject itself as representational being. In foregrounding transcendental givens, for example, as Kant does. These are the epistemological stakes of the whole of our modernity.

This illusion of objective reality has today reached a further stage, which we might address in terms of integral reality. What we have here, in fact, is a total hyper-reality, which no longer even has room for subjective reality, for representation. This is our new world – computerized, digital, virtual, etc. This integral reality exists at an elementary physical level, since it's the reality of particles, of segments; it's the analytic reality of things, in which there's no longer even the possibility for a subject of recovering a representational whole. We're beyond representation, or have fallen back short of it. At any rate, we're outside it. Objective reality was of the order of representation, being connected with the impossibility of acceding to the object itself (the Kantian 'thing in itself' or Lacan's 'real'). Here, we're in a world that does without representation. The system itself provides an effective, efficient, definitive critique of it. And in so doing, it liquidates any critique of representation one might make in the name of something other than reality – in the name of illusion, for example.

The perfect crime is the murder of reality, but it is, even more, the murder of illusion. It will never again be given to us to return to the idea of an ambiguous, undecipherable world; it will be totally deciphered. This is integral reality, which, as I see it, is entirely unbearable. At some point, there'll surely be a massive counter-transference against this total integrism of reality, which isn't even objective any more, since there's no longer any object!

You can tell yourself there's something radical about this virtual world: being outside representation, being beyond representation, and hence destroying certain philosophical categories I myself have criticized. The situation is very embarrassing. It's difficult to denounce a universe that has rid itself of the subject, salvation and transcendence. What can you do in a universe without transcendence, other than partake of this kind of dynamic immediacy, of effectuation of the world in digital terms? But is this technical immanence the same as the immediacy of the world of appearances? Not at all! So, it's radical illusion against integral reality. The 'classical' universe is encircled by these two; it's doomed to a disastrous collision, there's no way out! So long as the world was a world of objective reality, rationally conceived contradiction was possible and hence there was a possibility of revolt – which was a liveable situation. The reaction to the integral world will be one of violent denial. But what will that be, what will come of it? That I can't see! Goal-directed development is no longer an option, in rational terms, and we shan't be able to cling on to some goal other than that one, which no longer is a goal anyway. The world of speculation is exemplary in this regard: no concern for any goal whatever. If some day a crash occurs, what will remain? Perhaps debris – and not fragments. This is the case already. We're in a world of debris, of waste. Nuclear pollution is merely a tiny intimation of the problem.

The fragment as resistance to the debris?

We find ourselves, in fact, with the fragment on one side and the fractal on the other! And the way we're squeezed between the two is quite dramatic, all the more so as we no longer have the wherewithal to represent things dramatically. In the face of violent events, if we have an option of dramaturgy, then we're saved, so to speak. The integral universe, however, is no longer dramatizable; it's de-vitalized, de-dramatized. We're confronted with the unsurpassable nature of a universe that has absorbed its own transcendence, its own image. It's a world in which things are stuck together, the world of the short-circuit between anything and its representation – an immersion in the visual. And indeed every image is absorbed by the world's becoming image. This is perhaps the gravest danger. There's a kind of diabolical metabolism of the system that has integrated every critical, ironic or contradictory dimension, fractalizing everything. Everything's on-line, and there's no opposing an on-line event.

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5 Anthropological fragments

> We have perhaps too anthropomorphic an idea of Man.
>
> Stanislaw Lec

*I'd like to come back to what seems to me the very fertile opposition between the social wager {*le pari social*} and the social contract. As if, for example, the best way of solving urban violence and violence in schools lay in a revival of the social contract. There is here a positively surrealistic gamble. As though learning the contractualist foundations of the state could solve anything whatever at a deep level!*

The concept of 'the social' has gone awry the same way anthropology did. When the idea of 'the social' appeared, it represented a break with all religions, all transcendent orders; it had a certain radicalism, in so far as it was linked to society in action and the conflicts that emerged from history. And then 'the social' became an absolutist concept – even an imperialist one. It was then extended retrospectively to all societies and, prospectively, to all possible societies. At that point, it lost all definition. If everything is social from one end of history to the other, then nothing is. This is a disastrous consequence of all totalizing conceptualizations. Anthropology had already gone down a path of this same type, extending the concept of the human to all the societies which barely corresponded to it, which were, in fact, singularities that should have been treated as such. A certain form

of anthropology did in fact treat them this way, introducing the weapon of relativism into the analysis of modern societies, and this enabled us to dismantle the universal or its concept.[1] The social contract functions to put a stamp on an abstraction, a fleeting reality. It was analytical abstraction that created 'the social'. At bottom, the same is true of 'the political'. What do we mean by this concept?

I tend, rather, to see things in terms of reversible forms, challenges, seduction. Now, nothing is more contrary to this world of forms than purely conceptual analysis, which passes everything through the medium of a terminology, a science or an institution. That way, you arrive quite simply at meaningless stereotyped discourse!

If I understand you right, the social is nowhere to be found?

So long as the social was merely a utopian, destabilizing, non-established dimension, it had a subversive value, but as soon as it became something established, even in contractual terms, things changed. Has the social contract ever functioned? It's a mystery. It functioned for those who drew it up, but has it really been recognized? And this goes for the whole of modernity: has there genuinely been rationalization? The social is like a hypertext that's been generating itself at least since the eighteenth century; it's sustained by intellectuals and politicians, being more or less their stock in trade. It's not that it's cut off from reality, but it functions on its own, like a highly perfected technical object. It's all there is left to refer to things by, so we no longer see through things – the black box of the social has closed again. It's a good thing that all kinds of phenomena are coming up which no longer fall under the aegis of the social. When the major events are unemployment, mad cow disease . . .

And paedophilia. Three events which are rather – as you say in Cool Memories IV *– anti-events, non-events.*[2]

Exactly. All events that are not fundamentally of a social or political order, but which people try to politicize, and to which political significance gets attached, like the contaminated blood scandal. Politics ends up revolving entirely around these things, but they come, fundamentally, from elsewhere; they are contestations that have their origins in biology or other sectors. To try to reduce everything to social conflict was merely a dream. When I hear talk today of the social or the political, I get the impression people are talking to themselves and between themselves, which may fuel endless polemics, but that something is left entirely outside all that. The problem began with the concept of the mass, of the silent majority. The masses are no longer social! We speak of them in terms of sociology, as though this were a substance penetrable by the social, rationalizable by progress. But it isn't at all. The further we advanced into the social, the more a kind of dark matter formed.

You speak of the masses even as an indefinable anti-matter of the social. The masses might be said to be inertia, the power of the neutral. And the silent majorities cannot be seen as conductive of 'the social', or 'the political', or meaning.

Yes, indeed. An entirely resistant, irreducible 'matter', which we have tried to pin down by opinion-polls, statistics, and so on, as we've tried to pin down chaos in physics by the calculation of probabilities. You then set up a science which deals with these things, which holds up a kind of mirror to the masses and the social. There is in this a total misunderstanding of something which is not an anti-power, but a silent potency – or anti-potency – standing outside the social contract, and belonging thoroughly to the order of the challenge.

We find the social challenge here once again, rather than the social contract.

It's another agency acting against the social; it's possible today that there are many energies preparing to contest the social. We

only have to think of all those secret or mysterious ways by which people resist representation. This is obvious with political representation, which is being very deeply challenged, but it's also the case with any kind of representation. For better or worse, because denying representation – I don't need representing any more, I don't have to be represented – can be a mark of total sovereignty or the sign that you've been entirely overwhelmed, been scattered, steamrollered, and that you no longer even have any notion of yourself, nor any ideal to defend. Neither the politicians nor the intellectuals will face up to this state of affairs because democracy rests on this postulate of representation. Now, there's an increasingly great demand not to be represented, extending perhaps even to words, which might be seized by the temptation to stop meaning anything.

This could take us a long way.

There's a kind of relatively silent, unknown insurrection going on here, but one in which it seems to me that something fundamental is at stake.

To escape the power of language – in language 'servility and power are inescapably intermingled at the price of the impossible', as Barthes would say.[3]

Naturally, against language in the sense in which Barthes said it was fascist, since it is a summons to speak, and fascism wants to make people speak. People don't perhaps want to speak in that sense. Politicians are not all unintelligent, and doubtless some of them have an inkling of what is going on, but this is something they certainly cannot admit. I went so far as to suggest that politicians and the political class in general were there to manage this false 'accursed share', made up of all the waste-matter of 'the social' which no one knows what to do with, and that the masses (who are not necessarily millions of individuals) merrily fob all this rubbish off on to that coterie – or perhaps we should say mafia – who are lumbered with the filthy job and

who are, ultimately, sacrificial victims. We need an analytical reversal of the situation. Not to criticize the political sphere, corruption, etc., but to ask ourselves if all this isn't a kind of opposite strategy, a strategy that's not calculated – and is for that reason beyond attack – in the sense that the political scene is tolerated the way it is (with all the secondary gains the politicians themselves can derive from it) because power is in itself contemptible! Now, a certain rationalism may have led us to believe that power was a desirable thing, particularly in the years when power and desire went together and represented a kind of ideal cocktail. And yet it's never been demonstrated that power – any more than representation or truth, or even good – was deeply anchored in the collective desire. Any more, indeed, than social being. As though the human being were a social being!

That's one of the assumptions of all anthropology . . .

Every effort is made to keep this absolute assumption afloat. If we cast doubt on it, how will things stand then? There's the same assumption with the news media and journalists, who are criticized for playing fast and loose with the facts, with exploiting events. And indeed they have accused themselves of this, repenting publicly. Now, if we admit that the news and information media are a sort of viral activity, we may very well take the view that it isn't the job of journalists to exert a critical function on the event, that their job is to provide raw material and leave people the freedom to use it as they will. That people should at least have the freedom not to believe what they're told, and to see the news media for what they are – namely, a spectacle, a parody, a pastiche of the coming-to-pass of the world, and not an object that critically provides us with information in the noble sense, or with knowledge. We have, then, to take media people for what they are, and not seek to correct or rectify their role, to put them back into some kind of objective position. No, they are functional and that's all there is to it. But I claim the freedom to be able to judge for myself, without collusive interactivity. It's they who provide the information. Well, let them get

on with it! It's the same in the theatre. I'm quite happy to be in the auditorium: let the actors act and not take me for anything other than a member of the audience. Let's try to retain at least that sovereignty. Instead of trying to socialize everything, to interactivize everything, let's try to say: 'No, that's *your* problem; for my part, I'm free to decide for myself.'

To do what with that decision?

How can things turn out? That is, in fact, the great mystery. Let's assume that people have this demand not to be represented any more, that they don't want anyone to speak in their name – ultimately not even themselves, so that they no longer speak in their own name (it's an illusion to posit an individual agency of desire and power). What will become of us if we remove this hindrance? It's a mystery, but a really exciting one. What remains when we take away all these highly invasive superstructures? Naturally we aren't going to find a human nature. That too is a kind of superstructure. We won't find a nature in the individual sense of the term – but perhaps the duality I'm so fond of, the idea that everything takes place in a kind of attraction/distraction, where you can't pin down responsibility or freedom at any given point. It's a game! You have to keep to this idea that there's an insuperable confrontation and antagonism. And that we've always tried to conjure away this primal – and, in a sense, untamed – situation by the insertion of a representative space, a space that's rational, intellectual, conceptual, etc.

Any form of elevation, in the literal sense . . .

There is genuinely a question here. I don't suppose we're the only age to have run up against such questions, such an unfathomable radicality. The problem is, rather, to take the radicality into the very heart, not just of the space of representation, but also of this kind of fourth dimension, in which the space of representation is itself abolished. What becomes of duality in a space not just

with three dimensions, but where a fourth dimension volatilizes all the elements of the problem?

*

When people don't quite know how to classify you – neither as a philosopher, nor as a writer – they make you a sociologist and, moreover, a sociologist 'by training'. Which is quite funny, as you admit yourself that you had no sociological training.

I don't even deny it any longer. But the habit does seem to have developed of calling me either a philosopher or a writer. What does it matter! Sociology should be called to account again, as I did in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*.[4] I was, in a way, settling accounts in that book. The social provided a dynamic line of analysis in Caillois's time, for example, in the days of the Collège de Sociologie. It was a good angle of attack, though one which was not at all in the tradition of the social contract.

We should say here that Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris founded the Collège de Sociologie in 1937 – the 'college' developing out of the journal Acéphale *– to study the presence of the sacred in social realities.*[5]

It was something quite different from the representation of the social, from this kind of socio-therapy that sociology has become today. While remaining an academic object, the 'social' has imperceptibly become a parallel space–time, which you can no longer grasp, out of which whole categories have been expelled, being now 'extra-socialized'. The social will soon become an integral category – like integral reality – but there'll be no one left in it; it'll be a desert! And naturally, there'll be no contract here any longer, since there'll be no possibility of representation! On this integral social floats the curdled layer of politics, a vague coating of ice, a false mirror-stage, with extras posing as actors. On the other hand, the other universe, in which lots of things happen, is a split-off universe, a parallel universe. It isn't an object for

sociology. Sociologists always hold to the idea of a rationality of the social, a goal for, and goal-directed transparency of, the social.

Together with the fashionable idea of the social bond – a notion dished up every which way!

Those concerned with exclusion never get beyond that: exclusion as misfortune [*malheur*]! You have to cross-fertilize this with the idea of evil [*mal*], to say for example that exclusion may well be unfortunate, but, as destiny, it's something else, it's something played out and lived out. There's a tendency to regard all individuals as passive! Pride, defiance, honour – notions that are perhaps too aristocratic and hence archaic – have been replaced by freedom and by another set of notions around misfortune.

There's a social theatricalization of the victim, who becomes a chosen, honoured person, a kind of reverse elitism which, as Bertrand Vergely observes, constitutes a new aristocracy for an egalitarian age.[6]

Today everyone asks themselves where they can find their niche in misfortune! It's become the only surface of the social. There isn't much glory in this! The social which, in its time, was a fine idea, has assumed concrete form, has substituted itself for the political and is now itself swallowed up by the cultural. What an unhappy fate the social has met with – and sociology with it! The path Bourdieu took – that of a kind of activist regression in the name of the wretched, is perhaps the only one for sociology if it wants to outlive its time. I find it curious, all those people who've read Nietzsche and the others, but nothing has rubbed off on them. How can you go on doing your own thing in your own little discipline as though nothing had happened?

I pity – a figure of speech, since no one is to be pitied, neither oneself nor anyone else – an intelligence that's always getting caught up in its own outdated facts, its own values. There's the internalizing of a discipline or a reality or a group; a siding with something. Then there's no cross-disciplinary outlook, but sheer immersion. There are lots of people who can live only

fully immersed in something, a variant of protectionism. Without it, life would be too much to cope with.

All this has been short-circuited now, concertina-ed by technological change, which is much vaster and more definitive in its integrism. The state of confusion generated is very interesting to observe: as the whirlwind approaches, the century is going into convulsions. We have, in a way, gone beyond the end. People want to hold on to their goals [*leur finalité*], but they're already beyond them. They're living wholly at odds with themselves. They're living in a mode that's no longer the traditional, representative, social, electoral mode. The sham nature of elections has reached an extraordinary pitch – and not just in the United States! And I don't know what could take the place of the representative system. Maybe nothing! It's the consecration of emptiness, the emptiness show!

This is the image you use. Let me quote you here: 'What is there beyond the end? Beyond the end extends virtual reality, the horizon of a programmed reality in which all our known functions – memory, emotions, sexuality, intelligence – become progressively useless. Beyond the end, in the era of the transpolitical, the trans-sexual, the transaesthetic, all our desiring machines become little spectacle machines, then quite simply bachelor machines, Duchamp-style, before dying away into the countdown of the species. The countdown is the code of the automatic disappearance of the world.'[7]

There's a strategic use of this 'beyond the end', but it's increasingly difficult when the processes become exponential. To pass beyond the end is to bring into play the other arrow of time, to collapse the presumption of its end into the event itself. What would it be then? I've used this angle of approach a great deal, but it's becoming increasingly difficult to anticipate anything now, since the end is there without you being able to play on it as though it were a term set in the future. It's already there; we're already in it.

There's the penultimate and the ultimate, but not the post-ultimate!

Yes, there's the penultimate, the paroxysm – that is to say, literally, just before the end – but after that, nothing! We ought to find another 'oxysm' to refer to this temporal void.

6 Fateful fragments

> Death resists us, but it gives in in the end.
>
> Stanislaw Lec

*Let us take on this problem of evil more frontally, the problem of its transparence. The idea that evil shows through {*transparaît*} and transpires, the idea of a kind of upsurge, of bursting through. We come back here to the idea of the fragment.*

I come back to the opposition between *mal* and *malheur*: between evil and misfortune. We're in a culture of misfortune, a culture of misery. This is not to argue against the material reality of misfortune, but ideologizing it is something quite different. Ideologized misfortune has become a kind of emblem today, and a mode of action. There's a whole 'actionalism' of the deficit and the handicap, of legal action and seeking damages. The whole of the social order now rests on this kind of trading on misfortune, from which secondary gains may be derived. It's a way of rebalancing things in a negative mode, the mode of repentance.

We should turn all this on its head and ask ourselves what it is of evil that nonetheless shows through in misfortune, but is also warded off by it. The division of good from evil orders things. From the point where everything is divided into two opposing principles, in the name of which you can choose only the side of good, of course, we're caught up in a general trend to eliminate

evil. This excluded, foreclosed evil shows through in the very system of the good, in the whole virtuous, pious organization of things: it shows through in the form of misfortune. It's a kind of resurgence of the repressed, though I don't too much like talking about it in these terms, but there's an almost physical backwash to it. What washes back is the old principle of duality and reversibility. The idea that good and evil are inseparable – that they're two opposing principles (all this is very Manichean) and yet at the same time inseparable.

You can put this in terms of anamorphosis: evil appears only in a sort of anamorphosis through all the figures of good – in their going to the bad. We're in a culture in which everything is going better and better and, at the same time, from bad to worse – simultaneously in two directions at once, like time's double arrow.

I take exactly the opposite stance to our idealism regarding the nature of Man. To the idea that everything is going badly, but deep down everything is destined to go to the good, I oppose the idea of destiny, which is the idea of evil. To side with evil, while retaining the idea that all energy comes from there, is a Manichean, if not indeed a Cathar, vision. Evil is at the origin of the created world. Though God created the world for the purposes of Good, he nonetheless ran up against a matter that was as strong as Himself, if not stronger. He didn't get the Creation quite right. Lichtenberg puts forward the following hypothesis: the world was created by a God who wasn't perhaps quite up to the job. A kind of slightly unsuitable, low-ranking divinity.

It's interesting to re-situate things in the perspective of evil and not of misfortune. And so to imagine that everyone is confronted with evil – in spite of all the efforts to ward it off and other fantasies, and is so even through their own misfortunes. Confronted, that is to say, with a form of destiny. Then human beings are no longer the victims of anything whatever; they are the actors of their own deaths.

Some time ago, I took part, with Marc Guillaume, in a seminar organized by the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales at Lyon on the subject of road accidents. Everything that was said

there – about speed, danger, etc. – was couched in terms of the idea that the behaviour of motorists is very largely irrational, phantasmatic, aggressive, etc. and, since it's irrational, it must be possible to rationalize it by analysis and technique. No one advanced the idea that this behaviour, even if it verges on the suicidal, is an action, a way of confronting a world in which anything goes, in which anything is possible. And that it is unbearable that all this should be given without the possibility of our giving something in return. We're speaking here of the deep symbolic logic of the gift and the counter-gift, which isn't an imaginary logic, and which doesn't have anything to do with the prevailing pathos around security either. There's a kind of passion for risk. It put me in mind of Palermo, where the traffic is a real dramaturgy of death, but well-acted and well-controlled: everyone drives to the limit, each driver defying the other right up to the last moment. And they do it very well, with the result that there are no more accidents there than elsewhere. It's a great game, and the person who doesn't conform to this law of danger is viewed with contempt! These are knights, knights on chargers . . .

One thinks of the 'agonistic' stage analysed by Johan Huizinga in his essay 'Play and Contest as Civilizing Factors' in Homo Ludens.[1]

Precisely. To speak of safety then becomes totally absurd! Whatever the dysfunctions, the pollution, the corruption, there's always the intention to find an ideal, technical version of things, an absolute reparation for this world which is such a mess. At the same time, there's a dizzying fascination in car-driving behaviour – a dicing with death. In a society where death is foreclosed, you have to find it somewhere. You just have to look at the daily soap-opera. What people watch above all on the TV are the weekend's road accident figures, the catastrophes. And it isn't that they're seized by compassion; they're in the grip of a fascination.

Michel Serres has spoken of a polytheism of human sacrifice, whose high priests officiate every evening on the eight o'clock news. And isn't the

main part of television news built around the latest reports of death or sacrifice? Accidents, wars, earthquakes, epidemics, factory closures – all of them human sacrifices.

The political and social news that takes up most airtime doesn't really engage the imagination. People suffer that as a lifeless ritual, whereas the weather forecast, what the weather's like, what the road-death toll's like, aren't lifeless at all!

This brings us back to some of your analyses, particularly in Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Even then, you were looking at the question of the road accident.*[2]

Indeed. I get the impression people more or less consciously expect a blowback from technical objects. There's a game played with technology: it isn't just a medium; there really is a duel. We're used to talking about the revenge of objects, of 'Frankenstein' effects. This is very widely accepted. It isn't just accidents and death, but also technical problems and breakdowns – everything that both gives you the impression of a kind of ill will, but at the same time constitutes an event. A sort of breach opened up by objects, because everything today is mediated by objects or signs. Happiness or sadness, accidents or ecstasy can come only from objects – and this may extend as far as drugs or a psychedelic usage of technical objects (in particular the new information technologies).

Perhaps we can speak of a strategy here – like the one you talk about in Le Silence des Masses *– an offensive, paradoxical strategy or, at any rate, a strategy of collective or individual defiance of excessive security.*

It's vital to be able to respond in terms of defiance to safety, to the instinct of self-preservation, to ease of living. So there is no rational solution. The further you push safety, the more you push people into taking senseless risks. There are symbolic stakes here that can't be eliminated, and this is where the evil comes through. In our lives, doomed as they are to the ambient

miserabilism to which all our superadded values of human rights and responsibility equate, evil occasionally breaks through, pours through, and we should let it have its head, not suffer it as misfortune, but take it on board as destiny.

This is not *amor fati*, but it does run counter to the general mentality, which is after all to internalize one's own misfortune. As a result, the transparence of evil becomes more refined: with all the means we have to do good (to create more and more virtual possibilities, including with digitalization, cybernetics and information technology), it assumes a very distinctly viral form; it has become virality itself, which is not at all an accident. We speak of the virus of information, but it's information that's the virus!

We may take up the defence of the accident, as a subversion of the order of things, but regretfully – with a certain sadness that the world should be accidental. Or, conversely, we may make it, not an ideal mode, not a revolution, but the opportunity to ask ourselves what would change if we took a different stance. For example, instead of regarding all the corruption on display in the political world as a kind of regrettable epiphenomenon, of waste, a consequence of the perversion of individuals or institutions, could we not see it as a mode of functioning? It's the functioning itself that's perverse, not the dysfunctions. It isn't corruption that's perverse, but order; and corruption is a way of pushing it to its worst extreme, to the point of parody. It's hyper-function! This hypothesis connects with the topology of the accursed share. What do you do with an excess? You have to give it, yield it up, expend it; it has to burn. Corruption is one of the ways of expending this excess!

One is, admittedly, forced to see matters on two levels: to have a normal, human, indignant reaction against 'scandals' and, at the same time, an analysis that's of a different order. But where does this paradoxical analysis lead? To nothing, since it gives rise to no principle of action, no principle of equilibrium of the order of things.

Beware of indignation, resentment.

What use is resentment, what use is indignation? Everything's there. And if everything's there, it's because we wanted it. There's an order of the will which isn't that of the will for good.

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Where evil's concerned, you abandon any form of theodicy, of justification of evil. Your position is more or less the opposite of Leibniz's: not to stand back to perceive the perfection of everything, but to get up close and perceive perfection in the fragmentary. The problematic of evil is almost turned upside down: evil is perfection itself and not the celebration of good through its negative.

This is how it is with the perfect crime. It's the perfection that's the crime. What we have there is, indeed, a murder: the murder of evil. When I set out this idea, I remember certain objections, such as, 'What about exterminations?' Well, precisely, with exterminations, we aren't dealing with evil. Extermination is the extermination of evil done in the name of good. It's the outcome of a rational, logical order. The whole of ethics gets tied up in knots here: how can we act so that an excess of good doesn't turn into its opposite? Having said this, all things being reversible, there is an interplay between purpose [*destination*] and destiny. Perhaps when evil is pushed to a certain limit, it too produces good.

There is in your work the idea that the abolition of the real isn't the product of some remote decree: it's by contact that abolition is effected; the closer you get, the more it dissolves.

The real presents itself as a whole. The reality principle is a holistic principle. To eliminate it, destroy it, deny it, etc. isn't a naïve act, but means going beyond all possible wholes by a de-structuring. Then you get to the immediacy, the instantaneity of things and of their appearance. You go beyond representation, beyond the real. I've asked myself this question where images are

concerned: there's also a murder of the image, or at any rate of photography, in so far as it's a two-dimensional world and hence not of the order of representation, which is three-dimensional. The image in the 'pure' state is a kind of two-dimensional parallel universe, which, from this point of view, isn't of the order of the real, but of illusion. The murder of the image consists in reintegrating it in every possible way into the realist order, into the logic of representation (the image as reflection, as testimony). All its singularity as a parallel universe is taken from it. A two-dimensional entity, like the image, is perfect in itself. You don't need to wait for a third dimension as a kind of complement, of supplement underpinned by a conception of a purposive goal, where everything added is an improvement. It's the opposite: all that's added cancels out what went before. With it, this two-dimensional world is sacrificed. Now, it's the universe of illusion, in the strong sense of the term, and illusion has its perfection in itself and isn't a stage in some process of evolution!

With the third and fourth dimensions.

The third dimension is a form of denial of the image. With the fourth, with the virtual, you have a space–time that no longer has any dimensions at all, a dimensionless space–time! I like the fact that the image is two-dimensional, in so far as that connects – for reasons unclear to me – with the idea of duality.

Your basic Gnosticism . . .

It must be that! It seems to me that the symbolic order is dual in that sense and that all the orders we know are, by contrast, unitary, totalitarian.

What you've said of the two-dimensional image can also be said of music.

Quite. When they began to build quadriphonic rooms – I'd tried them out myself in Japan – there was absolutely perfect sound

reproduction, a sort of musical perfect crime. You had the impression that the specifically musical illusion, which is also a parallel universe, was eliminated. Sound was elevated into an object; in its perfection it became an object, and no longer something you can perceive at a distance. When you compare listening to an opera on CD or in a concert hall, it isn't really the same thing! The stereo puts out a music in which you're immersed, as in a bubble, whereas in the opera house it's listened to at a certain distance. The latter is real music; the other is a circulation in the mind. Obviously, you can be much more immersed in it with the CD player, as you can in the virtual world. And indeed it's virtual music: the more perfect the reproduction, the more it becomes virtual. Where is the real music? Who's to say? They've even felt the need to reintroduce noise and static to give a natural effect, or an effect of the hyper-simulacrum of the natural. At any rate, in the world of sound, as in that of the image, the quest is for adding new dimensions: triphony, then quadriphony, then multiphony. It's the same with images: they give them one, two, three or many dimensions. If you want to get right back to the essence of an aesthetic object, you have not to add, but always to take away. You have to take away all that's been added on in terms of time, movement, history, meaning or significance; everything that means that the particular spirit of the image is obliterated or, at any rate, masked.

Progress – at least what's called progress – always consists in adding on, in introducing refinements, sophistications. And it's more or less the same in the physical world; there too, hypotheses are added one to another in a kind of dizzying whirl. It's becoming impossible to maintain a system of values that could be called a normal dimension, the dimension of the real and representation, which is also that of aesthetic judgement, of aesthetic distance, of perception and pleasure. This three-dimensional universe has now begun to waver, submerged by a four-dimensional one, that of the virtual and the digital, the universe of what I call integral reality. The music we are talking about is the integral reality of music.

We can perhaps extend this analysis, by analogy, to the social, political and relational spheres. It does seem that, with the virtual extension of all available possibilities, with the airing of all problems in all sorts of alternative solutions, it's as if things are dissolving. What are we trying to do? Are we trying to fulfil ourselves more and more? This is, of course, the official version. Or are we trying to disappear, to hide ourselves away in dissemination? I really believe we are: the screen is a surface in the form of an abyss, not a mirror-shaped one; it's something in which you lose your image and all imagination.

The choice is a difficult one because we are forced to accede to this proliferation of images, to the world's becoming-image through the screens, the universe's becoming-image, the conversion of everything into images. But where everything is image, there is no image any more. No image as illusion, as exception, as scene, as singularity, as parallel universe. You can no doubt make the same analysis with music. With art, too, since what are called artistic objects are now situated in a dimension that's no longer that of illusion, but that of – more or less technical – performance, even if this brings colour and form into play. And even if the artwork is still a surface, it's now a performance surface, a screen-surface. It's no longer a surface obtained by the removal of depth.

If I understand you rightly, everything has become a screen!

Exactly. In the screen, the problem of depth doesn't arise. There's no other side of the screen, whereas there is a 'beyond' of the mirror. Which doesn't mean that all that appears as art is of this order; fortunately, there are exceptions. Every true image, every true photograph has value only as exception, and is, by that token, singular. Here, it's precisely the opposite, and continuous, perpetual succession [*enchaînement*] prevails. In integral reality, there are, in principle, no exceptions any more.

Which, by the way, gave me a problem with my photographic exhibition, 'The Murder of the Image', in which I exhibited series – in total contradiction with what I'm telling you. I only became

aware of the contradiction as I was making the exhibition. After having spoken up for the singularity of the image, the two-dimensional world, irreducible to the three-dimensional one, there I was using series, which, for the image, is a way of entering the fourth dimension, the dimension of the fractal, and is, therefore, part of the murder of the image. Well, so be it. I won't try to justify myself. There is, I appreciate, a total ambiguity here.

Let's come back to the requirement to take something away. It's essential because at the end, so to speak, there's the fragment, which must not be confused with the fractal.

We must stress this difference between the fragment and the fractal. The fractal is a kind of segmentation, of proliferation, but each element doesn't clear the decks around itself. The frag'-ment really does create a void, a blank space. Indeed, that's what enables the fragment to constitute a singularity. According to Musil, the fragment is the smallest possible whole. Rothko says – speaking of his work – that what characterizes it is that it opens up in all directions and at the same time closes up in all directions. I like this image a lot: closing up in all directions. That, it seems to me, is what the fragment does. It closes up in all directions, whereas the fractal universe neither opens nor closes; there isn't this diastole–systole, this breathing, this rhythm of its own; there's just a continuous diffraction! Seen from close up, the fractal and the fragment seem quite alike. Neither is part of the world of the real and representation; both are outside meaning, outside representation, but they are so each in their own, completely opposing, way. It's a distinction that's difficult to grasp.

The fragment lies in the direction of anamorphosis, whereas the fractal is of the order of the replica.

Or of metabolism, or metastasis. You can make series with infinite differences, you can play on a gamut of differences, but it's of the order of the spectral, of the 'spectrum' of differences, not of the play of forms and nuances.

And then in the fractal, you find yourself again. You don't lose yourself. A principle of identity remains.

The fractal is an infinite universe. In photography, for example, series are almost inevitable, given the way the technical apparatus simply wants to work indefinitely. Like the photographic act itself, which is potentially endless, you can't stop yourself. Any use of photography brings this possibility with it. Is it a danger? It is, rather, a dizzying whirl; here again a kind of dissipation. Every technical object bears within itself its indefinite repetition. The camera's no exception. So where does the possibility of stopping lie – not just of taking something away, but of halting the flow, the surge, of getting back to that void, that blank space, that suspense we were speaking of?

There's always a kind of hesitation between, on the one hand, the return to the one, to fusion, and hence to the ineffable, and, on the other, the temptation to go beyond the 'two' towards the 'three', the trinitarian, whether it be the Christian Trinity or the Hegelian 'Aufhebung' *(the dialectical synthesis). As though it were difficult to stay with the 'two', in pure contrariety, in oscillation, poised between. . .*

We must try always to maintain this discrepancy. Above all, we mustn't reconcile everything, but in fact, both in analyses and in practice, everyone seeks to reconcile principles. As Stanislaw Lec says, 'No one has ever asked the thesis and the antithesis if they agreed to producing a synthesis.' We must let the thesis live, let the antithesis live, and not try to move to a goal in the synthesis. You have to maintain the discrepancy, including in analyses, in the concepts themselves. Yet we always come to solutions of reconciliation or sublation [*dépassement*]. I do it myself. Language [*le discours*] leads us into it almost 'naturally' every time; we have to break through this again, reopen an antagonistic, implacable possibility for evil.

We have to stave off the dialecticizing temptation. The idea of salvation is totally absent from your thinking: there's nothing to save, nothing to hope

for. You expound a thinking on evil which is not inhabited, even secretly, by the idea that there's something that might have been lost and which could be recovered.

Evil [*le mal*] takes on its full meaning in its opposition to misfortune [*le malheur*]. In its opposition to good, it's more ambiguous, as there's a quasi-romantic connotation of the term 'evil', if not indeed a demoniacal one, and hence one that has a religious stamp to it. The language of evil is, therefore, a very difficult one to speak, if you want to avoid seeming satanic, pointlessly satanic.

A temptation to which Bataille often succumbs. I'm thinking of his paradoxical adherence to the Catholic faith in the cathedral at Reims – we're back on your native soil – while at the same time vowing to subvert it. He'll never leave behind the will to transgress; he remains haunted by the experience of salvation. That is, more or less, what Sartre reproaches him with in the famous 'Discussion on sin' at Marcel Moré's.[3]

He senses the possibility of getting back to a quasi-natural order, the order of continuity. The order of a general economy, a naturalness, with the energy of the sun. There is certainly some of that in him. With Bataille, there's a theoretical vision. You have to take theories as visions, if they seem to be of that order. At any event, we should refrain from dissecting them to sort the good from the bad. It's true that there's always a background and references, but, at a particular moment, you have the snapshot of a thought, and it is what it is, whatever misconceptions it may involve. We should practise a kind of visionary phenomenology of concepts, rather than insist always that they be right or wrong.

7 Fragments and viruses

> Propitious network winds bent their neurones
> Toward the instrumental world's virtual rim.[1]

There can be no question, then, of resisting virality – at any rate not in the style of the historical struggles of modernity's heyday.

I'm a bit resistant to the idea of resistance, since it belongs to the world of critical, rebellious, subversive thought, and that is all rather outdated. If you have a conception of integral reality, of a reality that's absorbed all negativity, the idea of resisting it, of disputing its validity, of setting one value against another and countering one system with another, seems pious and illusory. So there doesn't seem to be anything that can come into play except a singularity, which doesn't resist, but constitutes itself as another universe with another set of rules, which may conceivably get exterminated, but which, at a particular moment, represents an insuperable obstacle for the system itself. But this isn't a head-on resistance. That doesn't seem possible any more.

We have in the past identified four modes of attack and defence, of offensive and defensive action, a sort of genealogy: wolves, rats, cockroaches and viruses. To begin with, the enemy comes at us head-on. These are the wolves, but the same also goes for human enemies: so you build barricades, throw up ramparts, build the medieval town; at any rate, you resist head-on. The

enemy's visible. You know who you're dealing with. You might say that, up to Marx's class struggle, that was still the pattern. Then, following the wolves, come the rats. They're a subterranean enemy; there's no longer any way of defending against them head-on. You have to invent something else: a prophylaxis, a hygiene; you have to try to stamp out this more elusive enemy. After that comes another generation of enemies, the cockroaches, who don't move around in three-dimensional space, but in all the chinks in-between. Unlike the rats, they get everywhere. It's very difficult to keep them down. You have to restructure all the modes of defence. The fourth phase is the phase of viruses. At that stage we're in a fourth, viral dimension where resistance is no longer possible. What can you do then?

Sacrifice the supposedly pathogenic agents by veterinary carcase-burning . . .

We have to see what all this corresponds to. The rats are all the secret systems – intrigue and the like. The cockroaches represent parasitic action on all systems, making it impossible to be able to channel things. But the viruses are worse, because they are information itself. The virus is a supreme information-carrier, and at the same time it's destructive of information. It's an enemy, but we know nothing about it. Has it even a function? A vital function? It gets very difficult to protect yourself against it. These are problems the system itself has to answer, in terms of its self-defence. But those who wish to attack the system from the rear also face the same problem, since you have necessarily to follow the same lines of defence and attack.

In political terms, there are different levels: a level of head-on reaction and a level of subterranean abreaction. We have to make a clear distinction between reacting, which is to arm oneself against – and try to destabilize – the system, and abreacting. Abreaction consists merely in expelling something: you just don't accept it, but you don't fight it either, and you harbour no illusions about the possibility of overcoming it. It's simply unacceptable. This kind of abreacting seems to me today to be the mark of a very deep dissatisfaction, but a dissatisfaction that

can no longer be channelled through a critical consciousness and is no longer able to arm itself against a visible enemy.

Against an invisible and hence elusive enemy, I suppose you have to make yourself invisible and elusive. Thought has to become viral itself. This isn't a pessimistic conclusion, but you have to fight the enemy with its own weapons, in terms of its own logic. What we need, then, is a thinking that, in order to pose a challenge, is a match for a system that's paradoxical, elusive and random. There's a lot of self-delusion in trying to force problems back into traditional moulds: joining unions, protesting, demonstrating, as though we were still dealing with the same old world.

In his last book, The Great Disruption*, which hasn't been translated into French yet, Francis Fukuyama says the Internet will rebuild our societies; after the end of history, announced by him, the information revolution will enable us to recover the lost unity of our workplace and the site of our family life (through tele-working). A new social order that reactivates the old one . . .*

The account of things set out in *The End of History* seemed relatively unobjectionable to me, except that it was viewed very optimistically, very empathetically in relation to the system itself. For me, the Internet is part of the problem; it isn't a solution. We might even say it's the core of the problem today. I don't lend much credence to ideas of conviviality or even tribalism. Or then you can stay within a tradition that's more or less that of McLuhan: his analysis of the new media – globalism, the global village – was, in its way, quite optimistic.[2] But he was writing at a time when you could still see, if not a glowing future, then at least an open one, because we were still in a heroic period where the new technologies were concerned. This isn't the case any longer. We're in a period of saturation, and it's one thing to be facing a wave and quite another to have your head under the water.

What is a thinking that makes itself invisible and elusive? In other words, what is a thinking which itself becomes viral?

What becomes of a thinking [*une pensée*] when it's confronted with a world that is no longer exactly the critical world, the world of crisis and critical thought? Has it any purchase on a world that has become virtual and digital? I don't think so. Thought must be both homologous with its object and must at the same time be able to mark itself off from it one way or another. In relation to a viral, digital world and the like, thought too must perhaps become viral itself – that is to say, capable of creating different chains and unchainings of thought from those of objective or even dialectical criticism. It must be both immersed in this virality of the world and, at the same time, stand opposed to it: otherwise, it no longer exists as thought. It's a structural contradiction, but it's also an interesting condition: what does thought do with its object? Should it reflect it in terms of truth, be of the order of disclosure, refract it?

Or be of the order of correspondence – all the modalities of traditional metaphysics.

Or, alternatively, must thought be an event in itself, something which speeds up the order of the world? I am, rather, in favour of a thinking which obeys the rules by which the world plays itself out – since, if it plays another game, it no longer has any purchase – but a thinking which hastens the course of the world, precipitates it, in the literal sense of the word, towards its end. It's a precipitating factor. Otherwise, it doesn't constitute an event.[3] Thought, in this sense, remains a fatal strategy; it is in the order or disorder of things, which is no longer so very dialectical. It accentuates this sensitivity to the final conditions which seem to me to characterize the current course of the world, a paroxystic course. Thought is, then, this paroxystic element that is just before the end, but is moving ever more quickly towards the end. It's a little metaphysical still. Thought might perhaps

be said to share the physical condition of the world, which is viral, but it remains metaphysical in the sense that it shifts that condition to the second level; it ratchets up that 'objective' condition, which is objective only in name. What is going on now with thought is that there's a form of osmosis – though not of confusion – between subject and object, a form of chain reaction, rather than of reflection of the one on the other.

The epistemological break, so dear to Althusser, which gave a certain very French epistemology its finest hour, has had its day.

Yes, it's finished. While we were dealing with an objective reality principle, an objective reality, critical thought was within the realm of possibility. But if we take the hypothesis that we're dealing with an integral reality, an extreme reality, a reality more real than the real, a completion of reality that vanishes into virtuality, into the immanence of operations, we have to envisage other ways of thinking. This is very difficult to conceive, since thought has to be more and more radical, has increasingly to challenge the very order of cause and effect. In precipitating things towards their end, it's more in the area of effects (whereas critical thinking is in the area of causes; it lies always in the search for causes). This radical thinking, which corresponds to integral reality, is, then, in the area of effects: that is to say, it veers towards a form of paroxysm and extreme phenomenon we've already talked about.

But this remains very largely unresolved for me too, because this radical thinking has to be translated in some way into language. We come back to the problem: can language lend itself to a gymnastics – even an acrobatics – of this type? In any event, the advantage of this approach lies in its taking into account all the new elements: the random, the digital, the virtual and also the chaotic, which is the hypersensitivity to initial conditions.

The famous 'strange attractors' of Chaos theory, with the idea of sensitivity to initial conditions. To illustrate this phenomenon, use is generally

made of the so-called butterfly effect. And why not? On condition that we recall, as the meteorologist Edward Lorenz reminds us, that, 'If a beating of butterfly's wings can unleash a tornado, it can just as easily prevent one.'

I have come to wonder whether the strange attractor isn't, rather, in the final conditions. This precipitation of things towards their end plays at least as important a role as sensitivity to initial conditions. Thought is doubtless part of the chaotic elements, and hence of the initial conditions, which as such are no longer causes, but it seems to me to be much more on the side of this 'fatal' final term – 'fatal' not in the sense that it might be said to be inevitable or disastrous, but moving *fatefully* towards an end.

This is, it seems to me, a bit different from the viral. Virality doesn't seem to me to be of the order of the fateful, even though there's something ineluctable about it and it's of a different order from that of the sequence of causes and effects. Can thought be of that order, can it create chain reactions, generate metonymic sequences to infinity? Doubtless it can, but it's impossible for it to be of the order of cloning, of viral proliferation. All that is really very difficult to conceive. I'd imagined this might be a piece of good fortune for radical thought: since everything is conspiring to transfer all functions to the operational order, thought no longer has to deal with that; it finds itself both released from its objective responsibility and from burdensome functions, such as knowledge or the search for causes and so on.

It would be an opportunity for thought to radicalize itself in a state of weightlessness. In the current disorder this is perhaps the option we should take. But, in this ideal state of disengagement, if thought wants to constitute an event it must also reapprehend the event and the new order of things – all these new strategies of the digital and the virtual.

We have perhaps to see integrated criticism and this precipitation-style thinking as running in parallel.

Thought has always to be a challenge. It has to preserve something of the order of the counter-gift: not so much a critical opposition as a reversibility, an adverse power in the literal sense.

Critical thinking seems to me to march in time with the world it criticizes.

In that respect it might be said to be heir to a certain philosophy. There was a collusive form of critical integration in which contradiction could still have a place. Whereas, now – with critical, contradictory thinking having in a sense been absorbed, swallowed up by the course of things – thought has to find itself another field; it has perhaps to move into this fourth dimension; it would then have a clear vantage-point on something which ultimately goes its way without it. In virality there's no longer any question of transcendence, and hence no longer any need for reflection; things unfold by a kind of automatic writing. Thought too must find a way of unfolding automatically, that is to say, in a manner predestined by its own end. The most plausible hypothesis is that it's the event – in the anthropological or even cosmological order – that's seeking an end, though not in any way a transcendent end-goal.

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In Cool Memories IV*, you write: 'The rain which redoubles in violence before it stops. The water which speeds up as it comes to the waterfall. The athlete who "ties up" as victory approaches. Hypersensitivity to final conditions.'*[4] *And, in a more humorous vein, 'They say that old watches begin systematically to gain. Are they impatient for the end to come?'*[5] *What are we to say of this acceleration of the course of time as we approach the end?*

There is both a process which seems objective: things, such as water as it approaches the waterfall, go more quickly as they are nearing their end. This is a somewhat unfounded intuition which the physical sciences could perhaps verify. But it's also something I feel subjectively. A kind of hastening of things, of

anticipation of their end, of precession of the event which occurs at precisely that point in their unfolding. A total uncertainty sets in, but it is part of thought itself. It's the thought which implies its own end; it's the concept which implies its own realization. There is a form of catastrophe here in the literal sense.

Thought must move faster than things, faster than the world. From a certain point of view, thought is preceded by the world which, without even hypothesizing an objective reality, moves faster than it. The economy moves faster than economic thinking. But perhaps there is another field in which thought can, in its way – by a sort of ellipsis – move faster than the system. There's the ever-ambiguous interplay of the parallelism and intrication of thought and the world: are they synchronous? Are they definitively separated? Must they be? There's a distance that determines a kind of unequal tempo between thought and the world. The 'conservative' type of thought, which assumes thought to be a reflection of the world, will always lag behind. It was Rilke who said 'Events move in such a way that they will always inevitably be ahead of us. We shall never catch up with them.'

This is the case with critical thought in its historicist form, its incapacity to think its object which always eludes it.

It's always the shadow of something. But there is the possibility of another form of thought [*une autre pensée*]. This is made possible by language itself: if we dealt only with facts, if there were only facts, thought itself would be of the order of the facts; it would not, then, move faster. But language is something meteoric, which may assume another dimension, find a transverse form. If you accept there's an objective world, you can hypothesize that it's subject to the sequence of cause and effect and that, as a result, it doesn't move very quickly, since it can go no faster than that sequence. If, by contrast, you accept there's an order other than the causal, of which thought is the instigator, a different order, in which the effect would precede the cause, in which the sequences would form and unform differently, then there's a

possibility of moving more quickly. And, of course, it's that path I've found enticing.

Isn't the viral of that nature, as it is?

Yes, to an extent. It's another pathway that's no longer bound in to the causal sequence. Here we have to go beyond the hypothesis of objective reality toward that of integral reality. The same movement as leads from an analytical to a radical form of thought, which would be commensurate with a world 'veering' towards the viral, towards integral reality. Traditional, objective thinking is no longer up to this. What is? We come back here to language, to the elliptical forms of language, to the extraordinary possibilities for condensation – and hence for speed – that it offers. This isn't a spatial speed, obviously. Is it an acceleration? I don't know. Rather an ellipsis, a way of being able to concertina things, since language is not bound, in its literality, to the process of cause and effect. It can become almost a pure effect and, by that token, a sort of fantastic metaphor, establishing, by its speed, a form of precession of the event itself.

In any event, not an anticipatory, but a precipitatory form of thought.

Yes, a thinking based in precipitation and precession, not succession, which is of a rational type. The precessive order throws the ideas of origin and end into question; it overturns the successive order.

And hence, history and the traditional philosophies of history. This is the 'metaleptic' point of view, as you term it, which breaks with the rational course of things and stands it on its head.

It does. It's certain that language plays some part in this. There are perhaps other forms – why not? Plastic forms and sound forms. But language seems to me to be the major vehicle, the minor vehicle being analytic, causal thinking, which indeed we always practise in discourse. We live habitually in the discursive mode.

Yet the speech act, the act of thought, has the possibility of singularizing itself, of taking an elliptical, rather than a syntactic, form. It then manages to create singularities, mechanisms which no longer follow the normal course of things, but can go much more quickly, precisely because they have become singularities. In their manoeuvring, if I can put it this way, they no longer depend on the universal, on the dialectic between the universal and the particular. They are something singular. The whole task of art is to bring language down to its singularity, to wrest it from the particularity and universality of meaning. This is more or less what I have called poetic transference.

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You counterpose singularity to banality, but not in such a way as to come back to the categories of the universal and the particular. This is also for you the opportunity to go beyond the notions of identity, individuality, etc. Don't you go on, then, to an – at least implicit – critique of the underpinnings of democratic ideology. An unforgivable step!

I wouldn't fight on that ground; it's so ideological and demagogic. Yet it's patently obvious that democracy, as Lichtenberg says of freedom, is the easy solution. It's clear, he tells us, that man is born unfree, but, for quite obscure reasons, he finds this self-evident unfreedom unbearable. You could draw up a list of the easiest solutions: reality, for example, is an easy solution. Thought is part of a world it claims to analyse – there is an entanglement or a circularity which means there never will be any truth. It isn't possible to extract a truth from this cycle in which thought is integrally implicated, in which thought is a fragment of a whole which, at the same time, it mirrors. It will never be able to provide an omega point from which it would be the subject of knowledge! We are, then, in total uncertainty; this is the non-truth of the world, the non-reality of the world. It is the principle of illusion. The illusion is there, but it too is unbearable.

This isn't Platonic illusion, the lowest degree of knowledge.

And it isn't the argument that we can be said to have only a representation of things, as in Kant, and hence would never know anything of the world as it is in itself. No, the illusion lies elsewhere, in the entanglement and reversibility we were speaking of. This illusion is difficult to reconcile with existence. Hence the easiest solution: that of separating subject and object and instituting an objective reality. In a way, you can say that from the moment they are separated by this cutting of the umbilical cord, the object will fall into the grip of objective reality and the subject will end up in the illusion of his/her freedom. We are dealing here with a double illusion: the illusion of reality and that of freedom.

People find talk of this double illusion difficult to accept. You'll be met straight away with: 'What? Freedom doesn't exist? But you act as though you're a free subject!' Even if the sciences have reached the stage of definitive uncertainty, this easy solution, which has obvious, outward appearance on its side, is assured of survival. But it's a very exciting game for thought perpetually to escape the easiest solution. For want of being able to think evil and the principle of evil, we take the easy solution that is to speak of misfortune. Each time, we have this discrepancy, this gap. We have to accept this split; it's the extenuated form of duality.

Your dualism, as ever!

It's my transcendental Manicheism. But this duality is seldom experienced in its pure form. Most of the time it's experienced in the splitting of modes of life, of fantasies, of all the split lives, all the double lives, all the split societies which can be analysed from this perspective – the perspective of an abreaction to something unbearable.

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In symbolic exchange, as you conceive it, there's the idea of a reversibility of terms: life and death, good and evil, masculine and feminine. A reversibility that doesn't come into the commercial exchange based on the use-value or exchange-value of goods.

This idea of duality is really crucial for me: it's of the order of becoming. By contrast, individuality is of the order of change, of a plural identity. Change and becoming are very different things. Forms are of the order of becoming. They are never individualized. Forms, qualities and singularities are beyond comparison. They cannot be reduced to numbers, multiplication and calculation, whereas the individual lends itself immediately to digitization and multiplication. And it's this, in fact, that gives us the masses and the whole of mass culture, or cloning. This gives us the fractal, if you will, since the dual relationship has been fractured and, starting out from the basic unit, as in arithmetic, you can carry out all the operations you like; you are in an operational world. That's when you get into the series, into serial virality, cloning . . .

Let's look more closely at this idea of becoming, as opposed to change.

At birth, one of the possibilities takes shape, takes *my* shape, and everything else is ruled out; normally, from the subject's standpoint, the other possibilities no longer exist. But we may venture the hypothesis that all these others, which I have not been, continue to *become*; I, of course, exist, but the others continue to become, and, on occasions, I may become one of these others. Not just the other selves, but the others-than-myself, with which I can recover a dual relation, a becoming, not a self that might be said to subsist through change. This alternative of becoming can be seen in the notion of '*uchronia*' in the work of Charles Renouvier.[6] '*Uchronia*' is the possibility of a retrospective utopia, the idea that at a particular moment an event occurs, and hence exists, but, as we were saying, existence isn't everything. All the events that don't occur continue to become. Admittedly, they

don't take place, but there's another mode of being than existence, and their impact on the event itself – on the one that does occur – is considerable. So, what took place could virtually, so to speak, become something else, and did perhaps become so, and it isn't its end-goal that governs the event, but all these alternatives that we believe have disappeared. Their becoming forms part of the supposedly real existence of some particular event.

In the analysis of the French Revolution, for example, on which some historians pass an allegedly objective value judgement, we should be in a position to incorporate this '*uchronic*' dimension. There is a great and rather mysterious process of interplay here: the fact that, at a given moment, a particular decision becomes reality, a particular form imposes itself, to the apparent exclusion of the others. But the other possible outcomes are there. In the same way, perhaps, in the evolution of species, alongside a number of functional genes, all the others are obscurely going about their work. We should take this sort of simultaneity into account, a simultaneity not of the order of linear development, but rather of the order of becoming. And perhaps – we can see this as the Nietzschean horizon of the Eternal Return – all these possibilities will return, will occur in their turn. All the possibilities will then have the opportunity to occur and recur.

The self has its existence, its name, its history, and it changes, it identifies with itself, but I think it's always haunted by something other than what it is; it's haunted by what it could have become! This is very noticeable in poetic language. In Hölderlin, for example: his poetry is a perpetual becoming; he is successively the rivers he speaks of, his indwelling gods. He is not an identitary self, toying with his self-transformation into various figures; he is the theatre of the metamorphosis of rivers, gods and landscapes. It's not he who changes, but the rivers and gods which metamorphose through him. He makes room for a universal metamorphosis.

In this, Hölderlin is much closer to Heraclitus – 'Panta rhei'*: 'all things are in a state of flux' – than to Hegel, his old confederate in the Tübingen Stift.*

Infinitely closer to Heraclitus, in fact. I see here a radical opposition between a poetic, singular configuration, linked to the metamorphosis of forms, and the kind of virtual reality that's prevalent today. One can admittedly vary and multiply identities, but the (variable geometry) subject is still there. Whereas in the poetic form there's no subjected place; it is the forms which become.

We are, once again, as close as can be to Nietzsche; the idea of metamorphosis is very much present, and not just in Zarathustra. Metamorphosis and transmutation: a radicalism in action which, he said, will 'perhaps . . . one day be our posthumous fame'.[7]

Indeed. And this goes for language too. To manage to make language a site for the passage of forms, which it isn't in normal intercourse, where a definition of words and concepts persists; a site for the passage of forms, where words are no longer terms, but play-elements. Language as a kind of inhabited void.

The notions of singularity, destiny and impossible exchange occur together in your thinking. How are these three key concepts connected?

Identity implies difference. In the order of differences, and hence in the order of signification, of meaning, etc., there is a table of comparisons and exchanges. Singularity, by contrast, is incomparable. This is the essential point. It isn't of the order of difference. There's no general equivalent of singularity. It isn't governed by the abstraction of value and hence to exchange it is impossible. In each individual, too, there's something unexchangable, inalienable, irreducible even to change and existence. This is the character which may perhaps assume the form of a destiny.

8 Fragments of light

> While resting on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance – that is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.
>
> Walter Benjamin[1]

Art which moves us all the more when it is imperfect, fortuitous and fragmentary – these are your own words. This is perhaps a good way into our subject.

The problem is, rather, the word 'art'. What are we speaking of? Is it still a category, a history? What we understand intuitively by the term 'art' today is what is encompassed by discourses, museums, institutions, the history of art, general aesthetics. But are there still works that distinguish themselves sufficiently from the general run of things, from banality, to merit the name of art? This is the problem. In a way, everything is aesthetic, cruelly aesthetic. But in the order of illusion, in the order of another scene, does a power of art still exist?

What you've written about contemporary art has made a great stir!

Yes, and it's not over. It's still going on, even on the Internet where there are sites responding, always in extremely vehement terms, to this famous 'Art Conspiracy'.[2] It's curious because, ultimately, a lot of people share this analysis, but at the same time deny that they do – particularly among artists and critics, obviously.

We could perhaps go back over this 'art conspiracy'.

What was I saying? First that contemporary art was worthless [*nul*]! That was a provocation – all the more so as I accord the term *nullité* another meaning, a magical meaning, virtually a sublime one. Being *nul*, being worthless, knowing how to be worthless, knowing how to manage the illusion, the nothing and absence – there's a whole art to that, and it has always been the secret of great art. Whereas great art is *nul* because it manages all the wastage of daily life, art has become – at least since Duchamp – this kind of automatic refraction of a certain banality, to the point of turning itself into waste, of managing itself as waste, but with all the bombast and aura artistic practice dresses itself up in. It claims, then, to be *nul*, to be worthless! And all this is accompanied by a certain blackmailing through nullity which consists in saying: 'I present you with such and such a "work"; if you don't see anything in it, then you are stupid [*nuls*]!' A blackmail the world goes along with, or at least that the majority gives in to. Just as artists work on the world or on their bodies, to condemn them to decay, to annul them, as it were, the consumer, the spectator, does the same work on his mental faculties, annuls them also, and it's in this complicity that true nullity resides. It's the conspiracy . . .

A kind of 'con-plosion' . . .

You could say that – a form of implosion and conspiracy. Whereas for me nullity has another status. Not everyone is capable of being *nul*; it's even extremely rare. Not everyone is capable of being mad

like Artaud; not everyone is capable of being a machine like Warhol.[3] Contemporary art has turned its own disappearance, its declared self-destruction (announced two centuries ago) into its very material, but a material marketed and traded in terms of practice. Moreover, it has denied its own principles of illusion to become a performance, an installation performance, seeking to take over all the dimensions of the stage, of visibility, to make itself extremely operational too, and even if the torn and mutilated body of the artist is in play, this is still a conceptual operation. There is here a kind of forced visibility. With it, art moves into the same field as the media, as advertising, etc. It's no longer distinct from those things. Can we still speak of art? I'm not questioning the good faith of artists; I don't mind admitting that they do what they do in a state of sublime autosuggestion, but that cannot be the ultimate criterion.

Art has entered the field of consumption: not just that of the art market, but also of aesthetic vision. In the past (let us say until the eighteenth century) this illusion of art was not something shared by the masses; it was an entirely elitist object, wholly distanced, theatricalized. Whereas now, whether we like it or not, the masses have come into the game, and the artists have automatically incorporated this other, this terminal, that is mass demand. A demand that is, admittedly, elusive and improbable, but one that has been incorporated in so far as this mass destiny, this mass fate of banality, has been taken on board. Everything I happen to have written on this subject was the product of an intense, personal, subjective reaction, but also a reaction of annoyance and irritation and, particularly, of resistance to blackmail. That was what prompted it. Admittedly, you can find this same blackmail elsewhere, for example, in political discourse. If I singled out art, that was because it claimed immunity, benefiting from the aura its history confers on it. I took the view that this was a much more substantial abuse of power and prestige than you see among politicians, or even among intellectuals. Artists do claim a kind of extremely privileged status. So, no pity for them; we have to come back to what it is that they do. We see, then, that this is no longer any different from what people working in the

worlds of media 'image' and performance do. The concepts of performance and information have, so to speak, killed the concept of form.

You say art affects us when it imposes its illusion. Now, contemporary art, as you see it, no longer is illusion.

Art isn't capable any longer of creating this distance, this other scene or other dimension, this alternative world, this parallel universe, which isn't 'art for art's sake', but a kind of challenge to the reality principle and to reality itself. Contemporary art no longer seems capable of doing this! There are many 'personal' exceptions, but as soon as you enter the field of personalized judgement, the polemic gets completely out of hand.

It's possible, in effect, that this form of illusion – and of myth too – is no longer the commonest form of art. In a way, old Duchamp – in doing his little cut-and-paste operation on the object, which is doubled up when it is transposed into another dimension – gave rise to a general detachment.[4] Since then, the illusion specific to the work of art has disappeared. We have to take this into account, while retaining the idea that it's possible for illusion to re-emerge in appearances, but certainly not any longer in the institutional forms of current art. Similarly, though the social was once an idea, and though the political was once a dimension, we aren't going to find these things in their current forms.

So, term for term, we might say that if art no longer moves us, this is because it isn't imperfect, but residual; it's because it isn't fortuitous; it's no longer unconventional; it's no longer fragmentary, but of the order of waste.

To get at this, let's take the example of the image and the photograph.[5] I've been criticized quite a bit for taking photographs and exhibiting them, and as a result being in art, being an artist, like it or not. Now, to my mind, the photograph, that type of image, is a form alternative to what I was saying about art. So I'm not too

self-contradictory on this. Is there the possibility of a pure image, which wouldn't immediately be connoted by its aesthetic, by meaning, by the event? Can the almost anthropological status of the image be recovered, the magic proper to the image – that of a two-dimensional entity, as opposed to our universe of representation and reality – regaining, by that very recovery, a kind of purity? The term isn't a very good one, I agree, but can an image exist (other than a computer-generated image) that isn't the reflection or the representation of something? An image that would be – rather like what we said of thought in terms of the precipitating of an order towards its end – an accelerator of reality, but an accelerator towards illusion. An illusion-accelerator that is very clearly distinct from its object and is in a sense both an attractor and a form of destiny, of end. It's true that an image always puts an end to something; there's the freezing on the image, the freezing of the world in the image, and at the same time this definitive thing has already come to an end. What is captured is a form of objective fate [*fatalité*].

This brings to mind what Barthes says in Camera Lucida *of the young Lewis Payne, photographed by Alexander Gardner, waiting in a condemned cell: 'He is dead and he is going to die.'*[6] *A temporal short-circuit . . .*

There is in the image a parallel universe, a missing dimension which we should try to retain for it and so wrest it from the whole current visual universe, from the torrent of images. It's difficult, in so far as the same term 'image' refers to very different phenomena. How can we, then, restore to it this exceptional status of an image which puts an end to the world and is, at the same time, not its expression, but its emanation – a form of intuition from another dimension? To me, the photograph seems closer than film to the pure image. With the photograph, in effect, we remove movement, sound, smell and meaning from the object; we remove everything; the image is at the end of this indefinite process of subtraction. Whereas our common world of images is, rather, of an accumulative, informative order, just as traditional

thought is of an accumulative, evolutionist order. The other side is of a subtractive – I shan't say negationist – order, but ultimately this amounts to saying that the 'real' and 'reality' exist only under certain conditions, to which photography precisely puts an end.

You say we must relieve the real of the reality principle. What is at stake for the image is to free the real from this straitjacket of objectivity.

Yes, the challenge for the image is, by way of an object, to quash the principle of objectivity, and to transform it into something else, which isn't of the order of the subject either. In the photographic act, object and subject have their own particular modes of disappearance. You don't see many photographs today that aren't already over-determined or connoted by the name of the photographer, the theme or the style. Seldom do you see an anonymous image. Some old photographs are sometimes beautiful solely because we don't know where they come from; they come from a world that is past and gone, there's no sign of where they're from, no marks anywhere. It has become very rare to see photographs of this nature, and a successful photograph is one that forces you to look at it that way. Admittedly, the pure image is a dream, but the secret of that pure image has, I hope, not been lost.

We come back here to an idea you're fond of: photography as abreaction to the world in its most unusual, most unpredictable forms.

In the field of thought, I'd stood things on their head, saying: yes, we think the world, but because the world thinks us! In the image we find this same reversibility: the object which thinks us, which surprises us, which makes its own way. Ultimately, it would be best if nothing interposed itself between the object and the gaze, if that ground in between could be cleared. I'm thinking again here of what Rothko says – the idea of the work that moves towards the absolute confrontation of the object and the gaze, of the image and the gaze. At that point, it isn't a question of asceticism, of sacrifice or abnegation; it's a game. The rules of

the game belong both to the subject and to the object, something is played out without the subject being in control of the game. Seen this way, photography isn't a privileged object; the same question arises more or less everywhere. We settle it today in terms of participation, interactivity or interface, which seems to me a complete trap, because there has to be a duel. A game is also a duel. Between subject and object it's not a matter of reflection or refraction, but, at one and the same time, a cancelling-out of the respective poles and a duality.

We have to manage to rescue this duality, this dual confrontation. The problem today is that, with the whole world having become an image, it's increasingly difficult to find that omega point from which to put the world into abeyance through the image.

Photography which, in your own terms, should reveal 'the evil genius of reality' in the same way as you spoke in Fatal Strategies *of the evil genius of the social and the object. Evil again . . .*

This is the business of the transparence or *transparition* (the showing-through) of evil. Things appear to us only through the meaning we've given them, we no longer have any radical or immediate apperception, there's always a kind of filter. We have to foreground the idea of a radical '*transparition*' of things, their showing-through. This may be the transparence of evil, but also other forms of transparence. We might say it's the same with the image: behind our usual, common and commonplace three-dimensional world, might there not be an 'infra-reality', another more subtle, more secret world which would be that of illusion and its evil genius?

A parallel world?

Just that, a parallel universe. But we may hope that there are points of contact, points of emergence and appearance. I think so, for if this weren't the case, things would be quite hopeless.

What breaks through isn't an additional dimension. Photography doesn't add any dimension to the real that might be said to reveal some unsuspected depth of the world or its real transcendence: the aura of sanctity, the spectre or phantom (why not fairies, as in Nick Willing's film Photographing Fairies*?). On the contrary, for you photography is a kind of radical 'fragmentarization', a real flattening*[7] *of the image.*

There's the intuitive sense that this world, our three-dimensional world, isn't perhaps as real as we think and that it perhaps doesn't need reality in order to exist. The image is an act of treachery against the reality principle; it reveals that principle isn't perhaps as solid as we think.

Many ethnographic accounts stress the thorough strangeness for many cultures of supposedly representational photography. You have to learn to decipher three-dimensional space. You've only to look at Pierre Francastel's remarks on the invention of perspective – a 'systematic space' – in the Quattrocento.

The advantage of the image in this regard is that it casts absolute doubt on this dimension of meaning, this third dimension that is mental and gives us an illusion of reality. I once read a remarkable book called *Flatland*, written by Edwin A. Abbott, an American author, in 1884. In it he first describes 'Pointland', a dimensionless world which is reduced to a point and hence to an elusive, uninhabitable singularity, but which takes itself, nonetheless, for God. Then comes 'Lineland', into which the narrator makes a foray – a one-dimensional world that's purely linear. Then 'Flatland' with the two dimensions of a flat universe. And lastly 'Spaceland', the three-dimensional universe we know. Beyond this, the worlds no longer have names and no one visits them yet.

The following thought occurred to me. Space had in theory three dimensions, then Einstein came along and added a fourth: time. But time itself has three dimensions: present, past and future. Religion added eternity, but God himself has three dimensions: Father, Son and Holy Spirit . . . so what then would the

fourth dimension of God Himself be? The principle is that each supplementary dimension cancels out the others, and the fourth dimension – as it happens, that of the image in relation to the real world – would cancel out the objective conditions of this world. Admittedly, it isn't very scientific, but it's an intuition Abbott's book embodies strikingly. Everything that enables us to attribute a cause, an origin or an end to things comes from our being within the co-ordinates of a supposedly 'objective' world. So many postulates which can and must be questioned. The image is a kind of metaphor for this, and that's why photography excited me. I couldn't any longer see how to operate in the order of theoretical thinking. In the analytical field, whatever you do, you're always in the order of discourse, which is an order that's familiar, almost too familiar even – which carries away meaning. Whereas the image corresponded to a stranger rupture, a more radical vanishing point [*point de fuite*].

You also imply that there's no possible affective transference on to reality other than through a counter-transference from the image, and you add that this latter has to be resolved.

This may seem a bold proposition. But you can easily see – I experienced this myself at a photojournalism festival – the indifference of people's reactions to all the bloody scenes of murder and catastrophe of all kinds. There's a problem here, as there's a widespread illusion that you have to bear witness in order to bring about raised awareness. Not at all. Sensibility is completely nullified by the pornographic impact of the image! There is, literally, a murder of the image, a short-circuiting by signification, which means that the image itself, this kind of radical otherness, no longer exists as such. When it exists, when this transference on to the image itself exists, which is a counter-transference to the signification of the image, then something of what it attempted to signify does show through, as an added extra, so to speak.

Like the cure in psychoanalysis which, as Lacan put it, always came as something extra.

Exactly, it can only come as something extra. You can't pick up meaning frontally; an image that offers it to you that way won't be received. That creates a non-differentiation of meaning. For something like a signification or message to appear, the medium – in this case, the image – has to exist in a specific way of its own, to exist in itself; then we shall perhaps get a meaning. Otherwise, we get nothing. If we sacrifice the image, the meaning we thought we were getting through won't get through. There is here a form of paradox most photographers neglect. I was able to see this at Perpignan:[8] all the problems of a professional order relating to the right to the image, all these inextricable conflicts, came from the fact that they hadn't even posed this problem. In the way photography operates, you find practices that look a bit like the art conspiracy: between the photographic agencies, the dealers and the public, the information market is so circular that there's no longer any way out.

The same problem arises in language itself. If language doesn't exist in its own right, if we don't take it in its materiality, its literalness, and treat it in its form, then all that it's trying to suggest to us, to signify to us, fails to get through. This is a very topical problem; we're in this catastrophe of meaning, this total non-differentiation that's linked to an exponential build-up of messages. There is then a kind of zero-sum equation.

I like photographs because they're fragments, the smallest possible form of the whole. It's undoubtedly a very limited field but, here at least, you can try to see what remains of the possibility of the pure image – at least of its concept – and perhaps even of a 'beyond' of the image.

Your photos don't call forth any commentary. Otherwise we'd be back at an accumulative, evolutionist logic. You might say of the photographic image what Barthes said of the theatre: there is the being-there[9] of the image, and that's all there is to it: all the rest is literature.

Indeed. I'm talking about photography in general. Where each individual photograph is concerned, there's nothing to say, since it's a site of disappearance of the subject and meaning.

And you haven't yet written a book on your photography.

When I say I'm not a photographer, it's in that sense, because I can see that photographers want to be photographers: they make a product that is photography. Whereas for me photography's a medium. It's certainly a medium revealing of something, but it remains in itself an impersonal object. What interests me is the object, not the photographic project.

Those who read you from the early days surely didn't expect to find you doing this! They might have thought your criticism of representation would include photographic representation.

Indeed, there can be no question of successfully demonstrating that the image – in the sense in which I mean it – isn't of the order of representation. If one could just manage to give a sense of this, then that would already be an achievement. In the same way as I posed the question whether thought could move beyond meaning and truth, one may wonder whether the image and the photograph can also move beyond representation.

That is the sovereign hypothesis, the radical hypothesis. The commonest hypothesis is that they are both earmarked for the same destiny – for thought the destiny of saturating the discursive space, for the image the destiny of saturating the visual space.

Does your activity as a photographer owe anything to Roland Barthes, to the work he devoted to photography, Camera Lucida*? Although he wasn't a photographer himself, and that's quite a substantial difference from you. On the other hand he did draw, somewhat in the style of Michaux.*[10] *This brings to mind what Cocteau said: 'Drawing is writing tied and untied differently.'*

As it happens, I have one of those drawings, and you're right, it isn't unlike a Michaux, I find it very beautiful. A friend of Barthes's has a very fine collection of them which he exhibited at Rio. To come back to *Camera Lucida*, which I read with admiration, the book had no direct photographic influence on me, since it appeared in 1979, not long before his death, at a time when I wasn't at all interested! I came to photography in a much more occasional and fortuitous way, and only later. But Barthes's text was there and it's a permanent counterpoint or *contrapunctum*, Barthes being the one who used the word *punctum* to refer to the absent site at the heart of the image that gives it its force.

There's also Walter Benjamin, whom we've already spoken about, and his famous 'A Small History of Photography', which has just been republished in French. There, for example, we find the reference to an article in the Leipziger Stadtanzeiger *at the end of the last century, in which a journalist condemned photography as a black art from France that tries to 'capture fleeting mirror images', which can only be 'blasphemous'.*[11]

What Benjamin wrote on photography is key. I discovered him at the time I was talking about objects, images and signs, through his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. I didn't then know his writings on history, which I read later. Everything he wrote seems to me to be extremely lucid! He cast the dimension of the original into question outstandingly well, and not in a trivial way. Admittedly, by talking about the way technology changed that, but even more by talking about the metaphysic underlying technology. I'm thinking in particular about what he said of the *aura* as being 'the unique appearance of a distance, however close it may be'.[12] He also questioned the concept of history. He was a pioneer in his day. And then he writes densely and poetically. But he's never been such a close reference for me as Barthes, for example.

Benjamin wrote some very good pieces on photography. He says, for example, that photography 'overturns the fundamental character of art'.[13]

It puts an end to its transcendent character. But he is very ambiguous on this question and I like that too. This is his modern, topical side, in the sense that he doesn't do timeless philosophy. He's always fascinated and at the same time repelled by what he describes. The object is always dual. We're not talking about an object that's been isolated so that it can be mastered in the analysis. You have the impression, rather, that the object wrestles beneath his pen; it's drawn in, it pushes him away. He's fascinated by the photographic world, as he is by modernity, whether it be the Paris arcades or the city. He showed an interest in almost everything. Finding the secret of a reversibility of writing, between what it says and the way it says it: the secret of a reversibility of history, which isn't linear. It doesn't run in one direction. Not long after the discovery of relativity he was perhaps the first to have translated it into thought. Into ideas, I'm not so sure, nor into facts either . . . but certainly into thought. What Benjamin produced really was thinking [*une pensée*]! We might make a distinction between a philosopher, an ideologue and a thinker, even if this last term is a bit too serious. Thinking [*La pensée*] is something else, it's an entirely unfinished vision.

Thinking that can't be said to be inhabited by an ambition to achieve closure.

Quite the reverse, in thinking everything bursts through. So far as photography is concerned, lots of things have happened since, but, ultimately, we've never yet resolved how things stand with the image in a world where repetition, the serial and the visual have a hold of things. It's the irruption of the democracy of the gaze into a world in which not everything was perceptible, not everything was worthy of being seen. Most things did not reach the perceptible realm. Now, suddenly, everything comes into that realm and this is a real revolution. And indeed Benjamin sees it as such. But sadly revolutions aren't as we imagine them, or they aren't

what they were. He nonetheless gave culture a dimension that's not elitist, but rather qualitative, incomparable, singular, which must not be sacrificed.

An aristocratic conception of culture.

Aristocratic is the word! While being hypersensitive to all that's going on around him. In that respect he is, in the field of culture, to some degree the heir of Tocqueville. His status as an exile, as a Jew perhaps, gives him additionally this tragic dimension in relation to his own culture. Which is no longer the case today, with culture being perceived merely as a consensual medium, a great means of integration. In this sense, he was one of the great men of culture, without this assuming the aspect of a philosophical system. Moreover, many of his texts are like fragments; they are at best essays, always very short. It was this which, at a later stage, attracted me most to him: the form his thought takes. It's elliptical, a snapshot as we might say, reflecting a world that has definitively lost its cohesion, its *aura*. Must we, like the angel, advance facing backwards?[14]

Benjamin's work is both tinged with a deep melancholy – which is a quality – and a very remarkable intellectual adventurousness. This is an exceptional combination.

Among the many essays devoted to photography, we should also cite the very remarkable ones by Susan Sontag – in particular, On Photography.[15]

Certainly Susan Sontag, whom I read with great interest, or Wilhem Flusser, who's concerned more with the technical level. There are, like this, a number of outstanding books, some that are even a little mad, such as *La Photographie et le néant* written by an academic from Louvain, a kind of extraordinary mishmash where Benjamin, Barthes and Deleuze are all brought in,[16] a range of very good quotations, but also a totally fixed position, in which photography is seen as the absolute denial of the real, a denial both of representation and the real, and hence in a way as a symbolic murder. A symbolic murder effected by way of a

technical object. There's also a murder of the image, in the sense that it's exploited for all sorts of parasitic ends, but isn't this violence done to the image a payback for the symbolic murder the image itself perpetrates on the real?

A murder with a weapon that's more or less Lichtenberg's knife with no blade and no handle – the camera with no blade and no handle.

It's what happens in the fable of the invisible man: if he touches a visible object he makes it invisible. This is true of thought [*la pensée*], which has, itself, a handle and a blade. Or, rather, thought has to be this invisible, indiscernible blade that turns around against the handle (the world, the powers that be?), which is itself non-existent and indiscernible.

It had crossed my mind that the ultimate phase of photography, which has never for me been an end in itself, but merely a line of progression, might be – as with writing indeed – permanent silence.

That would enchant all those who are absolutely attached to your Zen side!

That has nothing to do with it. The ultimate stage would be to travel through an entire country without a camera, and also without the slightest remorse for the lost images. In short, to go beyond photography and see things as if they had themselves already passed beyond the image, as if you'd already photographed them in a previous life. Perhaps indeed we've already passed through the image-stage, as though it were a stage of animal development of which the mirror-stage is merely the pale reverberation in our individual lives. Admittedly, there's no compulsion to get to that point, but I'm attached to this idea that, at a given point, a symbolic activity – be it writing or photography – can have passed into fact, passed into the world as it is, and consequently no longer has any need to exist. But for that you have to attain a wisdom I don't possess! It's very tempting all the same, whether it be Rimbaud-like, where you say 'I've shown what I

can do. Goodbye. It's over!' – that was a temptation for a whole generation – or a form closer to disappearance, an art of disappearance, which wouldn't be *ressentiment*, but acceptance of the world as it is, seeking from that point on to remove all that intervened to disturb the play of appearances – that so rare and precious space of appearances. But, and this is perhaps good fortune, we're in a world that's too turbulent for that. It's too abstract a stance. I believe you have to be in the game while, at the same time, being in an offside position, so to speak!

*

In Impossible Exchange, *you devoted a chapter to photography as 'light writing', from the Greek etymology of the word, φόως γράφειν. What kind of insight does this give us into your practice of photography?*

The term 'writing' is metaphorical here. We should speak, rather, of light 'graphics'. When the word was invented in the nineteenth century, it had that meaning.[17]

You sum this up in an aphorism: 'Objects are merely a pretext for the light; if there were no object, light would circulate endlessly and we wouldn't even perceive it. If there were no subject, the circulation of thought would be infinite and there wouldn't even be an echo of it in consciousness. The subject is that on which thought halts in its infinite circulation, that against which it is reflected, and the object is that on which light halts, that which reflects it. So, photography is the automatic writing of light.'

Ultimately, it isn't we who grasp a part of the world; we are merely the obstacle against which light breaks. It's as ever the idea that there's a thinking that's independent of the subject: we think the world, but the world thinks us. There's nothing mystical in this, there's a gigantic process, and we shouldn't claim – we who are a spark, a fragment – to have brought it into the world. Thought, like light, is merely a phase in this process. In the cosmos there are two great mutations: the one in which

it divides in such a way that light appears and the world becomes visible to itself, which it wasn't previously. Thought is the other great mutation, by which the species and the world become, if not intelligible, at least self-reflexive.

We are merely fragments, but at the same time we have an essential role: that of being there, of arresting light, arresting thought in a freeze-frame. We're the pivot, the *punctum*, which gives us a crucial role. I come back to the proposition from which I started out when I was working on the object: it's the world which thinks us, it's the object which thinks us. A kind of reversion that might be said to translate reversibility into terms that are, unfortunately, still alternative, because discourse forces us to say it that way. We should be able to express this reversible form in one and the same figure, in terms of a kind of poetic situational transference.

But not the 'Apollinian' light as clarity, as transparency, the one that metaphorically accompanies all Western thought, as soon as it pretends to an adequate knowledge of its object. Nor Bataille's sun either, the inexhaustible reserve of energy. It would be, rather, a light that casts shadow. 'But to give light implies/No less a sombre moiety of shade', as Valéry says.[18]

Of course. It isn't Apollinian 'brightness'. Nor is it Bataille's sun – energy without anything given in return – since there's reciprocation here. If we weren't there, there'd be no *becoming* of light, or of thought. It's thanks to us that these things *become*, but the basic flow, the basic energy, comes from elsewhere.

The light from elsewhere. Watch out, they're going to think you've received illumination!

There isn't exactly a source, but light proceeds, nonetheless, from a fracture in the cosmic order. In the beginning it wasn't there. This fracture created something like matter and anti-matter. The anti-matter exiled into cosmic space by the distinguishing-out of matter doesn't for all that cease to exist. It's this kind of

dark continent that doubtless also radiates out. A radiation of anti-matter to which we might be said to be exposed and which makes us 'black bodies'.[19] Let's hope so! We aren't just instruments of light!

Where contemporary art is concerned – this is perhaps what makes it useless, preposterous and uninteresting in my view – it seems to me that no light appears in it any more. There are light sources, but no light any longer, except in a few cases, such as Hopper or Bacon. With a great deal of photography it's the same. What remains of light in a world of electricity? But the contrast between the two is itself fascinating. I was, for example, very sensitive to the magical opposition there is between the world of artificial light of Las Vegas – the world of gambling, in the harshly lit catacombs of the casinos – and the solar light of the surrounding desert.

9 Fragment fragments

He who has no shadow is merely the shadow of himself.

Isn't one always in a way faithful to one's youth? To what early thought or gesture have you remained faithful?

Doubtless to the idea of a break, a violent break, Rimbaud-like if you will, following a forced, very rapid process of assimilation during my adolescent years, a frenzied form of memory, all of which reached a critical mass. That break was to be combined with an intellectual and social break. Everything started there, it seems to me. At bottom, this has never changed, except that I put an end to the accumulative dimension, or it went underground, grew much more silent and hence less effective. Must one look in one's biography for the deep reasons for this break? Perhaps. I'm reluctant to sociologize, but it's true there was the break with my family, with my parents who were of peasant stock, with a largely uneducated milieu, to be propelled – by some obscure fantasy of my parents themselves, which I don't claim to understand – into a more cultivated dimension. But I've always remained deeply faithful to this primitive unsophistication. Culture is an added extra. It's something you must be able to reject, eliminate, do without. It's something other than culture that counts.

'He who speaks of himself should never say the whole truth; he should keep it secret and divulge only fragments.' This rule of scrupulous fragmentization out of a sense of delicacy applies as much to the theoretical and conceptual universe as to the real world. One should divulge only fragments and keep the rest secret. This is Kierkegaard's principle of 'scrupulous delicacy', to which I would happily add the principle of unscrupulous delicacy, of unscrupulous discretion.

*

Happiness is the easiest solution

Just as freedom forces itself upon us as the easiest solution to the problem of the subject and his/her destiny, so happiness has forced itself upon us as the easiest solution to the problem of evil. Or rather it is unhappiness and misfortune, even easier to manage than happiness, that is the solution to the problem of evil.

Just as freedom ends in integral liberation and, in abreaction to this, in a new servitude, so the unacceptable idea of integral happiness leads on to an entire culture of misfortune, a victim culture, a culture of recrimination, repentance, denunciation and miserabilist compassion.

We go on discarding freedom and happiness in every way, while continuing to speak in their name; we go on dreaming of perfect happiness, while sensing the potential boredom of paradise. But without waiting for paradise we are already confronted, in the form of an out-and-out technical culture, with the ideal conditions of life, and it is from hypersensitivity to these final conditions that, here and now, we are abreacting violently and obscurely, and are inclining towards misfortune and unhappiness as the most durable solution – a kind of 'cruise control' or line of flight – in the face of the terroristic happiness conspiracy.

We are not, for all this, getting any nearer to evil or the essence of evil. Quite the reverse. It is indeed misfortune that is most distinctly opposed to evil and the principle of evil, of which it is the denial (a fatal strategy?).

'For we know what Hell is like and those burning there, since Hell is not being able ever to do anything but evil. But what about those who, in Paradise, will no longer have any idea of Evil? God alone knows what awaits them.'

The unbearability of Evil

'Bis Gottes Fehl hilft', says Hölderlin, 'Until God's absence helps.' The death of God is, in fact, a piece of good fortune. It is the end of transcendence, the deliverance from all responsibility to another world. Henceforth the world is there, immanent; the world is totally self-evident and this self-evidence is unbearable. This is, properly speaking, evil, and there is no longer any possible redemption. Or rather redemption changes meaning: it is no longer the redemption of man and his sin, but that of the death of God. That death has to be atoned for (as in all cases where prophecy fails – Mühlmann[1]) by a compulsive effort of transformation of the world with a view to happiness. One must ensure one's salvation at all costs by realizing the world and by realizing oneself entirely (and here we come back to the problem of entire, integral reality). From this point on, Good and Evil, which were still opposing powers, but linked to each other in their straining towards transcendence, will be split, with a view to an optimal fulfilment, a definitive realization of the world under the sign of Good and Happiness. This has, in fact, merely a distant connection with the moral essence of Good, since Evil is driven out of it. Good of this kind no longer has anything moral about it, since it consists solely in the performance of happiness. The ideal of performance has taken over from moral self-surpassing – a new secular transcendence which completes that described by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which the world is transformed into value for the greater glory of God. In this case, the point is to make the world transparent and operational with no other aim than to root out all illusions and bad powers, all of Evil and the principle of Evil. In this way, under the hegemony of Good, everything is getting better and better and is, at the same time, going from bad to worse.

For this splitting of Good and Evil leads simultaneously, and in one and the same movement, to integral Good and integral Evil.

On the necessity of Evil and Hell

There is no longer any irrevocable damnation today. There is no longer any hell. We may concede that we are still within the mongrel concept of Purgatory, but virtually everything falls within the scope of redemption. It is clearly from such an evangelism that all the manifest, promotional signs of well-being and fulfilment derive that are offered us by a paradisaical society subject to the Eleventh Commandment ('Be happy and give all the signs of contentment!') – the one that cancels out all others. But we can also read this demand for salvation and universal atonement in the way that not only all current violence and injustices, but also, retrospectively, all the crimes and contradictory events of the past are now coming in for condemnation. The French Revolution is put in the dock and slavery is condemned, along with original sin and battered wives, the ozone layer and sexual harassment. In short, the pre-trial investigation for the Last Judgement is well under way. We are condemning, then pardoning and whitewashing, our entire history, exterminating the Evil from even the tiniest crevices in order to present the image of a radiant universe, ready to pass into the next world. A gigantic undertaking. One that is inhuman, superhuman, too human? As Stanislaw Lec says, 'We no doubt have too anthropomorphic a view of man.' And why feed this eternal repentance factory, this chain reaction of bad conscience? Because everything has to be saved. This is what we have come to today: everything will be redeemed, the entire past will be rehabilitated, polished to the point of transparency. As for the future, there's even better in store, and even worse: everything will be genetically modified to achieve biological perfection and the democratic perfection of the species. Salvation, which was defined by the equivalence of merit and grace, will, once the abscess of evil and hell has been drained, be defined by the equivalence between genes and performance.

Actually, once happiness becomes purely and simply the general equivalent of salvation, there is no further reason for heaven. No heaven without hell, no light without darkness. No one can be saved if no one is damned (by definition, but we also know this intuitively: where would the elect find pleasure, except in the contemplation of God, were it not for the spectacle of the damned and their torment?). And once everyone is virtually saved, no one is. Salvation no longer has any meaning. This is the fate in store for our democratic enterprise: it is vitiated from the outset by the neglect of necessary discrimination, by the omission of evil. We therefore need an irrevocable presence of Evil, an Evil with no possible redemption, a definitive discrimination, a perpetual duality of Heaven and Hell, and even in a way a predestination to Evil, for no destiny can be without some predestination. There is nothing immoral in this. By the rules of the game there is nothing immoral in some losing and others winning, nor even in everyone losing. What would be immoral would be for everyone to win. Now, this is the contemporary ideal of our democracy: that everyone be saved. And this is possible only at the cost of a perpetual upping of the stakes, of endless inflation and speculation, since ultimately happiness is not so much an ideal relationship to the world as a rivalry with, and a victorious relation to, others. And this is good: it means that the hegemony of Good, of the individual state of grace, will always be thwarted by some challenge or passion, and that any kind of happiness, any kind of ecstatic state, can be sacrificed to something more vital, which may be of the order of the will, as Schopenhauer has it, or of power, or of the will to power in Nietzsche's conception, but something which, in any event, is of the order of Evil, of which there is no definition, but which may be summed up as follows: that which, against any happy intended purpose [*destination heureuse*], is predestined to come to pass.

Beneath its euphoric exaltation, this imperative of optimum performance, of ideal achievement, certainly bears evil and misfortune within it, then, in the form of a profound disavowal of such fine prospects, in the form of a secret, anticipated disillusion-

ment. Perhaps even this is again just a collective form of sacrifice – a human sacrifice, but a disembodied one, distilled into homeopathic doses.

Wherever humans are condemned to total freedom or to ideal fulfilment, this subversion seeps in – this automatic abreaction to their own good and their own happiness. When they are ordered to get the maximum efficiency and pleasure out of themselves, they remain out of sorts and live a split existence. In this strange world, where everything is potentially available (the body, sex, space, money, pleasure) to be taken or rejected *en bloc*, everything is there; nothing has disappeared physically, but everything has disappeared metaphysically. 'As if by magic or enchantment', you might say. Only the fact is, it is more by disenchantment. Individuals, such as they are, are becoming exactly what they are. With no transcendence and no image, they pursue their lives like a function that is useless in respect of another world, irrelevant even in their own eyes. And they do what they do all the better for the fact that there is no other possibility. No instance, no essence, no personal substance worthy of singular expression. They have sacrificed their lives to their functional existences. They coincide with the exact numerical calculation of their lives and their performances. An existence fulfilled, then, but one at the same time denied, thwarted, disavowed. The culmination of a whole negative counter-transference.

This imperative of optimum performance at the same time comes into internal contradiction with the democratic moral law which ordains that everyone be perpetually re-set to equality and everything re-set to zero, on the pretext of democracy and an equal sharing of opportunity and advantage. Given the prospect of salvation for all and universal redemption, no one has the right to distinguish himself, no one has the right to captivate [*séduire*]. For justice to be done, all privilege must disappear; it is for all to rid themselves voluntarily of any specific qualities, to become once again an elementary particle[2] – collective happiness, based on levelling down and repentance, leading to the coming of the lowest common denominator and basic banalities. This is like a

reverse potlatch, with everyone outdoing each other in minimalism and victimhood, while fiercely cultivating their tiniest differences and cobbling together their multiple identities.

Repentance and recrimination are all part of the same movement: recrimination means going back over the crime to correct its course and effects. This is what we are doing in going back over the whole of our history, over the criminal history of the human race, to do penance here and now as we await the Last Judgement. For God is dead, but his judgement remains. Which explains the immense syndrome of resipiscence and (historical) rewriting (with the future genetic and biological rewriting of the species still to come) that has seized the twentieth century's end; with an eye, as ever, to deserving salvation and – with the prospect of the final accounting before us – to presenting the image of an ideal victim. Naturally, we are not speaking of a real trial or of genuine repentance. It is a matter of fully enjoying the spectacle of one's own misfortune: 'Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order' (Walter Benjamin).[3]

This is but the latest episode in a heart-rending process of revisionism – running down not just the history of the twentieth century, but all the violent events of past centuries, to subject them to the new jurisdiction of human rights and crimes against humanity (just as every action today is subjected to the jurisdiction of sexual, moral or political harassment). As part of the same trend by which all works of art (including the human genome) are listed as world heritage sites, everything is put on the list of crimes against humanity.

The latest episode, then, of this revisionist madness has been the proposal to condemn slavery and the slave trade as crimes against humanity. An absurd proposal to rectify the past in terms of our Western humanitarian consciousness or, in other words, in terms of our own criteria, in the purest traditions of colonialism. This imperialism of repentance really is the limit! The idea is, in fact, to enable the 'peoples concerned' to put this tragedy behind

them thanks to this official condemnation and, once their rights have been restored and they have been recognized and celebrated as victims, to complete their work of mourning and draw a line under this page of their history in order to become full participants in the course of modernity. It might be seen, then, as a kind of successful psychoanalysis. Perhaps the Africans will even be able to translate this moral acknowledgement into damage claims, using the same monstrous measure of equivalence from which the survivors of the Shoah have been able to benefit. So we shall go on compensating, atoning and rehabilitating *ad infinitum*, and we shall merely have added to raw exploitation the hypocritical absolution of mourning; we shall merely, by compassion, have transformed evil into misfortune.

From the standpoint of our recycled humanism, the whole of history is pure crime – and, indeed, without all these crimes there quite simply would be no history: 'If we eliminated the evil in man,' wrote Montaigne, 'we would destroy the fundamental conditions of life.' But, on this basis, Cain killing Abel is already a crime against humanity – and almost a genocide (there were only two of them!), and isn't original sin already a crime against humanity? All this is absurd, all this humanitarian, retrospective fakery is absurd. And it all stems from the confusion between evil and misfortune. Evil is the world as it is and as it has been, and one may look upon this with lucidity. Misfortune is the world as it never should have been – but in the name of what? – in the name of what should be, in the name of God or a transcendent ideal, of a Good it would be difficult indeed to define. We may take a criminal view of crime – that is the tragic view – or we may take a recriminatory view – and that is the humanitarian view, the pathos-laden, sentimental view, the view which constantly calls for reparation. We have here all the *ressentiment* dredged up from the depths of a genealogy of morals, and requiring in us reparation for our own lives.

This retrospective compassion, this conversion of evil into misfortune is the twentieth century's most flourishing industry. First as a mental blackmailing operation, to which we all fall victim, even in our actions, from which we can now hope only for the

lesser evil (keep a low profile, do everything in such a way as anyone else could have done it – decriminalize your existence!). Then as a profitable operation with gigantic yields, since misfortune (in all its forms: from suffering to insecurity, oppression to depression) represents a symbolic capital, the exploitation of which – even more than the exploitation of happiness – is endlessly profitable from the economic standpoint. It's a gold-mine, as they say, and there is an inexhaustible source of ore, because the seam lies within each of us. Misfortune commands the highest prices, whereas evil cannot be traded. It is impossible to exchange.

To transcribe evil into misfortune and then to transcribe misfortune into commercial, or spectacular, value – most often with the collusion or assent of the victim himself. But the victim's collusion with his own misfortune is part of the ironic essence of Evil. It is what brings it about that no one wants his own good, and nothing is for the best in the best of all worlds.

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Notes

1 Untimely fragments

1 '. . . *comme on n'a qu'une seule idée dans sa vie*'. This comment is qualified subsequently.*

2 From his first book, *La Philosophie Tragique*, published in 1960 – he was just twenty – to his latest, *Loin de moi* (1999), Clément Rosset has constantly had, if we may put it this way, a single iron in the fire: that of an essentially joyful, unconditionally and totally life-affirming philosophy.

3 F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 81.*

4 Pataphysics or, more properly, 'Pataphysics, was defined by Alfred Jarry as 'the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments'.

5 Baudrillard attended the Lycée at Reims in the 1940s. Daumal, Gilbert-Lecomte and Vailland had been there in the 1920s, when they adopted the pseudonyms Nathaniel, Coco le Colchide and Dada respectively in 'le Grand Jeu', a made-up world of the imagination built around an invented character, Bubu, and also experimented with intoxicants. They founded a magazine entitled *Apollo*.*

6 The title is in fact *Une saison volée* and the novel was published by Gallimard in 1986.*

7 See *Ubu Cocu* (*Ubu Cuckolded*), esp. Act I, Scene IV.*

8 'I am not dealing with a museum piece from the history of philosophy. I believe the system has an application: it can serve as a means of thinking' (J. L. Borges, 'The Kabbalah', *Seven Nights*. Translated by Eliot Weinberger, with an introduction by Alistair Reid (London: Faber, 1986), p. 101).*

9 In Cyril Connolly and Simon Watson Taylor's translation, *Palotins* are rendered as 'Palcontents' and the *gidouille* as the 'strumpot'. See Alfred Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1968).*

2 'Activist' fragments

1 The BDIC at Nanterre holds a copy of a publication described as *Bulletin d'information* n° 2 (January 1964) issued by the 'Comité d'initiative pour une association populaire franco-chinoise'.*
2 The OAS (*Organisation de l'Armée Secrète*) was the pro-*Algérie française* grouping of right-wing extremists and dissident soldiers who waged a campaign of terror in France and Algeria in the 1960s.*
3 Lefebvre was attacked by the Situationists in *L'Internationale Situationniste* 10 (March 1966) for allegedly plagiarizing the 'Theses on the Paris Commune' published by Debord, Kotanyi and Vaneigem in March 1962.*
4 Selections from Baudrillard's writings for *Utopie* will be published by Verso in 2004.*
5 For Baudrillard's concept of the transpolitical, see his works *Fatal Strategies* (London: Pluto, 1990) and *The Transparency of Evil* (London: Verso, 1993).*

3 Aphoristic fragments

1 *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 94.*
2 The French here is '*la dérive urbaine*'. On this concept, see L. Andreotti (ed.), *Theory of the Dérive and other Situationist Writings on the City* (London: Atlantic Books, 1997).*
3 The articles by Raoul Vaneigem entitled 'Basic Banalities' parts I and II (*from Internationale Situationniste*, nos. 7 and 8 respectively) are translated in Ken Knabb (ed.), *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: The Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), pp. 89–100, pp. 118–33.*
4 From the Greek *akedia*, which means indifference or heedlessness, but also torpor or sluggishness. Transposed into Latin (*acedia*), then into French, the term will come to refer, in monastic parlance, to spiritual weariness.
5 J. Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1988).*
6 Baudrillard discusses Chuang-Tzu's (or, more properly, Zhuang-zi's) butcher in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993), pp. 119–21.*
7 In the original, Baudrillard speaks of the 'corpus glorieux', a play on the usual designation in religious discourse of the body of the risen Christ.*
8 Reprinted in J. Baudrillard, *Le ludique et le policier & autres écrits parus dans* Utopie *1967–1978* (Paris: Sens et Tonka, 2001), pp. 93–105.
9 'Die Rose ist ohne Warum./Sie blühet, weil sie blühet./Sie achtet nicht ihrer selbst,/fragt nicht, ob man sie siehet' (*Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, 1655, spelling modernized). This is my translation [CT].*

10 See F. Furet, *The French Revolution 1770–1814* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).*
11 The allusion here is, of course, to the debate in France about this book. For the English translation, see Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).*

4 Fragments and fractals

1 J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*. Trans. Brian Singer (Basingstoke/London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1990), p. 131.
2 Ibid., p. 132.
3 Ibid., p. 133.
4 The reference here is to fragment J273 from Lichtenberg's *Südelbücher*.*
5 See G. Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (3 vols.) (New York: Zone Books, 1988–93).*
6 See Macedonio Fernandez, *Papiers de Nouveauvenu et continuation du Rien* (Paris: José Corti, 1992). Very little of Fernandez's work is as yet translated into English, though there is one collection: *Selected Writings in Translation* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Latitudes, 1984).*
7 Baudrillard discusses Klossowski in 'Living Coin: Singularity of the Phantasm', in *Impossible Exchange* (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 121–31.*
8 See J. Baudrillard, 'When Bataille attacked the Metaphysical Principle of Economy', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 11, 3 (1987), pp. 57–62.*
9 See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel. Lectures on* The Phenomenology of Spirit. Assembled by Raymond Queneau. Edited by Allan Bloom. Translated by James H. Nichols Jnr. (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1980).*
10 See Bataille, *Inner Experience* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988).*
11 'Nationalization, the death penalty, denominational schools . . . outdated concerns of an old left that has long beavered away without success and has become covered, like a whale, with all the seaweed accumulated on its old journeys', *Le Monde*, 21 September 1983.
12 The reference is to fragment J 278 in the text established by Wolfgang Promies in his six-volume critical edition published by Hanser of Munich. This same reference system is adopted by Charles Le Blanc in the widely used French edition of the aphorisms: *Le Miroir de l'âme* (Paris: José Corti, 1997). I shall follow it here, even though the English translation cited, which includes fewer aphorisms, does not employ the same system.*

13 Fragment K 153. Cited in the translation by R. J. Hollingdale, *Georg Christoph Lichtenberg*, *Aphorisms* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 174.*
14 This appears to be a reference to fragment L 402.*

5 Anthropological fragments

1 Baudrillard's debt to anthropology is examined in Gary Genosko, *Undisciplined Theory* (London: Sage, 1998), pp. 12–47.*
2 See *Cool Memories IV* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 42.*
3 Roland Barthes 'Inaugural Lecture' in Susan Sontag (ed.), *A Barthes Reader* (London: Vintage, 1982), pp. 461–2.
4 Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities; or, The End of the Social and Other Essays*. Trans. Paul Foss, John Johnston and Paul Patton (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).*
5 See Denis Hollier, *The College of Sociology (1937–1939)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
6 Bertrand Vergely, *La Souffrance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).
7 'A l'ombre du millénaire ou le suspense de l'an 2000', *D'un millénaire l'autre* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000). An earlier version of this text appeared in translation in *Economy and Society*, 26, 4, November 1997: the relevant passage is on p. 448.*

6 Fateful fragments

1 J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A study of the play element in culture* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), pp. 66–96.
2 J. Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage, 1993). See esp. pp. 177–80.
3 'Discussion sur le péché', *Dieu vivant*, no. 4, 1945. Republished in Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes* VI (Paris: Gallimard, 1973). Marcel Moré, a 'nineteen-thirties non-conformist', who wrote on many subjects, held a kind of Salon on the quai de la Mégisserie in Paris. It was there, in his apartments in March 1944, that the 'Discussion on Sin' took place, a theologico-philosophical dispute revolving around Georges Bataille's fourteen fundamental theses on 'good and evil in their relation to being or beings', and the opposition to them on the part of the Jesuit, and future cardinal, Jean Daniélou. A rather lively discussion ensued between such different thinkers as Pierre Klossowski, Louis Massignon, Maurice de Gandillac, Arthur Adamov, Jean Hyppolite, Pierre Burgelin and Jean-Paul Sartre.

7 Fragments and viruses

1 This is a pastiche of José-Marie de Hérédia's famous lines: 'Propitious trade-winds bent their antennae/Towards the western world's mysterious rim' ('The Conquerors', *Cassell's Anthology of French Poetry*, selected and translated by Alan Conder, London, 1950).*
2 Baudrillard reviewed Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* in 1967. A translation can be found in G. Genosko (ed.), *The Uncollected Baudrillard* (London: Sage, 2001), pp. 39–44.*
3 'ne fait pas événement'. This might have been rendered more colloquially as 'it has no impact', but I have generally tried to retain this reference to the event, which is a key notion for Baudrillard.*
4 *Cool Memories IV* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 24.
5 Ibid., p. 47.
6 See Charles Renouvier, *Uchronie, 1876* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).*
7 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 162.*

8 Fragments of light

1 Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1979), p. 250. The same passage appears in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' and is rendered as follows by Harry Zohn: 'If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch' (*Illuminations*, pp. 224–5).*
2 Baudrillard's essay on 'The Art Conspiracy' can be found in *Screened Out* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 181–5.*
3 Baudrillard has written on Warhol in 'Machinic Snobbery' in *The Perfect Crime* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 75–85.*
4 The allusion here is to Duchamp's 'ready-mades', such as the famous *Fountain* of 1917, a factory-made urinal rotated through 90° and inscribed with the words 'R. Mutt 1917'. The argument is that Duchamp's break with art's previous frame of reference has been replicated generally in contemporary art practice.*
5 Baudrillard's writing on photography is now voluminous. A recent essay is 'Photography or Light-Writing: Literalness of the Image' in *Impossible Exchange* (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 139–47.*
6 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 95.*
7 The French term here is 'mise à plat', which can also mean a close-up or point-by-point examination.*

8 This is presumably a reference to that city's Festival of Photojournalism.*
9 *L'être-là*. The term of course came into French philosophical discourse from German [*Dasein*: existence].*
10 Henri Michaux (1899–1984), the Belgian-born French poet and artist whom Blanchot called 'l'ange du bizarre'.*
11 Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', *One-Way Street*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1997), p. 241.*
12 W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1973), p. 224. Since Baudrillard follows Benjamin's original French translator Pierre Klossowski and reads the term *Erscheinung* in the original German as 'appearance' rather than 'phenomenon', I have modified the translation accordingly. For the German original, see 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit [Dritte Fassung]', *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I–2, p. 479.*
13 Though the wording in the original French here differs somewhat from Klossowski's translation, this is presumably an allusion to the following passage: 'In dem Augenblick aber, da der Massstab der Echtheit an der Kunstproduktion versagt, hat sich auch die gesamte soziale Funktion der Kunst umgewälzt' ('Das Kunstwerk . . .', *Gesammelte Schriften*, I–2, p. 482).*
14 This is clearly a reference to Benjamin's discussion of Klee's 'Angelus Novus', with his face 'turned towards the past' in the ninth of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1973), p. 259.*
15 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977).
16 This seems to be a reference to Gaston Fernández Carrera, *La Photographie, Le Néant. Digressions autour d'une mort occidentale* (Paris: PUF, 1986).*
17 The term 'art photographique' seems to have entered the French language in May 1839 shortly after the English term 'photography' was coined (apparently by Sir John Herschel in March of that year).*
18 Paul Valéry, 'Le cimetière marin'. Quoted here in the version by Cecil Day-Lewis, 'The Graveyard by the Sea'.*
19 'Black bodies' are objects which do not reflect any light at any wavelength.*

9 Fragment fragments

1 The reference is presumably to Wilhlem E. Mühlmann, the German ethnologist whom Baudrillard translated in the late 1960s. See Mühlmann, *Messianismes révolutionnaires du tiers monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).*
2 *Les Particules élémentaires* was the French title of the Michel Houillebecq novel translated into English as *Atomised* (London: Vintage, 2001).*
3 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, p. 244.*

Jean Baudrillard

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TELEMORPHOSIS

Translated by Drew S. Burk

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TELEMORPHOSIS

L' Élevage de poussière and *Télémorphose*
by Jean Baudrillard © 2001 Sens & Tonka

Translated by Drew S. Burk
as *Dust Breeding* and *Telemorphosis*
First Edition
Minneapolis © 2011, Univocal Publishing

Published by Univocal
123 North 3rd Street, #202
Minneapolis, MN 55401
www.univocalpublishing.com

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Thanks to Meredith Wagner, John Ebert, Hubert Tonka, Jeanne-Marie Sens, Sylvère Lotringer and Marine Baudrillard

Designed & Printed by Jason Wagner

Distributed by the University of Minnesota Press

ISBN 978-1-937561-64-2
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

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INTRODUCTION

> *Our entire reality has become experimental. In the absence of any stable destiny, modern man has reached the point of unlimited experimentation on himself.*
> - Jean Baudrillard

The art of living today has shifted to a continuous state of the experimental.

In one of his last texts, *Telemorphosis,* renowned thinker and anti-philosopher Jean Baudrillard takes on the task of thinking and reflecting upon the coming digital media architectures of the social. While "the social" may have never existed, according to Baudrillard, his analysis at the beginning of the 21st century of the coming social media networked cultures

cannot be ignored. One need not look far in order to find oneself snared within some sort of screenification of a techno-social community. "What the most radical critical critique, the most subversive delirious imagination, what no Situationist drift could have done… television has done." Collective reality has entered a realm of telemorphosis.

Baudrillard stares down what he identifies as the telemorphosis of reality within a culture, taken prisoner by its own fascination with itself: this cinematic *coup d'état* of the imaginary and the real, where banality and its celebratory status capture us all within self-referential spectacles of life and death. In a social mediated universe of parallel worlds of doubled up delirium between reality and its theatrical double, the screen, Jean Baudrillard's insights into the political, social, and cultural structures of the 21st

century and its relationship to media have only begun to resonate with such anticipatory richness, that any thinker or cultural theorist today must have the courage to read (or return to) this prophetic thinker at the edge of the coming age of singularities, networks, and technical image production.

Reality television and more importantly its digital offspring such as social networking sites like Facebook or Google+ have led to a theatricality and fascination with banality that now more than ever needs to be taken seriously as mechanisms of individuation, self-surveillance, and the restructuring of desire become turned into carnival attractions of the highest order and we find ourselves returning to Spinoza's famous question: of what is the body capable?

The political body, the social body, and digital body, all collectivities of the human today must pass through this telemorphosis of the screen.

> *We've become individuated beings: non-divisible with others or ourselves. This individuation, which we are so proud of, has nothing to do with personal liberty; on the contrary, it is a general promiscuity. It is not necessarily a promiscuity of bodies in space - but of screens from one end of the world to the other. And it is probably screen promiscuity that is the real promiscuity: the indivisibility of every human particle at a distance tens of thousands of kilometers - like millions of twins who are incapable of separating from their double. Umbilicus limbo.*

Umbilicus limbo. Artaud. The theatre and its double. Today we all dance the tango of the onscreen double. Baudrillard reminds us again that if one wants to avoid the traps of reality, one must "move

faster than it." And, as usual, Baudrillard's gaze accelerates faster than reality.

> *There will soon be nothing more than self-communicating zombies, whose lone umbilical relay will be their own feedback image - electronic avatars of dead shadows who, beyond death and the river Styx, will wander, perpetually passing their time retelling their own story.*

Yes, Jean, we know. We know the shadow stories are still singing. The encapsulation and self-confinement of the age of the screen world, even in its most mobile formats, becomes a reminder once again of the ecstasy of communication where everything is said, everything forgotten and where no one is speaking the same language.

Everyone knows that reality shows are edited image-scenarios, framed within a

pre-fabricated context in order to elicit certain responses and fascination from the audience. But as we enter headlong into a media-sphere where everything arrives with a built-in banality switch, we find the scenario trickling its way into every aspect of existence. Reality's desire is to bathe in the banality of its own image feedback, and in achieving this it becomes hostage of its own feedback image. We must have the courage to rigorously question our own relationship to the deliriums of the self-referential closed-circuit exchanges. We must attempt to liberate ourselves from our own fascination with the lowest common denominator of existence: the banality of existence itself.

- Drew S. Burk

DUST BREEDING

Our entire reality has become experimental. In the absence of any stable destiny, modern man has reached the point of unlimited experimentation on himself.

Two recent illustrations of this can be seen: *Loft Story*[1], the mediated illusion of the presentation of the real as "live". The other case is the story of Catherine Millet[2], who provides the phantasmatic illusion of "live" sex.

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1. *Loft Story* is the French adaptation of the T.V. reality show, *Big Brother.*

2. Catherine Millet is the author of an autobiographical book detailing her sex life from childhood up until adulthood. Some critics have called her account the most explicit book on sex written by a woman.

Loft Story is, of course, a concept that has become universally accepted: a condensed version of a human amusement park, ghetto, solitary confinement, and Exterminating Angel. Voluntary reclusion as a laboratory of synthetic conviviality, of telegenetically modified sociality.

It is here, when everything has been given over to viewing (as in *Big Brother* and the other reality shows) that one perceives that there is nothing left to see. It is the mirror of flatness, of the zero degree, where, contrary to all objectives of a real which the show claims to show, it becomes the proof of the disappearance of the other, and perhaps even the fact that the human is not a social being. The equivalent of a readymade - an unchanged transposition like that of *everyday life,* which is itself already rigged by all the dominant models.

A synthetic banality, fabricated within a closed circuit and under a controlled screen.

In this manner, the artificial microcosm of *Loft Story* is identical to Disneyland, which provides the illusion of the real external world, while if one looks deeper, one realizes they are one and the same. The entire United States is Disneyland and we are all on *Loft Story*. No need to enter into the idea of the virtual double of reality, we are already there - the televisual universe is nothing more than a holographic detail of global reality. All the way up to, and including, the most daily parts of our existence, we are already within a situation of experimental reality. And it is precisely from this that we have the fascination, by immersion, of spontaneous interactivity. Are we dealing with a porno voyeurism?

No. Sex can be found everywhere, but it is not what people want. What they profoundly desire is the spectacle of banality, which today has become the real pornography, the real obscenity - of nothingness, insignificance, and flatness. The complete opposite of the *Theatre of Cruelty*. But perhaps there is a form of cruelty which can be seen there as well, at least a virtual one. At a time when television and the media are less and less capable of accounting for the (unbearable) events of the world, they discover daily life, existential banality as the most deadly event, as the most violent actuality, even as the site of the most perfect crime. And actually... it is. And people are fascinated, fascinated and terrified by the indifference of the Nothing-to-say, Nothing-to-do, by indifference to their own existence. The contemplation of the Perfect Crime, of banality as a new vision

of fatality, has become a real Olympic discipline, or the last avatar of extreme sports.

All of this is reinforced by the fact that the public is itself mobilized as judge, that it has itself become Big Brother. We are way beyond the panopticon, of visibility as the source of power and control. It is no longer about rendering things visible to the external eye, but rendering them transparent to themselves, via a perfusion of control within the masses, and in erasing any trace of the operation. So it is that the spectators are implicated in a gigantic negative counter-transfer of themselves, and once again, it is from this situation that we see the dizzying attraction of this spectacle.

In the end, all of this comes from the desire to be Nothing and to be looked at as such. There are two manners of

disappearing: either we demand not to be seen (this is the current problem concerning image rights), or we immerse ourselves in the delirious exhibitionism of its nullity. We make ourselves nothing, a loser, in order to be seen as nothing - the ultimate protection against the necessity of existing and the obligation of being one's self.

It is from this that we get the simultaneous contradictory situation of not being seen and being perpetually visible. Everyone wants it both ways, and no legislation or ethics can get to the bottom of this dilemma - the unconditional right of being able to view and at the same time to not be viewed in return. Complete information access is part of human rights and with it we also find a forced visibility and over-exposure to the lighting of information.

Self-expression as the ultimate form of confession, as Foucault used to say. Keep no secrets. Speak, speak, and communicate endlessly. This is the type of violence aimed at the singular being and his secret. And at the same time, it is a form of violence against language as well, because from here on, it also loses its singularity, it is no longer anything but a medium, an operator of visibility, it completely loses its ironic and symbolic dimensions - precisely at the point where language becomes more important than what it says.

The worst part of this obscenity, this shameless visibility, is the forced participation, this automatic complicity of the spectator who has been blackmailed into participating. And it is this which is the clearest objective of the operation: the servitude of the victims, but a

voluntary servitude, one in which the victims rejoice from the pain and shame which they are made to suffer. The complete participation of a society in its fundamental mechanism: interactive exclusion - it doesn't get better than that! Decided all together and consumed with enthusiasm.

If everything ends up being visible, (which is, like heat in the theory of energy, the most degraded form of existence) the crucial point nevertheless is to succeed in creating out of this extreme disenchantment of life, out of this loss of any symbolic space, an object of contemplation, of awe-struck observation and perverse desire. "Humanity which, beginning with Homer, once used to be the object of contemplation for the Gods, has now become the contemplation of itself. Its alienation from itself

has reached such a point that humanity experiences its own destruction as an aesthetic sensation of the highest degree." (Walter Benjamin)

Everywhere, the experimental supersedes the real and the imaginary. Everywhere, it is the protocols of science and verification which have inoculated us, and we are in the middle, under the camera's scalpel, dissecting in vivisection the dimension of social relations, outside of any language or symbolic context. Catherine Millet as well is an example of the experimental - another kind of "vivisection": the entire sexual imaginary is swept away, all that remains is a perpetual protocol in the form of an unlimited verification of sexual functioning, a mechanism which in the end no longer has anything sexual about it.

There is a double misinterpretation:

- Making sexuality itself the ultimate reference. Repressed or expressed, sexuality is at best a hypothesis, and as such, it would be incorrect to make a reference or some sort of truth out of it. The sexual hypothesis is perhaps nothing more than a fantasy itself, and in any case, it is via repression that sexuality took on this authority and this aura of a strange attractor - and in its manifestation, it even loses this potential quality.

- From this we find the absurdity of acting out the systematic "liberation" of sex: one doesn't "liberate" a hypothesis. As for proving sex by sex, what a sad affair! As if everything was found within movement, derivation, transfer, and metaphor - It is not at all found within sex and desire, but within the filter of seduction, within the game where sex and desire are played with.

This is what renders the idea of showing "live sex" impossible. The same can be said for the viewing of "live" death or a "live" event on the news - all of these ideas are incredibly naturalistic. This is where we can see the pretension of bringing everything into the real world, of claiming that everything should be accelerated into an integral reality. And somewhere, we see, this is precisely the essence of power itself. "The corruption of power is to inscribe into the real everything which is found in dreams…."

The key to all of this is given to us by Jacques Henric in his conception of the image and photography: no use in covering one's face, our curiosity in regards to images has always been of a sexual order - all that we strive to locate within them, in the end, is sex, and more particularly feminine sex. And here not only do we find Courbet's

Origin of the World, but the origin of all images. So, let's go: let's photograph this one thing, let's give ourselves over to this singular scopic obsession! Such is the principle of a "real-erotik" of which the perpetual copulatory *acting-out* of Catherine Millet is the bodily equivalent: since in the end, what everyone dreams about is the unlimited sexual use of the body, let's go ahead and get right to the completion of this program!

No more seduction, no more desire, not even *jouissance* is spared. All that remains is the endless repetition, within an act of accumulation where quantity wins out over quality. A foreclosure of seduction. The lone question we have is the same one a man whispers into the ear of a woman during an orgy: "*what are you doing after the orgy?*" But this is also a useless question since for her there is no going beyond the orgy. She is

herself, in fact, beyond the end, where all processes take on an exponential allure and can only continue to indefinitely self-replicate. The same process is found in Alfred Jarry's *Supermale* (*Le Surmâle*), where, once the critical threshold has been reached, one can make love indefinitely. This is the automatic stage of the sexual machine. When sex has become nothing more than *sex processing*, it becomes transfinite and exponential. Nevertheless, it does not achieve its goal, which would be to exhaust sex itself, to go all the way to the end of the sexual exercise. This is obviously impossible. And this impossibility is all that remains of seduction and its revenge (and sexuality's revenge) against its unscrupulous operators - unscrupulous in regards to themselves and their own desire and pleasure.

"Think like a woman takes off her dress", says Bataille, but the naivety of all the

"Catherine Millets" of the world is thinking that taking off one's dress equates to being completely naked and that in doing so, one has access to the naked truth of sex and the world. If people take off their clothes, it is in order to be seen - not to be seen naked like truth (who still believes that truth remains truth once we have removed its veil?) but to be born into the realm of appearances, which is to say, the realm of seduction - and this is precisely the opposite of truth.

This modern disenchanted vision of the world, which considers the body as an object waiting to be undressed, and sex a desire merely waiting to be acted out and as pleasure to be fulfilled, is a complete misinterpretation. Whereas every culture based around masks, veils, and ornament says the exact opposite: they say the body is a metaphor. The real objects of desire and pleasure are the signs and marks

that pull the body away from its nudity, naturalness, its "truth", its integral reality of its physical being. Everywhere, it is seduction that tears things away from their truth, (including their sexual truth). And if thought takes off its dress, it is not in order to reveal itself in its nakedness, nor unveil the secret which up until that point would have been hidden. It would be in order to make this body appear as definitively enigmatic, secret, as a pure object whose mystery can never be revealed and which has no right being uncovered.

Under these conditions, the Afghan woman behind a Moucharaby lattice work, the woman covered in a sort of screen on the cover of *Elle* magazine, become striking alternative contrasts to the maddening virginal figure of Catherine Millet: The excess of the secret up against the excess of indecency. And yet, this

indecency itself, this radical obscenity (like that found in *Loft Story*) is still a veil, the ultimate veil of veils - impossible to lift this final one, the one which imposes itself once we have thought we have lifted all the others. We would like to get a glimpse of the worst, the paroxysm of exhibition, achieve total nudity, absolute raw and violent reality - we never get there. And there is nothing to do about it - the wall of the obscene is impenetrable. Paradoxically, this lost quest allows all the better for the reemergence of the fundamental rule of the game: the rule of the sublime, the rule of the secret, seduction, including the rule which leads us to continually track without end those veils which have already been torn apart.

Why not propose a reverse hypothesis (to that of voyeurism and collective

stupidity) that what people are searching for - every one of us - in colliding with the wall of obscenity, is to regain the feeling that there is nothing precisely to see, that we will never know the last word, and thus to verify *a contrario* the ultimate power of seduction? A desperate verification, but the experimental is always desperate. What *Loft Story* claims to verify is that the human being is a social being - which is not at all certain. What Catherine Millet claims to verify is that she is a sexed being - which is not certain either. What is verified in these experiments are the conditions themselves of experimentation, merely brought to their limit. The system decodes itself the best in its extravagances, but it is the same everywhere. Cruelty is the same everywhere. At the end of the day, to use a quote from Duchamp, it all amounts to "dust breeding".

TELEMORPHOSIS

The problem with *Loft Story* is threefold: there is what happens in the Loft, which, in itself, is uninteresting, and, in contradiction with this insignificance, the immense fascination that it exerts. But this fascination is itself the object of fascination for the critical gaze. Where is the original event in all of this? There isn't one. All that remains is this mysterious contagion, this viral chain that functions from one end to the other, and to which we are all accomplices even in our analyses. It is useless

to invoke all sorts of economic, political, and marketing data - the market is the market, and all commentaries themselves become part of the cultural and ideological market place. The mass effect is beyond manipulation, and incommensurate with the causes. This makes it exciting, like everything that resists intelligence.

The first hypothesis: if the audience is seen as such, it is not *in spite* of its stupidity, but thanks to this imbecility and the nullity of the spectacle. This seems to be quite certain. But this opens up two possibilities, which are perhaps not exclusive. Either the spectators immerse themselves within the void of the spectacle and get off from it like they do from their own image, everything merely provided with a face-lift for the circumstances, or they get off by feeling less idiotic than the spectacle - and thus

never get tired of staring at it. This could perhaps be a media strategy to merely offer up spectacles that are more ridiculous than reality itself - hyperreal in their idiocy, and providing the spectators with a different possibility of satisfaction. A seductive hypothesis, but which presupposes a large imagination on the part of the creators of the shows. Thus, it's better to hold on to the presumption of nullity - in the same way one says the presumption of innocence. And this, this is radical democracy. The democratic principle was of the order of merit, and equivalence (albeit relative) between merit and recognition. Here, in the Loft, there is no equivalence between merit and glory. It is everything in exchange for nothing. A complete principle of inequivalence. The democratic illusion is thus elevated to the highest degree: the maximal exaltation for a minimal qualification. And, while

the traditional principle merely insured a partial recognition for merit, the operation of the Loft insures a virtual glory to everyone in terms of the absence of merit itself. On one hand, it is the end of democracy, by the extinction of any qualification of merit whatsoever, but on the other hand, it is the result of an even more radical democracy on the basis of the beatification of the man without qualities. It is a great step towards democratic nihilism.

In this disequilibrium between merit and public recognition, there is a kind of breakdown of the social contract which leads to another type of injustice and anomaly: while we could accuse traditional democracy of not rewarding their citizens with the merit they deserved, here one would be better off accusing it of indifferently overvaluing everyone on the basis of

nothing. There is almost something funny and ferociously ironic about this strange glory devoted to anyone - because this form of radical democracy is a mockery of the entire establishment and its figures whether they are politicians, *intelligentsia,* or the *star system,* which make claim on some sort of glory based on their status or worth. At the least, this unfair competition of glory *start-ups* reveals both the latent imposture of all systems of distinction and the absurdity of a democracy embedded within a logic of the very worst. That being said, if these new exciting stars, emotionally intriguing thanks to their insignificance and transparency, if these usurpers produce an unbridled speculation against any egalitarian whole, if these *hit-parade* pirates do not deserve this glory excess, the society which permits itself to enjoy the enthusiastic spectacle of this masquerade

deserves exactly what it gets. *Loft Story* is both the mirror and the disaster of an entire society caught up in the race towards meaninglessness and swooning in front of its own banality.

Here, television succeeded in completing a fantastic operation of directed consensus building, a real power grab, an OPA to the entire society, a kidnapping - an unheralded success story on the path towards an integral telemorphosis of society. Television created a global event (or better, a non-event), in which everyone became trapped. "A total social fact" as Marcel Mauss says - if in other societies this situation indicated the converging power of all the elements of the social, in our society it indicates the elevation of an entire society to the parody stage of an integral farce, of an image feedback relentless with its own reality. What the most radical critical critique, the most

subversive delirious imagination, what no Situationist drift could have done… television has done.

Television has shown itself to be the strongest power within the science of imaginary solutions. But if television has achieved this, we are the ones who wanted it. There is no use in accusing the powers of media, or those of wealth, or even public stupidity in order to allow for some sort of hope of a rational alternative to this technical, experimental, and integral socialization in which we are all engaged, and which ends in the automatic coordination of individuals within irrevocable consensual processes. Let's call this the integral event of a society which, from then on, without a contract or rules, nor system of values other than a reflexive complicity, without any other rule or logic than that of immediate contagion of a promiscuity, blends us all together with

an immense indivisible being. We've become individuated beings: non-divisible with others or ourselves. This individuation, which we are so proud of, has nothing to do with personal liberty; on the contrary, it is a general promiscuity. It is not necessarily a promiscuity of bodies in space - but of screens from one end of the world to the other. And it is probably screen promiscuity that is the real promiscuity: the indivisibility of every human particle at a distance tens of thousands of kilometers - like millions of twins who are incapable of separating from their double. Umbilicus limbo.

It can also be the promiscuity of a whole population with the extras from the Loft. Or even more, that of an "interactive" couple who continuously project the entirety of their relationship onto the Internet in real-time. Who watches them?

They watch themselves, but who else does, since everyone can get off, virtually speaking, from the same domestically integrated circuit? There will soon be nothing more than self-communicating zombies, whose lone umbilical relay will be their own feedback image - electronic avatars of dead shadows who, beyond death and the river Styx, will wander, perpetually passing their time retelling their own story. Just enough of something is still taking place in order to give the retrospective illusion, beyond the end, of reality - or, in the case of Catherine Millet, the illusion of sexuality - or the illusion of the social, but which is only evoked in a desperate interaction with oneself.

One of the signs of this promiscuity is the compulsion of confinement which we see flourishing everywhere - whether it is like the confinement seen in *Loft Story* or that of an island, a gated community, a

luxury ghetto, or any space where people recreate in an experimental nest or privileged zone - some sort of equivalent space of initiation where the laws of open society are abolished. It is no longer about protecting a symbolic territory but of closing oneself off with one's own self-image, to live promiscuously with it as in a nest, in an incestuous complicity with it and with all the effects of transparency and feedback images which are those of a total screen, no longer having anything to do with others but via the relationship of image-to-image.

Moreover, the Loft could just as well have been fabricated with synthetic images - and in the future, it will be. But at the end of the day, they already are synthetic images. The gestures, the speeches, and actors already respond to the conditions of prefabrication, of programmed re-presentation in the same way that in the

future we will biologically clone human beings. But, in the end, they are already mentally and culturally profiles of clones.

This promiscuity made from mental involution and social implosion, but also from "on-line" interaction, this disavowal of any conflicting dimension whatsoever: is this an accidental consequence of the modern evolution of societies, or is it a natural condition of man, which will finally be able to put an end to the idea that man's social dimension of being is an artificial one? Is the human being a social being? It will be interesting to see if he continues as such in the future, as a being without a deep social structure, without a governed system of values and relations - within the pure contiguity and promiscuity of the networks, on automatic pilot, and in a kind of irreversible coma - and thus contrary to all presuppositions of anthropology. But, as Stanislaw

Lem tells us: do we not have too much of an anthropological conception of man?

In any case, seen by the success of *Loft Story* and the enthusiastic reception of this staging of experimental servitude, we can guess that the exercising of freedom is most certainly not a basic given in anthropology, and that man, if he ever did exercise freedom, never stops relinquishing it for the benefit of more animalistic techniques of collective automation. "If man does not do well with supporting the freedom of others, it is because it is not part of his nature. He does not even support this freedom for himself." (Dostoyevsky) But he adds something else to his servitude: the enjoyment of the spectacle of servitude.

Truth be told, the reality show itself quickly degenerated into a televisual soap opera that was not that

different than old variety shows made for large audiences. And its audience was amplified at the usual rate of competing *media*, which leads to the self-propagation of the show via a prophetic method: *self-fulfilling prophecy.* In the end, the ratings for the show play part of the spiral and return cycle of the advertising flame. But all of this is of little interest. It is only the original idea which has any value: submitting a group to a sensory deprivation experiment[3], in order to record the behavior of human molecules within a vacuum - and no doubt with the design of watching them tear each other apart in the artificial promiscuity. We have not yet reached this point, but this existential micro-situation functions as a universal metaphor for the

3. Which in other times was a form of calculated torture. But are we not in the middle of exploring all the historical forms of torture, served in homeopathic doses, under the guise of mass culture or avant-garde art? This is precisely one of the principle themes of contemporary art.

modern being, holed up in his personal loft, which is no longer his physical or mental universe. It is his digital and tactile universe, of Turing's "spectral body", of the digital man, captured within the labyrinth of the networks, of man turned into his own (white) mouse.

The most remarkable thing about it all is providing this properly unbearable situation to the gaze of the crowds, getting them to relish the event as an orgy with no tomorrow. A beautiful exploit, but it won't end there. Soon, following the same logic, we will have *snuff films* and televised bodily torture. Death as well must logically enter onto the stage as an experimental event. Not at all in the form of a sacrifice - it is precisely at the same point in culture we are trying to technologically eliminate it, that it will make its return on the screens as an experience of the extreme (a foreseen revival by specific

groups like those in trench warfare or the battles of the Pacific - still Disneyland but with a bit crueler infantilism). But at the same time, it returns as a pseudo-event, because - and this is the irony of all these experimental masquerades - parallel to the multiplication of these spectacles of violence grows the uncertainty in regards to the reality of what is being viewed. Did it or did it not take place? The more we advance into the orgy of the image and the gaze, the less we can believe it. "Real time" vision merely adds to the unreality of it. The two paroxysms: violence of the image and the discrediting of the image, cross paths according to the same exponential function. This leads us to constantly being doomed to deception (and more and more to the deception of synthetic images and CGI) but also revived by the deception itself. Because this profound uncertainty (strategically and

politically determined - who else would profit from it?) is to a large degree part of the insatiable demand of this type of spectacle.

A dizzying curiosity mistaken for a voyeurism, but which in fact, in both the case of *Loft Story* and Catherine Millet, has nothing at all sexual about it. It is a curiosity of the visceral, organic and endoscopic order. This evokes the Japanese striptease where clients are invited to plunge their noses and gaze into the woman's vagina in order, apparently, to explore the secret of her entrails - something quite different in its fascination than sexual penetration. A speleological *jouissance* (not too different than the videoscopy of the internal body by micro-cameras), a gaping hole abyss of the entire body. This is not too different as well from the caliph who, after the dance of the stripper, cuts her open to find out

just a bit more about what's underneath. Sex and sexual knowledge are superficial compared to this. The real bottomless curiosity is the one deep down. This compulsive involutive fetal gap that, to me appears to be in play in the so-called "sexual" activity of Catherine Millet and the fascination she exerts. Can one penetrate any further, even further than the sexual? Can one possess and be possessed completely?

It is, of course, an adventure without end. It can only come to an end via the countless repetitions of the sexual act, which nevertheless will never lead to absolute bodily knowledge nor the mortal pleasure of its exhaustion. In *Supermale* by Alfred Jarry, where Ellen and Marcueil flirt as well at the limits of sexual energy, Ellen dies (momentarily) at the achievement of this feat. There is nothing of the sort with Catherine Millet whose adventure is more

of a kind of frustrated sexual anorexia. But, what is interesting, is that in pushing sex to an absurd position, to a seriality where it can no longer be defined as such except by its automatism (equal to Jarry's velocipedic cadavers who pedal their bicycles even better when they are dead), in ripping sex away from the pleasure principle itself, she also rips sex away from the reality principle and here as well forces the question to be posed: What happened to the sexual being? Would sexuality, contrary to all natural evidence, be merely a hypothesis? Verified here all the way until exhaustion, we have to wonder. Verified beyond its end, it simply no longer knows what it is…. Everything must be revised: with *Loft Story,* the evidence of the human being as a social being. With Catherine Millet, the evidence of the human being as a sexual being. With the abundance

of transparency and information, the evidence of reality *tout court*.

Sexed (*sexués*), certainly we all are - and Catherine Millet as well, but sexual? This is the question.

Socialized, we are (and often by force) but social beings? That remains to be seen.

Realized, yes - but real? Nothing is less certain.

What Catherine Millet has in common with the people in the Loft is that she is subjected, by her own choice, via *serial fucking*, to the same sensory deprivation - giving way to the same radical, unique, minimal activity, which, by its repetition alone, becomes virtual. Not only does she get rid of any dual exchange or sexual participation, but also any obligation of orgasm or choice - and in the

end she simply gets rid of her own body. We can see in this refusal of choice as with any sort of elective affinity, a type of asceticism, a flaying of free will (which we know, is merely a subjective illusion), which would make Catherine Millet, as some have said, a saint....

But what can we say about sexuality? It is surely a less illusory hypothesis than that of free will, but is it a good thing to put an end to it in verifying it with such ruthlessness? If doing away with desire and its concept can be characterized as a nihilism of will, then this reiterated proof of the existence of sex by sex can be considered as a sexual nihilism. Unless....

Unless the secret objective is to get rid of sex itself? To exhaust this mechanical function of bodies before getting around to the grand game…. Surely this is the underlying meaning of:

What are you doing after the orgy? Once the wager and performance have been made *(we did it!)* can we not get on to more serious things and really have some fun? Thus, according to Noëlle Châtelet, the true gastronome makes sure to eat before getting to the pleasure of sitting at the table, hunger should not burden her.

Ellen, after the sexual rally with Marcueil: "That was no fun at all", she says. Moreover, Marcueil compares the tetanic erection and the parallel state in women to a "sclerosis", or spasmodic contortion of tissues. Thus, in secret, Ellen invites him to begin again, but this time, "for pleasure's sake" (and without the expert eye of Bathybius, scientifically recording the feat).

If this reversal doesn't take place, what is there to do after the orgy? Nothing,

unless, as in another of Jarry's texts, the hero from *Absolute Love,* Sengle, who right in the middle of an erotic act counts the number of times they have performed it and realizing he made a mistake exclaims, "Well, let's erase everything and start over!"

We find the same sensory deprivation in Catherine Millet as we do in *Loft Story,* the same attractive opening within the spectacle of the Loft as in the sexual offering of Catherine Millet. The same vaginal curiosity, more than vaginal, uterine even, for the hole in *Loft Story,* but in this instance opened up to another abyss: the void of insignificance. Always heading deeper towards this incontestable primitive scene of modernity. Where is the secret of banality, of this overexposed nullity, enlightened and informed from all sides, and which leaves nothing more to be seen except for transparency? The real

mystery becomes what to make of this forced confession of life as such…. It is both the object of a veritable horror, and the dizzying temptation to plunge into this limbo - the limbo of an existence in a vacuum and stripped of all meaning: the spectacle itself that we offer up to the Loft and its actors.

The twentieth century has seen all sorts of crimes - Auschwitz, Hiroshima, genocides - but the lone true perfect crime, is, according to Heideggerian terms, "the second fall of man, the fall into banality."

There is a murderous violence of banality that, precisely due to its indifference and its monotony, is the subtlest form of extermination. A veritable theatre of cruelty, of our cruelty to ourselves, completely played down and without a trace of blood. A perfect crime in that it abolishes all stakes and erases its own

traces - but above all in so far as in this murder, we are both the murderers and the victims. As long as this distinction exists, the crime is not perfect. And yet in all historical crimes that we know of, the distinction is clear. It is only with suicide that the murderer and the victim become the same, and in this regard the immersion into banality is indeed the equivalent of the suicide of the species.

The other aspect of this murderous banality is that it erases the theatre of operations of the crime - it is from then on everywhere within life, on every screen, within the lack of distinction between life and the screen. Here as well, we find ourselves on both sides of the equation. And while the other violent crimes of history provided us with an image (*Shoah, Apocalypse Now*) which at least could be distinguished from the crime,

with this other crime, this slow extermination offered up for our viewing pleasure via a spectacle like *Loft Story* and others, is one in which both *Loft Story* and ourselves all play a role.

We are dealing with a genuine Stockholm syndrome on a mass scale - when the hostage becomes the accomplice of the hostage taker - as well as a revolution of the concept of voluntary servitude and master-slave relations. When the entire society becomes an accomplice to those who took it hostage, but just as much when individuals split into, for themselves, hostage and hostage taker.

There is a long history of this growing promiscuity, from the glorification of daily life and its irruption within the historical dimension - up until the implacable immersion into the real all too real, into the human all too human, into

the banal and residual. But the last decade saw an extraordinary acceleration of this banalization of the world, by the relay of information and universal communication - and above all by the fact that this banality has become experimental. The field of banality is no longer merely residual; it has become a theatre of operations. Brought to the screen, as is the case with *Loft Story,* it becomes an object of experimental leisure and desire. A verification of what Marshall McLuhan stated about television: that it is a perpetual test, and we are subjected to it like guinea pigs, in an automatic mental interaction.

But *Loft Story* is merely a detail. It is all of "reality" which has passed over to the other side like we see in the film *The Truman Show,* where not only is the hero telemorphosized, but everyone else involved as well - accomplices and prisoners caught in the spotlight of the

same deception. There was a time - like in the film, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* - where the characters jumped off the screen and entered into real life in order to be embodied - a poetic situational reversal. Today, reality massively transfuses itself into the screen in order to become disembodied. Nothing any longer separates them. The osmosis, the telemorphosis, is total.

Pleasantville provided an opposite example of the heroic young couple of TV viewers who enter into the TV show and disrupt the direction of the show by reinjecting human passions into it (quite curiously, it is not sex which resuscitates life and brings back the color to an otherwise black and white world - the secret lies elsewhere). But all of this is just part of a running gag between the screen and reality which is over. Today, the screen is no longer the television screen;

it is the screen of reality itself - of what we can call integral reality. *Loft Story* is integral sociality. Catherine Millet is integral sexuality. The immanence of banality, the more real than real, is integral reality. By its absorption in information and the virtual, behind the murder underlying the pacification of life and the enthusiastic consumption of this hallucinogenic banality, reality is a process heading towards completion and it is lethal at every dimension. A return to limbo, to this crepuscular zone where, by its very realization, everything comes to an end.

Somewhere, we all mourn this stripped reality, this residual existence, this total disillusion. And there is, within this entire story of the Loft, a collective work of mourning. But a mourning which is part of the solidarity between the criminals themselves that we all are - the murderers of this crime perpetrated

against real life, and the wallowing confession made to the screen, which in some ways becomes our literal confessional (the confessional is one of the key sites of *Loft Story*). Here we see our true mental corruption - in the consumption of this deception and mourning which becomes a contradictory source of pleasure. In any case, nevertheless, the disavowal of this experimental masquerade is reflected in the deadly boredom that emanates from it.

That being said, we cannot see why man would not claim his right to banality, insignificance, and nullity, and at the same time demand its opposite. After all, the right itself is part of the banalization of existence.

Integral sociality - integral sexuality - integral reality: this entire process would be catastrophic if there existed a truth of

the social, a truth of the sexual, a truth of the real. Fortunately, they are merely hypotheses, and if today they take the form of a monstrous reality, they are nonetheless hypotheses. Forever unverifiable - the secret will never be uncovered. Truth, if it existed, would be that of sex. Sex would be the final word of this story…. But it isn't…. This is why sexuality will only ever be a hypothesis.

Meaning that the absolute of a systematic implementation of the social, a systematic implementation of the sexual, and a systematic operation of the real is itself, merely… virtual.

Hence the other question, taking the place as a final interrogation: WHO WAS LAUGHING IN THE LOFT? Within this material world without a trace of humor, what sort of monster could laugh back-stage? What sort of sarcastic

divinity could laugh about all of it from his innermost depths? The human all too human must have turned over in his grave. But as we know very well, human convulsions are a distraction for the gods, who merely laugh at them.

NEW EDITION

THE SPIRIT OF TERRORISM

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER

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Baudrillard sees the power of terrorism as lying in the symbolism of slaughter – not merely the reality of death, but a sacrificial death that challenges a whole system. Where the revolutionary of the past sought to conduct a struggle of real forces in the context of ideology and politics, the new terrorist mounts a powerful symbolic challenge, which, when combined with high-tech resources, constitutes an unprecedented assault on an over-sophisticated and vulnerable West. This new edition is updated with the recent essays 'Hypotheses on Terrorism' and 'Violence of the Global'.

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First published by Verso 2002
© Verso 2002
Translation © Chris Turner 2002
This edition first published by Verso 2003
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The Spirit of Terrorism first published as
L'esprit du terrorisme © Éditions Galilée 2002
Requiem for the Twin Towers first published as
Requiem pour les Twin Towers © Jean Baudrillard 2002
Hypotheses on Terrorism first published as
Hypothèses sur le terrorisme © Éditions Galilée 2002
The Violence of the Global first published as
La violence du mondial © Éditions Galilée 2002
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014–4606
www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN 1–85984–448–0

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the
Library of Congress

Typeset in Perpetua by M Rules
Printed and bound in the UK by
The Bath Press, Avon

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THE SPIRIT OF TERRORISM

When it comes to world events, we had seen quite a few. From the death of Diana to the World Cup. And violent, real events, from wars right through to genocides. Yet, when it comes to symbolic events on a world scale – that is to say not just events that gain worldwide coverage, but events that represent a setback for globalization itself – we had had none. Throughout the stagnation of the 1990s, events were 'on strike' (as the Argentinian writer Macedonio Fernandez put it). Well, the strike is over now. Events are not on strike any more. With the attacks on the World

Trade Center in New York, we might even be said to have before us the absolute event, the 'mother' of all events, the pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place.

The whole play of history and power is disrupted by this event, but so, too, are the conditions of analysis. You have to take your time. While events were stagnating, you had to anticipate and move more quickly than they did. But when they speed up this much, you have to move more slowly – though without allowing yourself to be buried beneath a welter of words, or the gathering clouds of war, and preserving intact the unforgettable incandescence of the images.

All that has been said and written is evidence of a gigantic abreaction to the event itself, and the fascination it exerts. The moral condemnation and the holy alliance against terrorism are on the same scale as the prodigious jubilation at seeing this global superpower destroyed – better, at seeing it, in a sense, destroying itself, committing suicide in

a blaze of glory. For it is that superpower which, by its unbearable power, has fomented all this violence which is endemic throughout the world, and hence that (unwittingly) terroristic imagination which dwells in all of us.

The fact that we have dreamt of this event, that everyone without exception has dreamt of it – because no one can avoid dreaming of the destruction of any power that has become hegemonic to this degree – is unacceptable to the Western moral conscience. Yet it is a fact, and one which can indeed be measured by the emotive violence of all that has been said and written in the effort to dispel it.

At a pinch, we can say that they *did it*, but we *wished for* it. If this is not taken into account, the event loses any symbolic dimension. It becomes a pure accident, a purely arbitrary act, the murderous phantasmagoria of a few fanatics, and all that would then remain would be to eliminate them. Now, we know very well that this is not how it is.

Which explains all the counterphobic ravings about exorcizing evil: it is because it is there, everywhere, like an obscure object of desire. Without this deep-seated complicity, the event would not have had the resonance it has, and in their symbolic strategy the terrorists doubtless know that they can count on this unavowable complicity.

This goes far beyond hatred for the dominant world power among the disinherited and the exploited, among those who have ended up on the wrong side of the global order. Even those who share in the advantages of that order have this malicious desire in their hearts. Allergy to any definitive order, to any definitive power, is – happily – universal, and the two towers of the World Trade Center were perfect embodiments, in their very twinness, of that definitive order.

No need, then, for a death drive or a destructive instinct, or even for perverse, unintended effects. Very logically – and inexorably – the

increase in the power of power heightens the will to destroy it. And it was party to its own destruction. When the two towers collapsed, you had the impression that they were responding to the suicide of the suicide-planes with their own suicides. It has been said that 'Even God cannot declare war on Himself.' Well, He can. The West, in the position of God (divine omnipotence and absolute moral legitimacy), has become suicidal, and declared war on itself.

The countless disaster movies bear witness to this fantasy, which they clearly attempt to exorcize with images, drowning out the whole thing with special effects. But the universal attraction they exert, which is on a par with pornography, shows that acting-out is never very far away, the impulse to reject any system growing all the stronger as it approaches perfection or omnipotence.

It is probable that the terrorists had not foreseen the collapse of the Twin Towers (any more than had the experts!), a collapse which – much

more than the attack on the Pentagon – had the greatest symbolic impact. The symbolic collapse of a whole system came about by an unpredictable complicity, as though the towers, by collapsing on their own, by committing suicide, had joined in to round off the event. In a sense, the entire system, by its internal fragility, lent the initial action a helping hand.

The more concentrated the system becomes globally, ultimately forming one single network, the more it becomes vulnerable at a single point (already a single little Filipino hacker had managed, from the dark recesses of his portable computer, to launch the 'I love you' virus, which circled the globe devastating entire networks). Here it was eighteen suicide attackers who, thanks to the absolute weapon of death, enhanced by technological efficiency, unleashed a global catastrophic process.

When global power monopolizes the situation to this extent, when there is such a formidable

condensation of all functions in the technocratic machinery, and when no alternative form of thinking is allowed, what other way is there but a *terroristic situational transfer*? It was the system itself which created the objective conditions for this brutal retaliation. By seizing all the cards for itself, it forced the Other to change the rules. And the new rules are fierce ones, because the stakes are fierce. To a system whose very excess of power poses an insoluble challenge, the terrorists respond with a definitive act which is also not susceptible of exchange. Terrorism is the act that restores an irreducible singularity to the heart of a system of generalized exchange. All the singularities (species, individuals and cultures) that have paid with their deaths for the installation of a global circulation governed by a single power are taking their revenge today through this *terroristic situational transfer*.

This is terror against terror – there is no longer any ideology behind it. We are far beyond ideology and politics now. No ideology, no cause – not even

the Islamic cause – can account for the energy which fuels terror. The aim is no longer even to transform the world, but (as the heresies did in their day) to radicalize the world by sacrifice. Whereas the system aims to realize it by force.

Terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere. There is a global perfusion of terrorism, which accompanies any system of domination as though it were its shadow, ready to activate itself anywhere, like a double agent. We can no longer draw a demarcation line around it. It is at the very heart of this culture which combats it, and the visible fracture (and the hatred) that pits the exploited and the underdeveloped globally against the Western world secretly connects with the fracture internal to the dominant system. That system can face down any visible antagonism. But against the other kind, which is viral in structure – as though every machinery of domination secreted its own counterapparatus, the agent of its own disappearance – against that form of almost automatic reversion of its own power,

the system can do nothing. And terrorism is the shock wave of this silent reversion.

This is not, then, a clash of civilizations or religions, and it reaches far beyond Islam and America, on which efforts are being made to focus the conflict in order to create the delusion of a visible confrontation and a solution based on force. There is, indeed, a fundamental antagonism here, but one which points past the spectre of America (which is, perhaps, the epicentre, but in no sense the sole embodiment, of globalization) and the spectre of Islam (which is not the embodiment of terrorism either), to *triumphant globalization battling against itself*. In this sense, we can indeed speak of a world war – not the Third World War, but the Fourth and the only really global one, since what is at stake is globalization itself. The first two world wars corresponded to the classical image of war. The first ended the supremacy of Europe and the colonial era. The second put an end to Nazism. The third, which has indeed taken place, in the form of cold war

and deterrence, put an end to Communism. With each succeeding war, we have moved further towards a single world order. Today that order, which has virtually reached its culmination, finds itself grappling with the antagonistic forces scattered throughout the very heartlands of the global, in all the current convulsions. A fractal war of all cells, all singularities, revolting in the form of antibodies. A confrontation so impossible to pin down that the idea of war has to be rescued from time to time by spectacular set-pieces, such as the Gulf War or the war in Afghanistan. But the Fourth World War is elsewhere. It is what haunts every world order, all hegemonic domination – if Islam dominated the world, terrorism would rise against Islam, *for it is the world, the globe itself, which resists globalization*.

Terrorism is immoral. The World Trade Center event, that symbolic challenge, is immoral, and it is a response to a globalization which is itself immoral. So, let us be immoral; and if we want to have some understanding of all this, let us go and

take a little look beyond Good and Evil. When, for once, we have an event that defies not just morality, but any form of interpretation, let us try to approach it with an understanding of Evil.

This is precisely where the crucial point lies – in the total misunderstanding on the part of Western philosophy, on the part of the Enlightenment, of the relation between Good and Evil. We believe naively that the progress of Good, its advance in all fields (the sciences, technology, democracy, human rights), corresponds to a defeat of Evil. No one seems to have understood that Good and Evil advance together, as part of the same movement. The triumph of the one does not eclipse the other – far from it. In metaphysical terms, Evil is regarded as an accidental mishap, but this axiom, from which all the Manichaean forms of the struggle of Good against Evil derive, is illusory. Good does not conquer Evil, nor indeed does the reverse happen: they are at once both irreducible to each other and inextricably interrelated. Ultimately, Good could thwart Evil only by ceasing

to be Good since, by seizing for itself a global monopoly of power, it gives rise, by that very act, to a blowback of a proportionate violence.

In the traditional universe, there was still a balance between Good and Evil, in accordance with a dialectical relation which maintained the tension and equilibrium of the moral universe, come what may – not unlike the way the confrontation of the two powers in the Cold War maintained the balance of terror. There was, then, no supremacy of the one over the other. As soon as there was a total extrapolation of Good (hegemony of the positive over any form of negativity, exclusion of death and of any potential adverse force – triumph of the values of Good all along the line), that balance was upset. From this point on, the equilibrium was gone, and it was as though Evil regained an invisible autonomy, henceforward developing exponentially.

Relatively speaking, this is more or less what has happened in the political order with the

eclipse of Communism and the global triumph of liberal power: it was at that point that a ghostly enemy emerged, infiltrating itself throughout the whole planet, slipping in everywhere like a virus, welling up from all the interstices of power: Islam. But Islam was merely the moving front along which the antagonism crystallized. The antagonism is everywhere, and in every one of us. So, it is terror against terror. But asymmetric terror. And it is this asymmetry which leaves global omnipotence entirely disarmed. At odds with itself, it can only plunge further into its own logic of relations of force, but it cannot operate on the terrain of the symbolic challenge and death – a thing of which it no longer has any idea, since it has erased it from its own culture.

Up to the present, this integrative power has largely succeeded in absorbing and resolving any crisis, any negativity, creating, as it did so, a situation of the deepest despair (not only for the disinherited, but for the pampered and privileged too, in their radical comfort). The fundamental

change now is that the terrorists have ceased to commit suicide for no return; they are now bringing their own deaths to bear in an effective, offensive manner, in the service of an intuitive strategic insight which is quite simply a sense of the immense fragility of the opponent – a sense that a system which has arrived at its quasi-perfection can, by that very token, be ignited by the slightest spark. They have succeeded in turning their own deaths into an absolute weapon against a system that operates on the basis of the exclusion of death, a system whose ideal is an ideal of zero deaths. Every zero-death system is a zero-sum-game system. And all the means of deterrence and destruction can do nothing against an enemy who has already turned his death into a counterstrike weapon. 'What does the American bombing matter? Our men are as eager to die as the Americans are to live!' Hence the non-equivalence of the four thousand deaths inflicted at a stroke on a zero-death system.

Here, then, it is all about death, not only about the violent irruption of death in real time –

'live', so to speak – but the irruption of a death which is far more than real: a death which is symbolic and sacrificial – that is to say, the absolute, irrevocable event.

This is the spirit of terrorism.

Never attack the system in terms of relations of force. That is the (revolutionary) imagination the system itself forces upon you – the system which survives only by constantly drawing those attacking it into fighting on the ground of reality, which is always its own. But shift the struggle into the symbolic sphere, where the rule is that of challenge, reversion and outbidding. *So that death can be met only by equal or greater death.* Defy the system by a gift to which it cannot respond except by its own death and its own collapse.

The terrorist hypothesis is that the system itself will commit suicide in response to the multiple challenges posed by deaths and suicides.

For there is a symbolic obligation upon both the system and power [*le pouvoir*], and in this trap lies the only chance of their catastrophic collapse. In this vertiginous cycle of the impossible exchange of death, the death of the terrorist is an infinitesimal point, but one that creates a gigantic suction or void, an enormous convection. Around this tiny point the whole system of the real and of power [*la puissance*] gathers, transfixed; rallies briefly; then perishes by its own hyperefficiency.

It is the tactic of the terrorist model to bring about an excess of reality, and have the system collapse beneath that excess of reality. The whole derisory nature of the situation, together with the violence mobilized by the system, turns around against it, for terrorist acts are both the exorbitant mirror of its own violence and the model of a symbolic violence forbidden to it, the only violence it cannot exert – that of its own death.

This is why the whole of visible power can do

nothing against the tiny, but symbolic, death of a few individuals.

We have to face facts, and accept that a new terrorism has come into being, a new form of action which plays the game, and lays hold of the rules of the game, solely with the aim of disrupting it. Not only do these people not play fair, since they put their own deaths into play – to which there is no possible response ('they are cowards') – but they have taken over all the weapons of the dominant power. Money and stock-market speculation, computer technology and aeronautics, spectacle and the media networks – they have assimilated everything of modernity and globalism, without changing their goal, which is to destroy that power.

They have even – and this is the height of cunning – used the banality of American everyday life as cover and camouflage. Sleeping in their suburbs, reading and studying with their families, before activating themselves suddenly like time

bombs. The faultless mastery of this clandestine style of operation is almost as terroristic as the spectacular act of September 11, since it casts suspicion on any and every individual. Might not any inoffensive person be a potential terrorist? If *they* could pass unnoticed, then each of us is a criminal going unnoticed (every plane also becomes suspect), and in the end, this is no doubt true. This may very well correspond to an unconscious form of potential, veiled, carefully repressed criminality, which is always capable, if not of resurfacing, at least of thrilling secretly to the spectacle of Evil. So the event ramifies down to the smallest detail – the source of an even more subtle mental terrorism.

The radical difference is that the terrorists, while they have at their disposal weapons that are the system's own, possess a further lethal weapon: their own deaths. If they were content just to fight the system with its own weapons, they would immediately be eliminated. If they merely used their own deaths to combat it, they would

disappear just as quickly in a useless sacrifice – as terrorism has almost always done up to now (an example being the Palestinian suicide attacks), for which reason it has been doomed to failure.

As soon as they combine all the modern resources available to them with this highly symbolic weapon, everything changes. The destructive potential is multiplied to infinity. It is this multiplication of factors (which seem irreconcilable to us) that gives them such superiority. The 'zero-death' strategy, by contrast, the strategy of the 'clean' technological war, precisely fails to match up to this transfiguration of 'real' power by symbolic power.

The prodigious success of such an attack presents a problem, and if we are to gain some understanding of it, we have to slough off our Western perspective to see what goes on in the terrorists' organization, and in their heads. With us, such efficiency would assume a maximum of calculation and rationality that we find hard to imagine in

others. And, even in this case, as in any rational organization or secret service, there would always have been leaks or slip-ups.

So, the secret of such a success lies elsewhere. The difference is that here we are dealing not with an employment contract, but with a pact and a sacrificial obligation. Such an obligation is immune to any defection or corruption. The miracle is to have adapted to the global network and technical protocols, without losing anything of this complicity 'unto death'. Unlike the contract, the pact does not bind individuals – even their 'suicide' is not individual heroism, it is a collective sacrificial act sealed by an ideal demand. And it is the combination of two mechanisms – an operational structure and a symbolic pact – that made an act of such excessiveness possible.

We no longer have any idea what a symbolic calculation is, as in poker or potlatch: with minimum stakes, but the maximum result. And the maximum result was precisely what the terrorists

obtained in the Manhattan attack, which might be presented as quite a good illustration of chaos theory: an initial impact causing incalculable consequences; whereas the Americans' massive deployment ('Desert Storm') achieved only derisory effects – the hurricane ending, so to speak, in the beating of a butterfly's wing.

Suicidal terrorism was a terrorism of the poor. This is a terrorism of the rich. This is what particularly frightens us: the fact that they have become rich (they have all the necessary resources) without ceasing to wish to destroy us. Admittedly, in terms of our system of values, they are cheating. It is not playing fair to throw one's own death into the game. But this does not trouble them, and the new rules are not ours to determine.

So any argument is used to discredit their acts. For example, calling them 'suicidal' and 'martyrs' – and adding immediately that martyrdom proves nothing, that it has nothing to do with truth, that it is even (to quote Nietzsche) the

enemy number one of truth. Admittedly, their deaths prove nothing, but in a system where truth itself is elusive (or do we claim to possess it?), there is nothing to prove. Moreover, this highly moral argument can be turned around. If the voluntary martyrdom of the suicide bombers proves nothing, then the involuntary martyrdom of the victims of the attack proves nothing either, and there is something unseemly and obscene in making a moral argument out of it (this is in no way to deny their suffering and death).

Another argument in bad faith: these terrorists exchanged their deaths for a place in paradise; their act was not a disinterested one, hence it is not authentic; it would be disinterested only if they did not believe in God, if they saw no hope in death, as is the case with us (yet Christian martyrs assumed precisely such a sublime equivalence). There again, then, they are not fighting fair, since they get salvation, which we cannot even continue to hope for. So we mourn our deaths while they can turn theirs into very high-definition stakes.

Fundamentally, all this – causes, proof, truth, rewards, ends and means – is a typically Western form of calculation. We even evaluate death in terms of interest rates, in value-for-money terms. An economic calculation that is a poor man's calculation – poor men who no longer even have the courage to pay the price.

What can happen now – apart from war, which is itself merely a conventional safety shield [*écran de protection*]? There is talk of bio-terrorism, bacteriological warfare or nuclear terrorism. Yet that is no longer of the order of the symbolic challenge, but of annihilation pure and simple, with no element of risk or glory: it is of the order of the final solution. Now, it is a mistake to see terrorist action as obeying a purely destructive logic. It seems to me that the action of the terrorists, from which death is inseparable (this is precisely what makes it a symbolic act), does not seek the impersonal elimination of the other. Everything lies in the challenge and the duel – that is to say, everything still lies in a dual, personal relation

with the opposing power. It is that power which humiliated you, so it too must be humiliated. And not merely exterminated. It has to be made to lose face. And you never achieve that by pure force and eliminating the other party: it must, rather, be targeted and wounded in a genuinely adversarial relation. Apart from the pact that binds the terrorists together, there is also something of a dual pact with the adversary. This is, then, precisely the opposite of the cowardice of which they stand accused, and it is precisely the opposite of what the Americans did in the Gulf War (and which they are currently beginning again in Afghanistan), where the target is invisible and is liquidated operationally.

In all these vicissitudes, what stays with us, above all else, is the sight of the images. This impact of the images, and their fascination, are necessarily what we retain, since images are, whether we like it or not, our primal scene. And, at the same time as they have radicalized the world situation, the events in New York can also be said

to have radicalized the relation of the image to reality. Whereas we were dealing before with an uninterrupted profusion of banal images and a seamless flow of sham events, the terrorist act in New York has resuscitated both images and events.

Among the other weapons of the system which they turned round against it, the terrorists exploited the 'real time' of images, their instantaneous worldwide transmission, just as they exploited stock-market speculation, electronic information and air traffic. The role of images is highly ambiguous. For, at the same time as they exalt the event, they also take it hostage. They serve to multiply it to infinity and, at the same time, they are a diversion and a neutralization (this was already the case with the events of 1968). The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event.

How do things stand with the real event, then,

if reality is everywhere infiltrated by images, virtuality and fiction? In the present case, we thought we had seen (perhaps with a certain relief) a resurgence of the real, and of the violence of the real, in an allegedly virtual universe. 'There's an end to all your talk about the virtual – this is something real!' Similarly, it was possible to see this as a resurrection of history beyond its proclaimed end. But does reality actually outstrip fiction? If it seems to do so, this is because it has absorbed fiction's energy, and has itself become fiction. We might almost say that reality is jealous of fiction, that the real is jealous of the image. . . . It is a kind of duel between them, a contest to see which can be the most unimaginable.

The collapse of the World Trade Center towers is unimaginable, but that is not enough to make it a real event. An excess of violence is not enough to open on to reality. For reality is a principle, and it is this principle that is lost. Reality and fiction are inextricable, and the fascination with the attack is primarily a fascination with the

image (both its exultatory and its catastrophic consequences are themselves largely imaginary).

In this case, then, the real is superadded to the image like a bonus of terror, like an additional *frisson*: not only is it terrifying, but, what is more, it is real. Rather than the violence of the real being there first, and the *frisson* of the image being added to it, the image is there first, and the *frisson* of the real is added. Something like an additional fiction, a fiction surpassing fiction. Ballard (after Borges) talked like this of reinventing the real as the ultimate and most redoubtable fiction.

The terrorist violence here is not, then, a blowback of reality, any more than it is a blowback of history. It is not 'real'. In a sense, it is worse: it is symbolic. Violence in itself may be perfectly banal and inoffensive. Only symbolic violence is generative of singularity. And in this singular event, in this Manhattan disaster movie, the twentieth century's two elements of mass fascination are combined: the white magic of the cinema and

the black magic of terrorism; the white light of the image and the black light of terrorism.

We try retrospectively to impose some kind of meaning on it, to find some kind of interpretation. But there is none. And it is the radicality of the spectacle, the brutality of the spectacle, which alone is original and irreducible. The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism of spectacle upon us. And, against this immoral fascination (even if it unleashes a universal moral reaction), the political order can do nothing. This is *our* theatre of cruelty, the only one we have left – extraordinary in that it unites the most extreme degree of the spectacular and the highest level of challenge. . . . It is at one and the same time the dazzling micro-model of a kernel of real violence with the maximum possible echo – hence the purest form of spectacle – and a sacrificial model mounting the purest symbolic form of defiance to the historical and political order.

We would forgive them any massacre if it had

a meaning, if it could be interpreted as historical violence – this is the moral axiom of good violence. We would pardon them any violence if it were not given media exposure ('terrorism would be nothing without the media'). But this is all illusion. There is no 'good' use of the media; the media are part of the event, they are part of the terror, and they work in both directions.

The repression of terrorism spirals around as unpredictably as the terrorist act itself. No one knows where it will stop, or what turnabouts there may yet be. There is no possible distinction, at the level of images and information, between the spectacular and the symbolic, no possible distinction between the 'crime' and the crackdown. And it is this uncontrollable unleashing of reversibility that is terrorism's true victory. A victory that is visible in the subterranean ramifications and infiltrations of the event – not just in the direct economic, political, financial slump in the whole of the system – and the resulting moral and psychological downturn –

but in the slump in the value-system, in the whole ideology of freedom, of free circulation, and so on, on which the Western world prided itself, and on which it drew to exert its hold over the rest of the world.

To the point that the idea of freedom, a new and recent idea, is already fading from minds and mores, and liberal globalization is coming about in precisely the opposite form – a police-state globalization, a total control, a terror based on 'law-and-order' measures. Deregulation ends up in a maximum of constraints and restrictions, akin to those of a fundamentalist society.

A fall-off in production, consumption, speculation and growth (but certainly not in corruption!): it is as though the global system were making a strategic fallback, carrying out a painful revision of its values – in defensive reaction, as it would seem, to the impact of terrorism, but responding, deep down, to its secret injunctions: enforced regulation as a product of absolute disorder, but a regulation it imposes

on itself – internalizing, as it were, its own defeat.

Another aspect of the terrorists' victory is that all other forms of violence and the destabilization of order work in its favour. Internet terrorism, biological terrorism, the terrorism of anthrax and rumour – all are ascribed to Bin Laden. He might even claim natural catastrophes as his own. All the forms of disorganization and perverse circulation operate to his advantage. The very structure of generalized world trade works in favour of impossible exchange. It is like an 'automatic writing' of terrorism, constantly refuelled by the involuntary terrorism of news and information. With all the panic consequences which ensue; if, in the current anthrax scare,* the hysteria spreads spontaneously by instantaneous crystallization, like a chemical solution at the mere contact of a molecule, this is because the whole system has reached a critical mass which makes it vulnerable to any aggression.

* This text was written in October 2001 and published in *Le Monde* on November 3 2001.

There is no remedy for this extreme situation, and war is certainly not a solution, since it merely offers a rehash of the past, with the same deluge of military forces, bogus information, senseless bombardment, emotive and deceitful language, technological deployment and brainwashing. Like the Gulf War: a non-event, an event that does not really take place.

And this indeed is its *raison-d'être*: to substitute, for a real and formidable, unique and unforeseeable event, a repetitive, rehashed pseudo-event. The terrorist attack corresponded to a precedence of the event over all interpretative models; whereas this mindlessly military, technological war corresponds, conversely, to the model's precedence over the event, and hence to a conflict over phoney stakes, to a situation of 'no contest'. War as continuation of the absence of politics by other means.

REQUIEM FOR THE TWIN TOWERS

A version of this paper was Baudrillard's contribution to a debate on the events of September 11 2001, the 'Rencontres philosophiques outre-Atlantique', organized jointly by New York University and France Culture in Washington Square, Manhattan. The formal contributions were broadcast on France Culture on the afternoon of February 23 2002. The debate, which was largely conducted in French, was chaired by Tom Bishop; other participants were Jacques Rancière, Charles Larmore and Mark Lilla. The footnotes, which refer to slight variations between the written text and the version delivered in New York, are my own [Trans.].

The September 11 attacks also concern architecture, since what was destroyed was one of the most prestigious of buildings, together with a whole (Western) value-system and a world order.[1]

1 In the New York debate, Baudrillard prefaced his talk with the following comments: 'There is an absolute difficulty in speaking of an absolute event. That is to say, in providing an analysis of it that is not an explanation – as I don't think there is any possible explanation of this event, either by intellectuals or by others – but its *analogon*, so to speak; an analysis which might possibly be as unacceptable as the event, but strikes the . . . let us say, symbolic imagination in more or less the same way.'

It may, then, be useful to begin with a historical and architectural analysis of the Twin Towers, in order to grasp the symbolic significance of their destruction.

First of all, why the *Twin* Towers? Why *two* towers at the World Trade Center?

All Manhattan's tall buildings had been content to confront each other in a competitive verticality, and the product of this was an architectural panorama reflecting the capitalist system itself – a pyramidal jungle, whose famous image stretched out before you as you arrived from the sea. That image changed after 1973, with the building of the World Trade Center. The effigy of the system was no longer the obelisk and the pyramid, but the punch card and the statistical graph. This architectural graphism is the embodiment of a system that is no longer competitive, but digital and countable, and from

which competition has disappeared in favour of networks and monopoly.

Perfect parallelepipeds, standing over 1,300 feet tall, on a square base. Perfectly balanced, blind communicating vessels (they say terrorism is 'blind', but the towers were blind too – monoliths no longer opening on to the outside world, but subject to artificial conditioning[2]). The fact that there were two of them signifies the end of any original reference. If there had been only one, monopoly would not have been perfectly embodied. Only the doubling of the sign truly puts an end to what it designates.

There is a particular fascination in this reduplication. However tall they may have been, the

2 In New York, Baudrillard here glossed: 'Air conditioning, but mental conditioning too'.

two towers signified, none the less, a halt to verticality. They were not of the same breed as the other buildings. They culminated in the exact reflection of each other. The glass and steel façades of the Rockefeller Center buildings still mirrored each other in an endless specularity. But the Twin Towers no longer had any façades, any faces. With the rhetoric of verticality disappears also the rhetoric of the mirror. There remains only a kind of black box, a series closed on the figure two, as though architecture, like the system, was now merely a product of cloning, and of a changeless genetic code.

New York is the only city in the world that has, throughout its history, tracked the present form of the system and all its many developments with such prodigious fidelity. We must, then, assume that the collapse of the towers – itself a unique event in the history of modern cities – prefigures a kind of dramatic ending and, all in all,

disappearance both of this form of architecture and of the world system it embodies. Shaped in the pure computer image of banking and finance, (ac)countable and digital, they were in a sense its brain, and in striking there the terrorists have struck at the brain, at the nerve-centre of the system.

The violence of globalization also involves architecture, and hence the violent protest against it also involves the destruction of that architecture. In terms of collective drama, we can say that the horror for the 4,000 victims of dying in those towers was inseparable from the horror of living in them – the horror of living and working in sarcophagi of concrete and steel.

These architectural monsters, like the Beaubourg Centre, have always exerted an ambiguous fascination, as have the extreme forms of modern technology in general – a contradictory feeling

of attraction and repulsion, and hence, somewhere, a secret desire to see them disappear. In the case of the Twin Towers, something particular is added: precisely their symmetry and their twin-ness. There is, admittedly, in this cloning and perfect symmetry an aesthetic quality, a kind of perfect crime against form, a tautology of form which can give rise, in a violent reaction, to the temptation to break that symmetry, to restore an asymmetry, and hence a singularity.

Their destruction itself respected the symmetry of the towers: a double attack, separated by a few minutes' interval, with a sense of suspense between the two impacts. After the first, one could still believe it was an accident. Only the second impact confirmed the terrorist attack. And in the Queens air crash a month later, the TV stations waited, staying with the story (in France) for four hours, waiting to broadcast a possible second crash 'live'. Since that did not occur, we shall

never know now whether it was an accident or a terrorist act.

The collapse of the towers is the major symbolic event. Imagine they had not collapsed, or only one had collapsed: the effect would not have been the same at all. The fragility of global power would not have been so strikingly proven. The towers, which were the emblem of that power, still embody it in their dramatic end, which resembles a suicide. Seeing them collapse themselves, as if by implosion, one had the impression that they were committing suicide in response to the suicide of the suicide planes.

Were the Twin Towers destroyed, or did they collapse? Let us be clear about this: the two towers are both a physical, architectural object and a symbolic object[3] (symbolic of financial power and

3 In New York, Baudrillard added: 'symbolic in the weak sense, but symbolic, for all that'.

global economic liberalism). The architectural object was destroyed, but it was the symbolic object which was targeted and which it was intended to demolish. One might think the physical destruction brought about the symbolic collapse. But in fact no one, not even the terrorists, had reckoned on the total destruction of the towers. It was, in fact, their symbolic collapse that brought about their physical collapse, not the other way around.

As if the power bearing these towers suddenly lost all energy, all resilience; as though that arrogant power suddenly gave way under the pressure of too intense an effort: the effort always to be the unique world model.

So the towers, tired of being a symbol which was too heavy a burden to bear, collapsed, this time physically, in their totality. Their nerves of steel cracked. They collapsed vertically, drained of

their strength, with the whole world looking on in astonishment.

The symbolic collapse came about, then, by a kind of unpredictable complicity – as though the entire system, by its internal fragility, joined in the game of its own liquidation, and hence joined in the game of terrorism. Very logically, and inexorably, the increase in the power of power heightens the will to destroy it. But there is more: somewhere, it was party to its own destruction. The countless disaster movies bear witness to this fantasy, which they attempt to exorcize with images and special effects. But the fascination they exert is a sign that acting-out is never very far away – the rejection of any system, including internal rejection, growing all the stronger as it approaches perfection or omnipotence. It has been said that 'Even God cannot declare war on Himself.' Well, He can. The West, in the position of God (divine omnipotence and absolute moral

legitimacy), has become suicidal, and declared war on itself.

Even in their failure, the terrorists succeeded beyond their wildest hopes: in bungling their attack on the White House (while succeeding far beyond their objectives on the towers), they demonstrated unintentionally that that was not the essential target, that political power no longer means much, and real power lies elsewhere. As for what should be built in place of the towers, the problem is insoluble. Quite simply because one can imagine nothing equivalent that would be worth destroying – that would be worthy of being destroyed. The Twin Towers were worth destroying. One cannot say the same of many architectural works. Most things are not even worth destroying or sacrificing. Only works of prestige deserve that fate, for it is an honour. This proposition is not as paradoxical as it sounds, and it raises a basic issue for architec-

ture: one should build only those things which, by their excellence, are worthy of being destroyed. Take a look around with this radical proposition in mind, and you will see what a pass we have come to. Not much would withstand this extreme hypothesis.

This brings us back to what should be the basic question for architecture, which architects never formulate: is it normal to build and construct? In fact it is not, and we should preserve the absolutely problematical character of the undertaking. Undoubtedly, the task of architecture – of good architecture – is to efface itself, to disappear as such. The towers, for their part, have disappeared. But they have left us the symbol of their disappearance, their disappearance as symbol. They, which were the symbol of omnipotence, have become, by their absence, the symbol of the possible disappearance of that omnipotence – which is perhaps an even more potent symbol.

Whatever becomes of that global omnipotence, it will have been destroyed here for a moment.

Moreover, although the two towers have disappeared, they have not been annihilated. Even in their pulverized state, they have left behind an intense awareness of their presence. No one who knew them can cease imagining them and the imprint they made on the skyline from all points of the city. Their end in material space has borne them off into a definitive imaginary space. By the grace of terrorism, the World Trade Center has become the world's most beautiful building – the eighth wonder of the world![4]

4 After delivering a slightly modified version of this last paragraph in New York, Baudrillard closed with the comment: 'So I set out to produce a Requiem, but it was also, in a way, a Te Deum.'

HYPOTHESES ON TERRORISM

We may dismiss from the outset the hypothesis that September 11 constituted merely an accident or incident on the path to irreversible globalization. An ultimately despairing hypothesis, since something very extraordinary occurred there, and to deny it is to admit that henceforth nothing can ever constitute an event, that we are doomed to play out the flawless logic of a global power capable of absorbing any resistance, any antagonism, and even strengthening itself by so doing – the terrorist act merely hastening the planetary ascendancy of a single power and a single way of thinking.

Counterposed to this zero hypothesis is the maximal one, the maximal gamble on the character of September 11 as event – event being defined here as that which, in a system of generalized exchange, suddenly creates a zone of impossible exchange: the impossible exchange of death at the heart of the event itself, and the impossible exchange of that event for any discourse whatever. Hence its symbolic potency, and it is this symbolic potency which struck us all in the Manhattan events.

According to the zero hypothesis, the terrorist event is insignificant. It ought not to have existed and, basically, it does not exist. This is to see things in terms of the idea that Evil is mere illusion or an accidental vicissitude in the trajectory of Good – in this case, the trajectory of the World Order and a happy Globalization. Theology has always based itself on this unreality of Evil as such.

Another hypothesis: it was an act of suicidal madmen, psychopaths, fanatics of a perverted cause, themselves manipulated by some evil power, which is merely exploiting the resentment and hatred of oppressed peoples to sate its destructive rage. The same hypothesis – but more favourably put, and attempting to lend terrorism a kind of historical rationale – is the one that sees it as the real expression of the despair of oppressed peoples. But this argument is itself suspect, since it condemns terrorism to represent global misery only in a definitive gesture of impotence. And even if it is granted that terrorism is a specific form of political contestation of the global order, this is generally done only to denounce its failure and, at the same time, its unintended effect, which is involuntarily to consolidate that order. This is the version advanced by Arundhati Roy who, while denouncing hegemonic power, denounces terrorism as its twin – the diabolical twin of the system. A small step, then, to imagine that if terrorism did not exist, the system

would have invented it. And why not, then, see the September 11 attacks as a CIA stunt?

Here again, this is to suppose that all oppositional violence is ultimately complicit with the existing order. It is to disqualify the intentions of the actors, and the very stakes of their action. It is to reduce that action to its 'objective' consequences (the geopolitical consequences of September 11), and never to see it in terms of its own potency. And, anyway, who is manipulating whom? Who is playing the other's game? In this case, it is just as much the terrorists who profit by the advance of the system, in order themselves to gain power, in a race along parallel tracks in which the two opponents, contrary to what happened in class conflict and historical warfare, never actually meet.

We should go even further: rather than the hypothesis of an 'objective' complicity between terrorism and the world order, we should advance the exactly opposite hypothesis of a deep internal com-

plicity between that power and the power ranged against it from the outside; of an internal instability and weakness which, in a sense, meet the violent destabilization of the terrorist act halfway. Without the hypothesis of this secret coalition, this collusive predisposition, one can understand nothing of terrorism and the impossibility of overcoming it.

If the aim of terrorism is to destabilize the global order merely by its own strength, in a head-on clash, then it is absurd: the relation of forces is so unequal and, in any case, that global order is already the site of such disorder and deregulation that there is no point whatever in adding to it. One even runs the risk, by this additional disorder, of reinforcing the police and security control systems, as we see on all sides today.

But perhaps that is the terrorists' dream: the dream of an immortal enemy. For, if the enemy no

longer exists, it becomes difficult to destroy it. A tautology, admittedly, but terrorism is tautological, and its conclusion is a paradoxical syllogism: if the State really existed, it would give a political meaning to terrorism. Since terrorism manifestly has none (though it has other meanings), this is proof that the State does not exist, and that its power is derisory.

What, then, is the terrorists' secret message? In a Nasreddin story, we see him crossing the frontier each day with mules laden with sacks. Each time, the sacks are searched, but nothing is found. And Nasreddin continues to cross the frontier with his mules. Long afterwards, they ask him what in fact it was he was smuggling. And Nasreddin replies: 'I was smuggling mules.'

In this same way, we may wonder what it is that is really being smuggled here, behind all the apparent motives for the terrorist act – religion,

martyrdom, vengeance or strategy? It is quite simply, through what seems to us like a suicide, the impossible exchange of death, the challenge to the system by the symbolic gift of death, which becomes an absolute weapon (the Towers seem to have understood this, since they responded with their own collapse).

This is the sovereign hypothesis: terrorism ultimately has no meaning, no objective, and cannot be measured by its 'real' political and historical consequences. And it is, paradoxically, because it has no meaning that it constitutes an event in a world increasingly saturated with meaning and efficacy.

The sovereign hypothesis is the one that conceives of terrorism, beyond its spectacular violence, beyond Islam and America, as the emergence of a radical antagonism at the very heart of the process of globalization, of a force irreducible to this integral technical and mental realization of the world,

irreducible to this inexorable movement towards a completed global order.

A vital counterforce grappling with the death force of the system. A force of defiance to a globality totally soluble in circulation or exchange. A force of an irreducible singularity, the more violent as the system extends its hegemony – up to a ruptural event like that of September 11, which does not resolve this antagonism, but lends it, at a stroke, a symbolic dimension.

Terrorism invents nothing, inaugurates nothing. It simply carries things to the extreme, to the point of paroxysm. It exacerbates a certain state of things, a certain logic of violence and uncertainty. The system itself, by the speculative extension of all exchange, the random and virtual form it imposes everywhere – lean production, floating capital, forced mobility and acceleration – causes a general principle of uncertainty to prevail, which terrorism

simply translates into total insecurity. Terrorism is unreal and unrealistic? But our virtual reality, our systems of information and communication, have themselves too, and for a long time, been beyond the reality principle. As for terror, we know it is already present everywhere, in institutional violence, both mental and physical, in homeopathic doses. Terrorism merely crystallizes all the ingredients in suspension. It puts the finishing touches to the orgy of power, liberation, flows and calculation which the Twin Towers embodied, while being the violent deconstruction of that extreme form of efficiency and hegemony.

So, at Ground Zero, in the rubble of global power, we can only, despairingly, find our own image.

There isn't, in fact, anything else to see at Ground Zero – not even a sign of hostility towards an

invisible enemy. What prevails there is merely the American people's immense compassion for itself – with star-spangled banners, commemorative messages, the cult of victims and of those postmodern heroes, the firefighters and the police. Compassion as the national passion of a people that wants to be alone with God, and prefers to see itself struck down by God than by some evil power. 'God bless America' has become: 'At last, God has struck us.' Consternation, but ultimately eternal gratitude for this divine solicitude that has made us victims.

The reasoning of moral consciousness is as follows: since we are the Good, it can only be Evil that has struck us. But if, for those who see themselves as the incarnation of Good, Evil is unimaginable, it can only be God who strikes them. And to punish them for what, ultimately, if not for an excess of Virtue and Power, for the excess signified by the non-division of Good and Power? A punishment for having gone too far in the Good and the incarnation

of the Good. Which does not displease them, and will not prevent them from continuing to do Good without the slightest misgivings. And hence finding themselves even more alone with God. And hence being even more profoundly unaware of the existence of Evil.

The twin sister of compassion (as much a twin as the two towers) is arrogance. You weep over your own misfortune, and at the same time you are the best. And what gives us the right to be the best is that from now on, we are victims. This is the perfect alibi; it is the whole mental hygiene of the victim, through which all guilt is resolved, and which allows one to use misfortune as though it were, so to speak, a credit card.

The Americans lacked such a wound (at Pearl Harbor they suffered an act of war, not a symbolic attack). An ideal reverse of fortune for a nation at last wounded at its heart and free, having atoned for

it, to exert its power in all good conscience. A situation science fiction dreamed of from the beginning: that of some obscure force that would wipe them out and which, until that point, merely existed in their unconscious (or some other recess of their minds). And all of a sudden, it materializes through the good grace of terrorism! The axis of Evil takes hold of America's unconscious, and realizes by violence what was merely a fantasy and a dream thought!

It all comes from the fact that the Other, like Evil, is unimaginable. It all comes from the impossibility of conceiving of the Other – friend or enemy – in its radical otherness, in its irreconcilable foreignness. A refusal rooted in the total identification with oneself around moral values and technical power. That is the America that takes itself for America and which, bereft of otherness, eyes itself with the wildest compassion.

Let us be clear: America is here merely the allegory or universal figure of any power incapable of bearing the spectre of opposition. How can the Other, unless he is an idiot, a psychopath or a crank, want to be different, irremediably different, without even a desire to sign up to our universal gospel?

Such is the arrogance of Empire – as in Borges's allegory (the mirror people[1]), where the defeated peoples are exiled into the mirrors, from where they are condemned to reflect the image of the conquerors. (But one day they begin to look less and less like their conquerors, and in the end they smash the mirrors and attack the Empire once again).

There is this same exile into the mirror of resemblance in Philippe Muray's address to the *Dear*

1 In 'Fauna of Mirrors', *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 67–8 [Trans.].

Jihadists:[2] 'We produced you, jihadists and terrorists, and you will end up prisoners of resemblance. Your radicalism is something we passed on to you. We can do this because we are indifferent to everything, including our own values. You cannot kill us because we are already dead. You think you are fighting us, but you are unconsciously on our side. You are already assimilated.' Or, elsewhere: 'You have worked well, but you have merely killed yourselves off as a singular force . . . . By your very act, you have re-entered the global game you execrate.'

A statement of the abject nature of our dying culture, but also a statement of the failure of any violence antagonistic to it, or believing itself to be so. Poor rebels, poor innocents! 'We shall defeat you because we are deader than you!' *But it is not the*

2 Philippe Muray, *Chers djihadistes* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2002) [Trans.].

same death that is at issue. When Western culture sees all its values extinguished one by one, it turns inward on itself in the very worst way. Our death is an extinction, an annihilation; it is not a symbolic stake. Herein lies our poverty. When a singularity throws its own death into the ring, it escapes this slow extermination, it dies its own natural death. This is an immense game of double or quits. In committing suicide, the singularity suicides the other at the same time – we might say that the terrorist acts literally 'suicided' the West. A death for a death, then, but transfigured by the symbolic stakes. 'We have already devastated our world, what more do you want?' says Muray. But precisely, *we have merely devastated this world, it still has to be destroyed.* Destroyed symbolically. This is not at all the same undertaking. And though we did the first part, only others are going to be able to do the second.

Even in vengeance and warfare, we can see the same lack of imagination – the same inability to regard the other as a fully fledged adversary, the same magical solution, which is to exterminate him and obliterate him unceremoniously.

To make Islam the embodiment of Evil would be to do it honour (and to do oneself honour in the process). But we don't see things that way: when it is said that Islam is Evil, the implication is that it *is not well*, that it is sick, and that it is violent because it is sick, because it sees itself as a humiliated victim, and is nursing its resentment instead of taking its place joyously in the New World Order. Islam is regressive and fundamentalist out of despair. But if it becomes offensive, then it must be reduced to impotence. In a word, Islam is not what it ought to be. And what, then, of the West?

There is the same inability to contemplate for one moment that these 'fanatics' might commit

themselves entirely 'freely', without in any way being blind, mad or manipulated. For we have the monopoly of the evaluation of Good and Evil, the implication being that the only 'free and responsible' choice cannot but be in keeping with our moral law. Which means imputing any resistance to, any violation of, our values to a blinding of consciousness (but where does this blinding come from?). That the 'free and enlightened' man should necessarily choose Good is our universal prejudice – and a paradoxical one it is too, since the man who has this 'rational' choice allotted to him is no longer, ultimately, free to decide (psychoanalysis, too, has specialized in the interpretation of these 'resistances').

On this point, Lichtenberg tells us something stranger and more original – namely, that the proper use of freedom is to abuse it, and make excessive use of it. And this includes taking responsibility for one's own death and that of others.

Hence the absurdity of the epithet 'cowardly' that is applied to the terrorists: cowardly for having chosen suicide, cowardly for having sacrificed the innocent (when we don't accuse *them* of taking advantage of this to reach paradise).

All the same, we should try to get beyond the moral imperative of unconditional respect for human life, and conceive that one might respect, both in the other and in oneself, something other than, and more than, life (existence isn't everything, it is even the least of things): a destiny, a cause, a form of pride or of sacrifice. There are symbolic stakes which far exceed existence and freedom – which we find it unbearable to lose, because we have made them the fetishistic values of a universal humanist order. So we cannot imagine a terrorist act committed with entire autonomy and 'freedom of conscience'. Now, choice in terms of symbolic obligations is sometimes profoundly mysterious – as in the case of Romand, the man with

the double life, who murdered his whole family, not for fear of being unmasked, but for fear of inflicting on them the profound disappointment of discovering his deception.[3] Committing suicide would not have expunged the crime from the record; he would merely have passed the shame off on to the others. Where is the courage, where the cowardice? The question of freedom, one's own or that of others, no longer poses itself in terms of moral consciousness, and a higher freedom must allow us to dispose of it to the point of abusing or sacrificing it. Omar Khayyam: 'Rather one freeman bind with chains of love than set a thousand prisoned captives free.'

Seen in that light, this is almost an overturning of the dialectic of domination, a paradoxical

3 See Emmanuel Carrère, *The Adversary: A True Story of Murder and Deception*, trans. Linda Coverdale (London: Bloomsbury, 2001) [Trans.].

inversion of the master–slave relationship. In the past, the master was the one who was exposed to death, and could gamble with it. The slave was the one deprived of death and destiny, the one doomed to survival and labour. How do things stand today? We, the powerful, sheltered now from death and overprotected on all sides, occupy exactly the position of the slave; whereas those whose deaths are at their own disposal, and who do not have survival as their exclusive aim, are the ones who today symbolically occupy the position of master.

Another serious objection – no longer this time with regard to motives, but to the symbolic tenor of the terrorist act. Are we dealing, in the September 11 attack – in this violent challenge to the triumphant logic of globalization – with a symbolic act in the strong sense (that is to say, implying a turnaround and transmutation of values)? According to Caroline Heinrich, for example, the terrorists, in

attacking a logic of simulation and indifference in the name of a system of values and higher reality, can be said merely to have revived a new identitary logic. 'Against the logic of indifference,' she says, 'the terrorists are trying to restore a meaning to something that no longer has any.' The Real for us being what it is – that is to say, a referential illusion – the terrorists could merely be said to be substituting for it new stakes and new values dredged up from the ancient past.

Something for which Philippe Muray also criticizes them: 'We had liquidated all our values; that was indeed the sense of our whole history, and you bring us back your phantom values, your phantom identity, your "integrity", which you set against a disintegrated world.' The terrorists are taking 'simulation' referents (the towers, the market, the Western mega-culture) for real ones. Against the inhumanity of integral exchange, they are once again inaugurating a metaphysics of truth (following

Caroline Heinrich here still). Now, the point is not to take it out on simulation, but *to take it out on the truth itself*. There is no point attacking simulacra, if it means falling back into truth. There is no point attacking the virtual, if it means falling back into reality.

All the more so, according to Caroline Heinrich, as the terrorists are themselves in out-and-out simulation: the terrorist act is generated by models. It is, even, a remarkable example of the precedence of models over the Real (Hollywood directors have been called in as consultants by antiterrorist strategists). Moreover, their action is modelled in every respect on the technological devices of the system. How can one, then, by playing the same game as the system, claim to overturn its goals?

The objection is a strong one, but reductive in so far as it confines itself to the religious and funda-

mentalist discourse of the terrorists, by which they claim effectively to contest the global system in the name of a higher truth. Yet it is not in discourse, but in the act itself that the 'minimal irruption of reversibility' which makes it a symbolic act resides. The terrorists are making an attack upon a system of integral reality by an act which has, in the very moment of its perpetration, neither true meaning nor reference in another world. The aim is simply to wreck the system – itself indifferent to its own values – by means of its own weapons. Even more than the system's technological weapons, the key arm they appropriate, and turn to decisive effect, is the non-meaning and indifference which are at the heart of the system.

A strategy of turning around and overturning power, not in the name of a moral or religious confrontation, nor some 'clash of civilizations', but as a result of the pure and simple unacceptability of that global power.

There is, moreover, no need to be an Islamist, or to appeal to a higher truth, to find this global order unacceptable. Islamist or not, we share this fundamental rejection, and there are many signs of fracture and disarray – of fragility – at the heart of this power itself. This is the 'truth' of the terrorist act. There is no other, and certainly not the truth of a fundamentalism to which it is referred, merely the better to disqualify it.

What terrorism revives is something that cannot be traded in a system of differences and generalized exchange. Difference and indifference can perfectly well be traded for one another. What constitutes an event is that for which there is no equivalent. And there is no equivalent for the terrorist act in some transcendent truth.

When Caroline Heinrich counterposes graffiti to terrorism as the only rigorous symbolic act, in so far as graffiti signifies nothing and makes use of

empty signs to reduce them to absurdity, she does not realize how right she is. Graffiti is indeed a terrorist act (itself also with New York as its place of origin), not by its identity claim – 'I am so-and-so, I exist, I live in New York' – but by its disinscription of the walls and architecture of the city, by the violent deconstruction of the signifier itself (the graffiti-tattooed subway trains plunged right into the heart of New York in exactly the same way as the terrorists hurtled their Boeings into the Twin Towers).

The question is that of the Real. According to Žižek, the passion of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the eschatological passion for the Real, the nostalgic passion for that lost or disappearing object.[4] And the terrorists might be said, ultimately,

4 See Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 5. (Though it should be pointed out that Baudrillard had not seen this work at the

merely to be responding to this pathetic demand for reality.

For Philippe Muray, too, the jihadists' terrorism is merely the last stirring of a dying reality – the aftermath of a dramatic history that is now coming to an end, and is paralysed precisely because it is moribund. But this calling to order of the Real and History is itself a thing of pathos, as it corresponds to an earlier phase, and not to the present integral-reality phase which is that of globalization. At this stage, no negativity whatever can provide a response. To this 'integrist' offensive of the global system, the only response can come through the irruption of a singularity,

time of writing, but had had access only to a much shorter conference paper by Žižek. The phrase 'the passion for the Real' in Žižek's text is taken, with acknowledgement, from an as yet unpublished work by Alain Badiou, entitled *Le Siècle* [Trans.].

which, for its part, has nothing to do with the Real.

The most recent of the versions of September 11, and the most eccentric, is that it was all the product of an internal terrorist plot (CIA, fundamentalist extreme right, etc.). A thesis that appeared when doubt was cast on the air attack on the Pentagon and, by extension, the attack on the Twin Towers (in Thierry Meyssan's *9/11: The Big Lie*).

And what if it was all untrue? If it was all faked up? A thesis so unreal that it deserves to be taken into account, just as every exceptional event deserves to be doubted: we always have in us a demand both for a radical event and for a total deception. A phantasy of foul machination which does indeed, quite often, turn out to be true: we have lost count of the murderous acts of provocation, the attacks and 'accidents' staged by all kinds of secret groups and services.

Above and beyond the truth of the matter, of which we shall perhaps never have any knowledge, what remains of this thesis is, once again, that the dominant power is the instigator of everything, including effects of subversion and violence, which are of the order of *trompe-l'œil*. The worst of this is that it is again we who perpetrated it. This, admittedly, brings no great glory on our democratic values, but it is still better than conceding to obscure jihadists the power to inflict such a defeat on us. Already with the Lockerbie Boeing crash, the theory of technical failure was for a long time preferred to that of a terrorist act. Even if it is a serious matter to admit one's own shortcomings, it is still preferable to admitting the other party's power (which does not exclude the paranoid denunciation of the axis of Evil).

If it were to turn out that such a mystification were possible, if the event were entirely faked up, then clearly it would no longer have any symbolic

significance (if the Twin Towers were blown up from the inside – the crash not being sufficient to make them collapse – it would be very difficult to say they had committed suicide!). This would merely be a political conspiracy. And yet . . . . Even if all this were the doing of some clique of extremists or military men, it would still be the sign (as in the Oklahoma bombing) of a self-destructive internal violence, of a society's obscure predisposition to contribute to its own doom – as illustrated by the high-level dissensions between the CIA and FBI which, by reciprocally neutralizing information, gave the terrorists the unprecedented chance to succeed.

September 11 will have raised with some violence the question of reality, of which the fanciful conspiracy theory is the imaginary by-product. Hence, perhaps, the vehemence with which this theory has been rejected on all sides. Is it because it may be

seen as anti-American, and absolves the terrorists from blame? (But to absolve them from blame is to relieve them of responsibility for the event, which comes back round again to the contemptuous view that the Islamists would never have been capable of such a feat.) No, it is, rather, the 'denial' aspect of this theory that explains the violence of the reaction. The denial of reality is terroristic in itself. Anything is better than to contest reality as such. What has to be saved is, above all, the reality principle. 'Negationism' is public enemy number one.[5] Now, in fact, we already live largely in a negationist society. No event is 'real' any longer. Terror attacks, trials, wars, corruption, opinion polls – there's nothing now that isn't rigged or undecidable. Government, the authorities and institutions

5 The French term 'négationnisme' usually designates what in English is called 'Holocaust denial', though clearly a wider sense is intended here [Trans.].

are the first victims of this fall from grace of the principles of truth and reality. Incredulity rages. The conspiracy theory merely adds a somewhat burlesque episode to this situation of mental destabilization. Hence the urgent need to combat this creeping negationism and, at all costs, safeguard a reality that is now kept alive on a drip. For though we can range a great machinery of repression and deterrence against physical insecurity and terrorism, nothing will protect us from this mental insecurity.

Moreover, all the security strategies are merely extensions of terror. And it is the real victory of terrorism that it has plunged the whole of the West into the obsession with security – that is to say, into a veiled form of perpetual terror.

The spectre of terrorism is forcing the West to terrorize itself – the planetary police network being the equivalent of the tension of a universal Cold

War, of a fourth world war imprinting itself upon bodies and mores.

Thus, for example, the world's leaders met recently in Rome to sign a treaty which, they all proclaim, puts a final end to the Cold War. But they didn't even leave the airport. They stayed on the tarmac, surrounded by armoured cars, barbed wire and helicopters – that is to say, by all the symbols of the new Cold War, the war of armed security, of the perpetual deterrence of an invisible enemy.

Neither politically nor economically did the abolition of the Twin Towers put the global system in check. Something else is at issue here: the stunning impact of the attack, the insolence of its success and, as a result, the loss of credibility, the collapse of image. For the system can function only if it can exchange itself for its own image, reflect itself like the towers in their twinness, find its equivalent in an

ideal reference. It is this that makes it invulnerable – and it is this equivalence that has been smashed. It is in this sense that, while it is every bit as elusive as terrorism, it has none the less been struck in the heart.

THE VIOLENCE OF THE GLOBAL

Current terrorism is not the descendant of a traditional history of anarchy, nihilism and fanaticism. It is contemporaneous with globalization and, in order to grasp its features, we should briefly go over a genealogy of that globalization, in its relation to the universal and the singular.

Between the terms 'global' and 'universal' there is a deceptive similarity. Universality is the universality of human rights, freedoms, culture and democracy. Globalization is the globalization of

technologies, the market, tourism and information. Globalization seems irreversible, whereas the universal would seem, rather, to be on the way out. At least as it has constituted itself as a system of values on the scale of Western modernity, which has no equivalent in any other culture.

Any culture that universalizes loses its singularity and dies. This is how it is with all those we have destroyed by forcibly assimilating them, but it is also the case with our own culture in its pretension to universality. The difference is that the other cultures died of their singularity, which is a fine death, whereas we are dying of the loss of all singularity, of the extermination of all our values, which is an ignoble death.

We think the ideal destination of any value is its elevation to the universal, without gauging the lethal danger that promotion represents: much rather than an elevation, it is a dilution towards the

zero degree of value. In the Enlightenment, universalization occurred by excess, in an ascending course of progress. Today it occurs by default, by a flight into the lowest common denominator. This is how it is with human rights, democracy and freedom: their expansion corresponds to their weakest definition.

In fact, the universal comes to grief in globalization. The globalization of trade puts an end to the universality of values. It is the triumph of single-track thinking over universal thought. What globalizes first is the market, the profusion of exchanges and of all products, the perpetual flow of money. Culturally, it is the promiscuity of all signs and all values or, in other words, pornography. For the global diffusion of anything and everything over the networks *is* pornography: no need for sexual obscenity, this interactive copulation is enough. At the end of this process, there is no longer any difference between the global and the universal. The

universal itself is globalized; democracy and human rights circulate just like any other global product – like oil or capital.

What comes with the transition from the universal to the global is both a homogenization and a fragmentation to infinity. The central gives way not to the local, but to the dislocated. The concentric gives way not to the decentred, but to the eccentric. And discrimination and exclusion are not accidental consequences; they are part of the very logic of globalization.

We may wonder, then, whether the universal has not already succumbed to its own critical mass, and whether it and modernity have ever existed anywhere other than in discourse and official moralities. For us, at any rate, the mirror of the universal is shattered. But this is perhaps an opportunity, for in the fragments of this shattered mirror, all the singularities are resurfacing: those we believe to be

threatened are surviving, while those we thought to be extinct are reviving.

The situation is becoming radicalized as universal values lose their authority and legitimacy. So long as they could assert themselves as mediating values, they succeeded, more or less well, in integrating singularities, as differences, into a universal culture of difference. But they can no longer do this now, as triumphant globalization has swept away all differences and all values, bringing into being an entirely in-different culture (or lack of it). Once the universal has disappeared, all that remains is the all-powerful global technostructure, set over against singularities that are now returned to the wild and left to themselves.

The universal has had its historical chance, but today, confronted on the one hand with a global order to which there is no alternative and, on the other, with singularities drifting off on their own or

rising up against the system, the concepts of freedom, democracy and human rights cut a very pale figure, being merely the ghosts of a vanished universal.

The universal was a culture of transcendence, of the subject and the concept, of the Real and representation. The virtual space of the global is the space of the screen and the network, of immanence and the digital, of a dimensionless space–time. In the universal, there was still a natural reference to the world, to the body and to memory. A kind of dialectical tension and critical movement which found their form in historical and revolutionary violence. It is the expulsion of this critical negativity which opens on to another kind of violence, the violence of the global: the supremacy of positivity alone and of technical efficiency, total organization, integral circulation, the equivalence of all exchanges. Hence the end of the role of the intellectual, bound up with the Enlightenment and the

universal – and also the end of the activist, who was linked to contradictions and historical violence.

Is there some inevitability to globalization? All cultures but our own escaped, one way or another, the fated outcome of abstract exchange. Where is the critical threshold of transition to the universal, and then to the global? What is this dizzying whirl that drives the world to the abstraction of the Idea, and that other which drives it to the unconditional realization of the Idea?

For the universal was an Idea. When it realizes itself in the global, it commits suicide as Idea, as ideal end. Having become the sole reference – and a humanity immanent in itself having occupied the empty place of the dead God – the human now reigns alone, but it no longer has any ultimate rationale. No longer having any enemy, it generates one from within, and secretes all kinds of inhuman metastases.

Hence this violence of the global. The violence of a system that hounds out any form of negativity or singularity, including that ultimate form of singularity that is death itself. The violence of a society in which conflict is virtually banned and death forbidden. A violence which, in a sense, puts an end to violence itself, and works to set in place a world freed from any natural order, whether it be that of the body, sex, birth or death. More than violence, indeed, we should speak of virulence. This violence is viral: it operates by contagion, by chain reaction, and it gradually destroys all our immunities and our power to resist.

However, matters are not cut and dried, and globalization has not won the battle before it begins. In the face of this homogenizing, dissolving power, we see heterogeneous forces rising up everywhere – not merely different, but antagonistic. Behind the increasingly sharp resistance to globalization, social

and political resistance, we should see more than mere archaic rejection: a kind of painful revisionism regarding the achievements of modernity and 'progress', a rejection not only of the global technostructure, but of the mental structure of equivalence of all cultures. This resurgence can assume aspects which, from the standpoint of enlightened thinking, seem violent, anomalous, irrational – ethnic, religious and linguistic collective forms, but also emotionally disturbed or neurotic individual forms. It would be a mistake to condemn these upsurges as populist, archaic, or even terroristic. Everything that constitutes an event today does so against this abstract universality – including Islam's antagonism to Western values (it is because it is the most vehement contestation of those values that it is enemy number one today).

Who can thwart the global system? Certainly not the anti-globalization movement, whose only objec-

tive is to curb deregulation. Its political impact may be considerable, but its symbolic impact is zero. That violence is still a kind of internal vicissitude which the system can surmount while retaining the upper hand.

What can thwart the system is not positive alternatives, but singularities. But these are neither positive nor negative. They are not an alternative; they are of another order. They do not conform to any value judgement, or obey any political reality principle. They can, as a consequence, be the best or the worst. They cannot be united in a general historical action. They thwart any dominant, single-track thinking, but they are not a single-track counter-thinking: they invent their own game and their own rules.

Singularities are not necessarily violent, and there are some subtle ones, such as those of language, art, the body or culture. But there are some violent ones, and terrorism is one of these. It is the

one that avenges all the singular cultures that have paid with their disappearance for the establishment of this single global power.

It is not a question, then, of a 'clash of civilizations', but of an – almost anthropological – confrontation between an undifferentiated universal culture and everything which, in any field whatever, retains something of an irreducible alterity.

For global power, which is every bit as integrist as religious orthodoxy, all different, singular forms are heresies. On this account, they are doomed either to re-enter the global order, like it or not, or to disappear. The mission of the West (or, rather, of the former West, since for a long time now it has had no values of its own) is to subject the many different cultures, by any means available, to the unforgiving law of equivalence. A culture that has lost its values can only take its revenge on the values

of others. Even wars – for example, the war in Afghanistan – aim initially, above and beyond political or economic strategies, to normalize savagery, to knock all territories into alignment. The objective is to quell any refractory zone, to colonize and tame all the wild spaces, whether in geographical space or in the realm of the mind.

The establishment of the global system is the product of a fierce jealousy: the jealous feelings of an in-different, low-definition culture towards high-definition cultures; of disenchanted, disintensified systems towards the cultures of high intensity; of desacralized societies towards sacrificial cultures or forms.

For such a system, any refractory form is virtually terroristic.[1] This is the case, again, with

1 It may even be argued that natural catastrophes are a form of terrorism. Large-scale technical accidents, such as the one at Chernobyl, have something of both the terrorist act

Afghanistan. That, on a particular territory, all 'democratic' freedoms and licence (music, television – even women's faces) can be prohibited, and that a country can stand out totally against what we call civilization (whatever the religious principle invoked) – these things are unbearable to the rest of the 'free' world. It is unacceptable for modernity to be rejected in its universal pretensions. That it

and the natural catastrophe about them. The poisoning by toxic gas in Bhopal in India – a technical accident – could have been a terrorist act. Any accidental air crash can be claimed by a terrorist group. The characteristic of irrational events is that they can be imputed to anyone or anything. At a pinch, anything can seem to the imagination to be of criminal origin: even a cold snap or an earthquake. And this is not new: during the Tokyo earthquake of 1923, thousands of Koreans, held responsible for the disaster, were massacred. In a system as integrated as our own, everything has the same destabilizing effect. Everything conspires towards the failure of a system that sees itself as infallible. And, in view of what we are already subjected to, within the framework of the system's rational, programmatic hold, we may wonder whether the worst catastrophe would not be the infallibility of the system itself.

should not appear as obvious Good, and the natural ideal of the human race; that the universality of our mores and values should be cast into doubt, if only in certain minds that are immediately characterized as fanatical – this is criminal so far as the consensual horizon and single-track thinking of the West are concerned.

This confrontation can be understood only in the light of symbolic obligation. To understand the rest of the world's hatred of the West, we have to overturn all our usual ways of seeing. It is not the hatred of those from whom we have taken everything and given nothing back; it is the hatred of those to whom we have given everything without their being able to give it back. It is not, then, the hatred bred of deprivation and exploitation, but of humiliation. And it is to humiliation that the terrorism of September 11 was a response: one humiliation for another.

The worst thing for global power is not to be attacked or destroyed, but to be humiliated. And it was humiliated by September 11 because the terrorists inflicted something on it then that it cannot return. All the reprisals have merely been a system of physical retaliation, whereas that global power was defeated symbolically. War is a response to the aggression, but not to the challenge. The challenge can be taken up only by humiliating the other in return (but certainly not by bombing him to smithereens, or locking him up like a dog at Guantánamo).

The basis of all domination is the absence of reciprocation – we are still speaking here in terms of the fundamental rule. The unilateral gift is an act of power. And the Empire of Good, the violence of Good, lies precisely in giving without any possible reciprocation. This is to occupy the position of God. Or of the Master, who allows the slave to live in exchange for his labour (but labour is not

a symbolic reciprocation, hence the only response is ultimately revolt and death). Even God left room for sacrifice. In the traditional order, there is still the possibility of giving something back to God, to nature, or to whatever it might be, in the form of sacrifice. This is what ensures the symbolic equilibrium between living beings and things. Today we no longer have anyone to whom we may give back, to whom we may repay the symbolic debt – and that is the curse of our culture. It is not that giving is impossible in this culture, but that the counter-gift is impossible, since all the paths of sacrifice have been neutralized and defused (there remains only a parody of sacrifice that can be seen in all the current forms of victimhood).

We are, as a result, in the relentless situation of receiving, always receiving. Not now from God or nature, but through a technical system of generalized exchange and general gratification. Everything is potentially given to us, and we are entitled to

everything, like it or not. We are in the situation of slaves who have been allowed to live, and are bound by a debt that cannot be repaid. All this can function for a long time thanks to our insertion into relations of trade and the economic order but, at some point, the fundamental rule wins out. Then to this positive transference there inevitably comes a response in the form of a negative countertransference, a violent abreaction to this captive life, to this protected existence, to this saturation of existence. This reversion takes the form either of open violence (terrorism is part of this) or of the impotent denial characteristic of our modernity, of self-hatred and remorse – all negative passions that are the debased form of the impossible counter-gift.

What we detest in ourselves, the obscure object of our resentment, is this excess of reality, this excess of power and comfort, this universal availability, this definitive fulfilment – ultimately the fate the Grand Inquisitor reserves for the domesti-

cated masses in Dostoevsky. Now this is exactly what the terrorists condemn in our culture – hence the echo terrorism finds among us and the fascination it exerts.

As much as terrorism rests, then, on the despair of the humiliated and insulted, it rests also on the invisible despair of the privileged beneficiaries of globalization, on our own submission to an integral technology, to a crushing virtual reality, to the grip of networks and programmes, which perhaps represents the involutive profile of the entire species, of the human race become 'global' (doesn't the human race's supremacy over the rest of the planet resemble the West's supremacy over the rest of the world?). And this invisible despair – our despair – is terminal, since it arises out of the fulfilment of all desires.

If terrorism arises, in this way, out of this excess of reality and its impossible exchange, out of this

profusion for which nothing is given in return and this forced resolution of conflicts, then the idea of extirpating it as an objective evil is a total illusion since, such as it is – in its absurdity and its meaninglessness – it is the verdict this society passes on itself, its self-condemnation.

Jean Baudrillard is the author of, among other works, *America*, *The System of Objects*, *Impossible Exchange*, *Screened Out*, and *The Perfect Crime*, all from Verso.

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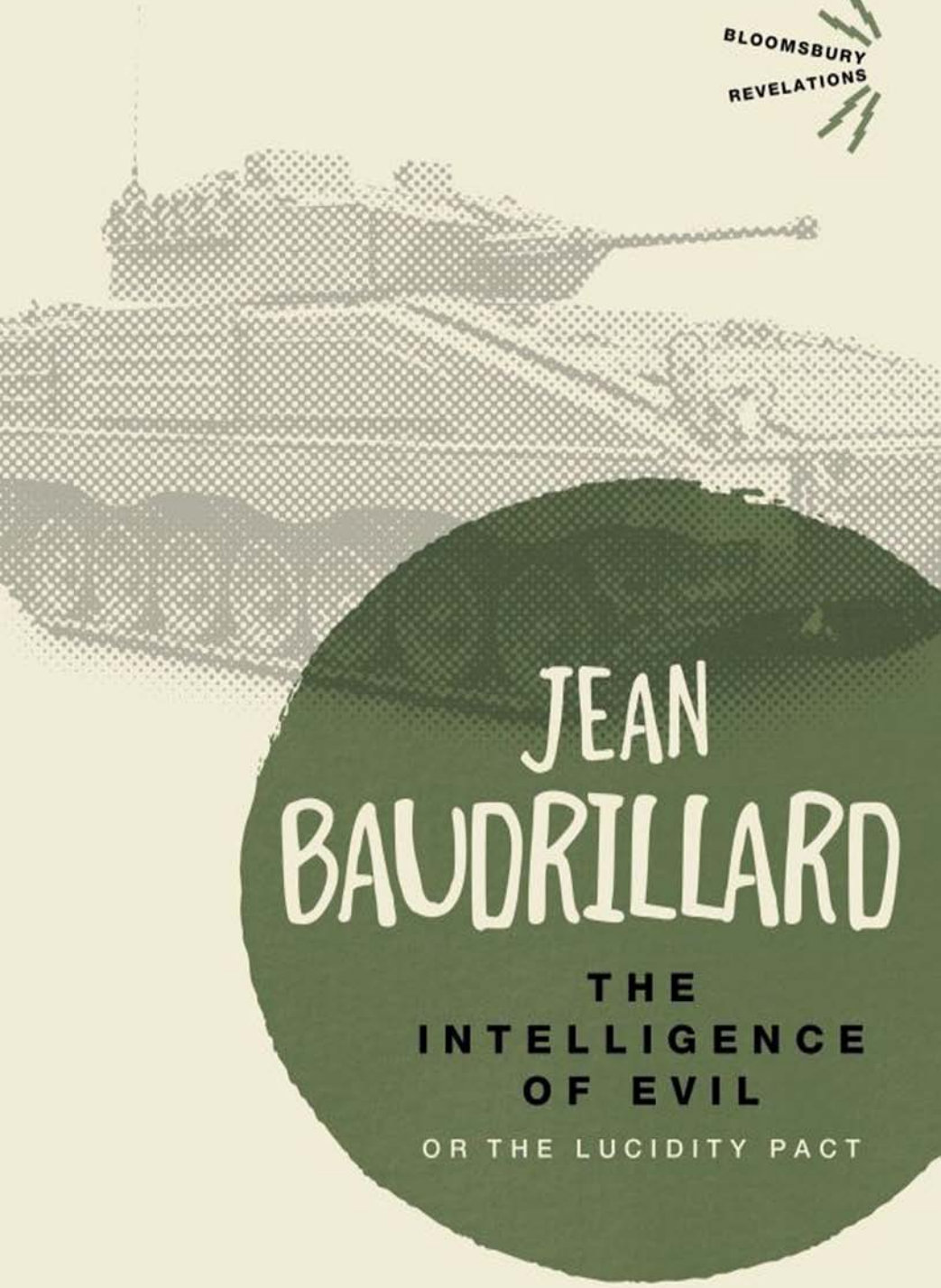

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The Intelligence of Evil

Or the Lucidity Pact

Jean Baudrillard

Translated by Chris Turner

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

175 Fifth Avenue
New York
NY 10010
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

English Edition
First published in 2005 by
Berg
First published in France, 2004 by Editions Galilée
© Galilée, 2004, Le Pacte de lucidité ou l'intelligence du Mal
Introduction and English translation © Chris Turner 2005

This paperback edition first published in 2013 by Bloomsbury Academic

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

EISBN: 978-1-7809-3642-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India

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Preface

We accept the real so readily only because we sense that reality does not exist.

Jorge Luis Borges

Last night I had a dream about reality.
It was such a relief to wake up.

Stanislaw J. Lec

The Intelligence of Evil

An Introduction

Chris Turner

The role of the translator is not to bring out, by a commentary, the author's intentions and connotations . . .

CLAUDE FAGES[1]

A revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere.

SØREN KIERKEGAARD[2]

Jean Baudrillard was born in Reims in 1929. Among his earliest published writings were reviews of literature for *Les Temps modernes* at a time when he was still teaching German at a provincial *lycée* and translating the works, among others, of Peter Weiss, Bertolt Brecht and Wilhelm Mühlmann. In the 1960s he made the transition to sociology, largely under the guidance of Henri Lefebvre, and began to teach the subject in October 1966 at the (small, but very radical) University of Nanterre.[3]

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[1] 'Note du traducteur' in José Saramago, *L'année de la mort de Ricardo Reis* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), p. 9.

[2] *The Present Age.* Translated and with an Introduction by Alexander Du. (London: Collins, 1962), p. 36.

[3] Nanterre was the birthplace of the 'mouvement du 22 mars', which played a prominent role in the events of May 1968. Baudrillard left Nanterre in 1986, at a point when it had been definitively 'normalized', and spent the latter part of his teaching career at Paris-IX Dauphine. The offer of the move to Paris-IX apparently came from Marc Guillaume.

In his teaching at that time, he drew, he tells us, almost exclusively on four books: Artaud's *Le théâtre de la cruauté, The Accursed Share* by Georges Bataille, Marcel Mauss's *Essay on the Gift* and *La Monnaie vivante* by Pierre Klossowski, translator of, and commentator on, Nietzsche.[4] As regards other, perhaps even more ingrained, influences, Baudrillard speaks freely of his early Nietzscheanism and his encounter during his schooldays with Jarry's pataphysics.

Baudrillard's first period as a social theorist began with an analysis of the world of everyday objects and, by extension, of advertising and the media, in such works as *The System of Objects* (1968), *The Consumer Society* (1970) and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972).[5] These were the years of the journal *Utopie*, to which he made many contributions over the period 1967–78, publishing there for the first time chapters from *The Mirror of Production*, his theoretical rejection of Marxism as productivism. This work, which appeared in book form later in 1973, and which takes up in its critical sweep not only Marxism, but the 'textual productivity' of *Tel Quel* and Deleuze/Guattari's machinic productivity of the unconscious, 'moves decisively to change the basis of his position away from that of a traditional concept of class struggle to that of opposing the symbolic order to the semiotic (or simulation) order constituent of contemporary Western culture.'[6] In particular, Baudrillard mounts an 'anthropological' challenge to Marx's championing of use-value against exchange-value, a position based ultimately on the assumption that use-values merely subserve human needs aculturally and transparently.[7]

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), which opens with the assertion that 'There is no longer any symbolic exchange, as organizing form, at the level of modern social formations',[8] Baudrillard pitches his tent firmly on the ground of Mauss's theory of gift-exchange

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[4] *Fragments*. Translated by Chris Turner (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 39.

[5] Though it should be said that *The Consumer Society* was written to a commission from a publisher and Baudrillard does not see it as representative of his intellectual trajectory at the time.

[6] Mike Gane, *Jean Baudrillard: In Radical Uncertainty*, p. 13.

[7] Thinkers within the world of anthropology were engaged on similar critiques at this same time, though rarely with an equal degree of radicalism. See, for example, Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

[8] *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 9. My translation.

and Bataille's 'general economy' (and also Saussure's writings on anagrams) and begins in earnest the elaboration of the radical anthropology on which his analyses will draw most centrally over the coming years.[9] Here he develops his theory of the three orders of simulacra,[10] arguing, in particular, that we have passed out of the industrial era, in which production was the dominant pattern, into a code-governed phase where the dominant schema is *simulation*. Simulation is, as he puts it elsewhere, the replacement of the world with a kind of substitute universe, a counter-world of signs. What is alien to it – and essential to the symbolic order – is *la réversibilité* (the reversibility/revertibility) of signs, particularly of life and death, proper to symbolic exchange. Within *réversibilité* is understood the possibility of actual *ré-version* – reversion/reverting/turnabout – and beneath it there are echoes of the act of *re-verser*.[11] paying back, making the counter-gift.

In an article entitled 'La prise d'otage' (Hostage taking), also published in *Utopie*[12] and incorporated with minor changes into *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, the political import of this understanding of the symbolic is brought out: 'It is impossible to destroy the system by a contradiction-based logic or by reversing the balance of forces – in short, by a direct, dialectical revolution affecting the economic or political infrastructure. Everything that produces contradiction or a balance of forces or energy in general merely feeds back into the system and drives it on.'[13] Hence,

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[9] See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy.* Translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies.* Translated by W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990). Some have criticized Baudrillard's reliance on an anthropological critique as representing a nostalgic dimension in his work (e.g. Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern* [Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1991], p. 112), but Baudrillard is always keen to dispel such a reading. In conversation with Maria Elena Ramos at Caracas in 1994, he describes his position as representing 'la nostalgia di une cultura non primitiva, sino radical' ('nostalgia for a culture not primitive, but radical').

[10] *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, p. 77.

[11] *Verser* being understood here in the very basic sense of handing over, as in the expression '*verser une somme'* .

[12] In March–April 1976.

[13] Jean Baudrillard, *Le ludique et le policier et autres textes parus dans Utopie [1967/78]* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2001), p. 335.

> the worst error, the one committed by all our revolutionary strategists, is to think they can put an end to the system on the *real* plane: that is . . . the imaginary the system itself imposes on them, a system that lives and survives only by getting those who attack it to fight on the terrain of reality, a ground that is always its own.[14]

Realism' is no kind of radicalism at all: the only solution is 'to challenge the system with a gift to which it cannot reply – except by its own death and collapse'.[15] Though the overt pretext for this piece is a terrorist act – and we may consider this, too, as significant – Baudrillard's political thinking in this period is dominated, like that of many around him, by the events of 1968 and their aftermath.[16]

Baudrillard's work of the late 1970s and early 1980s spells out the implications of his vision for the various domains of social theory with which he was then engaged (at least nominally) in his professional life: sexuality and the family, the social sphere (where the 'crisis' of the welfare state had emerged as a key problem) and politics.[17] In *A l'ombre des majorités silencieuses . . . ou la fin du social* (in a magnificently suicidal gesture for a practising sociologist), he offers at least four – not entirely compatible – lines of reasoning to support the argument that '*le social*' is no longer (or never was) a pertinent category for study: there is no 'social', there are only networks of symbolic obligations, which are not social relations since the constraint they impose does not assume contractual form. And, crucially, he also argues there that our modern western societies, having existed up to then on a basis of 'expansion and explosion at all levels', were on the point of implosion, a process heralded by the prevalence of terrorism in its radical non-representativeness and by the – near-heroic – inertia and non-socialization of the symbolically astute masses ('They know there is no liberation and that a system is abolished only by pushing it into

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[14] Ibid., p. 336.

[15] Ibid., p. 337.

[16] Baudrillard tells an interviewer, 'May '68 was an illogical event, irreducible to simulation, one which had no status other than that of coming from someplace else – a kind of pure object or event', and one senses here the traces of a kind of 'primal scene'.

[17] He was at this time team-teaching a seminar at Nanterre with Jacques Donzelot, who gives a fine account of their collaboration – and the differences between them – in 'Patasociologie à l'université de Nanterre', *L'Herne: Jean Baudrillard.*

hyperlogic . . .'[18]). With *De la séduction* of 1979 a further key term takes its place among the battery of concepts that structure Baudrillard's symbolic order: 'With the decline of psychoanalysis and sexuality as strong structures,' he writes, 'one may catch a glimpse of another, parallel universe . . ., a universe that can no longer be interpreted in terms of psychic or psychological relations, nor those of repression and the unconscious, but must be interpreted in the terms of play, challenges, duels, the strategy of appearances – that is, in the terms of *seduction*.'[19] And with this comes a recognition of what Baudrillard calls 'the supremacy of the object', a recognition that it is not the subject and its desire, but the object and its seduction that orders the world.[20]

As seduction moves to the fore (or at least *la séduction*, which is not quite semantically equivalent to its English cognate), so, in the spiralling movement of Baudrillard's thought, the concept of production comes into focus once again and mutates subtly into its underlying, etymological sense of leading forward (*pro-ducere*), of bringing into the open, exposing and over-exposing. Since what is over-exposed is, of course, obscene, the 'poetics' of the symbolic order can be seen now virtually to volunteer the opposition between seduction and scene, on the one hand, production and the obscene, on the other. This spiralling play between concepts is a characteristic and durable feature of Baudrillard's *écriture*: as, in his later work, he increasingly 'withdraws' himself as active subject and goes over, as he puts it, to the side of the

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[18] *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities.* Translated by Paul Foss, John Johnston and Paul Patton (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), p. 46.

[19] *Seduction.* Translated by Brian Singer (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1990), p. 7. My emphasis. Needless to say, this is a thoroughly post-structuralist position. The passage continues: 'A universe that can no longer be interpreted in terms of structures and diacritical oppositions, but implies a seductive reversibility.' Similarly, in *La fin du social,* Baudrillard writes: 'The challenge [*le défi*] is not a dialectic, nor a confrontation between respective poles, or terms, in a full structure [*une structure pleine*]. It is a process of *extermination* of the structural position of each *term,* of the subject position of each of the antagonists, and in particular of the one who issues the challenge.' *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities,* p. 69 (translation modified).

[20] *Les stratégies fatales* (Paris: Grasset, 1983), p. 172. This is a radical, unprecedented shift, engendering what one commentator has called a 'post-metaphysical tension' in Baudrillard's writings 'De subjectobject relatie wordt dus niet zozeer opgelost, als wel omgekeerd, waardoor een postmetafysische spanning wordt gecreëerd . . .' Henk Oosterling. 'Filosofie als schijnbeweging. Metafoor, metamorfose en ironie in het latere Werk van Jean Baudrillard', *Lier en Boog,* 7, 1, (1990), p. 37.

object, this sense of a poetic (and often ironic) dynamic within language itself underwrites the authenticity of the symbolic order and its various 'forms', which can thereby be seen also to preserve a secret, to guard a mystery.[21] And this repeats at another level the idea that the 'symbolic', the order of challenge, seduction and 'play', is not only what is repressed in modern western cultures, but also what is most resistant within them and is, in a sense, a hidden key to their functioning.[22] What we also see here, too, is a characteristic recourse to a *third term* that stands outside the apparently given dichotomy of production/destruction: 'seduction' is, as it were, the option from left field (Baudrillard also says it is the 'feminine' one, but that is another matter), the term that comes from outside the structure – from 'elsewhere'.

From this period onward, Baudrillard's understanding of the *pro-duction* of the world becomes increasingly radical. There is a sense not just that all hope of an alternative social project has 'imploded', not merely that 'all potential modes of expression' have been absorbed into 'that of advertising',[23] but that, with the merciless advance of simulation, a reality is being produced that is extreme in itself, extreme in the absence of critical distance it grants us, in the all-enveloping nature of its short-circuited, real-time, asphyxiating immediacy. At the same time, where once it was capital that caused all that was solid to melt into air, now a process of the 'destructuration of every referential, of every human objective' – the process Baudrillard calls the 'deterrence . . . of every principle'[24] – has turned around against power, capitalist or other, and reduced every institutional reality to simulation (and hyperreality: things do not disappear by their determinate negation, but by being driven on

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[21] One aspect of which is that canonic sociological explanations entirely miss the point: 'Deep down, things have never functioned socially, but symbolically, magically, irrationally, etc.' *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities,* p. 68 (translation modified). Pietro Bellasi pointed long ago to the 'ingrained poetic quality' of Baudrillard's theoretical writings: 'se non è poesia, c'è la grana profonda e segreta della poesia'. 'Introduzione' in Jean Baudrillard, *Dimenticare Foucault* (Bologna: Cappelli editore, 1977), p. 33.

[22] There is also something resistant, reversible and almost initiatory in Baudrillard's terminology itself: 'symbolic exchange' describes an order in which there is no exchange; '*les stratégies fatales*' are 'not really strategies' and the so-called 'perfect crime' is in actual fact a crime *of* perfection.

[23] *Simulacra and Simulation.* Translated by Shela Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 87 (translation modified).

[24] Ibid., p. 22.

to this 'hyper' level). This is the world of the 'beyond', of the 'after': *The Transparency of Evil* (1993) opens with a piece entitled 'After the Orgy', the orgy in question being 'the moment when modernity exploded upon us, the moment of liberation in every sphere'.[25] In conversation with the Russian artist Boris Groys in 1995, Baudrillard says: 'What we have to deal with now is the fact that our entire culture has, through simulation, the media etc., gone over into something else, into a space beyond the end.' And he adds, 'Things have no origin any longer and no end, they cannot develop logically or dialectically any more, but only chaotically or randomly. They are becoming 'extreme' in the literal sense – *ex terminis*: they are beyond the limits.'[26] A radical implosion has taken place and we have survived 'beyond the end', beyond a situation that could be grasped by our earlier categories of rational or dialectical thought. The course of the world is now dominated by a grandiose programme of total production which itself supplants the world, *realizes* it in the sense of turning it wholly into known, rationally structured reality, seeks to produce a *total* simulation, a virtual reality that aspires to obliterate entirely Baudrillard's realm of symbolic exchange.[27]

As the joint assault on the symbolic order by *l'information* and *l'informatique* escalates and mere 'simulation' (the state in which reality is supplanted by its models) yields to hyper-reality or integral reality (where events are definitively 'deterred'),[28] the anthropological term

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[25] *The Transparency of Evil.* Translated by James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), p. 3.

[26] From the website of the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie on the occasion of the presentation of the Siemens Media Prize of 1995 (*http://on1.zkm. de/zkm/stories/storyReader$1089*). Note the '*ex terminis*' here, which lays the ground for a linkage of this excess with the exterminatory mode, just as Baudrillard's play on *croissance* and *excroissance* (growth and excrescence / outgrowth) generates a sense of the cancerous.

[27] This goes far beyond Debord's *Society of the Spectacle:* 'Virtuality is different from the spectacle, which still left room for a critical consciousness and demystification. . . . We are no longer spectators, but actors in the performance, and actors increasingly integrated into the course of that performance. Whereas we could face up to the unreality of the world as spectacle, we are defenceless before the extreme reality of this world, before this virtual perfection. We are, in fact, beyond all disalienation. This is the new form of terror, by comparison with which the horrors of alienation were very small beer.' *The Perfect Crime.* Translated by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1996), p. 27.

[28] Or to what Baudrillard sometimes simply calls reality (though this is the most paradoxical – as well as the most paroxystic – term, because it is a 'reality' with all reality 'driven out' of it (ibid., p. 4). It must be emphasized, if only because critics who should know better come to grief over this question, that the 'obvious' opposition between 'the real' and 'the virtual' was never at all pertinent for Baudrillard, who is never, as a theorist,

'symbolic exchange' gives way to the ostensibly more accurate one of 'impossible exchange' (first used by Baudrillard in connection with the nuclear scenario of the 1970s) and to a number of variants on the notion of 'fate'.[29] The range of forms comprehended in the 'symbolic' (challenge, seduction, play, sacrifice, counter-gift) finds objective embodiment in a cluster of processes variously described as *stratégies fatales*, irreconciliation, objective irony, and later non-unification, the principle of evil or simply evil.[30]

Baudrillard sees the present work, *The Intelligence of Evil* (French title: *Le Pacte de lucidité ou l'intelligence du Mal*) as the closing text in a cycle of 'theory-fictions' that includes such works as *Les stratégies fatales* (1983), *America* (1986), *The Transparency of Evil* (1990), *The Illusion of the End* (1992), *The Perfect Crime* (1995), *Impossible Exchange* (1999) and also *Télémorphose* (2001), *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2001) and *Power Inferno* (2002), not to mention the more fragmentary and aphoristic *Cool Memories* series, the fifth volume of which has just appeared. In these writings, Baudrillard has embarked on analyses that have little to do with sociology as conventionally and narrowly understood and has moved into a space of theory which he occupies with a small number of others whom he considers significant today (the list contains the names Žižek, Agamben, Sloterdijk and Virilio, but not perhaps too many more). Simply put, these works are philosophical analyses of present events and (in best Deleuzian fashion) creations and elaborations of concepts with which to 'theorize' them,[31] though

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tempted into realism ('Mais moi, je ne crois pas au réel.' *Mots de Passe,* cassette 1: de l'object au virtuel, Paris: Vidéo éditions Montparnasse, 2000). After all, reality is itself a convention, as he says in the same video, of 'framing'. And in the latest volume in the *Cool Memories* series, he writes: 'Never believed in reality: I respect it too much to believe in it.' *Cool Memories V,* 2000–2004 (Paris: Galilee, 2005), p. 9.

[29] 'Actually in traditional societies exchange is absent. Symbolic exchange is the opposite of exchange. . . . There is an order of exchange and an order of fate.' *Forget Foucault & Forget Baudrillard, an interview with Sylvère Lotringer* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987), p. 84.

[30] Glossing 'la stratégie fatale', Baudrillard tells Sylvère Lotringer, 'Whether you call it the revenge of the object, or the Evil Genius of matter, it is not representable. But it is a power all the same. In fact, I would go along with calling it the principle of Evil, of irreconciliation, the way the Good is the principle of reconciliation. That exists, it is inextricable, it cannot be destroyed' (ibid., p. 98).

[31] In 1991, he told Anne Laurent, *'L'échange symbolique et la mort* is the last book that inspired any confidence. . . . Everything I write is deemed brilliant, intelligent, but not serious. There has never been any real discussion about it. I don't claim to be tremendously

the relationship between theory (perhaps the only *stratégie fatale*[32]) and events (or non-events) remains resolutely consistent with the theory itself: there are two orders – 'metaphors must remain metaphors, concepts must remain concepts' – and the relationship between them is a 'symbolic' one of *défi*, of challenge.[33]

In these 'theory-fictions', the process of 'simulation' has mutated into an even more extreme process of virtualization (and indeterminacy[34]), for which Baudrillard advances – at first playfully, but then with increasing force – the hypothesis that, because we are unable to bear the world of symbolic exchange (which is now transmuted into the more philosophical terminology of 'illusion'), our collective project of creating a virtual reality (in all its various forms, including such technical ventures as cloning) is to be understood as a suicidal project of termination of the human species.[35] This connects, of course, with Nietzsche's contention that humanity can only duplicate or destroy itself. Baudrillard now explicitly points up the connection also with Nietzsche's concept of the 'vital illusion'. In an interview dating from 1995, he says:

> The world of symbolic exchange was the world of illusion in the sense of the vital illusion in Nietzsche. These [primitive] societies or our earlier societies still knew how to handle this illusion. For us this radical illusion is difficult to bear. . . . We replace the radical world of illusion with the relative value of simulation. . . . For me the world of simulation isn't a world of alienation any longer. What is involved here is something more akin to what is perhaps a 'fateful' strategy of escaping from the world of appearance and phenomena into the world of simulation, into an artificial world that is, potentially, virtually

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serious, but there are nevertheless some philosophically serious things in my work!' 'This Beer isn't a Beer: Interview with Annie Laurent' in Mike Gane (ed.), *Baudrillard Live* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 189.

[32] *Les strategiés fatales*, p. 201.

[33] 'L'extase du socialisme', *A l'ombre des majorités silencieuses* (Paris: Denoël / Gonthier, 1982), pp. 103–4.

[34] 'Reading Baudrillard's essays since his book *Seduction* reveals a sustained but not entirely consistent attempt to think through the shift into indeterminacy' (Gane, *Jean Baudrillard: In Radical Uncertainty,* p. 96).

[35] There is a 'softer' version of this thought, in which the whole of human life is presented as having become experimental, 'a limitless experimentation on human beings themselves.' See *Télémorphose* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 2001), p. 9.

> perfect. Simulation today assumes the form of virtuality, through which we are attempting to invent a perfect, self-identical world.

This is, of course, what Baudrillard calls the perfect crime, the 'crime, which attempts to efface its own traces'.[36] Existentially, it drops us into a world of limitless banality; morally, we have fallen into a state of indifference where we are not, in Nietzschean style, 'beyond good and evil', but where good and evil are beyond us. We are *not au-delà*, but *en-deça*, not *jenseits*, but *diesseits*.[37]

The Intelligence of Evil: Or the Lucidity Pact is a book which brings political issues – or at least 'supra-political' ones, as Baudrillard puts it[38] – back to the fore. Written 'within the shadow cone of the events of 11 September', one of its central concerns is global power and the forms of resistance to it: those forms which surge up in abreaction to the excessive, prophylactic order of good, including such recognizably Baudrillardian 'objective ironies' as the globe's own 'negative reaction' to 'globalization' (below, page 23). We are back here, in dramatic form, with the system's reaction to its own perfection, with a kind of violent *transparence du mal* – a *transparence*, a 'showing-through' of evil. That phrase presents a characteristic form of Baudrillardian (poetic) reversibility (and compaction). Transparency, as positive value in Enlightenment discourse and one of the great buzzwords of modern European politics, is (not without a little linguistic sleight of hand perhaps) reversed into a '*transparence* of evil', a state of affairs in which, despite all fine words and good intentions, evil repeatedly *transparaît* i.e. shows through. *L'intelligence du mal* is a similarly polysemic, reversible title: not only does it imply an insight into 'evil' on the part of subjects,

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[36] 'Jean Baudrillard in Gespräch mit Florian Rotzer', ZKM website: *http://on1.zkm. de/zkm/stories/storyReader$*1072. In a move that further reinforces the Nietzschean underpinnings of his position, Baudrillard here dovetails his own history of succeeding conceptions of reality into the famous passage in Nietzsche's *Götzendämmerung* on 'How the "Real World" at last Became a Myth' (see below, page 25).

[37] '"Beyond Good and Evil" recalls Nietzsche and gives the impression of transcending these terms in the direction of a "higher" stage. But good and evil have already been done away with here. The global free market has no time for them. And we stand on this side [*diesseits*] of good and evil. Instead of transcendence – implosion and catastrophe.' Baudrillard interviewed by Ulrich Müller-Schöll in 'Demokratie, Menschenrechte, Markt, Liberalismus – das geht mich nichts mehr an', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 28 November 2002.

[38] Speaking on *Tout arrive*, France Culture, 11 May 2004.

but it can signify also the intelligence of the object 'evil', the world's own greater 'understanding' of its mode of operation than is possessed by its observers. And beneath it again lies a sense of *intelligence avec le mal* in the sense in which one speaks in English of intelligence with the enemy.[39]

Speaking in 2002, Baudrillard observed that 'evil has not ceased to exist. On the contrary, it has grown, and sooner or later it explodes. Not evil as seen from a moral point of view, but something in reality itself which radically contradicts the operationalization of the world, globalization, etc.'[40] But what exactly does Baudrillard mean by evil? First, it must be said that it is to be understood not theologically as substance, but metaphysically as form. It is, as Baudrillard says elsewhere, the 'non-unification of things – good being defined as the unification of things in a totalized world' – and, as such, it comprises for us 'all that rests on duality, on the dissociation of things, on negativity, on death'.'[41]

At the level of the philosophy of history, 'evil', understood in this way, plays its part in a radically anti-Hegelian vision that draws on the dualism, the agonism of the original symbolic exchange paradigm. Whereas for Hegel and Hegelianism, despite surface conflict and contradiction, everything coheres towards unity and a higher synthesis (the *List der Vernunft* is a principle of good; the real is rational), for Baudrillard the massive, but superficial, unifying drive towards ever-greater commercial, communicational and moral-political unity in globalization, virtualization and humanitarianism is held in check by an underlying agonistic dualism: the self-moving non-unification that is 'evil', all the singular forms (not necessarily violent or terroristic) that are irreducible to this empire of the good, the process whereby power produces its own 'retroversion' and in which 'meaning destroys itself'.[42]

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[39] In *Cool Memories V,* Baudrillard lists a string of writers and filmmakers – Nietzsche, Céline, Kazan, Riefenstahl, Heidegger and Bellow who are condemned for *intelligence avec le mal,* for rooting their thinking in a form which is other than that of 'universal reason' and pursuing an intellectual course that has nothing to do with 'critical' intelligence, morality or political reason (pp. 132–3).

[40] Müller-Schöll, 'Demokratie, Menschenrechte, Markt, Liberalismus'.

[41] *Passwords.* Translated by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2003), p. 33. Baudrillard's critique of Foucault's use of power as an explanatory principle centres on the absence of duality or reversibility within that concept. See *Forget Foucault & Forget Baudrillard,* p. 40.

[42] Hence also the opposition in this text between the positive, *symbolic* notion of evil ('le mal') and the negative, *exchangeable* one of misfortune ('le malheur'), a notion that underlies all manner of compensation claims and politico-legal horse-trading.

Against an 'integral reality' that betokens the suppression, the cancellation of all events, the elimination of any and every 'singularity', events are once again on the march. Baudrillard has in recent months added the images that came out of Abu Ghraib[43] to the 'catastrophe' of the Twin Towers (though catastrophe, he says disarmingly, is to be understood 'in the good sense', as 'a kind of apocalypse in the sense of a revelation'[44]) as evidence that events are again possible, that our (unreal) reality is not an absolutely terminal state. Is this *de-simulation*, as evoked in *The Illusion of the End* (1992), when the Berlin Wall had fallen and history seemed momentarily to be unfreezing? Has the possibility of the defiant, sacrificial counter-gift been reawakened?

At this point Baudrillard proposes his 'lucidity pact', and the word 'pact' is significant here. The pact is not a contract: it is not a thing of visibility – the visibility of legality and morality – but a matter of secrecy and collusion. Where analyses in terms of political realism and morality are inevitably sucked back into the media vortex to become themselves part of the unifying universe of good, can theory in some secret fashion, albeit ambiguously and dangerously, pose its 'challenge to the real':[45] can it defy, provoke and ultimately hold the world in an enigmatic, 'post-metaphysical tension'?[46]

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[43] See Jean Baudrillard, 'Pornography of War', *Cultural Politics* 1, 1 (2005), pp. 23–5.

[44] 'Mais . . . moi je . . . donne un bon sens au mot catastrophe, je veux dire, c'est une sorte d'apocalypse au sens de révélation . . .'. Baudrillard speaking on *Première édition,* France Culture, 22 February 2002.

[45] 'Now, theoretical concepts never offer a real alternative . . . they are a *challenge* to the real. And they must remain so, on pain of turning around against you in the form of value-judgement, in the form of principles and, in particular, of that reality principle which it is their task to demolish.' 'L'extase du socialisme', *A l'ombre des majorités silencieuses,* p. 103.

[46] 'Is there space for another kind of thought? An *other* thought – a paradoxical thought that would, in an inversion of the words of Marx, pose only insoluble, definitively insoluble problems? . . . Is there room for a kind of thought that would instead reproblematize all the old solutions and help to hold the world in enigmatic tension? No one is certain. This may be the risk thought has to take: it must risk falling victim to its own prophecies, just as history risks getting caught in its own snare.' Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 57.

Chapter 1
Integral Reality

What I call Integral Reality is the perpetrating on the world of an unlimited operational project whereby everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent, everything is 'liberated', everything comes to fruition and has a meaning (whereas it is in the nature of meaning that not everything has it).

Whereby there is no longer anything on which there is nothing to say.

The disappearance of God has left us facing reality and the ideal prospect of transforming this real world. And we have found ourselves confronted with the undertaking of *realizing* the world, of making it become technically, integrally real.

Now, the world, even freed from all illusion, does not lend itself at all to reality. The more we advance in this undertaking, the more ambiguous it becomes, the more it loses sight of itself. Reality has barely had time to exist and already it is disappearing . . .

The reality that has invented itself over recent centuries and which we have elevated into a principle is now dying out. To wish to revive it at all costs as a reference or a moral value is a mistake, since the principle is dead. What we see now, behind the eclipse of the 'objective' real, is the rise of Integral Reality, of a Virtual Reality that rests on the deregulation of the very reality principle.

We shall never get back beyond that blind spot, that unlocatable point where the real ceased to be real.

That which is real exists; that is all we can say (but existence isn't everything – it is, even, the least of things).

Let us be clear about this: when we say reality has disappeared, the point is not that it has disappeared physically, but that it has disappeared metaphysically. Reality continues to exist; it is its principle that is dead.

Now, reality without its principle is no longer the same at all. If, for many different reasons, the principle of representation, which alone gives it a meaning, falters, then the whole of the real falters. Or, rather, it exceeds its own principle and enters upon an unrestrained expansion no longer governed by any rule.

Objective reality – reality related to meaning and representation – gives way to 'Integral Reality', a reality without limits in which everything is realized and technically materialized without reference to any principle or final purpose [*destination*] whatever.

'Integral Reality' involves, then, the murder of the real, the loss of any imagination of the real.

The imaginary, which we happily associated with the real as its friendly shadow, vanishes in this same process. 'Integral Reality' has no imaginary.

Just as liberation no longer has anything to do with the play of freedom – the freedom of a subject wrestling with himself, which implies, among other things, that one remains free to be free (which is not the case in the present circumstances of unconditional liberation); just as verification puts an end to the workings of truth (for truth, if it exists, is something to be fought over, whereas verification transforms it into a *fait accompli*), so we have moved from reality as principle and as concept to the technical realization of the real and its performance.

And yet there are no proofs of this reality's existence – and there never will be – any more than there are proofs of the existence of God. It is, like God, a matter of faith.

And when you begin to believe in it, this is because it is already disappearing.

It is when one is no longer sure of the existence of God, or when one has lost the naïve faith in a self-evident reality, that it becomes absolutely necessary to believe in it.

We invested reality with the whole of our imaginary, but it is this imaginary that is vanishing, since we no longer have the energy to believe in it.

Even the will has gone out of it.

The passion for reality and the passion for truth have gone.

All that remains is a duty of reality, a duty of truth.

Henceforth we *must* believe in it. As doubt sets in everywhere, as a product of the failure of the systems of representation, reality becomes an absolute imperative; it becomes the foundation of a moral order. But neither things nor people obey a reality principle or a moral imperative.

It is the excess of reality that makes us stop believing in it.

The saturation of the world, the technical saturation of life, the excess of possibilities, of actualization of needs and desires. How are we to believe in reality once its production has become automatic?

The real is suffocated by its own accumulation. There is no way now for the dream to be an expression of a desire since its virtual accomplishment is already present.

Deprivation of dreams, deprivation of desire. And we know what mental disorder sleep deprivation induces.

Deep down, the problem is the same as with the 'accursed share': the problem of the surplus – not the lack, but the excess of reality – of which we no longer know how to rid ourselves.

There is no longer any symbolic resolution, by sacrifice, of the surplus, except in accidents or by the irruption of an anomic violence which, whatever its social or political determinations, is always a challenge to this irresistible objective constraint of a normalized world.

Effectuating, materializing, realizing, producing – it seems to be the ideal destination of everything to pass from the stage of possibility to that of reality in a movement of simultaneous progress and internal necessity.

All needs, all desires, all potentialities, tend towards this objective sanction, this litmus test. It is the same path that seems to doom appearances and illusion to vanish in the face of the truth.

Perhaps this reality is a dream; in that case, the real is part of our imaginary. And realizing everything is akin to a universal fulfilment of desire.

But today we are living through a turnabout that makes this universal fulfilment appear like a negative destiny – a catastrophic truth test. The excess of reality in all its forms, the extension of all possibilities, is becoming unbearable. Nothing is left now to the contingency of a destiny or to the non-satisfaction of desire.

Is this turn, this catastrophic inversion of effects, itself a perverse effect? Does it come under the heading of catastrophe theory? Or is it part of a universal acting-out, an inflexible logic of world-processing, the outcome of which it is impossible to predict: acceptance of a definitive reality or the collapse of that same reality, doomed to destruction by its very excess and perfection?

The eclipse of God left us up against reality.

Where will the eclipse of reality leave us?

Do we have here a negative destiny or quite simply the absence of destiny: the coming of a relentless banality, linked to the integral calculus of reality?

Destiny has not pronounced its last word.

It can be felt at the very heart of this integral realization, at the heart of this power, in that internal convulsion that follows out its logic and hastens its effects, in that maleficent reversal of the structure itself that transforms a positive destination into a murderous finality: this is where the very principle of evil lies and where the intelligence of evil must come into play.

Let us suppose two antagonistic trends:

Integral Reality: the irreversible movement towards the totalization of the world.

The Dual Form: the reversibility internal to the irreversible movement of the real.

It seems evolution (or involution) towards an integral universe is irresistible. But it seems, at the same time, that the dual form is indestructible.

There is no way for us to guess how this contradictory double movement will work itself out. We are faced with a confrontation between a dual form and total integration which cannot be resolved.

But only in appearance is there no solution, since this confrontation is constantly prey to a secret disintegration, to the dissent working away at it from the inside. It is the global violence immanent in the world-system itself which, from within, sets the purest symbolic form of the challenge against it.

There is no way to see a reconciliation here and, in all lucidity, there is nothing to tell us which force is the likely winner. Not from impartiality, since secretly we have already taken sides, but out of an awareness of the inevitability of this eternal divergence, this insuperable antagonism.

The integral drive and the dual drive: this is the Great Game.

The very idea of completion, of Integral Reality, is unbearable, but the dual form, the form that denies any final reconciliation, any definitive accomplishment, is also very difficult – and perhaps even impossible – to conceive in its radicalism.

And yet it is in this lucid vision of an endless reversion, in this denial of any objective solution, that the intelligence of evil, if it exists, is grounded.

Any questioning of reality, of its obviousness and its principle, is deemed unacceptable and condemned as negationist.[1]

The charge against you: what do you make of the reality of misery, suffering and death?

Now, it isn't about taking sides on material violence or on the violence of misfortune – it is about a line you are forbidden to cross, the line marking a taboo on reality, a taboo also on even the slightest attempt at interfering with a clear division between good and evil, on pain of being regarded as a scoundrel or an imposter.

The affirmation or contestation of reality, of the reality principle, is, then, a political choice, and almost a religious one, in that any infringement

[1] The term '*négationniste*', which Baudrillard uses here in a general, neutral sense, is associated predominantly with Holocaust denial. (All footnotes in the text are my own – Tr.)

of this principle is sacrilegious – the very hypothesis of simulation being perceived, deep down, as diabolical (it takes up where heresy left off in the archaeology of the thinking of evil).

The reality-fundamentalists equip themselves with a form of magical thinking that confuses message and messenger: if you speak of the simulacrum, then you are a simulator; if you speak of the virtuality of war, then you are in league with it and have no regard for the hundreds of thousands of dead.

Any analysis other than the moral is condemned as deluded or irresponsible.

Now, if reality is a question of belief and all the signs that attested to it have lost their credibility, if the real has fallen into fundamental discredit and its principle is everywhere reeling, it is not we, the messengers of the simulacrum, who have plunged things into this discredit, it is the system itself that has fomented this uncertainty that affects everything today – even the sense of existence.

What looms on the horizon with the advent of globalization is the constitution of an integral power, of an Integral Reality of power and an equally integral and automatic disintegration and failure of that power.

A dramatic form of reversibility.

A sort of turnabout, revenge and devastating irony, a kind of negative reaction on the part of the world itself against globalization.

All the forces denied and expelled by this very process, which thereby become the forces of evil, rebel. Power itself fights against becoming total: it passes the buck; it disinvests itself; in the end it works secretly against itself.

To speak evil is to describe the growing hegemony of the powers of good and, at the same time, their inner faltering, their suicidal crumbling, their reversion, their outgrowth and separation into parallel universes once the dividing line of the Universal has been crossed.

Chapter 2
On the Fringes of the Real

We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? … But no! with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

If we are not to believe that truth remains truth when we lift its veil, then truth has no naked existence.

And if we are not to believe that the real remains the real when we have dispelled its illusion, then the real has no objective reality.

What becomes of the world when freed from truth and appearances? It becomes the real universe, the universe of Integral Reality. Neither truth nor appearance, but Integral Reality.

If, in the past, the world reached towards transcendence, and if, in the process, it fell into other hinterworlds, it has today fallen into reality.

If there was in the past an upward transcendence, there is today a downward one. This is, in a sense, the second Fall of Man Heidegger speaks of: the fall into banality, but this time without any possible redemption.

Once the real world has been lost, at the same time as the world of appearances, says Nietzsche, the universe becomes a universe of fact, a positive universe, a universe 'as is', which no longer even has any need to be true. As factual as a ready-made.

Duchamp's *Fountain* is the emblem of our modern hyperreality, the product of a violent counter-transference of all poetic illusion on to pure reality, the object 'transferred' on to itself, short-circuiting any possible metaphor.

The world has acquired such a degree of reality that it is bearable only by a perpetual denial, with 'This is not a world' – reminiscent of Magritte's 'This is not a pipe' – operating as the surrealist denial of self-evidence itself, this dual movement of the absolute, definitive obviousness of the world and the equally radical denial of that obviousness dominating the trajectory of modern art.

And not just the trajectory of art, but of all our deep perceptions, of our entire mental apprehension of the world.

It is no longer a matter here of philosophical morality of the sort that says 'the world isn't what it ought to be' or 'the world isn't what it was'.

No, the world is as it is.

Once all transcendence is conjured away, things are no longer anything but what they are and, such as they are, they are unbearable. All illusion is gone from them and they have become immediately and totally real, with no shadow and no commentary.

And, at the same time, this insurmountable reality no longer exists. It has no grounds for existence any more, since it is no longer exchangeable for anything and has no opposite term.

'Does reality exist? Are we in a real world?' – this is the leitmotiv of our entire present culture. But it merely expresses the fact that we can no longer bear this world, which is so prey to reality, except by way of a radical denial. And this is logical: since the world can no longer be justified in another world, it has to be justified here and now in this one by lending itself force of reality, by purging itself of any illusion. But at the same time, by the very effect of this counter-transference, the denial of the real as such grows.

Reality, having lost its natural predators, is growing like some proliferating species. A little bit like algae or even like the human race in general.

The Real is growing like the desert. 'Welcome to the Desert of the Real'.

Illusion, dreams, passion, madness and drugs, but also artifice and simulacrum – these were reality's natural predators. They have all lost energy, as though struck down by some dark, incurable malady. We have, then, to find an artificial equivalent for them, since, if we do not, reality, once it has attained its critical mass, will end up destroying itself spontaneously, will implode of its own accord – which it is, in fact, currently doing, giving way to the Virtual in all its forms.

It is in the Virtual that we have the ultimate predator and plunderer of reality, secreted by reality itself as a kind of self-destructive viral agent.

Reality has fallen prey to Virtual Reality, the final consequence of the process begun with the abstraction of objective reality – a process that ends in Integral Reality.

What we have in virtuality is no longer a hinterworld: the substitution of the world is total; this is the identical doubling of the world, its perfect mirroring, and the matter is settled by the pure and simple annihilation of symbolic substance. Even objective reality becomes a useless function, a kind of waste that is ever more difficult to exchange and circulate.

We have moved, then, from objective reality to a later stage, a kind of ultra-reality that puts an end to both reality and illusion.

Integral Reality is also to be found in integral music: the sort you find in quadraphonic spaces or can 'compose' on a computer. The music in which sounds have been clarified and expurgated and which, shorn of all noise and static, is, so to speak, restored to its technical perfection. The sounds of such music are no longer the play of a form, but the actualization of a programme. It is a music reduced to a pure wavelength, the final reception of which, the tangible effect on the listener, is exactly programmed too, as in a closed circuit. It is, in a sense, a virtual music, flawless and without imagination, merging into its own model, and even the enjoyment of it is virtual enjoyment. Is this still music? The question must be open to doubt, since they have actually come up with the idea of reintroducing noise into it to make it more 'musical'.

The computer-generated image is like this too, a digital image which is entirely fabricated, has no real referent and from which, by contrast with analogue images, the negative itself has disappeared – not just the film negative, but the negative moment that lies at the heart of the image, that absence that causes the image to resonate. The technical fine-tuning here is perfect. There is no room for fuzziness, tremor or chance. Is this still an image?

Going further on these lines, we come to the very principle of Integral Man, reworked by genetics with an eye to perfection. With every accidental feature excised, all physiological or emotional pathology removed. Because what genetic manipulation is aiming at is not an original formula of the human, but the most conformable, most efficient formula ('serial morphing').

We get a foretaste of this in Stephen Spielberg's *Minority Report*, in which the crime is prevented – and the sentence handed down – before it has even taken place and without our ever knowing whether it would

have happened. Nipped in the bud in its very imagining, in accordance with the universal precautionary principle.

Yet the film is anachronistic, as it still involves policing, whereas future crime prevention will be genetic, intragenic: the 'criminal gene' will be surgically removed at birth – or even before – by a kind of prophylactic sterilization (which will very quickly have to become quite widespread since, from the police standpoint, which is that of power, we are all potential criminals).

This manipulation tells us precisely what the future human being will be. He will be a corrected, rectified human. He will be from the outset what he should have been ideally. He will never, therefore, become what he is. He won't even be alienated any longer, since he will be modified pre-existentially, for better or for worse.

There isn't even any danger of his encountering his own otherness, since he will, from the outset, have been devoured by his own model. All this is based on a universal process of eradication of evil.

Evil, which was once a metaphysical or moral principle, is today pursued materially right down into the genes (and also in the 'Axis of Evil'). It has become an objective reality and hence objectively eliminable. We are going to be able to excise it at the root, and with it, increasingly, all dreams, utopias, illusions and fantasies – all these things being, by the same general process, wrested from the possible to be put back into the real.

This absolute reality is also that of money when it passes from the relative abstraction of exchange-value to the purely speculative stage of the virtual economy. Marx in his day argued that the movement of exchange-value was more real than mere use-value, but, in our situation, where capital flows are unrelated to commodity exchange, money becomes an even stranger hyperreality: it becomes absolute money; it attains the Integral Reality of calculus. Being no longer the equivalent of anything, it becomes the object of a universal passion. The hieroglyph of the commodity has become the integral fetishism of money.

Last but not least comes that surgical operation on language whereby, in its digital version, its entire symbolic dimension is eliminated, that is to say, whereby everything that makes it much more than merely what it signifies is removed … All there is in it of absence and emptiness, but also of literalness, is eliminated, just like the negative in the computer-generated image – all that stands opposed to an exclusive

clarification. Such is the Integral Reality of language: it now signifies only what it signifies.

Time itself, lived time, no longer has time to take place. The historical time of events, the psychological time of affects and passion, the subjective time of judgement and will, are all simultaneously called into question by virtual time, which is called, no doubt derisively, 'real time'.[1]

It is, in fact, no accident if space-time is called 'real'. *Temps réel*, *Echtzeit*: this is 'authentic' time, non-deferred time, the time of an instantaneous presence that is no longer even the present moment in relation to a past or a future, but a point of convergence, and at the same time of cancellation, of all the other dimensions. An Integral Reality of time that is now concerned with nothing but its own operation: time-processing (like 'word-processing', 'war-processing', etc.).

With this notion of 'real time', all dimensions have contracted to a single focal point, to a fractal form of time. The differential of time having disappeared, it is the integral function that wins out: the immediate total presence of a thing to itself, which signifies that reality is henceforth the privilege of that which is identical with itself. All that is absent from itself, all that differs from itself, is not truly real.

This whole business is, of course, pure fantasy.

Nothing and no one is absolutely present to itself, herself or himself (or, *a fortiori*, to others). So nothing and no one is truly real and real time does not exist.

We do not even perceive the sun in real time, since the speed of light is relative. And so it is with everything.

In this sense, reality is inconceivable. Integral Reality is a utopia. And yet this is what, by a gigantic artifice, is being imposed upon us.

Behind the immateriality of the technologies of virtual reality, of the digital and the screen, there lies a hidden injunction, an imperative McLuhan had already identified in the TV and media image: that of a heightened participation, of an interactive investment that may reach dizzying proportions, that may go so far as the 'ecstatic' involvement we see everywhere in the cyberworld.

Immersion, immanence and immediacy – these are the characteristics of the Virtual.

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[1] This phrase is in English in the original.

There is no gaze any longer, no scene, no imaginary, no illusion even, no longer any exteriority or spectacle: the operational fetish has absorbed all exteriority, reclaimed all interiority, absorbed time itself in the operation of real time.

In this way we come closer to a world that is integrally realized, that is effectuated and identified as such, but not closer to *the world as it is*, which is something quite different.

For the world-as-it-is is of the order of appearances, if not indeed of integral illusion, since there is no possible representation of it.

Two hypotheses on this fatal strategy of the trans-digitization of the world into pure information, of cloning of the real by Virtual Reality, of substitution of a technical, artificial universe for the 'natural' world.

The first is the hypothesis of the radical illusoriness of the world – that is to say, of the impossibility of exchanging the world for any ultimate truth or purpose.

Such as it is, the world is without causal explanation or possible representation (any mirror whatever would still be part of the world).

Now, that for which there is neither a meaning nor a definitive reason is an illusion.

The world therefore has all the characteristics of a thoroughgoing illusion.

For us, however, whatever its metaphysical beauty, this illusion is unbearable. Hence the need to produce all the possible forms of a simulacrum of meaning, of transcendence – things which all mask this original illusoriness and protect us from it.

Thus the simulacrum is not that which hides the truth, but that which hides the absence of truth.

It is in this perspective that the invention of reality has its place.

In the shadow of reality, of this causal and rational simulation model, the exchange of the world becomes possible, since it is defined by objective laws.

Second hypothesis: the world is given to us. Now, in accordance with the symbolic rule, when something is given to us, we must be able to give it back.

In the past, we could give thanks in one way or another to God or some other agency; we could respond to the gift with a sacrifice.

But now that all transcendence has disappeared we no longer have anyone to whom to give thanks. And if we can give nothing in exchange for this world, it is unacceptable.

It is for this reason that we find ourselves having to liquidate the natural world and substitute an artificial one for it – a world built from scratch and for which we will be accountable to no one.

Hence the gigantic undertaking of eliminating the natural world in all its forms. All that is natural will be denied in the more or less long term by virtue of this enforced substitution. The Virtual appears here as the final solution to the impossible exchange of the world.

But in itself this does not settle the matter, as we shall never escape this new debt, contracted in this instance with ourselves. How are we to absolve ourselves of this technical world and this artificial omnipotence?

Here again, for want of being able to exchange this world (for what?), we need to destroy or deny it. Which explains, at the same time as we progress in building up this artificial universe, the immense negative counter-transference against this Integral Reality we have forged for ourselves.

A deep-seated denial that is present everywhere today. So that we do not know which will win out in the end, this irresistible technical undertaking or the violent reaction against it.

At all events, the undertaking is never complete.

We are never done with making good the void of truth.

Hence the flight forward into ever more simulacra.

Hence the invention of an increasingly artificial reality such that there is no longer anything standing over against it or any ideal alternative to it, no longer any mirror or negative.

With the very latest Virtual Reality we are entering a final phase of this entreprise of simulation, which ends this time in an artificial technical production of the world from which all trace of illusion has disappeared.

A world so real, hyperreal, operational and programmed that it no longer has any need to be true. Or rather it is true, absolutely true, in the sense that nothing any longer stands opposed to it.

We have here the absurdity of a total truth from which falsehood is lacking – that of absolute good from which evil is lacking, of the positive from which the negative is lacking.

If the invention of reality is the substitute for the absence of truth, then, when the self-evidence of this 'real' world becomes generally problematic, does this not mean that we are closer to the absence of truth – that is to say, to the world as it is?

We are certainly further and further removed from the solution, but nearer and nearer to the problem.

For the world is not real. It became real, but it is in the process of ceasing to be so. But it is not virtual either – though it is on the way to becoming so.

It is against this world become entirely operational, objective and without alternative that the denial of reality, the disavowal of reality, develops.

If the world is to be taken *en bloc*, then it is at that point we reject it *en bloc*. There is no other solution. This is a rejection similar to the biological rejection of a foreign body.

It is by a kind of instinct, a kind of vital reaction, that we rebel against this immersion in a completed world, in the 'Kingdom of Heaven', in which real life is sacrificed to the hyperrealization of all its possibilities, to its optimum performance, in much the way the species is sacrificed today to its genetic perfection.

Our negative abreaction is the product of our hypersensitivity to the ideal conditions of life provided for us.

This perfect reality, to which we sacrifice all illusion the way that all hope is left behind on the threshold of Hell, is quite obviously a phantom reality.

We are pained by it precisely as we would be by a phantom limb:

Yet, as Ahab says in *Moby Dick*: 'And if I still feel the smart of my crushed leg, though it be now so long dissolved; then, why mayst not thou, carpenter, feel the fiery pains of hell for ever, and without a body?'[2]

There is nothing metaphorical about this sacrifice. It is, rather, of the order of a surgical operation, which, moreover, becomes something of a source of pleasure for itself: 'Humankind, which once in Homer, was

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[2] Herman Melville, *Moby Dick,* translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), pp. 513–14.

an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.'[3]

One of the possibilities is, in fact, self-destruction – an exceptional one in that it is a defiance of all the others.

A twofold illusion: that of an objective reality of the world, that of a subjective reality of the subject – which are refracted in the same mirror and merged in the same founding movement of our metaphysics.

The world, for its part, isn't objective at all and may be said, rather, to take the form of a 'strange attractor'.

But because the seduction of the world and of appearances is dangerous, we prefer to exchange it for its operational simulacrum, its artificial truth and its *automatic writing*. However, that very protection is perilous since everything we use to defend ourselves against this vital illusion, our entire defence strategy, functions as a veritable character armour and itself becomes unbearable.

In the end, it is the strangeness of the world that is fundamental and it is that strangeness which resists the status of objective reality.

Similarly, it is our strangeness to ourselves that is fundamental and resists the status of subject.

It is not a matter of resisting alienation, but of resisting the very status of subject.

In all these forms of disavowal, nay-saying and denial, what is at work is not a dialectic of negativity or the 'work of the negative'. It is no longer a question of a thought critical of reality, but of a subversion of reality in its principle, in its very self-evidence. The greater the positivity, the more violent is the – possibly silent – denial. We are all dissidents of reality today, clandestine dissidents most of the time.

If thought cannot be exchanged for reality, then the immediate denial of reality becomes the only reality-based thinking. But this denial does not lead to hope, as Adorno would have it: 'Hope, as it emerges from reality by struggling against it to deny it, is the only manifestation of lucidity.' Whether for good or for ill, this is not true.

Hope, if we were still to have it, would be hope for intelligence of – for insight into – good. Now, what we have left is intelligence of evil, that

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[3] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility', in *Selected Writings*, vol. III (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 122.

is to say, intelligence not of a critical reality, but of a reality that has become unreal by dint of positivity, that has become speculative by dint of simulation.

Because it is there to counter a void, the whole enterprise of simulation and information, this aggravation of the real and of knowledge of the real, merely gives rise to an ever-greater uncertainty. Its very profusion and relentlessness simply spreads panic.

And that uncertainty is irredeemable, as it is made up of all the possible solutions.

Are we irremediably the captives of this transference of the real into a total positivity and of the equally massive counter- transference that tends towards its pure and simple denial?

Whereas everything is driving us towards this totalization of the real, *we must, rather, wrest the world from its reality principle*. For it is this confusion that conceals from us the world as it is, that is to say, at bottom, the world as singularity.

Italo Svevo: 'The search for causes is an immense misunderstanding, a deep-rooted superstition that prevents things, events from occurring as they are.'

The real is of the order of generality; the world is of the order of singularity. That is to say, of an absolute difference, a radical difference, something more different than difference – at the farthest possible remove from this confusion of the world with its double.

Something definitively resists us, something other than truth or reality.

Something resists all our efforts to confine the world to a sequence of causes and effects.

There is an elsewhere of reality (most cultures do not even have the concept). Something from before the so-called 'real' world, something irreducible, linked to primal illusion and to the impossibility of giving the world as it is any kind of ultimate meaning whatever.

> Wishing, knowing and feeling are inextricably intertwined. But there is perhaps a way of moving through the world other than by following the thread of the real.
>
> Robert Musil

Chapter 3
On the World in its Profound Illusoriness

The invention of Reality, unknown to other cultures, is the work of modern western Reason, the turn to the Universal. The turn to an objective world, shorn of all hinterworlds.

Concretizing, verifying, objectivizing, demonstrating: 'objectivity' is this capture of the real that forces the world to face us, expurgating it of any secret complicity, of any illusion.

We always imagine the Real as something face on. We think of ourselves always as facing the Real. Well, there is no face- to-face. There is no objectivity. Nor any subjectivity either: a twofold illusion.

Since consciousness is an integral part of the world and the world is an integral part of consciousness, I think it and it thinks me.

One need only reflect that even if objects exist outside of us, we can know absolutely nothing of their objective reality. For things are given to us only through our representation. To believe that these representations and sensations are determined by external objects is a further representation.

'The question whether things really exist outside of us and as we see them is absolutely meaningless. . . . The question is almost as absurd as wondering whether blue is really blue, objectively blue' (Georg Christoph Lichtenberg).[1]

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[1] Where I have been able to trace the fragments from Lichtenberg's work, I have referred to them using the classification system established in the six-volume edition published by W. Promies (Munich: Hanser, 1968–92).

This is something we definitively cannot judge. We can only represent an objective reality to ourselves, without ever prejudging its objectivity. If such objects do exist outside of us, we can know absolutely nothing of them, and there is nothing to be said about them . . .

The task of philosophy is to unmask this illusion of objective reality – a trap that is, in a sense, laid for us by nature.

'Nothing so clearly reveals the superior mind of man than his having been able to unmask nature at the precise point where it was attempting to deceive him' (Lichtenberg).[2]

But this is where philosophy stops – at the definitive acknowledgement of the illusoriness of the world. That is to say, at that point, that object, that something, that nothing, of which there is nothing more to be said.

The philosophical idea is, then, simple and radical: it is the idea of a fundamental illusoriness, of the non-reality of the 'objective' world.

This representation, this superstition of an objective reality held out to us by the mirror of the commonplace imagination, is itself a part of the general illusion of the world, of which we are a part at the same time as we are its mirror.

There is not just the illusion of a real world, there is also that of a real subject of representation – and the two illusions, the objective and the subjective, are correlative.

This is where the mystery lies.

For the world does not exist in order for us to know it,

It is not in any way predestined for knowledge. However, knowledge is itself part of the world, though precisely part *of the world in its profound illusoriness, which consists in having no necessary relation to knowledge*.

This is the miracle: that a fragment of the world, human consciousness, arrogates to itself the privilege of being its mirror. But this will never produce an objective truth, since the mirror is part of the object it reflects.

The current microsciences have taken cognizance of this definitive illusion, which is not the illusion of an objective non-truth (that would

[2] Fragment H 151.

still have the prestige of reality for itself), but of the entangling of two illusions, objective and subjective, of their inextricable complicity, which properly prevents any metaphysical reflection of the world by thought.

This is the trap nature sets for us.

The dilemma, which is that of an impossible equivalence, an impossible correlation between the object and its 'objective' representation, arises from this circularity, this reversibility of a process that can no longer then be called representation.

And it is an irresolvable one because reversibility is there from the outset. *It* is the fundamental rule.

'It is impossible for a being to undergo the effect of some other without that effect being mutual. . . . Every effect modifies the object that is its cause. There is no dissociation of the subject and the object – nor any original identity – there is only an inextricable reciprocity' (Lichtenberg).

Reversibility of the self and the world:

'Everything happens in the world of the self. This self, within which everything unfolds, resembles in this regard the cosmos of physics, to which the self also belongs by which that cosmos appeared mentally in our representation. . . . So the circle is complete' (Lichtenberg).

A circle which is that of an infinite embedding, in which the subject cannot lay claim to a determinate position anywhere, and in which the object is not localizable as such either.

What we have here might be said to be not so much a form of alienation as a perpetual becoming-object of the subject, a perpetual becoming-subject of the object. Once again, the world does not exist in order for us to know it or, more exactly, knowledge itself is part of the illusion of the world – and this is not an objection, far from it: it is here, in this insoluble affinity, that the secret of thought lies.

This is the very principle of the world that thinks us.

The question of whether there is an objective reality does not even arise: the intelligence of the world is the intelligence of the world that thinks us.

It is the created object which thinks us, and which sometimes thinks better than we do, and quicker than we do: which thinks us before we have thought it.

This paradoxical essence of man, who, though an integral part of nature, still tries to see how it could be for him beyond that state of belonging, puts us in mind of what Nietzsche says in his metaphor of the mirror:

'When we try to examine the mirror in itself we discover in the end nothing but things upon it. If we want to grasp the things we finally get hold of nothing but the mirror. – This, in the most general terms, is the history of knowledge.'[3]

This speculative abyss deepens yet again if we move from the mirror to the total screen of Virtual Reality.

This time it is not nature that lays the trap of objective reality for us, but the digital universe which sets us the trap of a hyperobjectivity, of an integral calculus in which the very play of the mirror and its objects is abolished – the last avatar of philosophical idealism. At the same time, it puts an irrevocable end to that hyperobjectivity, since the principle of representation itself disappears beneath the calculation and digital generation of operations. As a result, all that remains is to occupy that non-place, that pre-eminent empty space of representation that is the screen.

All this follows a kind of dizzying whirl, as though this growing abstraction, this rise of an integral hyperreality, were itself a response to a hypersensitivity to certain final conditions.

But what final conditions?

Reality will have been only a fleeting solution then.

Indeed, it merely succeeded others, such as the religious illusion in all its forms. This truth, this rationality, this objective reality – which we took in exchange for religious values, imagining that we had moved definitively beyond them – is only the disenchanted heir to those same religious values. It does not seem ever genuinely to have gained the upper hand, as it happens, nor does it appear that the transcendent solution is entirely past and gone or that God is dead, even though we now deal only with his metastases.

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[3] *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality.* Translated by R. J. Hollingdale with an introduction by Michael Tanner (Cambridge: Cambridge Univesity Press, 1982), p. 141.

Perhaps that solution was merely eclipsed and it is emerging from its eclipse in reaction to this very intensification of reality, to the weight of an ever more real, ever more secular world in which there is no possibility of redemption.

Reality too is a hinterworld and a substitutive illusion, and in fact we live in this 'real' world as in a hinterworld. It is merely that we have succeeded in negotiating it in a way that does without heaven and hell (though not without debt and guilt, for which we are now answerable to ourselves).

Have we gained or lost on the deal? There is no answer.

We have exchanged one illusion for another, and it turns out that the material, objective illusion, the illusion of reality, is as fragile as the illusion of God and no longer protects us, once the euphoria of science and the Enlightenment is past, from the fundamental illusion of the world and its absence of truth.

In fact, this secular, desacralized reality has slowly become a useless function, the fiction of which we are desperately attempting to rescue (as once we attempted to rescue the existence of God), but which, deep down, we do not know how to rid ourselves of.

This is where the last phase of the enterprise comes in.

Given reality's powerlessness to bridge the gap that separates us from the world and the insoluble enigma it presents for us, we have had to move to a further stage – that of the Virtual, Virtual Reality, the highest stage of simulation, the stage of a final solution by the volatilization of the world's substance into an immaterial realm and a set of strategic calculations.

God, who once was present, but also absent, from all things, now circulates in the arterial network of computers.

The play of transcendence is over, the paradoxical play of presence and absence. What remains is an integral form of reality, of which we are all operators.

What was still merely a relative idealism gives way to an absolute idealism, that of the new computer technologies, in which the fragile balance of subject and object is swept away and total abstraction takes its place.

This is the very end of the illusion of the object and hence of philosophy which defined itself, after all, by this point beyond which it had nothing more to say.

Henceforth the question no longer arises, since there isn't even any subject to pose it now. The very position of the subject is eclipsed in this integral functioning.

We are, in fact, in pure pataphysics, pataphysics being, on the one hand, the science of imaginary solutions and, on the other, the only known attempt to move to Integral Metaphysics, the metaphysics in which the phenomenal world is treated definitively as an illusion.

Now, this is precisely what we are up against with the XXX phase of reality that we have arrived at . . .

Objective reality corresponded to an horizon for metaphysics.

Integral Reality corresponds to the pataphysical sphere.

There is no more marvellous embodiment of Integral Reality than Ubu. Ubu is the very symbol of this plethoric reality and, at the same time, the only response to this Integral Reality, the only solution that is truly imaginary in its fierce irony, its grotesque fullness. The great spiral belly of Pa Ubu is the profile of our world and its umbilical entombment.

We are not yet done with pataphysics, that science which 'symbolically attributes to their lineaments the properties of objects, described in their potentiality' (Alfred Jarry).[4]

But the die is not cast, since, though the real is growing as a result of a breaking of the symbolic pact between beings and things, that break gives rise, in its turn, to a tenacious resistance, the rejection of an objective world, a separate world. Deep down, no one desires this objective face-to-face relation, even in the privileged role of subject.

What binds us to the real is a contract of reality. That is to say, a formal awareness of the rights and duties attaching to reality. But what we long for is a complicity and dual relation with beings and things – a pact, not a contract. Hence the temptation to condemn this contract – along with the social contract that ensues from it.

Against the moral contract that binds us to reality we must set a pact of intelligence and lucidity.

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[4] Alfred Jarry, Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, 'Pataphysician, Book II, Chapter *8 (1907). My translation.*

Having said this, on the verge of this dramatic changeover, we may still ask the question:

Is the end of history still a historical fact?

Is the disappearance of reality still a real fact?

No, it is an accomplished fact and, in the face of accomplished facts, it is not objectivity, but defiance that is in order. We must defy reality as we must defy any accomplished fact.

Chapter 4
The Easiest Solutions

The hypothesis of objective reality exerts such a hold on our minds only because it is by far the easiest solution.

Lichtenberg: 'That a false hypothesis is sometimes preferable to an exact one is proven in the doctrine of human freedom. Man is, without a doubt, unfree. But it takes profound philosophical study for a man not to be led astray by such an insight. Barely one in a thousand has the necessary time and patience for such study, and of these hundreds, barely one has the necessary intelligence. This is why freedom is the most convenient conception and will, in the future, remain the most common, so much do appearances favour it.'[1]

The exact hypothesis is that man is born unfree, that the world is born untrue, non-objective, non-rational. But this radical hypothesis is definitively beyond proof, unverifiable and, in a sense, unbearable. Hence the success of the opposite hypothesis, of the easiest hypothesis.

Subjective illusion: that of freedom.

Objective illusion: that of reality.

Just as belief in freedom is merely the illusion of being the cause of one's own acts, so the belief in objective reality is the illusion of finding an original cause for phenomena and hence of inserting the world into the order of truth and reason.

Despairing of confronting otherness, seduction, the dual relation and destiny, we invent the easiest solution: freedom. First, the ideal concept

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[1] Fragment J 278.

of a subject wrestling with his own freedom. Then, *de facto* liberation, unconditional liberation – the highest stage of freedom.

We pass from the right to freedom to the categorical imperative of liberation.

But to this stage, too, there is the same violent abreaction: we rid ourselves of freedom in every way possible, even going so far as to invent new servitudes.

Despairing of confronting uncertainty and radical illusion, we invent the easiest solution: reality.

First, objective reality, then Integral Reality – the highest stage of reality.

To this highest stage there corresponds the equally radical disavowal of that same reality. Violent abreaction to Integral Reality – negative counter-transference.

Despairing of an aim, salvation or an ideal, we invent for ourselves the easiest solution: happiness.

Here again we begin with utopia – the ideal of happiness – and end in achieved happiness, the highest stage of happiness. The same abreaction to integral happiness as to integral reality or freedom: these are all unbearable.

In the end, it is the opposite form of misfortune, the victim ideology, that triumphs.

Being incapable of accepting thought (the idea that the world thinks us, the intelligence of evil), we invent the easiest solution, the technical solution: Artificial Intelligence.

The highest stage of intelligence: integral knowledge.

This time the rejection will arise perhaps from a resistance on the part of things themselves to their digital transparency or from a failure of the system in the form of a major accident.

Against all the sovereign hypotheses are ranged the easiest solutions.

And all the easiest solutions lead to catastrophe.

Against the hypothesis of uncertainty: the illusion of truth and reality.

Against the hypothesis of destiny: the illusion of freedom.

Against the hypothesis of evil [*Mal*]: the illusion of misfortune [*malheur*].

Against the hypothesis of thought, the illusion of Artificial Intelligence.

Against the hypothesis of the event: the illusion of information.

Against the hypothesis of becoming: the illusion of change.

Every easy solution, pushed to its extreme – Integral Reality, integral freedom, integral happiness, integral information (the highest stage of intelligence, the highest stage of reality, the highest stage of freedom, the highest stage of happiness) – finds a response in a violent abreaction: disavowal of reality, disavowal of freedom, disavowal of happiness, viruses and dysfunctions, spectrality of real time, mental resistance; all the forms of secret repulsion in respect of this ideal normalization of existence.

Which proves that there still exists everywhere, in each of us, resisting the universal beatification, an intelligence of evil.

Do you want to be free?

Freedom? A dream!

Everyone aspires to it, or at least gives the impression of aspiring fervently to it.

If it is an illusion, it has become a vital illusion.

In morality, mores and mentalities, this movement, which seems to well up from the depths of history, is towards irrevocable emancipation.

And if some aspects may seem excessive or contradictory, we still experience the dizzying thrill of this emancipation.

Better: the whole of our system turns this liberation into a duty, a moral obligation – to the point where it is difficult to distinguish this liberation compulsion from a 'natural' aspiration towards, a 'natural' demand for, freedom.

Now, it is clear that, where all forms of servitude are concerned, everyone wants to throw them off; where all forms of constraint are concerned – physical constraints or constraints of law – everyone

wishes to be free of them. This is such a vital reaction that there is barely, in the end, any need of an idea of freedom to express it.

Things become problematic when the prospect arises for the subject of being answerable solely for him/herself in an undifferentiated universe. For this symbolic disobligation is accompanied by a general deregulation. And it is in this universe of free electrons – free to become anything whatever in a system of generalized exchange – that we see growing, simultaneously, a contrary impulse, a resistance to this availability of everyone and everything that is every bit as deep as the desire for freedom. A passion for rules of whatever kind that is equal to the passion for deregulation.

In the anthropological depths of the species, the demand for rules is as fundamental as the demand to be free of them.

No one can say which is the more basic.

What we can see, after a long period of ascendancy for the process of liberation, is the resurrection of all those movements that are more and more steadfastly resistant to boundless emancipation and total immunity.

A desire for rules that has nothing to do with submission to the law. It might even be said to run directly counter to it, since, whereas the law is abstract and universal, the rule, for its part, is a two-way obligation. And it is neither of the order of law, nor of duty, nor of moral and psychological law.

Regarded everywhere as an absolute advance of the human race, and with the seal set on it by human rights, liberation starts out from the idea of a natural predestination to be free: being 'liberated' absolves the human being of an original evil, restores a happy purpose and a natural vocation to him. It is our salvation, the true baptismal sacrament of modern, democratic man.

Now, this is a utopia.

This impulse to resolve the ambivalence of good and evil and jump over one's shadow into absolute positivity is a utopia.

The ambivalence is definitive, and the things liberated are liberated in total ambivalence.

You cannot liberate good without liberating evil. Sometimes evil even quicker than good, as part of the same movement.

At any rate, what we have here is a deregulation of both.

Liberation opens up a limitless growth and acceleration.

It is once this critical threshold has been crossed (this phase transition, much as in the physical world) that things begin to float – time, money, sex, production – in a vertiginous raising of the stakes, such as we are experiencing today, which brings an uncontrollable eruption of all autonomies, all differences, in a movement that is at once uncertain, fluctuating and exponential.

At this point freedom is already far behind, overtaken and outdistanced by liberation.

What is forming before us is a freedom of circulation of each autonomized human particle under the banner of total information and integration. Each one realizing itself fully in the technical extension of all its possibilities: all stakeholders and partners in a general interaction. Only the God of the Market will recognize his own, and the 'Invisible Hand' is now the weightless ascendancy of software and networks in the name of Universal Free Exchange – the highest stage of deregulation.

A logical, fateful consequence of a dynamic that seems to be at work from the origin of historical societies – the dynamic of a progressive, universal deregulation of all human relations.

From feudalism to capital and beyond, what we see is, above all, an immense advance in the freedom of exchange, in the free circulation of goods, flows, persons and capital.

The movement is irreversible, not in terms of human progress but in terms of the market, of the progressive advance of an inescapable globalization.

This is the last stage liberalism passes through in its unremitting advance towards generalized exchange, a process of which capital, with its conflicts, contradictions, violent history – simply with its 'history' – is ultimately just the prehistory.

However, we see resistance to this second 'revolution' springing up on all sides – forms of resistance even more intense than those aroused by the advent of the Enlightenment: all these movements of re-involution (the opposite of revolution), whether religious, sectarian or corporatist, new fundamentalisms or new feudalisms, which simply seem to be trying to rid themselves everywhere of this unconditional freedom and find new forms of oversight, protection and vassalage, to counter an unbearable disaffiliation with an archaic fidelity.

To counter deregulation with a new set of rules.

It may even be that the only refuge from the global, from a total exposure to the laws of the market, will once again be the condition of wage-earner, the 'social' with its institutional protection.

In other words, a defence of the good old 'alienated' condition, though protected by its very alienation, as it were, from overexposure to the laws of flows and networks alone. With this 'voluntary' alienation possibly extending as far as an even more archaic regression to *any* kind of protective transcendence that offers preservation from this scattering about the networks, this dispersion and dissemination into the void.

Only now do we realize we shall never be done with this paradox of freedom. For this irreversible movement of emancipation can be seen either as progress on the part of the species (it is, at any rate, this emancipation that ensures the superiority of the human species over all others) or, in a quite opposite way, as an anthropological catastrophe, an unbinding, a dizzying deregulation, whose ultimate goal we cannot grasp but which seems to be developing towards an unforeseeable extreme that may either be the highest stage of universal intelligence or of total entropy.

We pass the buck on freedom in every possible way.

In a continual transference, we devolve our own desires, our own lives, our own wills, to any other agency whatever.

If the people puts itself in the hands of the political class, it does so more to be rid of power than out of any desire for representation. We may interpret this as a sign of passivity and irresponsibility, but why not venture a subtler hypothesis: namely, that this passing of the buck proceeds from an unwittingly lucid intuition of an absence of desire and will of their own – in short, a secret awareness of the illusoriness of freedom?

'Voluntary servitude'?

The notion is doubly illusory, since it encapsulates in itself the double mystification of the two concepts of freedom and will. And the idea of a will, understood as autonomous determination of the individual being, is no less false when it turns round against freedom.

The illusion does not necessarily lie where one thinks it does, and if a few only (Lichtenberg) are able to know that they are 'unfree' and to accept that destiny, the great bulk of the others ultimately have fewer illusions about their free will than those who created the concept.

This does not stop 'voluntary servitude' having its rules and strategies.

It is by the absence of a desire of one's own that the other's will to dominate is thwarted: these are the ruses of seduction.

It is by transferring the responsibility of power on to the other that a form of equal deterrent power is exercised: these are the ruses of the accursed share.

Having said this, the present form of servitude is no longer the – voluntary or involuntary – form of the absence of freedom. It is, rather, that of an excess of freedom in which man, liberated at any price, no longer knows what he is free from, nor why he is free, nor what identity to commit himself to; in which, having all that is around him available for his use, he no longer knows how to make use of himself.

In this sense, the immersion in screens, networks and the technologies of Virtual Reality, with its immense possibilities, has spelled a great stride forward for liberation and has, at the same time, put an end to the question of freedom.

This resiling, in digital manipulation, from care of the self and responsibility – from that portion of freedom and subjectivity to which we lay claim so noisily and which we seek by all possible means to be rid of – is today the easiest solution. To the point where it is the essential task of government forcibly to redistribute responsibility, enjoining everyone to take responsibility for themselves 'freely and fully'.

The political authorities themselves strive constantly to assume an air of responsibility while passing the buck in every possible way (it is, in fact, better to be guilty than responsible, as guilt can always be imputed to some obscure force, whereas, with responsibility, the onus is on you).

Fortunately, there are other, more poetic ways of ridding oneself of freedom – that of gaming, for example, where what is at stake is not a freedom subject to the law, but a sovereignty subject to rules.

A more subtle and paradoxical freedom which consists in a rigorous observance, an enchanted form of voluntary servitude that is, as it were, the miraculous combination of master and slave: in gaming no one is free, everyone is both the master and the slave of the game.

Do you want to be anyone else?

Individuality is a recent phenomenon. It is only over the last two centuries that the populations of the civilized countries have demanded the democratic privilege of being individuals.

Before that, they were what they were: slaves, peasants, artisans, men or women, fathers or children – not 'individuals' or 'fully fledged subjects'.

Only with our modern civilization did we find ourselves forcibly inducted into this individual existence.

Of course, we fight to retain this 'inalienable' right, and we are naturally driven to win it and defend it at all costs. We demand this freedom, this autonomy, as a fundamental human right and, at the same time, we are crippled by the responsibility that ends up making us detest ourselves as such.

This is what resounds in the complaint of Job. God asks too much: 'What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him? And that thou shouldest set thy heart upon him? And that thou shouldest visit him every morning, and try him every moment? How long wilt thou not depart from me, nor let me alone till I swallow down my spittle?'[2]

This leaves us subject to a contradictory twofold requirement: to seek an identity by all possible means – by hounding the identities of others or by exploring the networks – and to slough off identity in every possible way, as though it were a burden or a disguise.

It is as though liberty and individuality, from having been a 'natural' state in which one may act freely, had become artificial states, a kind of moral imperative, whose implacable decree makes us hostages to our identities and our own wills.

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[2] Job 7: 17–19.

This is a very particular case of Stockholm Syndrome, since we are here both the terrorist and the hostage. Now, the hostage is by definition the unexchangeable, accursed object you cannot be rid of because you don't know what to do with it.

The situation is the same for the subject: as hostage to himself, he doesn't know how to exchange himself or be rid of himself.

Being unable to conceive that identity has never existed and that it is merely something we play-act, we fuel this subjective illusion to the point of exhaustion. We wear ourselves out feeding this ghost of a representation of ourselves.

We are overwhelmed by this pretension, this obstinate determination to carry around an identity which it is impossible to exchange (it can be exchanged only for the parallel illusion of an objective reality, in the same metaphysical cycle into which we are locked).

All the grand narratives of our individual consciousness – of freedom, will, identity and responsibility – merely add a useless, even contradictory, over-determination to our actions as they 'occur'. To the effect that we are the cause of them, that they are the doing of our will, that our decisions are the product of our free will, etc.

But our actions do not need this: we can decide and act without there being any need to involve the will and the idea of the will. There is no need to involve the idea of free will to make choices in one's life. Above all, there is no need to involve the idea of subject and its identity in order to exist (it is better, in any case, to involve that of alterity).

These are all useless, like the belief that is superadded to the existence of God (if he exists, he doesn't need it). And so we believe in a free, willed determination of our actions and it gives them a meaning, at the same time as it gives meaning to us – the sense of being the authors of those actions. But this is all a reconstruction, like the reconstruction of the dream narrative.

'A person's actions . . . are commonly continuations of his own inner constitution . . . the way the magnet bestows form and order on iron filings' (Lichtenberg).[3]

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[3] Fragment E 476.

This is the problem Luke Rhinehart sets himself in his novel *The Dice Man*: how are we to slough off this freedom, this ego which is captive to its free will? The solution he finds is that of chance.

Among all the possibilities for shattering the mirror of identity, for freeing beings from the terrorism of the ego, there is the option of surrendering oneself to chance, to the dice, for all one's actions and decisions. No free will any longer, no responsible subject, but merely the play of a random dispersal, an artificial diaspora of the ego.

At bottom, the ego is itself a form of superego: it is the ego we must rid ourselves of, above all.

We must live without reference to a model of identity or a general equivalent.

But the trap with these plural identities, these multiple existences, this devolution on to 'intelligent machines' – dice machines as well as the machines of the networks – is that once the general equivalent has disappeared, all the new possibilities are equivalent to one another and hence cancel each other out in a general indifference. Equivalence is still there, but it is no longer the equivalence of an agency at the top (the ego); it is the equivalence of all the little egos 'liberated' by its disappearance. The erosion of destinies occurs by the very excess of possibilities – as the erosion of knowledge occurs by the very excess of information or sexual erosion by the removal of prohibitions, etc.

When, under the banner of identity, existence is so individualized, so atomized ('*atomon*' is the literal equivalent of individual) that its exchange is impossible, the multiplication of existences leads only to a simulacrum of alterity.

To be able to exchange itself for anything or anyone is merely an extreme, desperate form of impossible exchange.

Multiplying identities never produces anything more than all the illusory strategies for decentralizing power: it is pure illusion, pure stratagem.

A fine metaphor of this fractal, proliferating identity is the storyline of the film *Being John Malkovich* (by Spike Jonze) or, more precisely, the moment when Malkovich, by means of a virtual apparatus, goes back into his own skin – until then it was the others who wanted to become Malkovich, this time it is Malkovich who wants to re-enter himself, to become himself at one remove, a meta-Malkovich as it were. It is

at this point that he diffracts into countless metastases: by a kind of fantastic image feedback, everyone around him becomes Malkovich. He becomes the universal projection of himself. This is the paroxystic form of identity (here treated with humour).

So it is that everywhere redoubled identity ends in a pure extrapolation of itself. It becomes a special effect which, with the coming of electronic and genetic manipulation, veers towards cloning pure and simple.

It is in the entire machinery of the Virtual and the mental diaspora of the networks today that the fate of *Homo fractalis* is played out: the definitive abdication of his identity and freedom, of his ego and his superego.

In these games of free will and identity, one novel variant is that of the double life.

This is what happens with Romand, who, in order to escape the banality of everyday, provincial life, invents a parallel life for himself and, covering his tracks (to the point where he wipes out his whole family to hide the traces of his 'real' existence), becomes, in his own life, his own stand-in or shadow.[4]

It is by doubling and not in any sense by recourse to dissimulation that Romand imparts a fatal twist to his life. To transfigure insignificance and banality, all that is needed is to turn them into a parallel universe. There is no simulation in all this. All the psychological and sociological explanations of this duplicity and all the categories – lying, cowardice, egoism – to which it is assigned are mere fabrications.

It is not even a question of schizophrenia. The phantom existence into which Romand settles has no meaning, but his home life, his 'normal' life, has no greater meaning. And so, as it were, he substitutes for the insignificance of his real life the even greater insignificance of his double life – transfiguring it in this way by an original form of counter-transference.

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[4] The reference is to the celebrated case of Jean-Claude Romand, who, having dropped out of medical school, nonetheless pretended to his family that he had qualified as a doctor and for several years maintained the pretence that he held a high-ranking position within the World Health Organization. For a literary treatment of the case, see Emanuel Carrère, *The Adversary: A True Story of Murder and Deception.* Translated by Linda Coverdale (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

And it is this that gave him his energy, the force of inertia that saw him able to bear this clandestine life so long. For, greatly deficient as it may have been, and deadly boring at times, there were extraordinary benefits to be had from it.

There was the possibility of becoming someone else, of existing incognito somewhere else. Of seeing without being seen, of preserving a secret side to oneself, even – indeed, most importantly – preserving it from one's nearest and dearest.

If Romand was able to survive in this (not even heroic) clandestine state, it was by dint of this secrecy, by dint of something the others had not even an inkling of – real 'insider trading'. This was the price paid for the privilege of playing a game whose rules he alone laid down.

There is the mystery of the invisibility that gave him the strength to spend hours in car parks. The remarkable enjoyment of that monotony that did not even have the charm of solitude.

But there is another mystery: namely, that the others should come, in time, to connive in the illusion. For, unless we assume his wife, parents and children remained silent out of resignation, then their lack of awareness, their ignorance, become as inexplicable as his lingering in the car parks and cafeterias. Except when we see all this as a dual operation, not something got up by a single individual.

Lying, illusion and simulation are always operations in which there is complicity.

The mystified party is always a participant. This is true, indeed, of any relationship: there is no active or passive; there is no individual, there is only the dual.

One cannot therefore test anyone's individual truthfulness or sincerity.

One can no more explain the silence of those around him than Romand's own silence. The deeper he gets into his stratagem, the deeper the others retreat into their absence of curiosity. It is genuinely a conspiracy.

There is no hidden truth. This is what gives the impostor his power. If there were a hidden truth, he could be unmasked, or he could unmask himself.

But we can clearly see throughout the whole story that he cannot, since the imposture is shared. To the point where the fact of wiping out his entire family in the end can, paradoxically, be regarded as a variant of suicide.

For the crime to be perfect, there must be no witnesses for the prosecution, but there must also be no defence witnesses, none who attempt at all costs to explain his act and to unravel this singular conspiracy. To find a moral or social reason is always to betray the secret; but Romand's crime is not so much the murder of his nearest and dearest as the thwarting of any moral and social justification.

In Elia Kazan's film *The Arrangement*, Eddie becomes sick of his own persona in the family and in his work. He therefore resolves to 'suicide' this official Eddie, this conformist version, to find out what his buried double is like, that double of which this 'real' Eddie is merely the empty outer shell. Gradually, then, he strips out all the elements of his conventional life: his job, his wife, his status, his sexuality, and even his father, of whom he rids himself in the end, and the house, which he burns down. Once all the marks of identity are swept away, all the terms of the ordered 'arrangement', what is left? Nothing. He returns to a meaningless conformism, into which he settles like his own shadow – or like the man who has lost his shadow.

The dream of identity ends in indifference.

What can be read between the lines of these stories is that chance and destiny are not to be found elsewhere, in some imaginary decree.

Chance is already present in the unpredictability of ordinary life. There is nothing more unpredictable than any moment of daily life.

All one needs to do is to acknowledge immediately the non-existence of this individual structure, and to recognize that the ego exists only in the showing-through [*transparition*] of the world and all its most insignificant possibilities.

It is no use wondering where freedom or identity lies and what is to be done with them. Human beings are the coming-to-pass of what they are and what they do.

Therein lies the movement of becoming, and what they wanted to be is not an issue; their ideals or free will are not an issue: these are merely retrospective justifications.

At bottom, says Barthes, we are faced with an alternative: either we suppose a real that is entirely permeable to history (to meaning, to the idea, to interpretation, to decision) and we ideologize or, by contrast,

we suppose a real that is ultimately impenetrable and irreducible and in that case we poetize.

This would, at any rate, explain the coexistence in everyone of the best and the worst or, in 'criminals' of an absolutely normal behaviour and an unintelligible violence which is itself a thing divided, as though alien to itself, as we see in so much crime reporting. 'He was so gentle, so kind . . .'

All this is inexplicable in terms of identity and individual will.

This simultaneity of contradictory behaviours merely reflects the entanglement of reality and its disavowal that is our collective horizon today.

Propitious network winds bent their neurones
Toward the instrumental world's virtual rim.[5]

[5] This is a pastiche of José-Marie de Hérédia's famous lines: 'Propitious trade-winds bent their antennae/ Towards the western world's mysterious rim' ('The Conquerors', *Cassell's Anthology of French Poetry,* selected and translated by Alan Conder, London, 1950).

Chapter 5
The Murder of the Sign

We have abolished the real world.

What world remains, then? The world of signs? Not at all.

We have put paid to the real world and, in the process, done away with that of the sign.

It is the murder of the sign that paves the way for Integral Reality.

It is commonly said that the real has succumbed to the hegemony of the sign, of images and of the simulacrum – in short, that reality has succumbed to artifice (it is this analysis that underlies the concept of the society of the spectacle).

We must say today, rather, that we have lost the sign and artifice and are left with absolute reality. We have lost the spectacle, alienation, distance, transcendence and abstraction – lost all that still separated us from the advent of Integral Reality, of an immediate, irrevocable realization of the world.

The constellation of the sign disappears with the constellation of the real, on the horizon of the Virtual and the digital.

Now, what makes exchange possible if not the abstract transcendence of value? What makes the exchange of language possible if not the abstract transcendence of the sign?

It is all these things that are eliminated today, ground to dust.

The same vertiginous deregulation is visited on both value and the sign. Not the real, but the sign and, through it, the whole universe of meaning and communication is undergoing the same deregulation

as markets (doubtless it even preceded the deregulation of the world market).

An example: Lascaux.

The original has been closed for many years and it is the simulacrum, Lascaux 2, which the visitors queue for. Most of them no longer even know it is a simulacrum. There's no longer any indication of the original anywhere. This is a sort of prefiguration of the world that awaits us: a perfect copy, which we shall not even know to be a copy. Now, what becomes of the original when the copy is no longer a copy?

This is the ironic dialectic of the simulacrum in the final stage of its disappearance.

Even the original is equally artificial. There is, definitively, no longer any God to recognize his own (in that sense at least, God is indeed dead). So there is a kind of justice here, in the fact that the privileged and the underprivileged both find themselves inhabiting the same artificial world.

Once the original is no longer anything but one allegory among others, in what is, at last, a technically completed world, democracy is fully realized.

Similarly, what becomes of the arbitrary nature of the sign when the referent ceases to be the referent? Now, without the arbitrary nature of the sign, there is no differential function, no language, no symbolic dimension. The sign, ceasing to be a sign, becomes once again a thing among things. That is to say, a thing of total necessity or absolute contingency.

Without instantiation of meaning by the sign, there remains only the fanaticism of language – that fanaticism Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio defines as 'an absolutist inflammation of the signifier'.

This stage is at once the consecration and the end of the political economy of the sign and, one might say, of the golden age of simulation.

Oh happy days, when the simulacrum was still what it was, a game on the fringes of the real and its disappearance, with all the various nuances in the art of disappearing.

This heroic phase is now over. The Virtual – Virtual Reality – ushers in the twilight of the sign and of representation. This concerns the whole

universe of the digital, where the binarism of 0 and 1 leaves room only for an operational universe of figures . . . Integral calculus, integrated circuits. Distance is obliterated, both external distance from the real world and the internal distance specific to the sign.

For the sign is a scene, the scene of representation, of seduction, of language: in language, signs seduce one another beyond meaning and, in their very architecture, signifier and signified are in a dual relation of seduction. And the disappearance of this scene clears the way for a principle of obscenity, a pornographic materialization of everything.

Hence, the direct spectacle of sexual acts that have become a visible performance and an acting-out of the body. No seduction, no representation: merely the integral coding of the body in the visible, where it becomes in fact definitively real, even more than it is really!

One of the variants of this lethal accomplishment, of this acting-out, is the realization of all metaphors – the collapse of the metaphor into the real.

Here, again, we have the phantasm of materializing all that is parable, myth, fable and metaphor.

Romain Gary: 'All humanity's metaphors end up becoming realities. . . . I am coming to wonder whether the real aim of science is not a validation of metaphors.'

This same dire fate also befalls dreams, as Machado de Assis prettily relates in his *Dom Casmurro*.

Attempting to recover a dream he lost on waking, the hero enquires of Night, who is at first reluctant to reply, but then admits that the dreams of yesteryear have come to an end. In the past, she, Night, distributed them, since she ruled over the Island of Dreams. But now dreams are born out of the brains of men; they no longer come from elsewhere – from Night or the Gods – they are produced by ourselves out of our memories or our digestions, from anamnesis and needs, from our unconscious or our physiology.

This is the fall of dreams into the psychical domain, 'the fall of the imagination into the psychological swamp' (Hélé Béji). This fall into the psychical domain means, in fact, that dreams no longer have any prophetic value: to do so they would have to originate in a

transcendence, the transcendence of night, and come from elsewhere, whereas they are now merely a mode of interaction with oneself.

Prohibitions themselves are no longer transcendent.

Once upon a time they were signified to us from on high by laws that came from a far-off region – perhaps, here again, an Island of Prohibitions, ruled over by a divinity concerned for our fate. But today they too have been internalized; they are produced by the brain.

It is we who produce them; they are secretions of the individual unconscious. They no longer have any grandeur, nor, in the end, do they even have any charm. They either disappear purely and simply (it is forbidden to forbid), or become once again, paradoxically, objects of nostalgia, objects of desire – where once they separated us from the accomplishment of desire.

And, admittedly, all the divinities – of dreams, of prohibitions – are now 'laid off', but it is we who are in mourning for the metaphor.

The abolition of meaning and metaphor can lead also to perverse or poetic effects.

Perverse, the man who sees himself as rubbish and throws himself on to the dustcart shouting 'I'm rubbish!' They pull him out and he jumps in again – he has lost all sense of metaphor.

Perverse and poetic, the woman to whom a man declares that he loves most of all the way she looks at him, and who sends him one of her eyes gift-wrapped.

She too goes beyond the metaphor of the gaze in a cruel act of seduction and counter-transference. The cruel transfiguration of language.

And ironic transfiguration in Harpo Marx's gesture when, to get into the nightclub, he substitutes a real fish for the password 'swordfish'. We are not far in this case from the joke [*Witz*], or from what Freud analyses in the dreamwork in terms of representability (when the word becomes a thing).

There is the same poetic transference in Marcel Duchamp's 'acting-out' when, skipping the stage of the real object and its signification, he sets up his bottle rack as a museum fetish, striking in one go at the classical organization of both the sign and the aesthetic universe.

And it is, indeed, to the more general problem of fetishism that this new twist brings us: after the becoming-sign of the object, the becoming-object of the sign.

In the sexual register, the fetish is no longer a sign but a pure object, meaningless in itself – a banal accessory, but one of absolute value, for which there can be no possible exchange. It is that object and no other.

But this banal singularity means that any object whatever can become a fetish. Its potentiality is total, precisely because it lies beyond any sexual reference or metaphor. It is the perfect object of sex, its perfect realization, insofar as it substitutes for any real sex – just as Virtual Reality substitutes itself for the real world and in that way becomes the universal form of our modern fetishism.

Modern man's immense panoply of information technology has become his true object of (perverse?) desire.

Fetishism being, as the name indicates (*feiticho*), linked to abstraction and artifice, it is all the more radical for the abstraction being total.

If it was possible, in the past, to speak of the fetishism of the commodity, of money, of the simulacrum and the spectacle, that was still a limited fetishism (related to sign-value). There stretches beyond this for us today the world of radical fetishism, linked to the de-signification and limitless operation of the real – to the sign's becoming pure object once again, before or beyond any metaphor.

The same acting-out, the same loss of distance and the same fall into the real threatens thought too, as soon as it crosses the demarcation line which is that of its impossible exchange with truth, as soon as it comes to act out truth.

Thought must at all costs keep itself from reality, from the real projection of ideas and their translation into acts.

The Overman and the Eternal Return are, in this way, visions and they have the sovereignty of a hypothesis. If we try to turn them into acts or *faits accomplis*, they become monstrous and ridiculous.

The same goes for less visionary perspectives, such as biogenetic experimentation on the human species: as a hypothesis, this opens up all kinds of metaphysical and anthropological questions. But if we move from potential mutation to real projection (as Peter Sloterdijk does in his

Menschenpark project), we lose all philosophical distance; and thought, in mingling with the real course of things, offers merely a false alternative to the operation of the system.

Thought must refrain from instructing, or being instructed by, a future reality, for, in that game, it will always fall into the trap of a system that holds the monopoly of reality.

And this is not a philosophical choice. It is, for thought, a life-and-death question.

Chapter 6
The Mental Diaspora of the Networks

Videos, interactive screens, multi-media, the Internet, Virtual Reality: interactivity threatens us on all sides. What was once separated is everywhere merged. Distance is everywhere abolished: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between the stage and the auditorium, between the protagonists of the action, between the subject and the object, between the real and its double.

And this confusion of terms, this collision of poles, means that nowhere is value judgement now possible anywhere any longer: either in art, or in morality or in politics.

By the abolition of distance, of the 'pathos' of distance, everything becomes undecidable.

When an event and the broadcasting of that event in real time are too close together, the event is rendered undecidable and virtual; it is stripped of its historical dimension and removed from memory. We are in a generalized feedback effect.

Wherever a mingling of this kind – a collision of poles – occurs, then the vital tension is discharged. Even in 'reality TV', where, in the live telling of the story, the immediate televisual acting, we see the confusion of existence and its double.

There is no separation any longer, no emptiness, no absence: you enter the screen and the visual image unimpeded. You enter life itself as though walking on to a screen. You slip on your own life like a data suit.

Unlike photography, cinema and painting, where there is a scene and a gaze, the video image, like the computer screen, induces a kind of immersion, a sort of umbilical relation, of 'tactile' interaction, as McLuhan used to say. You enter the fluid substance of the image, possibly to modify it, in the same way as science infiltrates itself into the genome and into the genetic code to transform the body itself.

It is the same with text, with any 'virtual' text (the Internet, word-processing): you work on it like a computer-generated image, which no longer bears any relation to the transcendence of the gaze or of writing. At any rate, as soon as you are in front of the screen, you no longer see the text as a text, but as an image. Now, it is in the strict separation of text and screen, of text and image, that writing is an activity in its own right, never an interaction.

Similarly, it is only with the strict separation of stage and auditorium that the spectator is an actor in his/her own right. Everything today conspires to abolish that separation: the immersion of the spectator in the spectacle, 'living theatre', 'happenings'.

The spectacle becomes user-friendly, interactive. The apogee of spectacle or its end? When everyone is an actor, there is no action any longer, no scene. It's the death of the spectator as such.

The end of the aesthetic illusion.

In fact, everything that was so much trouble to separate, to sex, to transcend, to sublimate and to metamorphose by distance is today being constantly melded together. All that has been wrested from reality we are in the process of realizing by force – there will always be a technique for laying hold of it and making it operational. 'You dreamed it, we made it.' Everything that was so much trouble to destroy, we are today hell-bent on restoring. What we have here, in fact, is an immense reductionism, an immense revisionism.

In the sphere of the Virtual – of the digital, the computer, integral calculus – nothing is representable. It is not a 'scene', and there is neither distance nor a critical or aesthetic gaze: there is total immersion and the countless images that come to us from this media sphere are not of the order of representation, but of decoding and visual consumption. They do not educate us, they inform us. And it is impossible to work back

from them to some tangible reality – even a political reality. Even war in this sense is no longer representable, and to the ordeal of war is now added that of the impossibility of representation – in spite of, or because of, the hypervisualization of the event. The war in Iraq and the Gulf War were vivid illustrations of this.

For there to be critical perception and genuine information, the images would have to be different from the war. But they are not (or not any longer): to the routinized violence of war is added the equally routine violence of the images. To the technical virtuality of the war is added the digital virtuality of the images.

If we understand war for what it is today (beyond its political stakes), namely the instrument of a violent acculturation to the world order, then the media and images are part of the Integral Reality of war. They are the subtler instrument of the same homogenization by force.

In this impossibility of reapprehending the world through images and of moving from information to a collective action and will, in this absence of sensibility and mobilization, it isn't apathy or general indifference that's at issue; it is quite simply that the umbilical cord of representation is severed.

The screen reflects nothing. It is as though you are behind a two-way mirror: you see the world, but it doesn't see you, it doesn't look at you. Now, you only see things if they are looking at you. The screen screens out any dual relation (any possibility of 'response').

It is this failure of representation which, together with a failure of action, underlies the impossibility of developing an ethics of information, an ethics of images, an ethics of the Virtual and the networks. All attempts in that direction inevitably fail.

All that remains is the mental diaspora of images and the extravagant performance of the medium.

Susan Sontag tells a good story about this pre-eminence of the medium and of images: as she is sitting in front of the television watching the moon landing, the people she is watching with tell her they don't believe it at all. 'But what are you watching, then?' she asks. 'Oh, we're watching television!' Fantastic: they do not see the moon; they see only the screen showing the moon. They do not see the message; they see only the image.

Ultimately, contrary to what Susan Sontag thinks, only intellectuals believe in the ascendancy of meaning; 'people' believe only in the ascendancy of signs. They long ago said goodbye to reality. They have gone over, body and soul, to the spectacular.

What are we to do with an interactive world in which the demarcation line between subject and object is virtually abolished?

That world can no longer either be reflected or represented; it can only be refracted or diffracted now by operations that are, without distinction, operations of brain and screen – the mental operations of a brain that has itself become a screen.

The other side of this Integral Reality is that everything operates in an integrated circuit. In the information media – and in our heads too – the image-feedback dominates, the insistent presence of the monitors – this convolution of things that operate in a loop, that connect back round to themselves like a Klein bottle, that fold back into themselves. Perfect reality, in the sense that everything is verified by adherence to, by confusion with, its own image.

This process assumes its full magnitude in the visual and media world, but also in everyday, individual life, in our acts and thoughts. Such an automatic refraction affects even our perception of the world, sealing everything, as it were, by a focusing on itself.

It is a phenomenon that is particularly marked in the photographic world, where everything is immediately decked out with a context, a culture, a meaning, an idea, disarming any vision and creating a form of blindness condemned by Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio: 'There exists a terrible form of blindness which very few people notice: the blindness that allows you to look and see, but not to see at a stroke without looking. That is how things were before: you didn't look at them, you were happy simply to see them. Everything today is poisoned with duplicity; there is no pure, direct impulse. So, for example, the countryside has become "landscape" or, in other words, a representation of itself . . .'

In this sense, it is our very perception, our immediate sensibility, that has become aesthetic. Sight, hearing, touch – all our senses have become aesthetic in the worst sense of the term. Any new vision of things can only be the product, then, of a deconstruction of this image-feedback, of a resolution of this counter-transference that blocks our vision, in

order to restore the world to its sensory illusoriness (with no feedback and no image feedback).

In the mirror we differentiate ourselves from our image, we enter upon an open form of alienation and of play with it. The mirror, the image, the gaze, the scene – all these things open on to a culture of metaphor.

Whereas in the operation of the Virtual, at a certain level of immersion in the visual machinery, the man/machine distinction no longer holds: the machine is on both sides of the interface. Perhaps you are indeed merely the machine's space now – the human being having become the virtual reality of the machine, its mirror operator.

This has to do with the very essence of the screen. There is no 'through' the screen the way there is a 'through' the looking-glass or mirror. The dimensions of time itself merge there in 'real time'. And, the characteristic of any virtual surface being first of all to be there, to be empty and thus capable of being filled with anything whatever, it is left to you to enter, in real time, into interactivity with the void.

Machines produce only machines. The texts, images, films, speech and programmes which come out of the computer are machine products, and they bear the marks of such products: they are artificially padded-out, face-lifted by the machine; the films are stuffed with special effects, the texts full of *longueurs* and repetitions due to the machine's malicious will to function at all costs (that is *its* passion), and to the operator's fascination with this limitless possibility of functioning.

Hence the wearisome character in films of all this violence and pornographied sexuality, which are merely special effects of violence and sex, no longer even fantasized by humans, but pure machinic violence.

And this explains all these texts that resemble the work of 'intelligent' virtual agents, whose only act is the act of programming.

This has nothing to do with *automatic writing*, which played on the magical telescoping of words and concepts, whereas all we have here is the automatism of programming, an automatic run-through of all the possibilities.

It is this phantasm of the ideal performance of the text or image, the possibility of correcting endlessly, which produce in the 'creative artist' this *vertige* of interactivity with his own object, alongside the

anxious *vertige* at not having reached the technological limits of his possibilities.

In fact, it is the (virtual) machine which is speaking you, the machine which is thinking you.

And is there really any possibility of discovering something in cyberspace? The Internet merely simulates a free mental space, a space of freedom and discovery. In fact, it merely offers a multiple but conventional space, in which the operator interacts with known elements, pre-existent sites, established codes. Nothing exists beyond its search parameters. Every question has an anticipated response assigned to it. You are the questioner and, at the same time, the automatic answering device of the machine. Both coder and decoder – you are, in fact, your own terminal.

That is the ecstasy of communication.

There is no 'Other' out there and no final destination. It's any old destination – and any old interactor will do. And so the system goes on, without end and without finality, and its only possibility is that of infinite involution. Hence the comfortable *vertige* of this electronic, computer interaction, which acts like a drug. You can spend your whole life at this, without a break. Drugs themselves are only ever the perfect example of a crazed, closed-circuit interactivity.

People tell you the computer is just a handier, more complex kind of typewriter. But that isn't true. The typewriter is an entirely external object. The page floats free, and so do I. I have a physical relation to writing. I touch the blank or written page with my eyes – something I cannot do with the screen. The computer is a prosthesis. I have a tactile, intersensory relation to it. I become, myself, an ectoplasm of the screen.

And this, no doubt, explains, in this incubation of the virtual image and the brain, the malfunctions which afflict computers, and which are like the failings of one's own body. On the other hand, the fact that priority belongs to the network and not to individuals implies the possibility of hiding, of disappearing into the intangible space of the Virtual, so that you cannot be pinned down anywhere, which resolves all problems of identity, not to mention those of alterity.

So, the attraction of all these virtual machines no doubt derives not so much from the thirst for information and knowledge as from

the desire to disappear, and the possibility of dissolving oneself into a phantom conviviality.

A kind of 'high' that takes the place of happiness. But virtuality comes close to happiness only because it surreptitiously removes all reference from it. It gives you everything, but it subtly deprives you of everything at the same time. The subject is, in a sense, realized to perfection, but when realized to perfection, it automatically becomes object, and panic sets in.

However, we must not look on this domination of the Virtual as something inevitable. Above all, we must not take the Virtual for a 'reality' (definitely going too far!) and apply the categories of the real and the rational to it. That is the same misconception as reinterpreting science in the terms of theology, as has been done for centuries, *not seeing that science put an end to theology*. Or interpreting the media in the Marxist terms of alienation, in socio-political terms from ancient history, not seeing that the course of history came to an end with the entry on the scene of the news media and, more generally, that it was all over with reality once the Virtual came on the scene.

However, with the Virtual we find ourselves up against a strange paradox. This is because the Virtual can deny its own reality only at the same time as it denies the reality of all the rest. It is caught up in a game whose rules it does not control (no one controls them!)

The Virtual is not, then, the 'last word'; it is merely the virtual illusion, the illusion of the Virtual.

There is no highest stage of intelligence – and Artificial Intelligence is certainly no such stage.

We have already seen the media revolution being misunderstood when the medium was reduced to a mere instrumental technique. We see here the same misunderstanding of the meaning of the Virtual when it is reduced to an applied technology. People did not see that the irruption of both overturned the very principle of reality. So they speak of the proper use of the Virtual, of an ethics of the Virtual, of virtual 'democracy', without changing anything of the traditional categories.

Now, the specificity of the Virtual is that it constitutes an event *in* the real *against* the real and throws into question all these categories

of the real, the social, the political and history – such that the only emergence of any of these things now is virtual.

This is to say that there is no longer any politics now but the virtual (and not a politics *of* the Virtual), no longer any history but the virtual (and not a history *of* the Virtual), no longer any technology but the virtual (and not a technology *of* the Virtual). Not to mention the 'arts of the Virtual' – as though art remained art while playing with the digital and the numeric. Or the economy, which has itself passed over into virtuality, that is to say, into pure speculation.

This upping of the stakes shows that the rationale for the Virtual does not lie within itself, any more than is the case with the economy, and that it constructs itself by headlong flight forward, as a simulation effect, as substitution for the impossible exchange of the world.

Conclusion: from the moment the economic is there for something else, there is no point making endless critiques of it or analysing its transformations.

As soon as the Virtual is there for something else, there is no point enquiring into its principles or purposes, no point being for it or against it.

For the destiny of these things lies elsewhere. And the destiny of the analysis too: everything changes depending on whether you analyse a system by its own logic or in terms of the idea that it is there for something else.

We must have a sense of this illusion of the Virtual somewhere, since, at the same time as we plunge into this machinery and its superficial abysses, *it is as though we viewed it as theatre*. Just as we view news coverage as theatre.

Of news coverage we are the hostages, but we also treat it as spectacle, consume it as spectacle, without regard for its credibility. A latent incredulity and derision prevent us from being totally in the grip of the information media.

It isn't critical consciousness that causes us to distance ourselves from it in this way, but the reflex of no longer wanting to play the game.

Somewhere in us lies a profound desire not to have information and transparency (nor perhaps freedom and democracy – all this needs looking at again). Towards all these ideals of modernity there is something like a collective form of mental reserve, of innate immunity.

It would be best, then, to pose all these problems in terms other than those of alienation and the unhappy destiny of the subject (which is where all critical analysis ends up).

The unlimited extension of the Virtual itself pushes us towards something like pataphysics, as the science of all that exceeds its own limits, of all that exceeds the laws of physics and metaphysics. The pre-eminently ironic science, corresponding to a state in which things reach a pitch that is simultaneously paroxystic and parodic.

Can we advance the hypothesis that, beyond the critical stage, the heroic stage (which is still that of metaphysics), there is an ironic stage of technology, an ironic stage of history, an ironic stage of value, etc.?

This would free us from the Heideggerian view of technology as the effectuation, and the last stage, of metaphysics; it would free us from all retrospective nostalgia for being, giving us, rather, a gigantic objective irony, a superior intuition of the illusoriness of all this process – which would not be far from the radical post-historical snobbery Alexandre Kojève spoke of.

At the heart of this artificial reality, this Virtual Reality, this irony is perhaps all we have left of the original illusion, which at least preserves us from any temptation one day to possess the truth.

Chapter 7
We Are All Agnostics . . .

When truth and reality were made to take lie-detector tests, they themselves confessed to not believing in truth and reality.

We are all agnostics.

There were those who believed in God and those who did not.

There are those who believe in reality and those who do not.

And then there are the reality agnostics who, though not rejecting it in an absolute sense, reject belief in it: 'Reality (like God in the past) may perhaps exist, but I don't believe in it.'

There is nothing contradictory or absurd in this.

It is the enlightened refusal to let oneself be caught in the trap of a reality that is fetishized in its principle, a reality that is itself caught in the trap of the signs of reality.

Is there such a thing as a naked, original reality, anterior to the signs in which it is made manifest?

Who knows? The self-evidence of reality has a shadow of retrospective doubt hovering over it.

However this may be, the agnostic is not concerned with this hinterworld or this original reality; he confines himself to reality as an unverifiable hypothesis, to signs as signs, behind which might also be hidden the absence of reality. (Their profusion in fact ends up voiding them of their credibility.)

Perhaps the agnostic even prefers signs to reality. Perhaps he prefers this undecidable situation, since you can play with these floating signs and that is not possible with so-called 'objective' reality.

The move from the real to the sign opens up an enormous field of play and uncertainty.

Particularly where the reality of power is concerned.

For if there is, indeed, a risk of anaesthesia and manipulation by signs and images that is to power's advantage, there is the risk that power itself may find itself reduced merely to the signs of power.

This profusion of signs and of what is manifested does, moreover, effect a profound change in the symbolic relation to power.

That relation is based on the unilateral gift (of laws, institutions, work, security, etc.). It is not so much by violence and constraint, but only by this symbolic obligation that power exists. Now, from the point when all that it gives us is signs, our debt to it is infinitely less great. With power distributing nothing but signs to us, we merely give back signs in return, and our servitude is the lighter for it. Admittedly, the enjoyment of immaterial goods is not so great, but this also means we owe little in return and we respond to the airiness of signs with an equal indifference. We can deny power and set it aside by mere incredulity, simply responding to the signs of power with the signs of servitude. This is perhaps what is meant by 'weak thought' (*pensiero debole*).

With Virtual Reality, this process of disinvestment becomes even more radical, and we enter upon a phase of unbinding [*déliaison*], of quasi-total disobligation.

To what in the virtual universe can one feel an obligation?

We are in a state of total agnosticism with regard to the existence of reality, with regard to ends and ultimate meaning – just as the Agnostics were with regard to the existence of God (which may be an asset in terms of technical performance and manipulation – the Agnostics are said to have been very learned and expert in their field).

The question is whether this represents greater freedom or an unprecedented capitulation.

The problem of the symbolic stake is crucial.

Everything is solicitation. Power is a solicitation, meaning is a solicitation, every sign is a solicitation and there cannot but be a reply to that solicitation, either by submission or subversion, by belief or denial of belief.

But the more random and indeterminate is power, the more the signs are meaningless and the more the reply is difficult. Now, power no longer questions us[1] (except in opinion polls where there is no genuine question and hence no possible reply); the signs of exchange no longer question us, except in interaction, communication and information, which are not the site of a dual relation, nor therefore of a genuine reply. Here lies the total abstraction and the source of all domination: in the breakdown of the dual relation.

The strategy of domination is, indeed, to ensure that, through all the techniques of communication, through inescapable, streaming information, there can no longer be any response. It is a domination by signs empty of meaning. But, on the other side, there is an equal indifference and blank resistance.

In this way, in a sociality of accelerated circulation but low sign-value, in a game of interaction with neither questions nor responses, power and individuals have no purchase on each other, have no political relationship with each other. This is the price to be paid for flight into the abstraction of the Virtual. But is it a loss?

It seems that it is, today, a collective choice. Perhaps we would rather be dominated by machines than by people, perhaps we prefer an impersonal, automatic domination, a domination by calculation, to domination by a human will? Not to be subject to an alien will, but to an integral calculus that absorbs us and absolves us of any personal responsibility. A minimal definition of freedom perhaps, and one which more resembles a relinquishment, a disillusioned indifference, a mental economy akin to that of machines, which are themselves also entirely irresponsible and which we are coming increasingly to resemble.

This behaviour is not exactly a choice, nor is it a rejection: there is no longer sufficient energy for that. It is a behaviour based on an uncertain negative preference.

Do you want to be free? I would prefer not to . . .

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[1] *'Le pouvoir'* here might also be rendered as 'those in power', 'the authorities'.

Do you want to be represented? I would prefer not to . . .

Do you want to be responsible for your own life? I would prefer not to . . .

Do you want to be totally happy? I would prefer not to . . .[2]

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[2] This last paragraph is in English in the original. The allusion is to Herman Melville's story *Bartleby,* in which the eponymous (anti-)hero repeatedly answers 'I would prefer not to', a phrase which is notoriously difficult to render into French.

Chapter 8
The Violence Done to the Image

The image also shares the baneful destiny of the sign and the metaphor: the fall into the real.

In itself, the image is bound neither to truth nor to reality; it is appearance and bound to appearance. That is its magical affiliation with the illusion of the world as it is, the affiliation that reminds us that the real is never certain – just as we can never be certain that the worst will happen[1] – and that perhaps the world can do without it, as it can do without the reality principle.

An image, I believe, affects us directly, below the level of representation: at the level of intuition, of perception. At that level, the image is always an absolute surprise. At least it should be.

And in this sense, unfortunately, one may say that images are rare – the power of the image being, most of the time, intercepted by all that we try to make it say.

The image is, most often, dispossessed of its originality, of its own existence as image, and doomed to shameful complicity with the real.

We commonly say that the real has disappeared beneath a welter of signs and images, and it is true that there is a violence of the image. But that violence is substantially offset by the violence done to the image: its exploitation for documentary purposes, as testimony or message, its

[1] The French saying 'le pire n'est jamais sûr' (the worst is never sure [to happen]) is being alluded to here.

exploitation for moral, political or promotional ends, or simply for purposes of information . . .

This is where the destiny of the image comes to an end, both as fateful illusion and vital illusion.

The Iconoclasts of Byzantium smashed images to erase their signification (the visible face of God). While apparently doing the opposite, and in spite of our cult of idols, we are still iconoclasts: we destroy images by overloading them with signification; we kill images with meaning.

Most current images reflect only the misery and violence of the human condition. Yet that misery and violence affect us the less for being over-signified. There is a total misconception in all this.

For its content to affect us, the image must exist by itself; it must impose its original language on us. For there to be transference on to the real, there must be a counter-transference on to the image, and that counter-transference must be resolved.

Today, misery and violence are, through images, becoming a leitmotif of advertising: for example, Toscani incorporates sex and AIDS, war and death into fashion. And why not (the advertising for happiness is no less obscene than that for misfortune)? But on one condition: that the violence of advertising itself be shown, the violence of fashion, the violence of the medium – something advertisers are decidedly incapable of doing. Now, fashion and high society life are themselves, in a sense, a spectacle of death. The world's misery is just as readable in the figure and face of a model as in the skeletal body of an African.

You can read the same cruelty everywhere if you know how to see it.

And indeed, this 'realistic' image does not capture what is, but what should not be – death and misery; it captures that which, from a moral, humanitarian standpoint, ought not to exist (while making a perfectly immoral aesthetic and commercial use of that misery).

Images that ultimately bear witness, behind their alleged 'objectivity', to a deep disavowal of the real, at the same time as a disavowal of the image, which is assigned the task of representing that which does not want to be represented, of violating the real by 'breaking and entering'.

In this sense, most photographs (but media images too, in general, and all that makes up the 'visual') are not true images. They are merely

reportage, realist cliché or aesthetic performance, enslaved to all the ideological systems.

At this stage, the image is nothing but an operator of visibility – the medium of an integral visibility that is the pendant to Integral Reality, becoming-real going hand in hand with becoming-visible at all costs: everything must be seen, everything must be visible, and the image is pre-eminently the site of this visibility.

Where the banality of the image meets the banality of life – as in all these 'reality-TV' programmes, such as *Big Brother*, *Loft Story*, etc. – is where this integral visibility begins, where everything is put on view and you realize there no longer is anything to see.

To turn yourself into an image is to expose your daily life, your misfortunes, your desires and your possibilities. It is to have no secrets left. Never to tire of expressing yourself, speaking, communicating. To be readable at every moment, overexposed to the glare of the information media (like the woman who appears live twenty-four hours a day on the Internet, showing the tiniest details of her life).

Is this self-expression the ultimate form of confession that Foucault spoke of? At all events, it is a violence done to the singular being, at the same time as to the image in its singularity.

In *Leaving Las Vegas* (Mike Figgis), you see a young blonde woman calmly peeing while continuing to talk, as indifferent to what she is saying as to what she is doing.

An entirely useless scene, but one that signifies conspicuously that nothing must escape the fade-in/fade-out of reality and fiction; that everything is subject to being put on view; that everything is ready-made for viewing, readied for enjoyment.

This is what transparency means: the forcing of the whole of the real into the orbit of the visual (of representation – but is this still representation? It is exhibitionism, which in fact takes the gaze hostage.)

The obscene is everything that is uselessly, needlessly visible, without desire and without effect – everything that usurps the rare and precious space of appearances.

This is the murder of the image. It lies in this enforced visibility as source of power and control, beyond even the 'pan-optical': it is no longer a question of making things visible to an external eye, but of making

them transparent to themselves. The power of control is, as it were, internalized, and human beings are no longer victims of images, but rather transform themselves into images.

In Jorge Luis Borges's fable on the 'Fauna of Mirrors', there is the idea that, behind every representation, every image in the mirror, there is a defeated singularity, a conquered enemy who looks like you, who is forced to look like you.[2]

So we may say that behind each image something has disappeared (this indeed is what creates the ambiguous fascination of the image: it is because something in it has disappeared). This was understood by the Iconoclasts, who denounced icons as a way of making God disappear. (Perhaps God himself had chosen to disappear behind the images?)

Today, at all events, it is no longer God, but we ourselves who disappear behind our images. No longer any danger of our image being stolen or our secrecy being violated. We no longer have any secrets. We no longer have anything to hide in this Integral Reality that envelops us.

This is the sign both of our ultimate transparency and our total obscenity.

The ultimate violence done to the image is the violence of the computer-generated image, which emerged *ex nihilo* from numerical calculation and the computer.

There is an end here to the very imagining of the image, to its fundamental 'illusion', since in the process of computer-generation the referent no longer exists and the real itself no longer has cause to come to pass, being produced immediately as Virtual Reality.

There is an end here to that direct image-taking, that presence to a real object in an irrevocable instant, which created the magical illusion of the photograph and made the image a singular event.

In the virtual image there is no longer anything of that 'punctual' exactitude, of that *punctum* in time (to use Roland Barthes's expression) – that of the old photographic image, which attested that

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[2] Borges, 'Fauna of Mirrors', *The Book of Imaginary Beings*. Revised, enlarged and translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 67–68.

something was there and now no longer is, and hence was testament to a definitive absence freighted with nostalgia.

Digital, numerical production erases the image as *analogon*. It erases the real as something that can be imagined. The photographic act – that moment of disappearance of both subject and object in the same instantaneous confrontation (the shutter release abolishing the world and the gaze just for a moment, a syncope, a *petite mort* that triggers the machinic performance of the image) – disappears in digital, numerical processing.

All this leads inevitably to the death of photography as original medium. It is the essence of photography that disappears with the analogue image. This latter still attested to an ultimate live presence of subject to object. One last reprieve from the dissemination and multiplicity of referentless images, the digital tidal wave that is about to break over us.

The problem of reference was already an almost insoluble problem: where does the real come in? What do we understand by representation? But when, with the Virtual, the referent disappears, when it vanishes into the technical programming of the image, when there is no longer any real world standing over against a light-sensitive film (the same applies with language, which is, as it were, the light-sensitive film of ideas), then there is no longer ultimately any possible representation.

There is a more serious point here. What distinguishes the analogue image from the digital is that within it a form of disappearance is in play, a form of distance, of freezing of the world – that nothingness at the heart of the object which Warhol spoke of.

By contrast, in the digital or, more generally, the computer-generated image there is no longer any negative, no longer anything 'deferred'. In that image nothing dies, nothing disappears. The image is merely the product of an instruction and a programme, aggravated by automatic dissemination from one medium to the other: computer, mobile phone, television screen, etc. – the automaticity of the network matching the automaticity of the construction of the image.

Should we, then, rescue absence and emptiness, should we rescue this nothingness at the heart of the image?

The photographic image is the purest because it simulates neither time nor movement and confines itself to the most rigorous unreality. All the other forms (cinema, video, computer-generated images) are merely attenuated forms of the pure image and its rupture with the real.

The intensity of the image is equal to its denial of the real, to the invention of another scene. To turn an object into an image is to strip it of all its dimensions one by one: weight, relief, aroma, depth, time, continuity and, of course, meaning. It is by dint of this disembodiment that the image assumes this power of fascination, that it becomes a medium of pure objectality, that it becomes transparent to a form of more subtle seduction.

To add back all these dimensions one by one – movement, ideas, meaning, desire – to multi-mediatize the image so as to make things more real, that is to say, better simulated, is a total misconception. And technology itself is caught in its own trap here.

To conceive an image in the pure state, we have to come back to a radically self-evident fact: it is a two-dimensional universe that has its entire perfection in itself and is in no way inferior to the three-dimensional universe of the real and representation or, in some way, the uncompleted phase of that universe.

It is a parallel universe, a depthless other scene, and it is this one dimension fewer that constitutes its specific charm, its genius.

Everything that adds a third dimension to the image, whether it be the dimension of relief, of time and history, of sound and movement, or of ideas and signification; everything that is added to the image, the better to approximate to the real and representation, is a violence that destroys it as parallel universe.

Each supplementary dimension cancels out the preceding ones. The third dimension cancels out the second. As for the fourth dimension, that of the Virtual and the digital, and of Integral Reality, it cancels out all the others – it is a dimensionless hyperspace. It is the hyperspace of our screens where, strictly speaking, the image no longer exists (but the universe of the real and representation no longer exist either).

We must, then, strip away, always strip away, to get back to the image in the pure state. Stripping away brings out the essential point: namely, that the image is more important than what it speaks of, just as language is more important than what it signifies.

There is a haziness about the real.

Reality is not in focus. The bringing into focus of the world would be 'objective reality', that is to say, an adjustment to models of representation – exactly like the focusing of the photographic lens on the object. Fortunately, the world never comes definitively into focus in this way. The lens makes the object move. Or vice versa – but there is movement.

Lichtenberg speaks, in one of his aphorisms, of a tremor: any act, even an exact one, is preceded by a trembling, a haziness of gesture, and it always retains something of it. When this haziness, this tremor, does not exist, when an act is purely operational and is perfectly focused, we are on the verge of madness.

And the true image is the one that accounts for this trembling of the world, whatever the situation or the object, whether it be a war photo or a still life, a landscape or a portrait, an art photo or reportage.

At that stage, the image is something that is part of the world, that is caught up in the same becoming, in the metamorphosis of appearances. A fragment of the hologram of the world, in which each detail is a refraction of the whole.

The peculiar role of photography is not to illustrate the event, but to constitute an event in itself. Logic would demand that the event, the real, occur first and that the image come after to illustrate it. This is, unfortunately, the case most of the time.

A different sequence demands that the event should never exactly take place, that it should remain in a sense a stranger to itself. Something of that strangeness doubtless survives in every event, in every object, in every individual. This is what the image must convey. And, to do so, it must also remain in a sense a stranger to itself; must not conceive itself as medium, not take itself for an image; must remain a fiction and hence echo the unaccountable fiction of the event; must not be caught in its own trap or let itself be imprisoned in the image-feedback.

The worst thing for us is precisely the impossibility of a world without image feed – a world that would not endlessly be laid hold of, captured, filmed and photographed before it has even been seen. A lethal danger for the 'real' world, but also for the image, since where it merely recycles the real and immerses itself in the real there is no longer any image – not, at least, as exception, illusion or parallel universe. In the

visual flow submerging us, there is no longer even time for the image to become image.

Can photography exempt itself from this flood of images and restore an original power to them? To do so, the turbulent operation of the world would have to be suspended; the object would have to be caught in that single fantastic moment of first contact when things had not yet noticed we were there, when absence and emptiness had not yet dissipated . . .

It would, in fact, have to be the world itself that performed the photographic act, as though the world were affording itself the means to appear, quite apart from us.

I dream of an image that would be the automatic writing of the singularity of the world, as dreamt of by the Iconoclasts in the famous Byzantine controversy. The only image they regarded as authentic was one in which the divinity was directly present, as in the veil of the Holy Face[3] – the automatic writing of the divine singularity of the face of Christ without any intervention of the human hand, in a kind of immediate transfer-printing (analogous to the negative of photographic film). By contrast, they violently rejected all the icons produced by human hand ('cheiropoietic' icons), which, for them, were mere simulacra of the divine.

The photographic act, on the other hand, is, as it were, 'arch-eiropoietic'. As the automatic writing of light, in which neither the real nor the idea of the real is involved, photography might be said to be, by this automaticity, the prototype of a literalness of the world without intervention of human hand. The world producing itself as radical illusion, as pure trace, with no simulation, no human intervention and, above all, not as truth, for if there is pre-eminently a product of the human mind, that product must be truth and objective reality.

There is a great affectation in giving a meaning to the photographic image. It is making objects strike a pose. And things themselves begin

[3] Also known as the veil of St Veronica.

to strike a pose in the light of meaning as soon as they feel the gaze of a subject upon them.

Have we not always nurtured the deep fantasy of a world functioning without us? The poetic temptation to see the world in our absence, free from any human, all-too-human, will?

The intense pleasure of poetic language is to see language functioning on its own, in its materiality, in its literality, without the intermediary of meaning. That is what fascinates us. Similarly in the anagram, in anamorphosis – the 'figure hidden in the carpet'.

Might not photography also function as revelatory, in the dual – technical and metaphysical – sense of the word, of 'the image hidden in the carpet'?

*

The world beyond the polished lenses is more important than the world beyond the seas, and is doubtless exceeded in importance only by the world beyond death (Lichtenberg).

Objects are merely a pretext for light.

If there were no objects, light would circulate endlessly and we would not even be aware of it.

If there were no subjects, thought would circulate infinitely and there would not even be any echo of it in consciousness.

The subject is that upon which thought comes to rest in its infinite circulation, that against which it reflects.

The object is that upon which light comes to rest, that which reflects it.

The photograph is the automatic writing of light.

The silence of the image is equalled only by the silence of the masses and the silence of the desert.

The dream would be to be a photographer without a lens, to move through the world without a camera, in short, to pass beyond photography and see things as though they had themselves passed

beyond the image, as though you had already photographed them, but in a past life.

And perhaps we have indeed already passed through the image phase, in the way we pass through different animal phases, the mirror phase being a mere reverberation of all this in our individual lives.

There is no self-portrait.

It is the world which, through the image, produces its own self-portrait and we are allowed there only out of kindness (but the pleasure is shared).

Conversely, every image should be looked at with the same intensity as our images in the mirror.

Photography is always also the veiled message from death in the Samarkand story.[4]

The summoning to a failed meeting with reality . . . out of preference, perhaps, for this other world.

Do we not prefer any old parallel universe to the real one?

Any old double life to the one given to us?

There is no finer parallel universe than that of the detail or the fragment.

Freed from the whole and its transcendent ventriloquism, the detail inevitably becomes mysterious.

Every particle wrested from the natural world is in itself an immediate subversion of the real and its wholeness.

Like the fragment, it has only to be elliptical.

It has only to be an exception.

Every singular image can be reckoned exceptional.

And it puts an end to all the others.

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[4] Baudrillard has referred to this story on many occasions. In one of the variants, it runs as follows: 'On the town square a soldier sees death beckoning to him. He takes fright, goes to see the king and says, "Death has beckoned to me, I am going to flee as far away as possible, I am fleeing to Samarkand." The king commands that death be sent to him, to explain why it has terrified his captain. And death tells him, "I didn't want to frighten him. I simply wanted to remind him we had an appointment tonight – in Samarkand".' *Passwords*. Translated by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2003), p. 68

A lens so subtle that it would capture only those who are really there and not those pretending to be there or those so absent from themselves that the film would be insensitive to them, as with ectoplasms and vampires.

At any rate, the lens simultaneously captures the way we are there and the way we are no longer there.

This is why, before the eye of the camera, we act dead in our innermost being, as God does before the proofs of his existence.

Everything in us crystallizes negatively before the material imagining of our presence.

The focusing is done on absence and not on presence. The singularity is that of an object, an image, a fragment, a thought which, to use Mark Rothko's fine expression, 'opens and closes up simultaneously in all directions'.

To wrest the real from the reality principle.

To wrest the image from the representation principle.

To rediscover the image as point of convergence between the light from the object and the light from the gaze.

Chapter 9
Contemporary Art: Art Contemporary with Itself

The adventure of modern art is over. Contemporary art is contemporary only with itself. It no longer knows any transcendence either towards past or future; its only reality is that of its operation in real time and its confusion with that reality.

Nothing now distinguishes it from the technical, promotional, media, digital operation. There is no transcendence, no divergence any more, nothing of another scene: merely a specular play with the contemporary world as it takes place. It is in this that contemporary art is worthless: between it and the world, there is a zero-sum equation.

Quite apart from that shameful complicity in which creators and consumers commune wordlessly in the examination of strange, inexplicable objects that refer only to themselves and to the idea of art, the true conspiracy lies in this complicity that art forges with itself, its collusion with the real, through which it becomes complicit in that Integral Reality, of which it is now merely the image-feedback.

There is no longer any differential of art. There is only the integral calculus of reality. Art is now merely an idea prostituted in its realization.

Modernity was the golden age of a deconstruction of reality into its simple elements, of a detailed analytics, first of impressionism, then of abstraction, experimentally open to all the aspects of perception, of sensibility, of the structure of the object and the dismemberment of forms.

The paradox of abstraction is that, by 'liberating' the object from the constraints of the figural to yield it up to the pure play of form, it shackled it to an idea of a hidden structure, of an objectivity more rigorous and radical than that of resemblance. It sought to set aside the mask of resemblance and of the figure in order to accede to the analytic truth of the object. Under the banner of abstraction, we moved paradoxically towards more reality, towards an unveiling of the 'elementary structures' of objectality, that is to say, towards something more real than the real.

Conversely, under the banner of a general aestheticization, art invaded the whole field of reality.

The end of this history saw the banality of art merge with the banality of the real world – Duchamp's act, with its automatic transference of the object, being the inaugural (and ironic) gesture in this process. The transference of all reality into aesthetics, which has become one of the dimensions of generalized exchange . . .

All this under the banner of a simultaneous liberation of art and the real world.

This 'liberation' has in fact consisted in indexing the two to each other – a chiasmus lethal to both.

The transference of art, become a useless function, into a reality that is now integral, since it has absorbed everything that denied, exceeded or transfigured it. The impossible exchange of this Integral Reality for anything else whatever. Given this, it can only exchange itself for itself or, in other words, repeat itself *ad infinitum*.

What could miraculously reassure us today about the essence of art? Art is quite simply what is at issue in the world of art, in that desperately self-obsessed artistic community. The 'creative' act doubles up on itself and is now nothing more than a sign of its own operation – the painter's true subject is no longer what he paints but the very fact that he paints. He paints the fact that he paints. At least in that way the idea of art remains intact.

This is merely one of the sides of the conspiracy.

The other side is that of the spectator who, for want of understanding anything whatever most of the time, consumes his own culture at one remove. He literally consumes the fact that he understands nothing and that there is no necessity in all this except the imperative of culture, of

being a part of the integrated circuit of culture. But culture is itself merely an epiphenomenon of global circulation.

The idea of art has become rarefied and minimal, leading ultimately to conceptual art, where it ends in the non-exhibition of non-works in non-galleries – the apotheosis of art as non-event. As a corollary, the consumer circulates in all this in order to experience his non-enjoyment of the works.

At the extreme point of a conceptual, minimalist logic, art ought quite simply to fade away. At that point, it would doubtless become what it is: a false problem, and every aesthetic theory would be a false solution.

And yet it is the case that there is all the more need to speak about it because there is nothing to say. The movement of the democratization of art has paradoxically merely strengthened the privileged status of the *idea* of art, culminating in this banal tautology of 'art is art', it being possible for everything to find its place in this circular definition.

As Marshall McLuhan has it, 'We have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art.'[1]

The revolutionary idea of contemporary art was that any object, any detail or fragment of the material world, could exert the same strange attraction and pose the same insoluble questions as were reserved in the past for a few rare aristocratic forms known as works of art.

That is where true democracy lay: not in the accession of everyone to aesthetic enjoyment, but in the transaesthetic advent of a world in which every object would, without distinction, have its fifteen minutes of fame (particularly objects without distinction). All objects are equivalent, everything is a work of genius. With, as a corollary, the transformation of art and of the work itself into an object, without illusion or transcendence, a purely conceptual acting-out, generative of deconstructed objects which deconstruct us in their turn.

No longer any face, any gaze, any human countenance or body in all this – organs without bodies, flows, molecules, the fractal. The relation to the 'artwork' is of the order of contamination, of contagion:

[1] In English in the original.

you hook up to it, absorb or immerse yourself in it, exactly as in flows and networks. Metonymic sequence, chain reaction.

No longer any real object in all this: in the ready-made it is no longer the object that's there, but the idea of the object, and we no longer find pleasure here in art, but in the idea of art. We are wholly in ideology.

And, ultimately, the twofold curse of modern and contemporary art is summed up in the 'ready-made': the curse of an immersion in the real and banality, and that of a conceptual absorption in the idea of art.

'. . . that absurd sculpture by Picasso, with its stalks and leaves of metal; neither wings, nor victory, just a testimony, a vestige – the idea, nothing more, of a work of art. Very similar to the other ideas and vestiges that inspire our existence – not apples, but the idea, the reconstruction by the pomologist of what apples used to be – not ice-cream, but the idea, the memory of something delicious, made from substitutes, from starch, glucose and other chemicals – not sex, but the idea or evocation of sex – the same with love, belief, thought and the rest . . .'[2]

Art, in its form, signifies nothing. It is merely a sign pointing towards absence.

But what becomes of this perspective of emptiness and absence in a contemporary universe that is already totally emptied of its meaning and reality?

Art can now only align itself with the general insignificance and indifference. It no longer has any privileged status. It no longer has any other final destination than this fluid universe of communication, the networks and interaction.

Transmitter and receiver merging in the same loop: all transmitters, all receivers. Each subject interacting with itself, doomed to express itself without any longer having time to listen to the other.

The Net and the networks clearly increase this possibility of transmitting for oneself in a closed circuit, everyone going at it with their virtual performances and contributing to the general asphyxia.

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[2] This passage is cited from an unidentified work by Saul Bellow, and I have not been able to trace the original. As a result, I can only offer here a retranslation of the French.

This is why, where art is concerned, the most interesting thing would be to infiltrate the spongiform encephalon of the modern spectator. For this is where the mystery lies today: in the brain of the receiver, at the nerve centre of this servility before 'works of art'. What is the secret of it?

In the complicity between the mortification 'creative artists' inflict on objects and themselves, and the mortification consumers inflict on themselves and their mental faculties.

Tolerance for the worst of things has clearly increased considerably as a function of this general state of complicity.

Interface and performance – these are the two current leitmotifs.

In performance, all the forms of expression merge – the plastic arts, photography, video, installation, the interactive screen. This vertical and horizontal, aesthetic and commercial diversification is henceforth part of the work, the original core of which cannot be located.

A (non-)event like *The Matrix* illustrates this perfectly: this is the very archetype of the global installation, of the total global fact: not just the film, which is, in a way, the alibi, but the spin-offs, the simultaneous projection at all points of the globe and the millions of spectators themselves who are inextricably part of it. We are all, from a global, interactive point of view, the actors in this total global fact.

Photography has the selfsame problem when we undertake to multi-mediatize it by adding to it all the resources of montage, collage, the digital and CGI, etc. This opening-up to the infinite, this deregulation, is, literally, the death of photography by its elevation to the stage of performance.

In this universal mix, each register loses its specificity – just as each individual loses his sovereignty in interaction and the networks – just as the real and the image, art and reality lose their respective energy by ceasing to be differential poles.

Since the nineteenth century, it has been art's claim that it is useless. It has prided itself on this (which was not the case in classical art, where, in a world that was not yet either real or objective, the question of usefulness did not even arise).

Extending this principle, it is enough to elevate any object to uselessness to turn it into a work of art. This is precisely what the

'ready-made' does, when it simply withdraws an object from its function, without changing it in any way, and thereby turns it into a gallery piece. It is enough to turn the real itself into a useless function to make it an art object, prey to the devouring aesthetic of banality.

Similarly, old objects, being obsolete and hence useless, automatically acquire an aesthetic aura. Their being distant from us in time is the equivalent of Duchamp's artistic act; they too become 'ready-mades', nostalgic vestiges resuscitated in our museum universe.

We might extrapolate this aesthetic transfiguration to the whole of material production. As soon as it reaches a threshold where it is no longer exchanged in terms of social wealth, it becomes something like a giant Surrealist object, in the grip of a devouring aesthetic, and everywhere takes its place in a kind of virtual museum. And so we have the museification, like a 'ready-made', of the whole technical environment in the form of industrial wasteland.

The logic of uselessness could not but lead contemporary art to a predilection for waste, which is itself useless by definition. Through waste, the figuration of waste, the obsession with waste, art fiercely proclaims its uselessness. It demonstrates its non-use-value, its non-exchange-value at the same time as selling itself very dear.

There is a misconception here. *Uselessness has no value in itself*. It is a secondary symptom and, by sacrificing its aims to this negative quality, art goes completely off track, into a gratuitousness that is itself useless. It is the same scenario, more or less, as that of nullity, of the claim to non-meaning, insignificance and banality, which attests to a redoubled aesthetic pretension.

Anti-art strives, in all its forms, to escape the aesthetic dimension. But since the 'ready-made' has annexed banality itself, all that is finished. The innocence of non-meaning, of the non-figurative, of abjection and dissidence, is finished.

All these things, which contemporary art would like to be, or return to, merely reinforce the inexorably aesthetic character of this anti-art.

Art has always denied itself. But once it did so through excess, thrilling to the play of its disappearance. Today it denies itself by default – worse, it denies its own death.

It immerses itself in reality, instead of being the agent of the symbolic murder of that same reality, instead of being the magical operator of its disappearance.

And the paradox is that the closer it gets to this phenomenal confusion, this nullity as art, the greater credit and value it is accorded, to the extent that, to paraphrase Canetti, we have reached a point where nothing is beautiful or ugly any more; we passed that point without realizing it and, since we cannot get back to that blind spot, we can only persevere in the current destruction of art.

Lastly, what purpose does this useless function serve?

From what, by its very uselessness, does it deliver us?

Like politicians, who deliver us from the wearisome responsibility of power, contemporary art, by its incoherent artifice, delivers us from the ascendancy of meaning by providing us with the spectacle of non-sense. This explains its proliferation: independently of any aesthetic value, it is assured of prospering by dint of its very insignificance and emptiness. Just as the politician endures in the absence of any representativeness or credibility.

So art and the art market flourish precisely in proportion to their decay: they are the modern charnel-houses of culture and the simulacrum.

It is absurd, then, to say that contemporary art is worthless and that there's no point to it, since that is its vital function: to illustrate our uselessness and absurdity. Or, more accurately, to make that decay its stock in trade, while exorcizing it as spectacle.

If, as some have proposed, the function of art was to make life more interesting than art, then we have to give up that illusion. One gets the impression that a large part of current art participates in an enterprise of deterrence, a work of mourning for the image and the imaginary, a – mostly failed – work of aesthetic mourning that leads to a general melancholia of the artistic sphere, which seems to survive its own demise by recycling its history and its relics.

But neither art nor aesthetics is alone in being doomed to this melancholy destiny of living not beyond their means, but beyond their ends.

Our capacity for degradation is infinite, and so long as we have not brought out all the crime that is potentially within us, our journey will not be at an end.

Guido Ceronetti

If man must reach the outermost bounds of his possibilities, then he must also go so far as to destroy himself. For that possibility is neither the least, nor the least glorious.

Saul Bellow

Chapter 10
Virtuality and Events

Two images: that of the bronze technocrat, bent over his brief-case, sitting on a bench at the foot of the Twin Towers, or, rather, shrouded in the dust of the collapsed towers like one of those bodies found in the ruins of Pompeii. He was, so to speak, the signature of the event, the pathetic ghost of a global power hit by an unforeseeable catastrophe.

Another figure: that of that artist working in his studio in the Towers on a sculpture of himself – his body pierced with aeroplanes – intended to stand on the plaza of the World Trade Centre like a modern Saint Sebastian.[1]

He was still working on it on the morning of 11 September when he was swept away, together with his sculpture, by the very event the work prefigured. The supreme consecration for a work of art: to be realized by the very event that destroys it.

Two allegories of an exceptional, earth-shattering event, cutting at a stroke through the monotony of a declared end of history. The only event worthy of the name, contrasting starkly with the non-event to which we are condemned by the hegemony of a world order nothing must disturb.

At this present stage of a networking of all functions – of the body, of time, of language – of a drip-feeding of all minds, the slightest event is a threat; even history is a threat.

It is going to be necessary, then, to invent a security system that prevents any event whatever from occurring. A whole strategy of deterrence that does service today for a global strategy.

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[1] The works referred to here are by J. Seward Johnson and the late Michael Richards, respectively.

Steven Spielberg's recent film, *Minority Report*, provides an illustration of such a system. On the basis of brains endowed with a gift of pre-cognition (the 'precogs'), who identify imminent crimes before they occur, squads of police (the 'precrimes') intercept and neutralize the criminal before he has committed his crime. There is a variant in the film *Dead Zone* (directed by David Cronenberg): the hero, who, following a serious accident, is also endowed with powers of divination, ends up killing a politician whose future destiny as a war criminal he foresees. This is the scenario of the Iraq war too: the crime is nipped in the bud on the strength of an act that has not taken place (Saddam's use of weapons of mass destruction). The question is clearly whether the crime would really have taken place. But we shall never know. What we have here, then, is the real repression of a virtual crime. Extrapolating from this, we can see looming beyond the war a systematic de-programming not only of all crime, but of anything that might disturb the order of things, the policed order of the planet. This is what 'political' power comes down to today. It is no longer driven by any positive will; it is merely a negative power of deterrence, of public health, of security policing, immunity policing, prophylaxis.

This strategy is directed not only at the future, but also at past events – for example, at that of 11 September, where it attempts, by war in Afghanistan and Iraq, to erase the humiliation. This is why this war is at bottom a delusion, a virtual event, a 'non-event'. Bereft of any objective or finality of its own, it merely takes the form of an incantation, an exorcism. This is also why it is interminable, for there will never be any end to conjuring away such an event. It is said to be preventive, but it is in fact retrospective, its aim being to defuse the terrorist event of 11 September, the shadow of which hovers over the whole strategy of planetary control. Erasure of the event, erasure of the enemy, erasure of death: in the insistence on 'zero casualties' we see the very same imperative as applies in this obsession with security.[2]

The aim of this world order is the definitive non-occurrence of events. It is, in a sense, the end of history, not on the basis of a democratic

[2] The French terms 'la sécurité' and 'l'insécurité' advert more clearly than their English cognates to the debate on what is colloquially known in English as 'law and order'.

fulfilment, as Fukuyama has it, but on the basis of preventive terror, of a counter-terror that puts an end to any possible events. A terror which the power exerting it ends up exerting on itself under the banner of security.

There is a fierce irony here: the irony of an anti-terrorist world system that ends up internalizing terror, inflicting it on itself and emptying itself of any political substance – and going so far as to turn on its own population.

Is this a remnant of the Cold War and the balance of terror? But this time it's a deterrence without cold war, a terror without balance. Or rather it is a universal cold war, ground into the tiniest interstices of social and political life.

This headlong rush by power into its own trap reached dramatic extremes in the Moscow theatre episode, when the hostages and the terrorists were jumbled together in the same massacre. Exactly as in Mad Cow Disease: you kill the whole herd as a precautionary measure – God will recognize his own. Or as in Stockholm Syndrome: being jumbled together in death makes them virtually partners in crime (it is the same in *Minority Report* the fact that the police seize the presumptive criminal before he has done anything proves *a posteriori* that he cannot be innocent).

And this is, in fact, the truth of the situation: the fact is that, one way or another, populations themselves are a terrorist threat to the authorities. And it is the authorities themselves who, by repression, unwittingly set the seal on this complicity. The equivalence in repression shows that we are all potentially the hostages of the authorities.

By extension, we can hypothesize a coalition of all governments against all populations – we have had a foretaste of this with the war in Iraq, since it was able to take place in defiance of world opinion, with the more or less disguised assent of all governments. And if the world-wide demonstrations against war may have produced the illusion of a possible counter-power, they demonstrated above all the political insignificance of this 'international community' by comparison with American *Realpolitik*.

We are dealing henceforth with the exercise of power in the pure state with no concern for sovereignty or representation; with the Integral

Reality of a negative power. So long as it derives its sovereignty from representation, so long as a form of political reason exists, power can find its equilibrium – it can, at any rate, be combated and contested. But the eclipsing of that sovereignty leaves an unbridled power, with nothing standing against it, a savage power (with a savagery that is no longer natural, but technical). And which, in a strangely roundabout way, might be said to get back to something like primitive societies, which, not knowing power, were, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, societies without history. What if we, the present global society, were once again, in the shadow of this integral power, to become a society without history?

But this Integral Reality of power is also its end. A power that is no longer based on anything other than the prevention and policing of events, which no longer has any political will but the will to dispel ghosts, itself becomes ghostly and vulnerable. Its virtual power – its programming power in terms of software and the like – is total, but as a result it can no longer bring itself into play, except against itself, by all kinds of internal failures. At the height of its mastery, it can now only lose face.

This is, literally, the 'Hell of Power'.

The policing of events is essentially carried out by information itself.[3] Information represents the most effective machinery for de-realizing history. Just as political economy is a gigantic machinery for producing value, for producing signs of wealth, but not wealth itself, so the whole system of information is an immense machine for producing the event as sign, as an exchangeable value on the universal market of ideology, of spectacle, of catastrophe, etc. – in short, for producing a non-event. The abstraction of information is the same as the abstraction of the economy. And, as all commodities, thanks to this abstraction of value, are exchangeable one with another, so all events become substitutable one for another in the cultural information market. The singularity of the

[3] 'L'information' in French has a broader range of reference than in English, denoting both information in the English sense, where it connects with information technology (l'informatique), and also news coverage in a general sense (cf. la presse d'information: the newspapers).

event, irreducible to its coded transcription and its staging, which is what quite simply constitutes an event, is lost.

We are passing into a realm where events no longer truly take place, by dint of their very production and dissemination in 'real time' – where they become lost in the void of news and information.

The sphere of information is like a space where, after having emptied events of their substance, an artificial gravity is recreated and they are put back in orbit in 'real time' – where, having shorn them of historical vitality, they are re-projected on to the transpolitical stage of information.

The non-event is not when nothing happens.

It is, rather, the realm of perpetual change, of a ceaseless updating, of an incessant succession in real time, which produces this general equivalence, this indifference, this banality that characterizes the zero degree of the event.

A perpetual escalation that is also the escalation of growth – or of fashion, which is pre-eminently the field of compulsive change and built-in obsolescence. The ascendancy of models gives rise to a culture of difference that puts an end to any historical continuity. Instead of unfolding as part of a history, things have begun to succeed each other in the void. A profusion of language and images before which we are defenceless, reduced to the same powerlessness, to the same paralysis as we might show on the approach of war.

It isn't a question of disinformation or brainwashing. It was a naïve error on the part of the FBI to attempt to create a Disinformation Agency for purposes of managed manipulation – a wholly useless undertaking, since disinformation comes from the very profusion of information, from its incantation, its looped repetition, which creates an empty perceptual field, a space shattered as though by a neutron bomb or by one of those devices that sucks in all the oxygen from the area of impact. It's a space where everything is pre-neutralized, including war, by the precession of images and commentaries, but this is perhaps because there is at bottom nothing to say about something that unfolds, like this war, to a relentless scenario, without a glimmer of uncertainty regarding the final outcome.

It is in the sphere of the media that we most clearly see the event short-circuited by its immediate image-feedback.

Information, news coverage, is always already there. When there are catastrophes, the reporters and photo-journalists are there before the emergency services. If they could be, they would be there before the catastrophe, the best thing being to invent or cause the event so as to be first with the news.

This kind of speculation reached a high point with the Pentagon's initiative of creating a 'futures market in events', a stock market of prices for terrorist attacks or catastrophes. You bet on the probable occurrence of such events against those who don't believe they'll happen.

This speculative market is intended to operate like the market in soya or sugar. You might speculate on the number of AIDS victims in Africa or on the probability that the San Andreas Fault will give way (the Pentagon's initiative is said to derive from the fact that they credit the free market in speculation with better forecasting powers than the secret services).

Of course it is merely a step from here to insider trading: betting on the event before you cause it is still the surest way (they say Bin Laden did this, speculating on TWA shares before 11 September). It's like taking out life insurance on your wife before you murder her.

There's a great difference between the event that happens (happened) in historical time and the event that happens in the real time of information.

To the pure management of flows and markets under the banner of planetary deregulation, there corresponds the 'global' event – or rather the globalized non-event: the French victory in the World Cup, the year 2000, the death of Diana, *The Matrix*, etc.

Whether or not these events are manufactured, they are orchestrated by the silent epidemic of the information networks. Fake events.[4]

François de Bernard analyses the war in Iraq this way, as a pure transcription of film theory and practice. What we are watching as we

[4] 'Fake events' in English in the original.

sit paralysed in our fold-down seats isn't '*like* a film'; it *is* a film. With a script, a screenplay, that has to be followed unswervingly.

The casting and the technical and financial resources have all been meticulously scheduled: these are professionals at work. Including control of the distribution channels. In the end, operational war becomes an enormous special effect; cinema becomes the paradigm of warfare, and we imagine it as 'real', whereas it is merely the mirror of its cinematic being.

The virtuality of war is not, then, a metaphor. It is the literal passage from reality into fiction, or rather the immediate metamorphosis of the real into fiction. The real is now merely the asymptotic horizon of the Virtual.

And it isn't just the reality of the real that's at issue in all this, but the reality of cinema. It's a little like Disneyland: the theme parks are now merely an alibi – masking the fact that the whole context of life has been disneyfied.

It's the same with the cinema: the films produced today are merely the visible allegory of the cinematic form that has taken over everything – social and political life, the landscape, war, etc. – the form of life totally scripted for the screen. This is no doubt why cinema is disappearing: because it has passed into reality. Reality is disappearing at the hands of the cinema and cinema is disappearing at the hands of reality. A lethal transfusion in which each loses its specificity.

If we view history as a film – which it has become in spite of us – then the truth of information consists in the post-synchronization, dubbing and sub-titling of the film of history.

In the former West Germany they are going to build a theme park where the décor and ambience of the now defunct East will be re-created (*Ost*-algia as a form of nostalgia). A whole society memorialized in this way in its own lifetime (it has not completely disappeared).

So the simulacrum does not merely telescope actuality, but gives the impression that the 'Real' will soon eventuate only in 'real time' without even passing through the present and history.

As a result, history becomes once again for us an object of nostalgia, and a desire for history, for rehabilitation, for sites of memory, can be

seen flourishing everywhere, as though, even as we suffer it, we are striving to fuel this same end of history.

History too is operating beyond its own end.

There was a definition of the historical event and the French Revolution was its model. The very concepts of event and history date really from that point. The event could be analysed as the high point in a continuous unfolding and its discontinuity was itself part of an overall dialectic.

It is not that way at all now, with the rise of a world order exclusive of all ideology and exclusively concerned with the circulation of flows and networks. In that generalized circulation, all the objectives and values of the Enlightenment are lost, even though they were at its origin. For there was once an idea, an ideal, an imaginary of modernity, but these have all disappeared in the exacerbation of growth.

It is the same with history as it is with reality.

There was a reality principle. Then the principle disappeared and reality, freed from its principle, continues to run on out of sheer inertia. It develops exponentially, it becomes Integral Reality, which no longer has either principle or end, but is content merely to realize all possibilities integrally. It has devoured its own utopia. It operates beyond its own end.

But the end of history is not the last word on history.

For, against this background of perpetual non-events, there looms another species of event. Ruptural events, unforeseeable events, unclassifiable in terms of history, outside of historical reason, events which occur against their own image, against their own simulacrum. Events that break the tedious sequence of current events as relayed by the media, but which are not, for all that, a reappearance of history or a Real irrupting in the heart of the Virtual (as has been said of 11 September). They do not constitute events *in* history, but *beyond* history, beyond its end; they constitute events in a system that has put an end to history. They are the internal convulsion of history. And, as a result, they appear inspired by some power of evil, appear no longer the bearers of a constructive disorder, but of an absolute disorder.

Indecipherable in their singularity, they are the equivalent in excess of a system that is itself indecipherable in its extension and its headlong charge.

In the New World Order there are no longer any revolutions, there are now only convulsions. As in an allegedly perfect mechanism, a system that is too well integrated, there are no longer any crises, but malfunctions, faults, breakdowns, aneurysmal ruptures.

Yet events are not the same as accidents.

The accident is merely a symptom, an episodic dysfunction, a fault in the technical (or natural) order that can possibly be prevented. This is what all the current politics of risk and prevention is about.

The event, for its part, is counter-offensive and much stranger in inspiration: into any system at its peak, at its point of perfection, it reintroduces internal negativity and death. It is a form of the turning of power against itself, as if, alongside the ingredients of its power, every system secretly nourished an evil spirit that would ensure that system were overturned.

It is in this sense that, unlike accidents, such events cannot be predicted and they form no part of any set of probabilities.

The analysis of revolution and the spectre of communism by Marx offers plenty of analogies with the current situation. He too made the proletariat the historic agent of the end of capital – its evil spirit, so to speak, since, with the rise of the proletariat, capital fomented the internal virus of its own destruction.

There is, however, a radical difference between the spectre of communism and that of terrorism. For capital's great trick was to transform the agent of disintegration it carried within it into a visible enemy, a class adversary, and thus, beyond economic exploitation, to change this historic movement into a dynamic of reintegration leading to a more advanced stage of capital.

Terrorism operates at a higher level of radicalism: it is not a subject of history; it is an elusive enemy. And if the class struggle generated historical events, terrorism generates another type of event. Global power (which is no longer quite the same as capital) finds itself here in direct confrontation with itself. It is now left to deal not with the spectre of communism, but with its own spectre.

The end of revolutions (and of history in general) is not, then, in any sense a victory for global power. It might rather be said to be a fateful sign for it.

History was our strong hypothesis, the hypothesis of maximum intensity.

Change, for its part, corresponds to a minimum intensity – it is where everything merely follows everything else and cancels it out, to the point of re-creating total immobilism: the impression, amid the whirl of current events, that nothing changes.

Generalized exchange – the exchange of flows, of networks, of universal communication – leads, beyond a critical threshold we passed long ago, to its own denial, which is no longer then a mere crisis of growth, but a catastrophe, a violent involution, which can be felt today in what might be called the 'tendency of the rate of reality to fall' (similarly, the profusion of information corresponds to a tendency of the rate of knowledge to fall).

Zero degree of value in total equivalence.

Globalization believed it would succeed in the neutralization of all conflicts and would move towards a *faultless* order. But it is, in fact, an order *by default*: everything is equivalent to everything else in a zero-sum equation. Gone is the dialectic, the play of thesis and antithesis resolving itself in synthesis. The opposing terms now cancel each other out in a levelling of all conflict. But this neutralization is, in its turn, never definitive, since, at the same time as all dialectical resolution disappears, the extremes come to the fore.

No longer a question of a history in progress, of a directive schema or of regulation by crisis. No longer any rational continuity or dialectic of conflicts, but a sharing of extremes. Once the universal has been crushed by the power of the global and the logic of history obliterated by the dizzying whirl of change, there remains only a face-off between virtual omnipotence and those fiercely opposed to it.

Hence the antagonism between global power and terrorism – the present confrontation between American hegemony and Islamist terrorism being merely the visible current twist in this duel between an Integral Reality of power and integral rejection of that same power.

There is no possible reconciliation; there never will be an armistice between the antagonistic forces, nor any possibility of an integral order.

Never any armistice of thought either, which resists it fiercely, or an armistice of events in this sense: at most, events go on strike for a time, then suddenly burst through again.

This is, in a way, reassuring: though it cannot be dismantled, the Empire of Good is also doomed to perpetual failure.

We must retain for the event its radical definition and its impact in the imagination. It is characterized entirely, in a paradoxical way, by its uncanniness, its troubling strangeness

– it is the irruption of something improbable and impossible

– and by its troubling familiarity: from the outset it seems totally self-explanatory, as though predestined, as though it could not but take place.

There is something here that seems to come from elsewhere, something fateful that nothing can prevent. It is for this reason, both complex and contradictory, that it mobilizes the imagination with such force. It breaks the continuity of things and, at the same time, makes its entry into the real with stupefying ease.

Bergson felt the event of the First World War this way. Before it broke out, it appeared both possible and impossible (the similarity with the suspense surrounding the Iraq war is total), and at the same time he experienced a sense of stupefaction at the ease with which such a fearful eventuality could pass from the abstract to the concrete, from the virtual to the real.

We see the same paradox again in the mix of jubilation and terror that characterized, in a more or less unspoken way, the event of 11 September.

It is the feeling that seizes us when faced with the occurrence of s*omething that happens without having been possible*.

In the normal course of events, things first have to be possible and can only actualize themselves afterwards. This is the logical, chronological order. But they are not, in that case, events in the strong sense.

This is the case with the Iraq war, which has been so predicted, programmed, anticipated, prescribed and modelled that it has

exhausted all its possibilities before even taking place. There is no longer anything of the event in it. There is no longer anything in it of that sense of exaltation and horror felt in the radical event of 11 September, which resembles the sense of the sublime spoken of by Kant.

The non-event of the war leaves merely a sense of mystification and nausea.

It is here we must introduce something like a metaphysics of the event, indications of which we find once again in Bergson.

Asked if it was possible for a great work to appear, he replied, No, it was not possible, it is not possible yet, it will become possible once it has appeared: 'If a man of talent or genius emerges, if he creates a work, then it is real and it thereby becomes retrospectively, retroactively possible.'[5]

Transposed to events, this means that they first take place, *ex nihilo* as it were, as something unpredictable. Only then can they be conceived as possible. This is the temporal paradox, the reversed temporality that designates the event as such.

As a general rule, we conceive of an ascending line running from the impossible to the possible, then to the real. Now, what marks out the true event is precisely that the real and the possible come into being simultaneously and are immediately imagined. But this relates to living events, to a living temporality, to a depth of time that no longer exists at all in real time.

Real time is violence done to time, violence done to the event. With the instantaneity of the Virtual and the precession of models, it is the whole depth of field of the *durée*, of origin and end, that is taken from us. It is the loss of an ever-deferred time and its replacement by an immediate, definitive time.

Things have only to be concentrated into an immediate present-ness by accentuating the simultaneity of all networks and all points on the globe for time to be reduced to its smallest simple element, the instant – which is no longer even a 'present' moment, but embodies the absolute reality of time in a total abstraction, thus prevailing against the irruption of any event and the eventuality of death.

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[5] Henri Bergson, La pensée et le mouvant. Third edition (Paris: PUF, 1990), p. 110.

Such is 'real time', the time of communication, information and perpetual interaction: the finest deterrence-space of time and events. On the real-time screen, by way of simple digital manipulation, all possibilities are potentially realized – which puts an end to their possibility. Through electronics and cybernetics, all desires, all play of identity and all interactive potentialities are programmed in and auto-programmed. The fact that everything here is realized from the outset prevents the emergence of any singular event.

Such is the violence of real time, which is also the violence of information.

Real time dematerializes both the future dimension and the past; it dematerializes historical time, pulverizes the real event. The Shoah, the year 2000 – it did not take place, it will not take place.

It even pulverizes the present event in news coverage [*l'information*], which is merely its instantaneous image-feedback.

News coverage is coupled with the illusion of present time, of presence – this is the media illusion of the world 'live' and, at the same time, the horizon of disappearance of the real event.

Hence the dilemma posed by all the images we receive: uncertainty regarding the truth of the event as soon as the news media are involved.

As soon as they are both involved in and involved by the course of phenomena, it is the news media that are the event. It is the event of news coverage that substitutes itself for coverage of the event.

The historic time of the event, the psychological time of affects, the subjective time of judgement and will, the objective time of reality – these are all simultaneously thrown into question by real time.

If there were a subject of history, a subject of knowledge, a subject of power, these have all disappeared in the obliteration by real time of distance, of the pathos of distance, in the integral realization of the world by information.

Before the event it is too early for the possible.

After the event it is too late for the possible.

It is too late also for representation, and nothing will really be able to account for it. September 11th, for example, is there first – only then do

its possibility and its causes catch up with it, through all the discourses that will attempt to explain it. But it is as impossible to represent that event as it was to forecast it before it occurred. The CIA's experts had at their disposal all the information on the possibility of an attack, but they simply didn't believe in it. It was beyond imagining. Such an event always is. It is beyond all possible causes (and perhaps even, as Italo Svevo suggests, causes are merely a misunderstanding that prevents the world from being what it is).

We have, then, to pass through the non-event of news coverage (information) to detect what resists that coverage. To find, as it were, the 'living coin' of the event. To make a literal analysis of it, against all the machinery of commentary and stage-management that merely neutralizes it.

Only events set free from news and information (and us with them) create a fantastic longing. These alone are 'real', since there is nothing to explain them and the imagination welcomes them with open arms.

There is in us an immense desire for events.

And an immense disappointment, as all the contents of the information media are desperately inferior to the power of the broadcasting machinery. This disproportionality creates a demand that is ready to swoop on any incident, to crystallize on any catastrophe. And the pathetic contagion that sweeps through crowds on some particular occasion (the death of Diana, the World Cup) has no other cause. It isn't a question of voyeurism or letting off steam. It's a spontaneous reaction to an immoral situation: the excess of information creates an immoral situation, in that it has no equivalent in the real event. Automatically, one wants a maximal event, a 'fateful' event – which repairs this immense banalization of life by the information machine. We dream of senseless events that will free us from this tyranny of meaning and the constraint of causes.

We live in terror both of the excess of meaning and of total meaninglessness.

And in the banal context of social and personal life these excessive events are the equivalent of the excess of signifier in language for Lévi-Strauss: namely, that which founds it as symbolic function.

Desire for events, desire for non-events – the two drives are simultaneous and, doubtless, each as powerful as the other.

Hence this mix of jubilation and terror, of secret elation and remorse. Elation linked not so much to death as to the unpredictable, to which we are so partial.

All the justifications merely mask precisely this obscure desire for events, for overthrowing the order of things, whatever it may be.

A perfectly sacrilegious desire for the irruption of evil, for the restitution of a secret rule, which, in the form of a totally unjustified event (natural catastrophes are similarly unjustified), re-establishes something like a balance between the forces of good and evil.

Our moral protestations are directly proportionate to the immoral fascination that the automatic reversibility of evil exerts on us.

They say Diana was a victim of the 'society of the spectacle' and that we were passive voyeurs of her death. But there was a much more complex dramaturgy going on, a collective scenario in which Diana herself was not innocent (in terms of display of self), but in which the masses played an immediate role in a positive 'reality show' of the public and private life of Lady Di with the media as interface. The paparazzi were merely the vehicles, together with the media, of this lethal interaction, and behind them all of us, whose desire shapes the media – we who are the mass and the medium, the network and the electric current.

There are no actors or spectators any more. We are all immersed in the same reality, in the same revolving responsibility, in a single destiny that is merely the fulfilment of a collective desire. Here again we are not far removed from Stockholm Syndrome: we are the hostages of news coverage, but we acquiesce secretly in this hostage-taking.

At the same time we violently desire events, any event, provided it is exceptional. And we also desire just as passionately that nothing should happen, that things should be in order and remain so, even at the cost of a disaffection with existence that is itself unbearable. Hence the sudden convulsions and the contradictory affects that ensue from them: jubilation or terror.

Hence also two types of analysis: the one that responds to the extreme singularity of the event and the other whose function might be said to be to routinize it – an orthodox thinking and a paradoxical thinking. Between the two there is no longer room for merely critical thought.

Like it or not, the situation has become radicalized. And if we think this radicalization is that of evil – evil being ultimately the disappearance of all mediation, leaving only the clash between extremes – then we must acknowledge this situation and confront the problem of evil.

We do not have to plump for the one or the other.

We experience the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of the event and the non-event. Just as, according to Hannah Arendt, we are confronted in any action with the unforeseeable and the irreversible.

But, since the irreversible today is the movement towards virtual ascendancy over the world, towards total control and technological 'enframing', towards the tyranny of absolute prevention and technical security, we have left to us only the unpredictable, the luck of the event.

And just as Mallarmé said that a throw of the dice would never abolish chance – that is to say, there would never be an ultimate dice throw which, by its automatic perfection, would put an end to chance – so we may hope that virtual programming will never abolish events.

Never will the point of technical perfection and absolute prevention be reached where the fateful event can be said to have disappeared.

There will always be a chance for the troubling strangeness [*das Unheimliche*] of the event, as against the troubling monotony of the global order.

A fine metaphor for this is that video artist who had his camera trained on the Manhattan peninsula throughout the month of September 2001, in order to record the fact that nothing happens, in order to film the non-event.

And banality went right ahead and blew up in his camera lens with the Twin Towers!

Chapter 11
Evil and Misfortune

Of evil in the pure state it is impossible to speak.

What one can speak of is the distinction between evil and misfortune, the reduction of evil to misfortune, and a culture of misfortune that is complicit with the hegemonic culture of happiness.[1]

The ideal opposition between good and evil has been reduced to the ideological opposition between happiness and misfortune. The reduction of good to happiness is as baneful as that of evil to misfortune, but this latter is more interesting because it shows up our humanistic vision more distinctly, that vision which sees man as naturally good, and evil and misfortune as mere accidents.

It is here, in the idea that man is good, or at least culturally perfectible, that we encounter our deepest imaginary conception, and with it our most serious confusion. For if misfortune is an accident and, ultimately, like sickness and poverty, a reparable accident (from the technical standpoint of integral happiness even death is no longer irreparable), evil, for its part, is not an accident. If misfortune is accidental, evil is *fatal*.[2] It is an original power and, in no sense, a dysfunction, vestige or mere obstacle standing in the way of good.

The sovereign hypothesis, the hypothesis of evil, is that man is not good by nature, not because he might be said to be bad, but because he is perfect as he is.

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[1] The key terms here are more evidently related at the lexical level in French: le Mal (evil), le malheur (misfortune), le bonheur (happiness).

[2] Primarily in the sense of destined, fated to occur.

He is perfect in the sense that the fruit is perfect, but not more perfect than the flower, which is perfect in itself and is not the unfinished phase of a definitive state.

Nothing is definitive – or rather everything is. Every stage of evolution, every age of life, every moment of life, every animal or plant species, is perfect in itself. Every character, in its singular imperfection, in its matchless finitude, is incomparable.

This is what evolutionary thought tends to suppress in the name of a finality that can only be that of Good, to the – perfectly immoral – advantage of some particular species, for it is in evolutionism, in the idea of a progressive succession, that all discriminations are rooted.

If one takes each term in its singularity – and not in its particularity, referred to the universal – then each term is perfect; it is itself its own end.

In this way every detail of the world is perfect if it is not referred to some larger set.

In this way everything is perfect if it is not referred to its idea.

In this way the nothing is perfect since it is set against nothing.

And in this way evil is perfect when left to itself, to its own evil genius.

Such is man before being plunged into the idea of progress and into the technical imagining of happiness: he is both evil and perfection – like the Cathars, who, while recognizing the singular power of evil and its total hold over creation, called themselves perfect: the 'Perfecti'.

Ceronetti, in *L'occhiale malinconico*, writes: 'I find the philosophical idea of the fundamental misfortune of the human race quite alien. In Leopardi, the inalterable innocence of the victim is always presupposed and nature then strikes them down as though with some malignant tumour. . . . I do not see innocence anywhere. I know men are base by nature and not by accident, but when I think "human condition", I lose any notion of happiness or misfortune – the night carries it away, all that remains is a hopeless puzzle.'

Or, again: 'I feel misfortune as a marginal burning sensation, which does not correspond to a vision of evil, of which it might be said merely to be an accident, a belated event.'

At bottom, the dogma of misfortune is too clear and too verifiable an idea to be fundamental. Evil is a confused, impenetrable idea. It is enigmatic in its very essence. Now, a tiny confused idea is always greater than a very big idea that is absolutely clear.

The idea of misfortune is, then, an easy solution.

Just as the idea of freedom is the easiest solution to the impossibility of thinking destiny and predestination, just as the idea of reality is the easiest solution to the impossibility of thinking the radical illusoriness of the world, so the idea of misfortune is the easiest solution to the impossibility of thinking evil.

This impossibility of thinking evil is matched only by the impossibility of imagining death.

Hence the question how an entire people was able to follow the Nazis in their enterprise of extermination is one that remains hopelessly insoluble for a rational thought, an Enlightenment thought that is incapable of thinking beyond an ideal version of man, incapable even of envisaging the absence of a response to such a question.

Unintelligence of evil, absence of insight into things by evil and therefore always the same discourse on the 'foul beast' and the same naïveté in the analysis of present events.

Our whole system of values excludes this predestination of evil.

Yet all it has invented, at the end of its burdensome therapy on the human species, is another way of making it disappear, that is to say, of ironically carrying the possibility of happiness to its opposite term, that of the perfect crime, that of integral misfortune, which was somehow waiting for it just at the end.

For you cannot liberate good without liberating evil, and that liberation is even more rapid than the liberation of good.

It is, in fact, no longer exactly a struggle between good and evil. It's a question of transparency.

Good is transparent: you can see through it.

Evil, by contrast, shows through: it is what you see when you see through.

Or alternatively, evil is the first hypothesis, the first supposition. Good is merely a transposition and a substitute product: the hypostasis of evil.

Good definitively scattered among the figures of evil. Anamorphosis of good.

Evil definitively scattered among the figures of good. Anamorphosis of evil.

It is only through the distorted, disseminated figures of evil that one can reconstitute, in perspective, the figure of good. It is only through the dispersed and falsely symmetrical figures of good that one can reconstitute the paradoxical figure of evil.

As it is only through the dispersion of the name of God in the labyrinth of the poem that you can sense the original figure running through it.

This way evil has of showing through in all the figures of good, this occult presence, is the matrix of all perverse effects and, singularly, of the fact that everything which stands opposed to the system today is merely an involuntary mirror to it.

So it is with all these developments in human rights, human-itarianism and all these things '*sans frontières*' that merely hasten the circulation of the New World Order for which they stand surety. Without that being anyone's strategy.

In this sense, the hypothesis of evil is never that of a determined ill-will, but the hypothesis of a rational concatenation, of normality on the move – a teleonomy that is particularly tangible in all the recent wars where the right of humanitarian intervention clearly takes over the role of extending that New Order. The Kosovans were not just human shields for the Serbs; the whole refugee drama served as a humanitarian shield for the West.

An entirely synchronous disconnect: the refugee drama was treated as a 'humanitarian' catastrophe, while the 'surgical' air strikes were unfolding just as implacably. Thus the apotropaic figures of good ensure the continuation of evil, just as (in Macedonio Fernández's writings) the vicissitudes of meaning and value keep the Nothing in being.

As Ceronetti says, 'Concrete salvation takes the form of an accelerated destruction.' But, in a way, it is not evil, but good that is manifestly at the controls of the suicide locomotive.

Thinking based on evil is not pessimistic; it is the thinking based on misfortune that is pessimistic because it wants desperately to escape evil or, alternatively, to revel in it.

Thought, for its part, does not cure human misfortune, the terrible obviousness of which it absorbs for purposes of some unknown transformation. Pessimism excludes any depth that eludes its negative judgement, whereas thought wishes to penetrate magically beyond the fracture of the visible. The rays of the black sun of pessimism do not reach down to the floor of the abyss.

Absolute depth knows neither good nor evil.

Thus the intelligence of evil goes far beyond pessimism.

In reality, the only genuinely pessimistic, nihilistic vision is that of good since, at bottom, from the humanist point of view, the whole of history is nothing but crime. Cain killing Abel is already a crime against humanity (there were only two of them!) and isn't original sin already a crime against humanity too? This is all absurd, and, from the standpoint of good, the effort to rehabilitate the world's violence is a hopeless exercise. All the more so as, without all these crimes, there simply wouldn't be any history.

'If the evil in man were eliminated,' says Montaigne, 'you would destroy the fundamental conditions of life.'

Everything comes from this confusion between evil and misfortune.

Evil is the world as it is and as it has been, and we can take a lucid view of this. Misfortune is the world as it ought never to have been – but in the name of what? In the name of what ought to be, in the name of God or a transcendent ideal, of a good it would be very hard to define.

We may take a criminal view of crime: that is tragedy. Or we may take a recriminative view of it: that is humanitarianism; it is the pathetic, sentimental vision, the vision that calls constantly for reparation.

We have here all the *Ressentiment* that comes from the depths of a genealogy of morals and calls within us for reparation of our own lives.

This retrospective compassion, this conversion of evil into misfortune, is the twentieth century's finest industry.

First as a mental blackmailing operation, to which we are all victim, even in our actions, from which we may hope only for a lesser evil – keep a low profile, decriminalize your existence! – then as source of a tidy profit, since misfortune (in all its forms, from suffering to insecurity,

from oppression to depression) represents a symbolic capital, the exploitation of which, even more than the exploitation of happiness, is endlessly profitable: it is a goldmine with a seam running through each of us.

Contrary to received opinion, misfortune is easier to manage than happiness – that is why it is the ideal solution to the problem of evil. It is misfortune that is most distinctly opposed to evil and to the principle of evil, of which it is the denial.

Just as freedom ends in total liberation and, in abreaction to that liberation, in new servitudes, so the ideal of happiness leads to a whole culture of misfortune, of recrimination, repentance, compassion and victimhood.

We go on discarding elements of freedom in all kinds of ways, while continuing to speak up for it.

We go on dreaming of perfect happiness, while sensing the potential boredom of paradise. For we know what Hell is like and those burning in Hell, since Hell is never being able to do anything but evil. But how is it with those in Paradise who will no longer have any idea of evil? God alone knows what awaits them.

It is here and now, however, that we are confronted with the tedium of the artificial paradises, with ideal living conditions. And it is by hypersensitivity to these ideal conditions that we abreact and tend towards misfortune as the most sustainable solution – a kind of escape route from the terroristic happiness plot. The despair of having everything.[3]

Yet we do not, for all that, move closer to evil or to the essence of evil. On the contrary, we move further away from it, for the closer you get to the comfortable obviousness of misfortune, the further you move from the invisible continuity of evil.

'*Bis Gottes Fehle hilft*,' says Hölderlin. 'Until God's absence comes to our aid.'

The death of God is, in fact, the deliverance from all responsibility to another world. But our responsibility for this world then becomes total, and there is no longer any possible redemption.

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[3] This sentence in English in the original.

Or, rather, redemption changes meaning: it is no longer the redemption of man and his sin, but the redemption of the death of God. That death has to be redeemed by a compulsive effort to transform the world. One has to ensure one's salvation at all costs by realizing the world for better or for worse.

A performance that tops off the one described by Max Weber in *The Spirit of Capitalism*: that of transforming the world into wealth for the greater glory of God. But it is no longer a question now of his glory; it is a question of his death and of exorcizing it. The point is to make the world transparent and operational by extirpating from it any illusion and any evil force.

And so, under the hegemony of good, everything is getting better and, at the same time, going from bad to worse: no hell any more, and no damnation. Everything becomes susceptible of redemption. From this point on, good and evil, which were still opposing powers, but linked to each other in transcendence, are to be dissociated for the purposes of a definitive realization of the world under the banner of happiness.

In fact, this idea of happiness bears merely a distant relation to good. For if good is moral in essence, happiness – the performance of happiness – is in essence perfectly immoral.

It is to such an evangelization that we can ascribe all the manifest signs of well-being and accomplishment offered to us by a paradisiac civilization subject to the eleventh commandment, the commandment that sweeps away all others: 'Be happy and show all the signs of happiness!'

We can see this demand for universal redemption in the way all current violence and injustice is being put on trial, and also, retrospectively, all the crimes and violent events of the past: the French Revolution, slavery, original sin and battered wives, the ozone layer and sexual harassment. In short, the investigative process for the Last Judgement is already well under way and we are doomed first to condemn, then to absolve and whitewash the whole of our history; to exterminate evil from even the tiniest interstices, so as to offer the image of a radiant universe ready to pass over into the next world.

An inhuman, superhuman, all-too-human undertaking?

And why fuel this eternal repentance, this chain reaction of bad conscience?

Because everything must be saved.

This is where we have got to today. Everything will be redeemed, the whole past will be rehabilitated, buffed up to the point of transparency. As for the future, it is better and worse yet: everything will be genetically modified to attain the biological and democratic perfection of the species.

The salvation that was defined by the equivalence of merit and grace will be defined, once the fixation with evil and Hell has been overcome, by the equivalence of genes and performance.

To tell the truth, once happiness becomes the general equivalent of salvation, pure and simple, then heaven itself is no longer needed. From the point when everyone is potentially saved, no one is. Salvation no longer has any meaning.

This is the destiny that beckons for our democratic enterprise: it is stifled at birth for having forgotten the necessary discrimination, for the omission of evil.

We need, then, an irrevocable presence of evil, an evil from which there is no possible redemption, an irrevocable discrimination, a perpetual duality of Heaven and Hell, and even, in a sense, a predestination of evil, for there can be no destiny without some predestination.

There is nothing immoral in this. According to the rules of the game, there is nothing immoral in some losing and others winning, or even in everyone losing. What would be immoral would be for everyone to win. This is the contemporary ideal of our democracy: that all should be saved. But that is possible only at the cost of a perpetual inflation and upping of the stakes.

And this is reassuring, since the imperative of salvation, of the individual state of grace, will always be thwarted by some challenge or passion from elsewhere, and any form of personal beatitude may be sacrificed to something more vital, which may be of the order of the will in Schopenhauer's terms or of the will to power in Nietzsche's, but which, in any event, retains the fateful quality of that which, in opposition to any happy finality, is predestined to come to pass.

Behind its euphoric exaltation, this imperative of maximum performance bears within it evil and misfortune in the form of a deep disavowal and a secret disillusionment.

Perhaps performance is merely a collective form of human sacrifice, but disembodied and distilled into our entire technological machinery.

In this strange world, where everything is potentially available – the body, sex, space, money, pleasure – to be taken or rejected *en bloc*, everything is there; nothing has disappeared physically, but everything has disappeared metaphysically. 'As if by magic,' one might say, except that it has disappeared not so much by enchantment as by disenchantment.

Individuals, such as they are, become exactly what they are. Without transcendence and without image, they carry on their lives like a useless function in the eyes of another world, irrelevant even in their own eyes.

And they do what they do all the better for the fact that there is no other possibility. No authority to appeal to.

They have sacrificed their lives to their functional existences. They are one with the exact numerical calculation of their lives and their performance.

Summoned to get the greatest efficiency and pleasure out of themselves, human beings are suddenly at odds and their existences dislocated.

An existence realized, then, but at the same time denied, thwarted, disowned.

Wherever humans are condemned to total freedom or to an ideal fulfilment, this automatic abreaction to their own good and their own happiness seeps in.

This imperative of maximum performance also comes into contradiction with the moral law, which dictates that everyone shall be put on an equal basis and everything set to zero in the name of democracy and an equal division of opportunity and advantage. From the perspective of universal redemption no one must stand out.

For justice to be done, all privilege must disappear; everyone is called on to shed any specific qualities and to become once again an elementary particle – collective happiness being that of the lowest common denominator. This is like potlatch in reverse, each outbidding the other in insignificance, while zealously cultivating their tiniest difference and cobbling together their multiple identities.

Recrimination means going back over the crime to correct its trajectory and its effects. This is what we are doing in going back over the whole

of our history, over the criminal history of the human species, so that we may do penance right now as we await the Last Judgement.

Hence the immense syndrome of repentance and rewriting (historical rewriting for now, but with the genetic, biological rewriting of the species yet to come) that has taken hold of this *fin de siècle*, from the perspective still of deserving salvation and of offering the image of an ideal victim at the last.

A 'clean-up' of all the violent events of past centuries, in order to bring them under the new jurisdiction of human rights and crimes against humanity. The latest episode of this revisionist madness is the proposal that slavery and the slave trade be condemned as a crime against humanity.

The rectification of the past in terms of our new humanitarian awareness. Or, in other words, in the purest colonial tradition, the imperialism of repentance! The idea is to allow the 'populations concerned' to carry out their mourning and draw a line under this page of their history in order to enter fully upon the path of modern history. Perhaps the Africans will even be able to turn this moral acknowledgement into damage claims on the same terms that have been granted to survivors of the Shoah.

Then we shall see no end to compensating, redeeming and rehabilitating, and all we shall have done will have been to add to the traditional exploitation the hypocritical absolution of all violence.

A victim economy, a political economy of misfortune: a positive tradeable stock, which, in all its forms, has substituted itself for the impossible exchange of evil.

A differential of victimhood that nowhere pays off so well, is nowhere so lucrative today, as in the negotiation of oneself as waste (something magnificently illustrated by contemporary art).

An inexhaustible seam, since this negative affect is the most widely distributed of all. We can always count on this denial of self that smoulders within each of us, much more than on pride, self-regard or self-love. Much more even than on pleasure or the taste for pleasure, we can count on this wallowing in misfortune.

Many people's only talent in life is to mobilize this affect and this alternative solution. 'After hatred, the fundamental enemy of the human race is remorse,' says Spinoza. But hatred and remorse are one and the

same: it is remorse at individuation and at the breaking of the symbolic pact that engenders self-hatred and *Ressentiment*.

Rendered official in this way, self-criticism and repentance have even become a mode of government: politicians constantly offer up the mirror of their uselessness for the assent of their fellow citizens, who can thus continue to live in contempt for themselves through the contempt they feel for their political class. For, if the love of others is the path taken by one's own self-love – La Rochefoucauld virtually made a set of rules out of this – one may also detest oneself through the hatred and contempt one feels for others.

Everyone counts on deriving the secondary gains from this vicious circle and misfortune is exchanged on the Stock Exchange of Values, whereas evil is inconvertible.

Immediate conversion, in the name of the law, of misfortune into earnings – the pay-off for an accident or for depression, the commercial equivalent of any setback, any handicap: rape, sexual harassment, even birth itself, regarded as a congenital affliction (for example, the blind, deaf, mute and mentally retarded child who was recently granted life-long compensation for the fact of being born).

Today this chronicle of recrimination and compensation covers the entire 'social' field, which is now merged with the fields of insurance and security.

And this model of repentance and reparation of all wrongs has been shifted on to a quite other level: the genetic reparation of all the deficits of the human species.

All this shows a very mediocre idea of oneself – always imputing misfortune to some objective cause.

Once it has been exorcized by causes, misfortune is no longer a problem: it becomes susceptible of a causal solution and, above all, it originates elsewhere – in original sin, in history, in the social order, or in natural perversion. In short, it originates in an objectivity into which we exile it the better to be rid of it. Once again, this bespeaks very little pride and self-respect.

In the past, what struck you down was your destiny, your personal *fatum*. You didn't look for some 'objective' cause of this or some attenuating circumstance, which would amount to saying we have no part in what happens to us. There is something humiliating in that.

The intelligence of evil begins with the hypothesis that our ills come to us from an evil genius that is our own.

Let us be worthy of our 'perversity', of our evil genius, let us measure up to our tragic involvement in what happens to us (including good fortune).

In a word, let us not be imbeciles, for imbecility in the literal sense lies in the superficial reference to misfortune and exemption from evil.

This is how we make imbeciles of the victims themselves, by confining them to their condition of victim. And by the compassion we show them we engage in a kind of false advertising for them.

We take no account of what degree of choice and defiance, of connivence with oneself, of – unconscious or quasi-deliberate – provocative relation to evil there may be in AIDS, in drug-taking, in suffering and alienation, in voluntary servitude – in this acting-out in the fatal zone.

It is the same with suicide, which is always ascribed to depressive motivations with no account taken of an originality of, an original will to commit, the act itself (Canetti speaks in the same way of the interpretation of dreams as a violence done to dreams that takes no account of their literalness).

So, the understanding of misfortune is everywhere substituted for the intelligence of evil. Now, unlike the former, this latter rests on the rejection of the presumption of innocence. By contrast with that understanding, we are all presumptive wrongdoers – but not responsible ones, for, in the last instance, we do not have to answer for ourselves – that is the business of destiny or of the divinity.

For the act we commit, it is right we should be dealt with – and indeed punished – accordingly. We are never innocent of that act in the sense of having nothing to do with it or being victims of it. But this does not mean we are answerable for it either, as that would suppose we were answerable for ourselves, that we were invested with total power over ourselves, which is a subjective illusion.

It's a good thing we don't possess that power or that responsibility. A good thing we are not the causes of ourselves – that at least confers some degree of innocence on us. For the rest, we are forever complicit in what we do, even if we are not answerable to anyone.

So we are both irresponsible and without excuses.
Never explain, never complain.[4]

One must never confess to being unfortunate or claim to be unfortunate, and hence in some way innocent and a victim.

There is no presumption of innocence and it is better to be part of evil than party to misfortune.

So, to say of a woman she is an innocent victim of seduction, that she has no part in the fact of being seduced, is an offence to femininity itself.

In this way, beyond good and evil, that dual relation is played out in which the victim ceases to be a victim by an active complicity with his/her own misfortune.

The extreme case of Stockholm Syndrome is like this, where the hostage ends up going over to the hostage-taker's cause – an incomprehensible turn of events if one cannot conceive that this complicity of the victim equates to a symbolic transference and forms part of the ironic essence of evil.

Which means there is nowhere a definition of Good or for anyone a clear definition of happiness – and that nothing is for the best in the best of all worlds.

The paradox may extend as far as the moral obligation of gratitude to the other for the evil he has done you, as illustrated by the following Japanese story, which is sublime, but difficult for our Western morality to accept, in which a woman decides not to save the life of a drowning child since, she says, 'You would owe me such a debt of gratitude that your entire life would not suffice to pay it back.'

Is there not also the profoundest pleasure in bitterness? No satisfaction, no victory, will ever be the equivalent of the bitter plenitude of the sense of injustice. It revels in itself. It draws on the very roots of an inner revenge on existence. Who, in the light of that, could claim to give a definition of happiness?

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[4] This phrase in English in the original.

Complex as is this entanglement of good and evil, so too is it difficult to pass beyond good and evil when the very distinction between the two has disappeared.

One may reject all this.

The fact remains that the hypothesis of evil, of the lack of distinction between good and evil and our deep complicity with the worst, is always present, rendering all our actions impenetrable. But it is itself a principle of action and doubtless one of the most powerful.

I am playing devil's advocate here.

But if you reject this hypothesis you can always think in terms of a wager of the Pascalian type. What Pascal says, more or less, is this: you can always content yourself with a secular existence and its advantages, but it's much more fun with the hypothesis of God. With just a few sacrifices to make in exchange for eternal salvation, the advantages are much greater.

Where we are concerned, this same wager becomes: you can always get by with the hypothesis of good and happiness, but it's much more fun with the hypothesis of evil.

A variant of the same wager would be: you can always get by with the hypothesis of reality, but it's much more fun with the hypothesis of radical illusion.

We should transfer on to reality – or rather on to the nonexistence of reality – Pascal's wager on the existence of God.

Pascal: It's to your advantage to believe in the existence of God and eternal life since, if they don't exist, you won't have lost much by sacrificing your life. On the other hand, if they do exist, you stand to gain infinitely.

Reality: It's to your advantage not to believe in it, since if you believe in it and it doesn't exist, you're duped and swindled and you will die stupid.

If you don't believe in it and it doesn't exist, you win on all counts.

If you don't believe in it and it does exist, you retain the benefit of the doubt, since there will never be any conclusive proof of its existence, any more than of the existence of God (moreover, if it exists, given what it is, it is better to be parted from it as quickly as possible).

Clearly this is the opposite choice to that of Pascal, who opts for God. But it is the same wager. And, in any event, no one is forced to gamble.

It is all down to the fact that the Devil had an unhappy childhood and one cannot accuse him of maleficence when he is merely doing the dirty work, in accordance with the providential designs of which he is merely the instrument. This poor devil, Mephisto, who always desires evil and always does good, really has no need of an advocate.

It would seem rather to be God who needed one. He who created the world and, as a result, took upon himself an infinite debt, and who has been constantly passing that debt on to mankind, the entire history of which since then is one of wrongdoing.

And worse: to that enforced guilt he added humiliation.

For mankind is faced with the impossibility of making a sacrifice to equal this gift of God's, the impossibility of making restitution and wiping away the debt. Being unable to take up this challenge, it has to humble itself and give thanks. It is at this point that God chose to cancel the debt himself by sending his beloved son to sacrifice himself on the cross. He pretends to humble himself, and, in so doing, inflicts an even greater humiliation on humanity by making it conscious of its impotence. Henceforth humanity is condemned to give thanks, not just for having been created, but for having been saved (very relatively, as it happens, for this humiliation does not mean it will be spared the Last Judgement).

This is the greatest act of manipulation ever.

And it succeeded far beyond its objective – even beyond the death of God, since we have taken it over today, augmented by the guilt of that death (God's cunning is infinite).

We mimic here below this humiliation received from God: in victimhood, humanitarianism, self-derision and self- deprecation, in this immense sacrificial effort that stands in, in our case, for redemption.

We could have taken advantage of the death of God to be free of the debt. But we didn't take that option. We chose rather to deepen the debt, to eternalize it in an endless performance, a sacrificial accumulation, as though we had already internalized God's judgement.

'God's absence' has not come to our aid – contrary to Hölderlin's expectation ('*Bis Gottes Fehle hilft*').

In fact God himself is complicit in all this.

God himself is in league with the principle of evil.

We have this from the fabulous tale of Lilith and Saekina which the Kabbalah recounts (Primo Levi).

When Lilith, the first woman created by God as the equal of Adam, had rebelled, God chose to create Eve, the fruit of Adam's rib, since the first man clearly needed a companion. However, God realized at this point that it is not good to be alone and he chose a wife for himself, Saekina, who was none other than his own presence in the world (fantastic: he marries his own presence in the world!). Saekina eventually takes umbrage at God's behaviour toward the Jews (when the temple at Jerusalem is destroyed – why did he not protect them better?). She runs off, going out into the world to do Good. And what does God do then? He takes a mistress. And who is this mistress? It is Lilith, who is none other than the principle of evil, a rebel against God and an unbeliever.

So God cheats on his own presence in the world with the – feminine – principle of evil! He betrays the integrality, the completeness, of the world – his union with Saekina – for an (adulterous) union with duality, which he takes as his mistress.

Now, that mistress, Lilith, has not, like Eve, issued from Adam as a kind of by-product. She exists *principio suo*, entirely autonomously, which makes her the emblem of evil . . . Well, God makes a pact with all that. He plots against his own presence and against the reproduction of the species by allying unnaturally with the emblem of evil.

And thus, while Saekina, the wife, continues to do Good throughout the world, she, Lilith, continues to do evil with God's connivance.

And so long as she is there, says the Kabbalah, everything will go from bad to worse.

Chapter 12
The Intelligence of Evil

This, then, is the way we must begin, with the secret intelligence of – the secret insight into – duality and reversibility, with speaking evil as in a mental Theatre of Cruelty.

Above all, we must not confuse the idea of evil with some kind of objective existence of evil. That has no more meaning than an objective existence of the Real; it is merely the moral and metaphysical illusion of Manichaeism that it is possible to will evil, to do evil, or, alternatively, to denounce it and combat it.

Evil has no objective reality.

Quite the contrary, it consists in the diverting of things from their 'objective' existence, in their reversal, their 'return' (I wonder if we might not even interpret Nietzsche's 'Eternal Return' in this sense – not as an endless cycle, not as a repetition, but as a turning about, as a reversible form of becoming – *die ewige Umkehr*).

In this sense, in precisely the same way as Canetti conceives vengeance, evil too is automatic.

You cannot will it. That is an illusion and a misconception. The evil you can will, the evil you can do and which, most of the time, merges with violence, suffering and death, has nothing to do with this reversible form of evil. We might even say that those who deliberately practise evil certainly have no insight into it, since their act supposes the intentionality of a subject, whereas this reversibility of evil is the reversibility of a form.

And it is, at bottom, the form itself that is intelligent, insightful: with evil it is not a question of an object to be understood; we are dealing with a form that understands us.

In the 'intelligence of evil' we have to understand that it is evil that is intelligent, that it is it which thinks us – in the sense that it is implied automatically in every one of our acts.

For it is not possible for any act whatever or any kind of talk not to have two sides to it; not to have a reverse side, and hence a dual existence. And this contrary to any finality or objective determination.

This dual form is irreducible, indissociable from all existence. It is therefore pointless to wish to localize it and even more so to wish to denounce it. The denunciation of evil is still of the order of morality, of a moral evaluation.

Now, evil is immoral, not in the way a crime is immoral, but in the way a form is. And the intelligence of evil itself is immoral – it does not aspire to any value judgement, it does not do evil, it speaks it.

The idea of evil as a malign force, a maleficent agency, a deliberate perversion of the order of the world, is a deep-rooted superstition.

It is echoed at the world level in the phantasmic projection of the Axis of Evil, and in the Manichaean struggle against that power.

This is all part of the same imaginary.

Hence the principle of the prevention, the forestalling, the prophylaxis, of evil; rather than morality or metaphysics, what we have today is an infection, a microbial epidemic, the corruption of a world whose predestined end is presumed to lie in good.

A more subtle misconception is that of a hypostasis of evil as indestructible reality, a kind of primal scene, a sort of substratum of accumulated death-drive.

The radicality of evil is seen as that of a naturally inevitable force, associated always with violence, suffering and death.

Hence Sloterdijk's hypothesis that 'the reality of reality is the eternal return of violence'. To which he opposes a 'pacifism that is in keeping with our most advanced theoretical intuitions, a deep-level pacifism, based on a radical analysis of the circularity of violence, deciphering the forces that determine its eternal return'.

A radical analysis, then, to remedy the radical evil.
But can a 'radical' analysis have a finality of whatever kind?
Is it not itself part of the process of evil?

However that may be, duality and evil are not the same as violence.

The dual form, the *agon*, is a symbolic form and, as such, it might be said to be much nearer to seduction and challenge than to violence. Closer to metamorphosis and becoming than to force and violence.

If there were a force of evil, a reality of evil, a source and an origin of evil, one could confront it strategically with all the forces of good.

But if evil is a form, and most of the time a form that is deeply buried, one can only bring out that form and come to an understanding with it [*être en intelligence avec elle*].

This is how it is, for example, with the Theatre of Cruelty: in that gestural and scenic externalization of all the 'perverse' possibilities of the human spirit, within the framework of an exploration of the roots of evil, there is never any question of tragic catharsis. The point, rather, is to play out fully these perverse possibilities and make drama out of them, but without sublimating or resolving them.

'To speak evil' is to speak this fateful, paradoxical situation that is the reversible concatenation of good and evil.

That is to say that the irresistible pursuit of good, the movement of Integral Reality – for this is what good is: it is the movement towards integrality, towards an integral order of the world – is immoral. The eschatological perspective of a better world is in itself immoral. For the reason that our technical mastery of the world, our technical approach to good, having become an automatic and irresistible mechanism, none of this is any longer of the order of morality or of any kind of finality.

Nor is to speak and read evil the same thing as vulgar nihilism, the nihilism of a denunciation of all values, that of the prophets of doom.

To denounce the reality contract or the reality 'conspiracy' is not at all nihilistic. It is not in any sense to deny an obvious fact, in the style of 'All is sign, nothing is real – nothing is true, everything is simulacrum' – an absurd proposition since it is also a realist one!

It is one thing to note the vanishing of the real into the Virtual, another to deny it so as to pass beyond the real and the Virtual.

It is one thing to reject morality in the name of a vulgar immoralism, another to do so, like Nietzsche so as to pass beyond good and evil.

To be 'nihilistic' is to deny things at their greatest degree of intensity, not in their lowest versions. Now, existence and self-evidence have always been the lowest forms.

If there is nihilism, then, it is not a nihilism of value, but a nihilism of form. It is to speak the world in its radicality, in its dual, reversible form, and this has never meant banking on catastrophe, any more than on violence.

No finality, either positive or negative, is ever the last word in the story.

And the Apocalypse itself is a facile solution.

To speak evil is to say that in every process of domination and conflict is forged a secret complicity, and in every process of consensus and balance, a secret antagonism.

'Voluntary servitude' and the 'involuntary', suicidal failing of the power systems – two phenomena that are every bit as strange as each other, on the fringes of which we can make out all the ambivalence of political forms. This is to say that:

– immigration, the social question of immigration in our societies, is merely the most visible and crudest illustration of the internal exile of the European in his own society.

– terrorism can be interpreted as the expression of the internal dislocation of a power that has become all-powerful – a global violence immanent in the world-system itself. Hence the attempt to extirpate it as an objective evil is delusional given that, in its very absurdity, it is the expression of the condemnation that power pronounces on itself.

That, as Brecht said of fascism (that it was made up of both fascism and antifascism), terrorism is made up of terrorism and anti-terrorism together.

And that, if it is the incarnation of fanaticism and violence, it is the incarnation of the violence of those who denounce it at the same time as of their impotence, and of the absurdity of combating it frontally without having understood anything of this diabolical complicity and this reversibility of terror.

The violence you mete out is always the mirror of the violence you inflict on yourself. The violence you inflict on yourself is always the mirror of the violence you mete out.

This is the intelligence of evil.

If terrorism is evil – and it certainly is in its form, and not at all in the sense in which George W. Bush understands it – then it is this intelligence of Evil we need; the intelligence of, the insight into, this internal convulsion of the world order, of which terrorism is both the event-moment and the image-feedback.

Chapter 13
For Whom Does the Knell of Politics Toll?

It is the secret failing of politics that it is no longer able to think evil.

Politics is the site of the exercise of evil, of the management of evil, scattered into individual souls and collective manifestations in all its forms – privilege, vice and corruption. It is the inescapable fate of power to take this accursed share upon itself, and that of men in power to be sacrificed to it, a privilege from which they expect to derive all the secondary gains.

But practising evil is difficult and one may suppose that they are constantly trying to pass the buck in every way possible.

In the past, power was arbitrary, which corresponded to the fact that it came from elsewhere, being devolved from on high without regard for inherent qualities – being, in a sense, predestined.

Royal power was like this. Hence Louis XVI's stupefaction on being told that the insurgents wanted power. How can you want power?

It is given to you, and all you can do is exercise it, like it or not. No one can rid you of it. The idea of deposing the King is as absurd as the idea of a constitutional God.

Power is an obligation and one must not demand it, one must consent to it.

On the other hand, it is arbitrary since, for that very reason, it does not have to justify itself. The only solution was, indeed, the death of the King, that is to say, the restoration of the accursed share to the whole of society.

That each should have his or her portion of the 'accursed share' is the democratic principle. But it seems the 'citizens' do not really want to submit to this sovereign obligation and they are afraid of their own arbitrary power.

It will, then, be devolved to a few – these will be the politicians, who themselves most often have only one idea: to give it away. You have only to see them redistributing power in every possible way – on the one hand, to prove to themselves that they have it, and, on the other, to ensure that no one escapes it, for those who refuse it are dangerous. 'If I knew,' said Canetti, 'that there still are on this earth *some human beings without any power* I would say that nothing is lost.'

The great danger for the very existence of politics is not that human beings should compete to take power, *but that they should not want it.*

Those in power have a twofold problem: in the political order, the problem of wielding power; and in the symbolic order, the problem of getting rid of it.

It's exactly the same as with money: the economic problem is to earn money and make it work for you; the symbolic problem is to be rid of it at all costs, to lift that curse from yourself. And it's an almost impossible task.

You have only to see those American start-up companies, suddenly made rich by speculation and desperately trying to hand out donations right and left, trying to invest in all kinds of charitable trusts and foundations for promoting the arts. Alas, by some fearful curse they just make even more profit. Money takes its revenge by multiplying.

It is the same with power: in spite of all the rituals of interaction, participation and devolution, power is not soluble in exchange, and the dominated are too cunning really to take their part in it. They prefer to live in the shade of power.

So, when it comes to power or money, no absolution; the defiance remains total and the ordeal of the rich and powerful is, in this sense, inescapable. By their very privilege they are cast in the role of victims, since they are burdened with all the responsibility we have relinquished, a responsibility of which they are the stooges and mercenaries.

The 'social contract' ideally represented the portion of sovereignty citizens relinquished to the state, but nowadays we would be talking rather of *the relinquished, alienated part of themselves that they rid themselves of in order to retain their sovereignty.*

In the same way, more or less, as we once handed over the management of money to the Jews and the usurers, we have passed the dirty work of management and representation off to a body of people that has by that very act become accursed and untouchable, and which expects to take the profits from it in the form of 'power'.

When they describe themselves as servants of the people and the nation, they do not know how right they are. They are, in fact, the occupants of a servile – traditionally servile – function: the administration of things. May God protect and keep them!

This discredit resurfaces in the way the political class are perpetually on trial, in this endless question of lack of public confidence for which they can find no answer – a repudiation that sounds like an invitation to suicide, the only political act worthy of the name.

We dream of seeing the political class resigning *en masse* because we dream of seeing what a social body without a political superstructure would be like (as we dream of seeing what a world without representation would be like): a massive relief, a massive collective catharsis.

In every trial, in every public challenge to a politician or statesman, this millenarian demand (naturally always thwarted) resurfaces: the demand for a power that would speak out against itself, unmask itself, giving way to a radical, unhoped-for and, admittedly, hopeless situation, but one from which the inextricable tangle of mental corruption would be removed.

However, this art of disappearing, this predisposition to elimination and death – which is, properly speaking, sovereignty – was long ago forgotten by politicians (they are sometimes recalled to it by the involuntary sacrifice of their lives). Their sole objective remains the renewal of their class and its privileges(?) with our most total connivence, it must be said, which is justified by the fact that they are the perverse instrument of our sovereignty.

One always hopes that the politicians will admit their uselessness, their duplicity, their corruption. One is always on the look-out for an ultimate demystification of their sayings and doings. But could we bear this? For the politician is our mask, and if we tear it off we run the risk of ending up with our responsibility painfully exposed, that very responsibility we relinquished to the politician's advantage.

Corruption: that is, indeed, the heart of the problem.

It is never an accident. It is inherent in the exercise of power and, hence, in the exercise of evil. The whole world over and wherever they come from, those who reach the nerve centre of affairs are immediately transfigured by corruption and it is here that their real complicity is forged.

But the complicity does not end there – nor the essence of evil.

For the corruption of the élites is, precisely, the corruption of everyone: corruption is a collective psychodrama and, since we have the leaders we deserve, if we feel contempt for them it is only ever the reflection of the contempt we each feel for ourselves as political animals.

Doubtless we should even see corruption as one of the real rules of the game, the echo of a basic symbolic rule (different from politics and the social), which has become, above and beyond all morality, a practical, immanent and secret rule of operation. A serious question this, since it concerns the whole of public morality and connects with Mandeville's hypothesis on the supremacy of vice in the happy conduct of affairs.

The corruption of ideas is no exception.

They too follow a much more cynical, subtle trajectory than the pathways of reason, and the networks of thought that are created bear only a distant relation to truth.

It is this cunning which means that, as soon as they are invested with power, politicians immediately turn against that which, or those who, carried them to power, just as intellectuals very quickly turn against the very ideas that inspired them.

There is no point, then, tormenting oneself over this state of corruption, in which is to be seen the radicality of politics – or, in other words, from which we can read off what politics is in its symbolic dimension: namely, a sharing-out of evil.

Such is the living coin of power in a confrontation that goes way beyond representation, in a system of obligation in which there is always a gift and a counter-gift, a lethal revenge.

This is the 'two-sidedness of corruption'. Where those in power are concerned, the aim is to corrupt the dominated, to induce in them some form or other of 'voluntary servitude'. Whereas the aim of the dominated is to corrupt the dominant precisely by their voluntary servitude, which they turn round against them like a weapon: this is the whole strategy of the masses, of the silent majorities.

Once the great and the good had the privilege of granting pardon. Today, they want to be pardoned in their turn. They take the view that, on the basis of human rights, they are entitled to the universal compassion that had until now been the prerogative of the poor and of victims (in fact we cannot pardon them enough and they deserve all our compassion, not for reasons of rights or morality, but quite simply because there is nothing worse than being in power).

However this may be, they believe they must now stand before the moral tribunal of public opinion and even declare their corruption before it (more or less spontaneously!). They would even accuse themselves of crimes they did not commit in order to gain an artificial immunity as a by-product.

But the cunning of the dominated is even subtler.

If consists not in pardoning them (you do not pardon those in power), nor in inflicting any real punishment on them, but in passing over their little acts of embezzlement and this faked-up spectacle with a certain indifference. And this should leave the politicians very crestfallen, as it is the clear sign of their insignificance for everyone. Some of them have demanded to be judged and found guilty (though they are innocent, of course!). But the 'ordeal' the judges have put the politicians and the big industrialists through has in the end only restored legitimacy, recognition and an audience to people who had lost them.

Hence the strange confusion that prevails in the political sphere. For there is in the fact of this universal compassion a deep disturbance of symbolic regulation. Everywhere today we see the tormentors (pretending to) take the victim's side, showing them compassion and compensating them (as in Charles Najman's film *La mémoire est-elle*

soluble dans l'eau…?). This may perhaps resolve things on the moral plane, but it aggravates them at the symbolic level.

On the symbolic plane there is only one way to pay back, and that is the counter-gift. If that is impossible, then there is vengeance, which is itself a form of counter-gift. Compassion here is useless and perverse: it merely adds to the inferiority of the victim.

Moreover, this ruse of repentance is a particularly underhand manoeuvre on the part of those in power, since it means stealing from the people the last of their rights, their only opportunity for political participation: the chance to unmask and condemn the powerful.

It is the same with the media and the news sources when they put themselves in the dock and engage in self-criticism. They rob the public of the last of their rights as citizens – the right not to believe a single word they are told.

Just as advertising, by affecting a self-deprecating ironic tone, short-circuits our opportunities for deriding it. This kind of deterrence is at work everywhere: 'citizens' are deprived of their right of revenge and their capacity to take reprisals.

Happily, the citizen still has the spectacle and the ironic enjoyment of that spectacle. For, if we are politically under house arrest, and if we cannot be the actors of politics, we must at least have the spectacle of politics. It was already like this, according to Rivarol, during the French Revolution: the people did not mind making revolution, but primarily they wanted the spectacle of revolution.

Here again, then, it is naïve to pity those populations that are condemned to 'the society of the spectacle'. Alienated they may be, but their servitude is double-edged. And there is here, in this combination of indifference and the enjoyment of politics as spectacle, a mischievous form of revenge.

Chapter 14
The Destruction of the Golden Temple

There is no longer any metaphysical presence of evil nowadays, no presence of God or the Devil who fought above our heads and did battle over our souls.

There is no longer any mythological presence of evil, the presence of a Mephisto or a Frankenstein embodying its principle.

Our evil is faceless and imageless. It is present everywhere in homeopathic doses, in the abstract patterns of technology, but it no longer has any mythic presence.

There remains, however, some spark of evil in the heart of modern industrial misfortune – perhaps not evil in the pure state, but a little spark of it all the same – as, for example, in the Villa Palagonia in the heart of Palermo's suburbs where happiness and misfortune are conjured away simultaneously by a truly evil piece of stage-management – that of all the distorting mirrors her lover sets up around her – around his wife's beauty – to entrap her.

Or in the fabulous story of *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* told by Yukio Mishima:

This beautiful building was before long going to be turned into ashes, I thought. As a result, my image of the Golden Temple gradually came to be superimposed on the real temple itself in all its details . . .: the roof in my image was superimposed on the real roof. . . . The Golden Temple . . . had, so to speak, been transformed into a symbol of the real world's evanescence. Owing to this process of thought, the real temple had

now become no less beautiful than that of my mental image. Tomorrow, for all we knew, fire might rain down from the sky. . . . But for the present it stood serenely before us in all its fine details, bathing in that light which was like the summer's fire.[1]

The courage required to make a confession was a trifling matter. . . . The fact is that by . . . refusing to confess I had until then been experimenting with the single problem: 'Is evil possible?' If I were to persist until the end in not confessing, it would prove that evil, albeit merely a petty evil, was indeed possible. . . . The thought that if I should confess, the first petty evil of my life would collapse, held me back.[2]

Good wants always to speak itself, whereas evil is bound up with secrecy. Hence the confession of sex and, before long, simply the frenzied urge to talk of it. The parading of sex, from the obnoxious to innocuousness; cleansing and absolution by language. The special quality of hell is to see everything clearly down to the last detail.[3]

On the one hand, a phantasm of immortality emerged from the apparently destructible aspect of human beings; on the other, the apparently indestructible beauty of the Golden Temple gave rise to the possibility of destroying it. Mortal things like human beings cannot be eradicated; indestructible things like the Golden Temple can be destroyed. . . . If I were to set fire to the Golden Temple . . . I should be committing an act of pure destruction, of irreparable ruin, an act which would truly decrease the volume of beauty that human beings had created in this world.[4]

Nothing else can change anything in this world. Knowledge alone is capable of transforming the world, while at the same time leaving it exactly as it is. When you look at the world with knowledge, you realize

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[1] Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*. Translated by Ivan Morris (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 41–2.
[2] Ibid. pp. 82–3.
[3] Ibid., p. 95. The passage in italics doesn't appear in the current French edition of Mishima's work or in the English translation.
[4] Ibid., pp. 182–3. The term translated here as phantasm is rendered as 'simulacre' in the French.

that things are unchangeable and at the same time are constantly being transformed. You may ask what good it does us. Let's put it this way – human beings possess the weapon of knowledge in order to make life bearable. For animals such things aren't necessary. Animals don't need knowledge or anything of the sort to make life bearable. But human beings do need something, and with knowledge they can make the very intolerableness of life a weapon, though at the same time that intolerableness is not reduced in the slightest.

. . . Well, beauty – beauty that you love so much – is an illusion of the remaining part, the excessive part, which has been consigned to knowledge. It is an illusion of the 'other way to bear life' which you mentioned.[5]

If I burn down the Golden Temple, I told myself, I shall be doing something that will have great educational value. For it will teach people that it is meaningless to infer indestructibility by analogy. They will learn that the mere fact of the Golden Temple's having continued to exist, of its having continued to stand for five hundred and fifty years by the Kyoko Pond, confers no guaranty upon it whatsoever. They will be imbued with a sense of uneasiness as they realize that the self-evident axiom which our survival has predicated on the temple can collapse from one day to another.

The continuity of our lives is preserved by being surrounded by the solidified substance of time. . . . Take, for example, a small drawer, which the carpenter has made for the convenience of some household. With the passage of time, the actual form of this drawer is surpassed by time itself and, after the decades and centuries have elapsed, it is as though time had become solidified and had assumed that form. A given small space, which was at first occupied by the object, is now occupied by solidified time. It has in fact become the incarnation of a certain form of spirit. . . . It is written . . . that after a hundred years have passed and objects have been transformed into spirits, the hearts of men are deceived, and this is given the name of Tsukumogami, the year of the mournful spirit. It is the custom of the world to remove one's old

[5] Ibid., pp. 203–4. The term translated as 'illusion' here is rendered in the French as 'fantôme'.

household utensils each year before the advent of Spring and to throw them into the alley; and this is known as the house-sweeping.[6]

Thus my deed would open the eyes of men to the disasters of the Tsukumogami and save them from those disasters. By my deed I should thrust the world in which the Golden Temple existed into a world where it did not exist. The meaning of the world would surely change.[7]

It is a truly superb allegory, this story of the Golden Temple: the allegory of evil's revenge, of destruction as the only way out from beauty and the excess of beauty.

But not just beauty. Evil can also befall intelligence.

Intelligence protects us from nothing – not even from stupidity.

Being intelligent is not enough, then, to prevent one from being stupid, and sometimes intelligence even lives in stupidity's shade, and vice versa.

Not only does intelligence not mark the end of stupidity, there is no other way out from excess of intelligence but stupidity. In keeping with an implacable reversibility, stupidity lies in wait for it, as its shadow, as its double.

Only thought, only lucidity, which stands as much opposed to intelligence as to stupidity, can escape this trial of strength.

But there is no rule, no more for good than for evil: they chase each other endlessly around the Moebius strip.

Given the hellish production of collective intelligence, we shall have to reckon in the future with an ever-higher rate of artificial stupidity.

A few millennia further down the road of the last century – and everything men do will exhibit the highest intelligence; but that way intelligence will have lost all its dignity. By then it will doubtless be necessary to be intelligent, but it will also be so common and vulgar that a nobler taste will experience this necessity as a *vulgarity*. And just as a tyranny of truth and science could make lying more highly esteemed, a tyranny of intelligence would be capable of producing a

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[6] Ibid., pp. 183–4

[7] Ibid., p. 184.

new species of nobility. To be noble might then come to mean: to have madness in one's head.'[8]

With the emergence of Artificial Intelligence – the 'highest stage of intelligence', that of an integral, limitless intelligence – it will not even have taken thousands of years for Nietzsche's prophecy to come true.

An asexual intelligence, unfolding by contiguity and brain-grafting. A fractal intelligence and yet an intelligence undivided since, though subdividing indefinitely, it is never opposed to itself.

An absolute progress, then, towards the ramification of single-cell organisms, towards a numerical sequencing and automatic calculation anterior to any complex, analytical thought. The mental equivalent of biological regression to a stage prior to that of sexuation: the genetic involution of the species towards the zero degree of procreation in cloning parallels the mental involution of the species towards the zero degree of thought in Artificial Intelligence.

It seems nothing can counteract the proliferation of this Artificial Intelligence based on the zero degree of thought.

Nothing, that is, except this reversibility of intelligence and stupidity – the latter representing a renewed challenge to victorious intelligence.

There is something here too like a revenge of evil.

Something to which the tyranny of reality leads equally well – to appreciating any old form of madness and illusion.

What the tyranny of Artifical Intelligence leads to most surely is the birth of a previously unknown stupidity – artificial stupidity – deployed everywhere on the screens and in the computer networks. It is at this point that natural stupidity may, like madness, recover a degree of nobility in abreaction to Integral Reality.

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[8] Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Book 1, Section 20. I have used my own translation here, as Baudrillard's French version differs considerably from the available English ones. In particular, the term *Klugheit* is rendered here as 'intelligence', where Walter Kaufmann, for example, translates as 'prudence'. And where some English translations work from a text containing the phrase 'ein eklerer Geschmack', this French version clearly assumes 'ein edlerer Geschmack', which seems rather more probable.

When intelligence becomes hegemonic, becoming a mode of technical, collective, automatic adaptation, then any other hypothesis than intelligence becomes preferable. Stupidity becomes preferable.

When the hypothesis of intelligence ceases to be *sovereign* and becomes *dominant*, then it is the hypothesis of stupidity that becomes sovereign. A stupidity that might be said to be a sort of higher intelligence, on the verge of a radical thought – that is to say, beyond truth.

Artificial Intelligence, for its part, sees itself as purged of all stupidity; it prefers to overlook the eternal duel between intelligence and stupidity – it is in this sense that it is stupid: it is like a disembodied thought that could be said to have lost its shadow. Now, he who has lost his shadow is merely the shadow of himself.

At any rate, no one knows what the destiny of this intelligence will be.

Perhaps natural selection will win out even among artificial entities.

Every day thousands of sites die out on the Internet. What applied in the case of living beings over the course of evolution is continuing now in that of digital, genetic, cybernetic artefacts, doomed to disappear in droves to leave only a few of them, or their distant descendants along the digital chain. And we are only at the dawn of this ruthless selection process. In the order of artificial beings, we are at the stage occupied by bacteria in the order of life.

'The measurement of intelligence,' says Stephen Jay Gould, 'is itself the mark of unintelligence.'

In the symbolic chain, nothing is comparable with anything else; there is no scale of measurement. Man and animals and the other forms are part of a chain, but do not merge with each other.

It is when they are 'liberated', unchained from each other, that they become comparable, measurable and almost automatically inferior or superior to one another. All hierarchies, discriminations and scales of superiority derive from this passage through comparability, measurement and the ideological instruments of measurement. The measurement of IQ is simply the caricatural example.

Why do we persist in measuring intelligence? If it exists, it does so in the much more subtle sense of complicity (intelligence with the enemy!).

And, in that sense, anyone 'at the bottom of the scale' can have greater intelligence than anyone else at the top.

By contrast with the exponential character of technical and digital intelligence and the virtually infinite expansion of the networks, thought is finite.

By its very singularity it remains a circumscribed, initiatory form.

It will never be available at will by a mere productive miracle, such as the one flooding the market of knowledge, information and skills.

Understood as empirical, mechanical functioning, there is, according to the whole of modern analytic philosophy (Turing), a highest stage of the machine, of mathematical calculation and technicity in general.

Moreover, this analytic function has a history, whereas thought does not (Adorno: 'No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb'[9]).

Thought is finite, technical intelligence is infinite. It presupposes an irreversible evolution, a highest stage which Turing glimpsed as a definitive ideal.

Thought is measured by a different rule, and puts us in mind, rather, of those souls whose number, according to certain ancient myths, is limited.

There was in that time a limited contingent of souls or spiritual substance, redistributed from one living creature to the next as successive deaths occurred. With the result that some bodies were sometimes waiting for a soul (like present-day heart patients waiting for an organ donor).

On this hypothesis, it is clear that the more human beings there are, the rarer will be those who have a soul. Not a very democratic situation and one which might be translated today into: the more intelligent beings there are (and, by the grace of information technology, they are virtually all intelligent), the rarer thought will be.

Christianity was first to institute a kind of democracy and generalized right to a personal soul (it wavered for a long time where women were concerned). The production of souls increased substantially as a

[9] *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton (London, Routledge, 1973), p. 320.

result, like the production of banknotes in an inflationary period, and the concept of soul was greatly devalued. It no longer really has any currency today and it has ceased to be traded on the exchanges.

There are too many souls on the market today. That is to say, recycling the metaphor, there is too much information, too much meaning, too much immaterial data for the bodies that are left, too much grey matter for the living substance that remains. To the point where the situation is no longer that of bodies in search of a soul, as in the archaic liturgies, but of innumerable souls in search of a body. Or an incalculable knowledge in search of a knowing subject.

Such is our intelligence, that intelligence that lives on the illusion of an exponential growth of our stock.

Whereas the most probable hypothesis is that the human race merely has at its disposal, today, as it had yesterday, a general fund, a limited stock that redistributes itself across the generations, but is always of equal quantity.

In intelligence, we might be said to be infinitely superior, but in thought we are probably exactly the equal of preceding and future generations.

There is no privilege of one period over another, nor any absolute progress – there, at least, no inequalities. At species level, democracy rules.

This hypothesis excludes any triumphant evolutionism and also spares us all the apocalyptic views on the loss of the 'symbolic capital' of the species (these are the two standpoints of humanism: triumphant or depressed). For if the original stock of souls, natural intelligence or thought at humanity's disposal is limited, it is also indestructible. There will be as much genius, originality and invention in future periods as in our own, but not more – neither more nor less than in former ages.

This runs counter to two perspectives that are corollaries of each other: positive illuminism – the euphoria of Artificial Intelligence – and regressive nihilism – moral and cultural depression.

All this arises from the fact that, though we have a purchase on intelligence, and a purchase on the world by way of intelligence, thought, for its part, does not depend on us. It comes to us from the world, which thinks us.

The world is not intelligent, but thought has nothing to do with intelligence. The world is not what we think, it is what thinks us in return.

[I]f one did not look at the world with the world's eyes, the world already in one's own gaze, it fell apart into meaningless details that live as sadly far apart from each other as the stars in the night-sky.

Robert Musil

Chapter 15
The 'Blowback' of Duality

Our entire system, both technical and mental, tends towards oneness, identity and totality, at the cost of an extraordinary simplification. And the whole of our metaphysics and all our neuroses chart the evils and confusions that ensue from that simplification.

But duality is indefectible.

It is totality that falters in the more or less long term.

Any political, economic, moral or mental system that achieves this even virtual totalization, that achieves this kind of perfection, either automatically fractures or duplicates itself to infinity in a simulacrum of itself. Everything that comes close to its definitive formula or its absolute potency can only repeat itself indefinitely or produce a monstrous double – whether it be terrorism or clones.

There is never any equilibrium state or state of completion that cannot suddenly be destabilized by a process of automatic reversion.

Everything which offends against duality, which is the fundamental rule, everything which aims to be integral, leads to disintegration through the violent resurgence of duality – or in conformity with the principle of evil, whichever you prefer.

It is duality and reversibility which everywhere govern the principle of evil. It is duality, liquidated everywhere, conjured away by all possible means, that restores an absence and an emptiness that are generally submerged by a total presence. It is duality that fractures Integral Reality, that smashes every unitary or totalitarian system by emptiness, crashes, viruses or terrorism.

A reversibility that can be seen even in natural catastrophes which intervene in the course of the world with consummate indifference, which explains why they exert a profound fascination. This is also the charm of the weather; insofar as it is unpredictable, it continues to terrify, and to fuel, the imagination.

So it is with the smallest earthquake, the least accident, some terrorist act or other: these are all equivalent in the emergence of evil, in evil showing through like an inalienable dimension, irreducible to the rational order.

There is no point deploring this – nor exalting it for that matter. These are quite simply the rules of the game. Everything that seeks to infringe these rules, to restore a universal order, is a fraud.

Our moral law is one of universal rationalization, of retotalization of the universe according to the law. But the moral law can do nothing against the rules of the game and the order of evil, which takes its revenge come what may.

Everything turns around. And the virtual completion of the world, the perfect crime, the fantastic attempt to bring into being an integral world – that phantasm of total information paradoxically allows us to glimpse an even more fundamental form: that of its radical incompletion.

In the same way, Integral Reality brings the spectre of radical illusion into view, or back into view.

The height of obscenity brings the re-emergence of the pattern of seduction: 'What are you doing after the orgy?'[1]

So it is that Artificial Intelligence opens on to the radical exercise of thought. So it is that the paroxysm of technology opens on to the constellation of the mystery (Heidegger[2]).

There is a kind of predestination in this.

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[1] This phrase is in English in the original.

[2] Baudrillard writes 'la constellation du secret' here, quoting Heidegger in the standard French translation by André Préau, which reads 'la constellation, le mouvement stellaire du secret'. 'La question de la technique', *Essais et conférences,* Paris: Gallimard, 1958, p. 45. William Lovitt renders this as 'the constellation, the stellar course of the mystery'. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 33.

This reversibility means that the object and the subject are in a sense predestined. So it is with the feminine and the masculine in seduction: they become each other's destiny instead of remaining face to face in the mirror of alienation.

There is no equivalent in terms of which they could be exchanged, short of taking sex, sexuality, as a kind of general equivalent, which we do, in fact, do today in reducing masculine and feminine to their 'difference'.

Similarly, we reduce life and death to the opposition between them, reduce them to opposing terms or, in other words, to their 'objective' reality. Now, neither life nor death can be exchanged for anything.

There is no equivalence in the name of which they could be exchanged.

They alternate and that is all there is to it. Like the seasons, like the elements that change into one another – fire, water, earth and air. Like colours: neither red nor blue can be exchanged; they are exchanged only in terms of wavelength. Otherwise, they are incomparable qualities.

Or, rather, there is a duel between them: death toys with life, life toys with death.

Which of the two succumbs?

Stanislaw Lec reverses the terms here: it is not we who defend ourselves against death, it is death that defends itself against us: 'Death resists us, but it gives in in the end.'

Nothing else so stunning as this has ever been said about death.

Needless to say, this dual relationship has nothing to do with interactivity, which is a parody of it. There is nothing interactive in the antagonistic process of reversibility and becoming.

The feminine and the masculine are not 'interactive': that is ridiculous.

Life and the world are not interactive – life isn't a question-and-answer session or a video game.

There is nothing interactive in words when they are articulated in language.

Interactivity is a gigantic mythology, a mythology of integrated systems or of systems craving integration, a mythology in which

otherness is lost in feedback, interlocution and interface – a kind of generalized echography.

Nor is there any interface between gods and men.

The only rule, as everywhere else, is the dual rule of gift and counter-gift.

According to Bataille, we live on the immense free gift of solar energy, on that natural excess and unreciprocated prodigality. But there is no natural excess and the sun does not dispense its energy free of charge. The Aztecs knew this, they who made it function by performing human sacrifices. Solar energy itself is the product of a dual, sacrificial exchange, a real potlatch. You sacrifice to the gods and they sacrifice in return to make the light exist and with it the stars and living creatures. Or the gods sacrifice themselves first and human beings reciprocate: the dual form plays in both directions.

What would humans be if the sun afforded them its light with nothing in return? If they are not able to give anything back, they are nothing. Conversely, if the gods did not respond to human sacrifice with their blessings they would be nothing. They would not even exist.

Nothing has existence in itself. Nothing exists except in dual, antagonistic exchange.

We have put an end to this dual relation with the sun.

With nuclear power and the bomb, says Canetti in a superb image, we have annexed the sun; we have dashed it down on to the earth, without any possibility of surrendering it, and its light then is a light of death.

Reversibility is still there, but it takes the form of vengeance.

Chapter 16
Lines of Fracture

Lines of fracture, inversions, splits, rifts: there is, as it were, a line beyond which, for every expanding system – every system which, by dint of exponential growth, passes beyond its own end – a catastrophe looms.

We are no longer in a system of growth, but of excrescence and saturation, which can be summed up in the fact that there is too much.

There is too much everywhere, and the system cracks up from excess.

Every mass produces a critical mass effect – in the physical sense of a certain magnitude (mass, temperature, pressure) that produces a radical change in the properties of a body or in the development of a phenomenon.

It is in this way that every phenomenon can reverse its course by mere acceleration or proliferation. It is in this way that a simple variation in the overall mass of the cosmos can tip our universe over from expansion to sudden, violent contraction.

All velocity produces an equivalent or even greater mass.

All acceleration produces an equal or even greater inertia.

All mobilization produces an equal or even greater immobility.

All differentiation produces an equal or even greater indifference.

All transparency produces an equal or even greater opacity.

All information produces an equal or even greater entropy or disinformation.

All communication produces an equal or even greater in-communicability.

All knowledge, all certainty produces an equal or even greater uncertainty.

Etc.

Every process growing exponentially generates a barrier: the speed barrier, the heat barrier, the information barrier, the transparency barrier, the Virtual barrier. And that barrier is insuperable.

The energy of acceleration is exhausted in compensating for the inertia resulting from that acceleration.

The additional information intended to offset the perverse effects of information merely reinforces those effects.

Every exponential form leads to the critical threshold at which the process reverses its effects.

For example, the accumulation of truth, of the signs of truth, produces an irresistible effect of uncertainty.

There is nothing more dissuasive than the accumulation of evidence.

Nothing more unreal than the accumulation of facts.

On the horizon of the signs of the real the simulacrum looms.

When the signs of good accumulate, the era of evil and the transparency of evil begins.

In this way, the passage from the true to the false (or rather to the undecidable), from the real to the simulacrum, from good to evil, is like a critical mass effect, a non-dialectical logic, a fateful logic of excess.

The excess of health engenders viruses and virulence.

The excess of security produces a new threat, that of immune system failure.

The excess of capital engenders speculation and financial collapse.

The excess of information engenders undecidability of facts and confusion of minds.

The excess of reason engenders the unjustifiable.

The excess of transparency engenders terror.

The gravitational collapse of every system, of every process, of every body in movement, whose acceleration creates a reciprocal shock wave, an antagonistic force not just equal but greater, which constitutes its absolute limit, its negative horizon, and beyond which it cancels itself out.

Too much is too much.

Without noticing it, we have gone through the social barrier, the politics barrier, the information barrier. It might even be said that we have gone through the virtual reality barrier and we are approaching the critical eventuality of a collapse of the information systems.

Perhaps, like demographic growth, intelligence itself, in its neuronal extension, constitutes a critical mass?

There will soon be as many artificial neurones on earth, in all of our 'intelligent' machines, as in all our 'natural' brains (120 billion neurones each). Are we not running the risk, after the elimination of dark matter,[1] of an exhaustion of all grey matter, from the point when the stock of Artificial Intelligence exceeds the symbolic capital of the species, this latter ceasing to exist once its much more efficient artificial counterpart comes into being?

Is there room on the earth for as many artificial as natural species, for as much computer-generated substance as organic matter, dead or alive, for as much Artificial Intelligence as natural intelligence?

Is there room for both the world and its double?

So long as we were in a kind of spatial, geographical and mental infinity and transcendence, universality could function as a dynamic idea – totality being fine and desirable only as a dream.

What we have today is the absolute reverse of the dialectic of the universal, the stage of the globalization of a finite, excessive, transcendence-less universe.

Too much is too much.

The 'fine souls' say: 'The excess of culture will never abolish the desire for culture. The profusion of sex will never abolish desire.'

And the same goes for communication, information, democracy and human rights too. They cannot imagine that there is too much (yet obesity, that surfeit of body-mass, ought to make them think).

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[1] I take this to be a reference to the recent challenges to conventional assumptions on the extent of dark matter in the universe. See, for example, the article 'Things Fall Apart' in *The Economist*, 5 February 2004.

All this is wrongheaded. Nothing escapes the law of sudden, violent deflation through excess, through overproduction – particularly not desire, which is pretty much geared to lack!

The same law applies here as in the markets, and the same crash looms over any form of excrescence, be it sexual, cultural or economic.

Information, communication, production, spectacle – what if there were an explosive accumulation of all these things?

We might think that the human capacity for adapting to the very worst is infinite. Most of the time it is proven to be so, and that can even produce an inverted thrill – but perhaps it will not turn out to apply indefinitely?

The surfeit of the social drives us out of the social.

The surfeit of politics drives us out of politics.

The surfeit of reality drives us out of reality.

One soul more and everywhere is overpopulated.[2]

One single element more and the whole system tips over into excess or exclusion.

A single mad cow and the whole herd has to be slaughtered.

This is the dictatorship of abundance, of excess, of the critical mass that overturns the accounting principles and sets us on an abusive, exponential course.

In any event, for the maleficent spirit of pataphysics everything is already excessive. The world itself is *de trop*.

The world, having become integral, absorbs everything into its fullness and, in so doing, expels itself. In its very totality, which is at once, like Ubu, naïve and ridiculous, it demonstrates irrational behaviour.

This is why, from a certain critical density onward (for example, the density of traffic in traffic jams), rational behaviour no longer pays. To move towards one's goal randomly is as efficient as taking a calculated

[2] 'Un seul être de plus et tout est surpeuplé.' This echoes Lamartine's famous line from the seventh stanza of 'L'isolement' (*Méditations*): 'Un seul être vous manque et tout est dépeuplé.' Interestingly, this line was also parodied by Jean Giraudoux in *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* as 'Un seul être vous manque et tout est repeuplé.'

route (as in Naples, for example, where absolute disorder produces the same results as absolute order).

Sometimes irrational behaviour can even be superior to the rational: so, for example, two boats on Lake Constance in dense fog are in less danger of colliding if their pilots are drunk than if they are attempting to master the situation.

And from this we can draw some conclusions regarding the beneficial effect of evil and also the diabolic effect of good.

In our current situation, where we are everywhere on the verge of this critical density, if not indeed beyond it, the wise thing would be to act generally in irrational ways. Out of intolerance to the system itself.

For, paradoxically, whereas tolerance is held up everywhere as the supreme value, the question of intolerance to the system itself and to its effects is never raised, of intolerance to good and to the excess of good.

Tolerance, this peaceful coexistence of all cultures, all religions, of mores and ideas, is more or less the equivalent of that degraded form of energy that is heat (leaving aside the fact that, following its own 'humanitarian' logic, it assumes, on occasion, entirely intolerant forms of intervention).

In a world ruthlessly doomed to this principle, the irruption of intolerance will soon be the only event. The automatic return of all forms of racism, integrism and exclusion in reaction to this unconditional conviviality.

Whereby evil ironically resurfaces.

However, it may seem that positive values emerge from evil, but once again it is evil that is at work in this ironic reversal – there is, once again, in this violation of logic a violence done to reason.

It was in this way that Jarry drew happy consequences from the exponentiality of sex, writing in *The Supermale* that once a certain critical threshold has been passed, you can make love indefinitely . . .

But that is pataphysics!

Chapter 17
Parallel Universes

The totalization of the world, this coming of an Integral Reality, leaves behind it all kinds of useless functions: the body, sex, reproduction, language, death. All this is useless from the viewpoint of the networks, of cloning and of Artificial Intelligence. Thought, work and the real, voided of their essence by their substitutes, become relics or useless oddities.

Death itself ceases to be an event, a specific, individual destiny. Diluted in the clone or in a kind of mental coma, it disappears on the biological horizon of the machine body.

But perhaps it then becomes an inalienable singularity that assumes its full force as symbolic stake, as challenge, as pure form of reversibility?

Perhaps all these functions, at the same time as they disappear on the horizon of the real, are doomed to perpetuate themselves as parallel universes, as autonomous singularities, entirely dissociated from the dominant universe?

In this way, life itself can become a kind of parallel universe, something strange that happens to us while we are doing other things.

And the ego itself, freed from its identity, can strike out along the parallel paths of becoming.

Words, freed from their meanings, move on another orbit, that of language in the pure state.

In this way, starting out from what is expelled by the real, all sorts of silent circulations form – dual lives, absent events, transverse dimensions.

Existential divide[1]

Birth as watershed, as demarcation line between two universes, the ego and the non-ego, the only potentiality that has been embodied being the ego.

But this differentiation is not as decisive as one thinks, as all the possibilities set aside at birth continue to run parallel to the ego, to the only potentiality realized, and from time to time make a foray into its lifeline.

It is these excluded alternatives that make up alterity and thereby one of the forms of becoming – linked to the possibility of crossing the line in the other direction, of going across that demarcation line towards the other, towards all the others – to become the other.

Whereas the ego of identity is content to pursue its history inside this lifeline, the play of destiny implies the crossing of this 'existential divide'.

Such are the two parallel dimensions of any existence: that of its history and its visible unfolding, and that of its becoming, a transfusion of forms towards these parallel universes, a devolution, an anamorphosis of the will.

Double life entails the notion of double death.

In one of these two lives you may already be dead, doubtless without knowing it. Sometimes it is the dead element that pulls the living along. In faces even, often one part is alive and the other already dead.

A double life entitles you to two deaths – and why not two amorous passions at the same time? So long as they remain parallel, all is well. It is when their paths cross that the danger arises. You may from time to time desert your life – one of the two – and take refuge in the other. The one in which you exist, the other in which you don't.

Where this living death doesn't exist, life takes its place. Just as the person who loses his shadow becomes the shadow of himself.

('The shadow of himself' – that would be a fine title. With the subtitle: 'Memoirs of a double life'.)

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[1] 'Existential Divide', 'Time Divide' and 'Continental Divide' are in English in the original.

All identity problems run up against this parallax of death – this parallel axis of death. And this is never anything other than the day of reckoning contemporaneous with our existence, lived simultaneously – which does not, therefore, await us at the end of life, but accompanies us faithfully and implacably in it.

But this is merely one particular case in the distribution of life and death.

One is dead in one's lifetime itself; multiple deaths accompany us, ghosts that are not necessarily hostile, and yet others, not dead enough, not dead long enough to make a corpse.

So in *The Piano* (by Jane Campion), Ada – or at least one of the Adas – remained at the bottom of the ocean, bound to the piano that had sunk, and the other got free and resurfaced into a past – or later – life.

At any rate, we have all already been dead before living, and we came out of it alive. We were dead before and we shall be dead again after.

We do lots of wondering about the time after our death, but, paradoxically, none about the time before our birth.

Death and life can reverse themselves from this standpoint. And this implies another presence of death to life, because it – not simply an indeterminate nothingness, but a determinate, personal death – was there before and it does not cease to exist and to make itself felt with birth.

It is not merely hanging over the future like a sword of Damocles, it is also our prior destiny – there is something like a precession of death, which combines with the anticipation of the end in the very unfolding of our lives.

This connects up with the genetic process of apoptosis, in which the two opposing processes of life and death begin at the same time. In which death is not the gradual exhaustion of life: they are autonomous processes – complicit in a way, parallel and indissociable.

Hence the absurdity of wishing, as all our current technologies do, to eradicate death in favour of life alone.

Along these same lines of thinking, Lichtenberg made an amusing suggestion: he imagined a world in which human beings would be born

in old age and would get younger and younger until they became children again – these latter continuing to get younger until they were put in bottles where, after returning to the embryonic state, they would lose their lives. 'Girls of fifty to sixty would find particular pleasure in raising their now tiny mothers in bottles . . .'

Time divide

One can imagine also a temporal dividing line with time flowing off to either side of it, in accordance with a contradictory double arrow, like the waters separated by the Continental Divide that are in the end reunited in the same oceanic cycle.

According to Ilya Prigogine, we intuitively sense the irreversibility of physical phenomena and time's arrow is irreversible. But we may hypothesize a reversible process at the very heart of time, and at the very heart of thought. A dual arrow of time, a dual arrow of thought (according to some scientists, the elementary physical laws are reversible; that is to say, their mathematical expression is unchanged if the temporal variable is reversed). How can we reconcile this reversibility with the irreversibility we observe on the basis of the commonplace intuition we have of time?

This other dimension of time isn't another directional arrow in the opposite direction. It isn't a regression (as in most science fiction novels), but a reversion. And if we may designate the usual dimension of time with an arrow, then the other would, rather, be a deviation, a clinamen, an opposite declination.

Ultimately, the Big Bang and the Big Crunch are born at the same time. The one does not come at the end of the other (any more than death comes at the end of life) or succeed the other in a cosmic cycle. They occur simultaneously and unfold in parallel, but in opposite directions.

It is as though time were squinting – a metalepsis that leads it to mistake the effect for the cause, and causes things to unfold in the other direction or, better, in both directions at once, like that famous wind that blows in all directions.

There is no more linearity, end or irreversibility than there is an indefinite linear function. In the order of chaos all systems and all functions convulse, bend back and fold in on themselves in accordance with a logic that excludes any evolutionary theory (and the theory of time's arrow, just like the theory of entropy, is an evolutionary theory).

Thus, what is merely a hypothesis where physics is concerned is a striking metaphor for our own lives and history: on our scale, too, things turn around at every moment, there is involution at the same time as there is evolution. Things are not first there and then gradually exhausted; they vanish as they appear.

To the phantasm of an integral universe of information and communication there stands secretly opposed the desire for a universe made up entirely of elective affinities and unforeseeable coincidences.

The universe of chance, luck and play.

In which nothing happens accidentally, but things happen rather by an internal necessity, or by happy or unhappy covergence.

Nothing is left to statistical probability here; all is left to the open possibility that the event may occur. Now, *everything wants to occur* and it is we who stand in the way of this infinite possibility.

All these events are potentially there. The potentiality in question is that of things yearning to appear and it has an echo within us. It is from this that the certainty comes that something *must* happen. And the event is made up of all those which, simultaneously, did not take place. For nothing of what did not take place disappears entirely. Absent events continue to exist as part of a parallel history and at times re-emerge suddenly in a manner unintelligible to us. The actual present is made up of this ever-living inactuality.

John Updike, in *Toward the End of Time*:

> 'Perhaps': the word is like the little fork in reality when a quantum measurement is made. Each time that we measure either the position or momentum of an elementary particle, the other specific becomes, by Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, unknowable. The 'wave function' of the particle collapses. Our universe is the one containing our observation. But, some cosmic theorists aver, the system – containing the particle, the measuring apparatus, and

> the observer – continues to exist in its other possible states, in parallel universes that have branched from this moment of measurement. The theory is called that of 'many worlds.' . . . From the same verifiable quantum formulations arises the possibility that our universe, born from nothing, was instantly boosted, by the gravity-reversing properties of a 'false' vacuum, into an expansion so monstrous that the universe's real limits lie many times beyond the matter of which we can gather evidence with our farthest-seeing telescopes.[2]

The hypothesis of parallel events and lifelines throws into question the conception of linear, progressive history.

At any moment, the linear existence of the individual may be crossed by these lines of force from elsewhere. When these parallel lines never meet, it is a bad sign (but we do not live in a Euclidean geometry).

When nothing happens to interrupt the thread of history, then it can be regarded as dead, since it is unfolding in accordance with an identical model.

We may mention here the concept of 'uchronia' introduced in the nineteenth century by the philosopher Renouvier, echoing the notion of utopia, but in the opposite direction.

Utopia relates to an imaginary future: 'What might happen ideally if . . .' Uchronia plays on this same standpoint, but with regard to the past: 'What might have happened if . . .' Bringing the variables around past events into play, what other event would we have ended up with? What other retrospectively possible sequence of events? (Take Cleopatra's nose, or the multiple random elements in the death of Diana or the unexpected arrival of Blücher on the battlefield at Waterloo . . .)

There is, thus, a whole uchronic 'imaginary', which we may regard as entirely futile if we take a realist view of things, but which assumes its full force if we retain the hypothesis of the potential force of absent events.

Today, utopia is at an end and uchronia with it. All these things have been absorbed into the only possible universe, that of real time and an inexorable present-ness.

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[2] *Toward the End of Time* (London: Penguin. 1999), pp. 16–17.

At the same time as it gave rise to the utopian dimension, modernity gave rise to the opposite dimension of objective – technological, scientific, economic – reality, which relentlessly proceeds on its course to the exclusion of any imaginary order.

And if they were both able for a long while to lead contradictory, but collusive, existences, they have both been absorbed today into the operation of the Virtual.

In digital calculation, fiction can no longer resurface; as for the real, our good old real, which gloried in its image and its reference to the world – that disappeared long ago.

The possible itself is no longer possible.

What happens happens, and that's all there is to it.

It is the end of history, then, in its linear continuity and the end of the event in its radical discontinuity.

All that remains is the blatant self-evidence of actuality, of the actual performance, which, by that fact, becomes once again a total fiction and hallucination.

Chapter 18
Anamnesis

It is probable that we have all been everywhere, in dreams, in an epileptic fit, in successive transmigrations and at present we are dying of boredom at always seeing the same places. Who can say with certainty whether he has or has not been to a particular place?

GUIDO CERONETTI

We have all been everywhere in some past life.

This suprasensory reminiscence, this 'journey of the soul' through places, bodies and successive lives, this fantasy ubiquity, has nothing to do with the ubiquity that is ours through the networks, through telepresence and telereality.

Though we might imagine the Virtual as the shortened version and prefigurement of future lives (not past ones any more), of a 'journey of the brain' (not the soul) through successive disembodiments – as the space-time of a spectral metempsychosis of the future.

The (radical) difference between virtual ubiquity and the anamorphosis of successive transmigrations is that in the space of the Virtual it is we who change place, who pass technologically from one place to another, whereas in the poetic space or in great mythology it is places, gods that metamorphose within us – and we are the theatre of that metamorphosis, the privileged site where their forces meet and where they all inhabit us, one by one, in some particular other life, at one moment or another.

Poetic man in Hölderlin's vision is like this: he is run through, shot through, by all divinities; he takes his source with all the rivers and

inhabits all the mythic places of the globe, from Patmos to the Indus, by the mere force of becoming.

Becoming is linked to elementary forms, to natural or mythical beings or to all kinds of elective affinities by the same devolution, the same transference of will.

It is by paying this price that we pass from one form to the other, all of which can return. This is the secret meaning of the Eternal Return: all forms are both distinct and singular, but bound together in a chain. And if you manage to place yourself on this cycle of becoming, you can snake back endlessly from the one to the other and have control over them all.

This is what the gambler does in Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance*.

It is what the poem does when the sign become a destiny in which reality loses itself, when language becomes again the immense play of signs, the structuring of which escapes us . . .

The enumeration of rivers, mountains, gods, heroes, in the mythic unfolding of their births, their exploits, their sacrifices – and, ultimately, their mere naming.

The scattered elements of the poetic anagrammatization come together again in the pure utterance of the proper name. Naming cities, rivers, demigods, deified elements.

Melancthon Brunswick. Names, as fragments of a world out of joint, vestiges of a kind of cosmological disaster, but all speaking to each other across the ages, beyond history – no need even to recount any history.

An end to the sentimental panegyric of nature. Everything has become mythic – the seasons are there like gods, the rivers are there like gods.

There is also the infinite paradigm of language, the paradigm of the declension of cases: nominative, vocative, genitive, dative, but also active/passive, singular/dual. The noun (the name) alone, without attribute, without substance, without adjective, without verb, without complement, without history, bears the whole literal burden. The anagrammatization of all the names of God. And hence also his death, his perfect fragmentation, his end as transcendent totality.

Nietzsche, like Hölderlin, gives himself all the names of history, Dionysus, the Crucified one. He does not identify with them (that is madness), nor does he equate himself with them or measure himself against them (*hubris* and immoderation). He becomes all the Gods and Heroes and Rivers: anamorphosis, metamorphosis.

No metanoia or identification mania, but a chain of forms, figures, names.

Every name is a dual relation to the world, and each detail, each fragment, stands in a dual relation to the whole.

This is the fragment's revenge on the discourse.

The secret of the world is in the detail, in the fragment, in the aphorism – in the literal sense, *aphorizein* meaning to isolate, to separate, to cut off – not in the whole. It is through the detail that the anamorphosis, the metamorphosis of forms, passes, whereas the whole short-circuits this becoming by totalization of the meaning or the structure.

It is the same with Anagrams in language: the name of God is scattered through the poem; it now appears only fragmented, dismembered.

It will never be revealed.

It does not even become what it is, in keeping with the ensnaring formula of a finality of being; it simply *becomes*. That is to say, it passes from one form to the other, from one word to the other; it circulates in the detail of appearances.

Taken in its detail, the world is always perfectly self-evident.

Someone said: everything is true, nothing is exact.

I would say the opposite: nothing is true, everything is exact.

In this sense, any image, any act, any event, any detail of the world, is good, provided it is escribed, isolated, separated, scattered – anagrammatized, anamorphosed, 'aphoristic'.

The sign in general, as fragment, as particle wrested from the natural world, is already in itself an immediate subversion of the discourse of the real and of meaning in its pretension to totality.

Thought too must fragment and scatter.

Thought is a spectrum, and truth, if it exists, can only show through anagrammatically in the spectrum of thought.

'He could refract an idea which everyone thought simple into a hundred others, as the prism does with sunlight, each finer than the other, then gather together a host of others to recreate the white light of the sun, where others merely saw disorder and confusion' (Lichtenberg).

Rothko's transition to an immediate, definitive form, light years from what he was doing up to that point.

'My images have two characteristics: either they dilate and then open up in all directions, or they contract and then close up precipitately on all sides. Between these two poles lies everything I have to say.'

A change by which he separates himself miraculously from the artist he still was, with his place in the history of art, to be nothing but the sovereign medium of an extremely simple form, which no longer has anything to do with expressionism or abstraction.

'The form which appears stuns you with its simplicity. And perhaps the most surprising thing is that, during our earthly existence, in which our brains are bound with bands of steel – the tightly-fitting dream of our own personality – we have not peradventure given that little mental shake which would have freed the imprisoned thought and would have procured for it the ultimate intelligence' (Vladimir Nabokov).

Doesn't everyone have in them this potential change and becoming? This absolute singularity which demands only to occur effortlessly, an inspired form freed from the straitjacket of our individual being?

We have this becoming within us, and we lack nothing, since we are rid of truth.

The world too lacks nothing as it is; it opposes any attempt to make it signify anything whatever. To inflict truth on it is like explaining a joke or a funny story.

The poem too lacks nothing: any commentary makes it worse. Not only does it lack nothing, but it makes any other discourse appear superfluous.

Poetry and thought are to be taken in their literalness, not in their truth: truth merely makes things worse.

All language is *de trop*, except for the forms that know how to retain something of this silence and to set language off towards another destination – that of a shadow which follows us and unfolds beyond our presence.

In the anagrammaticality of poetic language, the words seem to have come from elsewhere, to have covered their tracks, and yet to have been there forever. It seems that language, in its multiple singularity, has always been there. Better, it seems to be a long way ahead of us and to turn back in our direction to think us.

The singularity of a language is that, even if it has a history and an origin, it seems to reproduce itself 'as is' at every moment, and autonomously to re-invent itself. It is in this sense that we experience language as a kind of predestination – a kind of happy predestination.

The halting of becoming is the imposition of an end, of a finality, of any finality whatever.

The human race owes its becoming (and perhaps even its survival) entirely to the fact that it had no end in itself, and certainly not that of becoming what it is (of fulfilling itself, identifying with itself).

A fatal strategy that is perhaps itself coming to an end in our desperate effort to finalize the species at all costs, even in its genetic dimension, in order to enslave it to its own finality.

It is the same with the individual being. Its only chance of becoming is to have no end, no ideal formula or alternative solution.

Thought, too, while scattering its traces, leaves the literalness of the world intact, leaves intact the pure literalness of objects, though it sends their meaning up in smoke.

Shadowing the world[1] – following the word like its shadow to cover up its tracks and to show that, behind its supposed ends, it is going nowhere.

It is in this way that thought connects up with the event of the world – not with the occurrence of a totality that is nowhere to be found, but with the occurrence of the world as it is, in its unpredictable coming-to-pass.

---

[1] This phrase is in English in the original.

It is in this way that we attain to the literalness, the material imagining, of the world, by the elimination of whatever obstacle may be between the image and the gaze.

The more daily life is eroded, routinized and interactivized, the more we must counter this trend with complex, initiatory sets of rules.

The more reality becomes reconciled with its concept in an objectless generality, the more we must seek out the initiatory rupture and the power of illusion.

If we cannot make the world the object of our desires, we can at least make it the object of a higher convention – which, precisely, eludes our desire.

Any illusion, any initiatory form, involves a severe rule.

Any created object, visual or analytic, conceptual or photographic, has to condense all the dimensions of the game into a single one: the allegorical, the representative (mimicry), the agonal (*agon*), the random (*alea*) and the vertiginous (*ilinx*).[2]

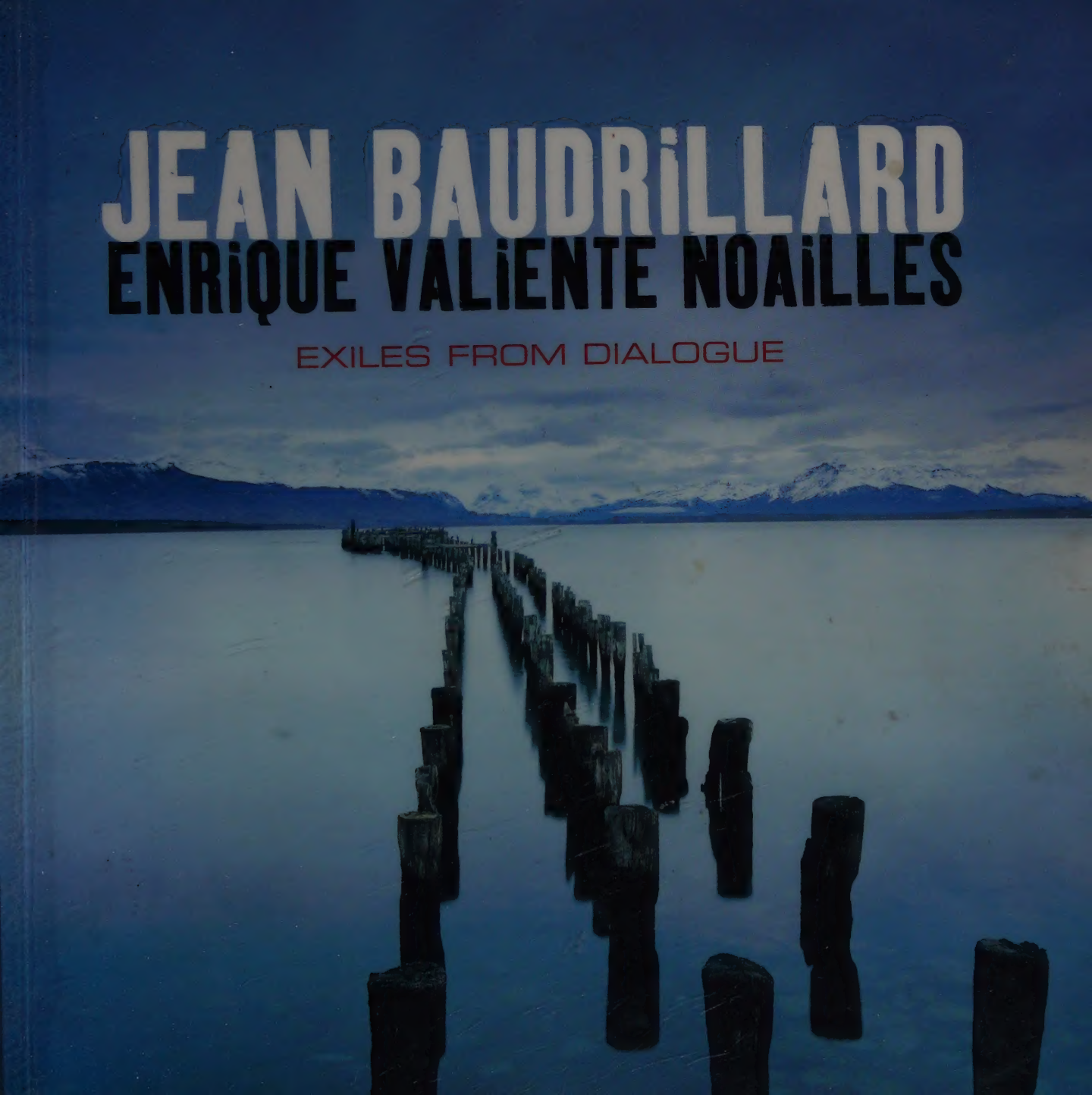
Recomposing the spectrum.

A work, an object, a piece of architecture, a photograph, but equally a crime or an event, must: be the allegory of something, be a challenge to someone, bring chance into play and produce vertigo.

[2] These dimensions of play and games are identified in the work of Roger Caillois. See Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1962).

JEAN BAUDRILLARD
ENRIQUE VALIENTE NOAILLES

EXILES FROM DIALOGUE



EXILES FROM DIALOGUE

LONDON BOROUGH OF HACKNEY
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Never to seek the other in the terrifying illusion of dialogue.

Jean Baudrillard

EXILES FROM DIALOGUE

Jean Baudrillard and Enrique Valiente Noailles

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER

polity

First published in French as *Les Exilés du dialogue* by Jean Baudrillard and Enrique Valiente Noailles
© Les Éditions Galilée, Paris, 2005.

This English translation © Polity Press, 2007.

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

Ouvrage publié avec le concours du Ministére français chargé de la culture – Centre National du Livre.

Published with the assistance of the French Ministry of Culture – National Centre for the book

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ISBN-13: 978-07456-3990-1
ISBN-13: 978-07456-3991-8 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Sabon
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Manchester
Printed and bound in India by Replika Press PVT Ltd, Kundli.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

LONDON BOROUGH OF HACKNEY	
HJ	28/01/2008
194	£15.99
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Not long ago, two friends, Jean Baudrillard and Enrique Valiente Noailles, the one having come from Buenos Aires, the other from nowhere, met in Paris. They had a long discussion, without any precise aim. It was more a way of brushing up against metaphysics with no risk of contagion. They gave it the title they did as a mirrored homage to Bertolt Brecht, and shortly afterwards they parted company and went their separate ways.[1]

[1] The French title of this work *Les Exilés du Dialogue* is an inversion of *Dialogues d'exilés*, which is the French title of Bertolt Brecht's *Flüchtlingsgespräche* (literally, 'Refugee Conversations'). There are no footnotes in the original work, and such minimal footnotes as have been added in this edition are therefore mine [Trans.].

The Retrospective Echo of the Event

ENRIQUE VALIENTE NOAILLES: *I'd like to begin our conversation by referring to Giorgio Manganelli, the Italian writer. He says he believes in God, but that God himself is an atheist . . .*

JEAN BAUDRILLARD: If God doesn't believe in God, perhaps he's never existed. Like reality. It exists only if you believe in it. But perhaps reality doesn't believe in it itself. If put on a lie-detector, it would perhaps admit it doesn't exist.

And if it existed, it would more likely be polytheistic! . . . But Manganelli also says: 'It's possible that a ticking, coming from somewhere, simulates

thought and marks hours that don't yet exist and have never begun.' I find that a little bit of a metaphor for your work: a ticking that comes ahead of the clock. It could, of course, also be the ticking of the timing device on a bomb!

Yes. In any case, time itself is a time bomb.

Yes, it seems a thinker is at once a kind of anticipation of an age and the precipitation of that age towards its end. That might be the case with you. What do you think?

It isn't so much a question of anticipation; that's still within a classical dimension of linear prediction. It isn't an anticipated verification either. If you say, 'I've been saying it was coming for a long time and there you are, it's happened!', then you're verifying your own thought, but fulfilled prophecy robs the event of its singularity. What you have there is merely the image-feedback of thought on the event. The problem is, rather, that of a precession of thought over the event – and yet, simultaneously, of the precession of the event over thought. It's this double helix that's mysterious. In the case of the World Trade Center, for example, everything I've been writing for twenty years was, ultimately, something like a prefigured shock wave of the event, as though it had always been there, identified in a kind of retrospective anticipation. Thought's neither a prophecy nor a prediction. It's a prefiguration. It's already there like the event in a sense, and it finds its fulfilment in something that wholly escapes it. The event impacts on thought even before it has occurred. And when it finally happens, it's both the realization of thought and its end.

The event might be said to take place at several places at once, then, without any previous history. Thought and event would be face to face – not like mirrors, but like strange attractors. Between them you might say there's a secret correspondence, a silent pact, like the pact between two parallel lines that would agree to meet somewhere one day. Something particularly interesting also follows from what you say: it would perhaps be one of thought's additional tasks not to get in the way of the singularity of the event, as well as to protect that singularity from the assault of any reductive transcription. Perhaps part of its effort consists in deterring the artificial, premature production of the event. At any rate, it seems to me there is in thought a jouissance *and an expectation where the idea of precipitation is concerned. Borges said, 'Almost immediately, reality collapsed at several points – the truth is that it wanted to give way.' It's as though reality were waiting for something that would precipitate it, and thought procured that pleasure for it. In this sense, for example, there was a kind of implosion of the concept of 'the social' after* In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities[2] *– without any direct causality, of course.*

The appearance of thought itself is of the order of an event. In that sense, it brings things more quickly to a head. That something like 'the social' is hurtling towards its end – and that the analysis of the social contributes to that – is certain. It's more or less the story of the river speeding up as it comes to the waterfall. All things speed up once they've lost their principle. History, they say, is accelerating. In fact, history has disappeared, but it's left the acceleration behind. We might, in the same way, say reality has disappeared, but it's

[2] J. Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983). Original French edition: *A l'ombre des majorités silencieuses* (Fontenay-sour-Bois: Cahiers d'Utopie, 1978).

left us its principle. Or the reality principle has disappeared, but it's left us reality. It's marvellous, this reality that speeds up like a headless chicken, while its principle goes on like a chickenless head. There are other parallel patterns: God himself, who has disappeared, but has left us his judgement that still hovers over us like the grin of the famous Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Yes, we're left with just the worst residues! Perhaps what's currently being lost calls on thought to help speed up the process. We might think of thought as being always on standby to do this, as well as to lay bare everything that's lost its principle. But your work perhaps goes further: like a neutron bomb, it leaves the pure literality of objects standing while it vaporizes their foundations. There's an abrupt neutralization of meaning in that 'operation', but at bottom it's merely the neutralization of the attempt to neutralize the world. In a way, you do a 'Suite vénitienne' on the world itself, without seeking to take its secret from it: shadowing it and following it in order to wipe away its traces from afar and abolish it.[3]

You can widen this out to the world. 'Shadowing the world' is following the world like its shadow, while at the same time stealing its identity. A distant echo of Peter Schlemihl, the man who lost his shadow, but here the lost shadow comes back again to dog its steps. Once they've been followed like this and shorn of their shadows, things no longer have any precise ends. All functions, set free from their goals, their ends, their use-values in this way, become exponential. That's how it is with reality: set free from its principle, it invades everything and goes off in any direction.

[3] 'Suite vénitienne' is the title of a 'photo essay' by Sophie Calle on the obsessive surveillance of a passing acquaintance, identified as Henri B., over a thirteen-day period in Venice in 1981.

Yes. To put it another way, thought's not beyond things, but before them, so to speak. It comes before things are constituted in themselves, before they're petrified in an irreversible logic of causal order and linear temporality. It's an act of prestidigitation by which you pull away the tablecloth leaving the objects on the table, because there's always a material presence of objects, from which, however, the meaning has been removed.

That's right. Or taking things by surprise before the tablecloth has been laid. This is how it had seemed to me with the photographic object: to arrive even before the objects had entered the order of reference. As soon as you're present, you give them a meaning, and it's already too late. So, you have to take advantage of the little space of time when you're still not really there, take advantage of your absence to grasp what the world may be in your absence.

Yes, because when things notice you're there, they take on reality or, to go on with the photographic image, they begin to pose in the light of meaning. It's important not just that they don't realize you're there, but even that we ourselves don't manage to notice our own presence too much either. For us not to, thought must preserve a furtiveness in its movement.

The act of thought is, in fact, furtive. Like the photographic act, it's an act of disappearance. An act in which you eclipse yourself at the same time as you capture things.

Perhaps thought, in a first phase, strikes a pact of reflection and symmetry with the movement of the world, only to eclipse itself immediately

afterwards by prompting the world, by reflection, to behave in the same way. It's prompted, then, to take part in an asymmetrical duel, a duel of mutual furtiveness. The problem of the real and its petrification is that it shows only a single phase of things, the phase of appearance. Thought consigns them once again to disappearance.

It means restoring an absence that is usually dispelled by a total presence. Starting out from the idea that events all want to come to pass, but are obstructed by meaning and history, you have to remove everything in the event's way, to disobstruct it by creating a void – to take things out of the confines of their reality, to wrest reality from the reality principle.

The *jouissance* of Language

NOAILLES: *I'd like to speak a little about writing and language. At one stage, you used terms like 'symbolic exchange', 'fatefulness', 'seduction', 'hyperreality', etc. Your work seems to have explored all the resources of language and now expresses itself in a manner beyond metaphor and closer to absolute literalness. How, retrospectively, do you see your relation to language?*

BAUDRILLARD: The concepts from the early days still belong to conventional language. They're the common repertoire of the disciplines that were prevalent at the time: anthropology, semiology, psychoanalysis . . . , but with a requirement to deconstruct them. Or, rather, not deconstruct them, but take

the terms to their limits, show up their emptiness. To make them disqualify themselves in order to open up other issues. It was at that point that simulacrum, seduction, the hyperreal and the fateful [*le fatal*] appeared: terms not substitutable for one another, but succeeding each other and unfolding in a kind of spiral. At any rate, at that point theoretical language stopped being conceptual, and the very form became a challenge to objective signification. Nothing operated in an equivalent or dialectical relation any longer, but, by a kind of escalation, language became a fatal strategy [*stratégie fatale*]. It was no longer an instrument of the production of meaning, but of appearance and disappearance, imposing its own surprises, events and catastrophes. And, in the end, in fact, what there is here is a kind of material articulation of language, a literalness that has its own rules. This is true even of theoretical language: it's no longer exactly that we impose ideas on it. What we mean is what we say, but it's also what *it* wants to say – 'it sometimes happens that words, through his mouth, say true and profound things' (Schnitzler).

The danger, the classical short-sighted objection, is to say you're producing literature, or poetry.

There's a risk of that, but what you have to avoid, above all, is labour and boredom. You mustn't weary language, you mustn't force it to say what it doesn't want to. Even if you have your own idea, you have to avoid making language suffer. And it's a question of rhythm.

They sometimes say that people are crushed or depressed by what you write. For my part, I get great delight [jouissance] *from reading you.*

That's the idea. Writing's neither alternative nor redemptive. Nihilistic or not (it may be so in content, but never in form), it always offers a bonus of *jouissance*. The pleasure of writing is in the form. But are people truly sensitive to the *form* of writing? And to the distance it maintains from what it says? That distance in itself is a *jouissance*. Are people sensitive to the implicit seductiveness of what's left unsaid? They're generally sensitive only to the content, to the expression of the ideas. But the only thing that counts is the form the ideas assume, and whether that form is a felicitous one. Sadly, most of the time those who write just add infelicity of form to infelicity of content.

Yes, in more recent writing, there might be said to be a form equivalent to what you call integral reality. An 'integral writing' that never knows how to stop what it's saying before it's said, the expression of which goes right to the end of what it has to say, thereby rendering any reading superfluous. A form that shapes ideas brutally, just as integral reality pushes the real to the point of brutality; that uses language as a recipient into which to pour the content of what you have to say, instead of letting language form a mimetic relation, as it were, with its content, so that the two lend each other added force. We're talking about a writing that is entirely profane in its relation to language, but is, above all, sad, like everything that exhausts meaning. Lastly, it's utterly boring, as you were saying. A writing oriented towards jouissance *seems to be a style whose main achievement is to surprise language itself. Perhaps* jouissance *has to do with effecting the disruption of thought in the face of the total de-realization of the world. This freeing-up of thought, this freedom to think the world the other way round – perhaps that's where* jouissance *lies.*

Yes, and at the same time the fact of rediscovering symbolic chains. The fact, with the free circulation of ideas in full swing, of rediscovering an obligation;

the fact, amid a total permissiveness of meaning, of rediscovering the material chaining of forms and language. Where you come back to the – immoral and poetic – maxim of Omar Khayyam: 'One freeman whom thy kindness has enslaved / Outweighs by far a thousand slaves set free.'[4] The extreme deregulation (liberalization) of the world forces us to invent another set of rules, to play on reversibility, to enter into a 'fatal strategy' of inversion, into a poetic transference of situation. And that too is a source of *jouissance*.

The search for this chaining [enchaînement], *language in pursuit of a new restriction of meaning, reminds me also of that fine line from Kafka's Diaries: 'A cage went out in search of a bird.' The tender nature of that pursuit chimes with the idea of chaining up something with kindness. Language seems to be a form in search of a content that would be sufficiently seduced to chain itself up voluntarily. There's a kind of autonomy of language in writing. It isn't language that obeys, but language that controls the situation, and you have to let it say what it has to say.*

Yes, all contents have been liberated, but nobody can liberate language as form. You never liberate a form; it's the form that enchains you. Hence all these inverted formulas: it's the object that thinks us; it's language that thinks us; it's the world that thinks us – formulas of duality and reversibility.

And of a kind of adequation to the very form of language, of respect for the form of appearance and disappearance of language.

[4] Omar Khayyam, quoted from Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1914).

It's a perpetual dramaturgy, but you mustn't, above all, fall into the formal trap of language: form has to remain an inner challenge; it mustn't appear as an ideal solution. It's like the figure in the carpet, its outline must remain secret.

On the other hand, there is in the delight in reading and writing a kind of coupling between pleasure and violence, as you suggest in Cool Memories.[5] *If there's no violence, there's no pleasure. It isn't a question of any old violence or any old pleasure. These aren't either the sort of violence or pleasure that would have a positive reference from which to extract their* jouissance*: their source of* jouissance *is linked to the volatilization of the referent in the very act of naming it. It's this form of precisely calibrated destruction that provides language with a permanent blood transfusion. In this way, for example, the poetic, as the paradigm of language, may be said to act as a protective atmosphere: it breaks up meaning when meaning, after the manner of meteorites, attempts to pass through it. The work of language could be said to lie in withdrawal, in what it leaves behind when it withdraws, like that fine phrase of Hölderlin's: 'God created the world by withdrawing.'*

That's right. The violence writing does to its own content, the charm of the exasperation of language and that of the violence done to meaning, that of thwarting meaning in its very expression. The enigma of meaning is the secret of writing, and this is expressed in its concision and its aphoristic form. I would like, for example, to have made an anthology of short, elliptical phrases that seemed to me to entrap meaning, all possible meanings, in a subtle twist. This one, for example: 'There isn't a woman in the world

[5] Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories* (London: Verso, 1990).

whose possession would be more precious than the truth she reveals to you by making you suffer.'[6] That simple sentence is inexhaustible. Or this one: 'Existence isn't everything. It is, even, the least of things.' As Rimbaud said, that is 'true literally and in all senses'. Interpretation has no purchase on it. Or this other one: 'Death resists us. It does its best, but it gives in in the end.' This is beyond our imagining, but it's the finest thing that can be said about death. It's by Stanislaw Lec. It's the only way of conquering death, the idea of death, and giving it back to us as something almost intimate and familiar.

If I can just add two or three sentences to these, though not in the same sense, sentences that render a pure power of language, without the least meaning becoming clear in them, though without meaning being absent either. 'Powdered water: just add water to get water.'[7] That's marvellous. It's difficult to go further. Or again: 'He was so thin he had to pass the same spot twice to cast a shadow.' That's a linguistic delight. A third one, by the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro: 'The four points of the compass are three: North and South.' There's genius in this compression of meaning, this rapidity, this electrocution of language . . . What can you add to that?

It's a little bit what we could say of Rothko and his work, which opens up and closes in all directions at one and the same time – it's unassailable. This seems to me to be characteristic of every singularity: impregnable from outside and totally open towards the inside – initiatory. Such sentences are more precious than a whole explanatory presentation. They are, by their

[6] Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories IV*, 1995–2000 (London: Verso, 2003), p. 117.
[7] Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories I*, p. 69.

transparent opacity, a kind of miracle, since they have behind them, nonetheless, a clandestine intuition of meaning. It isn't nonsense; it's just before meaning arrives; before the trap closes again.

Yes, it seems the clandestine character of language and that of thought and the world intersect for a moment. It's a one-off, luminous revelation, without any possible development. And the jouissance *lies perhaps in the movement of withdrawal at the same moment as it appears. This fits with what you've said: 'Language expatriates itself into words that are afraid to signify.'*

Perhaps too this ellipsis is the sacrificial aspect of language, the sacrificial aspect of thought. Poems too are elliptical in the literal sense (*ek-leipein*) in which they leave all the rest outside and are sufficient in themselves. They're not closed in the sense of being closed to the world, but in the sense that there's nothing beyond the horizon of the poem. They are, in that sense, initiatory. The poem is the microcosm. It exhausts all its possibilities in itself, and, as a result, what does it leave you? It leaves you *jouissance*. It doesn't leave you the possibility of escaping *jouissance* by meaning. But the violence of interpretation, there as everywhere, is always ready to re-establish order and to forbid us *jouissance*. And, indeed, most things deserve nothing but commentary.

Escaping jouissance *by meaning – I like that expression. Perhaps, then, the whole immense process of the destruction of the world through meaning comes from a secret terror of* jouissance? *This suspicion is corroborated by the fact that the most frequent and emphatic declaration of human beings, from Aristotle onwards, concerns the pursuit of happiness. It's possible that*

the avowal of this pursuit of joy is a cloak concealing the actual path taken, which runs in the opposite direction. Beneath this declaration of principle, the opposite form is playing itself out, a form of horror, the construction of an igloo of meaning to protect ourselves from jouissance. *(However, just as the destruction of the world through meaning has the aim of ridding itself of a form of* jouissance, *so perhaps this whole opposite thrust of the destruction of meaning is linked to its recovery.) After all, what reason would we have to protect ourselves from* jouissance *by taking refuge in the realization of the world and the destruction of illusion? Perhaps because a fundamental aspect of* jouissance *is that you can't store it up (in the same way as you can't save up anything from a felicitous phrase), and misfortune is preferred for its 'hoardable' character!* Jouissance *can only be seduced, but misfortune can be produced.*

That's true. There's no remainder, no residue, either in the poem or in *jouissance*. The event is total, but it's finite. It's like the sphere of play – a field circumscribed by rules and in itself unassailable. But we mustn't idealize play against the real, since the form of play is not opposed to the real. There are two almost diametrically opposed routes for liquidating the real and meaning. I think we should speak in the one case (the virtual) of an irrevocable extermination and in the other of a playing with meaning, with its disappearance, a perpetual thwarting of meaning, not its denial. Play isn't a denial of the real. It doesn't put an end to it. It makes sport of it, in the same way as seduction sports with desire. It's a form of appearance/disappearance, not a radical elimination.

Perhaps it's difficult not to fall into the temptation of torturing meaning, in response to the torture it inflicts. But you're right, since to play against the

real is to remain absolutely captive to – and, ultimately, complicit with – the real itself, by reflection, as in the aleatory, 'artistic' or surrealistic rupture. It's the same with the distinction you make: not sub-version, but reversion.

Play isn't opposed to anything. You can say of play, as you can of the nothing, that it's perfect because it's not opposed to anything. We should look, rather, towards radical exoticism (Segalen) or the magical abstraction of that singular object, the fetish.

How might we describe the fetish?

Though the fetishism of commodities, which characterizes the abstract circulation of all values, is fascinating, let's leave it aside and look at the fetish object. According to Freud, it's the substitute object for the sexual relation. So it's no more sexual in itself than the fetishized commodity is a material object. It's an abstract prosthesis, a kind of disembodied mental object – an article of clothing, a shoe, a jewel, an accessory – in which the impossible exchange of sex is gathered and crystallized. It is, if you like, an idol, but it's no longer a sign. It's meaningless in itself, but it takes the place of everything. Of everything that cannot take place. Which means that it can't be exchanged for anything. It is, in a sense, a pure object – an artefact, an artifice (this is the literal sense of the word 'fetish'). It's the perfect sex object since it substitutes for any real sex, just as the abstraction of the commodity substitutes for any exchange of real goods, just as virtual reality substitutes for the real world and thereby becomes the form of our modern fetishism. A radical fetishism this, since it affects all areas of existence and knowledge.

We may say all the new technologies have become our new object of desire (I wouldn't venture to say 'perverse' object, as Freud has it with his definition of fetishism as perversion). More generally, there's fetishism when there's no longer transference of meaning, no longer any possible metaphor, when the object merges with the operation of the sign. As with the man who jumps into the dustcart shouting, 'I'm rubbish!', for example; or Harpo Marx who, wanting to get into a club that has 'swordfish' as its password, turns up with a swordfish under his arm. It's literalness that upsets the operation of the sign.

Or the woman who sends her eyes to the lover who has praised them. 'If you like them so much . . .'

Yes, she too has lost the sense of metaphor. But, with her, it's a deliberate sacrifice and a poetic act of defiance. The lover must have been crushed by that absolute gift.

Absolute literalness.

And totally cruel. The lover having fetishized her gaze, she gives him her eyes as literal object. You can see the magical element in fetishism, in this electrocution of meaning and metaphor.

She'd lost the sense of metaphor, but she'd perhaps gained the sense of metonymy! She'd chosen to stay outside the system of representation to carry

out an operation of pure contiguity. In another register, it reminds me of the story of the pirate who threw all his vanquished enemies into the sea one by one, after first asking each his name. One of them, a crafty sailor, replied with the name of the pirate standing before him: the blood-thirsty Jacob Cow. The terror inspired by the name was so great that the real Jacob Cow went back to his ship and vanished. He might well have thrown himself into the sea![8] The terror belonged to the name itself, independently of its bearer, and circulated in something like a chain reaction, an abstract substitution. You might say that in the collection of phrases we've just cited, there's also an absolute literalness. But everything's open in it, whereas in the pure object, everything's closed.

Yes, it's a definitive response that closes off the game through amputation of the sign and a literal short-circuiting. It's the equivalent of the joke in language. The *Witz*, too, is a use of the literalness of language that explodes meaning. Many things in there are of the order of humour, of a savage humour – for example, the sacrifice the woman makes of her eyes by taking her suitor's conventional homage literally.

Kant said laughter was an affection arising out of the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. Humour relieves us and delivers us perhaps from what we hope for . . . But that isn't the whole secret of the operation, because it isn't just any old 'transformation . . . into nothing'. It isn't just anything colliding with just anything.

[8] This story comes from Jean Paulhan's *Jacob Cow le pirate ou Si les mots sont des signes* (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1921), where it is ascribed to Pierre MacOrlan.

No, of course not. It isn't a Brownian collision of particles. And, indeed, it's the weakness of a rearguard aesthetic, a gimcrack Surrealism, that any old kinds of thing are brought together. You find this sort of random manipulation and creativity everywhere. There's no happy coincidence any longer; there's just a promiscuity of everything, an obscene contiguity. It's a wholesale exploitation of chance, begun, in fact, by the Surrealists with their *hasard objectif*. Breaking down the traditional order of things was a fine programme, but if it's to end up in a generalized probability, a reintensified promiscuity, so to speak – that is to say, the opposite of a fateful order, the order of happy coincidences – then the poetic project has collapsed. The same error is made by the 'dice man' in his plan to entrust all his decisions to chance. That's just a random 'devolution' – a veritable parody of fate which, for its part, is based not on random selection, but on elective affinities, and on a rigorous coincidence between will and event. In the fateful order, the will must coincide obscurely with what befalls you. Merely removing the will by throwing dice isn't enough to gain you a destiny, just as saying anything whatever isn't enough to make you enigmatic.

Yes, for there to be a poetic effect, for there to be a happy coincidence, there has to be absolute necessity – even at the level of language or the level of the pure object and the event. An acknowledgement of necessity, not of chance.

Absolutely not of chance. Chance is a derivative, a by-product of the rational, causal world. Instead of a rational enchainment, what you have there is a rational unchaining, in which everything is jumbled, in which everything can be the cause of anything. Now, this is the absolute danger: this kind of mixing, hybridization, confusion and generalized exchange that we're given

to believe is a liberation of things. Multiculturalism, multimedia, interactivity – so many watchwords of a false revolution of desire. Though doubtless not false in fact: the ideal of liberation is that everything should communicate with everything else; it's generalized exchange, prefigured on the global scale by economic liberalism. Now, there's a fundamental rule in the symbolic order that keeps things apart. If you break that rule, then everything comes into interaction, in an unbridled immanence. But there's no source of *jouissance* in this any longer – except in the sense of a mere thrill at a chain reaction. So the play of the virtual and of multiple identities is a form of transitional activity in which you rediscover a little of the infantile confusion, of the virtual omnipotence of thought Freud spoke of, in which language hasn't yet assumed the force of a symbolic obligation – an informal stage which is also, in my opinion, the stage of information, in its profusion and confusion. And there is, indeed, an intense satisfaction in that, a collective satisfaction that might be said to be of the order of desire if the word still had a meaning.

How, then, are we to distinguish this morbid and exponential jouissance *of infinite commutation from the* jouissance *that attaches to a rigorous necessity and to the singular form of the poetic?*

In the sexual order, the exponential downhill path would be that of homogenization and the extenuation of difference. This is the general watchword: everything tends towards transsexuality, towards a total sexual plasticity and flexibility, beyond sexual difference properly so-called. But it's the opposite of seduction which, for its part, is far beyond sexual multiplicity. Seduction might be said to correspond to the maximum degree of *jouissance*, whereas the unlimited play of sex, while equating to a performance (Catherine Millet), would equate also to the zero degree of *jouissance*. It's on this basis that

transsexuality, which was formerly a psychotic hallucination, has become one of our human rights (should we conclude from this that human rights have become a psychotic hallucination?). Seduction, for its part, will never be part of human rights. Sex is, ultimately, merely a reductive hypothesis in relation to seduction, and transsexuality an even more reductive hypothesis in relation to sexuality itself. Perhaps the final solution. The extremization of sex as minimum degree of sex, so to speak.

It's always the same: absolute disorder or seduction. When there's an effect of jouissance, *you don't pass through the second instance, do you, but jump directly from the first to the third?*

That's right. Through sex, you find yourself up against the impossible exchange of sex and, in just the opposite way, on the seduction side of things, you get back to a form of impossible exchange. *Jouissance* of generalized exchange, *jouissance* of impossible exchange. It's both homologous and entirely antithetical.

It's the same with Zen, which says: 'Before studying Zen, the mountains are mountains and the rivers are rivers. During the learning of Zen, the mountains are no longer mountains and the rivers are no longer rivers. Once you've learned Zen, the mountains are mountains and the rivers are rivers.' Between the first and the third instances, things are radically different, but you state them in the same way. When you say, 'The mountains are mountains and the rivers are rivers,' then perhaps, in Heideggerian terms, what you understand by 'being' isn't the same thing. 'Being' in the first instance is a kind of petrified identity, while 'being' in the third instance is a total

openness (perhaps the openness that opens and closes in all directions, as you said of Rothko). Perhaps the expression zero degree/maximum degree represents the difficulty of putting the two phenomena on a single scale discursively. From one reduction to the next (sex against seduction and transsexuality against sex), it would seem that you reach the end of a process, whereas what's going on is perhaps a pure reversion without these things lying on any shared scale. And this reversion would be a way of understanding the Zen figure: the reversion of the third stage precisely never belongs to the class of the negation of the second. This difference even justifies the appearance of this second stage, which does the work of absorbing all the energy of negation and excludes it from the other instances. Could we establish a consonance between our Zen example and these lines of Hölderlin, even if we had to put the word 'truth' in inverted commas? 'For once between Day and Night must / A truth be made manifest. / Now threefold circumscribe it, / Yet unuttered also, just as you found it, / Innocent virgin, let it remain.'[9]

I don't know what figurative representation you can give to this; the two extremes of the mountain meet. In the one, it's a mountain assured of its existence, in the other it's merely a paradoxical moment that revives at every instant. Perhaps we could see it as the figure of the *ouroboros*, the creature that bites its own tail and encircles the whole world before looping back on itself. And to this topology I'd like to add the Moebius strip, another interesting figure, in which each surface becomes its reverse on a continuous band. There's no confusion between the one and the other, yet there is transfusion. Isn't that reversibility and, at the same time, the end of the dialectic,

[9] Hölderlin, 'Germania', trans. Michael Hamburger in Eric L. Santner (ed.), *Hyperion and Selected Poems* (New York: Continuum, 1990), p. 215.

since the reverse becomes the obverse, the positive becomes the negative (and vice versa) without a blow having been struck? There's no difference any more, but transference. No logical or dialectical opposition, but a curving, an involution of the world into itself.

Encircling the whole world and then looping back on itself cancels out any difference between origin and end: everything is closed and open at the same time. These figures say more than any attempt to make the world signify . . .

'Signifying' is of our invention, as is the order of 'causing to do'. The virtual is causing and causing-to-do; information is making known, causing-to-know; communication is making speak, causing-to-speak; advertising is causing-to-be-valued. These things are all factitive and perhaps even factitious; they're simulation in action, the operational, the place where everything *changes*, but nothing *becomes*.

The strategy of opposition: if we mustn't play off truth against truth, we mustn't play off total liberation against truth either – all that's needed is a slight manipulation of appearances as you were saying. Between the banal and the fateful, there's just this slight difference in the manipulation of appearances. It's like the 'signifying' we were just talking about: the poetic doesn't signal to liberation, nor to the accomplishment of the world, it merely gives a little nod and a wink.

I'd even say that it creates a new pact, a total complicity with appearances, without any obligation to truth. I think of Hölderlin again when he speaks

of rivers, trees, cities and mythical heroes. He doesn't speak of them in mythological terms at all, in allegorical or romantic terms. He's the site of their dramaturgy. He's the place where the gods metamorphose, the place where rivers metamorphose, the site where all the fragments of becoming converge. He doesn't liberate the world, he doesn't express it. He's at the confluence of the forces that come from all sides, and he's in thrall to their metamorphosis. You find this in Rimbaud too, from *Illuminations* to *A Season in Hell*: it's a continual metamorphosis from one sentence to the next, and the form conveys this surprise of the whole world in a few sentences.

As in Fragment 12 of Heraclitus ('As they step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow upon them'). There's a symbiosis between what he says and the way he says it; the river and the flow are in the rhythm of the language . . . And, to come back to Rimbaud, he seems to efface himself in the language . . .

He's the absent site, the site of the succession of appearances.

This is perhaps one of the ways his 'I is another' can be taken?

If the 'I' identifies with itself, it's a one-way complicity. It is what it is, and the other is merely the residue. True alterity is what you become, never what you are. What you are is merely the object of alienation.

A fine age, the age of alienation!

Yes, and we're currently losing that too, along with criticism and negation. Soon we'll be able to look back on all that as a golden age.

A nostalgia syndrome? We might even say that when the real is being denigrated, we see a kind of dynamism of the mirage: reality shifts, but the lost paradise does so at the same pace.

Yes, with the upsurge of the global, it's universal values that come to seem like a golden age and a lost paradise. Reality, at the moment of its disappearance, becomes part of the heritage of the species, something akin to a human right . . . a democratic value, a value to be defended. All the values of the nineteenth century are buffed up and revalorized to protect ourselves from apprehending the present world in panic mode. There's always regression, as in Freud's sexual mechanism of fetishism, to the immediately preceding stage.

Towards the paroxystic object, the one that protects you from the end . . .

As we speak of the transitional object, the one that leads to reality, so the paroxystic object (in the literal sense *par-oxyton* means 'penultimate', 'the one before last') is the one that precedes the end, that's just before the end. It's different, then, from the customary meaning as the 'last' or 'culminating moment'.

There's an antagonistic connection here between language and perfection. Language never coincides with perfection; we might even say it comes at the point where perfection ceases to be. As in the wonderful story of John, for

example, who reaches the age of 14 without saying a word and then, one day, suddenly begins to speak in order to ask for the sugar. They ask him why he's never spoken before and he says, 'Up until then, everything was perfect' . . . Hence, language was superfluous. This also happens with Mallarmé's poetic flower, the 'one absent from all bouquets'; without that absence the rest of the flowers are de trop, *as is language.*

It's roughly the same with the world. The world is perfect if you take it as it is, as absolute self-evidence. Then that self-evidence is disturbed, and you have to begin to explain it, to give it a meaning – and that's the beginning of the end.

It's what Nietzsche called 'amor fati'. In other words, there's only one possibility: that of accepting the world tragically.

You have to restore to it its criminal perfection, since it's perfect and criminal at one and the same time. As, indeed, is the entirely abnormal existence of John before the sugar episode. In John's case, the perfection preceding language is idyllic; it's almost the perfection of the state of nature. But another criminal perfection perhaps awaits us at the end of the process. With everything available technologically in a perfectly operational world, there will, once again, be no need to speak. And John, who won't lack for anything, even sugar, will fall dumb again. The fully accomplished world will be the end of language. The quest for a perfect world and a perfect human being, for total information and total efficiency, the quest that haunts our present world, is, then, perfectly criminal. But you can also take the view that perfection's merely a game, that we're merely playing at

arriving at an ultimate point, a terminal point, with the idea that it will never end there and that the movement will always take us beyond the end. We may even hypothesize that we've reached that point already, that we're already beyond the end, beyond perfection, and in the failure that inevitably follows or, even, that accompanies it like a double. There's always a moment when the sugar runs out. And what's thrilling is this moment when the perfection of the real falters, in the convulsions of perfection itself and in its final failure. Moreover, in this strange topology, we must correct an error: that of believing that the failure comes at the end of the perfection. It is there from the outset and follows perfection like its shadow. From the beginning, we're beyond the end. The two processes get under way at the same time, like the Big Bang and the Big Crunch in the theory of the double arrow of time, like life and death. They're born and grow at the same time, contrary to the illusion of death coming at the end of life. All processes trigger the opposing process as soon as they begin, and the story of John is a myth: there never has been an ideal moment, the moment of perfection, when there was no lack of sugar.

The Unbearable Gift

NOAILLES: *One's always rediscovering the difference between this kind of originary perfection, an absolute response to what is there from the outset, and the 'other' perfection, the one you look for at the end.*

BAUDRILLARD: You're quite right, but, once again, the perfection of the beginning is mythic, allegorical, and that of the end is nowhere to be found.

Neither is bearable. We're wrenched from the former by language, and we resist the latter by language. And why are we so mortally allergic to perfection, which we otherwise claim to be our ideal? Doubtless because we can't bear the world being perfect without us; because then we're excluded from it. And yet, in a perverse way, it's the destiny we're manufacturing for ourselves: a perfectly operational world from which we'll automatically be excluded as human beings – while believing we're creating a world in our image.

Hypotheses that are both fine and fearsome: the hypothesis of jealousy towards what unfolds better without us, and that of resentment against what we perceive as lacking nothing, and particularly against all that we perceive as having no need of us. Excluded from the beginning, we've adopted the destruction of this world as destiny, so as to perish like Samson bringing his temple down around him. There is, however, no human force that can demolish the world, which is why we've intuited a more subtle form of destruction that is within our grasp: its duplication. The hypothesis of the virtual.

Exactly. Ultimately, we could take this (technology, simulation, the virtual) as a challenge to the natural perfection of the given world, a challenge to God who gave it to us, if you like – going back, by way of that metaphor, to the fundamental symbolic rule, which states that the unilateral gift is unbearable and that all giving must be reciprocated. There is, then, no original innocence, and the world as it is isn't innocent. It's a poisoned chalice, and we can't accept it as that. We can't take responsibility for it either, because the debt would be too onerous. And yet it's God's strategy to make us responsible for it, or to redeem the debt (or to pretend to do so by the sacrifice of his son),

which puts us even more in his debt and overwhelms us even more. We have, then, to dispel this natural world and respond with a world made by our own hand, a world desired and designed by us. The true response lies in defiant challenge, not at all in the idea of being 'free' or 'responsible'. It's in the challenge that the responsibility is total, and that it's resolved. In this sense, the enterprise of substituting a world made with our own hands for a given world is, indeed, a metaphysical challenge and one that conforms, in some way, to the symbolic rule (one always has to bear this in mind in the critical evaluation of technology). The unfortunate thing is that this operation implies a substitution for the natural human being of an artificial, inhuman being, the future sovereign of this virtual universe, born of an endless duel with the natural world. In this sense, too, the virtual is a form of disappearance, but that disappearance is, at least, one we shall have desired.

This counter-gift makes us dependent on the original giver. That is perhaps the way God ensures the impossibility of any atheism, in Nietzsche's sense: i.e. as freedom from debts (Un-schuld) *to the gods. This is the reason for the rush to have original sin exist, for such haste to be finished with innocence. This search for reciprocity with God by means of this cruel, sacrificial exorcism of the world is a curious thing. Is it a question of dismantling it and duplicating it every inch of the way, by seeking out the original tracks of God? Is it a dissimulated extermination that conceals the shame of its own cruelty? Is it a question of gaining a counter-*jouissance *from our own suffering? Anything goes, except not responding at all, which would in a sense be worse than the virtual realization, wouldn't it?*

It would mean losing face, which is worse than death. This symbolic rule, which has very largely been lost in the free circulation of things, is, nonetheless,

absolute. I don't know if the world in its primal, raw state obeys it, but in the human order everything operates in terms of this rule – without it having to be reflected upon or internalized.

It's an obligation overarching all rational calculations. We say, ignorance of the law is no excuse. But, in fact, we are ignorant, we can be ignorant, of the law. On the other hand, secretly no one's ignorant of this rule, and no one transgresses it. The whole technical and scientific enterprise should be analysed in these terms: is it a massive response, a gigantic counter-gift, or does it attempt definitively to break this symbolic rule?

That's a tremendous perspective! It remains only to work out what God himself is responding to in 'giving back' this world! What did he receive before he gave it back? In our case, the world is given back as we received it, doubly realized by us.

Yes, redoubled by artifice – it's a fatal strategy of the artefact. And this changes the coloration of things, because it goes beyond a mere critique of technology. What's at stake? What are the symbolic stakes in all this?

What is happening seems, in fact, to be part not of a moral process of becoming, but of a symbolic one. Taking the term 'symbolic' in its etymological sense,[10] *the whole act of the duplication of the world seems to be*

[10] In Greek the word σύμβολον, which derives from συμβάλλειν (to reunite), refers to the two halves of a token that are broken and reunited.

a despair at the absence of one half, that half which, if it coincided or fitted, would make it possible to recognize the totality. We might be said, then, to be producing that half artificially. As a result, this evolution/involution can no longer be read in terms of denigration or approbation: ultimately, as you say, the issue extends far beyond a banal critique of technology.

You can judge all the consequences of technology negatively, but from this other point of view there's no longer either negative or positive. It is, rather, a wager. This is played out within a dual relation, not the framework of an objective reality. Seen from this angle, all the ideas of technical progress, of positive transformation of the world, are swept away. The management of reality, all the internal developments of technology and science become, so to speak, a by-product. What's essential is going on elsewhere and no one's fully in control.

Perhaps there's also an obligation to manufacture a perfection equal to the perfection we take ourselves to have received. A kind of obligation to put ourselves in God's place.

That's the idea of a rivalry with God, rather than a religious obligation (here again religion masks the more radical dual relation), the idea of an ever-open challenge rather than a division of tasks. An irresolvable challenge, no doubt, because we'll never, in the end, give back as much as was given. That seems impossible, especially as the symbolic rule implies that you should give back more than is given to you. It's an arm-wrestle, then, a potlatch between the divinity and ourselves.

Is this what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God? A 'mirroring' that merely repeats this original act of God. It is perhaps a summons too, at the same time as a prohibition. There is in this, I don't mean a consolation, but . . .

Yes, there would then be a rivalry, a mimetic violence between God and man. The great game, eh! Playing God with God! With the world as the stakes. The fact remains that, if we lose at this game, if we don't manage to bring to bear an equal or greater response to meet the challenge, then we have to sacrifice this given world, to destroy it.

The fact is that, paradoxically, the equal or greater response might perhaps precisely be to sacrifice it. (Can one imagine any equal or greater response to 'creation' other than destruction?) Moreover, can one, ultimately, give it back without destroying it?

In the symbolic universe, there was a mode of sacrificial destruction: the accursed share. For one reason or another, this symbolic organization has fallen apart, and we've substituted a mode of material production and consumption for sacrifice and sacrificial consumption. This is our response, but it isn't really successful, for the sacrificial world was, admittedly, cruel, but acceptable, whereas ours is much gentler, but unacceptable. And the more consumable it is, the more unacceptable, for nothing any longer deserves to be sacrificed in it.

Or perhaps it's a still unfinished sacrifice?

Let's suppose it's an immense operation of redemption and expiation for the loss of sacrifice. This isn't the same thing at all. Is it a variant of sacrifice or the product of its excommunication? The immense process of *growth* would then be merely the manifestation of this internalized failure, the abreaction to emptiness – an unbounded work of mourning.

An immense sacrifice or an immense extermination.

It's almost impossible to decide between the two. We'd have to come back, perhaps, to the Moebius strip, to see good and evil transform themselves, as twins, into each other, since all this technical operation of the world is, more or less, the extrapolation of good, the operation of absolute good, through the obliteration of evil and the principle of evil, through the suffocation and liquidation of the accursed share. But, here again, the proliferation of good to infinity brings the parallel proliferation of its twin, absolute evil.

The Cloning of God

NOAILLES: *Yes, you even say sometimes that there's a simultaneous upsurge of good and evil. In other words, that combating evil leads to reactivating it.*

BAUDRILLARD: You've only to take the 'zero deaths' formula, a basic concept of the security order. It's clear that this equates mathematically to 'zero lives'. By warding off death at all costs (burdensome medical treatment, genetics,

cloning), we're being turned, through security, into living dead. On the pretext of immortality, we're moving towards slow extermination. It's the destiny of maximum good, of absolute happiness, to lead to a zero outcome. Illusion, that is to say, evil, is vital. When you exchange this vital illusion for the unconditional promotion of Good, then you're heading for a blowback from the accursed share. This is how things are getting better and better and, at the same time, worse and worse.

But what's a mystery is that, having received a perfect duality in the beginning, we see it as our task to give back only one part of it. We don't want to give back the world in a dual mode, and the enterprise of history might be said to be a kind of attempt at annihilating one part of the duality; all in all, the conversion of the dual into the dialectical.

Human beings can't bear themselves, they can't bear their otherness, this duality; can't bear it either in the world or in themselves. They can't bear failing the world by their very existence, nor the world failing them. They've sown disorder everywhere, and in wishing to perfect the world, they end up in a sense failing themselves. Hence this self-hatred, this detestation that fuels the whole technological effort to make the world over anew. A kind of vengeance on oneself or on the human race arising out of our having contravened the order of the world by the very act of our appearance. We can't do anything about this, but it in no way diminishes the fact that the situation is unbearable. It's on this failing of existence that all religions thrive. You have to pay. In the past it was God who took the reprisals, now we do it. It's we who've undertaken to inflict the worst on ourselves, and to engineer our disappearance in an extremely complex and sophisticated way, in order to restore the world to the pure state it was in before we were in it.

Perhaps the Last Judgement has already taken place, perhaps it took place at the origin and we're carrying out the punishment.

A fine metaphysical hypothesis, except that this self-hatred is the turn taken by Western subjectivity (and also one it's currently imposing on the rest of the world). This inner verdict, this nihilism really begins only with Romanticism, but at that point it was still just an aberration. It's now become a major undertaking, an enterprise of self-immolation by technology against a background of obscure resentment at the evil spirit that's dragging us into it. So there you are: depending on how you see it, it can be taken for a challenge in suicidal form or for the enactment, as you said, of God's judgement.

What makes it look more like a punishment being carried out than a suicide is that it's taking place in slow motion.

And cloning can be said to be something like a slow-motion suicide. By that I mean not a sudden disappearance, but an innovative form of extinction of the species by scissiparity, by automatic doubling. It is, indeed, the obliteration of something by that selfsame thing – which is the definition of suicide.

This could also be a repetition of the original act, we ourselves also giving over the world to something else: in the same way as we received it, giving the world over to another species, handing on the torch. We can't do any more with it, so over to you!

It's a way of being rid of the problem, of relieving ourselves of the responsibility by devolving it to another – artificial – species; a way of telling God: 'Sort it out with them!' But that's just a dream . . . And even the future digital society, the future primitive society of the digital will have a merely uncertain existence. Without either enemy or antibodies (like the primitive cultures of the past), it'll become vulnerable once again to the slightest virus, whether electronic or biological, whether archaic or from the realms of some even more developed species. Yet one question remains: isn't the process of artificial perpetuation, if not immortality, of the species – which runs counter to evolution – itself part of evolution? (With his reversive effect and the invention of morality, Darwin himself was going against natural selection.) 'Natural' evolution wants species to disappear. It isn't just a biological fact, but a symbolic rule – doubtless the profoundest and most radical – that every species and every individual wishes both to persevere in its being, to live and survive, and at the same time to disappear. It isn't just that it's destined to disappear, but that it wants to, by another kind of will, and does all it can to do so. Human beings are opting to break that rule today, by aiming for immortality (through cloning and many other things). But aren't they actually obeying the same rule, merely deferred, or even bringing about an accelerated disappearance (there'll no longer be a human race, properly so-called, but its artificial double)? And it might perhaps be an opportunity for the human race, by putting a world of clones into orbit, to recover its original form. But God will be forced to clone himself too! It would take a clone-God to manage a world of clones.

Nietzsche's madman, who went looking for God with a lantern in the daytime, would run off horrified shouting, 'God has been cloned!' And if we've materialized the kingdom of God in this world, we've created an immanence with all the tools of transcendence, including salvation and

damnation. If what Saint Thomas Aquinas cruelly points out is true ('That the saints may enjoy their beatitude and the grace of God more abundantly, they are permitted to see the punishment of the damned in hell'), it is perhaps this deep ressentiment, *this delight in the misfortune of others that's the engine of the duplication. Is it as much a question of creating an instance from which we can derive* jouissance *as of creating a species in which we can vest damnation? But what if we get the opposite outcome?*

But the real problem lies in the fact that we're already in this artificial world. Genetic clones aren't needed. We've already become clones here and now. We've already exchanged transcendence for the law of the code and of DNA. The moral law, Kant's law, the one that was written in the starry sky and in man's inner world, is now inscribed in the genetic code. There's no ideal site of consciousness any longer. And if, in the past, we could symbolically exchange this world with God under the sign of a moral law we'd invented, we can't exchange it for anything any longer, except the spectral universe that awaits us. The impossible exchange of the world is completed with the free circulation of the nothing (the exchange of the same for the same is one of the figures of the exchange of the nothing). Even in the economic field, the field of exchange *par excellence* and of value, we're beginning to realize, as generalized speculation takes over, that it's the nothing that circulates. And this is, in fact, why things are going faster and faster, no longer being hampered by either the moral law or the law of value. There's obviously an extraordinary fragility in this, which shows up in the perpetual crisis of the economic and political spheres. What we will not see is that there's much more than a crisis of operation or representation here; there is, in fact, a definitive crisis of transcendence. As we said earlier, we've moved from an upward transcendence to a downward transcendence, the last stage of which is the exchange of the nothing. But there's a complicity in this exchange of

the nothing, a deep complicity that has a bright future before it because it's a collusion between criminals (and we know that that's the most solid type), between accomplices in the perfect crime. There'll no longer be anyone to say the emperor has no clothes, no longer anyone to betray the fact that all this generalized exchange is based on nothing and that it can generalize itself only on the basis of the nothing. If this were revealed, it would be the apocalypse in the literal sense, and we would stand before the nothing as a *fait accompli*.

This criminal complicity reminds me of a remark by Cioran: 'My mission is to kill time, and time's to kill me in its turn. How comfortable one is among murderers.' And the substitution of the genetic code for the moral law's a terrifying image. You can't imagine Beethoven being moved by DNA the way he was moved by Kant's dictum. The admiration of the starry sky has given way to a dread of the stars going out one by one.[11] *And, reflecting on the will to accomplish the world at all costs, I think also of Borges's line: 'Aesthetics is the imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced.'*[12] *The originary unbearableness isn't perhaps the unbearableness of perfection but a terrible imminence that hasn't yet revealed itself and that you would have to accomplish. The world might be said to be in a state of total imminence, without ever realizing itself, without ever passing over to the other side. The temptation to complete it is too great; this imminence is the most unbearable feature of illusion and appearances. Even thought, as you've said somewhere, would be horrified at*

[11] This is a clear reference to Arthur C. Clarke's story, 'The Nine Billion Names of God' (1967), to which Baudrillard has referred repeatedly in his writings.

[12] I have drawn here to some extent on Ruth L. C. Simms's translation of the relevant passage: 'that imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality' (*Other Inquisitions 1937–1952* (London: Souvenir Press, 1973), p. 5).

itself and its incompleteness in its endlessly unverifiable form, and would accomplish itself as function, as desire. The chief horror would be to remain as one 'is', either a pure imminence or a total completion. The deepest horror would be to allow the word 'be' to be complicit with a static meaning. The world would abominate any form that could arrest itself in itself.

I don't recall who said that 'poetry completed what God hadn't managed to finish'.

It's only with fulfilment that there's failure. With it comes the fall into time. The lost paradise would be pure imminence, but we've always known that paradise isn't something that can be borne.

Baltazar Gracián's hypothesis is that God keeps human beings in suspense. It's his strategy to keep human beings eternally in suspense. And, for their part, human beings basically try to escape God by going to the end, by bringing about a *dénouement*.

Yes, they detest suspense. It's like in a film when you never manage to find out who did it.

And if you don't know who it was, you want to take their place.

Absolutely. You want to finish the film!

Hence this universal striving to explain the world and find the key. It always ends in the Oedipus story, where you find, obviously, that you're the criminal. The truth of the Oedipus myth isn't so much in the psychoanalytic truth about the father and the mother, but in this circular operation of revelation and detection of the crime.

Yes, when, like Oedipus, you have an extreme investigative drive – which is, in itself, a criminal attitude – the detective finds himself inside the crime a priori.

It's the signalling or beckoning of destiny we were talking about before. (In all this, God is only a metaphor). Truth, for its part, never beckons to us. It can only be the object of revelation. Only destiny beckons.

There are perhaps two moralities: you may believe in God without duplicity and in parallel with that, like Paul Virilio, carry out a radical analysis of the apocalyptic state of things.

Rather than two moralities, there might be said to be two divergent visions. The one performs an investigation that's prophetic, so to speak, describing the march towards the apocalypse in its technical twists and turns. There is, then, no secret in it: all is revealed, announced, and God himself is there, as alternative to the fateful outcome. God remains possible, and there's still a chance we may forestall the apocalypse. A prophetic, apocalyptic vision and one that's redemptive out of despair – but not a fateful vision. The fateful vision is quite different. It's that of a strategy which precipitates the world towards its end in the very effort of elucidating it and making it an ideal

world. There's no longer any transcendent instance here, but the implacable unfolding of a logical process. We discover we're the criminals of this perfect crime, we're the authors of our own doom. We aren't, then, the victims of God's anger. We're within that kind of fateful irony you find in the Samarkand story, where the soldier, in order to escape death, rushes off to the place where he had an appointment with it.[13]

But isn't there a less banal, more subtle idea of God than that of belief?

Yes, in which God would be something other than an object of conviction and a final solution. In which he'd be something like the partner in a dual relationship and in which God himself would conform to the symbolic rule of exchange. But then it's no longer a question of believing in him. The question of his existence doesn't arise. Ultimately, God doesn't take himself for God and doesn't even believe in himself. At any rate, he's no longer any bigger than the game of the world [*le jeu du monde*].[14]

Being no bigger than the game of the world leads us perhaps precisely to some kind of pantheism . . . But you say that belief is the mark of a secret

[13] Baudrillard relates this story as follows in *Passwords* (London: Verso, 2003): 'On the town square a soldier sees death beckoning to him. He takes fright, goes to see the king and says, 'Death has beckoned to me, I am going to flee as far away as possible, I am fleeing to Samarkand.' The king commands that death be sent to him, to explain why it has terrified his captain. And death tells him, 'I didn't want to frighten him. I simply wanted to remind him we had an appointment tonight – in Samarkand.'

[14] This is the Nietzschean idea that the world deploys itself as game or play, i.e. rejecting any rule external to itself.

doubting of God. Going back to Manganelli's idea at the beginning of this dialogue, it's possible that God doesn't believe in himself precisely because he exists, and he rejects this superfluous duplication that would put him in doubt in his own eyes. Heidegger said: 'The Greeks did not believe in their gods.' Perhaps because they lived with them and dealt with them constantly.

Quite. Belief is a weak relation. It's content to worship, but it's a disintensified relation – a first step towards indifference, in fact, since it contents itself with the existence of God. Now, if God exists, there's no need to believe in him, and if you begin to believe in God, the fact is you're no longer really sure. In faith, there's no exteriority, no setting God at a distance, there's a kind . . .

. . . of immediate intensity? Do you have faith, for, as Nietzsche said, when you have it, you can afford yourself the luxury of scepticism?

Neither faith nor belief. I went from faith to belief, then to nothing. That's to say, from initially being a Christian, I became a Catholic (the person who no longer has the faith, but who still believes in it – this is the great operation of the Church, to substitute belief for faith), then agnostic. In other words, heretical in respect of all beliefs. That's all a long time ago.

And you don't have any god lingering in your bloodstream . . . ?

No god and no trace of a reality principle, because the problem has shifted today. The problem of belief has shifted from God to reality. The postulate of

reality is as strong and plays the same role as belief in God did in the past. Unbelief in reality is equivalent to the agnostic heresy or the free-thinking of eighteenth-century minds. 'Those who believed in God and those who didn't . . .' – there's no longer any real friction between the two. Where the most violent demarcation line runs now, with consequences in all fields (political, moral and relational), is between those who believe in reality and those who don't (those who deconstruct its principle or have a hypothetical view of it, the 'reality perspectivists'). This denial of reality is quite simply immoral, and if there were the same intolerance as in the days when the Chevalier de la Barre was executed for not doffing his hat when a religious procession passed by, then they'd execute those who don't bow to reality today. Such agnostics and free-thinkers are rare (as were those of the eighteenth century), but, deep down, everyone (including those who believe they still believe in God) are agnostics *lite* today. Everyone toys with the disappearance of the real. We no longer believe in it deeply, and the sense that we're no longer in that line of filiation is widespread. The incontestable evidence of an objective reality has been broken down (it was a kind of mirror stage of Western rational culture), and the only consciousness we have of it is an unhappy one. But few will admit this and, if questioned, all will protest the absolute self-evidence of the real, along with their good faith, since it's as serious to deny this principle as it once was to deny the existence of God. Such a denial can emerge only from the heretical depths of a libertine consciousness.

Illusion / Real / Simulation

NOAILLES: *I'd like to talk about some key aspects of your thought. Without wishing to schematize at all or descend into facile solutions, we*

find a kind of triptych in your work: illusion/real/simulation. Illusion, the real as the dispelling, abstract projection and precipitate of appearances, and simulation as the ecstasy and metastasis of the real itself. This triadic pattern often recurs elsewhere in your analysis. First of all, why do you think illusion is unbearable? Why does illusion have to be dispelled by the real? Why can't we play with appearances, with forms; why do they have to be dispelled, liquidated? We could very well just take delight in this situation.

BAUDRILLARD: Absolutely. But perhaps illusion isn't a primal scene. *Il-ludere* is to put into play, to put oneself into play. And for that you have to create the rules of the illusion.

The radical illusion of the world, as you call it, seems thinkable, at first blush, as a kind of primordial form (not in temporal terms of course).

One should be wary of this primordial, original imagining. One can imagine the world even before the appearance of human beings and thought, when there's nothing there to give it meaning, when it is, strictly speaking, without truth or reality – hence in a state of radical illusoriness. At any rate, that's what I mean by 'radical illusion', which remains the illusion today of appearances, of the pure play of appearances. But then, what does this advent of thought mean, which gives it meaning and perhaps, in a sense, hastens it towards its end? I can't yet see whether thought, as production of meaning and reduction of appearances, is what's bringing the world most rapidly to its end; ultimately, that is to say, first towards simulation, then towards disappearance. Is thought an art of disappearance?

On the one hand, I don't clearly see the location of the emergence of meaning in the appearance on the scene of human beings, who are themselves part of that emergence. Is it possible that the inclination of things towards meaning comes as much from things themselves as from the thought that brings them into play? Might meaning be conceived as another form of intersection rather than as a unilateral imposition of the subject? Is it possible that the very idea that it's thought that gives meaning is a leftover from the classical subject–object relation which is now shattered? On the other hand, it seems to me that thought can, in its extended sense, be seen as an art of disappearance. It could be the operator of the transfusion between illusion and the real, in either direction. Against the real, which is the art of making the world appear, of producing it and freezing it, thought restores the world to illusion.

It seems to me that this is the issue facing a radical thought. But there remains a mystery: what's this kind of artifice by which thought (is it the same? should we give it another name?) stubbornly persists in analysing the world, in dissolving it into simple, abstract elements and, therefore, in reducing its power of illusion?

Perhaps there might be said to be a dual, irresolvable ambivalence to thought: a thought that wishes for the absolute dis-illusioning of the world and a thought that seeks to restore the illusoriness of the world. The two forms seem to be equivalent in violence and intensity, and to have a symmetrical drive, even if they go in entirely opposite directions, and even if they don't occur simultaneously. (Radical thought does seem to respect the symbolic rule of not interacting immediately with the other form of thought, and it emerges only when analytical thought is reaching its end.) So, when

thought weaves a final solution, radical thought unpicks it with equivalent or greater precision. It's even possible that the sum may, in the end, always be zero and that we've never left illusion behind! (What if the 'development' of the world were merely that rhythmic space of the exchange of illusion with itself?) In this way, thought would duplicate the radical ambivalence of the world, which never makes itself present without at the same time withdrawing, but this ambivalence would be necessary and would have a raison d'être*: it's the only way to bring the reversibility of things into play. If there were no ambivalence in thought, it couldn't possibly be reversible; if there were no ambivalence in the world, it couldn't exercise its own reversibility either. Perhaps the secret rule everything follows, including thought, is fundamentally that of setting in place this reversible movement, without final solution, which makes it possible to bring into play the* il-ludere*, the play of illusion.*

This is a really tricky question. Thought, for its part, produces the real, reality, as a challenge to illusion. What we would have, then, would no longer be illusion being debased into reality, but a duel, in which the transformation of the world under the sign of the real, squares up to the radical illusion of appearances. But thought is perhaps also merely a participant, active or passive, in appearances, of which it might be said to be a kind of subtle mirror. (A two-way mirror: appearances would be refracted in it, but on the other side of the mirror of appearances, thought could reflect [on] them without being seen.) However this may be, by dint of playing on the real and reality, thought plunges beyond objective reality, which is an unstable form, into integral reality or, in other words, into a total elimination of illusion and of the dual situation. How can illusion be sacrificed to the real? A mystery. But we may imagine that illusion takes its revenge by plunging the real into simulation, then into the virtual and into integral reality. At that

stage, with the coming of artificial intelligence, the question is solved. With the virtual, the digital and information technology, the world becomes digitizable, countable, codable, absolutely real and, hence, beyond all possible illusion. All ambivalence is removed. But for that same reason, for having expelled all ambivalence, the world becomes perfectly impossible. It exists, but the fact of existing in no way detracts from its impossibility.

Having said this, we may wonder whether this digital resolution, this analytical resolution of the world might not, all the same, be a form of destiny, a destiny of disappearance by which the species might have found its final solution. Only it would be a technical solution and no longer an art of disappearing.

Yes, because disappearance isn't the same as annihilation. Now, if that were the case, just as there's an excess in operational thinking that leads the world equally into existence and into impossibility, as you say, an excess that leads the world to extermination by its artificial perfection (a perfection that transforms the world into a surplus of world), I wonder whether radical thought doesn't also, at a certain moment, cross a threshold, a form of excess greater than excess, that consigns the world back to non-existence, but perhaps also once again to possibility. (I know it's difficult to think of a supplementary form of excess on the part of radical thought, for the essence of radical thought might be said to be excess itself.) This way, in a sense, the two forms of thought would, in excess, imperceptibly exchange 'roles': it would be the destiny of operational thought to disappear, having desired for itself only a destiny of pure appearance, while radical thought would have as its destiny the recovery of a form of appearance, when it had always been its aim to disappear. (A major case of serendipity!?) Even like that, we might take the view that radical thought isn't the opposite of non-radical thought, but its dissolution, a prior state of non-scission of the two forms which contains them

simultaneously, 'the violent intersection of the continuity of the world and the continuity of the nothingness', as you say, between other intersections that combine contraries before any binary scission. In this way, radical thought (ultimately, the thought of the world) could never be one of the terms of a binary opposition, but would be the seat of all duality before its conversion into something binary.

Duality and binarism are, in fact, exclusive of each other. On the one hand, duality's opposed to dialectics, in the same way as the duel is opposed to the dialogue (we are here the voluntary 'exiles from dialogue'!), but it's even more vigorously distinct from the binary and the digital. We have to distinguish clearly, in this complex game, between the dual antagonism, the dialectical opposition and the binary relation. Language itself is a source of confusion here. We must keep as clear as possible the distinction between thought (the term 'radical' adds nothing to it: if there's thought, then it's radical, come what may) and analytical intelligence (the science that Heidegger said doesn't think).

I'd like us to pose another problem: human beings themselves combine with illusion and are brought into play by it. At a certain point, a split might be said to be produced within illusion itself, and from it there emanates a 'consciousness', to put it in a provisional way, an artifice sufficiently powerful to open up a passage between two shores: the real would, in this way, be configured at a stroke, in opposition to illusion. Nietzsche pointed out that consciousness is the last and latest of the organs to evolve ('consciousness is an organ, like the stomach') and is, moreover, the most fragile in the organism. Man needs, then, a splitting into two and an immense, almost superhuman power to dis-illusion the world; and, moreover, it's with his weakest organ that he performs this feat! How can it be that part of illusion has sufficient

force to dis-illusion the world? It isn't easy to conceive this collapse of the illusion through human beings; it isn't easy to conceive the possibility of wresting illusion from its own form.

Yes, our species may be said to be a kind of accelerator of disillusion. But when does this begin? Before the revolution of thought, there was the revolution of life, which is perhaps also a catastrophe. So, what lies behind our apparent course, from one catastrophe to another, from one acceleration to another, along an irreversible path towards total disillusion? In this case, the mystery is no longer in this incomprehensible process of disillusion, but in what remains that's irreducible to this movement, in what remains that's reversible and ambivalent in this apparently irreversible process.

That's right. The mystery lies perhaps as much in the world's resistance to appearing entirely in a real state as in its resistance to disappearing entirely in illusion. The world could be said to be in a kind of dynamic suspension between realization and disappearance; it would be beneath a threshold that isn't destined to be crossed in any direction.

There would, at bottom, be two ways of understanding the world: the one that considers it to be a prior given, onto which thought would graft itself – there'd be a basic reality, and everything would come down to putting together the given more or less felicitously – and the other, which thinks that the world isn't finally made, that it's a constant process of appearance, that it's in no way produced. We may, in this way, take the view that the world has never left the 'initiatory' stage. I say 'initiatory' and not 'initial' because the latter word gives the idea of a starting point for the world, from which it would be developing. The idea of the initiatory, by contrast, is a recognition of the permanent state of initiation of things, a movement that doesn't manage

to yield itself up, an act that never leaves itself behind, a form of being that never transforms itself into 'has been', a world which, like a verb, couldn't and wouldn't transform itself into a participle. Clearly, we have to leave the linear hypothesis behind for all this. For the world would be there, suddenly, without ever constituting itself. Pure appearance and illusion are there; they would never take a second step, they are in a kind of pure being-outside-of-themselves (ekstatikōn), *never completing themselves. I think of Heraclitus and his famous* 'Panta rhei' *('Everything flows'). It isn't a process at all, a succession; it isn't temporality at all (Heidegger said that time doesn't appear at all in Heraclitus). It would, rather, be an openness of things, an emulsion of being, but one that never manages to materialize in terms of identity.*

Yes, but I don't know whether we can imagine the world that radically, whether we can imagine a literal universe in its literalness. It can only be a great play of forms, the great play of becoming as Heraclitus saw it.

Illusion, in that sense, has no history. Illusion isn't the opposite of reality or the opposite of truth. It's a game that in no way asks itself the question of truth or reality – very Heraclitean in fact: it plays itself out, and that's all there is to it. Being initiated into that game is like being initiated into the cosmogonic play of the natural elements – water, fire, air and light – and their metamorphosis into one another. I believe the field of illusion is that of metamorphosis. We must distrust the trap of representation which makes us see illusion in a figure as static as the figure of truth. Illusion is a transfiguration.

Yes, we may tend at times to fall into the trap of stratifying illusion. Nevertheless, once we reach the point of what you call 'integral reality', that virtual and absolutely over-realized form of the world, from which all illusion is absent, I wonder whether illusion doesn't also escape towards a form of

'integral illusion', a site of absolute exclusion of the real and, in consequence, also a place that is, in a way, circumscribed and 'static'. The over-realization of the real is, ultimately, what completely interrupts the circulation of forms, and this coagulation of the world might perhaps be said to create at the same time an effect of coagulation of illusion, since illusion is such only if it sets itself in play in the world, as you were saying before. As for the term 'metamorphosis', couldn't it wrongly give the idea of a 'meta-', of a beyond?

The 'meta' of metamorphosis isn't that of metaphysics. It's a dimension of transference, of transfusion of one form into the other, without any higher instance than the game itself.

At any rate, a thing that transforms itself into another and that doesn't have its otherness within itself, so to speak, is perhaps in itself a mirage. It's difficult to conceive how otherness could be 'outside' of whatever it may be, since that 'whatever it may be' lacks identity; how could a thing have its otherness 'this side of it', since it has no limits, no inside and outside? I prefer the term 'transfiguration', because it gives the sense of a figure that never completes itself, a movement that's unceasing, yet never arrives at identity.

On condition that one understands this too as the passage from one figure to another (as in 'transcontinental') and not in the sense of 'sublimation'. As for 'otherness in itself', it seems problematical to me. I'd see, rather, an otherness outside of self, as you were saying, an otherness from elsewhere, coming precisely from beyond the subject and its identity, in the becoming of forms, and passing through neither meaning nor value. The domain of illusion is

that of forms. The domain of reality is that of value. These are two opposite sides of things, perhaps two opposite destinies.

Either one starts out from reality and hypothesizes illusion, or one starts out from illusion and hypothesizes reality. Whichever way, it's a gamble. The gamble on illusion against reality, the gamble on reality against illusion. Which doubtless corresponds to a challenge: illusion's challenge to reality, reality's challenge to illusion. There's no way of getting around this. It's possible that thought produces the real not as disillusion, but as a challenge to illusion – not simply as debasement of illusion into the real or as response to unbearable illusion, but as a duel, in which the finalization or transformation of the world under the sign of the real squares up to the challenge of appearances, the challenge of a brute, literal world. We're in the area of hypotheses – the hypothesis of reality, the hypothesis of truth, the hypothesis, even, of illusion – these are all merely hypotheses. And hypotheses, by definition, aren't made to be verified. Above all, obviously, not that of illusion – to 'verify' the hypothesis of illusion would really be the end. Hypotheses are made to be pushed to their limits as hypotheses.

It's true that the expression 'otherness in itself' is very problematical. One might, in this connection, try to make a distinction. There would exist, at least, a provisional entity of things, without which nothing could come from elsewhere, and it's this entity we'd call singularity. Without this hypothesis, there'd be no forms, but unbounded chaos. It would be a singularity born within the shadow of space (which serves to prevent everything being in the same place) and within the shadow of language (which prevents everything from having the same meaning, too, as you've so aptly put it). In the singularity there's never any identity: it's delimited, but completely collapsed at the same time. (A lateral hypothesis: does multiplicity take shape only on the basis of the singular?) This singularity of forms doesn't initially presuppose

an identity or a signification, so long as one doesn't force it, which realist thought will do (this will, in fact, violate Parmenides' commandment in Fragment VII: 'Never is this to be forced: that things that are not are'). Thus the singularity would not have its otherness in itself, whilst any dream of reality would bear its difference and its otherness within itself. Now, it seems to me that it isn't only the 'unbearableness' of appearances that leads to realizing them (it's perhaps a question of a duel or a challenge, as you suggest), but perhaps all things would secretly like to be outside themselves – even illusion. Would it be possible to think of a strange necessity for illusion to abandon its 'condition', even if we take the view that illusion is nothing outside the game itself? Might not the fact that it allows itself to be invested by the real be part of its very play? The real might thus be seen as a moment of the becoming of the world, as an immanent relinquishment of illusion? Can one conceive a self-challenge as an implicit movement on the part of illusion?

Being outside itself I like, and that's doubtless the most immediate figure of alterity. But for illusion to wish to be outside itself would mean it is unbearable to itself. Now, it's already in itself a form of radical otherness. How would it want to become outside itself? If we take the singularity, it doesn't strive to be outside itself, it has its own set of rules. The game itself has its rules and doesn't try to externalize all the rest, nor annex it to itself. It plays on its own account and, outside it these rules have no validity. This is the absolute horizon of appearances. As for what may be going on beyond, I know nothing of it, but there's an event internal to the illusion, to the game, to the singularity. To the work of art and the poem, if you like. Rothko was quoted, in connection with his work, as saying 'What I do opens up in all directions, but at the same time closes in all directions.' A singularity is a bit like that; something that closes up in all directions and

which, at that moment, is no longer subject to any external or transcendent instance. It is to itself, as you said, its own otherness. It lives and dies that way. Primitive cultures are singularities of that order. There's a continual metamorphosis going on inside, but there's no possible transposition to other cultures.

That all things ultimately would only want to be 'outside themselves' would mean not an externalization, but that nothing would want to remain in itself, ever. Being 'outside oneself' equates to not being in oneself, while not being elsewhere either. It's like a permanent exorcism of forms and identity. Things would be eager to outflank their principle (whatever it may be), to refract themselves into another logic, to escape themselves. It's perhaps here that illusion itself diffracts itself prismatically into the real and simulation.

Well, that's something else, and the prism's a fine image. Light that diffracts itself and the spectrum of light in fact characterize the play of illusion, as it diffracts into appearances, into all the dimensions of appearance. But to go from there to saying that it diffracts into the real and simulation is something I can't conceive. The spectrality of diffraction, the spectrality of the prism or light, isn't the same thing as the spectrality of the virtual and simulation.

Yes, these are entirely different spectralities. I could try to express the idea another way: the real could be a fringe of the illusion on the inside of the Moebius strip. The instances would not be autonomizable. Doesn't the real, with its challenge, reinforce the power of illusion (beyond its provisional annihilation)? Doesn't it regenerate it with its antagonism? Doesn't illusion operate – in complete awareness of the theorem of the accursed

share – by dividing itself into an antagonism beyond its radical otherness, to regenerate itself on a permanent basis? Isn't the real the zone against which illusion operates its reversibility? Could reversibility exist without a movement of the real that sought to become linear? Could seduction, for which a form of dissuasion is essential, exist without a will to production? Could it withdraw something from the order of the visible without the establishment of the visible itself? In this way, the real is perhaps what enables illusion to adopt its radical form, and the diffraction of illusion into the real would be what completes its own form. It's for this reason (though I may be completely mistaken!) that I tend to think of illusion diffracting itself and passing through the real and simulation, rather than thinking in terms of these forms being exclusive. If, going to extremes, we were to say that the coefficient of reality is proportional to the mass of illusion it displaces, we would end up with an analysis made in the substitutive light of Archimedes' Principle rather than in the reversible light of the Moebius strip. This would also pose a problem for the hypothesis of integral reality – of integral reality as compact mass that would leave all trace of illusion outside. Even if the 'provisional' autonomy of these instances is necessary for analysis.

The problem is that all this is inconceivable other than in the terms of discourse – terms which refer to one another in an endless round, a perpetual correlation – which is meaningful whether one likes it or not. This is the irremediable trap of discourse which is only ever an easy solution. Illusion is unbearable for whatever reason it may be; we have, then, to invent easy solutions, and the real is one such. As Lichtenberg said of freedom, 'It's the easiest solution and hence it is the one with the brightest future.' Only the notion of the real enables us to resist the fateful hypothesis of illusion with all that it implies of challenge, duel and death. But we always come back to

the same question: Why run away from it? Why this refuge in reality as rational and objective determination?

It's rather as Nietzsche says, 'The infinite is the primordial fact, the only thing to explain would be the origin of the finite.' We know the primordial situation, but we can't locate the origin of the break.

Yes, the mystery can be said to be that of the real, of reality. And of the subject too. Why suddenly this subject effect, this subjectivity? Or again, the mystery of banality: suddenly this residue, this commonplace, statistical, random reality. In primitive organization, and doubtless in our deep mentality, chance, the 'anyhow' and the random don't exist. Everything's willed, everything's an effect of will (which clearly gives a much more exciting universe than the one ruled by causes or probabilities). It's a vision of the world, whereas the other's just a representation. Everything wants to happen, wants to become, wants to seduce – nothing's ever neutral. If we start from there, how does it come about that, at a given moment, a system of causes and effects comes to prevail? It was Nietzsche again who said, 'The effects are there, there are only effects,' adding 'with the cause as a bonus'. I find that marvellous, 'the cause as a bonus'; that what we regard as essential is something given to us 'into the bargain'! And you can go further in questioning causality (and hence, reality, since the real is what has a cause and, therefore, an objective existence) by taking up Italo Svevo's argument that 'causes are just a misunderstanding that prevents us from seeing things as they are'. What if reality itself were merely a misunderstanding? In short, we invent all that to defend ourselves against something unbearable, but something that hasn't always been so for everyone, and may exceptionally cease to be so for us too.

Causality might ultimately be said to be just a form of domestication of the idea of necessity, the conversion of this cruel aspect of the world into something digestible. The random is retrospectively inoculated to give the impression that things could possibly have not taken place. The same thing's done prospectively, and this enables us to harbour the illusion of controlling the world. The production of this commonplace reality, a colonizable reality, helps us to overcome the feeling that we're like masters without slaves in the world, though the whole drive behind it comes perhaps from the opposite, from the feeling that we're slaves without masters! Moreover, it's much easier to sacrifice a banal universe, as virtual reality will do with the real, after having sacrificed the symbolic universe. It's a minor crime after a major one, like looting after warfare. Now, if the 'unbearable' hasn't always been so for everyone, it becomes difficult to identify the moment at which – and the reason why – a species sees itself suddenly terrorized by its symbolic universe, the moment at which it feels compelled to replace vision by representation (can we conceive that it's the fatal attraction of illusion, the fear of collapsing into it once and for all, the terrifying homologation with it, that leads us constantly to murder it and develop a will for its opposite?) Though we may wonder whether the 'bearability' of illusion among primitives isn't a kind of opposite projection that would be re-creating a lost paradise.

Of course we can always dream, and no one will ever be able to prove it. But it's in theoretical terms that this is interesting. And we can guess at it analogically, through language, which remains a living utopia and a much more proximate singularity. You can see that the singularity of language has never disappeared. Even instrumentalized as a means of communication, there's a hard core of literalness in language that seems to me irreducible. Signification is only the part of language that shows above the surface. In its form and

sequencing, it still retains the singular potency which means, indeed, that one language isn't comparable with any other.

Gradation / Degradation / Hierarchy

NOAILLES: *So should we think of the instances of illusion, real and simulation as a gradation? Is there a transition from one to the other? That seems difficult to me.*

BAUDRILLARD: There would, rather, be a degradation.

But that's more or less the same thing, the same story in reverse, the story of an impoverishment of appearances, of a shrinkage of illusion. I can only imagine the real and illusion coexisting, without either of them being the starting point, without the pre-eminence of the form of illusion (which poses the problem of the origin of the real). Ultimately, one couldn't privilege either of the terms of the challenge. That's why I feel attracted by the prismatic idea rather than by the idea of gradation/degradation. If there's a gradation, then we've two problems: the movement and the hierarchy between the instances.

The schema of gradation – or degradation – would be like this: a radical initial (initiatory) form, that of illusion – the real is the extenuated, disintensified form of this – and an even more disintensified simulation, the minimal phase. On the fringes of the virtual and the hyperreal (the extreme

phase of simulation), we're as far as possible from illusion and seduction; we're in what I call integral reality, the end-point of that vertiginous undertaking of the realization of the world. At the height of simulation – in other words, at the height of the virtual and the digital – we're in the pure operation of a world expurgated of any illusion, and hence perfectly real, technically realized. All this, which seems in fact to constitute a single, linear, graduated or degraded, apparently irreversible process – an almost entropic process – can be seen as more or less the opposite of Hegel's ascent towards Absolute Spirit.

But this isn't the last word on the subject, since this single, irreversible process is, in fact, shot through with, and undercut from within by, duality and reversibility, in which is condensed the power of illusion as form, not as original ideal stage (as the reference to primitive societies may unfortunately imply, with its suggestion of illusion as lost object). If you bring this rule of reversibility into play, then at the height of obscenity, you find seduction again. Or Heidegger saying that, at the extreme limit of technology, you rediscover the 'constellation of the mystery'.[15] And this reversion doesn't just come at the end, in the terminal phase. This oppositionality develops and grows in parallel throughout the process, in a latent or varyingly violent form. At the heart of reality itself, something like illusion re-emerges – and this certainly isn't dialectical; it's the decisive stakes of a dual, antagonistic form.

That's an extremely interesting point. First, I think that if we were dealing with the inversion of the Hegelian movement, we'd perhaps run the risk of

[15] 'La constellation du secret'. The standard French translation by André Préau reads: 'la constellation, le mouvement stellaire du secret' ('La question de la technique', in *Essais et conférences* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958) p. 45). William Lovitt renders the German as 'the constellation, the stellar course of the mystery' (*The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 33).

being forced to apply to any idea of regression the same arguments as we've used to criticize metaphysically the idea of progress (or progression). What's difficult for me to conceive is just this coexistence of the idea of progression / regression with that of reversibility, locating the reversibility at the end of the process, 'after the orgy'. Starting from there, it seems to me that history could be the 'micro' development of what happens with Being on a 'macro' scale. The being 'outside of itself' of that which exists, the 'there is' [il y a], *seems to develop as an irreversible process. And this is perhaps merely deceptive, in the same way that history, which seems to be consolidating itself as process, is in reality, as you say, being undermined from within by its reversible form. No linear form manages to constitute itself, even though it seems to make great headway. The same thing might be seen as taking place at the level of the initiatory movement of the world: no consolidation of an identity, no conversion of one thing into 'something else' can take place because there's a permanent reversibility that undermines any emergence* (apparition). *It's the powerful dynamics of emergence, which dissolves any possibility of identity at the very outset. I'm aware, however, that this raises an almost insoluble problem: it's a vision that leads to a universe that's so dynamic it's almost static. It's a form of absolute velocity, a way the world has of being rapid without moving. To this is added the difficulty that one can scarcely account for the externalization of movement. But Zeno brings relief on this point! (Borges described Zeno brilliantly as the 'denier that anything can happen in the universe', which I find particularly alluring.)*

This is perhaps what happens when thought leaves 'Euclidean' space behind. We may think of what McLuhan is indicating in his Global Village: *in the scene in* Star Wars *at the precise moment when Han Solo sets his spacecraft to a particular speed, all the points of light remain static. By travelling faster than light, the spacecraft becomes simultaneous, and it's everywhere at once. (What McLuhan described as a property of acoustic space, by opposition to the Euclidean and the visual, is a space whose centre is*

everywhere.) But, suggestively, McLuhan said of that space (a retrospective echo of your own thought?) that it's 'a proper place for the birth of metamorphosis'.

As a methodological strategy, it may perhaps be necessary to posit the hypotheses of the real, simulation and integral reality for a theoretical development to be possible, since, if we merely accepted the hypothesis of illusion, that development would be cancelled out too soon (it would seem necessary also to avoid the silence or ineffable expression we would arrive at by that route), since the hypothesis that everything is reversible simultaneously in the very act of emergence runs the risk of being an excessively rapid return to the starting point, the risk of never getting beyond that starting point . . . Yet the hypothesis of illusion, the real and simulation also enables us to hypothesize linearity, that Euclidean form of thought. Perhaps everything in the universe is working towards a return to illusion. Perhaps that's its sole mission, and integral reality would be a perverse short-cut which, as you say, opens up a space for 'a thinking freed from all purpose, all "objectivity" and restored to its radical uselessness',[16] *the poetic 'transference of situation'. The mother of all reversibilities! The hyperbolic form acquired by the world would be led inevitably to send itself back to its starting point.*

Lastly, what you say about the re-emergence of seduction at the high point of obscenity is true only of someone who's thoroughly grasped the rule of reversibility. In this sense, it's a tricky expression, a paradox and a danger too, since one could make this concession only after having made a radical critique, as you've done.

We must, in fact, steer clear of the assumption of an original illusion. Illusion isn't nostalgic, it's immanent, it's an immanent reversion. It must

[16] Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 111.

emerge not from an ideal alternative, but from the state of things as it is. It's almost impossible to perform a radical phenomenology of illusion without bringing in assumptions from elsewhere. Yet, it's in this way, by a spectral analysis, so to speak (in the likeness of this spectral reality of simulation and of the technical identification of the world), that you may try to find – not re-find – or invent the form of illusion, almost as though it had never existed; that you may try to produce it out of the very internal failing of the operational system. Beyond a critical analysis of simulation itself, ultimately caught in the trap of simulation, one has to see through to reality as an untenable paradox, with its hiatuses, slips and antibodies – something that's coming apart at every moment. It's this one must see through to – whether we call it illusion or not – this irreducible antagonistic power. Illusion has no existence in itself; it's reality that produces it, like a kind of magnetic field. In this sense, reality does, indeed, outstrip fiction and all the critical analysis you can perform on it.

The fact that illusion isn't an ideal alternative, but emerges out of a state of things, reminds me of your distinction between evil [mal] *and misfortune* [malheur]*: 'Evil is the world as it is, misfortune is the world as it should have been.' I'm happy illusion isn't doomed to an unhappy* [malheureux] *destiny! Now, if all precedence of illusion over the real or of the real over illusion is impossible, the two phenomena will become inseparable, despite their antagonism and their irreducibility. To dream of a precedence is possible only within the mirage of linearity, in the conformation of which radical analysis itself doubtless plays a role, for we're necessarily obliged to carry out such an analysis in a linear fashion, as we were saying earlier, even if we incorporate the convulsions as we go along or if we do it in a language homologous to the language of illusion, retaining the paradoxical form. Even if we can try to speak of the world as Apollinaire did in his* Calligrammes*: to speak of*

a horse he traced its outline with the poem; to speak of rain he had it fall in lines . . .

Discourse is, in fact, discursive by definition. In other words, it's linear and non-reversible. But without going so far as the poetic mode, you can subsume the philosophical paradox in a kind of spiral. Consciousness analyses the world, but itself forms part of the world, and hence its claim to analyse it is itself part of the very operation of the world. Thought is, therefore, by homology, part of the general illusion by virtue of this enfolding, this embedding, of the one in the other. However far you go in objective analysis, you still remain in an operation that's itself part of appearances: that is to say, an operation that has no basis of any kind in a consciousness external to the world. This is where the secret lies, in this involuntary complicity, of a true – and I would even say poetic – grasp of the phenomenon of the world. The world, said Wittgenstein, is what is the case. And consciousness is the case too, of course. But it can't claim any kind of privilege. It's there, so to speak, as a bonus (as Nietzsche said about causes in relation to effects). It's the world that affords itself the luxury of consciousness.

Yes, this paradox of consciousness, as integral part of the world, analysing the world, is also given form in Nietzsche's words: 'An instrument of knowledge that wants to know itself. The stomach that digests itself.' And Wittgenstein too had this fine image: the difficulty thought finds itself in is like the difficulty of someone who's in a room and would like to leave it. First he tries the window, then the fireplace, but to no avail, and he would only have to turn round to see that the door has been open all along! You can't, in fact, imagine a stronger force than illusion. You could only

instantiate the real by a kind of ruse of illusion itself. If you think of the impoverishment in this transition between illusion, the real and simulation, you invert the hierarchy, but leave hierarchy itself in place. Nietzsche again said that the pathos of distance, the sense of hierarchical distance, lies at the deepest heart of any morality. Perhaps we have before us an ultra-sophisticated form of morality, its non-Euclidean form, for what seems difficult to me is to escape from the trap of foundation, once one overturns the hierarchy.

To escape that, to escape the phantasm of evolution or of an original reference, I can see only one solution. Each phase of this process (which is not, in fact, a process) has to have its perfection in itself; it has to be taken in its absolute singularity, without any possible comparison and, hence, without hierarchy. The flower is as perfect as the fruit. Childhood has its singularity, and old age too. Nothing culminates at a universal destination – not even the human species. According to Nietzsche, it isn't true that the ideal of the human race lies in its highest happiness. We can envisage something much better: a specific happiness or misfortune, a personal destiny and not a general destination. Any race, species, age or sex has its secret rule. 'Each cloud has its own repose,' says Hölderlin. Instead of that, we constantly have one eye on generality, and that's when the regime of differences and discriminations sets in. Lichtenberg thought we were dead before we were alive – in other words, there was already a specific state before life. In seeing things that way, he broke down the evolutionary curve of life, which would mean going from life to death. Death is there first, life afterwards. It's like saying: illusion, nothingness is there first; something, the real is there afterwards. But there's neither priority nor privilege in this. Each state is an exceptional one. And what thought must do, if it can, is to except each fragment from the whole to retain its specific character.

That idea of perfection is, to some extent, the opposite of what Cioran said: 'Theology and metaphysics abdicate before the authority of the trivial detail.' I prefer your idea that in the detail each thing is perfect, and that, taken overall, the world is decidedly disappointing. We could at least agree that, whether it's in the detail or in the whole, perfection's never in both at once! And I also like the idea of a perfection immanent in each singularity (one knows that this is difficult, nevertheless, for if it were the case, we'd be obliged to conceive a perfection of the real, of simulation, of integral reality, etc., and it seems that critical energy could find itself for some moments bereft of its fuel, which is denunciation). But, at the same time, this doesn't prevent the idea that each phase has its own perfection being a very fine one. Perhaps we cannot really choose between the hierarchy or the perfection of the world? (Perhaps the world is dynamically hierarchical and statically perfect?)

These are thoughts akin to Zen, as we were saying before. The Zen pronouncement about mountains and rivers doesn't make any comparisons, even though it seems difficult not to understand it as a process (is it possible to conceive a process without either evolution or involution?). The third stage is just like the first, literally, but it isn't the same at all. You say, 'It is as though we had passed from a universe that does not yet know value or the sign function to a universe of sign value, commodities and meaning, and then again – but this is not the same at all – to a universe that no longer knows value and which is, then, the site of a total, undifferentiated equivalence.' When you cast off transcendent difference, that doesn't mean at all that you enter into indifference. There's a kind of new immanent difference. Might the world itself be organized not around a transcendence or an order of values, but rather in an immanent fashion, in terms of its nearness to, or distance from, illusion?

An immanent attraction, yes, as in a magnetic field. And, over against that, an immense process of deregulation.

But to distinguish between its stages, 'hierarchy' seems to slip unavoidably into the analysis. It's a little bit like in the extremes of seduction and simulation: simulation also abolishes the real, as does seduction, but between the two there's a difference of enchantment.

Yes, a considerable difference. They have in common this oblivion, this obliteration of meaning, but that's a negative common denominator. The liquidation of meaning in the virtual is merely the zero degree of meaning, the 'this side' of signification. Whereas seduction is a 'beyond' of meaning, by resolution and absolution. From the standpoint from which you were talking, it's the stage after the learning of Zen: a form that could be said not even to have the idea of meaning and to function without even the hypothesis of meaning. But it sometimes seems difficult, from just this point of view of meaning, to differentiate between the extremes. It's the same with impossible exchange. We have here two incomparable opposite figures: on the one hand, impossible exchange by default, the type that affects our system of generalized exchange, which ultimately turns out to be impracticable, and, on the other, impossible exchange from excess, that of inexchangeable singularities. Impossible exchange, then, on either side of a zone of conventional exchange.

Yes, the difficulty is that we're prisoners of the perspective of meaning, the true motive force behind the desire to resolve this problem. In this connection, Jean Cohen distinguished three instances: conventional language, absurd language and poetic language. Conventional language has denotation, but no connotation; absurd language shatters conventional language and has neither denotation nor connotation; poetic language has no denotation, but it does have connotation. In other words, the two – the absurd

and the poetic – have shattered conventional language. I'm tempted to establish a correspondence between these three orders of language and the orders of illusion, the real and simulation. The order of illusion would be that of the poetic, a kind of 'primordial' language, a non-reductive form of the world. Conventional language would be a violation of that language, in the way that the real violates illusion (in my opinion, it isn't at all poetic language that shatters conventional language, but the opposite). The real would thus be the equivalent of conventional language, and perhaps simulation would be comparable to the instance of the absurd, even though simulation is not absurd at all – that universe which lies this side of connotation and also of denotation, the absurd as pure and simple predator on meaning, which uses the same weapons as meaning to liquidate it, a form of rupture which remains nonetheless indebted to meaning, a form of disintegration of the sign and the impossibility of finding an equivalent for it.

Poetic language has no meaning, but, nonetheless, it isn't the language of the absurd and of meaninglessness. A large part of modern art and poetry, including Surrealist art and poetry, has invented a whole sphere of meaninglessness and absurdity. That's all part of the destruction of meaning, but it's merely the broken mirror of meaning. It isn't a singular poetic form which, for its part, has no concern for meaning or meaninglessness.

Finalistic language is the static photograph of a world that's always elsewhere. The real and the conventional are merely a condensation at a point, a truce language affords itself so as to be able to appear. One might say that, in the poetic, negativity is given as added extra, never as a condition of the

poetic. The poetic creates the rupture because it is; *it isn't the rupture that brings it into being. It's rather like what Roland Barthes says about Japan: 'The haiku's task is to achieve exemption from meaning within a perfectly readerly discourse (a contradiction denied to Western art, which can contest meaning only by rendering its discourse incomprehensible).'*[17] *This is what distinguishes illusion, and what you call signalling, when something signals in an untranslatable, yet intelligible way. In* Fatal Strategies, *you say, 'It is not enough for a story to be illogical and senseless to be seductive, it also has to signal enigmatically.'*[18] *In illusion and seduction, something signals, and this does not occur in simulation. What might this signalling be – the signalling or beckoning, for example, in the story of death in Samarkand? What distinguishes this signalling, beyond its addressee, from any other act in the world?*

This isn't the sign in the semiological sense of the term. It's the *Witz*, the shaft of wit or the allusive wink. It isn't about communication, but about an immediate secret complicity. It's an allusion, and in that regard akin to illusion, without lexicon or syntax; it's elliptical and always of the order of seduction,

[17] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), p. 81.

[18] I have stayed with Valiente Noailles's version of this passage here, though he is clearly either quoting from memory or retranslating the Spanish translation when he says: 'Il ne suffit pas qu'une histoire soit illogique et insensée pour être séduisante, il faut encore qu'elle *fasse signe* de façon énigmatique' (*Les Exilés du dialogue*, p. 83). In *Les Stratégies fatales*, Baudrillard actually writes not 'de façon énigmatique', but 'de façon inintelligible', which seems rather more radical. For some reason, the English translation of *Les Stratégies fatales* by Beitchman and Niesluchowski adds a further complication by rendering the second clause as 'it is still necessary *that this be signalled* in an unintelligible way' (*Fatal Strategies* (New York: Semiotext[e]/Pluto, 1990), p. 136).

as though coming from elsewhere and, most of the time, as in the Samarkand story, it's linked to a fateful occurrence. We might say, then, that there are three stages (again!): that of the trace or *trait*; that of the sign properly so-called; and, in the current state of the digital, that of the cipher [*chiffre*], in which there's no longer any trace of a sign.

*This triptych form seems unavoidable in analysis: metamorphosis/metaphor/metastasis, antagonism/*Aufhebung/Steigerung, *otherness/difference/indifference, dual/polar/digital, etc.*

Yes, but the fundamental argument remains that of duality. The triptych mustn't lead us to forget that, ultimately, everything is played out in a quasi-Manichaean clash in which the shadow of the principle of evil can be seen to loom – unless the forces grappling with each other aren't doing so frontally and the principle of evil in this case takes the form of reversibility. Analysis may distinguish moments in a process, the finality of which we don't perceive (it runs off into an indeterminate dimension), but that doesn't render the antagonistic postulate invalid, the fact of two powers exclusive of each other and irreconcilable. Between illusion and integral reality, between seduction and production, between radical otherness and the systematic identification of the world, there's no possible compromise; the confrontation between them is irresolvable. The only relation can be one of reversion (neither inversion nor subversion, but reversion). The analytical order is something conceived by the mind, it's the mind working. But reversibility isn't something played out by the subject, it's the working of the world itself. This rule of the overall game – duality and reversibility – is to a large extent beyond our grasp. But many metaphysics have envisaged it. It isn't perhaps very far from the myth of Eternal Return. But we can barely represent this

to ourselves in space or in mental space. It's difficult to give it material form in some dimension or other. Some theories in physics come close: that of the double arrow of time, for example, with the hypothesis of the Big Bang and the Big Crunch beginning simultaneously. But we're sliding towards science fiction a bit there.

I can see this primacy of the dual over the triptych-style analysis. Let's think about these other 'couples' of terms: immanence / transcendence, surface abysses / depth, secret / decipherment, reversibility / linearity, rule / law, observance / belief, pataphysics / metaphysics, rituality / sociality, etc. There's no frontal relation: the first term of the pair isn't linked dialectically to the second. It functions rather as a solvent of the irreversible pretensions of the second. The first term is anterior to the slash between the two, anterior to the distinction that instantiates the real between the two. Ultimately, perhaps, everything would be readable as duality and as triptych. The first seems to be a state of things preliminary to the instantiation of any binary divide; the second is a concept that emerges naturally from that divide. Perhaps the fundamental difference between these two analytical matrices plays out in a secret tone of reconciliation or irreconciliation. Isn't the triptych-style analysis imperceptibly orientated towards a form of resolution, a temptation to synthesis that would put an end to the antagonism? Doesn't the third axis of the triptych operate at times as a deus ex machina *attempting to resolve conceptually that which is irresolvable? Every duality that begins to be understood in a binary fashion necessarily calls forth a third element (the dialectic is always fertile, even if it eventually summons up cloning!), whereas a duality understood as such has no need to eliminate duality. In this Manichaean duel, we might wager that seduction would become more powerful than production, because it has become syntonic with the reversible modality of the world. So far as the other term is concerned, reversibility comes to it* de facto, *it isn't incorporated into*

its form; on the contrary, indeed, it dispels reversibility. And, to return to our original triad, it seems there's one term too many. I wonder what the density of the real might be today, between illusion and simulation.

Very low. What's the credibility of the real today? This brings us back to some degree to our initial proposition, that of God's atheism. If reality's no longer dependable, that's because it has no confidence in itself any longer. It's become confused with banality and with the fall into banality. But there are, paradoxically, two points it comes down at: radical illusion and integral reality (the virtual). In other words, it falls either by relinquishment of its own principle or by exceeding its own principle. In the meantime, it constitutes a rallying point by default, a collective convention, so to speak – a kind of compulsory club, whose outdated ceremonial one accepts. Groucho Marx said, 'I wouldn't join a club that would have me as a member.' Well, reality is the virtual club we're co-opted into in spite of ourselves (and, like Groucho, we don't necessarily want to be members). In fact, there no longer are any members, but it serves nonetheless as a referent and a moral code. If you reject it, anathema ensues. Immorality has now come to refer entirely to the denial of reality, to the questioning of reality. The taboo of reality has replaced the sexual taboo. And that taboo is so strong only because reality is currently disappearing.

Yes, the real might be said to be a form of purgatory for the original crime, but a purgatory which, paradoxically, we find quite comfortable because it defers the decision on where we come down. Despair increases as the real's room for manoeuvre shrinks because the alternative you speak of then becomes inevitable: coming down in illusion or, ultimately, in integral reality. The more the real disappears, the more there's panic. And, to fuel its existence,

the real demands sacrifices to its gods: and, naturally, they start with the heretics who speak against it.

And even more, what speaks to one side of it, outside its field, and no longer takes it into account. But realist thought takes its revenge. It confuses the messenger with the 'bad' news (that of the death throes of the real). It sees a conspiracy in this and makes you the objective accomplice of those things you are trying to read against the grain. It confuses you with Le Pen, for example, or terrorism, if you venture to speak 'dangerously' about them. All irony, all distance has disappeared from the intellectual field. The cult of the real, of the lost object, dominates us with all its bad conscience.

Yes, in the eyes of realist thought, everything is functional: by the very fact of exploring the scene of the crime, radical thought lays itself open to being charged with the murder. The strategy consists in deflecting exploration from another hypothesis: that of an assisted suicide of the real, a suicide from an incapacity to tolerate the overload of meaning. Responsibility must be assigned to someone in the hope that, if ironic discourse is eliminated, the problem itself will be also.

Realism is a magical thinking. Like magical thinking, it takes words for things. Integral reality interprets everything, the negative and the positive, in the same sense and by the same value criterion, that of a total positivity. No negativity any longer, no critical thought – that's the price to pay for joining the club. Now, even if we were able to analyse the 'critical illusion', we did so in the sense of a radical thinking, of a 'beyond' of critical thinking. Here, we're up against a liquidation, a reduction and immediate digestion of

anything that can constitute opposition. It's like a form of virus that devours immunities and leaves us defenceless. 'Objective' reality was always in some way a critical reality: it carried out its own defence. In the face of extreme reality we are, by contrast, defenceless. We cannot but feel nostalgic, then, for that critical spirit produced by the Enlightenment, which appears, retrospectively, as a historical singularity – when faced with an integrist real which, having to some degree eliminated the rational, has retained conceptual energy only so as to exterminate what remains of it.

It's terrifying, this kind of nuclear winter that's spreading over theory and the world, which eliminates at birth the slightest trace of life. If, out of panic, illusion has been eliminated, the traces of illusion must also be wiped out. We're confronted with the pluperfect crime.

Yes, all illusion must be hounded out, particularly the sacrificial forms. I'm thinking of the Spaniards landing in Mexico, who could very well have exploited the gold and the Indians without exterminating them. Yet they had a major reason for doing so. The fact was that the Spaniards had already, at that time, lost the sense of the sacred; they'd already ceased to invest in their religious faith, and they quite simply couldn't tolerate a people that went as far as human sacrifice in its religious ritual. Such striking proof of an intense faith arouses fierce jealousy among those who've lost it. This example encapsulates the entire modern enterprise of an undifferentiated world, our world, which cannot but exterminate any kind of singularity or difference.

Why is singularity experienced as a threat? It's a mystery similar to that of the logic that leads us to exterminate illusion: the act of extermination occurs

repeatedly against anything which, like illusion, shows a spark of difference and intensity. Although, without doubt, the hypothesis of a fierce jealousy is also the reason for the violence exerted against any form of singularity, against any area attesting to an ironic reserve on the part of the world? However, the duel is lethal and hopeless for realist thought: whilst its enemy grows in its entrails, it dreams of conquering it by annihilating it from the outside.

In our world, the only good singularity is a dead one. Or – but this is the same thing – a singularity resuscitated and locked away in our museum universe. The exterminated Indians are being given a territory again today and a social existence. The bodies of their ancestors are being returned to them, and they're even being turned into casino managers. That's the Disneyland operation, in which all that's disappeared is artificially restored. But all modern nations have built themselves up – and continue to do so – on the basis of an extinction of local singularities or their assimilation into folklore. And what will there be at the end of this total absorption? In the heart of this indifference, unfortunately, there's still enough nostalgia and remorse to carry the extermination through to the end. That nostalgia, which takes the form of humanitarian redemption and remorseless protection, is, in fact, the best way of finishing the job. We're the only culture that's ever committed itself to an undertaking of this kind. The others could be violent and conquering, but they didn't aim for this annihilation, this global moronization.

This lobotomization is even worse than violence.

Yes, because violence is still a dual relation, an antagonistic relation, whereas there's a form of pure elimination here, of mental genocide. It's what you see,

too, in the recent 'wars' (which, for that very reason, weren't wars): the extermination of the enemy as enemy, their disqualification as opponents. They don't exist, their character of enemy is wrested from them, the very possibility they might have of fighting. I don't remember who it was who said that war means destroying the other side's quality of light. What has happened in Afghanistan? The disqualification of that country and the installation of the global order (including in the form of music, television, democracy and tearing off the veil). But, beyond the strategic and political conflict, all wars ultimately have this objective and this main effect: the destruction of singular cultures and of everything that resists the global order and generalized exchange. Anthropological genocide.

Transcendence / Immanence

BAUDRILLARD: Not only the stage of the real, but that of the sign itself is behind us today and has been absorbed into the virtual and the digital. This marks, as it were, the decline of simulation and of the theory of simulation, of what will very soon seem to us to have been a golden age of the simulacrum. In simulation, the real is to a great extent set at a distance, but there's still the shadow of a lost signification, an underlying vision of the real. Simulation has run out of signs, but it hasn't really broken with the classical analysis of representation. It's still an interplay between two similar qualities, between reality and virtual reality.[19] When the virtual wins out, this

[19] The French here is 'entre chien et loup', which is to say between two things that are difficult to distinguish. The expression is commonly used in French to indicate nightfall, the point at which one cannot distinguish between dog and wolf. As such, it can apparently be traced back at least to a Hebrew text of the second century BC.

complex game of the sign and its substitution for the real comes to an end. The dialectic of meaning and the equilibrium of the sign first give way to the disequilibrium of meaning and signification in the simulacrum (there's no longer any general equivalent in the real, the sign can no longer be exchanged for reality), then, at the highest stage of simulation, to the fractalization of meaning in the digital, to acceleration into the void. One no longer even has that alienation of meaning that still corresponded to the notion – and the society – of the spectacle. There's no longer even the shadow of a reference. Figures and digital calculation (the 0/1 which is no longer a difference at all, but a formal alternation) lay hold of information and of the whole sphere of artificial intelligence. The differential calculus of the sign gives way to the integral calculus of the virtual. There's been much talk of the murder of reality by the sign, but that hypothesis needs to be nuanced: more serious than the murder of the real is the murder of the sign. And if the phase of simulation is indeed that of the murder of the real, the virtual, for its part, is the phase of the murder of the sign.

NOAILLES: *It's the move from a parody of the real to the real without any parody. It's fantastic to see how the Zen 'progression' comes into play again, although still inverted: from the universe that knows no value to the universe of value and the sign, then 'once again' to a universe that no longer knows any value. Might we be moving from a shadow that distantly evoked a body to a body that succeeds, by way of revenge, in ridding itself entirely of its shadow? The simulacrum still conformed, perhaps, to the last degree of the inversion of Platonism. But in this additional step, in the death of the sign, the world goes further, towards the recognition not only that there aren't two worlds, but that there isn't even one. A world that eliminates its shadow, its phantasmatic form, is the most concrete form of impossibility. But I greatly like this image you use: by doing away with transcendence, we've*

materialized the kingdom of God immanently. The total realization of transcendence in immanence.

In Saul Bellow, there's this idea that transcendence is still there, but it's downward transcendence now, not upward.

That's lovely, a bit like Hölderlin's image of falling upwards. In Saul Bellow, so to speak, it's transcendence towards the before rather than the beyond. Ultimately, there's a kind of drive towards transcendence that we can't do without. As for immanence, there's the rather Spinozan idea of an absolute coextensiveness of the real and the possible, a perfect coextensiveness, entirely opposite to Leibniz's theory of one world among other possible worlds. In the same way as, for Spinoza, what is in potentia *in God exists necessarily, and what doesn't exist, necessarily isn't possible. (If something were possible but didn't exist, God wouldn't be all he could be; he wouldn't be infinite.) You might say that it's the dialectical negation of the world that opens up 'the possible' as alternative and that pure affirmation, for its part, closes the field of the possible. To conceive the necessity of the world and not its random character immediately rules out any space beyond. Hegel himself defined necessity in the* Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences *as 'the union of possibility and actuality'.*[20] *It would seem that the world conceived as impossible exchange, without equivalent beyond or before it, can only be such if it's conceived as completely necessary.*

[20] The English reader may be more familiar with a reference here to Hegel's *Logic*. The precise reference is: *Hegel's Logic. Being Part One of The Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. William Wallace, with a Foreword by J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), §147, p. 208.

In the past, the virtual had the possibility of becoming actual [*réel*]. Actuality was even its destination. There was, then, possibility. Today, when the virtual is winning out over the real, there's no longer any possibility, since everything is immediately realized. We have, then, here again, if you like, an absolute coextensiveness, though not, as in Spinoza, by ideal adequation, but rather, by confusion and mutual cancelling. In the virtual, there's no longer any actual, since any other actual is simultaneously possible; there's no longer any possible, since all the possibilities are immediately realized. The result is acceleration into the void . . . the desert, as I put it. The Real is the desert, and the Real is growing like the desert. 'Welcome to the desert of the real,' as they say in *Matrix*, that perfect illustration of virtual reality. The metaphysical immanence of Spinoza has given way to the operational immanence of the virtual.

Once arrived at the point of a pure operational immanence, without distance, transcendence or signification, then we may wonder whether illusion might ultimately be destructible.

I'm torn between the idea of an integral calculus of the world, and hence of a definitive loss of illusion, and that of an indestructible form of illusion. Not by a privileging of the origin, for if illusion were originary, it could come to an end, but by a kind of fatal strategy internal to the system itself, which ensures the reintroduction of something indestructible that thwarts it – something one may call illusion, but one of the forms of which may quite simply be thought [*la pensée*].

For what does the immense episode of materialization, doubled by artificial intelligence, ultimately give way to, once it has reached its perfection or, in other words, once the perfect crime has been perpetrated? It gives

way to thought: to thought, the sole master of the void, as ascendancy of the void and ascendancy over the void, into which ultimately this integrally realized world plunges itself. Physics offers us a metaphor for this void; it's no longer the void in which there's nothing, but a void charged with potentiality, a potential void, and thought would be this potential of the void. If we push these lines of thinking as far as we can, the extremes surely meet, the desert of the virtual and the potential void of thought meet – like that stucco angel, the allegory of the virtual, whose extremities meet in a curved mirror. These are all 'fatal' hypotheses.

The Vaccinated System

NOAILLES: *To think politics a little and to come back to Europe, I'd like us to talk about the strange rise of the extreme Right and the disappearance of the Left.*

BAUDRILLARD: The Left has long been living a merely phantom existence; it's a long time since it had a political will of its own. The same goes for the Right, by the way: they're both disappearing together. In fact, it's the distinction between them that's disappeared and with it the stakes on the political scene. That's why the only political discourse today is that of Le Pen who, for his part at least, articulates this objective complicity, this confusion, between Right and Left. That is, in a sense, the basic truth which the entire activity of the political class strives to mask. But since, ultimately, the Right is part of normal life and the everyday scenery, it's the Left, as emblem of the political, that will be mourned.

Perhaps we're still in the evil / misfortune [mal/malheur] *difference here, since the Left to some extent represents the world as it should have been.*

Yes, and so it embodies misfortune. In a sense, that's entirely to its credit. As the vehicle of the social ideal (not to speak of revolution), it's dying from the death throes of the social itself. It's a long time since anyone thought of the Right as having a social agenda; it might be said, rather, to be the 'degree zero' of politics, and it remains in being as such because it's the easiest solution. The Left itself, which was the marked term, is no longer either marked or remarkable. But, all the same, it still takes itself for the divine Left. It can scarcely claim any historic privilege any more, but it still claims to retain a moral privilege.

The idea that it's still the vehicle and repository of meaning.

Yes, but for there to be meaning, there has to be difference. When general equivalence sets in, the confrontation between Left and Right is no longer anything but a closed, zero-sum exchange. Instead of giving a political form to their action, they merely exchange themselves for each other in a fictive alternation. And, as a result, it's the political that becomes impossible to exchange. This is what has been pointed up by Le Pen, who, in his very ubuesque emergence, embodies that impossibility. By stigmatizing this equivalence, he appears as the only marked term; all the others are the degree zero. He's the evil, the one who speaks and bears evil, and the fact he's a grotesque individual is of no importance – that's the irony of evil. He's the evil [*le mal*], and the others are in misfortune [*le malheur*]. They manage the perpetual misfortune, for want of confronting the evil. This situation is irresolvable, since the idea

of putting evil in power makes no sense either. The point is to do evil to power, not to put evil in power.

And perhaps he'd turn into an absolute moderate . . .

He'd become part of the political game, that's certain. Evil can irrupt, but it isn't made to last. It can only be an exception. Many in the political class have sensed this creeping evil, and they've tried to find a homeopathic solution for it, letting a little dose of doubt, confession, irony and contestation seep in – the devil's share – but, of course, they can't pull it off, despite this 'ill' will, since the system is vaccinated – self-vaccinated – the circuits are too well integrated and the absorption of the evil is automatic.

In a sense the system wants absolutely to create its antithesis.

Yes, but there isn't one any more. We've devoured the antithesis. Even the antithesis has become a prosthesis.

And do you think such a phenomenon could occur in the USA?

There is an American fundamentalism. Analysing the Waco episode and the Oklahoma bombing, Gore Vidal shows that the fundamental antagonism, outside racial and economic conflicts, the real war of secession, is now between the individual – the typical product of American liberalism – and

the federal state. This deep hostility to the state, which we have difficulty imagining here, has no doubt been there from the start. The state here is experienced as the emanation of a civil society, whereas over there it barely has any sovereignty, and the individual's always on the verge of feeling persecuted by it. This is the source of the fundamentalism of the whole American extreme Right, including that of the military circles. There's the potentiality in this for an internal terrorism, which has often been seen at work. Not an anti-American terrorism, but rather a hyper-American terrorism – a form of exacerbated isolationism. One imagines America as a kind of homogeneous superpower, but it isn't: as with everywhere else, there's this old visceral hostility to the universality of the state, that dominant abstraction of modern history. Is it a good, is it an evil? However this may be, the more the powers of the state are strengthened, the more this muted revolt grows, a revolt that isn't even exactly political, but calls into question the political structure. You might call it reactionary, from the standpoint of the dominant liberalism. Both in France and in the wider Europe, there is in this same way an anti-Europeanism that isn't met only among farmers or small traders – a rejection of this synthetic Europe and the abstract entity of Brussels.

A desire for singularity?

Yes, everything that resists global power today is part of that. It underlies all the forms of isolationism and ethnic, linguistic and religious particularism that resist this enforced promotion into the universal. Look what happened in the Dutch parliamentary elections of 2002. You have there a rich, enlightened, totally conformist country, a country so self-assured that it can afford itself the luxury of permissiveness (drugs, etc.). Well, suddenly, at the elections, deepest Holland went over to the extreme Right.

Twin Holland?

Yes, the silent, perverse twin awakened. Suddenly, it was acting out, bursting out, like in *Alien*.

What you say about singularity is interesting, because in Argentina in recent years we've seen a kind of acting-out of singularity, but through failure – a pursuit of differentiation through failure. It may be thrilling, as you say, to feel privileged by bad luck, even by banal, rather than fateful, bad luck.

You can mark yourself out as singular by the best of things or the worst. Specificity can come through misfortune, provided it's out of the ordinary. But to go back to the Le Pen episode, there's an original twist here. It's no longer a protest from some part of the political chessboard, but a manifestation of an allergy to the political itself – and hence something almost transpolitical. The transversal emergence of something other, of an unidentified political object. In this sense, I'd like to rethink what happened in May '68 – to do so, that is, not in political, ideological terms or in terms of its consequences, but as an event, a ruptural event. And, paradoxically, May '68 arose out of a crisis of prosperity, and the moral poverty that ensued from economic prosperity. Prosperity faced people with a problem of changed values. The old prohibitions, the old miseries, were over and done with; the new challenge was how to come to terms with your needs, your desires, all your pleasures – and that's where things began to go wrong. An abreaction to what was called the consumer society, in fact to that sudden broadening of the horizon, to that form of de-territorialization, to the new lifestyle competition. That's what the universities reacted to first, in a kind of anticipated suicide of knowledge and

culture. This all became diluted subsequently into economic demands, but that wasn't the real story. It was the mental fracture that was the key, and a defensive reaction to everything that was already looming as the future global order: a technical, free-market order. And there weren't any real political consequences to the event, nor any bright future to follow, but, at the time, there *was* an event, something mythic, which precisely flouted causes and consequences. All in all, we find ourselves facing a fracture of the same type today, that of a broadening to a global horizon, implicitly experienced as catastrophe . . .

But, since then, May '68 has been whitewashed . . .

Of course it has, just as the French Revolution was whitewashed by taking out the Terror. They found the 'correct' way of dealing with the Revolution. Where 1968 is concerned, since there was no means to find a 'correct' way of dealing with it, it's been consigned to the dustbins of history. This is quite simply revisionism, if not indeed historical denial. What hurts is the meaning *as event*, the implacable element that wells up in a society on the path to total reconciliation. So, the event has at all costs to be peacefully laid to rest, and its political exploitation primarily serves that end.

But the Le Pen episode didn't have the force of a pure event. It only went half way . . .

Yes, it was just a twist characteristic of a new type of event, of a new situation that has no parallel with political history or prehistory. In my opinion, the World Trade Center event's part of this too.

It looks like an event destined never to take place. As in Waiting for Godot, *you're sure it won't happen, but everyone's waiting for it. And there's something in play in that waiting.*

Perhaps it's a form of silent plotting that corresponds in some way to the conspiracy between events (for events conspire together, we can be sure of that). It's perhaps a form of immunization too, of vaccination against catastrophe. At any rate, the relation between the 'real' or historical world and the world of events is very strange. They're two parallel universes that don't have the same co-ordinates. With historical violence, even revolutionary violence, even the Cold War, we were in a single dimension, whereas here, we're in an asymmetrical order that's no longer, strictly speaking, a history. In this sense, Fukuyama isn't entirely wrong: history as determination, history as such, is over. What's happening now no longer corresponds to a historical unity of space-time.

But surely you wouldn't agree with him . . . !

No, of course not. Not in his panegyric for the democratic, free-market system. But he does get some things right. For example, his judgement of French intellectuals. What is it with these intellectuals, he says, who swear by no one but Sade, Nietzsche and Artaud and sign democratic petitions for human rights or against war?

He finds this incoherent, that this metaphysical ferocity goes together with such political conformism . . .

And he's quite right. All these intellectually incorrect ideologues who have a politically correct unconscious (even if it expresses itself only in petitions or in a 'democratic' sensibility) – their references all subversive, their behaviour entirely compliant.

There seem to be two parallel universes: the universe of Good and Evil in capitals and that of good and evil lower-case. Nietzsche himself said that. You may feel beyond Good and Evil in capitals, but not at all beyond lower-case good and evil. In a word, you can transgress in upper case, while conforming in lower case.

I prefer Fukuyama, who, for his part, isn't concerned any longer with Good and Evil in capital letters and who advocates good without constantly eyeing evil. Take another example, that of Julia Kristeva! Talking of the Front National vote, she spoke of the French having an Unconscious that was complicit with Le Pen. Yet she must have some understanding of the Unconscious. She must know it's a total absurdity, from the pyschoanalytic standpoint, to make the Unconscious the obscure accomplice in a political act, for what would a political determination of the unconscious be? She knows all this, but when democratic morality demands it, she'll mobilize the Unconscious and prostitute it ideologically in the service of democracy. An easy solution, but a dangerous one, since then, at the same time as she's denouncing those who voted for Le Pen, she's also denouncing the Unconscious. Now, to denounce the Unconscious is ridiculous, as ridiculous as it would be to make the unconscious denounce something. A fine example of duplicity.

You've spoken of Latin America as an exciting phenomenon: it never seems able to find a political, economic or social reality principle, which represents an advantage today over the European confusion about these same principles. Might Latin America, paradoxically, have a more developed uncertainty principle than Europe?

The so-called underdeveloped countries are in the avant-garde in that sense: they've skipped the transition through all the phases of modernity in which we're currently bogged down. But my proposition mainly concerned Brazil. I find that in Brazil the categories of the economic or the political are hazier, more uncertain. Is it a question of societies that haven't yet incorporated the determining principles of the economic and the political, or societies that are already indeterministic, in which, with the rule today, as in the sciences, being uncertainty, social, economic and political categories are caught in this same uncertainty?

Could there be said to be a kind of de-stabilization of politics that hasn't first passed through stability?

Everyone's agreed on rescuing the imaginary of politics, but, in the end, the political has fallen into the sphere of the floating signifier, as Lévi-Strauss would say: a changeable, random space, as witness the fluctuations of Right and Left or the American elections, for example. This is all reinforced by opinion polls that claim to report on a hazy reality and are themselves even hazier than the reality.

Not so long ago, in Argentina, there was, concretely, a sort of sudden de-signification of signs – at the level of the institutions, but also of the economy. It's happened to us several times that money has lost its value – it had realized itself beyond the real in a sort of trance-like realization, in hyper-inflation. Furthermore, people lost their trust in the banks, everyone went to take out their money together. It's like a disappearance of the sign, a kind of advanced integral reality laboratory!

It's perhaps the highest stage of money. In Germany, I was given two 500-euro notes. I wasn't able to change them anywhere. Even the bank refused to exchange them for cash. I had to pay them into my account and transform them into virtual money before they'd give them back to me as real money. There's no faith in the money-sign any longer (though that itself is an abstraction); only the digital counts. At bottom, value, like signs, can now realize itself successfully only within a very narrow window. For things to circulate as quickly as possible, value must no longer have the time to realize itself, signs must no longer have the time to signify.

The Suffering of Stones

NOAILLES: *It's really the de-signification of the sign, of banking and money. And debt, too, which has lost the sign of obligation. We're getting rid of that completely.*

BAUDRILLARD: Ah, yes, since it reappears in the form of stocks and shares. There's no longer even any negative equivalence – what made a debt a debt.

Suffering falls into this same category: if we're becoming increasingly sensitive to it and if we're trying increasingly to eliminate it (and death too), that's because it has no equivalence any more and no value. You no longer suffer for a God, for your salvation, for another world – there, at least, there was a form of equivalence. Current suffering's unbearable because it no longer has an equivalent.

It seems every form of exchange with suffering has been forgotten except therapy. In fact, we could be said to have replaced all metaphysics by therapies capable of immediately expurgating the dissonances the universe might present. This is the new preventive metaphysics. Yet, what should be exchangeable for suffering seems also to be lacking!

Yes, and as a consequence, its exchange becomes doubly impossible. For that reason, too, I'm more sensitive to non-human suffering, to the suffering of animals or trees (not to mention the suffering of stones! Let's think of the specific, silent suffering of being a stone, or, in other words, in Heidegger's terms, of not even being-in-the-world!). I feel this not out of ecological sensibility, but because human suffering, for its part at least, has its equivalence in a consciousness – that's why it was once the only suffering that moved us, because it was the only form that could speak and represent itself. But today, the suffering of inanimate entities has become more moving, because they don't even have a destiny; they don't even have the right of moral retribution for their suffering. So, it's even more unjust – if that term can indeed have a sense elsewhere than in human consciousness. What's changing, too, is that we're falling into the same inhuman condition, that of beings without consciousness that suffer for nothing. With no possible equivalence. We are, then, becoming more

sensitive to what is happening on the other side, the inhuman side. Where misfortune is concerned, we're seeing a whole system of equivalence and compensation being created: the whole victim syndrome that's thriving everywhere. To have yourself recognized as a victim is one of your human rights today. There's a whole political economy of misfortune. There is a possible exchange of misfortune, whereas there's no possible exchange of evil.

There's a vertiginous – and almost inhuman – beauty in what you've just said. This might be seen as a turn on the part of the universe towards absolute gratuitousness, a kind of moral unemployment in which we've lost the right to a minimum social income. A voluntary unemployment, as it were, and you prefer the universe of all that we've always considered as slavish, the inhuman universe, to these new unemployed, who want, moreover, to liberate it. (All that's missing is the liberation of stones indeed.) As for exchange, this is the distinction we were talking about before between evil and misfortune . . .

Evil is this extreme situation of impossible exchange. The world is unexchangeable because there's no criterion of equivalence external to the world. This radical situation is unbearable, and hence a convertible situation has to be substituted for it: that of misfortune. Misfortune is exchangeable, and hence bearable, the ideal being that everything should be soluble in exchange. This puts me in mind of a film, Charles Najman's *Can Memory Dissolve in Évian Water?*, in which you see Auschwitz survivors taking the waters at a spa every year in the lap of luxury, all paid for by the Germans. They are, at bottom, going back to the primal scene of the camp: what they went through then, they are

reliving in the mode of reconciliation. Most of them are very pleased with this. In reality, they've found the solution to the impossible exchange of death.

It's rather like the idea that suffering in this life will be compensated elsewhere. But, in fact, it's like a doubling of the suffering. It's a strange make-over – underscoring the past like this with its sign reversed.

Yes, evil is made over into misfortune. Evil is soluble in misfortune. That's what 'victimhood' is.

Could you range this idea of evil and misfortune under that of tragedy? For example, when Clément Rosset says that misfortune begins only when you no longer accept the real? Misfortune might be said to begin when you think things could have been different.

Yes, *ressentiment* is the product of an – inevitably – disappointed idealization. Cioran says, for example, that it's the desire to give a meaning to life that makes us failures. But where Rosset's concerned, there's an ambiguity over the meaning of the term 'real'. He employs it in a radical sense, that of an absolute 'idiocy' [*idiotie*], which for me would be the equivalent of singularity. But I agree with him on the aura of the real 'in itself', stripped of any interpretation, whether it be that of music or Camembert: everything's idiomatic. What remains strange is that we strive remorselessly to disenchant this singular object, to pervert the real, precisely by giving it meaning.

So, any inclination to change the world is necessarily inspired by unhappiness or misfortune?

It's both the engine and the ineluctable consequence of changing the world. From the standpoint of evil, there's no sense wanting to change the world.

Perhaps this standpoint of evil has been obscurely understood, that it's senseless to want to change the world. This would solve the mystery of Marx's thesis on Feuerbach ('Hitherto existing philosophers have merely interpreted the world, the point, however, is to change it'). And that would absolve us philosophers at a stroke! (But who will absolve us of interpretation?)

To change the world is to finalize it: we're still in the phantasm of surpassing and perfection here – a phantasm that automatically fuels unhappiness. How do things work? Do they work according to the law, according to reason? There would, in that case, be some chance of reducing evil, and we wouldn't need misfortune. But, in fact, everyone uses this latter immorally, and societies themselves, according to Mandeville, function by illegality and corruption. It seems that's where the vital energy lies – or at least the rules of the social game. Do we have to call this corruption? That's about as justified as calling everything in our psychical lives that contravenes the moral law 'perversion'. It's law and order that can be termed perverse. The symbolic form, for its part, the rules of the game, are never perverse.

This is evil showing through in an order that sees itself as the order of

good. And here we get to a supra-sensible, supra-moral position which reveals that no one ultimately has ever regarded the moral law as something written in the hearts of men. The moral law is a bit like the social order; it's an epiphenomenon, a fragile, exceptional structure under constant challenge. In fact, evil is always there, like the void beyond space.

And everyone has a grasp of evil, without necessarily being aware of it. With misfortune, on the other hand, everyone's aware of it; it's an object of exchange, understanding, solidarity and conviviality. It circulates like an official commodity (whereas evil tends, rather, to circulate on the black market); but behind this banal exchange, this statistical equivalence of misfortune, there's doubtless the insight into another order, an order without possible equivalence, that of evil. Other societies made the distinction clearly, recognizing duality, which, for us, has become the absolute heresy, whereas in those societies, there was no heresy, but a ritual, sacrificial putting-in-play of that duality.

Of irreconcilement?

Yes. But we're no longer in a dual order; we're in a dialectical order and under the principle of reconciliation. On the question of the irreconcilable, they've just discovered Neanderthal man to be an 'other' human species. Other in the sense that it couldn't reproduce with our own, *Homo sapiens*. This duality is interesting. It's even a fantastic scenario, the idea that there were *two* human species, one of which, the Neanderthal, disappeared after 15,000 years of cohabitation in the same European space. This means that since the other was eliminated, we've retained a monopoly on the human, and on a unidirectional anthropology. That should cast some ambiguity on the concepts of the human and humanism.

Neanderthal Man

NOAILLES: *But the monopoly is itself growing tired. With cloning, we're rediscovering the lost duplicity.*

BAUDRILLARD: Perhaps that's the unhappy destiny of all that manages to establish itself as sole possessor of a power, whatever it may be. Monopoly is unstable. It's doomed to split or fracture. We saw this with the Cold War, where things operated around two poles under the sign of the balance of terror. Once the monopoly of global power was achieved, after communism had fallen, that global power fractured and was confronted with its monstrous double: terrorism in all its forms. *Our* double – you're right – is the clone. Oneness, giving birth on its own, produces a simulacrum of itself or a double. Cloning might thus be said to be a kind of miscarriage. Yet, we're moving towards this oneness, this totality, by the elimination of all singularities, such as that of this twin, different human race.

This is very interesting because, with clones, we're recreating this twinness melancholically.

A system that's exterminated the other can only be exterminated in return. It ends up producing this rebound of the selfsame destroying itself – a kind of esoteric disaster.

We're perhaps in a world that knows it seems to have lost its own shadow, that knows it's lost the light source that gave rise to that shadow, and that's desperately seeking to regenerate it by way of duplication. Might this headlong flight forward be the product of fear of the revenge of this exterminated shadow; the product of the presentiment of an inevitable duel, like that of William Watson in Poe's tale? In that case, as at Samarkand once again, a fateful destiny awaits us. Out of fear of the vengeance of the proscribed shadow, we're producing a world whose hidden function will be precisely to avenge that shadow. Could the clone be said, then, to be a kind of suicide of the species? And what would the obsessive fear be that leads us to cloning?

A complex, derivative form of mortality, whereas cloning was intended to ensure automatic immortality for us. What are we seeking? Precisely this perpetual identity, this definitive form. But splitting oneself indefinitely is a way of going over to the other side, beyond one's own end.

But we might also suspect that when the infinite of a situation is eliminated absolutely, when only the finite remains, that tends to vanish into the infinite.

Yes, it's the splitting of the finite into another infinite. But this self-multiplication is interpreted as a progress towards the universal, which is entirely wrong. We're sacrificing the prey for its shadow, the universal for the global. Which is, perhaps, a remote consequence of the fact that, to safeguard that universal, we've sacrificed others: the Neanderthal, for

example. If there are two different human species, there's no universality. When one of the two is eliminated, the remaining one becomes universal. That was how we became the sole and unique universal human being! – at the risk of becoming Neanderthals again, or seeing them re-emerge. For we still are secretly a little Neanderthal. The spectre of the Neanderthal is always there!

All that's been repressed, all that's been eradicated, carries on obscurely along its parallel path. We carry it within ourselves like the dead twins in mythologies. Of the two twins, there's always one who has to die. But he's still there, inside, and life is an immense labour of de-twinning. I have my own little theory, on the fringes of psychoanalysis, about the fundamental separation. It isn't the separation from parents, but the break with one's original twin. In the beginning, we're always two, and we have to get rid of our twin. And we only really exist from the moment we get rid of him. It's very difficult. Some never manage it. There's always this buried otherness or, rather, buried 'sameness', and all problems of identity, of neurosis, come much more profoundly from this breaking of twinness or the failure of that break, than from the parental drama.

I like this 'theory': perhaps the labour of a life consists in washing away the bloodstains of this sacrifice. It's the term of the duality that was eliminated that becomes your destiny.

It resurfaces involuntarily, one way or another. If you eliminate it, you find yourself with countless twins (clones are an illustration of this) – a teeming twinness which is simply the endless metastasis of the being that was eliminated at the beginning. So, all the virtual egos eliminated at birth by the constitution of a single ego – all these other egos – make up our profound otherness.

Either you respect duality, so to speak, even lost duality, or you create a unity that metastasizes.

Unless you manage to bring twinness back into play. But almost all the stories of mythological twins have a tragic ending. It's a destiny that leads, one way or another, to death. We choose to eliminate one of them from the outset, which brings us back to Neanderthal man, who seems like the monstrous twin we really had to get rid of. Today, when we can no longer pride ourselves so assuredly on the universality acquired at his expense, we're turning back to him with some nostalgia, as we are to all the cultures or species that have been sacrificed. Retrospectively, we're no longer very sure of the universality of the human race, but it's no use mourning, since we are, in any case, going to offload it on to an artificial species that won't even remember it.

Why do we experience duality as a threat, but not the oneness that splits or metastasizes?

All the ethical problems around cloning show that it's felt to be a threatening prospect and, at the same time, exerts a fascination more powerful than any morality. We have to come back here to the distinction between seduction and fascination. Fascination is linked to vertigo. And the technical transformation of the world, of which the reduplication of the species is part, is a vertiginous undertaking. Chain reactions and the exponential are fascinating. Seduction is, by contrast, a dual game, a finite game, with rules. It has its measure; it has its limits; it stands opposed to the modern universe of deregulation. Fascination is linked to the desire for immortality which the

whole development of technology implies, whereas seduction implies death. Now that we're set on this vertiginous course today, I can't see what could be ranged against it.

I don't see anything emerging from elsewhere to get the better of this irreversible process. Out of what's currently becoming the 'all', I can't see where the 'nothing' might re-emerge. But, in fact, the more we press forward with the duplication of human beings, the more we notice they're incredibly ambivalent, and we can't reproduce that ambivalence. The more we press on with the transformation of the world, the more we notice it's the world itself that resists globalization. Oneness and duality: it's an endless pursuit race around the Moebius strip.

So humanity seems to have invented the real only so as to have illusion always before it, as destiny? It seems to have eliminated its twin in order to ensure a destiny – even a fatal destiny - for itself? Might it have eliminated its twin only to ensure that, if ever it had nothing to pursue, it would at least be secretly pursued by someone? At any rate, this pursuit race around the Moebius strip is precisely what makes it difficult to imagine illusion being eliminated.

The more we hunt it down, the more it infiltrates, like a virus, into the very interior of the process. And this is reassuring, since it signifies the *a priori* failure of any systematic attempt at disillusionment.

And how does this self-splitting of the global monopoly play itself out at the political level? What's the equivalent of cloning at the political level?

It's the establishment of a political and cultural order generative of millions of clones – not necessarily genetically, but mentally cloned, and programmatically differentiated. We've already reached this point. And this fractalization of the same model also applies in politics, which also reproduces itself clonally by way of opinion polls, statistics, stifling consensual thinking and political double-speak. In the end, this will become an immense theme park in which democratic individualization will generate a Brownian motion of elementary particles and free radicals, each becoming the clone of the other and, most importantly, of itself. What we may hope is that all of this will unleash some new passions, a whole mimetic violence, a virulence of mimetic desire, once there comes to be rivalry between each individual and his double. *The Student of Prague* can serve as a reference here, that film in which the student's double, put into circulation by the devil, precedes the student everywhere he goes, anticipating his acts and his least desires.

In another age, the psychoanalyst Otto Rank saw doubling as an ancestral fear of death, with the double representing what protects us from our own death. Fears have transmuted into fascination, and the double now has the function of hastening death. So is it like a sort of secret urge? Does a universe expurgated of its shadow (and its death) exert an absolute fascination? As Heraclitus said: 'How will one hide from that which never sets?'[21]

Let's take matter: when you begin to analyse it, you move towards simpler and simpler elements, invisible, elusive particles, towards that which no longer has any reference to matter as substance. It's the same with the

[21] This is Diels–Kranz fragment number 16, cited here after Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 271. Kahn's full translation reads: 'How will one hide from (*lathoi*: 'escape the notice of') that which never sets?'

human: we've begun to split it, break it up, reduce it to simple elements, to the point of genetic exploration, the mapping of the genome – a point where there's no longer any human referent. There's no more of a human referent in current genetics than there's a material referent in subatomic physics.

Perhaps this process is, secretly, of the order of the instinct of repetition . . .

Yes, of machinic accounting. Let's take the example of *The Sexual Life of Catherine M.* It's the story of a machinic sexual investigation, of a mechanics of sex and copulation, free of any seduction and desire. Does this still have anything to do with sex? No, it has to do precisely with repetition, with functional repetition identically and to infinity. This is why I posed the question whether Catherine M. was really a sexed being.

It might be said, rather, to be the cloning of sex. But there are other machinic behaviours than the sexual.

Yes, and I very well understand the desire to be a machine, to go to the limits of machinality. And, ultimately, cloning is just the human version of seriality,[22] the modern dimension of the industrial world, and, subsequently, of the artistic world. Warhol illustrated this brilliantly with his 'machinic snobbery'. Machinality is an original event, but immediately afterwards it becomes just that – a machinic event, a purely repetitive mechanics, expressing that

[22] 'la version humaine de la sérialité'. There are overtones here of 'mass production', which, in French, is 'la production en série'.

yearning for repetition which Freud saw as the death drive. And we find ourselves up against the same question: Is seriality a way of putting an end to the image? Is repetitive sex a way of putting an end to sex (and seduction)? Is cloning a way of putting an end to the original (the human being)? We can see Catherine M. only as a sexually indifferent being, indefinitely miming sexuality, giving all the conventional signs of sexual activity. There's an unexpected destiny of 'liberated' sexuality here. And it is, in fact, a question of liberation. The liberation of sex sets it free to repeat itself indefinitely, just as the liberation of work sets human beings free to work indefinitely. Just as, for its part, reproduction, liberated from sexuality by cloning, also assumes limitless dimensions.

Perhaps it's the horror at having lost sex that leads to its being continually verified . . .

Yes, it's by dint of sex that Catherine M. establishes the indifference of the sexual act, while at the same time according it an exclusive value. It's almost as though she were cheating on herself sexually. This view of sex as ultimate illumination, that is to say, as an illumination that puts an end to sex itself, is really an eschatological belief [*une croyance des derniers jours*] – a kind of libidinal *parousia*, contemporaneous with the subsumption of all forms of action into machinality.

It's the Inhuman that Thinks Us

NOAILLES: *Some points in* Simulacra and Simulation *have never reappeared subsequently, or have perhaps reappeared in another form. I'm thinking*

of the problem of the 'remainder'. You listed the dialectical oppositions: only with the remainder was there nothing on the other side of the bar. Nothing stands opposed to the remainder. You wrote: 'When a system has absorbed everything, when one has added everything up, when nothing remains, the entire total changes into the remainder, becomes remainder'.[23] *The idea is perhaps an anticipation of impossible exchange, as it's a kind of unexchangeable principle that cannot accede to value.*

BAUDRILLARD: It's like the nothing. The nothing's perfect because it's opposed to nothing (it isn't opposed to the 'all', the 'everything'; it's something else). The remainder isn't opposed to anything; it has no contrary (except perhaps the surplus, the opposite of the residue?). But the problem of what has no opposite is much wider than this: it's the general problem of singularity. The apple has no opposite, this table has no opposite, this poem has no opposite. This apple, then, is perfect, this table is perfect, since they are opposed to nothing.

Yes, the singularity is opposed to nothing so long as it isn't dragged towards a dialectical form, so long as it doesn't move away from a form of dual exchange. The world is a singularity that couldn't be said to be opposed to thought, but rather poses a challenge to it. This is what makes it possible to say that it's the world that thinks us, like the mirror in The Seducer's Diary:[24]

[23] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 144; trans. modified.

[24] Søren Kierkegaard, 'The Seducer's Diary', in *Either/Or*, Part I, ed. and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 301–445.

Cordelia doesn't think of the mirror, but the mirror thinks of her. That thought is akin also to the idea that it's language that thinks us, that it's language that speaks through us.

Yes, and also it's television that watches us, and so on. A paradoxical game of subject–object inversion that means just one simple thing: we believe we think the world, but the belief is mutual. It's a dual relation, and we can think it only because it thinks us in return. And this isn't in any way a question of interactivity; it isn't a question-and-answer or communication game.

It's a challenge, without either sender or receiver . . .

Yes, each one sizes the other up. Each has an understanding with the other. It's a rivalrous complicity. We aren't talking, then, of objective knowledge, nor of thought as logical organization. I don't know how to define what thinking means in this sense. The closest illustration for me is photography. There I have the distinct impression, more than in the field of writing, that it's the world that sees me and makes itself seen. The shot's a two-way process. But that's the very essence of the gaze: either it's a two-way thing or it's nothing.

It's a kind of intersection between two agencies in flight: neither the subject nor the world is what it was any more. It isn't an inversion either.

No, it isn't a pure and simple inversion of the privilege of the object. It's more of the order of what Plato says about the image: the image is at the intersection of the light coming from the object and that coming from the gaze.

That's amazing! Is that in Plato?

I hope so. Otherwise, it'll join the fake quotations!

Like Ecclesiastes?

Yes, like the quotation from *Ecclesiastes* (the epigraph to *Simulacra and Simulation*: 'The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true.'[25] There is, of course, no such verse in *Ecclesiastes*). This phrase – 'it's the world that thinks us' – is a bit like those poetic phrases we were talking about. It isn't really susceptible of commentary. But it isn't mystical, it's simply enigmatic.

You see it even better perhaps with language. Ultimately, we can understand the world as language, and when we say, 'the world that thinks us', we would in fact be saying, 'language that traverses us'.

[25] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1.

Do you mean by that what Nietzsche says: that it's language – grammar, syntax, the subject, the complement, plural, singular, etc. – that shapes our value system and governs our morality?

The idea of the world as language goes even further: it's a kind of unsaid verbality; it's the blossoming of appearances. I can clearly see how language is extra-human, even if, at some particular time, it takes a human form. The human being might thus be said to be a hollow form through which language itself blows, and the whole task would consist, then, in modulating that void to give form to this sound. So, when Heraclitus says in the famous fragment 50, 'It is wise, listening not to me but to the report [τού λόγου], to agree that all things are one,' he's saying there's something elsewhere one hears, there's something elsewhere that speaks – and that is language. It's the unsaid that speaks, and we reply. Yet, in order to reply and in order for the duel to exist, we should speak, while at the same time retaining a kind of non-saying. But it's difficult (and, at the same time, beautiful) to transpose this same inversion on to thought itself.

What's difficult to conceive is a subjectless thought, a non-reflecting thought. Thought is conventionally of the order of reflection. So when we say, 'it's the world that thinks us', this is precisely to get around the trap of the subject thinking the world when he reflects, in a position of mastery, as the subject of knowledge. Now, thought is something different from – human, all too human – reflection; it is, rather, the refraction of what there is that's inhuman in the world. We might equally well say: it's the inhuman that thinks us. At any rate, it is in fact a duel, and in this dual circuit of thought there's no privileged position – and doubtless not even any determinate position at all. And the language that circulates from the one to the

other is, to go back to Plato's formula, at the meeting-point of the human and the inhuman.

If it isn't overturning privileges, it is, at any rate, abolishing our *privilege.*

Certainly. Other systems of thought, other cultures don't have any philosophy in the reflective sense of the term. They're content simply to name things, to describe a kind of mental space in which forms circulate: you are not truly anywhere, but you are in the succession of that which is said. Thought in this sense is akin to poetry.

If thought is the refraction of what's inhuman in the world, we might be said to be back perhaps to the idea of prism. Thought would be the surface of incidence and of deviation of the light of the world, of its conversion and decomposition. Yet, as you say, language (light) circulates from the one to the other, and the world might be said to act in the same way, deviating and decomposing any interpretation, without for all that abandoning the challenge of thought. It would be a kind of encounter, without any form of adaequatio. *This raises a question: how would concepts be born? Foucault says man was invented 200 years ago. In other words, there wasn't any 'man' before; it's an invention of language. Even better, as Heidegger said, in Greek there are no objects; the Greeks don't have 'culture', 'religion' or 'social relations'. And of course, one might add, Oedipus didn't have an Oedipus complex at all!*

To conceive this form, we'd have to abandon the transcendent logic that dreams of decoding the world, of discovering the secret key to it held somewhere. Immanent logic intensifies the enigma and is opposed, in fact, to the diminishing of the world's secrets and the idea that things are waiting to be

discovered. But the world isn't enciphered: it is said in the only way possible, without translation, explanation or development. (This reminds me of Pessoa's phrase: 'Things are the only hidden meaning of things.') Or, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, if things had had another way of expressing themselves, they'd have expressed themselves differently. Ultimately, the fact of perceiving the world as a woman slipping what is hidden beneath her skirts is what has always justified the ravishing of the world. You can always argue that 'the world led me on'. Concepts aren't fixed, waiting to be discovered by an expanding wisdom; they emerge from a sort of intersection between language and the world. We can't be said to be faced with a world of latencies which yield themselves to knowledge by a slow strip-tease, but a world in which the irruption of language has a power of instantiation.

We've naively forced language to bite the dust of linearity; we've forced things to bite the dust of finality. But the linear transforms itself, like any supporting material; it's too fine a silk, it's a material that collapses when you apply an excessive load of meaning to it. Like language, which isn't that homogeneous surface we'd like it to be, the world, which isn't such a surface either, yields with a sudden intensity, paralysed by the obligation to stay still. The real, subject to this kind of sexual harassment, feigns a climax, thus allowing the univocal interpretative discourses to feel like good lovers. But this demand for increasing, simulated jouissance *exhausts all interpretation and renders it impotent . . .*

We may ask ourselves what manipulation causes a man-effect, a subject-effect, a reality-effect, a history-effect, to emerge from language? Even in the case of the Unconscious, when Freud coins that term, something begins truly to exist. Far from being a timeless psychical structure, the Unconscious begins at that point. And this moment of conceptual invention is a critical threshold where things, reflected by the word that names them, both assume force of reality and begin to fade.

This happens perhaps when language is operating with a will to reflection, which would, in reality, render it refractory. Although language could also have the power to name as well as to denominate . . .

The Genealogy of Disappearance

BAUDRILLARD: It's the beginning of the end, if I may put it like that. Things are realized by language and, at the same time, short-circuited by it. The class struggle, for example: when Marx enunciates the concept, when that concept surfaces in historical consciousness, the unbridled phase of the class struggle is already at an end. 'When I speak of time, it already is no more,' said Apollinaire.[26] This is difficult to grasp, because the common conception has it that it's at this point, in fact, that the story begins. But the genesis and destiny of ideas are more complex. Reality exists through language; then, within the shadow of language, it quietly ceases to exist. Doubtless it's the same with the very recent concept of globalization, which has itself suddenly gone global. Mightn't this sudden spread of the concept mean that globalization is, to all intents and purposes, over and that we're moving on to something else now?

NOAILLES: *I like this idea: things materialize and come to their end, as it were. Hegel suspected this too: philosophy appears only when reality has accomplished and terminated its process of formation. It's only as twilight descends that the owl of Minerva flies out.*

[26] I have not been able to locate this line in Apollinaire, though it does occur in Raymond Queneau's poem 'Les Ziaux'.

Globalization's been around for a long time – in business, finance, culture, drugs, mores, music and pornography (doubtless the first case of 'global' expansion). What's new is that the concept has been invented (and, in the process, that of anti-globalization). The invention of the concept is a decisive moment – that of the Unconscious in Freud's work, for example, or of the class struggle in Marx. But this moment of emergence is also the moment it begins to disappear, the beginning of the end of what it denotes. It's like philosophy for Hegel, which appears at twilight. Are we already at the twilight of globalization? The seal would be set on the apogee of globalization, then, by the event marking its end – namely, the destruction of the Twin Towers, which were its emblem. An event that occurred not long after the advent of the concept. Just as the fall of the Berlin Wall ushered in the end of a certain history – precisely that history that preceded the 'global' era. But what new situation does the event of 11 September usher in? It's a paradoxical fact: as soon as they're hallowed by the concept – in other words, as nominal values – all these things vanish as realities. At the point where they become the leitmotif or obligatory reference of a culture, they're already disappearing. Values shine out only as they are waning, and sometimes even, like dead stars, their light reaches us only when they no longer exist. Thought too, like Kafka's Messiah, always arrives late. This is the destiny of value (economic, moral or political). After the moment of their general acceptance, which was the moment of the universal, in which they were underwritten by a kind of gold reserve and transcendent equivalence, they fall into the ecstasy of value, where they're no longer exchangeable for anything, but circulate increasingly rapidly and revolve faster and faster on their orbit: this is the paroxystic stage in which all values become indistinguishable. We could subject sexuality to the same analysis. Once it's being named and identified everywhere, it's in its terminal phase.

It may be that the fact of naming is the most secret form of the rear-view mirror (McLuhan said that an era thought only through its rear-view mirror). Might language be a form of despair about what is disappearing, while at the same time being an agent of that disappearance? Does language, like the world, hover between the retrieval of what is disappearing and the annihilation of what sees itself as unilaterally real?

In that sense, history too is something we project retrospectively. All these founding concepts are founded only on the names that articulate them. It's a kind of genealogy of disappearance. This connects also with what Lacan said about language: that it isn't what conveys meaning, but what's there in place of meaning. We think, naively, that where there's language there's meaning, whereas, when language comes into being, meaning is no longer really there. (And the converse is true: when meaning wins out, language is no longer there.)

Perhaps it's the emptiness of something that calls on language to name it; when it nears its end, it's the emptiness that proposes . . .

. . . and language that disposes. In other words, it's when things disappear that you seek to verify them, that the whole machinery of verification through language gets going. And the more you verify, the more reality fades. It's a paradoxical, perverse effect of which reason knows nothing. It knows only how to prove and provide evidence. But that within truth which is only truth is of the order of illusion. Things present their credentials through language. But that merely holds up a mirror to their disappearance.

There are two wagers. The first, as we were saying before, is that all the big concepts – the unconscious, history, etc. – are invented; they aren't discovered. But your argument goes even further: by the time language arrives, what it names has already disappeared.

When something is reflected and from the moment it's reflected, the fact is that it's no longer being thought. Where thought ends, reflection begins. This connects with Borges's fable, 'Fauna of Mirrors'.[27] A fantastic fable: the defeated peoples are condemned by the Empire to be imprisoned behind mirrors, where they merely reflect the image of their conquerors. But one day they begin to resemble them less and less, and in the end, they pass through to the other side of the mirror and invade the Empire . . .

It's a story of silent revolt.

It's the whole story of representation. Those who are condemned to resemblance and representation are the defeated. Representation is a slave condition. To free yourself, you must smash the mirror of representation. Behind every image, behind every representation, behind every concept perhaps, there's a defeated person, someone who's disappeared – but who isn't dead and who's waiting for the point where they'll no longer be a likeness, no longer a mere reflection, and will re-emerge victorious.

[27] Jorge Luis Borges, 'Fauna of Mirrors', in *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 67–8.

But it's the politicians themselves who long ago merrily kissed representation goodbye!

That's true. The Empire itself, the system, no longer functions by representation. But this duel between representation or reflection and thought – this last being beyond any reflecting – still exists.

So, apart from being one of the world's primordial forms, language might itself merely be the mirror of what has disappeared. Or perhaps a retarding mirror . . .

Yes, a consigning of things to house arrest in their very concepts, in the language that names them. And the Emperor would be something like the Master of language. Yet, language itself may disappear, with the appearance of digital languages – and the mirror itself disappear, with the appearance of the screen.

If the reflected form disappeared, it would no longer be possible even to smash the mirror. Are we talking about a disappearance of another order here, an extermination?

Yes, it's the end of the interplay between the world and thought, the interplay between the world and language. With the virtual stage of the screen, which eliminates the mirror stage, the world and language disappear simultaneously. What's in danger is this distancing function that belongs to

language, this function of distinguishing itself from materiality by way of the concept and yet still being a fragment of the world, of the material world, this extraordinary paradoxical conjunction (there being no ascendancy of the one over the other, but a reciprocity between them). With digital and systemic organization, we're in a *dispositif* that's no longer even representational, but purely operational.

But which is, in a sense, another materialization of language.

Yes, admittedly, but in extremely simple elements, which are no longer signs, but ciphers. An inert world that responds to you now only with sterilized information, that is to say, information expurgated of any connotation of affect or meaning. From this point on, exchange is really impossible, but this world, the virtual world, no longer asks itself the question of impossible exchange: it has swallowed its own mirror; it has swallowed its own reference; it is its own truth. No transcendence any more, and hence no questioning. We're really up against what Hegel called 'a life of death, moving within itself'.[28] And which, of course, may continue indefinitely, since it is beyond distances, beyond contradictions. Now, language is what maintains distance. Language is so designed that you can't say everything at the same time. With the computer, the total logic tool,[29] by contrast, we have the possibility of saying everything at the same time, of simultaneously carrying out all operations. Hence, it's the absolute opposite of language. There's no longer any

[28] I have followed the translation here by the eminent Hegel scholar Shlomo Avineri in *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 95.

[29] The French is *logiciel*, a term which can normally be translated as 'software package', but which has broader connotations here.

negative, any distance. Everything can follow on by mere contiguity . . . But I'm a little distrustful of my own personal, subjective judgement in this matter, since that's a world that's alien to me . . .

I use it a lot. It's like a parallel universe that doesn't nullify thought, but I understand what you say. As in the case of clones, it is perhaps the dream of creating a language that obeys us completely . . .

What strikes me in all this is that you're there in front of your screen and you make everything appear on that screen. You call things up, and they come. All information's there, stored up; it's just waiting to be made available to you. It's exactly the opposite of the conception I might have of frequenting the world, of the emergence of the world, of the possibility of things happening or not happening, the kinds of surprises and events you've no control over. The idea that freedom means having everything available to you is a total misconception. Paradoxically, when everything's possible, and because everything's possible, I see this as the end of all sovereignty, both the world's and my own. Moreover, this incessant circulation, which corresponds to a mental immobilism, also has a counterpart at the physical level in a devastating immobilization of the body. The spectral body of the virtual is itself virtual; it no longer is a body. At the screen, the body's useless. The only beings adequate to this system of functioning are clones, automata or robots, since there's no need to be a human being to do this, and you no longer even should be.

Might we speak here of another 'mirror people'?

Absolutely. With this perfect obedience to the cybernetic command, we're back precisely at Borges's fable, but transposed now from mirror to screen. It's no longer the forced resemblance of the mirror, it's the total obedience and total virtual jurisdiction of the screen. And, to stay with the fable, we might ask what disappears, defeated, behind the screen, like the 'mirror people'? What, in virtual reality, has succumbed and been condemned to exile (having perhaps, unlike in the fable, no chance of re-emerging)? What is assigned, not in this case to resemblance and representation, but to virtuality and spectrality, to immediate presence in real time (on the screens) and unlimited duplication (cloning, which is the limitless form of resemblance and of the human in the age of its technical reproducibility, to parody Benjamin!)? There's an illustration of this in a recent news story. Someone put a small ad. on the Net. He was looking for a man of a particular height, particular appearance, particular eye and hair colour – precisely his own personal characteristics. He was looking for his twin, his double, his clone. Through the network, he found him – and killed him. He thus afforded himself the luxury of disappearing with impunity (he wanted to disappear, and he had to be believed to be dead). Cloning thus enables you to commit 'virtual' suicide; it enables you to survive while fleeing from yourself. Where this absorption of the human into the virtual screen is concerned, you've only to look at the postmistresses, the post office clerks behind their computers. They used to carry out manual, even mental, operations. Now, they each have their screen. The discrepancy between the two – the computers and these human beings – is incredible, for they're still human beings, but they're consigned to virtuality, in the same way as Borges's peoples are made to resemble their masters. So, to escape becoming mere extensions of the machines and to stay alive, they think up all kinds of things. They put flowers on their terminals. But it's like weeping over their own graves.

Polychrony

NOAILLES: *Just as language lies between two forms of non-existence ('Reality exists through language; then, within the shadow of language, it quietly ceases to exist'), might it be that thought lies between the non-existence of precession and that of realization? In any event, this time gap between thought and event could be related to the relative velocities of the world or, in other words, of time. 'True' time, which isn't the same for everything, which, unlike 'real time', isn't the time of absolute simultaneity, but the time that delays things and causes them not to coincide.*

BAUDRILLARD: Here again, time is what makes everything not happen at the same time, and it can even become a reversible dimension . . . Beyond chronological time and real time, one might envisage a singular time, the time of singularity. Physics already teaches us that every object has its own specific time and space. So, each singularity has its own time within which everything is synchronous and reversible, and the thought included in this event time may very well echo the event before its occurrence. Being in a time bubble is like being in a poem – another singularity where everything corresponds in all directions. A form of polychrony, if you like, which makes possible this reversion of thought to the event, and of the event to thought.

Yes, this can be seen clearly with poems, because the lines correspond and cast light on each other reciprocally, whether they're at the beginning or the end. There's a simultaneous light cast in all directions and you might say that

the notions of beginning and end lose their meaning, even though the organization of the poem is entirely rigorous. It's more or less the same with thought and the event you were speaking of. Perhaps everything's there from the outset, in the initiatory state, and this enables all directions to be kept open.

In language, too, all the possibilities are there, but it takes a form of accident for them to be brought into existence. The origin and the end are there simultaneously. Everything's there simultaneously in terms of vision (not of representation). It's more or less what Lévi-Strauss said about language. He advanced the very metaphysical hypothesis that, as signifying form, language appears in its entirety at a stroke. There's no primitive accumulation of language. It's a pure event. It's like thought. There's no primitive accumulation of thought. It doesn't appear over a process of evolution. Or even life, living matter: its appearance isn't the fruit of a long process of selection and adaptation. You can of course, trace the history and genealogy of life, but as a form it's there from the outset in its entirety, like the articulation of language. After that, you can produce meaning in ever greater quantities; you can follow all the twists and turns of signification; but, as event, meaning is there – virtually *ex nihilo*. And it's in this way, as form, that it's in danger of abruptly disappearing, as suddenly as it appeared. Once again, none of this has anything to do with the accumulation of knowledge; it's a question of how you see thought. In this view, it wouldn't be a reflective articulation but a kind of predestination that linked thought to the event, and the world to thought.

The drastic possibility you speak of here, of a sudden disappearance of language, is very interesting. Might language be battling against its own

disappearance by accomplishing the uninterrupted task of consigning everything, in turn, to disappearance? Now, the relative velocities of things mean they do not meet – which would be paradoxical if everything were there from the outset.

Yes, there would be a risk of total confusion, of crowding and madness.

Perhaps this is another feature of illusion we can't bear: this total presence of appearances, this absolute simultaneity . . . We have, then, to digest it, and defer it.

Illusion has to be, or has to become, a game. And for it to be a 'putting in play', a kind of dispersal's needed, a diffraction of appearances, as with white light . . . The 'prismatics' you spoke of at the beginning.

Yes, the dispersive role of the prism being to separate the diversity of lights that make up white light. To come back to the problem of time, you've propounded the notion of real time as a kind of fourth dimension of time in which the others are abolished. It's the dimension of the virtual that precedes and substitutes for the real. What are the consequences of living in real time?

I don't know, I don't live in real time yet. Nor do I live exactly in the 'real world' – and I certainly don't live in the instantaneous time of communications. I have a spontaneous form of resistance, or rather of allergy and indifference, that comes from an irremediable sense of dispersion. But I see people

living in real time who, as they perform their various operations, no longer have any identity problem and become, as a result, increasingly efficient, since, to play with the networks, to move from one part of the spectrum to the other, you don't need either to be yourself or to be free any longer (in this sense we're quite close to the logic of play); you have only to be ductile (docile), flexible and transparent.

You say, too, somewhere that real time doesn't exist. That real time never exists in the immediate term: all that's real is always deferred. (But perhaps that's a false quote too!)

We have to avoid the confusion of terms here. What's called 'real time' today is, in fact, the time of virtual reality, of the simultaneous screens and networks. It's the time, then, of an extreme simulation, that time precisely which, by contrast with traditional 'reality', can no longer admit of any difference within time.

Yes, the real doesn't, therefore, accept 'real time' as part of its make-up. If we speak of relative velocities, the real might perhaps be an effect of the slowdown of appearances. Meaning would be the world filtered through a slow-motion camera; simulation would be a form of acceleration; and integral reality a final form of the halting of the course of the world. (Although, as you say, 'speed and acceleration are merely the dream of making the world reversible'.) At any rate, it seems that these concepts which have been subjected to critique – identity, the principle of contradiction, which is geared to identity, transition, change, origin, end, substance, the social, which is a kind of broadening of the cogito *– can all be overturned as soon as we make a*

critique of time . . . Or the idea of substance: it's clear that it's geared to linearity. Time could be said to be the password that makes the reversion of these linear concepts possible, and it isn't possible to overturn these concepts and critique them without at the same time critiquing time or without indirectly rethinking time.

Ultimately, you shouldn't really be able to abstract time or make it a transcendental dimension. Time is the very becoming of things; it isn't a kind of pre-existent temporal space that would merely be the dimension of their change or their succession. Similarly, language isn't a kind of material within which meaning would distribute itself: that's the language of communication, language as medium. But today, not just the time of becoming, but the very time of history come to grief in real time. Yet, nothing happens there, since in real time everything is over-exposed simultaneously.

The Abolition of Night

NOAILLES: *It's like that image you used: if the speed of light were infinite, all the stars would be there at once, and the incandescence would be unbearable.*

BAUDRILLARD: Yes, the space of the screen, of virtual reality, is the space of the abolition of night, the abolition of the alternation of night and day and of waking and dreaming – in a kind of perpetual watchfulness. One of the

great differences between a future 'trans-realized' species and ourselves will be the definitive absence of night and dreaming. Now, consciousness exists only by passing from night to day, from sleep to waking.

Otherwise, it's eternal insomnia, a form of torture. We can imagine with a certain dread the sleepless nights in which whole armies would fight to get back to sleep. Chuang-Tzu and his butterfly come to mind here: was it Chuang-Tzu who dreamed he was a butterfly or the butterfly that dreamed it was Chuang-Tzu? If we had to find a sign that the universe had become unliveable, it would surely be the impossibility of continuing to ask this question. (Never being able to rest from oneself is the worst of hypotheses. Might that have happened to God? To indulge in more fantastical hypotheses of this kind, might God also be a victim of insomnia? Might we be the product of his insomnia rather than his dreams?) It's an abominable vision: we'd be a species akin to those battery hens who never see the light of day. The lights are permanently left on so that they lose all sense of time, so that they eat constantly and fatten up at great speed. This is how those hormone-inflated species grow, having never walked and never really been able to sleep.

The virtual beings of the future will be sleepless. Asexual and sleepless. Stanislaw Lec said: 'I had a dream about reality. It was such a relief to wake up.'[30] Well, the beings of the future, having lost sleep, won't even have the good fortune of dreaming of reality and escaping from it when they wake; they'll live perpetually in an integral reality, an integral daylight. This

[30] Stanislaw J. Lec, *Unkempt Thoughts* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1962), p. 154.

paradoxical shifting from dream to wakefulness, from night to day, this rhythm of transition from the one form to the other, this is roughly what the form of time is like – and it enables you, by alternation, to escape the unilateral reality principle.

Being incapable of crossing the fragile frontier between waking and sleep, will they in the end be beings without boundaries, living in the absolute desert of integral reality with no alternation? When you eliminate an aspect of the fundamental duality of the world – in this case, sleep – the surviving term suffers an equivalent death by hypertrophy. So we'd find ourselves facing a hypertrophy of wakefulness. We'd be faced with open eyes, but no waking state (as when Macedonio Fernandez writes: 'Not all is wakefulness in open eyes'). Just as not all is sleep in closed eyes.

Where substance and identity are concerned, a wonderful Nasreddin story comes to mind, the story of the cat and the pound of meat. The master, seeing that the meat has disappeared, questions the servant girl, who says the cat has eaten it. The master says: 'We'll see about that.' He has the cat weighed. It weighed a pound before and still weighs a pound. So, the master says, 'If that's the cat, where's the meat? If the meat's there, then where's the cat?' I would ask the same question in another connection. If you put the man who says he possesses the truth on the scales, and he weighs exactly what he did before, then if that's the man, where's the truth? If the truth is there, where's the man?

Perhaps illusion might be said to be a kind of dietetics. You should get your weight down!

Yes, I'm going to strive to spit out my truth, in order to preserve my waistline. But watch out. If you make the cat spit the meat out, then there's no cat either! It's quite a business, this substitution of truth. Where it is, we are not. Where we are, it is not.

There's a fine ironic wisdom.

It's the idea that truth passes from one head to another, that substance passes from one form to another by a kind of prestidigitation, and that you can't anywhere say: 'That's the truth.'

It would be interesting to weigh thinkers after they've thought.

Yes, to measure the difference. As you see in the film '21 Grams', where the body loses 21 grams at the moment of death: it's the weight of the soul escaping. But, in a sense, this story of the subtraction of the meat or the truth is comforting, for if you take the truth away, what remains? The man remains, the human being, the singular being, who is never equivalent to truth, is never one with it. In even the most banal human beings there's a form irreducible to what they 'weigh', to any truth whatever or, indeed, to what they 'think', to the consciousness they have of themselves. A form of 'idiocy', as Clément Rosset would say.

It wouldn't be difficult to imagine which would be more dangerous, then, the claim to truth or absolute idiocy . . .

Quite obviously, truth. The truth is a dangerous madness, idiocy is merely a gentle madness. One can, admittedly, see madness as an idiomatic form, a singular form (Deleuze and schizophrenia). But, most of the time, madness is just the obverse of reason, as nonsense is just the obverse of sense or meaning. Being raving mad doesn't necessarily make you singular. Being unintelligible doesn't necessarily make you a genius. Madness is confused in the public imagination with unreason, with nonsense. It isn't, therefore, an alternative to truth (if there were one, it would be illusion, not unreason). But it doesn't have the form of singularity either.

It's a disturbance of the rules . . .

Exactly, whereas the symbolic form has a rule – it's the very opposite of a total deregulation. The problem was raised in the 1970s with regard to the concepts of de-territorialization of desire and its rhizomatic proliferation. We were, of course, all looking for a radical alternative. But rather than in a deregulation and a dissemination of desire, I saw that alternative in a set of rules of the symbolic game and a dual obligation. Deleuze talks a lot about becoming: becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-child, etc. I find this form of becoming very fine, provided that it isn't confused with the proliferation of desire, which is merely the dispersal of a force. With the rhizome and the molecular, you find yourself faced with a constellation, an infinite host of possibilities. It's very poetic, but so far as this operation of multiplication to infinity and of de-territorialization is concerned, it happens to be the case that computers and all the new virtual technologies are carrying it out on a grand scale. It seemed to me that, in the guise of libidinal deregulation, Deleuze and Lyotard were simply ratifying the future state of things. As for Guattari's molecular revolution, I'm sorry, but it has, in a sense,

become part of our lives – through genetics, computational biology, 'mental morphing', etc.

It's always the same thing: there's the conceptual moment, the moment of intuition and hypothesis, the philosophical moment, and then that tends to realize itself by every means possible. It's the aim of all technologies to operationalize things, including philosophical visions and insights.

Perhaps the strength of a thought is proportional to the impossibility of its realization? Might thought be a form of pure waste?

No, I don't think so. Writing's often portrayed today as a kind of potlatch or a sort of ready-made. But writing is an act of mastery, which conforms to the conditions of a managed intervention, but does so without a determinate project and without any illusions as to its general destination. Fortunately or unfortunately, others will seize on it and turn it into a discourse of truth, either to illustrate it or to criticize it. Inertia always operates in that direction – taking on truth, taking on reference, searching for signs and marks.

Yes, it's the eternal questions: 'Where are you coming from? Where are you going? What position do you speak from? Who authorizes you to do so? And, above all, who authorized you not to believe in the real?'

The moment of writing is transfused into the linear time of communication, of reception, diffusion and commentary . . . But one colludes in that too. Of course, you can try to escape it, but it's like trying to walk in the snow without leaving footprints.

Yes, so long as the snow hasn't melted! You say: 'No thought can be sure of itself nor conscious of its mechanism; it must espouse the risks of what it doesn't say and not the prudence of what it says.' In other words, there's a radicalism of thought when it doesn't aspire to prove itself. But you sometimes say it's a game we know the rules of. So I wonder about the 'innocence' of thought. You're lost if you know its mechanism . . .

If you know the instruction manual, yes. Then you become a kind of finite object for yourself. There are styles of writing, for example, that have no secret to them, where you see how they've been manufactured – like a technical object. But sometimes, in writing, you have the delightful impression that something has worked secretly, something unforeseeable, something you have no sight of. A secret which is, in the end, a bit like the secret of birth – your own birth remains forever a secret to you (your own death too).

Can there be said to be a 'consciousness' of the mechanism when, in order to speak of speed, you adopt a rapid form? When, to speak of seduction, language itself assumes that seductive form?

I'm not sure this collusion between thought and writing is a reflective form; it might, rather, be said to be a reflex form whereby language partakes of the event of thought by an unconscious strategy. At any rate, seduction, whatever the object of the discourse, is part of the originality of writing. It is, indeed, its original form.

If the operation of thought is homologous with the operation of the world (the best-case scenario), there's no strategy at all.

You're part of a strategy on the part of the world.

Of a strategy without a strategist. Of something, like thought in fact, that can barely be called strategic, since strategy presupposes an evaluation, a calculation, a choice of ends and means.

But in Fatal Strategies, *it doesn't work like that.*

That's right. But the term 'fatal strategy' has always been poorly understood. I've misused the term myself at times to refer to an irrational strategy that has disastrous consequences. A bad decision, as it were . . . whereas a fatal strategy is something quite different: it's the invention of a destiny. That is to say, an undertaking in which an involuntary reversibility is in play, for better or for worse. One in which striving for one's ends drags you irresistibly in the opposite direction; or, alternatively, one in which not striving for your ends gets you to them without your wanting to. There is in it, at any rate, an outstripping of any will of your own. Seduction, for example, is a fatal strategy. But if you conceive it in terms of calculation and manipulation (for sexual or other ends), you sink into a banal strategy in the most vulgar sense.

Here, the example of Kierkegaard's seducer . . .

. . . is quite remarkable because he, precisely, sees himself as effecting such a deliberate strategy, yet it's he, in the end, who's caught in the trap: he forgot that seduction is *fatal* or, in other words, reversible.

He's within a game that's bigger than he is.

Yes, and if the hero doesn't know this, Kierkegaard certainly does. He describes with precision the unilateral strategy of the person who tries to boss the game, but he knows the game has no boss, that no one can be bigger than the game itself.

You think you control the game, whereas the game controls you.

It's the illusion of the will. Or even, in the case of the 'dice man', the illusion of the 'will to chance'.[31] According to what may seem a fatal strategy, the dice man chooses to entrust his fate at any moment to the random decision of the dice, that is to say, to a random operation of desire – a challenge to his ego and to his own will. In a sense, then, he's trying to be master of the game of chance. But he fails totally – chance (which doesn't exist, having, *pace* Mallarmé, been abolished long ago) propels him back inexorably to his own desire.

[31] The allusion is to Luke Rhinehart's novel, *The Dice Man* (London: Panther, 1972).

But the trap of seduction – and even the trap of Kierkegaard's story – is that, in the first instance, people feel capable of producing it.

Unlike the Don Juans and Casanovas – and far superior to them in this respect – Kierkegaard, through his character Johannes, carries out a very thorough experimental study of this strategic logic. It's by pushing this kind of undertaking, which is independent of desire, to its logical end that he shows that the subject of seduction transforms himself imperceptibly into a victim, and that there is, then, no subject of seduction, but a division of roles.

When all's said and done, the only thing you can produce is a vacuum, an irresistible zone of attraction into which things tend to fall, to plunge. It's as if you were satisfying this secret desire of things.

Yes, that is Johannes's tactic – almost the tactic of an oriental martial art. And that's doubtless also Kierkegaard's relation to his own writing. He too inevitably succumbs to the seduction of the text, while exerting that seduction. In writing, too, you are always both master and victim.

From time to time, there's a happy coincidence, the charm of a certain predestination where a number of things intersect. An actual grace, but a grace that may veer towards madness.

A Luxurious Dysfunction

NOAILLES: *You sometimes seem to come to the same conclusion as Sartre: thought is, ultimately, a useless passion. In Sartre there was something nostalgic in that judgement. It's as though one were saying, 'After so much effort, it's useless!' Whereas, in this case, it's something different! It's before any effort that it's useless, and it's perhaps only for that reason that one does it . . .*

BAUDRILLARD: Useless for what? We always say things are useful for something, but what are they useless for?

Useless in the sense that this stage of the virtual can be said to have entirely cleared the way for thought at last to be free to be useless.

Right. And at that point it becomes a passion again, since it's only in uselessness that something like a passion functions. As a result, it returns the virtual, which is monopolizing all useful functions, to its uselessness.

Perhaps, then, it's the new – necessarily useless – passion?

It isn't uselessness that defines passion. Thought as passion could be described like this: when energy is straining towards an end and that end disappears, then the potential energy passes into a phase in which it has no

meaning, but all the more intensity for that. The end is lost, but the intensity remains, which can then transfer itself to language and writing. But, unless it's shared, thought, when freed entirely from its ends, can quite simply turn to paranoia. However, uselessness isn't the essential thing – it's a prior condition or a secondary determination. For example, art, that other useless passion, isn't useless in itself, if I can put it that way. It's useless additionally; it's beyond usefulness and uselessness. Unfortunately, it doesn't remain in that sublime zone: from the nineteenth century onwards, it aspires to be useless, it plays at the uselessness of 'art for art' and at that point it sinks into aesthetics.

Would that mean that thought is a luxurious dysfunction?

Dysfunctioning is in itself more entertaining than functioning, but, ultimately, we can say that the dysfunction is a variant – and perhaps the most successful variant – of functioning, that inadaptation is the most successful form of adaptation, etc. Things are more complicated today, because the fact of dysfunctioning is part of the game. Everyone's required to be different, singular, anomic, subversive. And even disablement is a bonus. There's a whole paranormal conformism going on.

Can you give an example of this injunction?

The whole of advertising today has as its leitmotif irony, transgression, and the interplay of prohibition and its overstepping. According to Philippe Muray, the 'festive' is our new categorical imperative – deregulation in partying.

Casting off responsibility?

Yes, obeying the pleasure principle, no longer genuflecting to the reality principle. Everything becomes an opportunity for a big parade, a great collective show in the new spaces of freedom. That is, of course, all of the order of duty and morality, and has nothing to do with that luxurious dysfunction we were talking about.

How to Eat the Nothing?

NOAILLES: *I'd like to introduce another fake quotation now: 'Keyboard not found. Press any key to continue.' This could well be from Genesis (or even from the book of Revelation). And I'd like us to speak about the problem of nihilism, of the nothing and the continuation of the nothing. It seems that nihilism is an immense surgical procedure carried out on the nothing, aimed at radically extirpating it. According to Heidegger, nihilism is the forgetting of the nothing: perhaps the essence of nihilism lies in not taking the question of nothingness seriously . . . 'What are we to say, then, if the omission of this question regarding the essence of nothingness was the reason why Western metaphysics has fallen into nihilism?' he asks. Nietzsche, it seems to me, is different because, in his view, nihilism is the devaluing of all values and the triumph of the reactive forces. And Heidegger says further: 'How does it come about that being has primacy everywhere and claims for itself all that "is", whereas what is not an essent, the nothing understood as Being itself, is forgotten?' We might wonder, then, whether true nihilism wouldn't be to forget the nothing by material-*

izing it in the essent. Nihilism might be said to be the systematic elimination of the nothing in the analysis of things.

BAUDRILLARD: But we should differentiate the nothing from that which is worthless (*nul*) – by maintaining the idea that what is worthless is precisely that which has forgotten the nothing. You see this in great systems like political economy, which is based ultimately on the exchange of the nothing, on the multiplication of zero-sum exchanges. Exchange is exchange for the nothing, and it's the nothing that's exchanged beneath the apparent exchange of value. We have here the twofold aspect of impossible exchange. In the interstices of exchanges squints the nothing, and we squint at the nothing (convergent strabismus). Most of the time, it's worthlessness that rules, the equivalence of the nothing. But, from time to time, the nothing draws attention to itself as what it 'is'; the absent term of every exchange resurfaces in the breakdown, the accident, the crisis of generalized exchange.

We may note two things, then. Everything is exchanged for nothing – this is 'traditional' nihilism. By contrast, nothing is exchanged, the nothing is inexchangeable – this is impossible exchange, though here we have the superlative dimension, the poetic dimension of impossible exchange. This is the opposite of nihilism. It's the resurgence of the nothing at the heart of the essent, at the heart of the something. Warhol talked, for example, of bringing out the nothingness at the heart of the image. And Barthes's *punctum* in photography is this too: the blind spot, the non-place at the heart of the image. What, then, would the opposite of nihilism be?

Duality perhaps. That which leaves the dual principle of things intact, and isn't intent on exterminating the nothing.

I entirely agree. It's the dual form that creates the void and preserves the void, whereas oneness, being always the oneness of the whole, of the something, no longer leaves space for the nothing. Antonio Machado says that we always credit God with having created the world *ex nihilo*, with having created something out of nothing, but we ought to acknowledge in him a much higher power, that of having created nothingness out of something.

Yes, and we could perhaps draw here on the story of the worm that ate its parasite, even though it was vital to it. At some point, we really did eat the nothing; we made it disappear and realized the world completely.

We've filled up the world, yes. We've eaten the nothing. The image is a fine one.

The nothing as the parasite that enables you to digest the real. Having devoured that parasite, we can no longer digest the real. That's why reality is so heavy. And perhaps illusion doesn't eat the real because that would also spell its own death.

We could go back here to the story of Kant's dove which, feeling the resistance of the wind, imagines it would fly much faster in a vacuum. So we imagine we'll arrive at absolute Good if we eliminate Evil, at the All if we eliminate the Nothing, at the Eternal if we eliminate Time. We conceive the Nothing as a diabolic resistance and as an emanation of Evil. A total misconception – the Nothing is as essential to life as are air and wind to the

flight of the dove. The proof is in the cruel Bible saying, 'He that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath.'[32]

Let's go back to the question of nihilism. In the Heideggerian version, it's the forgetting of the nothing, and hence its exclusion. In the Nietzschean version, that of active nihilism, it might be said to mean pushing things, value systems, to their limits, where it turns out that there's nothing, that they lead to nothing. It is, all the same, a way of making the nothing appear in the end – a sort of forceps delivery. But once again, we have to distinguish between the two, between the positive and negative connotations of the nothing. This ambivalence is, to some degree, the ambivalence we find with the remainder. The remainder and the nothing are somehow linked. 'Of the remainder' – and I'm not playing on words here – once the operation is finished, 'nothing remains'. That is to say, when the world is completed, it's the nothing that remains. The very term [*rien*, in French] is etymologically ambiguous, since it comes from *rerum*, which means 'something'.[33]

We could also come at this subject from the angle of your question: 'Why is there nothing rather than something?' with the nothing 'positively' connoted. It's more or less what Gorgias says. We have, as it were, run through his treatise On the Nonexistent or On Nature[34] *in both directions: being* is not*; if it* were*, it would be unknowable; and if it were knowable, it would be inexpressible. History has travelled the journey that leads from the constating of being to the accreditation of the knowledge of being and the creation of the subject that expresses it. In our turn, by rapidly travelling the*

[32] Mark 4: 25.
[33] The derivation of *rien* is more conventionally given from the accusative singular, *rem*.
[34] This is known also as *On Non-Being or On Nature*.

opposite path, we've devoured that history . . . by beginning at the end: we've rid ourselves of the subject of knowledge, we've rid ourselves of knowledge itself, and we've come back to the initial finding, this time in its 'negative' sense.

Yes, we're devouring history, this time retrospectively. For so long as it was unfolding, we could retain the illusion of understanding it. Today, it's coming to an end without our knowing why. We're trying, therefore, to revive it, so as to guess its meaning, to 'digest' it. It's the same as with the Big Bang. We have perpetually to go back to it to try to understand what there was *before* – that is to say, Nothing. It's hopeless. With the Nothing, we're in initial despair and, with the obliteration of history, in final despair.

You've spoken of things like that: the nihilism of transparency or, in other words, the process of the destruction of appearances in favour of meaning.

Yes, it's the temptation to reduce duality; the lethal temptation to reunify the whole, with the nothing eliminated.

One might think the nothing is what protects things from becoming something, and thus from coming to an end, for when they realize themselves, that's also their end. This functions then a bit like the theorem of the 'accursed share', doesn't it? When you take away all the viruses, the antibodies have nothing to do.

Yes, we've devoured the accursed share. Since appearances are what protect us from reality, to arrive at integral reality, appearances and their symbolic envelope have to be abolished. Reality devours appearances the way the worm devours its parasite, and integral reality devours them integrally.

But illusion remains intact, like Jonah inside a double whale!

We may take the view, too, that it's illusion, with its veils, that protects us from naked reality.

You say, 'It would be fine to be a nihilist if there were still a radicality!' And they continue to accuse you of nihilism!

Yes, and why not also of negationism?[35] Whereas it's the system that's truly negationist, since it's the denial of the nothing, the denial of any illusion. It's the whole system that's become nihilistic. Extending its moral nihilism, it's become technically nihilistic. And, as a result, the term no longer means much. Nihilism (which is the forgetting of the nothing) is technically realized. Having said that, we always hear the same test-of-confidence question: where does all that get you? The old ultimatum, the old ideology of a reconciliation of theory and practice, the old dialectical nostalgia – of the kind we've absorbed throughout our philosophical and moral education! It's

[35] The French term 'négationnisme' generally denotes 'Holocaust denial'. It is, of course, used more broadly here, but the negative connotations are still present.

incredible how encrusted this prejudice for reality is, not just in people's practice, but in their imaginations. I believe it to be insurmountable. It's the easiest solution, as Lichtenberg says. Hence it's the one with the brightest future.

How can we take this kind of analysis to the other side (not the side of reality of course) without debasing it completely? How can we recover a dual relation on the basis of practical uselessness? In a word, is there, all the same, a possible exchange of impossible exchange?

And why is there a kind of basic temptation here? Is it perhaps the temptation of things to be always outside of themselves . . .

Well, I'm beside myself in every sense of the word!

This drive everything has – perhaps it's the will to power after all . . . (the will not being what people will, but that which wills in willing, as Deleuze says). Perhaps the will to power is not just a will of things to grow, but pure superhuman desire, the pure desire of things or that of immanence, at a particular moment, to become an ecstasy – not the ecstasy of simulation which you describe, but rather the opposite: 'ek-stasis' *in the etymological sense. Even illusion wouldn't resist . . .*

It's its destiny to exorcise itself, as it were.

To extricate itself, to de-realize itself.

Extricating itself, de-realizing itself – this is a fatal hypothesis. The banal strategy being that which wishes simply to externalize itself, to expose itself so as to realize itself. Over against that, there's the strategy that puts itself dramatically in play, so as not to realize itself. At the cost of disappearing even, for there's a subtle difficulty in coming out of oneself while avoiding realizing oneself. It's a little bit like this with writing. Something finds its ultimate form, always slightly short of its realization. You have, in this way, to keep your balance in the paroxystic moment.

That's a fantastic idea! A challenge you can't shirk, but one that has to be stopped in time, on pain of disappearance. It would be an ek-stasis *that never gets to* stasis*; illusion that opens up and closes again at the same time. Like the paroxysm, which stops before the end, what would be the term to refer to what stops before the beginning? A world that won't fulfill all its possibilities, and that never opens its umbrella either . . . In reality, we can't dismiss the fact that, when you walk, the path moves too. The forward march of the world creates a similar effect of advancement: you don't leave the spot because the path moves in step with you. There's a very subtle movement here between immobility and the first step; the world can almost never be said to have taken the first step . . .*

In any event, we never knew it. But we can imagine the last.

All in all, what would never have taken a first step is the world as radical illusion. Appearances are there, but they'd never succeed in taking a step beyond themselves. The first step is signification and meaning; that is to say, the first step is always the one that leads to the abyss. The Big Bang, the realization

of the world would include the simultaneous triggering of the Big Crunch. As you said, the two processes get under way at the same time.

Thought is produced by the ecstasy of the world itself: it's part of its unfolding, its dispersal, at the same time as it's the distillation of the world in homeopathic doses. In this sense, the history of the universe is thrilling. This universe born of the expanding Big Bang, but not seeing itself, since there isn't any light yet, and hence not having the possibility of reflecting [on] itself. Then light appears and hence visibility, but there's no one to see. Then life appears, and hence something that can see. And lastly thought, which reflects the whole. But that's doubtless not the end-point. One is always tempted to loop back on this course of events.

That's interesting because I've always loved the fact that there are insects on the sea bottom, in a place of total darkness, and that they have extraordinary colours. A useless beauty that will never be seen. A beauty unconcerned with being seen . . .

The opposite would be the pure gaze, without there being anything to see . . . A useless function . . . the function of God.

A fine expression . . . We find the opposite image in the other excess, in the hyperreality of those images to which people lend attention but which offer nothing to the gaze, in the obscenity in which the distance of the gaze disappears, in the form of gaze that has closed the circle so as to have nothing to see either . . .

But I've another underwater story. It's the story of a deep-sea creature with a minimal brain, which wanders around for a long time before finding a spot to which to affix itself. As soon as it's found one, it survives by devouring itself. And what it devours first is its own brain.[36] This modicum of grey matter that served only to help it find its place is no longer needed, so it devours it. I wonder whether the human race isn't following the same course.

First of all, I like these 'scientific' examples, which are heirs, in a sense, to simulation, and which one can take up as though they were illusions, too . . . When science sometimes has these kinds of intuitions, it recoils from them. Ernst Mach, who straddled philosophy and physics, saw the universe as a 'one-sided entity, whose mirror complement does not exist or, at least, is not known to us'. He initially opts for a form of impossible exchange, but he steps back just in time, leaving a door open to the possibility that the universe can acquire value! In any event, your underwater story's a troubling allegory . . . (Can we imagine a species that would have found an allegory of its end that was so fine that it couldn't resist the fate of bringing it to fruition? A species whose destiny would have been entirely bewitched by a little story?) But would that species, like the sea-creature, have found the fixed point that enables it to devour its singularity?

Endowed with a superior intelligence, which has perhaps enabled it to find its place, the human race is devouring it. It's using its brain as an operational mechanism to the point of sacrificing it to artificial intelligence. There it is in its fixed spot. The operation's over. It's come to its end. And so it devours its own thought, that function that has now become useless. The species, having arrived at its ends, gives up on itself and its own specificity.

[36] The reference is to the sea-squirt, which, at a certain point in its life cycle, digests its own cerebral ganglion.

Yes, or perhaps we've gone even further. Perhaps we've succeeded in throwing off, in some unthought-out way, this fixed point that prompted us to devour ourselves, and are now lost in indefinite seriality, in an inertia devoid of any reference. It's interesting: if human beings find a fixed spot, a point of reference, they devour themselves. If they completely lose that fixed point, they remain 'freed' from themselves and are exposed to a kind of metastasis. Might there be an intermediate strategy, a form that combines the attempt at preservation, which a fixed point of purchase implies, and the attempt at abandonment that leads to their final doom?

The destiny of thought is that of the species. And that destiny lies within its singular limit. In other words, thought must never devour the distance that separates it from itself. It must always be exiled from itself (and 'exiled from dialogue'!). Or, to put it another way, it cannot, except by abolishing itself, jump over its shadow and into transparency. It cannot immortalize itself before the mirror of truth, which reflects back only its own image. There's a horizon of thought, which is pushed back as it goes along and which it must never reach. That is the very horizon, the uncrossable horizon, of singularity. This is, literally, the meaning of aphorism – *aphorizein*: the end-point, the limit of a process, be it thought or writing, that will never reach its end. By contrast, the virtual might be said rather to map out the hypochondriacal field of a thought obsessed by its own functioning, absorbing its own limits and its own horizon. The species itself has this same configuration. It too can't jump over its shadow without destroying itself. It too, unless it is to destroy itself, has to keep within the limits of an inescapable singularity, where it will have an infinite spread spectrum available to it.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD
ENRIQUE VALIENTE NOAILLES

EXILES FROM DIALOGUE

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER

Not long ago, two friends – Jean Baudrillard and Enrique Valiente Noailles – the one having come from Buenos Aires, the other from nowhere, met in Paris. They had a long discussion without any precise aim. It was, rather, a way of rubbing up against metaphysics without risk of contagion. They called it Exiles from Dialogue *as a mirrored homage to Bertolt Brecht and shortly afterwards they parted company and went their separate ways.*

In this remarkable new book based on this gnomic meeting, Baudrillard and Noailles range over the entirety of philosophy and thought underpinning Baudrillard's unique work, from *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983) to his recent writings on 9/11. Philosophically, the book takes in its breadth Heraclitus to Wittgenstein by way of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzche. Its literary sources are diverse: Gracian and Saul Bellow, Hölderlin and Stanislaw Lec; and the theories of Fukuyama and Kristeva are weighed, considered and analysed.

With his usual incandescent brilliance, Baudrillard discusses the themes of his writing: thought as (non-prophetic) anticipation; t acceptance of the world; the disappearance of the world into the death of the 'social' (and with it the Left). Vitally, Baudrilla some of the misconceptions that plague his work (about his strategies', for example), qualifies some of his bolder pron (notably softening his position on the question of the 'virtu other lines of thinking further than ever before.

Razor-sharp, volatile and capacious, this book will be essential reading for students and scholars of Baudrillard and those interested in the theories and philosophies that currently abound – and rebound – in the social sciences and humanities.

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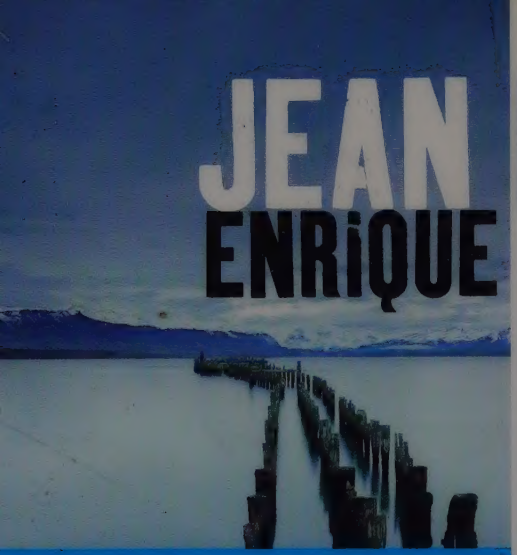

JEAN BAUDRILLARD
taught sociology at the University of Paris X (Nanterre) from 1966 to 1987. Among his works translated into English are *Simulations and Simulacra*, *Fatal Strategies*, *Seduction*, *America*, *Cool Memories* I–V, *The Illusion of the End* and *The Spirit of Terrorism*.

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polity
www.polity.co.uk

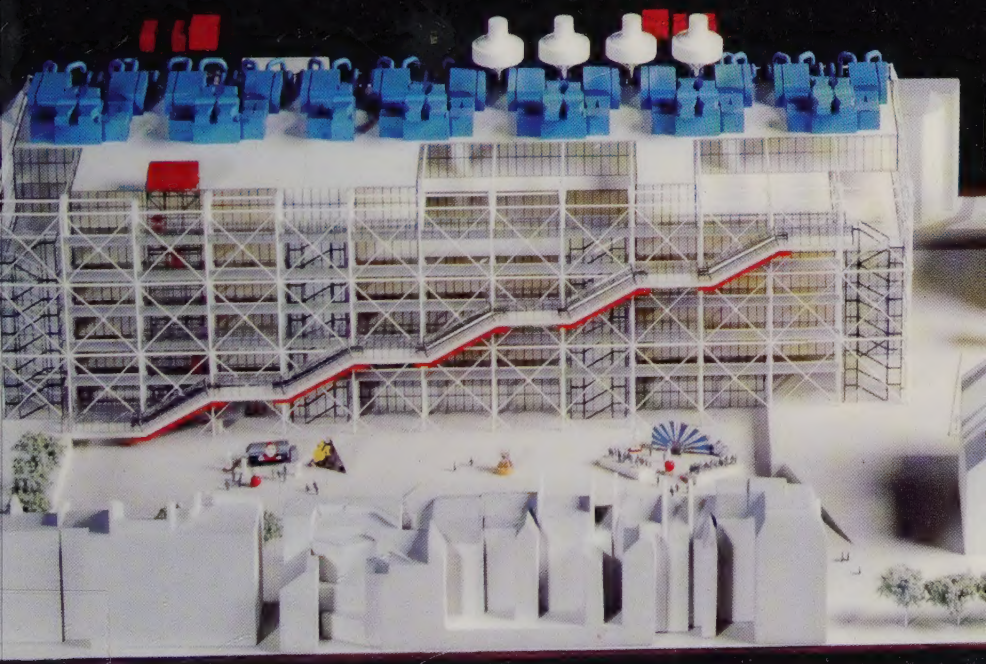
Printed in India

ISBN 978-0-7456-3991-8

Utopia Deferred

Jean Baudrillard

Writings for *Utopie* (1967–1978)



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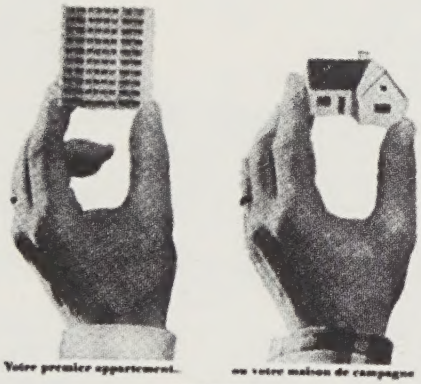

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The publication of this book was supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, New York.
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Original published as "Le Ludique et le policier," Paris, Sens & Tonka, 2001
Jean Baudrillard/Jean-Louis Violeau, "A Propos d'Utopie," Paris, Sens & Tonka, 2005

Published by Semiotext(e)
501 Philosophy Hall, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027
2007 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 427, Los Angeles, CA 90057
www.semiotexte.com

Special thanks to Jean-Louis Voileau, Craig Buckley, Andrew Berardini, Nicholas Zurko and Ardevan Yaghoubi.

Cover Photography by Hervé Véronèse
© Centre G. Pompidou/Bibliothèque Kandinsky
Back Cover Photography by Sylvère Lotringer
Design by Hedi El Kholti

ISBN: 1-58435-033-4
Distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England
Printed in the United States of America

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2006

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Utopia Deferred

Jean Baudrillard

Writings from *Utopie* (1967-1978)

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Translated by Stuart Kendall

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1

On *Utopie*, an interview with Jean Baudrillard

Jean-Louis Voileau: *How could Utopie express an "ideal-specific" relationship between architects and "intellectuals"?*

Jean Baudrillard: The equivalent of a symbiosis between a few architects and young intellectuals effectively occurred at the end of the 1960s, but at that time, it seems to me that architecture didn't have the façade, the surface that it has today. And since these architects were still unknown, they could take more risks in a certain way, leave their "technical" space so as to see elsewhere. I don't know if this is still the case today. It is not the same situation. Basically, the intention was to surpass architecture as such, just as urbanism as such had been surpassed and as the Situationists had liquidated the space of the university as such... Everyone was trying to liquidate his own discipline. There was a mode of disappearance through excess in which each of us could rediscover himself. Today, I have the impression that between architects and intellectuals, or artists and intellectuals or philosophers—because artists also participate in this movement—it's more a question of a friendly contract. We pass in the halls. The conditions are no longer the same. Fusion can no longer be envisioned. Within *Utopie*—and besides this is what *Utopie* was—we were in search of

a point of intellectual gravity from which it would have been possible to radiate out to all disciplines. Thus, each of us eventually set out from his own point of view, but in the end sought to transverse all the themes of the period. Today, I truly believe that it is much more of a graft, or even a search for justification. In fact, a search for "intellectual salvation" founded on the will to save the discipline of architecture—architecture as such—or to rehabilitate it, or rediscover its meaning, etc. Because it too is experiencing a mental crisis, in its foundations, even if it isn't the sole cause, since everything, everywhere around, it is, evidently... Today we are seeing an attempt at consolidation, at re-foundation, such that, at that time, the intention was the opposite: to go as far as possible toward disappearance, just to see what would happen out there. Today, I have the impression that the intellectual is perceived as a resource. This is only an impression... I myself have not really sounded this one out... Compromise imposes itself everywhere. Politics and culture support one another. If there is a political crisis, it is surpassed in the holy alliance with culture. We see it with Le Pen[1]... There is a crisis in contemporary art, but we've switched it to the extreme right, and made it a political accusation, exchanging at once processes and combinations. But I don't want to discredit it entirely for that. It is good that these exchanges have taken place, that these dialogues have taken place, but all of this remains on the order of exchange and dialogue. *Utopie* was not on this order. *Utopie* was a bit of a fusion, of a superfusion. We were looking for something other than simple dialogue...

Was there a conscious intention to renew architectural thought or urbanism?

We were effectively part of such a postulate, nourished by sociology —more precisely by the thought of Henri Lefebvre. It was about questioning architecture and every formal and symbolic practice in terms of historicity and radicality. All of this reviewed across every intellectual sphere, at once of everyday life and of history, which deformalized and deprofessionalized architectural practice.

The urban as "separated" space…

Yes, the end of the urban, the process of the disappearance of the urban and more precisely of the urban utopia. This wasn't so much my project as it was that of Lefebvre as a philosopher, and of Hubert Tonka, as an architect, even if it was already clearly exposed in architectural practice. This inquiry anticipated 1968, of course, a "moment" during which any even slightly formalized, slightly professionalized activity was called into question… This movement came before 1968, undoubtedly. And besides, in fact, *Utopie* could hardly continue for very long after 1968, even if it nevertheless endured for several years, though with some wandering… The ascendant period, when there had not yet been any kind of event— or "non-event"…—like 1968, was more interesting. The 1968 event came, in some way, "to realize" the project, though also, in the same blow, to extinguish a little of its potential.

How did you meet Hubert Tonka?

This whole thing began started with Lefebvre. I had known Lefebvre at the beginning of the 1960s. He was at the center of a group interested in urbanism. He taught at the *Institut d'urbanisme* and Tonka was his assistant. We got to know one another in 1962 and

1963. *Utopie* truly began at Lefebvre's place at Navarrenx, in the Pyrenees, in 1966. Lefebvre and Lourau were already there… There, in 1966, I got to know the group. In fact, just before 1968. All of this really began right before 1968…

*What was your relationship to the "*enrages*" at Nanterre?*

Nanterre… the sociology department… Cohn-Bendit… the 22nd of March[2]… We were at the center of the "events." We participated in AG, we went to the barricades… The "spirit of May" circulated for several years at Nanterre. We still had a certain power. The students were behind us. We defended the department of sociology above all. This situation lasted until 1973-74. I stayed on a few more years, through inertia. During the work of mourning, for me, there was no longer any activity. I had passed to the side of theory. Leftism, or what it had become, closed militarism, was no longer an option.

You were never tempted by Vincennes…

Why not? Lourau went there, Lyotard too… Tonka… Undoubtedly I should have gone, but I made a bet, I said: no, I'll stay here, I'll stay till the end, I want to see what happens, in the end, at Nanterre. I haven't regretted having made this choice, even when it was clear that I couldn't stay at Nanterre any longer. It was simply too late to go to Vincennes. The story, for me, ended at Nanterre…

Yes, but from that moment, you were among the references for the students…

Yes. I was very friendly with Lyotard, with Guattari, all of them... I was already at the center of that group even if I remained on the margins of the "elite." I worked with groups like *Utopie*, which was nevertheless a "cell," a little on the margin, or I worked largely alone. In the end, I always preferred working alone.

Where do you situate Utopie *in this intellectual and political context?*

There were a number of movements like it during those years, analogous anticipations that wanted to be marginal. We should remember that there was still a phobia about official political action and about parties, a refusal of all political and intellectual nomenclature. The Situationists were closest to us, but the Situationists didn't want to see anyone else. And we didn't really seek them out. We had known them, with Tonka, at the beginning of the 1960s, just before their break with Lefebvre. The position of the Situationists, in 1968, became very problematic. Previously, at Nanterre, between the anarchists, Cohn-Bendit, and the Situationists, there was an extraordinary focal point, but the workers councils the Situationists extolled in 1968 seemed irrelevant to us. We had the feeling of having surpassed this kind of initiative. Debord disappointed us in 1968, with his "old moons," and again twenty years later, rereading what he had written, cloning himself by saying: nothing has changed, what I said was absolutely true, there is nothing more to say about it. While completely recognizing the value of what happened before, he was nevertheless already fossilized for us. The 1960s were really extraordinary, more than the 1970s, which were more "spectacular." The 1960s were more rich, more complex, even if it was also during these years that I began mourning "politics." For us, 1968 was already more than

politics. It was symbolic, almost "metahistorical." Thereafter, it was all over. In the 1970s, we passed beyond the end. Thereafter, we passed entirely to the side of theory. This moment is also the moment that *Utopie* effectively ceased all engaged activity, even all activity relative to architecture. We passed inexorably toward disappearance, a disappearance tending toward the most radical...

What role did Aspen play in this process?

We were simply delegates in Aspen. It's true that we created a "moment," a little event in Aspen, in passing.[3] But in the end, the scene was too large for it to be of any importance. No, if I had to think of an influence, I would more likely reference *The System of Objects*, which provoked a small event, an event that went beyond me and beyond *Utopie* as well. Aspen, it's true, was the place where a counter culture expressed itself and is therefore worthy of interest. This "counter culture" was foreign to us. We were very "French," therefore very "metaphysical," a French metaphysics of revolt, of insubordination, while the counter culture that expressed itself in Aspen was largely American. Aspen was a "moment" and not an event, even if, at that time, despite a certain vigor in the American movement which persisted, the decline was nevertheless in the air. Even if Vietnam and Cambodia were still going on, even if violence still followed, even if we had discovered the occasion, I think that the "counter cultural flash" was already a little "metastasized," even if the trip, it's true, nevertheless remains a revelation. America truly started things, an illuminating trip, even if we didn't bring much back to France when we returned. How could we do something here in France? There was no way to metabolize this contribution in a French context dominated by the "politico-careerist" New Left,

even if, from that moment on, things simultaneously began to decline here too. We were already on the road to the great recycling, to the restoration, to rehabilitation… I lived through this recycling at Nanterre, at the university level. We really saw the recycling, the restoration of things, the return of the authorities to their jobs, etc. We struggled for several years against it, but it was inexorable. We moved toward an integrated society. Integration, even if I should admit that this grand recycling wasn't entirely negative. Architecture, for example, was reborn, but this time, in a professional form, at another level… Evidently, in the eyes of our initial transversal utopia, this rebirth was undoubtedly a revision, revisionism, but architecture started over, just the same, from that situation, with other means, other technologies, other minds. What remains of it today? Someone like Stinco, for example, "makes architecture"… He does his job, in a certain way. Nouvel is a foundational spirit, but he is also a true professional. He would truly ask himself, Nouvel… In the end, he could be both completely unique and retain the first class, high tech image, which he really has, of course… But he still has concerns… This vast movement gave us the people that we know today: Portzamparc, Nouvel, Gaudin… Free spirits, troubled… But in the end, architects. Today it's no longer about questioning all of that. Today I no longer see what might question the postulates of this evolution.

How did you see the role of the architects—among others…—refusing to build immediately after 1968?

I have never been very libertarian, nor spontaneous… The idea that creativity was everywhere and that there was no longer any need for architects always left me indifferent. I never really believed it. It's

appealing, certainly, but in a "virtuality," in a dream space, a dream of equality… And this—even if I brought the entire group to a theoretical level—to the only level that it was possible to think and create. With theory, one can work alone, do what one wants, and, on this point, I have never compromised. The University was nothing. I never found myself caught up in having to return to a "conventional" activity. This problem is much more complicated for people like architects, pragmatists, those who do things, real operators. I have never been anything, but a virtual, theoretical operator, and in theory I have complete freedom. Having eliminated the few constraints that I felt on a political level at a given moment, I have been perfectly free. I choose this freedom, but people like Tonka, who wanted to be both theoretically radical and to nevertheless maintain the working method of a group and a communitarian practice, never got out. Besides, Hubert is still at the center of this insoluble dilemma, a dilemma that, with his build, he gives a rather unique character. But this is a situation for which there can be absolutely no model. One cannot even offer an example. This is a very, very particular case. For those who have wanted to maintain the essence of a collective, utopian imaginary and to continue to work in the sharpest way, it is very difficult. I believe that one really has to choose. I chose to distance myself. I chose to do what I wanted to do, practically alone. For a time, a journal like *Traverses* was the locus of a collective activity, a structure of reception, but never my unique center of gravity. It was a thematic journal that invested in the world, but even this kind of journal was already no longer possible on the fringes of the 1980s…

What really happened at the beginning of the 1980s… I am thinking, notably, of those three great expositions of architecture in Paris, and

more particularly, of one of them, La Modernité ou l'esprit du temps, *curated by Jean Nouvel, in which you participated, with François Barré… In 1981,* Présence de L'Histoire, l'après modernisme, *the Venice Biennale that came to Paris in 1980. The following year, in response to Nouvel and to Chemetov,* Modernité, un projet inachevé, *which made its appeal to Habermas' caution, all of this in the midst of the modern/postmodern controversy… A controversy wrapped up in the promises of modernity, unfinished because unfinishable according to Chemetov, finished in Venice around Portoghesi, and finished in a completely different way by Nouvel… What is your view of what has been called postmodernism in architecture?*

I've never had anything but an amateur's eye for this. I never followed the history of architectural ideas. On a theoretical level, on the contrary, I had enormous reservations since the beginning, and even an absolute distrust about concepts like these. In part, besides, because I have been classed in a certain abrupt fashion among the supporters of postmodernism. I found myself bound by a certain etiquette, having enjoyed undeserved success based on a total misunderstanding. In fact, I didn't see what this label corresponded too. People took "simulation" for postmodernism, and I became a guru of postmodernism… In regard to this controversy, I've always stayed at arms' length. I don't like the so-called "postmodern" architectural displays. It is clear that I resisted this kind of architecture. I remained modern in the sense that I refer to Manhattan, in its truly modern version. What happened afterward didn't please me at all, at all. In my eyes, the referencing of past forms incarnated a movement that was not only a regression, but also a reversal. I did not see it as a sign of renewal in any way, but more as *bricolage* at the highest level, reusing all past forms. We've seen similar phenomena elsewhere in

art, in theory, and in philosophy. This movement is still going on. Luc Ferry and his group do postmodernism, in their way. We don't call it that, but they are in the process of cobbling together a subject, a weak humanism…

The old moral ground…

Exactly. An old moral ground that reappears, the replacement of a system of values… After 1968, a liquidation was sought. It was necessary at least to go to the end of that, and not return to these things to work with the past. We destroyed—or deconstructed—the old moral ground. We analyzed it joyfully, if you will, and today we see all these people applying themselves to reconstructing the past in distress, in any case out of sadness. All of this is not very comforting. I never adhered to an intellectual program, but in foreign countries, in all the other countries, I'm always asked about it, always questioned about it… Certain habits are tough. One would have thought that all this would pass away bit by bit. This is more or less the case in France, since, after all, we have never spoken much about it in France. But elsewhere, no, the label persists, incarnating an entire period, an entire era… And then, it is useless to want to clear up a misunderstanding. No one can correct anything. You are pegged once and for all, that's it.

It is true that the vision of architecture offered by the catalogue of Jean Nouvel's exposition is practically the opposite of that offered by the catalogue of Paolo Portoghesi's. In the end, it is not "postmodern" in the sense that the term was primarily defined at the time. Elsewhere, the exposition was called Modernity or the spirit of the times…

Yes, yes, absolutely… But here I might fool you. I was never close to the ambiance of architecture, the evolution of the 1980s… I would not even be capable of offering a "religion," an opinion about it. I followed events like that, through chance relations and friendships, but the stakes of these things, I cannot say that I followed that. I'm not really a good resource about them.

Rather your interest in this was through your friendship with Jean Nouvel…

Yes, Nouvel. Even if it was not really a choice. It happened that I knew him best, and that what he did pleased me, though I still didn't really know why… I went to New York to see Tschumi a little in the same spirit. To the extent that these people thought they found things that inspired them in what I was doing—why not?—but truthfully, I never really understood what excited them about my work. The problem posed itself in the same way with the artists. I saw more or less clearly what they found in my work—at least what they gathered from it…—but reciprocation was hardly required. I cannot say that I never found myself inspired by their work. The only text that I had to write on architecture was on La Villette for Tonka, for the book *Parc Ville Villette*.[4] A text that has certain architectural elements but which is more "metaphysical"… Similarly, in regard to painting, I was certainly interested in Warhol and Duchamp, but I situate myself on the fringes of painting. Something else is at stake, a metaphysics of the object, of the image… It is the same for architecture: Beaubourg interested me, but as an object, and not strictly as architecture. Besides, I have no real understanding of architecture. As an object, on the other hand, Beaubourg, this "monster," was interesting to me. In the end, the

architectural "monsters" were interesting to me... I'm really only a wild amateur and I don't really know how to slip out of this amateur's taste. Once, Nouvel, Tonka and I did a long dialogue. Yes, we felt that there were several points of intersection, but there was no real point of anchorage, like there was, even if the complicities were a little forced, between Tschumi and Derrida or Eisenmann, even if, between them, there was a very determined will, a common project. It was something else. In my opinion, the transplantation of deconstruction into architecture was not very convincing. Fundamentally, I don't really believe in this kind of contamination, even if, for those who attempt it, it should certainly reveal itself to be very exciting. For myself, I never entered into any game that was so advanced. The "contamination" eventually occurred only through simple affinities. I certainly acquired the equivalent of credit on the basis of *The System of Objects*, of design, since the people that worked in these areas, including architecture, used me as a reference. There was an entire movement, but in the end, I always flirted with all that, without... And I don't know, from their side, if the flirting went very far anyway... I can't say that the ideas circulating in architecture or in architectural debates were really influenced by my work. My trajectory passed, like that, through architecture, just as it has passed through philosophy. Without any privilege. For me, even the history of ideas is a field with which I flirt, at its limits, but I only pass through. I work more at a distance. I never really return to the heart of a discipline. For the rest of them it's a question of recurrence: whether it be psychoanalysis, semiology, architecture or linguistics... I never came back to the details of things, the structures of things, to make an internal critique because I saw too clearly that if one entered too deeply into a discipline, one would never get out. Of course, my point of view

can seem a bit cavalier, but I've preserved this reaction because it prevents me from truly investing myself in the details of things. If alchemy worked better with architects, as in the *Utopie* group, it is because they were also avoiding the details of their activity. They wanted to make something else. They had an ambition that was different than building, if I may say so.

So this relationship with Nouvel is of an entirely different nature than the one that you entertained with the architects of the Utopie *group…*

Yes, even if there wasn't an organic relationship with the architects in *Utopie*. We never really worked together, even if, between us, we talked a lot… I don't think that any truly common project could have come of it. With Nouvel, I also don't think that I was involved in any development whatsoever. The way that Tonka was engaged in this kind of collaboration is very different. He always remained linked very closely with architecture, and it was rather through him that I was associated with the architectural milieu with, meanwhile, enormous intermittences.

Tonka's chosen affinities became your own, marginally…

Yes, in echoes, resonances… His ambition is to mediate these exchanges, to be a bit of a "resonator," the spokesman. I was one pole for him, but there were others… And he really wanted to be a bit of the convector for this entire elective cartography. I gladly accepted this ambition. We have been friends for a long time… Our relations have always been woven with resonance, ricochet…

A family…

Yes, the architects are a bit like my cousins, but in the end, they aren't my cousins… It is not a close family, even if I should admit that I don't really have a close family, if only in my head, or really, anywhere else…

Have you been tempted by the experience of Unités pédagogiques *(UP) after 1968?*[5]

No. To enter the universe of the UP, one must possess a certain skill at infiltration, militant infiltration. I was not adept at this relationship of pedagogy and militancy. I was always so conscious of the limits of these enterprises that my strategy has been, each time, to withdraw rather than to enter… And then, it would have been necessary to be the clearest person of one's times, the most activist, and I am not an activist. These groups were already set up, they already had a framework, each was already more or less affiliated with such and such a movement. It must have begun and set itself up within that framework, to recognize positions… Very quickly, that set off intrigue, influence, things that I was afraid of and that depressed me. In fact, I remained quite outside the institutions, a shy partisan of minimal institutional arts…

Did architecture students attend your seminars at Nanterre?

No, I don't think so, even if we can't really know, at a given moment, who precisely attended those seminars… It is true that at the height of the New Left, there must have been an osmosis, in the end, they came because it was Nanterre, and undoubtedly not so much because they were architecture students… There were people who passed through. I remember people who came from elsewhere, from

Belgium, from Germany, linked more or less to architecture, who came to follow the class, even if, in any case, the drainage was not the same as at Vincennes. Besides, Nanterre ended up becoming a desert, more or less abandoned. In fact, I really liked that disaffection. It left me the time and freedom that I needed to work. In the end, through the first years, after 1968, for four or five years, there was such an infatuation and so variable an audience that it was very difficult to delineate the contours of a "devoted" audience…

You weren't interested in the shake-ups at the École des beaux-arts *before 1968, for example?*

I heard echoes, because I knew people there. But I didn't participate or follow the events very closely. I wasn't looking elsewhere for a replacement institution. We broke out during a moment at Nanterre. Then, life at the university little by little resembled that of an asylum. I was part of it, even if I lived much more while traveling in foreign countries. I traveled all over a little, and I was no longer invested here, in Paris, in any case much less than elsewhere. I don't think that it should be a choice.

Is there something American that happened in Utopie…

Nothing much could have. *Utopie* really preceded my departure for America, even if I already had access to American culture, cinema, and literature… There was, it's true, a fascination. Did these things happen in *Utopie*? It's true that since the 1960s, hyperreality, the hyperreal, Warhol, American painting, already interested me… And then, I already knew American literature, certainly that of the previous generation, and film, yes… We swam in that culture since

the 1960s, and then, I already had an anti-French prejudice, or in any case a shifted position… There was certainly, at the same moment, a political radicality that was still rather more oriented toward Marxism, at least for a certain time, but it was despite all that an imaginary, an anticipation, which was much more American. Since the 1960s, this imaginary was there. I already had it—I don't know if the others participants had it as much as me…—but I don't think that it could have passed through my writings of the period, at least, not so much that one could presume that it did.

The imaginary of the immoderate?

The imaginary of simulation. There was already *The Consumer Society*, *The System of Objects*, the objects, consumption, through reading Marcuse, the Frankfurt School… I read the Frankfurt School before it was translated. It was an analysis of alienation, effectively repeated in Sartre and many others—Marx…—but reactivated, updated in the American context, as though in a completely different society, where the story of hyperreality became an extreme phenomenon. The context changed all the givens of the analysis. America had been an analyst, in this sense, the equivalent of a shifter. When I arrived in Paris, at the beginning of the 1960s, and when I began to work with Lefebvre, all this was still really in limbo, even if it was also in that moment that there were glimmers, clear indications. Toward the middle of the 1960s, this thought began to be outlined. Certain elements had been perceived since the beginning. One didn't have to wait for the year 2000 to perceive all that was going to take place. It was not even necessary to have a particular gift for anticipation. One could analyze very well, x-ray it. We also had instruments that were new. Sartre had phenomenology

as well, but then we also had semiology, psychoanalysis… powerful tools. A series of fundamental discoveries occurred at the same time.

Even if you must have had a particular relationship to structuralism, having been a disciple of Lefebvre…

Yes, but I was never a structuralist. Lefebvre, it's true, was an anti-structuralist. For me, Foucault or Barthes were very interesting. The question didn't come up. Lefebvre had very "phobic" limits in relation to a bunch of things like that… In the end, Lefebvre was never really a reference for me, nor a model. I liked him well enough, we worked together, but I very quickly found certain of his positions a little naïve… Barthes, for example, influenced me much more. It was very pleasant to work with Lefebvre, but he had a rhetoric that was occasionally too set, that didn't suit me. I'm thinking of his disdain, of his contempt for psychoanalysis and for semiology in the name of a rhetorical libertinage, a touch "Old France," if one may say so… We had a lot of affection for him, but that was beside the point. There were much more acute tasks, much more pointed in all these other disciplines, without these "disciplines" being for all that truly autonomous. It was an experimental period, which was nevertheless very powerful, wherein things already no longer came from previously constituted disciplines, nor even from the university, but transversally between methods of analysis. We tried a bit of everything at that moment. My first books, objects, consumption… were the hybrid and intertwined results of all these contributions. These first books were still at once a bit serious and traditional, with an experimental tone at the same time. Thereafter, for me, all this was a little decanted through radicalization. The problem was that of political radicality. I initially passed from a poetic and metaphysical

radicality—Hölderlin and Rimbaud…—when I was in my twenties, to a political subversion—the Algerian War, Leftism, etc. Then, there was a passage wherein it was necessary to transform the political radicality that no longer had any stakes—for which we no longer felt any stakes…—into a theoretical radicality. It's an unoriginal path, all things considered, but one which, for me, seemed very clear. Thereafter, things are a little fixed, because beyond this radicality, I no longer see very well what it would be possible to write… The same goes for my path in the institution: I began by being a professor in a provincial school, then I moved to the university, where, at the moment, the dream… 1966, 1968, it was great. But at the end of the moment, it's inexorable, the stage was emptied. And so I passed to the cosmopolitan level, to travel and the world, to the transoceanic level… I stayed there, and there too, I began to get tired. But beyond, there is nothing. I no longer see very clearly what I could undertake beyond, but I certainly cannot go back and include myself in existing or pre-existing institutions. And now I'm too old to look for a place in the intellectual world!

2

Dialectical Utopia

We want to situate ourselves in the uncrossed interval between theory and praxis. Praxis (conservative) situates itself in the existing order. Grasping the urban totality and all of its contradictions; apprehending every possibility. The social possibilities are presented and remain to be created—in the sense of made to appear—; the urban contains and confines them; it is essentially a question of freeing them and putting their revolutionary potentiality into play.

The existing order is a *topos*. Criticism and analysis of this topos permits the elaboration of *utopia*; the definition and situation of utopia, the criticism of utopia and the updating of its means of realization (philosophical, political, economic...).

Utopia has two fields of possible realization. 1. Existing power, whatever it is, assimilates the means, the criticisms, and the project of utopia, therefore, in a certain measure, its goals, by rejecting them. But, if there had not been a fundamental modification of the existing order, a share of *utopia* nevertheless passed into reactionary praxis. 2. The revolution that destroyed the *topos* theoretically permitted a total realization of *utopia*, which becomes a (revolutionary) *topos*. In advance, one cannot determine what will constitute the revolutionary praxis of this *topos* and what will remain theoretical and reintegrated in theory.

The realized *utopia* is a new *topos,* which will provoke a new critique, then a new utopia. The installation of utopia passes through a (total) urbanism.

And that is the complete process.

Topos (conservative)—critique/utopia/revolution—urbanism/topos (revolutionary and conservative)/new utopia… etc.

We call that *Dialectical Utopia.*

Utopia is the phase of theoretical construction, but it is absolutely indissociable from the other phases and can only exist as part of dialectical utopia. It is only through dialectical utopia that we can elaborate, outside and within the present system, an urban thought.

(To be continued)

3

The Ephemeral...[1]

The ephemeral is undoubtedly the truth of our future habitat. Mobile, variable, retractable structures inscribe themselves in the formal demands of architects and in the social and economic demands of modernity. But this is only true in an ideal dimension. One must not lose sight of the fact that:

1. Neither the ephemeral nor the durable are absolute and exclusive values. Only their constant relation, and the multiple play of oppositions between them, founds a logic of cultural significations. One can inflect their rapport, loosen it as a function of social rhythms: in this sense everything pushes us strongly toward the accelerated mortality of objects and structures. Meanwhile these two terms have meaning only relative to one another.

More precisely, if clothes, objects, appliances, and automobiles increasingly obey (but there is a limit threshold) the norms of the ephemeral, nothing says that they do not, taken together, oppose "inhabiting"—which itself constitutes a specific function which could be brutally or ideally assimilated to other aspects of consumption or fashion. Their symbolic schema is that of ventilation and expenditure, the symbolic schema of inhabiting is that of provision and investment. To reduce the two to the same ephemeral synchrony is undoubtedly to liquidate an entire field of very rich

contrasts. Lived culture (and thus the logic of sense) only exists through the tension between two poles like these.

2. It is true that the social deficit that modular or pre-fabricated construction, in disposable or durable materials, represents today is colossal. It contradicts economic rationality and social exchange with the irreversible tendency toward greater social mobility, the loosening of infrastructures, etc. Meanwhile one must account for the latent psychological, familial, and collective functions, of the "disposable" and the solid, very powerful functions of integration that also return in the social "budget."

3. The ephemeral will perhaps one day be the collective solution, but for the moment it is the monopoly of a privileged fraction whom its economic and cultural position permits to question the myth of durability.

It is because generations of bourgeois were able to enjoy the permanent and traditional décor of property that certain among them can today grant themselves the luxury to deny to cut stone and delight in the ephemeral: the fad belongs to them. On the other hand, every generation of the lower classes, who had no chance in the past of acceding to the cultural models at the same time as to durable property,—to what does one wish that they aspire if not to live the bourgeois model, and to found in their turn for themselves and their children, a derisory dynasty in the stone buildings and bungalows of the suburbs—how can one demand of these classes, now "promotable," that they regard their buildings as sacred and accept outright the ideality of mobile structures? They have vowed to desire that which lasts and only this aspiration can translate the cultural destiny of their class.

Reciprocally, the cult of the ephemeral ideologically connotes the privilege of the avant-garde: according to the eternal logic of

cultural distinction, a privileged fraction savors the instantaneousness and the mobility of architectural structures at the moment when the others accede only just to the quadrature of their walls. Only the privileged classes have the right to the actuality of the models. The others have the right once these models have already changed.

If therefore in the logic of forms the "ephemeral" represents the truth of modernity, if even it represents the future formula for a rational and harmonious society, it still takes an entirely different sense in the present cultural system. In its logical foundation, culture continually plays on the two *distinct* terms: the ephemeral and the durable, of which neither can be made autonomous. In the socio-cultural class system, on the contrary, this relation breaks into two *distinctive* poles, of which one—the ephemeral—becomes autonomous in a culturally superior model, returning the other to its "obsolescence."

This is not at all to disqualify the formal research of the architect: but there is a bitter derision in the fact that that search for social rationality succeeds precisely in reinforcing the irrational logic and the strategy of the cultural class system.

4

Play and the Police

To speak of repression is to speak of the CRS.[1] But this is a dangerous impressionism. The dramatic evidence of repression when it flowers on the surface of cities under the uniform of the Special Brigades mystifies us largely on its latent systematics, which haunts the depths of our consciences. It was one of the victories of the movement of May to have been able to ward off repression, to have brought it to light as the truth of the institution and of the social order, but it was its weakness to only have been able to ward this off under a spectacular form, in its murderous and archaic aspects, upon which of course a tactical solidarity is tied ("Everyone against repression"), but upon which too the movement exhausted itself in a spectacular guerrilla conflict—ending in the fascination of the symbolic street fight, where incarnated repression became, accordingly in the iconography and the obsessional folklore inspired by the CRS, the *number one object of consumption* for the rebellious imagination.

If the movement of May is caught in this trap, this game, this symbolic counter-dependence which is part of our cultural mechanism (that it meanwhile attempted to surpass toward the end in the slogans of commercial self-management), one can admit that it has been reduced by the tactical political conditions and that it's target

was, beyond the violence of the police, the fundamental social violence, the repressive essence of politics, the violence of all kinds, sexual, cultural, economic, done to human beings by the social order *because it is an order.*

But it does not suffice to see radical insurrection against society as a carnivorous flower, a political and transpolitical reincarnation of the Bad Mother. If this kind of genetically distant phantasm, intending to subvert even the principle of social reality, has certainly nourished the "contestation of global society," one must still, to explain their resurgence, grasp the specific mechanisms of repression in contemporary society. What new type of repression provokes this new type of insurrection?

1.

In order to read repression, one must unravel not only the schema of the police, but also the empirical schema, vulgarized by psychoanalysis, of vital forces being pushed back, of the frustration of "essential" needs, etc. Repression in civilized countries is no longer a negation, an aggression, it is an *ambiance.* It is pacified everydayness, wherein the distinction between play and the police is effaced. Again, in other words, generalized repression, which translates itself through the internalization of contraries (intellectual and sexual) and wherein the repressive instance becomes *maternal,* is the place of an intense *participation.* Behind the maternalist slang of the environment, of the ambiance, of interest, of participatory values, which substitutes itself for that, normative and judiciary, of Order, of Justice, of Hierarchy, which was the social lexicon of the Word of the Father, the open era of co-repression installed itself. This repression is imponderable because it operates through signs. It won't be warded off in the street, nor

through street fighting, because it is inscribed even in the arrangement of the street, not panning the windows, not in the spectacle of the street fighting. In co-management, it nourishes the signs themselves (but only the signs) of responsibility and power. This historic transition of violent forms of repression toward complicit euphoria can be read in the face of the city: the grand Parisian boulevards, once the site of insurrection and of its suppression, have become grand commercial and spectacular arteries. Here social conflicts are no longer resolved by force, rather they come here to abolish themselves.

2.

This repression, defined at the lived level as *ambiance* and complicity, is defined inversely, in theory, as a systematic totality of division, of *separation*. Today social violence expresses itself less in the direct repression of drives, in the physical constraint of individuals or in the open oppression of the class or category than in the grid of social relations, in the ever more complex, systematic, geographical, professional, and cultural segregation, in the irreversible technical and social division of labor, in the unlimited lessening of needs.

The principle of separation, which breaks the unity of desire and institutes human activity in multiple sectors—to which a certain autonomy and a certain liberty is in isolation attached—is the most effective principle of neutralization of energies. The public sphere and the private sphere: Marx traced the historical genesis of this dissociation: between the two, a negative reciprocal determination. Under the illusory liberty of the private domain, all the contradictions of the economy and of politics come to strain the routine and to alter the course of life. Our dream of the domain "reserved" for leisure. Here one can clearly see the essence of repression:

to index the free aspiration on the schema even of servitude. Doubled in work and leisure, the everyday routine organizes each share in the same way. Those who live parked in public housing or in the promiscuity of the assembly line can only dream, under the same sign of liberty, of overcrowded beaches and a sea of cars. The disconnection between paradise and hell is that people can only dream of a paradise in the image of their hell.

The system of repression takes root in the division of labor. But the violence that exerts itself on the level of production, the human deficit that results from fragmented labor is rarely experienced as freedom: repression is not consummate (in all the senses of the word: it is not perfect and it does not savor its own image). More significantly today for us is that it exerts itself in the division of needs. Because some risk the illusion even of the pleasure principle. All the prophets of the society of consumption extol our freedom from needs, to promote the multiplication of pleasures. In modern man, there would be a virtuality of needs that awaits only the products necessary for their satisfaction. To awaken these needs is to liberate man, it is to tear mankind from millennia of repression. "Liberate yourself from your superego, enjoy life fully, etc." Of course, these neo-sorcerers are mindful to liberate man according to an explosive finality of happiness. The goal is to permit the drives, long blocked by mental authorities (taboos, superego, guilt) from crystallizing on objects or concrete instances in which the explosive force of desire comes to abolish itself and to materialize the ritual repressive function of the social order. The ever more "free" irrationality, the multiplication of needs will at base be equal to more and more strict control at the summit.

What interests us here is these two united aspects: the repression of desire accomplished through the emancipation of needs

(Marcuse's "repressive desublimation")—this emancipation accompanies a differentiation and a forced ventilation of needs, their arrangement and calculated dispersion across the span of products. It is in effect the needs that are induced by the products —or moreover: since the products have the greatest coherence (the needs are absolutely contingent), it is the needs which return to them and come, broken apart, discontinuously, to insert themselves in the span of objects (just as active practices forcefully come to insert themselves within the division of labor—escaping only through the inoffensive regression into *bricolage*). The system of individual needs is in some way indexed, classified, cut up by the objects and the products (cultural products as well). It can therefore be directed (this is the real finality of the system on the socio-economic level).

This is to clarify Marcuse's notion of "repressive needs" and introduce a critique. Having seen that the most subtle modern alienation links itself at this level with the internalization of the extra-economic violence that describes the repressive needs, Marcuse calls for the "determinate negation" of these needs and for raising new needs, which are conscious and concerted in their harmonious finality, which is to say not complicit with the repressive principle of reality, not complicit with the irrational pleasure principle, but on the contrary, which inaugurate a kind of rational and collective pleasure principle. This is illusory: on the one hand, if the needs are historically determined (which Marcuse himself admits, of course), one cannot really see where these non-alienated needs would come from. In particular, this "revolution of needs" is nothing at bottom, but the modern version of the old idealist project of the moral education of humanity, of a revolution in consciousness, etc. We must be clear: neither needs nor any theory

of needs will never offer a non-alienated perspective, a revolutionary alternative, because the needs are immediately as such a product of repression, being immediately as such broken apart, divided, ordered. On the other hand, regarding current repressive needs ("determinate negation") in their specificity, one risks inscribing them in advance (negatively) in a problematic that is already that of repression, one risks sealing them off in a negativity without escape, which quickly becomes part of cultural mechanisms. Thus: the anti-theater is impossible, despite the prowess of Grotowski or the Living Theater. It is the institution of the theater itself which should be questioned, with its fundamental inscription of the stage as the place where separated activity is exercised, homologous with the separated institution of Power in every hierarchized society.

Similarly, it is not this or that need, but the institution of needs as separated ends that should be denied. Neither needs nor labor exist as separate. As a historical social fact only the *division of labor* exists and the correlate *division of needs*. And it is this double division that should be analyzed as the foundation of repression. Every theory of needs, even those with revolutionary intentions, can only reorganize the contradiction between the social ends of order and the anomie of desire, can only loosen the code of directed sublimation and supply a theoretical (ideological) basis to super-repression.

By locating repression in the disjunction itself, in the segregation of social and individual practices, one condemns oneself to struggling for the progressive liberalization of separated domains. For sexual "freedom," for example. This is linked to the exercise of sexuality as a need, as a separated activity, as performance, as perversion, as object of consumption, as individual

regression (and not as desire). The same with the liberation of labor. And with the sun during vacation: the rehabilitation of the body, concern for beauty, demand for well-being? Yes, but therein separated ends, circumscribed to vacation, puritan satisfactions, parenthesis in work, substituted for desire: *alibis*. Vacation sun is repressive, its real function is to disavow the value of pleasure, because it intervenes as a sign of an *absent* totality. Thus nudism: is it the truth of the body? Not at all: the truth of the body is desire and nudism, usurping nudity as a sign, disavows more completely, omits and censures nudity as flesh. Hypocrisy? No. The logic of repression.

Of course, repression exerts itself directly on certain contents *as well* (mainly sexual). But what one must see is that it is first of all a strategy, which passes through the systematic disjunction of the social body, like a physical body, in zones, in sectors, in dissociated activities, by which it is deservedly assigned to a partial end of *need*, which is today devoted to satisfaction (or to frustration) and not to pleasure and transgression. Another example: I am not alienated insofar as I am a consumer of "free" time, of leisure, but to the extent that I live as free a time formally opposed to the time of work, the extent or the effect even of freedom results from the process of the dissociation of the time of work from leisure time. Therein lies repression, and not in the eventual restriction of leisure time.

If we admit (with Marcuse) that, everywhere in affluent society, repression systematizes itself through needs, which is to say in the principle of partial satisfaction linked to regression, and not at all in the pleasure principle linked to transgression, we also admit that all speculation on needs is pious, and that only desire, in its irrational vehemence, in its heretical and insurrectional drive toward totality can offer a revolutionary alternative.

3.

HAVING SEEN HOW the principle of repression is structurally organized, we quickly return to its phantasmatic organization. The repressive effectiveness of this society comes not only from paternal authority, that which founds the reality principle, institutes the rational processes of work, the bureaucratic processes of organization and of the political processes of power, nor does it come from the pure and simple substitution of a maternal power for that paternal power, gratifying, incarnate in society in well-being, which would serve the energies in the name of a revolution in gentleness. The effectiveness of the system comes from what it now stakes on a *double authority*: the "traditional" repressive Power is still strongly present, with its technique and social principle of reality, its class domination, the absolute finality of production, but it has learned how to avoid the risks of brutal irruption of that which has been inhibited and of the subversion of its order by setting in play at the heart even of repression the *signs* of the pleasure principle. It is all the litany of the gift, of the offering, of gratification, of blossoming, which haunts advertisement: "See how society as a whole can only adapt to you and your desires." You haven't produced the object (wage-earners), you haven't purchased it (wage-earners), you emitted the desire, and global society (good mother), through its engineers, its technicians, its services, gratified that desire. But one can clearly see that this litany is a *political* discourse, the tactic of which rests on a splitting in two: that of the social reality in a real authority and in an image, one effacing itself behind the other, becoming illegible and ceding place only to a schema of absorption in the maternal ambiance.[2]

When advertisement suggests in essence : "Society adapts itself completely to you, adapt yourself completely to it," it is clear that

the reciprocity is rigged: an imaginary authority adapts itself to you, while you adapt yourself in exchange to a very real order. In an armchair which "marries the forms of your body," YOU marry the entire technical and political order of society. Society makes itself maternal to better preserve an order of constraints. Besides, behind this system of gratification, we see all the structures of authority reinforce themselves: planning, centralization, bureaucracy —political parties, apparatus, States reinforcing their hold behind this vast maternal image which renders their (real) contestation less and less possible.

We can formulate things differently: the authoritarian repressive apparatus, which wore itself out by forcefully diminishing the contradiction between the reality principle and the pleasure principle, between individual drives and social purposes, today reaches this same end by warding off the drives in a systematics of happiness, which "harmoniously" integrates itself in a dynamic of production. The schema of happiness, the phantasms and the drives anterior to the reality principle are no longer sacrificed: we arouse them, provoke them, satisfy them. *Repression operates through the detour of regression.* Doing so, it helps to reinvest in the reality principle everything that, anterior to it and repressed, risked surging back on it and sinking it.

A good example of this regression/repression is the eroticism of advertisement (which haunts all mass culture, and which says to all good apostles of modernity that our society is on its way to eliminating sexual prohibitions). The eroticism of advertisement is not genital, or adult. It is precisely, beneath a genital poster, the repression of all adult desire through (or across) regressive schema that are pre-genital, maternal, nourishing, narcissistic, of an infantile homosexuality, etc. The entirety of repressed pre-genital sexuality

comes to haunt the signs of "liberated" genital sexuality. This is the true content of sexual liberation, and one sees how repression accomplishes its goals much more profoundly here than in puritan repression. No more prohibition, censorship, or moral ideology—but a substitution of inoffensive infantile processes for a dangerous sexual irruption.[3]

This repression through infantilization, powerfully reactivates structures of risk (the irony or the antiphrase of advertising which has no critical value at all, but a *paracritical* value integrated in advance in the effect of advertising, under the same heading as an obligatory smile). In the society of consumption, everything becomes a sign to be wagered and consumed, including the most radical critique of that society. Repression does not escape. Struggling on the barricades, the students exalted at the same time in their aural image on the radio. Society watches itself everywhere, but the human that it puts into self-reflection is not at all critical: it's the humor of *Lui* magazine, of Godard's films, etc.; complacent lucidity is the number one value of spontaneous intellectual discourse.

Better (and it is here that the system subtly closes itself and becomes almost unbeatable) this play of distancing is the proper mode of the consumption of *culpability* which attaches itself to the infantile regression that implicates consumption itself. Open, traditional repression functions in the name of a puritan morality. Modern repression functions in the name of play. In play (the combinative "freedom"), as it blossoms in the mass media, in erotic play, etc., as it culminates in the "critical" play of the intelligentsia, desire resigns itself definitively in play. This play is far from being, as in the child or the work of art, the reconciliation of desire and the reality principle. On the contrary, it masks, behind signs of nonchalance, the intense culpability which

attaches itself to this type of regressive gratification. Warded off in this way, in signs of play, culpability consumes itself like any other object.

It is perhaps even the end of the end of consumption for a certain social group: the intellectuals. Culpability is the order of the day, through psychological exegesis. It should be in sociology as well. This is to say, among other things, to analyze how culpability can become the nourishment even of the existence of the group, and be exploited by it toward cultural ends.[4] For the intelligentsia in particular culpability is a distinctive value. Of course, it has individual psychological foundations, but it is *socially orchestrated* overall, like any other way of dressing or behaving, at its limit like an effect of fashion—like an element of the social code.

There is a "culpability value" among Western intellectuals, just as there is a "goat value" in Kikuyu society. A properly social *exchange value*, which has nothing to do with the neurotic disposition of anyone. This culpability does not require psychoanalysis; it is an economic element of the group. It is requires a social crisis, or cultural contact with other groups. That we dream of the delightful malaise that we seek in the Living Theater, in the political masochism of the intellectuals of the Left, etc. More generally, shame is a primary journalistic value. It is a collective drug (which never engages responsibility): thus the great campaigns on the "Wall of Shame," "Biafra: Shame of Civilized Man," etc. Everyday consumption and advertisement are themselves impregnated with culpability. It is one of the aspects of the "malaise of the civilization." The collision of the two moral imperatives: the ascetic ethos and the modern imperative toward delight, finds an escape in a compromise: delight indexed in blame—shameful delight—reintegration of the failure to delight in orgasm, etc. This is *also*

"consumption." There is an entire lexicon of exasperated delight in advertisement.

It is therefore not only the position of an isolated group that we are describing: it is the contradiction of an entire civilization which here expresses, as usual, the marginal class of the intellectuals —but at the same time *it seizes this contradiction as a distinctive value*: it monopolizes it, manipulates it and assures it a portion of its power.

All of this defined, faced with the radical negativity of desire, a second negativity of play, become autonomous everywhere today, but more particularly among the "intellectuals" in the *paracritical subculture*. Thus the transgression of hierarchic social values returns in the play of a cultural elite, the subversive call to happiness returns in the game of social differentiation; where repression is properly crowned, where the repressive authority and the forces of transgression coexistent in a veritable conjugal neurosis.

Where do we go from here? Is there a point outside the system, from which the system can flatter itself, in its functionality even, gambling with and evading disruptive forces? What type of political action is possible? Revolution? The principle of Revolution, as it is founded on a historical dialectic of the resolution of social contradictions, is a *rational* principle. It situates itself entirely in the field of the reality principle. It is the motor of the repressive society of the traditional type because it situates itself in the same theoretical and political field, but it is still gearing up in a society of the new type, wherein the fundamental contradictions still exist, but masked, outsmarted by playful and regressive processes, where repressive adjustment leaves room for an agreed upon adjustment, for a systematic complicity and for that euphoria of ambiance discussed above.

An entirely new situation has been created. A situation of *perfect repression*, which through the fact that it exerts itself beyond politics, calls for a kind of transpolitical intervention. It is this type of intervention that we have seen rise up during the events of May, during which in the end, we spoke very little of objective contradictions and of dialectical surpassing, but wherein we saw the irruption of a principle anterior (or ulterior) to the reality principle, intervening in a block like the living contestation of the system, and through this even denouncing it, breaking it down, directing it even more to subvert it, to block it so as to make it shatter contradictions so as to resolve them dialectically. Facing the principles, conjugated in their antagonism, of repressive Power and of Revolution, a third principle is addressed: that of Subversion.

In still other words: the revolutionary dynamic has been able to prevail up to this point, against the established order, and to conserve itself, from the principle of change, of movement, of social progress (at once economically: as the liberator of productive forces, and symbolically). But faced with a society that takes account of every ideology of change and of development, and of which the repressive mode (the "modernist" reality principle) is that of functionality, of productivity, of innovation, in which the mode of appearance is that of a perpetual flux of signs (fashion in all its aspects, consumption in the largest sense), faced with such a society, the Revolution can no longer inscribe itself as the principle of change, it will translate itself on the contrary through interruption, rupture, dysfunction, blockage. When the system comes to balance itself through progressive flight, when it manages to digest its contradictions and profit from its crises, when the hierarchy of functions and relations assumes the form of objective reason and when sexual liberty itself is a by-product of productivity, what

remains other than interruption and to address the almost blind demand of the real pleasure principle, the radical demand for transgression, against the massive collusion that passes under the sign of satisfaction? This is what appeared as the "style of intervention" of the active elements of the month of May.

"Historic possibilities should be thought according to the forms that place the accent on rupture more so than on continuity with past history, on negation more than on positivity, on difference more than on progress."[5]

In a society that is no longer exactly a society of repression, but a society of persuasion, of dissuasion of individual goals, only the subversion of the instinctual order can constitute a point exterior to the system. That subversion is nevertheless also political, by the fact that it appears in the political field. But its register is not that of conscious finality nor of contradiction, its mode is not dialectical. Its negativity is radical. Its goal is not a surpassing of contradictions, but an abolition of separations. It intends to restore the totality, not through a dialectical labor on the separated elements, but by a pure act of critical regression.

Because one must say that the contestation of this repressive/regressive society creates itself (we saw it in May) with the help of schema largely borrowed from values and models anterior to the reality principle: the refusal of work, of organization, the drive to happiness, "play without obstacles," etc.[6] In this way, the transfer of this radical subversive action to a class which was not exactly political —the youth—might be clarified; this is to say to a class latent economic and social responsibility, to a class yet to confront economics in its real contradiction, but as a system of values and, on the other hand, ends. Besides, the concept of transgression goes back expressly to archaic societies, societies anterior to the contradictions

of our economic order. The highly integrated primitive hierarchal order, which knew nothing of revolution, presumed ritual and periodic transgression. Transgression is a cyclical space of social menstruation, like the order that it inverts periodically. In our rationalized society too transgression is largely integrated in rituals of rebellion (those of the "critical" intelligentsia, see above) or of revolution (socialism de rigueur). But this society remains inferior to primitive societies in its real power of integration. It largely masters conscious oppositional processes, but not yet unconscious oppositional processes, and transgression flowers like a wild resurgence, like a diehard radical who no longer represents the political and moral conscience confronting power, but a vital drive confronting a vital repression, not of this or that political system, but of the social order insofar as it is an order, and not of the order in its contradictions, but in its coherent finality itself. More and more often we will have to deal with these unforeseen transgressions, these convulsions of the value system.

The political problem is to analyze how this radical negativity can articulate itself in the "objective" contradictions, and this not from some metaphysical or metapsychological point of view, but in the reality of the social classes which support it, and in the social struggles that carry them along.

The theoretical analysis itself should, from this moment, set out from the hypothesis not of a polar antagonism, Social classes/ Revolution, but from three terms, Class Institution/Revolution/ Subversion, and from the complex relationships among these three.

5

Technics as Social Practice

Every technical practice is a social practice, every technical practice is soaked in social determination. But it doesn't present itself as such: it claims autonomy, innocence, a technical rationality founded on science. This rationality subtends the ideology of faith, which imposes itself on our society as morality, wherein technical practices, separated from social reason, become a technique of the *social*, and more precisely of social manipulation, and therefore a technics of power.

The practical efficiency of technics changes in social efficacy. But this is too general a statement.

It would be interesting to see how, in different epochs, technical assets were seized by the logic of privilege. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the wealthy reserved avant-garde techniques: they served their festivals. Through the ages, but in a far more evident way during the twentieth century, the leading technical practices have been military, an exclusive domain of power. The directing classes only let those filter down that were strictly for the reproduction of productive forces—sometimes organizing even stagnation or a deliberate technical deficit. In any era, technical knowledge and its use has divided the social body into distinct airs, categories, zones of privilege. Technical discrimination is a given throughout history.

Nevertheless, it is only when technical knowledge definitively emerges from religious, ritual, playful, or corporate constraints, as in the Industrial Revolution, that it becomes a "free" productive force, while at the same time it establishes itself in the totalitarian myth of modern societies. But this, here again, is too simple; it is not the effect of a global authority called technics on a global society that must be analyzed, it is how society stratifies itself as a function of technical knowledge, what relationship diverse groups and classes maintain, each with the others, across technics as practice and as myth—and what type of relationship exists between social discrimination in the order of a system of values called technical knowledge and the social discrimination according to other systems of values—cultural, for example.

Contrary to the myth that demands—in the inverse of culture—the place of an hereditary inequality—that technics should be a "democratic" dimension:

— the myth according to which individuals of every social origin would be more naturally, more spontaneously equal before technics than they are in regard to culture and art (with even an inverse privilege for non-privileged classes, closer, as one would like to say, to the empire and to the mechanical arts),

— the myth according to which technics would be a more rational domain, therefore more democratic, since virtually accessible to everyone through academics training and practice—in contrast to the subtle paths that bring one into culture and political science,

— the myth according to which technics would be an innocent domain, distinct from politics, innocent because linked to the mastery of nature while culture, economics, and politics would be more directly implicated in social organization and mastery.

In fact, technics is only in a first moment, or in a first place, an instrument of the mastery of nature and of the liberation of productive forces. It is therefore simultaneously an instrument for restructuring social relations and for elaborating a social rationale. Once crossed, a certain level of mastery of natural forces (and we crossed this threshold a long time ago), technics becomes despite itself an instrument of mastery and of social control.

This in two ways—directly as an auxiliary of politics—indirectly as a mechanism of acculturation.

1. Politically. Every social imperative was subordinated to that of faith and therefore to the directed exercise of technics, to mastery of technical research conditions and the exclusive control of advanced technological operations (singularly military research) creating, to the profit of power, a radical privilege, on the basis of which the political game unfolded. Every investment and economic rhythm depends on this monopoly. The confinement of sacred devices and secret rituals was never, in any era, in any society, as exclusive as the secret, technological manipulation of the state in our modern societies.

The structures of this monopoly must of course be explored, defining the techno-political decision-making groups in opposition to the pure technicians and traditional politicians—defining the technical ideology proper to these groups in opposition to the technocratic myths available to everyone, etc.

2. Culturally. Technics, far from homogenizing society through knowledge, affects, from level to level, a discrimination as precise, is not as traditional and hereditary, as cultural initiation. This system of differentiation functions, just like the other, through:

— consecrated authorities (Research Institutes, the Academy of Sciences, the Centre nationale de recherche scientifique, Atomic

and Space administrations) which sanction technics as a model and universal value at a higher level. At this level, technics sublimates itself in research and science,

— a scholarly system of technical teaching as a subordinate vocation (in our Western societies certainly, but we can ask if the celebration of technical values in the East is not fundamentally linked to economic objectives), which is always ambiguous in its double, shameful relationship with cultural education and education in scientific theory.

The remarkable inequalities that this apparatus institutes in the real participation in technics and that tend to mask the diffuse mythology of technology, this hierarchy, official or officious, is the object of a very strong social code. From theoretical practice to vulgar practice, from a noble technical knowledge to applied knowledge or, lower still, to the application of simply technical recipes in manipulation and construction—from access to the treatises on nuclear physics to reading "Science and Life" or the "Manuel of Domestic Techniques," it is all a sliding scale of *status* that we go through. Each of these indices signals a social condition and a relation to others for assigning each group its respective rank.

This is clearly a question of status and not of knowledge. It is not about concrete differences in knowledge, which, logically, have nothing to do with the social hierarchy of people. It is a question of social *distinction*, of class distinction founded on the *quality* of knowledge taken as an index of *value*—therefore of a *properly cultural system*, of a code of social designation not through literary or artistic habitus, for example, but across a more or less elevated level of *initiation* into the technical order.

In the social logic of culture, this system of technical order comes into play in relation to the system founded on "humanist" values, as a parallel *system of acculturation*, relaying the other and supplementing it through mechanisms analogous to the failings of traditional cultural integration.

Technics effectively constitutes one of the most powerful themes of "mass culture." Large strata of the population, at bottom hardly touched by the properly cultural models, integrated only through dreams, impulses, fragmentary understandings that are dispersed to them in the domain of technics.

The vast phenomenon of autodidacticism, the process of cultural education characteristic of the social emergence of the middle classes, nourishes itself in large part through technics. All the givens accounted for in scientific or cultural training are welcomed in one way or the other in technics. Not that that is their natural propensity: it's the logic of the global cultural system that assigns them to this subculture that lives, in unconscious resignation, off of the prestige of science.

To the direct power that it confers through political efficacy, technics connects the parallel power and ideology that it draws from functioning like a pseudo-culture, a second culture more particularly destined to the "uncultivated" classes—but a systematized culture nonetheless, in its equipment, its legitimating authorities, its mechanisms of diffusion, its models and norms—in brief functioning like a total cultural system coming to reinforce the other to clinch the social hierarchy of powers.[1] Thus one can only grasp the ambiguity of technics by analyzing the position that is assigned to it in the order of a global system of values: made sacred as an absolute spring for power over the international economic chessboard, technics remains a shameful academic and cultural value. One must also

analyze how our societies fail to make technical values autonomous as full and transcendent values, this failure (or its rationalization) in a universalist myth of technics.

But fundamentally, if our societies fail to rationalize their social practice of technics (and not only their technical practice), this lapse is not at all innocent: to rationalize technical practice equals failing to establish a social strategy on the *mystery* of technics.

In a hierarchical society, technics must, like other things, no longer have a function, but a mystery of functionality. And this mystery, that weighs on each technical product, on each technical articulation of the social body, is a social mystery.

The Mythic Organization of Technics

Technics opens directly onto the social level, which is to say when one leaves the abstract and rational level of pure technology, as a divided system, as the systematic opposition of two terms where each is the functional alibi of the other: a metatechnics and an everyday practice. A transcendent technics, hypostasized in fiction, and a banal technics, reified in consumption.

This distortion of technics is often formulated in terms of effects: everyday life, maintained (for strategic reasons) in a state of technical infantilism, would meanwhile benefit from high tech "effects." This presumes the thesis of the unequal development of different sectors of social reality, and, behind that, the hypothesis of a theoretical homogeneity, of a technical transparency, the diffusion of which would be opposed only by social structures.

In fact, there is no other technics than that elaborated by men in such a social context, nor another sense of technics than that which it assumes in social logic. This social logic immediately

imposes technics as an ideological system with two poles. Not that social organization comes simply to divide unitary technics in principle; it and it alone institutes technics and institutes it as divided, disassociated, and fundamentally, in its status as social signifier, in the logical distance between these two poles. Sublime technics, banal technics. Fiction, everyday. Between the two, neither a split nor "effects," but a logical distance and a contradictory implication.

In this, technics is homologous with culture—both obeying the same social logic. There is no longer an educated culture from which mass culture would be "fallout" (according to the model/series schema)—there is a direct cultural system founded on the logical distance between educated culture and mass culture—one defining itself as a function of the other, one implicating the other, one exclusive of the other—to the evident benefit of educated culture, which maintains absolute models.

In the same way, one can admit that advanced technics is founded, *in its advancement*, only on the principle of the technical segregation of everyday life and of the forced assignment of everyday life to consumer stereotypes. It is therefore not a social accident if everyday life is in a chronic state of technical under-development. It is not a dysfunction: it is a *logical* function of the system, entirely like a flight from scarcity and poverty is a functional element of the "welfare state."

The imagination plays on this tactical division. Advanced technics, cut from everyday technical practice and confusedly identified with science, comes to be able to serve the imaginary of the banal technics of "consumption"—exactly like educated culture fundamentally serves as an imaginary model for mass culture. The spatial, nuclear, futuristic heroization of technics, that entire demiurge, that *science* fiction comes into play and is revealed in domestic gadgets, that would thus not at all be experienced as effects, but transfigured as

signs and as the promise of a total technological revolution, whose model is already here, suggested everywhere in the exalted and euphoric discourse on technics (which always doubles as a moral, pessimistic discourse, complicit with the first, and which only reinforces the "dizzying" effect). Across the washing machine's control panel, the average person thinks of himself as a distinct citizen of the technological revolution, though this control panel precisely in its caricature of power is linked to an archaic world of functions, only sends him back to the absence of a total, innovative, structuring technics—and makes him consume it as an absence. The smallest of everyday objects underscores a myth of the absolute functionality of a completely technological world, beyond social contradictions and history. This is the other aspect of the social mystery which we mentioned above.

This technics completes itself in grand mythic oppositions, like that of spatial fusion and the automobile. In fact, the opposition between a prestigious technology and an obsolete technology is only apparent: the concrete dictatorship of the automobile, which has swallowed an entire civilization, and the abstract fascination of spatial adventures are the two poles of a systematic implication in which technics and everyday life are both enclosed and alienated.

A consequence of this division of the system, where one term can imagine the other: the technical objects do not intervene directly in everyday life, as mediators of structures and new social functions, but on the contrary as *already mediated by the idea of technology* and by a metaphysics of rationality.

Concretely, this signifies that the objects or new technologies are not experienced as practical and social innovations but as erratic novelties, drawing their fascination from their complicity with myth, with the future, with the imaginary, and not at all from their possibility of changing the present. This is how they are received as

objects, which is to say fixed and idealized as *avant-garde* signs, peopling an unreal everyday world. This is how they fall into *consumption*. And, according to this paradox, the more they are technologically new, the more they are perceived as aesthetic and desired for privileged consumption.

Thus technology, submerged in everyday life, realizes itself as science fiction, nourishing all of its powers in the prestige of consumption. What happened to cinema happens a little to every object or technological group. Edgar Morin has clearly demonstrated how, from the immense possibilities for information, communication and social change that cinema initially opened as a scientific technology of the image, it has almost entirely and, it seems irremediably—teetering in the imaginary—become cinema-spectacle, a cinema of consumption.[2]

Conclusion: "All Technics in the Service of Everyday Life?"

If one admits that technics presents itself directly, in the social logic of class, as the system of opposition that we have come to describe, and thereby as a system for the mythic transfiguration of real contradictions (those of everyday life and of social structures).[3] What happened to the revolutionary slogan: "All technics in the service of everyday life" (Henri Lefebvre).

Effectively, so that there could be a technical revolution of everyday life, there would already have to be a revolution of the entire system to make technics something other than what it is.

This hope is founded on the postulate of the fundamental rationality of the technical order, that it would be sufficient to liberate and articulate it within in social reality for the world to be overturned. But this isn't so easy. This rational level of technics really

exists: it's technology. But as private individuals or social subjects, we have no other business with technology other than with technics as a system of value and ideology. Can we hope that if technics is the product, in its most effective substance, of a social order that sanctions failure and contradiction, masking them in its prodigious flight and thereby clearing away the chances of resolving them—how can we hope to place it in the service of a social revolution?

Maintaining every proportion, this would be the same illusion as demanding that "the police enter into service for the collectivity"—though it is by definition social, in the service of private interests and of power. One could say the same thing about culture.

In short, one must be careful to consider the dereliction of the technics of everyday life as an accident along the way, such that it would suffice to shift technics to the right path, to liberate its virtualities to change life. One must see that it is our society itself, in its most fundamental organization, that reinvents technics at every moment as a dimension of salvation, and not of knowledge, as a mythic system and strategy of power, and not as a rational instrument and revolutionary social practice.

In every state of the case, it would know to create the revolutionary "irruption" of technology in concrete society. So that technical innovation inaugurates real structural changes, it would first be necessary to initiate a *technical culture*, which is to say the slow and difficult substitution of another system of values for traditional culture, and this through *a radically different educational system*, not so much in its contents as in its educational *techniques*. Finally, one must separate technics from the technical spectacle and from the myth that encloses it, so as to recognize it in its principle, which is that of "capability and rational exercise,"[4] and bring this principle to the root of social training, if one wants to put an end to magical manipulation.

6

Utopia deferred...

UTOPIA HAS BEEN DEFERRED in idealism through a century and a half of triumphant dialectical historical practice. Today it's starting, in its rigorous indefiniteness, to surpass all revolutionary definitions and to refer every model of revolution back to bureaucratic idealism.

Utopia is no-place, the radical deconstruction of every political space. It offers no privileges to revolutionary politics.

There could be no model for utopia nor utopian function, because utopia denies the inscription of all finality, whether unconscious or in the class struggle.

Utopia is not only the denunciation of the simulacra of Revolution, it is also the analysis of the Revolution as a political *model of simulation* of a rational deadline for man which opposes itself to utopia's radicality.

Utopia is never spoken, never on the agenda, always repressed in the identity of political, historical, logical, dialectical orders. It also haunts and crosses them irrevocably, forcing them into

an overstatement of rationality. Utopia does not write itself into the future. It is always, from right now, what the order of the day is missing.

In the topic of the sign, Utopia is the gap, the fault, the void that passes between the signifier and the signified and subverts every sign. It passes between every thing and its model, annulling their respective places. It ceaselessly displaces politics and annuls it as such.

Utopia is not the dialectic of the possible and the impossible. It is not what overcomes contradictions dialectically. It transgresses them in their own terms.

Utopia is the ambivalence which crosses every order, every institution, every rationality, even "revolutionary" rationality, every positivity, no matter what, and returns them to their non-place. Utopia is the deconstruction of every unilateral finality of man or history.

Utopia is the smile of the Cheshire cat, the smile that floats in the air before the cat appears and for a time after he disappears. A little before the cat takes his place, a little after he vacates it. This smile annuls the Cheshire cat and is itself mortal.

Utopia, through the abolition of the blade and the disappearance of the handle, gives the knife its power to strike.

That our discourse analyses everyday life, celebrations, strikes, the media, and sexual liberation and denounces everything therein

that is subject to phantasms, slogans, and current revolutionary models—that it appeals, beyond the code, to the radicality of the symbolic and of ambivalence: therein lies a fundamental contradiction—worse than a contradiction—the insoluble position of every theoretical discourse which is irremediably rational, didactic, and political and whose speech fails to subvert the code of the analysis. Too bad. Before canceling itself out through some more radical practice, something must be said.

7

Strike Story

October 1971

Does a revolutionary event unmask the logic of an entire situation, the knots and mechanisms of an entire regime? In this sense, the ten day strike of the metro conductors is a revolutionary event. It questioned all of the givens of today's society, revealed all the conditions of a social struggle in modernist society, provoked and woke up so as to unmask all the future phantasms of this new society.

1.

It was an "egoistic" struggle of a "privileged caste," a purely and deliberately catagorial action. Regression, perversion, betrayal in regard to solidarity and transcendental proletarian internationalism? Not at all! This translates the objective reality (and not dialectical twaddle) of the hierarchal and technocratic socialization of labor in this society. Labor increasingly but gradually atomized, such that it integrates the whole society in a single and same movement. It happens today, at least in the exploitation of labor power, in discrimination, in social categorization, in an infinite fragmentation of statutes, interests, privileges. The "jungle," as journalists from *Le Monde* put it. In this business of social dislocation, one

finds a capitalism still more savage than in the first phase of industrialization. Hence, to be clear, and, without dreaming of words on the order of reformism, pious with solidarity, linked to the *ideal type* of proletariat, and not at all with the present reality of the new contradictions and savages of the system—say that the metro conductors have gone much further than all strikes in unity, scrupulously "designated" by the unions, in taking into account and in exacerbating this categorical *alienation*, in making a weapon of their objective condition. And one needs a certain nerve for this, when one dreams of the mystique of the masses, of mass action, of contact with the masses,—the masses as *medium*, mass *medium* of political action, as absolutely referential, for which there is no point of salvation, the masses as caution for political reality, the masses as the objective reason of politics, the phantasm culminating in the myth of the general strike, or the masses reflecting triumphantly, in the most beautiful vein of the Hegelian spirit. The metro conductors put an end to the myth of solidarity and of the general strike ("if the comrades of the Régie strike, we'll return to work") which for a longtime now has turned against the strikers themselves. We saw it in May '68, we saw it in Mans in the OS strike, we just saw it in the metro: everywhere the unions use the tactic of diffusing the strike to dilute it, to "hear a solution" and control it. It's the police that they exercise with the label of the regime. A wild strike is minoritary. That this minority confounds itself with a professional category doesn't matter; this is what gives it its power. Therein, the conductors were irreducible: no matter their "motives" (an entirely hypocritical, demobilizing moral vision is unrelenting against them, from the left and the right)—for wanting to be minoritary, in refusing mediatisation at all costs, the mass mediatisation of their strike, they made clear the resort to a

political *radicality* that we have largely forgotten in the language of mass socialism. Only this "immoral" determination permitted them to bring the edifice of the system to a critical threshold, an explosive situation, in ten days.

2.

Another aspect of this radicalization: for the first time, it was a wild strike against not only the bosses and the unions (in a certain way this is not new, insofar as, for the unions, this strike really had been the moment of truth and the death certificate) but also a *wild strike against the mass media* and the puppet-headed substance it secretes: public opinion. The "psychological" pressure (in reality political pressure), the repressive blackmail that the entirety of the media had exerted immediately through the discourse on social services, usage rights, the sacralization of the "public," was immense. Here they revealed themselves clearly as a weapon par excellence of social control (and it was not necessary to believe that the government had "manipulated" them): press, radio, television exerted, spontaneously and with a beautiful unity, their real political function. Beyond the violence of the state, beyond the unions, they truly appeared as the deepest form of repression, that with which every political action should henceforth count in the first place and of which it should break the "symbolic violence." Their demagogy condensed every strategy of the neo-capitalist system: to transform every social labor relation into relations of social *service*, to set up the effective fiction of a collective responsibility, of a religious solidarity, at bottom, where all conflicts are abolished. This blackmailing of solidarity, to which the electricians ceded very quickly in 1970, also plays on the diffuse socialization of problems, on the all powerful jurisdiction

of a mass (this time no longer the mass of producers and workers, to whom the union and the PC referred, but the mass of users and consumers). That this mass had no other reality than that given them by the media, who were its writers and directors, is obvious. The referenced mass is still there, like all "objective" frames of reference, only as an alibi. In its name, the journalists act like dictators, they desperately search for their social legitimacy and, under this heading, they have all become, in a few days, the CDR Vérité of the mass media. The smallest victory of the conductors should not have been enough to sell them out, to the Trade Council, setting them up in this way against the "democracy" of information, against the hypocritical and distilled temptation of all parties to "sell" their strike, to "maximize its profits" by appeasing the press and public opinion, conscious in the end that they were *also* struggling against the entire system of information, objectively in solidarity, in its contents and in its form, with the system of social domination.

3.

THIS STRIKE IS an analysis *in action* of the *present* stage of political economy. Resistant to the blackmail of use-value (the comfort of users, the moral goal of the "right to transport"), the conductors revealed the strategic position that use-value has in the system of exchange value. Use-value, in solidarity with exchange value, and on which the system acts—to the point of terrorism—to better assure the process of reproduction of exchange value.

When it comes to exchange value, one has suppressed the conductors' action, still according to the "catagorial" interpretation, in wanting to make believe that at bottom they were only aiming for a more comfortable place in the capitalist system of

exchange value. They have disclaimed all that at a much more radical level by refusing to "sell out" their strike, which is to say to make it valuable in exchange value. In acceding to this trap, they effectively reentered the game. By refusing, they impeached the system of exchange value not only in the act of the strike, at the level of the sale of labor power, but beyond that, by refusing to sell their strike itself to the media. This is decisive, since it seizes the system not only according to 19th century analyses, but in its present structure: that of the generalization of the system of exchange value in exchange—sign value.

IT IS IN THIS SENSE that this strike is itself truly *general*: because it questions the system of exchange value in its *generalized* form. Generality is a regressive anti-revolutionary concept, in its acceptation of "masses," it assumes its true meaning, which is that of radicality (which attacks the system in its roots, which is to say in its general form).

Since May 1968, this is the most decisive theoretical and practical step that has been taken. That it wasn't students this time (toward whom the blackmail of the "privileged group" already delivered the base), but because it is convenient to refer to a "fraction of the working class," should not carry any proletario-centric conclusion. The displacement of politics is also the displacement of the notion of classes. Since this displacement, as a general category, returns in the topic of the system, it is condemned. No matter what particular "category" can return thereafter in the decisive place—non-place of the political act (this is true as well for ethnic and linguistic, "particularist" cultural insurrections).

One must accept this strike as a wild analysis. Which is to say that none of the models of revolutionary analysis have a grip on it.

Disconcerted, the whole world was too happy to unburden themselves of the event thanks to a superficial, "objective" analysis: the number of conductors, the caste pride, their egoistic revendication. It's clear: all of this is reactionary. And of course: the conductors themselves developed nothing theoretically from what was implicated in their strike. It was opaque to them: this is another aspect of its wild character: it is not even folded in models of analysis. Irrecuperable for any orthodoxy, even Leftist, since it lacks the great Subject of History, the proletariat armed with a clear conscience of its actions. Too bad for dialectical prescience and its Office for the Study of History, if radical practice creates an event somewhere else.

8

Requiem for the Media

Introit

There is no revolutionary theory of the media. The "revolution of the media" has to date remained empirical and mystical, as much in Marshall McLuhan as among those who stand so willfully apart from him (the intelligentsia of the Left in particular). McLuhan himself has said, with his Texo-Canadian brutality, that with the appearance of the telegraph, Marx's theory, a contemporary of the steam engine and the railroad, was already obsolete during his lifetime.[1] In his candid fashion, he is saying that Marx, in his materialist analysis of production, has almost circumscribed a privileged domain of productive forces from which language, signs and communication have been excluded. To tell the truth, Marx does not even have a theory of the railroad as a "medium," as a mode of communication: it isn't considered. All technical evolution in general is only considered under the heading of production—primary, material, infrastructural—the sole determinant of social relationships. Dedicated to an intermediary ideality and a blind social practice, the "mode of communication" has been at leisure for a century to "make its revolution" without changing anything in the theory of production.

From here, and on the condition (which is already a revolution in relation to orthodox Marxism) that the exchange of signs is not

considered as a marginal, superstructural dimension among beings that the single true theory (materialist) defines irrevocably as "producers of their real life" (of goods destined to satisfy their needs), we can envision two perspectives:

1. We retain the general form of Marxist analysis (dialectical contradiction between forces of production and relations of production), but we admit that the "classical" definition of productive forces is a restricted definition, and we enlarge our analysis in terms of productive forces to the entire field thus far blind to signification and communication. This implies setting loose in all their originality the contradictions freed from this theoretical and practical extension of the field of political economy. This hypothesis is the point of departure for Enzensberger: "Monopoly capitalism develops the consciousness shaping industry more quickly and more extensively than other sectors of production; it must at the same time fetter it. A socialist media theory has to work at this contradiction."[2] But this hypothesis accomplishes little more (and, in this sense, it is also late) than to virtually extend the commodity form to every domain of social life. And in fact there already is a "classical" theory of communication, a "bourgeois" political economy of signs and their production, as there came to be one of *material* production since the 18th century. It is a class-bound theoretical discipline.[3] Until now, no fundamental critique, no logical extension of Marx's critique, has responded to it. The critique of the political economy of the sign has been rendered impossible by the relegation of this entire domain to the superstructure. Thus, at best, Enzensberger's hypothesis could only make up for the tremendous delay in classical Marxist theory.

2. This hypothesis is only radical in the eyes of orthodox Marxism, which, completely immersed in the dominant models,

and for its own survival, forbids itself even this much. But the radical alternative is elsewhere. In place of reinterpreting the crucial problem posed to revolutionary theory by the production of meanings, messages, and signs in terms of classical productive forces—which is to say of generalizing a Marxist analysis considered to be definitive and sealed with the approval of the "spokesmen of the revolution"—the alternative is to disrupt these terms in light of the irruption of this problem in the theoretical field (which no Marxist who "respects himself" would do, even as a hypothesis).

In other words, maybe the Marxist theory of production is itself irremediably partial, and cannot be generalized. Again: the theory of production (the dialectical continuity of contradictions linked to the development of productive forces) is strictly homogeneous with its object, material production, and cannot be transferred, as a postulate or theoretical framework, to contents that it was never given.[4] The dialectical form is adequate to certain contents, those of material production: it exhausts its meaning, but does not exceed, as an archetype, the definition of this object. The dialectic is in ashes because it offered itself as a system of interpretation for the *separated* order of material production.

This hypothesis is, all in all, logical. It attributes Marxist analysis with a global coherence, an internal homogeneity which forbids it from retaining such and such an element and from excluding such and such an other, according to a technique of *bricolage* of which the Althusserians are the most subtle pyrotechnicians. Conversely, we will give Marxist theory credit for a maximum of coherence, and it is for this same reason that we will say that this coherence should be broken, because it is a without response before a social process which far exceeds that of (material) production.[5]

Enzensberger: A "Socialist" Strategy

Lacking a theory and an offensive strategy, Enzensberger claims, the "left" remains disarmed. It contents itself with denouncing mass media culture as ideological manipulation. It dreams of taking control of the media, sometimes as a *means* of aiding the masses assumption of a revolutionary consciousness, sometimes as a *consequence* of a radical change in social structures. A contradictory impulse, which simply reflects the impossibility of integrating the media into a theory of infra- and superstructure. Lacking a conception of the media as new and gigantic, potentially productive forces (Enzensberger), the media (and one should add the entire domain of signs and of communication) remains a social mystery for the "Left": it is split between fascination and panic before this wizardry, which it cannot escape, but which it morally and intellectually reproves (this of course is the "Leftist intellectual" speaking through Enzensberger's self-criticism). This ambivalence reflects only the ambivalence of the media, without surpassing or reducing it. As a good Marxist sociologist, Enzensberger imputes the "phobia" of the Leftist intellectuals and movements to their bourgeois or petit-bourgeois origins: they defend themselves instinctively against mass culture because it shatters their cultural privilege.[6] True or false, maybe it would be better to ask what responsibility the intelligentsia of the Left have in this fascinated contempt, this tactical disarray, and this refusal of investment before the media. Precisely what responsibility Marxist prejudice, its nostalgic idealism of the infrastructure, its theoretical allegiance to everything that is not "material" production and "productive labor." "Revolutionary" doctrine has never accounted for the exchange of signs other than in functional use: information, diffusion, propaganda. And the current, new look in

public relations material, the entire modernist subculture of Leftist parties is not made to break this tendency: it shows well enough how bourgeois ideology can pass elsewhere only through "social origin."

All this results, following Enzensberger, in the political schizophrenia of the Left. On one side, an entire revolutionary (subversive) faction launches itself in the apolitical exploration of the new media (subculture, underground). On another side, the "militant" political groups still live essentially with archaic modes of communication, refusing to "play the game," to exploit the gigantic virtualities of electronic media. They reproach the students of May '68 for having had recourse to traditional artist's means (Beaux-Arts) for the diffusion of their slogans, and for having occupied the Odéon, a cultural capital, rather than the ORTF.

Enzensberger's thought attempts to be optimistic and offensive. The media are currently under the monopoly of the dominant classes, which turn them toward their profit. But their *structure* remains "fundamentally egalitarian" and it falls to revolutionary practice to release the virtuality inscribed in them but perverted by the capitalist order—saying the word: to liberate them, to return them to their social *vocation* of open communication and unlimited democratic exchange, to their true socialist destination.

It is clear that this is a question of the extension of the same schema forever allotted, from Marx to Marcuse, to productive forces and technology. They are the promise of human accomplishment, but capitalism blocks and confiscates them. They are liberators, but we must liberate them.[8] The media, one sees, do not escape the fantastic logic of the filigreed inscription of the revolution in things. To hand the media over to the logic of productive forces is thus no longer a critical act: it more firmly encloses them in revolutionary metaphysics.

As usual, this position is lost in contradictions. On one side, though their own (capitalist) development even assures a more and more extended socialization—even though it should be technically thinkable, there is no closed circuit television for the happy few, "because this would go against the grain of the structure" of the medium.[9] "For the first time in history, the media make possible the participation of the masses in a collective process that is social and socialized, participation in which the practical means are in the hands of the masses themselves."[10] But the "socialist movements must fight and will fight for their own wavelengths."[11] Why fight (in particular for wavelengths), if the media realize socialism on their own? If this is their structural vocation?

Enzensberger claims, following Brecht,[12] that the present order reduces the media to a simple "medium of distribution."[13] We need to make the media a veritable medium of communication (the same dream always haunts the Marxist imagination: to tear objects from exchange value and return them to their use value), and this transformation, he adds, "is not technically a problem." But:

1. It is false that the media in the current order are "purely and simply a means of distribution." Here again, this makes them the relay of an ideology which would find its determination elsewhere (in the material mode of production). In other words, the media as marketing and merchandising of the dominant ideology—in which there is the assimilation of the employer-employee relationship with that of the producer-transmitter of the media—to irresponsible receptive masses. This is not as a vehicle of contents, it is in their form and their operation even that the media induce a social relationship, and this relationship is not exploitative, it is one of abstraction, of separation, of the abolition of exchange. The media are not coefficients but conductors of ideology. Not only are they

not revolutionary in destination, they are not even, elsewhere or virtually, neutral or non-ideological (the phantasms of their "technical" status or of their social "use value"). Reciprocally, ideology no longer exists somewhere else as a discourse of the dominant class before being invested in the media. It is the same in the sphere of commodities: nowhere do they possess some other status as reality (the "use value of the product") other than the form they assume in the operation of the system of exchange value. And ideology is no longer some imaginary floating in the wake of exchange value, it is itself the operation of exchange value. After the Requiem for the Dialectic, we should sound the Requiem for the Infra- and for the Superstructure.

2. It follows that when Brecht and Enzensberger affirm that the transformation of the media into a veritable medium of communication is not technically a problem ("it is" Brecht claims, "but the natural consequence of their development"), one must understand in effect (but conversely and without playing on words) that it is not exactly a technical problem, since the ideology of the media is on the level of form, of the separation that they institute, and which is a social division.

Speech without Response

The mass media are characterized by being intransitive, anti-mediators, manufacturing non-communication. If one accepts the definition of communication as an *exchange*, as the reciprocal space of speech and response, and therefore of a *responsibility*; not a psychological and moral responsibility, but a personal correlation from one to another in exchange. In other words, if one defines communication as something other than the simple transmission-reception of information which could be reversed in feedback. The entirety of

contemporary media architecture is founded on this definition: *the media forbid response forever*; they make every process of exchange impossible (excepting in the form of the *simulation* of a response, itself integrated into the process of transmission, which doesn't change the unilaterality of the communication in any way). This is their true abstraction. And the system of social control and power is based on this abstraction.

To clearly understand the term *response*, one must understand it in the strong sense, and for this one must refer to its equivalent in "primitive" societies: power belongs to the one who can give and *to whom one cannot respond.* To give, and to do it in such a way that one cannot respond, is to disrupt the exchange to one's profit and to institute a monopoly. The social process becomes unbalanced. Response, on the contrary, disrupts this power relationship and institutes (or restores), on the basis of an antagonistic reciprocity, the circuit of symbolic exchange. The sphere of the media is the same: it speaks and *no response can be made.* This is why the only revolution in this domain—and everywhere besides, the revolution as such—is in the restitution of the possibility of response. This simple possibility presupposes the overturning of the current structure of the media in its entirety.

No other theory or strategy is possible. Every impulse to democratize its contents, to subvert it, to restore the "transparency of the code," to control the process of information, to manage a reversibility of the circuits, or to assume power over the media, is hopeless if the monopoly of speech is not broken; and this not to offer it individually to each of us but so that it can be exchanged, given and responded to,[14] as one would a look and a smile now and then, and without ever being able to be stopped, clogged, stockpiled and redistributed to some place in the social process.[15]

For the moment, we live in non-response, in irresponsibility. "Minimal autonomous activity on the part of the spectator and voter," says Enzensberger. The first and most beautiful of the mass media is in effect the electoral system: its crowning achievement is the referendum, in which the response is implied in the question, as in polls. It is a speech which responds to itself through the simulated detour of a response, and there again, the absolutization of the speech beneath the formal mask of exchange is the definition of power. Roland Barthes points to the same non-reciprocity in literature: "Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and customer, between its author and reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*."[16] Today, the status of *consumer* defines this relegation, and the general order of consumption is nothing other than that wherein it is no longer permitted to give, to respond or exchange, but only to take and to use (appropriation, individualized use value). In this sense, "consumer" goods are also a mass medium. They answer to the general form we have described. Their specific function is of little importance: the consumption of products and messages is the abstract social relation that they establish, the taboo cast on every form of response and reciprocity.

Thus it is not true, as Enzensberger affirms, that "for the first time in history, the media make possible a mass participation in a production social process," nor that "the practical means of this participation are in the hands of the masses themselves." As if owning

a television or a camera inaugurated a new possibility of relation and exchange! Strictly speaking, no more than owning a refrigerator or a toaster. There is no response to a functional object: its function is there, integrated speech to which it has already responded, and which leaves no place for play, for a reciprocal gesture (except for its destruction or for turning it away from its function).[17] The functional object, like all messages made functional by the media, like the operation of the referendum, therefore controls rupture, the emergence of meaning, and censorship. At the limit, if the authorities are not also obsessed with contents and convinced by the media's force of ideological persuasion, and therefore of the necessity of controlling messages, they would offer each citizen a television without concern for its programs. It is effectively useless to fantasize about the police appropriating television for the authorities (Orwell *1984*): Television is, in its mere presence, social contract at home. It is unnecessary to conceive of it as a spy-glass of the regime into our private lives, because it is better than that: it is *the certainty that the people will no longer speak*, that they are definitively isolated before a speech without response.

Such is the structure of television as a mass medium. And, in this sense, McLuhan, whom Enzensberger contemptuously characterizes as a ventriloquist, is much closer to a theory when he says that "the medium is the message" (except that, totally blind to the social form we are discussing, he exalts the media and their planetary message with a delirious tribal optimism). "The medium is the message" is not a critical proposition, but, in its paradoxical form, it has analytical value. Enzensberger's ingenuity on the "structural nature of the media" (!),[18] such that "no power can permit the liberation of their potentiality," on the other hand and although it wants to be revolutionary, is only mysticism. The mystique of the socialist

predestination of the media, inverse but complementary to the Orwellian myth of their terroristic manipulation by the authorities. Even God would approve of socialism: the Christians say so.

Subversive Strategy and "Symbolic Action"

One might object that the mass media played a role in May '68 by spontaneously amplifying the revolutionary movement. At one moment at least during the action, they were (involuntarily) turned against the authorities. The subversive strategy of the American Yippies (Hoffman, Rubin) is based on this necessity and this possible redirection. In worldwide revolutionary movements, a theory of "symbolic action" has been elaborated from it. Redirect the media through their ability to chain react. Use their power to generalize information instantaneously. The assumption here is that the impact of the media is reversible, that it is a variable in the class struggle that one must know how to integrate to one's profit. This must be questioned, it might be only a large strategic illusion.

May '68 can serve as an example. Everything would lead us to believe in the subversive impact of the media during that period. Suburban radio stations and newspapers echoed the student actions everywhere. If the actions were the detonator, the media were the resonator. The authorities accused them directly of "playing the revolutionary game." But this evidence was based on an absence of analysis. I would say on the contrary that the media never played their role so well and that they were, in their function of *habitual* social control, on top of the events. This was because they maintained *their* form (amid the disruption of their contents) and that this form, no matter the context, makes them inexorably in solidarity with the power structure. By diffusing the event in the *abstract*

universality of public opinion, they *imposed* a sudden and inordinate development on it and, through this forced and anticipated extension, they deprived the original movement of its rhythm and its meaning—in a word: they short-circuited it.

In the traditional field of politics (Left and Right),[19] where sanctified models of canonical speech are exchanged, the media transmit without altering the meaning. They are as homogeneous to this speech as they are to the circulation of commodities. But transgression and subversion don't pass over the waves while being subtly denied as such: transformed into *models*, neutralized as *signs*, they are emptied of their meaning.[20] There is no model, prototype, or series of transgression. It is therefore still the best way to reduce them. Fatal publicity is still the best way to lessen the impact of transgression. Earlier, this operation might have led us to believe in "spectacular" results. In fact, it is equal to dismantling the movement by removing its primary impulse. The act of rupture is changed into a distant bureaucratic model—and this is what the media does.[21]

All of this is readable in the derivation, the distortion of the term "symbolic." The action of March 22nd at Nanterre was symbolic and transgressive because, at that moment in that place, it invented a radical rupture or, returning to the analysis proposed above, invented a *response* there, where the administrative and pedagogical power of the institution held forth and kept others from speaking. The broadcast and contagion of the mass media did not make this action symbolic. Today however, it is more and more this last sense (the impact of exposure) which suffices to define symbolic action. At the limit, the subversive act is no longer produced *save as a function of its reproducability.*[22] It is no longer created, it is produced directly as a model, like a gesture. The symbolic has slipped from the order of the production of meaning even (political

or otherwise) to the order of its reproduction, which is always that of power. The symbolic becomes *coefficient*, pure and simple; transgression becomes exchange value.

The entirety of rationalist critical thought (Benjamin, Brecht, Enzensberger) sees decisive progress in this. The media does nothing but actualize and reinforce the "demonstrative nature of any given political act" (Enzensberger). This evidently agrees with the *didactic* conception of the revolution, and, moreover, with the "dialectic of consciousness rising," etc. This rationalist thought has not renounced the bourgeois thought of the Enlightenment, it inherits all of its conceptions of the democratic virtue (here revolutionary) of the diffusion of knowledge. In its pedogagic illusion, this thought forgets that—the political act deliberately targeting the media and expecting power from it—the media itself is deliberately targeting the political act to depoliticize it. An interesting fact might be cited here as support: the contemporary eruption of news in the political sphere (which converges with Benjamin's idea of the passage of the work of art from the political stage through its reproducability). A tidal wave in Pakistan, a black boxing match in the United States, a bistro owner shoots a youth, etc. These kinds of events, once minor and apolitical, find themselves invested with a power of diffusion which gives them social and "historic" scope. Undoubtedly the new sense that they assume, the confrontation of incidents that never before made the news, and in which the new forms of politics are crystallized, is to a large extent created by the media. These news items are unplanned "symbolic actions," which return through the same process of political signification. Doubtless, their reception can only be ambiguous, and if, thanks to the media, politics returns under the heading of minor news items, thanks to the same media, minor news items invade politics. Elsewhere the status of the news

has changed with the extension of the mass media: from parallel category (related to almanacs and popular histories) it has become a social system of mythological interpretation, a tight network of models of signification from which no event escapes. This is mass mediatization. It is not a group of technologies for the diffusion of messages, it is the imposition of models. Here again is McLuhan's formula: "Medium is the message" performs a transfer of meaning in the medium itself as a technological structure. This is still technological idealism. In fact, the great *Medium* is the Model. That which is mediated is not that which passes through the press, the TV, the radio: it is that which is fulfilled by the form-sign, articulated in models, regulated by the code. Similarly, commodities are not produced industrially, they are mediated by the exchange value system of abstraction. One sees that at best what functions under the sign of the media is the formal surpassing of the categories of news and politics and of their traditional separation, so as to more easily assign them together to the same general code. It is strange that we never wanted to measure the strategic impact of this forced socialization as a system of social control. Once more, the electoral system is the first great historical example of this. And it has never lacked revolutionaries (once among the greatest, today the least significant) who believed themselves capable of "playing the game." The general strike itself, an insurrectional myth for so many generations, has become a reductive schema. That of May '68, to which the media contributed largely by exporting the strike to every corner of France, while apparently the culminating point of the crisis, was in fact the moment of its decompression, of its asphyxiation through extension, of its defeat. Of course, thousands of workers went on strike. But they didn't know what to do with this "mediatized" strike, transmitted and received as a model of action (by both the media or

the unions). Abstract in a sense, it neutralized local, transversal, and spontaneous forms of action (not entirely). The Grenelle accords didn't betray it.[23] They sanctioned the passage to the generality of political action, which brought an end to the singularity of revolutionary action. Today, it has become (in the form of the calculated extension of the strike) the final weapon of the unions against wildcat strikes.

The electoral system and the general strike are thus also media of a certain kind. Playing with extensive, formal socialization, they are the subtlest and most assured institutions for filtration, dismantling, and censorship. There is no exception nor miracle.

Walls and words, silk-screen posters, and hand-printed flyers were the true revolutionary media in May, the streets where speech started and was exchanged: everything that is an *immediate* inscription, given and returned, speech and response, moving in the same time and in the same place, reciprocal and antagonistic. The street in this sense is the alternative and subversive form of all the mass media because it is not, like them, an objectified support for messages without response, a distant transit network. It is the cleared space of the symbolic exchange of ephemeral and mortal speech, speech that is not reflected on the Platonic screen of the media. Institutionalized by reproduction, spectacularized by the media, it burst.

It is therefore a strategic illusion to believe in a critical reversal [*détournement*] of the media. Today such speech passes through the *destruction* of the media such as they are, through their deconstruction as systems of non-communication. This does not imply liquidation any more than the radical critique of discourse implies the negation of language as signifying material. But this certainly implies the liquidation of their present functional and technical structure as a whole, of their operational form, if I can put it that way, which reflects their social form throughout. At the limit of

course even the concept of the medium disappears, and should disappear: exchanged speech, reciprocal and symbolic exchange denies the notion and the function of the medium, of the intermediary. It can imply a technical apparatus (sound, image, waves, energy, etc.) as well as a corporeal apparatus (gestures, language, sexuality), but this no longer acts as a medium, as an autonomous system regulated by a code. Reciprocity passes through the destruction of the medium as such. "People meet their neighbors for the first time while watching their apartment houses burn down."[24]

The Theoretical Model of Communication

To summarize these diverse hypotheses:

1. McLuhan (remember): the media create, they are the revolution, independently from their contents, from their singular technological structure. After the phonetic alphabet and books, radio and cinema. After radio, television. Here and now we live in the era of instantaneous, global communication.

2. The media are controlled by power. We must tear them away from it, either by taking power ourselves, or by reversing them by raising the spectacular stakes through subversive content. Here the media are viewed only as a message. There is no question of their form (any more than there is, of course, in McLuhan, who views the medium only as a medium).

3. Enzensberger: the present form of the media induces a certain type of social relationship (assimilated into that of the capitalist mode of production). But through their structure and their development, the media possess the virtuality of a socialist and democratic mode of communication, of a rationality and a universality of information. Liberating their potential will suffice.

From the perspective of a revolutionary strategy, only Enzensberger's (Enlightened—Marxist) hypothesis and that of the radical American left (spectacular—Leftist) interests us (we are not talking about the practice of the official Left, Marxist or not, which is confused with that of the bourgeoisie). We have analyzed these positions as strategic illusions, the cause being that both of them share with the dominant ideology implicit reference to the same *theory of communication*, a theory admitted everywhere, on the strength of received evidence and a highly "scientific" formalization by a discipline, the semio-linguistics of communication, applied to structural linguistics on one side and infomatics on the other, endorsed by the universities and mass culture (mass media professionals are its connoisseurs). The entire conceptual infrastructure of this theory is ideologically in solidarity with the dominant practice, as it was and still is to classical political economy. It *is* the equivalent of that bourgeois political economy in the field of communication. And I think that if revolutionary practices remain bound to the strategic illusion of the media, it is because they have never made anything more than a superficial critical analysis of it, without carrying out a radical critique of the ideological matrix of its theory of communication.

Formalized most specifically by Jakobson, its basic unity is provided by the sequence:

transmitter—message—receiver

(encoder—message—decoder)

The message itself being structured by the code and determined by the context. To each of these "concepts" corresponds a specific function: referential, poetic, phatic, etc. Each communicative process is thus vectorized in a single sense, from the transmitter to the receiver. The receiver can become a transmitter in turn, the same

schema repeats itself. Communication can always be reduced to this simple unity where the two polar terms are never exchanged. This structure is offered as objective and scientific, since it follows the rules of the method: it breaks its object down into parts. In fact, it contents itself with formalizing an empirical given, abstracting the evidence and lived reality. This is to say that the ideological categories through which a certain kind of social relationship speak, precisely that wherein one speaks and the other does not, wherein one chooses the code and the other has the sole freedom to submit or abstain. This structure is based on the same arbitrariness as signification: two terms are artificially isolated and artificially reunited by an objectivized content called a message. There is no reciprocal relation nor presence of one to the other of these terms,[25] since both are determined in isolation in their relationship to the message and the code, an "intermedium" which maintains both of them in a respective situation (the code holds both of them in "respect"), distanced from one another, a distance which comes to fulfill the full and automated "value" of the message (in fact: its exchange value). This "scientific" construction institutes a *model of simulation* of communication from which reciprocity, the antagonism of the partners, or the ambivalence of their exchange is immediately excluded. What effectively circulates is information, content in the supposedly readable and univocal sense. The authority of the code guarantees this univocality, and thereby even the respective positions of the encoder and the decoder. So far so good: the formula has a formal coherence which assures it is the only *possible* schema of communication. But if one suggests an ambivalent relation, it all falls apart. Because there is no code for ambivalence. Without a code, no encoder or decoder: the extras flee the stage. No message either, since the message is defined as "sent"

and "received." The entire formalization is only there to avoid this catastrophe. Therein lies its "scientificity." In fact, it establishes the terrorism of the code. In this directive schema, the code becomes the sole authority which speaks, which exchanges itself and reproduces itself through the dissociation of the two terms and the univocality (or the equivocality, or the multivocality, it hardly matters: through the non-ambivalence) of the message. (Similarly, in the economic process of exchange, people no longer exchange, the system of exchange value reproduces itself through people.) This formula at the basis of communication succeeds in offering, as a reduced model, a perfect shortcut for social exchange *as it is*, as in every case the abstraction of the code, forced rationalism, and the terrorism of separation regulate it. Such is the objectivity of science.

Separation and closure: it is already the same schema active at the level of the sign in linguistic theory. Each sign is divided into a signifier and a signified, assigned to one or the other, but in a "respective" position, and each sign on the basis of its arbitrary isolation "communicates" with all the others through a code called language. There too, the scientific taboo is cast on the terms' potentiality for symbolic exchange, beyond the signifier-signified distinction, in poetic language for example. In poetic language, as in symbolic exchange, the terms *respond* to one another beyond the code. We have indicated this response throughout this text as deconstructive to every code, every control, every power, which, inversely, is always based on the separation of terms and their abstract articulation.

Thus the theory of signification serves as a nuclear model for the theory of communication, and the arbitrariness of the sign (this theoretical schema for the repression of meaning) assumes all its political and ideological scope in the arbitrariness of the theoretical

schema of communication and information.[26] Which, as we have seen, echoes not only in the dominant social practice (characterized by the virtual monopoly of the pole of the transmitter and the irresponsibility of the pole of the receiver, the discrimination between the terms of the exchange and the *diktat* of the code) but also, unconsciously, through all the velleities of a revolutionary media practice. It is clear, for example, that everyone who aims to subvert media contents can only reinforce, in its autonomy, the separated notion of the message and therefore the abstract bipolarity of the terms of communication.

The Cybernetic Illusion

Sensitive to the non-reciprocity of the current process, Enzensberger believes this can be helped by demanding that the same revolution intervene at the level of the media as that which disrupted the exact sciences and the subject/object relation of understanding, which has been engaged in a continual "dialectical" inter-reaction ever since. The media would have to take into account all the consequences of the inter-reaction, whose effect is to break the monopoly and to permit everyone's integration into an open process. "The programs of the consciousness industry must subsume into themselves their own results, the reactions and corrections that they call forth...they are therefore to be thought of not as means of consumption but as means of their own production."[27] This seductive perspective: 1. leaves the separated authority of the code and the message intact; 2. attempts, on the other hand, to break the discrimination of the two poles of communication, toward a more supple structure of the exchange of roles and feedback ("reversibility of circuits"). "In its present form, equipment like

television or film does not serve communication but prevents it. It allows no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver; technically speaking it reduces feedback to the lowest point compatible with the system."[28] There again, we fail to surpass the categories of "transmitter" and "receiver," despite the effort to mobilize them through "switching." *Reversibility* has nothing to do with reciprocity. Undoubtedly, for this profound reason, today cybernetic systems understand very well how to put this complex regulation, this feed-back, to work without changing anything about the abstraction of the process as a whole, or allowing any real "responsibility" into the exchange. This is even the systems' best defense, since it thereby integrates in advance the possibility of such a response.

One can no longer effectively conceive, as Enzensberger shows in his critique of the Orwellian myth, a mega-system of centralized control (a control system for the current telephone system would have to surpass it *n* times in complexity, and is therefore excluded practically). But it is a little naïve to think that censorship should be eliminated though the extension of the media. Even long term, the impossibility of police mega-structures simply signifies that the current systems integrate within themselves, through feed-back and self-regulation, these henceforth useless mega-systems of control. They know how to introduce that which denies them *as a supplementary variable*. There is censorship in their operation itself; they don't need a mega-structure. They never cease from being totalitarian: they realize in some way the ideal of what we can call a decentralized totalitarianism.

At a more practical level, the media also know very well how to put in place a formal "reversibility" of circuits (letters from readers, listener call-ins, polls, etc.), without leaving room for any response, without changing the discrimination of the roles.[29] This is the social

and political form of feed-back. Enzensberger is therefore always, in his "dialecticalization" of communication so strangely proximate to cybernetic regulation, a victim, though in a more subtle way, of the ideological model we are discussing.

From the same perspective, breaking the unilaterality of communication, which translates itself at once into the monopoly of specialists and professionals and that of the class enemy over the media, Enzensberger proposes as a revolutionary solution that *each of us become a manipulator*, in the sense of an active operator, an editor, etc., in short, pass from the status of receiver to that of producer-transmitter. Therein is a kind of critical reversal [*détournement*] of the ideological concept of manipulation. But here again, because this "revolution" retains as its basis the category of "transmitter," it is content to generalize as separated, making each of us his or her own transmitter, it fails to check the mass media. If each of us possessed his or her own walkie-talkie or Kodak, and made his or her own films, we know what would result: personalized amateurism, the equivalent of Sunday *bricolage* on the periphery of the system.[30]

This is evidently not what Enzensberger wants. He is thinking of a newspaper edited, distributed, created by its own readers (as *Underground* was in part), of video networks for the use of political groups, etc.

This would be the sole means to unfreeze a blocked situation: "In the socialist movements the dialectic of discipline and spontaneity, centralism and decentralization, authoritarian leadership and antiauthoritarian disintegration has long ago reached a deadlock. Network-like communications models built on the principle of reversibility of circuits might give new indications of how to overcome the situation."[31] This is a question of restoring a dialectical

practice. But can the problem continue to be posed in dialectical terms? Is the dialectic itself dead at this point? The examples he gives are interesting in that they surpass a "dialectic" of transmitter and receiver. One finds in effect a process of immediate communication, not filtered by bureaucratic models, an original form of exchange, in fact, because there are *not transmitters and receivers*, but people who *respond*. The problem of spontaneity and of organization is not surpassed dialectically here, it's terms are *transgressed*.

That is the essential difference. The other hypotheses leave the separated categories to subsist. In the first case (the private demultiplication of the media), transmitter and receiver are simply reunited in a single person: manipulation is in some way "internalized."[32] In the other case (the "dialectic of circuits"), transmitter and receiver are simultaneously the two sides: manipulation becomes reciprocal (hermaphroditic combination). The system can act on its two tableaux at the same time as on the classical bureaucratic model, and in every possible combination of the two categories. What is essential is that these ideological categories should be saved, and with them the fundamental structure of the political economy of communication.

Once again, in the relationship of symbolic exchange, there is a simultaneous response, there is neither transmitter nor receiver for one part and another of a message, nor is there any longer a "message," a *corpus* of information to decipher in a univocal way under the auspices of the code. The symbolic consists precisely in breaking the univocality of the "message," or restoring the ambivalence of meaning, and eliminating in the same blow the authority of the code.

This can help us evaluate Umberto Eco's hypothesis. Briefly stated: changing the contents of the message changes nothing, one

must modify the reading codes, impose other reading codes. The receiver (who in fact is not one) intervenes here essentially, he opposes his own code on that of the transmitter, he invents a veritable response escaping the trap of directed communication. But in what way is this reader "subversive"? Is this still reading, in the sense of deciphering, the recovery of an univocal meaning? And what is the code that he opposes? Is it a singular mini-code (ideological, but without interest) or another schema directing reading? In which case it is only a question of textual variation. An example might illustrate Eco's perspective: the reversal [*détournement*] of advertising with graffiti after May '68. It's transgressive not because it substitutes another content, another discourse, but because it responds, there, in place, and breaks the fundamental rule of all media, non-response. Does it oppose a code with another code? I don't think so: it simply breaks the code. It does not offer itself as a text to be deciphered alongside the advertising discourse. It lets itself be seen as transgression. Hence the slogan, the transgressive reversal of discourse, does not act by means of another code, as a code, it acts by means of the instantaneous deconstruction of the dominant discursive code. It volatilizes the category of the code and that of the message.

Therein lies the key to the problem: wanting to conserve (even by "dialectically surpassing") *any of the separated instances of the structural communication grid*, one forbids oneself from changing anything fundamentally, and condemns oneself to fragile manipulatory practices, that it would be dangerous to mistake for a "revolutionary strategy." In this sense, only that which radically checks the dominant form is strategic.

Requiesçant media in pace

9

DNA or the Metaphysics of the Code

Jacques Monod is the metaphysical principle of identity transferred from God and the Subject to the code and the genetic program.[1]

Sweep away teleology in favor of a teleonomic principle? Sweep away the dialectical process of evolution (with its *determined* rationality) in favor of a discontinuous indeterminism —mutation and chance? Be careful not to see revolution in what is only a metamorphosis. Finality is no longer an end, it is a beginning—but it remains written in advance. Simply the final order of the great signifieds (essential or dialectical contents) hereafter yields to the play of signifiers. This is the definitive assumption of the code, through inscription in biological nature. Ideology, or the process of the naturalization of social structures of domination, never went as far. Up to this point, it nourished itself more from an imaginary nature as origin and substance. Now it nourishes itself on an imaginary nature as code. In this sense, DNA should be cleared of scientific fascination and denounced as a phantasm, as an ideological concept, as a metaphysical sanctuary. Of this genetic and molecular transcendence, Monod is the stern theologian, Morin the ecstatic supporter (DNA = Adonai). The ethics of knowledge and the idealism of the molecule go together, and mingle their phantasms.

Given the living/non-living division, denounced as the source of all metaphysics: its abolition in favor of the non-living of biochemistry, grounds science in all its rigor! That is the total blindness of *sense*. Certainly, once it has raised this distinction, science can realize its totalitarian aims (its phantasm here too: the universality of a single principle, of a single law, of a single order of determinations regulating every process). Science is only ever capable of thinking the principle of identity. Contradiction, conflict, castration, ambivalence escape it. And the principle of identity is *metaphysical*. And all science works furiously around this phantasm of a universal and homogeneous corpus of signification. If this is not what has given birth to every magic and every unitary religion, which is to say pure accomplishment of desire and misrecognition of the difference which grounds sense, what is it? In this, Monod's scientism easily equals every theology. Because its finalism is never that of this or that content (whether it be God or the ideality of a social order or rediscovered nature), it is in the delirious illusion to reunify, to reconcile man and the world under the single principle, *whatever it is*, and thereby to assign it an *end*. Science is monist: it can only assure itself by neutralizing difference. It is incompatible with Apollo and Dionysus, said metaphorically, with the existence of *two* principles, irreducible, irreconcilable, eternally ambivalent... The Greeks retained something from dualist religions, "animists" that despise Monod in his monist vision.

The abolition of the living/non-living cut completes the neutralization of meaning, of contradiction, of the subject, of the dialectic, of sexuality (as desire), of the symbolic. All this is flattened in the hereditary immanence of the code. *This liquidation is objectively intended throughout the book*. And this project, ultrafinalistic without knowing it (?), has nothing properly "genetic"

about it: it is a *socially and historically determined program.* What is sanctioned, hypostasized here in biochemistry, is the programmatic ideal of a social order immutably regulated by a genetic code, by a calculus, by a molecular PPBS—definitively escaping all dissension, all conflict, all ambivalence.[2] Techno-cybernetics finds its ontology herein, its "natural philosophy" as Monod says. Throughout the history of science, this reductive fascination is present in biology, in physio-chemistry. It is active in Spencerian organicism (bio-sociologism) at the level of the structures of the second and third order (to take up Jacob's classifications from *La Logique du Vivant*).[3] It is active today, in modern biochemistry, at the level of fourth order structures.

There is no question, against Monod, of resuscitating the living, the "human," transcendental subjectivity and other mirages of liberal thought. A certain idealism dies with cybernetics, the most subtle heritage of which is that of dialectical thought. Nothing is serves by wanting to save Engels from Monod (and not only in the caricature offered by the "Dialectic of Nature"—the entire dialectic is devoured by a secret finality in the genesis of meaning, due to the fact that it is undoubtedly itself only an unavowed system of interpretation and of the control of meaning, a discursive rationality which wouldn't know how to admit any other principle than itself)—save truly seeing that the cybernetic critique, which feigns speaking in the name of a pure objectivity (morally directed by the "ethics of knowledge") is still much more finalized than all the ethico-political theories that it denounces, by its social efficacy. Far from finding its end in its only object as a science, it has already found it, in fact, in the social techno-cybernetics that it nourishes and guarantees. Here ethics is, as it has never been, the shadow of programmatics and politics. There is no trace of theoretical thought

in any of this. Monod shows that the *facts*, the real processes (micro-macro molecular) are not dialectical. But who, if not alas the dialecticians themselves, has ever believed that the dialectic was a business of facts or an observable reality (historical as well)?

Dialectical criticism is therefore regressive here, but it works. The neo-positivism of the code, in its total blindness to the problem of meaning, can hint that the dialectic itself has passed to the side of a certain problem of meaning, of symbolism, of articulation, or symbolic disarticulation. This problem, as it was posed, would appear to be a false alternative between the all powerful genetic code and the nostalgic defense of dialectics.

Monod also did well by mixing in his criticism of animism, finalism (metaphysical and religious), and dialectics (historical). There is a certain racism in not wanting to distinguish one black from another black. In regard to "animism," that "magical" thought which is an obstacle to science everywhere, Monod offers proof of an obsolete and ferocious ethnocentrism, that one would have believed surpassed since the progress of anthropology (but is it a "science"?). Monod describes the animism of archaic societies as a phantasm—which it is not—while conversely he never reveals his own theory as what it is: the objectivized phantasm of a social order. Reductive phantasm, from which all the actualization of symbolism is excluded, so that primitive "magic," when it is not reintegrated blindly through a racist scientificity, far from being a projection alienated from irrational forces, is a rationality in its order (maybe Monod should read Lévi-Strauss?)—but of course: it intends to and succeeds at maintaining a symbolic exchange of the living which spontaneously surpasses the living/non-living cut. Because this disjunction, on which all finalistic ideological is founded, if one thinks about it, is not abolished by Monod at all. He only generalizes

and privileges one of its terms (the entire ethic of knowledge is founded on the formal negation of the living). But to privilege one or the other of the terms doesn't matter: their opposition founds metaphysics. Primitive societies don't make this cut: they aren't finalistic. Through a strange ethnocentristic twist, Monod projects precisely on them, in the term "animist," the ideological phantasms of substitution which result from *our* metaphysical configuration, from this living/non-living cut.[4]

Monod can therefore deny every idealism that precedes him in the name of a definitive rigor. In fact, he only represents a more evolved phase in the history of Western metaphysics, such that in itself techno-capitalist evolution changes. He only deconstructs all subjectivity, positivistic consciousness (the idealism of the subject, etc.), to reinstitute the absolute positivity of objectivity and of the code (the idealism of the code). Politically and historically, this signifies the substitution for social control by the *end* (and the more or less dialectical *providence,* which watches for the accomplishment of that end), by social control, by *prescience*, simulation, programmatic anticipation, indeterminate mutation commanded by the code. In place of a finalized (and rationalized) process according to its ideal development, this is a business of rationalization according to the code, of generation by a *model.* In place of a prophecy, we have a right to an "inscription." Despite appearances, there is no radical difference between the two: one transcendence pursues the other, only the schema of control change (and it must be said perfect themselves fantastically). From a "liberal" capitalist society, simply productivist, to a (neo-capitalist) cybernetic social order, which now aims toward absolute social control, even more than exploitation and profit: the biological theorization of the code has given its weapons to this gigantic mutation. But this mutation

is not "indeterminate" at all. It is the result of the history of an entire system wherein God, Man, Progress, and History pass away in favor of the code, wherein transcendence passes in favor of immanence because immanence corresponds to a more advanced phase in the vertiginous manipulation of social relations.

In this sense, and in this sense only, Monod's hypermoralism, his terrorism is clarified. According to a logic that hasn't ceased since the dawn of capitalism and of western rationalism, recovered by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Monod represents the point of convergence of an advanced neo-capitalism and a hyperpuritanism of knowledge. Formally, the whole book is perfectly contradictory, if one considers that it locates all philosophical, ethical, and political choice, all valuation to the hell of superstition, so as to exalt thereafter in all its rigor the ethical position of knowledge. What is the ethical choice of science—which is not at all chance, aleatory teleonomics, but a pure decision, and, in short, the height of self-determination? Is this choice not inscribed in the code? Is it not biological evolution itself that produced "science" to reflect it? (Morin, like Novalis at one time, in his kind of cosmic morality, goes this far.) Monod is totally illogical with himself: he basically puked up all metaphysics, all finalism, all dialectics so inflexibly only so as to restore in his crystalline Puritanism the moral ethos, moral law and its absurd wager. But this is explained very well if one admits that it is only the logical heritage of the premises of rational capitalism—of that profane /sacred cut inaugurated by the West, of this intra-worldly asceticism which grants a place to knowledge, to the ethics of knowledge... and to efficacy. Axiomatic from the value, based on detachment, separation (*askesis*)—ideological prong of the first capitalists of the sixteenth century—revived here in its radical version, definitively

expurgated, by the theoreticians of neo-capitalism (consciously or not). To an infinitely more subtle and more totalitarian stage of capitalism corresponds a more pure expression of its ideology: there is nothing there but logic. That DNA and moral law, genetics without appeal and the scientific vocation collide here in the worst contradiction, owes nothing to the profound coherence of the ensemble as an ideological structure. It's useless to hold Monod's absurdity and theoretical weakness against him, the truth is elsewhere.

The problem of the status of science as a discourse, of objectivity as a discourse is posed once and for all. Good time to pose it here where this discourse absolutizes itself with such candor. "Plato, Heraclitus, Hegel, Marx: these ideological edifices, presented as *a priori*, were in reality constructions *a posteriori*, destined to justify a preconceived ethico-political theory... The only *a priori* for science is the postulate of objectivity, which forbids taking part in this debate." But this postulate itself results from an entire system of values, from a never innocent decision to make the world and the "real" objective. In fact, this postulate is that of *the coherence of a certain discourse*, and all scientificity is undoubtedly only the space of this discourse, which never offers itself as such; its objective simulacra includes political, strategic, and ideological speech. A little further still, Monod expresses arbitrariness very clearly: "One can ask oneself if all the invariances, conservations and symmetries that constitute the frame of scientific discourse are not fictions substituted for reality so as to give it an operational image... Logic founded on a potentially conventional, purely abstract, principle of identity. A convention from which meanwhile human reason seems incapable of escaping." One might be better to say that science resolves itself like a generative formula, like a model discourse, on the faith of a principle of identity that is far from being a simple

"convention," which is the fundamental principle of a total reduction. Monod sends himself elsewhere to slip on the dangerous hypothesis of this principle of identity as a conventional abstraction. Better to ground it solidly, in an incontestable reality. Physics is there to testify that identity is not a principle or a postulate: it is *in things*, as the "absolute identity of two atoms with the same quantum state." Thus: convention or objective reality? The truth is that science is organized, like any other discourse, on a conventional logic, but that it demands for its justification, *like any other ideological discourse*, a "real," "objective" reference in a substantial process. If the principle of identity is "true" somewhere, even at the level of two atoms, then the whole conventional edifice of science, which inspires it, it also *true*. So it is with metaphysics. The principle of identity accounts for things previously determined and formalized so as to obey it: "objectivity" is nothing other than that, and the ethics which sanctions this objective knowledge is never more than the system of defense (and of misrecognition), which wants to preserve this vicious circle.

"Fundamentally, every hypothesis which permitted belief in a true world" as Nietzsche says.

10

The Mirror of Production

A SPECTER HAUNTS the revolutionary imagination: the phantasm of production. It sustains an unbridled romanticism of productivity. The critical thought of the *mode* of production doesn't touch the *principle* of production. All of the concepts that it articulates describe only the dialectical and historical genealogy of the *contents* of production; they leave its *form* intact. The form itself reemerges, idealized, behind the critique of the capitalist mode of production. This critique does nothing, in effect, but strengthen the revolutionary discourse, through a curious contagion, in terms of productivity: from the liberation of productive forces in *Tel Quel*'s unlimited "textual productivity" to the factory-machine productivity of the unconscious in Deleuze (and already, the "work" of the unconscious), no revolution can place itself under any other sign than this one. Productive Eros is the watchword. Social wealth or language, meaning or value, sign or phantasm, there is nothing that isn't "produced" according to some "labor." If this is the truth of capital and of political economy, it is entirely replicated by the revolution: we are going to subvert the capitalist mode of production in the name of an authentic and radical productivity. We are going to abolish the capitalist law of value in the name of a de-alienated hyper-productivity, of a productive hyperspace. Capital develops productive

forces, but it slows them as well: they must be liberated. The exchange of signifieds has always hidden the "labor" of the signifiers: liberate the signifier! the textual production of meaning! The unconscious is surrounded by social, linguistic, Oedipal structures: return it to its brute energy, restore it as a productive machine! Everywhere the productivist discourse reigns, and whether this productivity has objective ends or is deployed for itself, in either case, productivity is the form of value. Leitmotif of the system, leitmotif of its radical contestation: a terminological consensus like this is suspect. Perhaps the discourse of production is only a revolutionary metaphor—the reversal and return of a concept, which essentially emanates from political economy and obeys the reality principle of that economy. But this metaphor is dangerous if it is meant to designate a radical alternative. Perhaps the alternative isn't radical and contamination by the productivist discourse signifies more than a metaphoric infection—it signifies a real impossibility of thinking beyond or outside the general schema of production, which is to say in counter-dependence on the dominant schema.[1]

But isn't this dominant schema, metaphorizing all azimuths, itself a metaphor? Is the reality principle that it imposes anything other than a code, a cipher, a system of interpretation? Marx shattered the fiction of *homo economicus*, the myth that summarizes the entire process of the naturalization of the system of exchange value, of the market, of surplus value and its forms. But he did it in the name of the emergence into action of labor power, of man's own power to make the value of his labor visible (*pro-du-cere*), and we can ask if there is not an equal fiction, an equal naturalization, which is to say an equally arbitrary convention, a model of simulation destined to *code* all human material, every eventuality of desire and of exchange in terms of value, finality and production. Production

in this case would be nothing other than a code, imposing a kind of deciphering, imposing decipherment where there is properly neither finality, cipher, or value. It is a question of a gigantic secondary elaboration which hallucinates in rational terms the predestination of man for the transformation of the world (or for the "production" of himself: humanist theme generalized today: it is not longer a question of "being" oneself but of "producing" oneself, from conscious activity to the wild "productions" of desire). Everywhere man has learned to reflect himself, to assume himself, to *direct* himself according to this schema of production, which is assigned to him as the final dimension of value and meaning. At the level of the entirety of political economy, there is something of what Jacques Lacan described in the mirror stage: across this schema of production, this *mirror* of production, the human species comes to consciousness *in the imaginary*. Production, work, value, everything through which an objective world appears and in which man recognizes himself objectively—all of this is the imaginary wherein man has embarked on the incessant decipherment of himself through his works, finalized by his shadow (his own end), reflected by this operational mirror, this kind of ideal of the productivist ego—not only in the materialized form of economic obsession with output, determined by the *system* of exchange value, but more profoundly in this *overdetermination by the code*, by the mirror of political economy, in this identity that man dons in his own eyes, when he can no longer think of himself other than as something to produce, to transform, to make visible as a value. This remarkable phantasm is confused with that of representation, in which man becomes—for himself—his own *signified*, enjoys himself as *contents* of value and meaning, in a process of self-expression and self-accumulation whose form escapes him.

It is clear (despite the exegetical prowess of structuralist Marxists) that the analysis of form/representation (the status of the sign, of the language which directs all western thought)—the critical reduction of this form in its collusion with the order of production and of political economy—escaped Marx. Nothing is served by making a radical critique of the order of representation in the name of production and its revolutionary watchword. The two orders are inseparable and, as paradoxical as this seems, Marx didn't submit form/production to radical analysis any more than he did form/representation. These two great, unanalyzed forms imposed their limits on him, the limits of the imaginary of political economy. We understand this to mean that the discourse of production and the discourse of representation are the mirror wherein the system of political economy comes to be reflected in the imaginary and to reproduce itself as determinant authority.

In order to grasp the radicality of political economy, it does not suffice to unmask what is hidden behind the concept of consumption: the anthropology of needs and use value. We must also unmask everything that hides behind the concept of production, of the mode of production, of productive forces, of relationships of production, etc. All the concepts fundamental to Marxist analysis need to be questioned starting from even from its demand for radical critique and for the transcendence of political economy. What is axiomatic about productive forces, about the dialectical genesis of modes of production from which revolutionary theory springs? What is axiomatic about the generic wealth of man—labor power, about the motor of history, about history itself, which is only "the production by men of their material life"? "The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself.

And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life."[2]

The liberation of productive forces is confused with the liberation of man: is this a revolutionary watchword or one for political economy? Almost no one has doubted this final evidence, certainly not Marx, for whom men "begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence"[3] (why must man's vocation always be to distinguish himself from animals? Humanism is an *idée fixe* that comes to us—it too—from political economy—leave that). But is existence itself an end for man, an end for which he must find the means? These little innocent phrases are already theoretical ultimatums; the separation of ends and means already constitutes the most ferocious and most naïve postulate about the human species. Man has needs. Does he have needs? Is he sworn to satisfy them? Is he a labor power (through which he separates himself, as means, from his own ends)? Prodigious metaphors of the system that dominates us; a fable of political economy still recounted to generations of revolutionaries, infected even in their political radicality by the conceptual virus of this same political economy.

Critique of Use Value and Labor Power

In the distinction between exchange value and use value, Marxism assumes its greatest force but also its weakness. The presupposition of use value, the hypothesis, beyond the abstraction of exchange value, of a concrete value, of a human finality of commodities in the moment of their direct relationship of use for a subject, we have seen that this value is only an effect of the system

of exchange value, a concept produced by the system, in which the system completes itself.[4] Far from designating a beyond for political economy, use value is but the horizon of exchange value. A radical questioning of the concept of consumption begins on the level of needs and products. *But this critique assumes its full scope in its extension to that other commodity, labor power.* The concept of production then falls under radical critique.

Don't forget that according to Marx himself the revolutionary originality of his theory consists in unleashing the concept of labor power from its status as an exceptional commodity, the insertion of which, in the cycle of production *under the name of use value* carries the X element, the differential extra-value which generates surplus value and the whole process of capital. (Bourgeois economics speculates on simple "labor" as one factor of production among others in the economic process).

The history of the use value of labor power in Marx is complex. Adam Smith attacked the Physiocrats and the Exchangists with the concept of labor. Marx in turn deconstructed abstract social labor (exchange value) and concrete labor (use value) in the double concept labor power/commodity. And he insisted on the necessity of maintaining in all their force the two aspects, the articulation of which alone can aid in objectively deciphering the process of capitalist labor. To A. Wagner, who reproached him for having neglected use value, he responds: "... the *vir obscurus* overlooks the fact that even in the analysis of the commodity I do not stop at the double manner in which it is represented, but immediately go on to say that in this double being of the commodity is represented the *two-fold character of the labor* whose product it is: *useful labor* i.e., the concrete modes of the labors which create use values, and *abstract labor*, *labor as expenditure of labor power*, irrespective of whatever 'useful' way it is

expended... that in the development of the *value form of the commodity*, in the last instance of its money form and hence of *money*, the *value* of a commodity is represented in the *use value* of the other, i.e. in the natural form of the other commodity; that surplus value itself is derived from *a 'specific' use value of labor power* exclusively pertaining to the latter, etc. etc., thus for me use value plays a far more important part than it has in economics hitherto, however, that is only ever taken into account where it springs from the analysis of a given economic constellation, not from arguing backwards and forwards about the concepts of words 'use value' and 'value'."[5]

It is clear that in this text the use value of labor, losing its "naturality," recovers a "specific" value that is much greater in the *structural* functioning of exchange value. Also, that in maintaining a kind of dialectical equilibrium between qualitative concrete labor and quantitative abstract labor, Marx—while granting logical priority to exchange value (the given economic formation), retaining, even in that structure, a kind of concrete precedence, a concrete positivity of use value—still retains something *of the apparent movement of political economy*. He does not radicalize the schema to the point of reversing this appearance and revealing use value *as produced by the play of exchange value*. We have shown this for the products of consumption, it is the same for labor power. The fact of defining objects as useful, and responding to needs, is the most complete, the most internalized expression of abstract economic exchange: its subjective closure. The fact of defining labor power as the source of "concrete" social wealth is the complete expression of the abstract manipulation of labor power: the truth of capital culminates in this "evidence" of man as producer of value. Such is the twist by which exchange value retrospectively originates and logically closes itself off in use value. In other words, here the signified "use value" is still

an *effect of the code*, the final precipitate of the law of value. It does not suffice to analyze the operation of the quantitative abstraction of exchange value *starting from* use value, one must still make visible the conditions for the possibility of this operation: to understand the production of even the concept of the use value of labor power, of a specific rationality of productive man. Without this generic definition, no political economy. Therein, in the last instance, lies the foundation of political economy. It is therein as well that one must disrupt it, by unmasking this quantitative—qualitative "dialectic," behind which the definitive structural institution of the field of value is hidden.

What is Concrete about Labor: the Quantitative—Qualitative "Dialectic"

"The quantitative consideration of labor could only come about once it had been universalized during the 18th century in Europe... Until then, different forms of activity were not comparable in their breadth... At first, all tasks presented themselves as diverse qualities."[6] Qualitative labor, differentiated in relation to its process, its product, and the destination of its product. Historical epoch of the artisanal mode of production. Succeeded, in the capitalist mode of production, by the double aspect under which labor is analyzed: "While labor which creates exchange values is *abstract*, *universal*, and *homogeneous*, labor which produces use value is concrete and special and is made up of an endless variety of kinds of labor according to the way in which and the material to which it is applied."[7] Here we rediscover the moment of use value: concrete, differentiated, incomparable. In opposition to the quantitative measure of labor power, labor use value remains a qualitative potentiality. Neither more nor less. It is specified by its own end, the material that it works, or simply

because it is the energetic expenditure of a particular individual at a particular moment. The use value of labor power is the moment of its actualization, of the relation of man to the useful expenditure that he possesses—it is basically an act of (productive) *consumption*—and this moment retains, in the general process, all of its singularity. At this level, labor power is incommensurable.

There is a profound enigma in the articulation of Marx's theory: how is surplus labor born? How does the actualization of labor power, by definition qualitative, come to be "more" or "less"? If not by supposing that the "dialectical" opposition of the quantitative and the qualitative only expresses an apparent movement.

In fact, this is again a question, with the *effect* of quality and of incomparability, of the *apparent* movement of political economy. What the universalization of labor in the 18th century, and its reproduction thereafter, produced, was not the reduction of concrete qualitative labor into abstract quantitative labor, but, from the outset, the structural articulation of both terms. On the basis of this "fork" labor is truly universalized, not only as market value but as human value. Ideology always proceeds in this way through a binary structural division (or moreover by redoubling in a qualitative structural effect, which is an effect of the *code*) investing the entire field of possibility. Henceforth there can only be labor—qualitative or quantitative. The quantitative still only signifies the comparability of all forms of labor in abstract value. The qualitative, under the banner of incomparability, goes much further: it signifies *the comparability of every human practice in terms of production and labor*. Or again: the abstract and formal universality of the labor power commodity underlines the "concrete" universality of qualitative labor.

But the word "concrete" here is an abuse of sense. It seems to oppose abstraction to the interior of the fork; in fact it is the fork

itself which grounds abstraction. In the play of one and the other—of abstract and concrete, of qualitative and quantitative, of exchange value and use value—the autonomization of labor is sealed. The fetishism of labor and of productivity comes to be crystallized in this structured play of signifiers.[8]

What is concrete about labor? Marx: "The indifference as to the particular kind of labor implies the existence of a highly developed aggregate of different species of concrete labor, none of which is any longer the predominant one. So do the most general abstractions commonly arise only where there is the highest concrete development, where one feature appears to be jointly possessed by many, and to be common to all."[9] But if no type of labor dominates all the others, it is because labor itself dominates all the other regimes, that it substitutes itself for all other forms of wealth and exchange. Indifference in regard to determinate labor corresponds to a much more complete determination of social wealth by labor. And what is this social wealth, placed entirely under the sign of labor, if not use value? The "richest concrete development" is the qualitative and quantitative multiplication of use values. "The greater the extent to which historic needs—needs created by production itself, social needs—needs which are themselves the offspring of social production and intercourse, are posited as *necessary*, the higher the level to which real wealth has become developed. Regarded *materially*, wealth consists only in the manifold variety of needs."[10] Is this not the program of an advanced capitalist society? Because it does not conceive of a mode of social wealth other than that founded on labor and production, Marxism no longer furnishes, long term, a real alternative to capitalism. Adopting the generic schema of production and needs, there is an astounding simplification of social exchange by the law of value. A fantastic proposition, if conceived correctly; arbitrary and fantastic

in regard to the status of man in society; belied by the analysis of all primitive or archaic organizations, and by the feudal symbolic order, and even by that of our societies. It is clear that all of the perspectives opened up by the contradictions of the mode of production drive us into political economy.

The dialectic of production only redoubles the abstraction, the separation of political economy. And this leads to the radical interrogation of the Marxist theoretical discourse. Since the dialectic abstract-concrete relationship is in the final instance defined by Marx as the relationship between "scientific representation and real movement" (what Althusser will analyze precisely as the *production* of a theoretical object), it appears that this theoretical production, itself caught in the abstraction of representation can only redouble its object, in this case the logic and movement of political economy. Between the theory and the object (this goes not only for Marxism) there is effectively a dialectical relation, in the fatal sense wherein it encloses them both in a unsurpassable specularity.[11] Thought beyond the production form, beyond the representation form becomes unthinkable.

The "Generic" Double Face of Man

In fact, the use value of labor power is no more real than the use value of products, no more real than the autonomy of the signified and the referent. The same fiction reigns in the orders of production, consumption, and signification. Exchange value makes the use value of products appear as its anthropological horizon. The exchange value of labor power makes use value visible as the originality and concrete finality of the act of labor, as its "generic" alibi. The logic of signifiers produces "evidence" of the "reality" of the signified and of the referent. Throughout, exchange value makes

concrete production, concrete consumption, and concrete signification appear as a kind of abstraction, as an abstract distortion. Exchange value foments this concreteness as its ideological ectoplasm, as its originary phantasm and its surpassing. In this sense, needs, use value, the referent "don't exist": they are only concepts produced and projected in a generic dimension by the same development of the system of exchange value.[12]

In the same way, the double potentiality of man, that of needs and labor power, that "generic" double face of universal man is only that of man as he is produced by the system of political economy. And productivity is not there at first as a generic dimension, as the human and social seed of all wealth, that one must extract from the dross of capitalist relations of production (the eternal empiricist illusion), one must reverse all of this, and see that it is the development of abstract and generalized productivity (the developed form of political economy) that makes the *concept of production* itself visible as movement and generic end of man (or again the concept of man as producer).

In other words, the system of political economy produces not only the individual as labor power sold and exchanged, it produces the concept of labor power as the fundamental human potentiality. More profoundly than in the fiction of the individual freely selling his labor power in the market, the system takes root to the extent that the individual identifies with his labor power and his act of "transforming nature toward human ends." In a word, there is not only the quantitative exploitation of man as productive force by the *system* of capitalist political economy, but the metaphysical over-determination of man as producer by the *code* of political economy.[13] In the final instance, that is how the system rationalizes its power. *And in this Marxism aides the capitalist deceit by persuading men that they are alienated by the sale of their labor power,*

censuring the much more radical hypothesis that they could be alienated as labor power, as the "inalienable" power of creating value through labor.

If Marx affiliates himself with the ulterior fate of labor power objectivized in the process of production, as abstract social labor, under the aspect of its exchange value—the existence of this human (energetic, physical, intellectual) capacity of production, this productive potentiality which is that of all men, in every society, "to transform their surroundings toward ends useful for the individual and society," this *Arbeitsvermögen* is never questioned by Marxist theory. Its critique and history halt strangely before this anthropological postulate. Curious fate for a Marxist concept.

The concept of need in its present operation (the consumption of use value) appears in the same light. It offers the same marks of singularity, of differentiation, of incomparability, in short of the "qualitative" as the concrete capacity of labor. If one can be defined as a "particular type of action producing its own work," the other can also be defined as a "particular type of tendency (or other psychological motivation, of course, because all of this is only bad psychology) searching for its own satisfaction." Need also "decomposes matter and form...in infinitely diverse types of consumption." One is that by which man offers a useful objective end to nature, another is that by which he offers a useful subjective end to products. Needs, labor: double potentiality, double generic quality of man, same anthropological sphere which defines the concept of production as the "fundamental movement of human existence," as defining a rationality and a society proper to man. Moreover, one finds them logically reunited in a kind of final perspective: "In a superior phase of communist society ...when labor will not only be a means of living, but will itself become the primary vital need."[14]

Marxist theory, radical in its *logical* analysis of capital, sustains itself with an *anthropological* consensus with Western rationalist options, in the definitive form that it assumed in the bourgeois thought of the 18th century. Science, technology, progress, history: an entire civilization understands itself as the producer of its own development and draws its dialectical momentum toward completing humanity, designated in terms of totality and happiness. Genesis, development, finality: Marx invented none of this, nor did he change anything essential, nothing of the *idea* of man *producing* himself in his infinite determination and continually surpassing himself toward his own end.

Marx translated this concept into the logic of material production and into the historical dialectic of modes of production. But to differentiate the modes of production is to render unsurpassable evidence of production as determinant instance. It is to generalize the rational mode of economics over the entire stretch of human history, as a generic mode of human becoming. It is to circumscribe the entire history of man in what is undoubtedly only a gigantic model of simulation. It is in a way to turn against the order of capital by using as an instrument of analysis the most subtle ideological phantasm that capitalism itself has elaborated. "Dialectical" reversal? Is it not the system that is leading its own dialectic here, that of its universal reduction? If one advances the hypothesis *that there never has been and that there never will be more than a single mode of production, regulated by the capitalist political economy*, this concept only makes sense in relation to the economic formation which produces it (observe the theory that analyzes this economic formation). Thus the generalization, even "dialectical," of this concept, is but the *ideological* universalization of the system's postulates.

Ethic of Labor; Aesthetics of Play

This logic of material production, this dialectic of modes of production always returns, beyond history, to a generic definition of man as a dialectical being, understandable based on the sole process of the objectification of nature. This is heavy with consequences to the extent that, even through the fortunes of his history, man (whose history is also a "product") will be ruled by this clear and definitive reason, by this dialectical schema which acts like implicit philosophy. Marx developed it in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, Marcuse revives it in his critique of the economic concept of labor: "Labor is an ontological concept of human existence as such." He cites Lorenz von Stein: "Labor is...in every way the actualization of one's infinite determinations through the self-positing of the individual personality [in which the personality itself] makes the content of the external world its own and in this way forces the world to become a part of its own internal world."[15] Marx: "Labor is *man's coming-to-be for himself* within the *externalization* or as *externalized* man...[that is] the *self-creation* and self-objectification [of man]."[16] And even in *Capital*: "So far therefore as labor is a creator of use-value, is useful labor, it is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society, for the existence of the human race; it is an external nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and nature, and therefore no life."[17] "Labor is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and nature. He opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces setting arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body in motion in order to appropriate nature's productions in a form adapted to his

own wants."[18] The dialectical culmination of all this is the concept of nature as "the inorganic body of man": the naturalization of man and the humanization of nature.[19]

On this dialectical basis, Marxist philosophy unfolds in two directions: an ethics of labor, an aesthetics of non-labor. The first across the entirety of bourgeois and socialist ideology—the exaltation of labor as value, as an end in itself, as a categorical imperative. Labor loses its negativity here and stands as an absolute value. But is the "materialist" thesis of the generic productivity of man far from this "idealist" sanctification of labor? It is in any case dangerously vulnerable here. Marcuse: "Insofar as they take the concept of 'needs' and its satisfaction in the world of goods as the starting point, all economic theories fail to recognize the full factual content of labor... The essential factual content of labor is not grounded in the scarcity of goods, nor in a discontinuity between the world of disposable and utilizable goods and human needs, but, on the contrary, in an essential excess of human existence beyond every possible situation in which it finds itself and the world."[20] In the name of which he separates play as a secondary activity: "In the structural sense, within the totality of human existence, labor is necessarily and eternally 'earlier' than play."[21] Labor alone founds the world as objective and man as historical, only labor founds a real dialectic of transcendence and completion. It even justifies metaphysically the burdensome nature of labor. "In the final analysis, the burdensome character of labor expresses nothing other than a negativity rooted in the very essence of human existence: man can achieve his own self only by passing through otherness: by passing through 'externalization' and 'alienation'."[22] I have only cited this long passage to show how the Marxist dialectic can lead to the purest Christian ethic (and inversely of course: today we see a large

contamination of these two points of view on the basis of this transcendence of alienation and this intraworldly asceticism of effort and of the overcoming that Weber located as the radical germ of the capitalist spirit). And also because since the beginning this aberrant sanctification of labor found itself to be the secret vice of Marxist political and economic strategy. Walter Benjamin stigmatized it violently: "Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving. From there it was but a step to the illusion that the factory work which was supposed to tend toward technological progress constituted a political achievement. The old Protestant ethics of work were resurrected among German workers in secularized form. The Gotha Program already bears traces of this confusion, defining labor as the 'source of all wealth and all culture.' Smelling a rat, Marx countered that '... man who possesses no other property than his labor power' must of necessity become 'the slave of other men who have made themselves owners...' However, the confusion spread, soon thereafter Josef Dietzgen proclaimed, 'the savior of modern times is called work. The... improvement...of labor constitutes the wealth which is now able to accomplish what no redeemer has ever been able to do.'"[23] Is this a question of a "vulgar" Marxism as Benjamin suggests? No less "vulgar" in the case of the "strange delusion" Paul Lafargue denounced in *The Right to be Lazy*: "A strange delusion possesses the working classes of the nations where capitalist civilization holds its sway."[24] Apparently orthodox Marxism preaches the liberation of productive forces under the auspices of the *negativity* of labor. But is this not a question, faced with the gospel of labor, of an "aristocratic" idealism? The other is positivist, and Marxism

wants to be "dialectical," but they have the hypothesis of man's productive vocation in common. If one admits that it raises the purest metaphysics,[25] then the difference between "vulgar" Marxism and the "other" would be that of a mass religion and a philosophical theory—which, as we know, is not much.

Confronted with the *absolute* idealism of labor, dialectical materialism is perhaps only a *dialectical* idealism of productive forces. We will return to this to see if the dialectic of means and ends which is at the heart of the principle of the transformation of nature does not already virtually imply the autonomization of means (the autonomization of science, of technology, and of labor, the autonomization of production as generic activity, the autonomization of the dialectic itself as general scheme of development).[26]

In the fine print of Marxist thought and against this labor ethic, the regressive character of which evidently maintains what it represses—Marx's capital discovery about the double aspect of labor (his discovery of an abstract and measurable social labor)—there is an aesthetics of play, of non-work, which is based on the dialectic of the quantitative and the qualitative. This is the perspective, beyond the capitalist mode of production and the qualitative measure of labor, of a definitive qualitative mutation in communist society: the end of alienated labor, the free objectification of man's own powers. "In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production... Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy

and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom which, however, can blossom forth, only with this realm of necessity as its basis."[27] Or again Marcuse, returning to less puritanical (less Hegelian) conceptions, though undoubtedly entirely philosophical (Schiller's aesthetic philosophy): "Play and display, as principles of civilization, imply not the transformation of labor but its complete subordination to the freely evolving potentialities of man and nature. The ideas of play and display now reveal their full distance from the values of productiveness and performance. Play is *unproductive* and *useless* precisely because it cancels the repressive and exploitative traits of labor and leisure."[28]

This *beyond* of political economy called play, non-work, or non-alienated labor, is defined as the reign of finality without end. It is in this sense that it is and remains, in the very Kantian sense of the term, an *aesthetic*. With all the bourgeois ideological connotations that this implies. And it is true that the thought of Marx, if it settled its accounts with bourgeois morality, remains defenseless against bourgeois aesthetics, the ambiguity of which is more subtle, but whose complicity with the general system of political economy is also profound. Once again, it is at the heart of its strategy, in the analytic distinction that it makes between the quantitative and the qualitative, that Marxist thought inherits from the aesthetic and humanist virus of bourgeois thought—the concept of the qualitative is burdened with all these finalities, whether the concrete finality of use value or the endless idealist and transcendental finalities. This is the defect of every notion of play, of liberty, of transparency, of disalienation, the defect of the *revolutionary imagination*—insofar as in the ideal type of play, of the free play of

human faculties, we are still in the process of repressive desublimation. This sphere of play effectively defines itself as the fulfillment of human rationality, as the dialectical culmination of man's activity, of his incessant objectification of nature and control of his exchanges with it. It presupposes the full development of productive forces, it remains "mixed up with" the reality principle and the transformation of nature. It can only flourish, Marx says clearly, when based on the reign of necessity. This is to say that, wishing itself beyond labor, but in its *prolongation*, the sphere of play is never only the aesthetic sublimation of its constraints. We are still well within the typically bourgeois problematic of necessity and freedom, the double ideological expression of which has always been, since coming into existence, the institution of a reality principle (repression and sublimation: principle of labor) and its formal surpassing in an ideal transcendence.

Work and non-work. "Revolutionary" theme. Therein lies the most subtle form of the previously mentioned binary structural opposition. The end of the end of the exploitation by labor is truly this inverse fascination with non-labor, this inverse mirage of free time (obligated time—free time, full time—empty time: another paradigm that seals the hegemony of the order of time, which is always merely that of production). Non-work is still only the repressive desublimation of labor power—the antithesis that acts as an alternative. The sphere of non-work, even if one does not confuse it immediately with that of leisure and its present bureaucratic organization, wherein the desire for death and for mortification and its management by social institutions is as powerful as in the sphere of work. Even if one envisions it in a radical way that *represents it* as other than the model of a "total availability," of a "liberty" for the individual to "produce" himself as a value, to "express" himself, to "liberate" himself as authentic *content* (conscious or unconscious), in short the ideality of

time and of the individual as an empty form, to be filled in the end by his freedom. The finality of value is always there. It no longer inscribes itself, as in the sphere of productive activity, in *determined* contents. It is there henceforth as *pure form*, but no less determining. Exactly as the pure institutional form of painting, of art and theater shines, emptied of its contents, in anti-painting, anti-art, anti-theater—non-work shines with the pure form of labor. The concept can therefore be fantasized as the abolition of political economy, it is bound to fall back into the sphere of political economy, as a sign—and only a sign—of its abolition. It already escapes the revolutionaries to enter into the programmatic field of the "new society."

Marx and the Hieroglyph of Value

In *Semeiotike*, Julia Kristeva writes: "From the viewpoint of social distribution and consumption (of communication), labor is always a value of use or value which it is, and not in any other way. Value is measured by the quantity of time socially necessary for production. But Marx clearly outlined another possibility: *work could be apprehended outside value*, on the side of the commodity produced and circulating in the chain of communication. Here labor no longer represents any value, meaning, or signification. It is a question only of a *body* and a *discharge*..."[29]

Marx: "The use values, coat, linen, etc., i.e., the bodies of commodities, are combinations of two elements—matter and labor... We see, then, that labor is not the only source of material wealth, of use-values produced by labor, as William Petty puts it, labor is its father and the earth its mother... Productive activity, if we leave out of sight its special form, viz. the useful character of the labor, is nothing but the expenditure of human labor-power."[30]

Is there a conception of labor in Marx different from the production of useful ends (canonical definition of labor as value in the framework of political economy and the anthropological definition of labor as human finality)? According to Kristeva, Marx's vision is radically different, centered on the body, expenditure, play, anti-value, non-utility, non-finality, etc. She would have him have read Bataille before writing, freely—forgetting it just as quickly: if there is something that Marx did not think, it is expenditure, loss, sacrifice, prodigality, play, the symbolic. Marx thought about *production* (already not bad) and he thought about it in terms of value.

There is no escape from this. Marxist labor is defined in the absolute framework of a natural necessity and of its dialectical overcoming as rational activity producing value. The social wealth that it produces is *material*. It has nothing to do with *symbolic* wealth which comes conversely from destruction, from the deconstruction of value, from transgression and expenditure, which mocks natural necessity. These two notions of wealth are irreconcilable, perhaps even exclusive of one another, and it is useless to attempt acrobatic transfers. According to Bataille, "sacrificial economy" or symbolic exchange is excluded from political economy (and from its critique, which is only its completed form). It is just to return to political economy what belongs to it: the concept of labor is consubstantial with it. For this reason, it cannot be turned to any other field of analysis, and it certainly cannot become once again the object of a science that claims to overturn political economy. The "labor of the sign," "intertextual productive space," etc. are ambiguous metaphors. There is a choice to be made between value and non-value. Labor definitively elevates the sphere of value. This is why the concept of labor in Marx (like his concepts of production and of productive force) must be submitted to a radical critique as an

ideological concept. With all of its ambiguities, this is not the moment to generalize labor as a *revolutionary* concept.

The citations from Marx to which Kristeva refers do not in any way carry the sense she gives them. The genesis of wealth through genital combination of labor-father and earth-mother repeats well enough a "normal" productive-reproductive schema: we make love to have children, not for pleasure. The metaphor is that of reproductive genital sexuality, not at all that of an expenditure of the ecstatic body. But this is only a detail. The "expenditure" of human power that Marx speaks of is not an expenditure of pure loss, in Bataille's sense, a symbolic (pulsionary, libidinal) expenditure, it is still a productive, finalized, economic expenditure because it engenders only through coupling with this other productive force called earth (or matter). It is a useful expenditure, an investment, and not at all a festive and free volatilization of the power of the body, a game with death, the action of a desire. Moreover, this "expenditure of the body" does not have, as in play (sexual or otherwise), its response in other bodies, its echo in a nature that would play or expend itself in exchange. It is not based on symbolic exchange. What man offers of his body in labor is never *given* or *lost*, nor *rendered* by nature in a reciprocal mode. Labor intends only to "render the yield" of nature. Expenditure in this sense is therefore only an investment of value, a *making valuable*, opposed to every symbolic play, whether in a gift or an expenditure.

Kristeva poses the problem of redefining labor beyond value. In fact, for Marx, as Jean-Joseph Goux has shown, the line demarcating value passes between use value and exchange value. "If we proceed further, and compare the process of producing value with the labor-process, pure and simple, we find that the latter consists of the useful labor, the work, that produces use values. Here we contemplate the

labor as producing a particular article; we view it under its qualitative aspect alone. Here it is a question merely of the time occupied by the laborer in doing the work—of the period during which the labor power is usefully expended."[31] Thus the abstraction of value begins only that of the second stage, that of exchange value. This amounts to removing use value from the sphere of the production of value, or again: the sphere of use value is confused with that which is beyond value (this is Goux's point, in extending this proposition to the use value of the sign). Here, as we have seen, there is a very serious idealization of the process of concrete, qualitative labor and, in the end, a compromise with political economy—to the extent that the entire theoretical investment and strategy crystallizes on this line of demarcation within the sphere of value, the line "external" to the closure of this sphere of political economy is left in the shadows. By positing use value beyond exchange value, we enclose all transcendence within this single internal alternative to the field of value. Qualitative production is already the reign of a rational, positive finality—the transformation of nature is already the place of its objectification as productive power, under the sign of utility (this is simultaneously true of human labor). Labor and production—before even the stage of exchange value and of the temporal equivalence of abstract social labor—already constitute an abstraction, a reduction and an unsurpassed rationalization in relation to the wealth of symbolic exchange. This "concrete" labor, with all of its values of repression, of sublimation, of objective finality, of "conformity to a goal," of the rational domestication of sexuality and of nature, this *productive eros* already represents, in relation to symbolic exchange, the real cut that Marx himself displaces and situates between abstract quantitative labor and concrete qualitative labor. The process of "valorization" begins with the process of the

useful transformation of nature, with the instauration of labor as generic finality, with the stage of use value. And this real cut is not between "abstract" labor and "concrete" labor, but between symbolic exchange and labor (production, economics). The abstract social form of labor and of exchange is only the completed form, overdetermined by capitalist political economy, of a scheme of rational valorization and production inaugurated long ago, breaking with every symbolic organization of exchange.[32]

Kristeva would like to escape value, but not labor or Marx. You have to choose. Labor is defined (historically and anthropologically) as what disinvests all the ambivalent and symbolic potentialities of the body and of social exchange, reducing them to a rational, positive, and unilateral investment. Productive eros pushes all alternative potentialities of meaning and exchange, in symbolic exchange, toward the process of production, accumulation, and appropriation. If we want to question this process which places us in the hands of political economy, of the terrorism of value, if we want to rethink expenditure and symbolic exchange, the concepts of production and of labor developed by Marx (not to speak of classical economics) must be resolved, analyzed as ideological concepts in solidarity with the general system of value. And if we want to find a realm beyond value (which is in effect the only revolutionary perspective), then we must shatter the *mirror of production*, in which all of Western metaphysics is reflected. Should we abandon Marx?[33]

In the Shadow of Marxist Concepts

Historical materialism, dialectics, modes of production, labor power: all these concepts by which Marxist theory seeks to shatter the abstract universality of the concepts of bourgeois thought

(Nature and Progress, Man and Reason, formal Logic, Labor, Exchange, etc.). Marxism in its turn is in the process of universalizing them according to a "critical" imperialism as ferocious as that of bourgeois thought.

The proposition according to which a concept is not only an interpretive hypothesis, but the translation of the movement of the universe, raised by pure metaphysics. Marxist concepts don't escape this lapse. Thus, by all logic, the concept of history must maintain itself as historical, turn on and clarify itself by abolishing the context that produces it. In place of this, it is transhistorisized, it is redoubled in itself and thereby universalized. Dialectics, in all rigor, should dialectically surpass and annul itself. Production and modes of production: radicalizing the concept in a given moment, Marx made a breach in the social mystery of exchange value. Thereafter the concept took all of its strategic power from its irruption, by which it deposes political economy from its imaginary universality. But it lost it's power, already in Marx's time, by offering itself as a principle of explication. It cancels its "difference" by universalizing itself, returning by the same blow to the form of the dominant code, universality, and to the strategy of political economy. It is not tautological that the concept of history should be historical, the concept of dialectics dialectical, the concept of production itself a product (which is to say judged by a kind of auto-analysis). This simply designates the present, explosive, mortal form of critical concepts. From the moment they assert themselves in the universal, they cease to be analytical: the religion of meaning commences. They become canonical and they enter into the general system's mode of theoretical reproduction. At this moment too—and this is not by chance—they assume their scientific cast (the canonization of Marxist concepts from Engels to Althusser). They set themselves

up to express an "objective reality." They become signs: signifiers of a "real" signified. And if, in the best moments these concepts have been practiced as such, this is to say without taking themselves for reality, nevertheless they have fallen into the *imaginary of the sign*, which is to say into the *sphere of truth*, no longer in the sphere of interpretation, but in that of *repressive simulation*.

From here, they can only evoke one another, in an indefinite metonymic process: man is historical, history is dialectical, dialectics is the process of (material) production, production is the movement of human existence itself, history is that of modes of production, etc. Scientific and universalist, this discourse (this code) becomes immediately imperialist. All these possible societies are summoned to respond. To interrogate Marxist thought to see if societies "without history" are something other than "pre"-historic, other than a chrysalis and a larva. The dialectics of the world of production is not yet well developed, but you lose nothing by waiting—the Marxist egg is ready to hatch. The psychoanalytical egg, elsewhere, is also already ready, because everything that we have said of these Marxist concepts goes for the unconscious, repression, Oedipus, etc. This even better: the Bororos are closer to the primary processes than we are.

All of this constitutes the most surprising—and the most reactionary—theoretical aberration. There is *neither mode of production nor production itself* in primitive societies. There is *no dialectic* in primitive societies. There is *no unconscious* in primitive societies. All of these concept analyze only our societies, regulated by political economy. These concepts have only a kind of boomerang value. If psychoanalysis speaks of the unconscious in primitive societies, should we ask what psychoanalysis represses or what repression produced psychoanalysis itself? When Marxism speaks of the mode of production in primitive societies, should we ask to what extent

this concept fails to account for even our historical societies—the reason we export it. And there where all of our ideologues seek to finalize, to rationalize primitive societies according to their own concepts, to encode the primitives, should we ask what obsession makes them perceive this finality, this code blowing up in their faces. In place of exporting Marxism and psychoanalysis (not to mention bourgeois ideology, though on this level there is no difference), bring all of the impact, the entire interrogation of primitive societies to bear on Marxism and psychoanalysis. Maybe then we can shatter this fascination, this auto-fetishism of Western thought, maybe we could escape from a Marxism which has become a specialist in the impasses of capitalism much more than a road to revolution, from a psychoanalysis which has become a specialist in the impasses of libidinal economy much more than in the ways of desire.

The Critique of Political Economy is Basically Completed

Understanding itself as a rationality of production superior to that of bourgeois political economy, the weapons that Marx thought he seized turn against him and make his theory the dialectical apotheosis of political economy. At a much higher level, his critique falls to his objection to Feuerbach for making a radical critique of the *contents* of religion, but for having made this critique in a religious *form*. Marx made a radical critique of political economy, but he still made it in the form of political economy. Such are the ruses of dialectics. Therein is undoubtedly the limit of every "critique," a concept born in the West at the same time as political economy, a concept which is perhaps, like the quintessence of Enlightenment rationality, only the subtle, long term expression of the system's expanded reproduction. Dialectics does not escape the destiny of

critique. We will perhaps see that the return of idealist dialectics in dialectical materialism was only a metamorphosis, that it is the logic itself of political economy, of capital and of the commodity which is dialectical and that, in the guise of having produced the internal and fatal contradiction, Marx basically only offered a descriptive theory. The logic of representation, which is to say of the redoubling of its object, haunts all rational discursivity. All critical theory is haunted by this surreptitious religion, desire indexed by the construction of its object, negativity subtly haunted by the form even of what it negates.

This is why, after Feuerbach, Marx said that the critique of religion is basically completed (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*), and that in order to overturn this ambiguous limit beyond which it cannot go (the reinversion of religious form in critique itself), it is necessary to pass resolutely to another level—precisely to the critique of political economy, which alone is radical and which can, by making the true contradictions apparent, definitively resolve the problem of religion. *Today we are at exactly the same point as Marx was.* For us, the *critique of political economy is basically completed.* Dialectical materialism has exhausted its contents by reproducing its form. The situation at this level is consequently no longer critique, it is inextricable. And according to the same revolutionary movement as Marx's, we affirm that we must move to a radically different level which permits, beyond its critique, the definitive resolution of political economy. This level is that of symbolic exchange and its theory. And as Marx thought that he should, in order to open the way to the critique of political economy, begin with a critique of the philosophy of law, we think that the preamble to this radical shift in terrain is the critique of the metaphysics of the signifier and of the code, in the entirety of its present ideological breadth—which we call, for lack of something better, the critique of the political economy of the sign.

11

Marxism and the System of Political Economy

A Euclidean Geometry of History?

Historical materialism appeared in a society regulated by the capitalist mode, a stage of actualization knotted with contradictions linked to the mode of production and the final episode of the class struggle. It hopes for the decipherment of this final phase of political economy and aims for its abolition. Theoretical rationality and universal practice, the dialectic of productive forces and productive relations, a continuous logic of contradiction, a homogeneous space of positivity and negativity: all of this, and the concept of history itself, is organized according to the idea that with the capitalist mode of production this universal process reaches its truth and its end. Prior modes of production were never envisioned as autonomous or definitive. It is unthinkable that history could have stopped during one of them. The dialectic condemns them to be no more than successive phases of a revolutionary process, which is also a cumulative process of production. The capitalist mode does not escape this inexorable logic, but it nonetheless assumes an absolute privilege to the extent that the other modes of production only opened the way to the fundamental contradiction between the production of social wealth and the production of social relations, and

to the possibility for men to finally resolve their social existence *in its real terms*. In the prior formations, men blindly produced the social relations at the same time as their material wealth—the capitalist mode is the moment wherein they become conscious of this double, simultaneous production and intend to rationally take control of it. No prior society posed this question to itself, not in these terms, and hence no society could resolve it. They could not have any knowledge of the end of history because they did not live historically nor through a mode of production. This is why they were prior: their truth was already beyond them, in the future concept of history, and in its contents, the determination of the social relation through material production, the concept which would appear only at the final stage of capitalism and its critique, clarifying at once the entire previous process. Capital is therefore an end, and all of history comes to be collected in the final process of its abolition. It is the only mode of production through which critique becomes possible in its real terms. This is why the revolution which puts an end to it is definitive.

Two postulates behind all of this:

— A process of historical development is already present in all prior societies (a mode of production, contradiction, a dialectic), but they do not produce a concept of historical development nor therefore of its transcendence.

— The moment the process becomes conscious (the production of the critical concept linked to the conditions of capitalist formation) is also the decisive stage of its resolution.

All of this is perfectly Hegelian, and we can ask ourselves what kind of necessity creates the fundamental contradiction, connected to the determinate instance of the economy—everything already at work "objectively" in the prior formations—becomes manifest at

the same time as the discourse capable of founding it theoretically (historical materialism). As if by chance, the *reality* of the mode of production enters the events at the moment it discovers someone to create its *theory*. As if by chance, the class struggle, at the same time that it enters its open and decisive phase, finds the theory that makes it scientific and objectively accountable (whereas the blind and latent class struggles of prior societies produced only ideologies). The connection is too beautiful and irresistibly evokes the Hegelian trajectory wherein the epic of Spirit is entirely illuminated, retrospectively, so as to culminate in Hegel's own discourse.

This connection of analysis and "objective reality" ("communism is the movement of the real itself") is only the materialist variant of the pretension of our entire culture to the privilege of being closer than any other culture to the universal, closer to the end of history, closer to the truth. This rationalist eschatology, which finds its support in the irreversibility of the linear time of accumulation and unveiling, is *par excellence* that of science. The phantasm of science is double, simultaneously that of a "epistemological break," which relegates all other thought to a senseless prehistory of knowledge and of a linear accumulation of knowledge, and therefore of truth as a final totalization. This procedure permits our societies to think and live as though they were superior to all others: not only *relatively* more advanced through the fact that they succeeded the others, but *absolutely* more advanced because, possessing the *theory* of the objective finality of science and history, they are reflected *in the universal*, given as an end and therefore, retrospectively, as a principle of explication of prior formations.

The materialist theory of history does not escape this ideology: we are at the moment of objectivity, of the truth of history, the revolutionary denouement. But what authorizes the contempt of

science for magic or alchemy, for example, the disjunction of a truth to come, the destiny of objective knowledge, concealed within the infantile misunderstandings of these societies? And for the "science of history": what authorizes this disjunction between a history to come and an objective finality which robs earlier societies of the determinations by which they lived, of their magic, of their difference, of the meaning that they had for themselves, to place them within the infrastructural truth of a mode of production for which we alone possess the key? The culmination which is produced by the Marxist analysis, within which it clarifies the denouement of every contradiction, is only that of the *staging of history*, which is to say of a process wherein everything is said to be resolved later, from the perspective of an accumulated truth, of a determinant instance, of an irreversible history. History could thus be, at bottom, only the equivalent of an ideal vanishing point which, in the rational and classic perspective of the Renaissance, is permitted to impose an arbitrary unitary structure on space. And historical materialism could only be the Euclidean geometry of that history.

It is only in the *mirror* of production and of history, beneath the double principle of indefinite accumulation (production) and of dialectical continuity (history), it is only through the arbitrariness of the *code* that our western culture can be reflected in the universal, as the privileged moment of truth (science) or revolution (historical materialism). Without this simulation, without this colossal reflexibility of the concave (or convex) concepts of history or production, our era loses all privilege. It would not be closer to any term (of knowledge) or to any (social) truth than to any other.

This is not a question of an ideal perspective on historical materialism. Rather it is a question of knowing if historical materialism (history made dialectical by modes of production) does not

itself constitute an ideal perspective, which is to say the point of view of a reductive ideality on all social formations, even ours. This is why it is important to begin with this *mythological reduction* and to strip our culture, *including its materialist critique*, of the absolute privilege that it grants itself through the imposition of a universal code (the strategic element of this code being the conjunction, beneath the sign of truth, of theory and reality, of "critical" theory and "real" contradictions).

Returning to Marx, Althusser develops this theory of a moment of history (ours) wherein science exists in the immediate form of consciousness, wherein the truth can be read in the open book of phenomena. In opposition to all earlier modes, the capitalist mode constitutes "the exceptional, specific present in which *scientific abstractions exist in the state of empirical realities*... This historical epoch of the foundation of the science of political economy does seem here to be brought into relationship with experience itself (*Erfahrung*), i.e. with the straightforward reading of the essence in the phenomenon. Or, if you prefer, the sectional reading of the essence in the slice of the present seems to be brought into relationship with the essence of a particular epoch of human history in which the generalization of commodity production and hence of the category commodity appears simultaneously as the absolute condition of possibility and the immediate given of this direct reading from experience."[1] Marx extends this in a citation on the anatomy of the ape and in his analysis of value in Aristotle: "It requires a fully developed production of commodities before, *from experience* alone, *scientific truth* springs up."[2] If it is in the epistemological break that Marxist discourse is founded as science, this break is only possible "in a society in which the commodity form has become the general form of the produce of labor."[3] Althusser: "If the

present form of capitalist production has produced scientific truth itself in its invisible reality (*Wirklichkeit, Erscheinung, Erfahrung*), in its self-consciousness, its phenomenon is therefore its own self-criticism in act (*en acte*)—then it is perfectly clear why the present's retrospection on the past is no longer ideology but true knowledge, and we can appreciate the *legitimate epistemological primacy of the present over the past.*"[4]

We can object to this Marxist scientific position in two ways:

1. We can admit that this epistemological break which, made possible by a certain historical process, makes possible in its turn a scientific analysis of this process, marks not a "critical" rupture, but a vicious circle. Made possible by the generalized commodity form, historical materialism accounts for all of the significations of our society as regulated by the generalized commodity form (either through the mode of production or through the dialectic of history. The concept by which one grasps this circularity doesn't matter. In any case, this "science," on the basis of this break, only describes the coincidence of the state of events which produced it and of the scientific model that it outlines). Dialectical? Not at all. The self-verification of a model which completes itself in the adequation of the rational (itself) and the real. In fact, this break through which Marxism prevails is equivalent, as for all "science," to the institution of a principle of rationality which is only the rationalization of its own process.

2. Instead of contesting historical materialism based on the position it grants itself (its pretension to a scientific discourse founded on a certain historical development), we can grant it that, but so as to add that, precisely from the time of Marx, the commodity form did not at all attain its generalized form, that that form had a *long history* since Marx, and therefore that it was not in a

historical position to speak scientifically, to speak the truth. In this case, another break imposes itself, which would risk making Marxism appear to be the theory of a surpassed stage of commodity production, therefore as an ideology. At least if one wanted to be scientific!

In the first case, one challenges the entire validity of Marxist concepts (history, dialectic, mode of production, etc.) as an *arbitrary* model which verifies itself, like every self-respecting model, through its circularity. One challenges historical materialism in its form, and it falls to the rank of an ideology. In the second, one preserves the fundamental *form* of the Marxist critique of political economy, but forces its *content* to break out beyond material production. In this hypothesis, one can admit that since Marx there has been such an extension of the sphere of productive forces, or again of the sphere of political economy (in which are directly integrated or are on the way to integration as productive forces; consumption as the production of signs, needs, knowledge, sexuality—in short, many things have irrupted in the "infrastructure") that the distinction between infrastructure and superstructure breaks down and that contradictions now emerge at all levels.

Something has radically changed in the capitalist sphere. Marxism no longer responds to it. It should therefore revolutionize itself in order to survive. Something it certainly hasn't done since Marx.

This hypothesis is distinguished from the first one in that it maintains that everything can still be explained in the conceptual structure of a critique of political economy (but generalized) and from the perspective of historical materialism (the instance of production), but expanded to all those domains and radically released from its economistic tendency. Go to the end of Marx. But it is not certain that this hypothesis would be tenable. It is possible that the extension of the sphere of productive forces, which

equates to a radicalization of the concept, is such that the concept itself collapses. Infra-superstructure, ideology, the dialectic of productive relations, surplus value, classes and the class struggle; what becomes of all these key concepts of historical materialism, once confronted with this generalized political economy? Do they reveal such a coherence among themselves *and with the historical phase wherein they are born* that they become useless for us, even mystifying?

Perhaps political economy is inseparable from the theory of the determinant instance of *material* production. In which case, the Marxist critique of political economy is not extendable into a generalized theory.

The Third Phase of Political Economy

In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx set up a kind of genealogy of the system of exchange value:

1. Only what is superfluous to material production is exchanged (in archaic and feudal forms, for example). Vast sectors remain outside the sphere of exchange and of the commodity.

2. The entire volume of "industrial" material production is alienated in exchange (capitalist political economy).

3. Even that which was considered to be inalienable (shared, but not exchanged): virtue, love, knowledge, consciousness; all of this falls into the sphere of exchange value. This is the era of "general corruption," "the time when each object, physical or moral, is brought to market as a commodity value, to be priced at its exact value."

The schema is clear, beyond even what Marx anticipated. Between the first and second phases, the birth of capital, a decisive mutation, not only when it comes to the *extension* of the sphere of exchange, but according to its repercussions at the level of social

relations. Between phases two and three, on the contrary, Marx and Marxism see only a kind of extensive effect. The "infrastructural" mutation, which locates the mode of production and contemporary social relations, is acquired in phase two. Phase three only represents the "superstructural" effect in the domain of "immaterial" values. With Marx, and against him in a way, we think that one must grant this schema all of its analytical force.

There is a decisive mutation between phase two and phase three. It is as revolutionary in relation to phase two as phase two was to phase one. To the third power of the system of political economy, another type of contradiction than that of phase two, which is properly that of capital (and of *Capital*). Anticipated by Marx, this new phase of political economy, which had not yet assumed in his time its full extent, is as quickly neutralized, drawn into the wake of phase two, in terms of the market and of "mercantile venality."

Even today, the only "Marxist" critique of culture, of consumption, of information, of ideology, of sexuality, etc., is made in terms of "capitalist prostitution," which is to say in terms of commodities, exploitation, profit, money, surplus value. These are all characteristic terms of phase two and terms about which one can say (in reserve for the moment) that they now assume their full value, but that they serve only as a *metaphoric reference* when they are transferred to analytical principles in phase three. Even the Situationists, undoubtedly the only ones who attempted to release this new radicality from political economy in the "society of the spectacle," still refer to this "infrastructural" logic of the commodity. Their fidelity to the proletariat is logical if, behind spectacular organization, the exploitation of labor power is still determinant—the spectacle being only an immense connotation of commodities—illogical if the concept of the spectacle is taken *as that of the commodity as it was by Marx in*

his time, in all its radicality, as a process of generalized social abstraction of which "material" exploitation is only a particular phase. In this hypothesis, the form-spectacle is determinant, from it one sets out *as from the most developed structural phase*.[5] This overturns many perspectives on politics and revolution, the proletariat and class, but take it or leave it. Things have changed in any case. A revolution has taken place in the capitalist mode without our Marxists having wanted to apperceive it. When it comes to the objection that our society is still largely dominated by the logic of the commodity, the objection is valueless. When Marx set himself to analyze capital, capitalist industrial production was still largely in the minority. When he outlined political economy as the determinant sphere, religion was still largely dominant. The decision was never at the quantitative level, but at the level of structural critique.

This mutation concerns the passage from the commodity form to the sign form, from the abstraction of the exchange of material products under the law of the general equivalence to the operationalization of all exchanges under the law of the code. With this passage *to the political economy of the sign*, it is not a question of a simple "mercantile prostitution" of all values (the completely romantic vision of the celebrated passage from the *Communist Manifesto*, capitalism trampling all human values, art, culture, labor, etc., to make money: the *romantic critique* of profit). It is a question of the passage of all values to the value of sign exchange, under the hegemony of the code, which is to say of a structure of control and of power much more subtle and more totalitarian than that of exploitation. Because the *sign is much more than a connotation of the commodity*, than a semiological supplement to exchange value. It is an operational structure around which the quantitative mystery of surplus value appears inoffensive. The meta-ideology [*suridéologie*]

of the sign and the generalized operationalization of the signifier—sanctioned everywhere today by the new master disciplines: structural linguistics, semiology, information theory, and cybernetics, which have replaced good old political economy as the theoretical foundation of the system—this new ideological structure, which plays on the hieroglyphs of the code, is much more illegible than that which plays on productive energy. This manipulation, which plays on the faculty to produce meaning and difference, is more radical than that which acts on labor power.

The sign form should not be confused with the *function* of social differentiation through signs, which is itself contemporaneous with the drama of the bourgeois class, the moneyed class nostalgic for caste values. There has long been a literature about the social psychology of distinction and prestige, linked to the consolidation of the bourgeoisie as a class and today generalized to all the middle and petty bourgeois classes, since the French moralists of the 17th century. (This literature finds its philosophical resonance in the "dialectics" of being and appearance.) But it is not a question of that. It is a question of the symbolic destruction of all social relations, not so much of the ownership of the means of production but of the *hegemony of the code*. This concerns a revolution in the capitalist system, equally as important as the industrial revolution. And it would be absurd to say that this logic of the sign concerns only the dominant class, or the middle class "avid for distinction"—the proletariat being preserved by the materiality of its practice—as much as to say that the theory of the commodity form was very good for the industrial and urban classes, but that the peasants and artisans (the immense majority in the time of Marx) had nothing to do with it. This sign form implicates the entirety of the social process. It is largely unconscious and one must no longer confuse it with the *conscious* psychology of

prestige and the differentiation; one must not confuse the commodity form and the abstract and general structure of exchange value with the *conscious* psychology of profit and economic calculation (where classical political economy remains).

Against those who, blinded by their legendary materialism, cry Idealism from the moment that one speaks of a sign or of anything that exceeds productive manual labor, against those who have a muscular and energetic vision of exploitation, we say that if the term "materialist" has a critical meaning, and not a religious one, then we are materialists. But what's the point: happy are those who look to Marx as if he would always be there to recognize them. What we have attempted to observe here is the extent to which Marxist logic can be torn from the restricted context of political economy in which it was born, the extent to which it can account for *our* contradictions, on the condition of rendering its theoretical *curve* the flexibility that it lost long ago in favor of an instrumentalism, of a fixed linearity, on the condition of tearing it from the restricted dimensions of a Euclidean geometry of history, to offer it the possibility of becoming what it might be, a truly *general* theory. Once again, this is only an exploratory hypothesis, which postulates a dialectical continuity between the political economy of the commodity and the political economy of the sign (and therefore between the critique of one and the critique of the other). Nothing properly speaking guarantees this continuity, if not the Marxist assertion itself, which turns on the concept of modes of production. The radical hypothesis being that which can no longer even accept this fundamental concept and sees in it only the arbitrariness of a particular model. At bottom, this is the question:

— Are we still in the capitalist mode of production? If yes, continue gaily with the classical Marxist analysis.

— Are we in an *ulterior* mode, so different in its structure, in its contradictions and its mode of revolution that one must radically distinguish it from capitalism (while admitting that this is still a question of a mode of production, which is determinant as such)?

— Are we even, more simply, in a mode of production, *and have we ever been*?

On this present phase of political economy, within Marxist thought we locate only the analysis centered on monopolistic capitalism. This is effectively the only point which imposes the necessity of theorizing something that Marx merely foresaw. But diverse theoreticians (Lenin, Rosa Luxembourg, etc.) did this according to the principle of the least theoretical effort, keeping as close as possible to classical concepts, and restricting the problem to its infrastructural and political givens (the end of competition, control of markets, imperialism). The monopolistic phase signifies much more than the extension of the competitive phase of capitalism. It signifies a complete restructuring and a different logic.

What happens when the system becomes monopolistic? Marx returns to a quote from Ricardo in his account (*The Poverty of Philosophy*): "Commodities which are *monopolized*, either by an individual, or by a company, vary according to the law which Lord Lauderdale has laid down: they fall in proportion as the sellers augment their quantity, and rise in proportion to the eagerness of the buyers to purchase them; their price has no necessary connection with their natural value; but the price of commodities, which are subject to competition, and whose quantity may be increased in any moderate degree, will ultimately depend, not on the state of demand and supply, but on the increased or diminished cost of their production,"[6] (and therefore of labor time). Thus when the system

becomes monopolistic, labor time, the costs of production ceased to be decisive criteria (what of surplus value?). But one does not go so far with the law of supply and demand, defined by liberal thought as a *natural* equilibrium between the two terms. Their correlation is not free, any more than the market itself is free. The control of demand (Galbraith) becomes the strategic articulation. When the competitive system still acted at a contradictory and perilous level, the exploitation of labor, the monopolistic system transferred its strategy to a level where the dialectic was inactive. In the monopolistic system, there is no dialectic of supply and demand, this dialectic is short-circuited by a provisional calculation of equilibrium. The monopolistic system (the techno-structure according to Galbraith) is supported throughout by a fiction of competition;[7] throughout the hegemony of production is supported by a fiction of the dialectic of supply and demand. But there is nothing to this: in the planned cycle of the consumer demand, these new strategic forces, these new structural elements—needs, knowledge, culture, information, sexuality—are denied all of their disruptive force. In opposition to the competitive system, *consumption* was instituted in the monopolistic system as control, the abolition of demand in its contingency, socialization directed by the code (publicity, fashion, etc. are only the spectacular aspects). The contradictions do not end here: they are functionally integrated and neutralized by the process of differentiation, of redistribution (which the competitive system did not have available to it in the area of labor power). Is consumption, which characterizes the monopolistic era, anything other than the phenomenology of abundance? It signifies the passage from a mode of strategic control, of predictive anticipation, of the absorption of the dialectic and the general homeopathy of the system by its own contradictions.

Demand, which is to say needs, corresponds more and more to a model of simulation. These new productive forces no longer pose a question to the system: they are an anticipated response; the system itself controls their emergence. It can afford the luxury of contradiction and dialectic through the play of signs. It can offer itself all the signs of revolution. Since it produces all the responses, it annihilates the question at the same time. This is only possible through the imposition and the monopoly of the code. This is to say that, however one takes it, one can only respond to the system in its own terms and according to its own laws, answering it with its own signs. The passage to this stage constitutes something other than the end of competition, it signifies that, from a system of productive forces, of exploitation and profit, as in the competitive system, its logic dominated the time of social labor, we pass to a gigantic operational game of questions and responses, a gigantic combinatory wherein all values commutate and exchange according to their operational sign. The monopolistic stage signifies less the monopoly of the means of production (which is never total) than the *monopoly of the code.*

This phase is accompanied by a radical change, in the functioning of the sign, in the *mode of signification.* The goals of prestige and distinction still correspond to a traditional status of the sign, where a signifier refers to a signified, where a formal difference, a distinctive opposition (the cut of clothes, the style of an object) still refers to what we might call the use value of the sign—to a differential profit, to a lived distinction (signified value). This is still the classical era of signification, with its referential psychology (and philosophy). This is also the *competitive* era in the manipulation of signs. The sign form describes an entirely other organization: the signified and the referent are abolished to the benefit of a single game of signifiers, a generalized formalization wherein the code no

longer refers to any subjective or objective "reality," but to its own logic: it becomes its own referent, and the use value of the sign disappears to the benefit of its commutation and exchange value alone. The sign no longer designates anything, it reaches its true structural limit, it only refers to other signs. The whole of reality becomes the place of a semiurgical manipulation, of a structural simulation. And since the traditional sign (in linguistic exchange as well) is the object of a conscious investment, of a rational calculation of signifieds, here the code becomes the instance of absolute reference, and at the same time the object of a perverse desire.[8]

The homology with the sphere of commodities is total. "Traditional" commodities (up through the competitive era of capitalism) are at once exchange value and real use value. The proper and final relationship of the subject with the produced object, the consumptive finality of the product still exists; just like the use value of the signified in the classical organization of the sign. There is already a general equivalence of production (the abstraction of exchange value), but not yet a general equivalence of consumption, the products retain a concrete finality. With monopolistic capitalism, the same mutation takes place as in the sphere of the sign. The final reference of products, their use value, completely disappears. Needs lose all autonomy, they are coded. Consumption no longer has an ecstatic value, it is placed under the constraint of an absolute finality, which is that of production. Production, on the contrary, is no longer assigned to other finalities than itself. This total reduction of the process to one of its terms, for which the other is no more than an alibi (use value alibi of the code), designates more than an evolution in the capitalist mode: a mutation. Through the elevation of production to total abstraction (production for production), to the power of a code *which no longer even risks being called into question*

by an abolished referent, the system succeeds in neutralizing not only consumption, but production itself as a field of contradictions. Productive forces as a referent ("objective" substance of the process of production) and therefore also as revolutionary referent (motor of contradictions of the mode of production), lose their specific impact, and the dialectic between productive forces and relations of production no longer acts, just as the "dialectic" between the substance of signs and the signs themselves no longer functions.[9]

Contradiction and Subversion: the Displacement of the Political

With the generalization of political economy, it becomes more and more evident that its originary action is not where Marxist analysis grasped it, in the exploitation of labor as productive force, but rather in the imposition of a form, of a general code of rational abstraction, of which the capitalist rationalization of material production is only a particular case. The domestication of language in the code of signification, the domestication of all social and symbolic relations in the schema of representation are not only contemporaneous with political economy, *they are its process itself.* Today it betrays its form and radicalizes itself in these "superstructural" realms. The capitalist system, linked to profit and exploitation, is only the inaugural modality, the infantile phase of the system of political economy. The schema of value (exchange and use) and of general equivalence is no longer limited to "production": it invested the spheres of language, of sexuality, etc. The form has not changed. One can also speak of a political economy of the sign, a political economy of the body, *without metaphor.* But the center of gravity has been displaced. The epicenter of the contemporary system is no longer the process of material production.

Nothing says that at bottom the political economy of language, of the sign, of representation did not begin well before that of material production. If material production—the quantitative operationalization of productive forces—was able to serve, for nearly two centuries, as a fundamental reference, this is perhaps according to an apparent movement. For a much longer period, the operationalization of the code has been fundamental (division, abstraction, functional systematization and structural organization). Today the code unfolds all of its consequences. But this is not a question of changing the determinant authority or of reversing priorities: that would be a return to a naïve idealism, which privileges the contents of representation, while the naïve materialism privileges the contents of production. There is no choice between the two. The system itself does not present this problem. It doesn't bother with this materialism or idealism, whether infra- nor superstructural. It proceeds according to its form, and this form carries production and representation, signs and commodities, language and labor power at the same time. In the final instance, it is its own determination. Today this form inscribes terror and social abstraction at every level.

The properly capitalist phase of socialization forced by labor, of the intensive mobilization of productive forces has been overturned. Now we have a *desublimation of productive forces*—without the logic of the system betraying the world in the least, on the contrary, its logic of reproduction expanding in its way. Everything happens as if the industrial coercion, disciplinary concentration, the integration of larger and larger masses in the apparatus of production since the 19th century, the directed crystallization of every energy into material production, was only a provisional solution, enormous but provisional, an enterprise of rationalization and of social control,

the breadth of which largely surpasses this phase. Surplus value, profit, exploitation—all of these "objective realities" of capital never do more than mask the immense social domestication, the immense directed sublimation, of which the process of production is only the *tactical* aspect. Today the system reproduces itself according to an inverse tactic: no longer a general mobilization but a techno-structural rationalization, which has the effect of corrupting whole categories or a greater and greater fraction of the productive social time of all categories. Today, contradictions appear from this "demobilized sphere," repressively "desublimated" in regard to production, no longer from the sphere of productivist exploitation.

Forced industrialization and direct exploitation are followed by prolonged education, studies subsidized through the student's 25th year, permanent development, recycling. All things apparently destined to multiply and differentiate social productivity. In fact, the system does not need this sophistication, this polyvalence, this real, statistically restrained, high level, permanent development. At its limit, it fulfills itself in a very mobile structure of polyvalent technocrats assuming all the functions of decision, and in a mass of disqualified, unaccountable, socially irresponsible others offered this illusion of participation and personal development.[10] All of these institutions of "advanced democracy," all of these "social conquests," related to education, to culture, to personal and collective creativity, all of this is, as never before, the right to private property; the real right of some and, for the remainder, day-care, cribs, social controls wherein productive forces are deliberately neutralized. Though the system no longer needs the productivity of everyone, it needs everyone to play the game.

Hence the paradox for those who must struggle to remain within the circuit of labor and productivity, of those who have been forced

or left out of that circuit, *off limits*, through the development of productive forces—the inverse of the initial situation of capitalism.[11] New contradictions are born from this. If the exploited class bore a violent contradiction, it was not on the order of an integration, a wild and forced socialization, but in a socialization nevertheless, in the structure of the general productive system. The revolt arose from the integration of labor power as a factor of production. The new categories of people, de facto dropouts, testify to the incapacity of the system to "socialize society" in its traditional strategic structure, to dynamically integrate it, even by violent contradiction at the level of production. And it is on the basis of their *total irresponsibility* that these marginal generations carry on the revolt. This revolt can remain ambiguous, if it survives in the mode of anomie and loss, if it occupies by default the margin that the system assigns it, where it is institutionalized as marginal. But it suffices that it radically adopts this forced exteriority to the system in order to call the system into question, no longer through functioning from within, but from without as a fundamental structure of society, as code, culture, interiorized social space. The entire system of production would be disinvested in this way, teetering on the social void that it has itself produced. All of its positivity would sink into this non-place, this disaffected zone, where those left to their own devices return their complete disaffection. Subversion is born here, from *elsewhere*, while contradiction works the system from *within*.[12]

Hence the major role of students, of the young, those disqualified in advance, voluntarily or not, but also of every kind of social category, of regional, ethnic, or linguistic community, once the community falls, through the process of centralization and the technocratic pyramidalization of the system, into the margin, the periphery, the zone of disaffection and irresponsibility. Excluded

from the action, their revolt consequently targets the rules of the game. Desocialized, they put not only their own exploitation by the system but the social capitalist *reality principle* in check. Segregated, discriminated, satellitized, these categories are relegated bit by bit to *the position of unmarked terms* in the code that structures the system. Their revolt consequently targets the abolition of the code, of this strategy made of distinctions, of separations, of discriminations, of structural and hierarchized oppositions.

The Black revolt targets race as code, which is to say a level much more radical than economic exploitation. The Women's struggle targets the code which makes the feminine an unmarked term. That of the youth targets a process of extreme racist discrimination, in which it lacks the right to speak. And so it is with all of these categories which fall beneath the structural bar of repression, of relegation, where they lose their meaning. This position of revolt is no longer that of the economically exploited, it targets less the extortion of surplus-value than the imposition of the code in which the present strategy of social domination is written.

The more that the system is concentrated, the more it expels these entire categories. The more it hierarchizes itself according to the law of value (sign or commodity), the more it excludes those who resist that law. So it was with the confinement of the mad on the threshold of Western rationality (Michel Foucault). It is the same today for all of civil society, which has become a place of confinement, wherein quieted man is closely watched. Everywhere, behind factories and schools, suburbs and offices, museums and hospitals, asylums and ghettos are profiled as the purest form of truly rationalized society.

This terroristic rationality produces, over the centuries, the radical distinction between masculine and feminine, with its "racial"

inferiorization and sexual objectification of the feminine. No culture but ours has produced this systematic abstraction, wherein all the elements of symbolic exchange between the sexes have been liquidated for the sake of a binary functionalism. And this separation, which has assumed its entire force through capitalist political economy, is not at all reabsorbed in our day: sexual hyperactivism, the "equalization" of the sexes, the "liberation of desire," in short the "Sexual Revolution" quite simply offers the illusion of symbolic destructuring under the sign of sex as a differential mark, as an index of status, and as a function of pleasure. The women's struggle (or gay liberation) targets this mark, not the democratic and rationalist revindication of equal political and sexual rights (equivalent to the salary claims of the worker), not the accession of women to power, turning the code in their favor, but the abolition of the code. Marxism has ignored this subversion of the political economy of sex, the law of value in the sexual domain, and of the phallus, of masculinity, as general sexual equivalent. Marxism "dialectically" subordinated it to economic contradictions, allowing all of its radicality to escape.

The same for racial discrimination: no other culture than ours has produced this systematic distinction between black and white. Not as afterthought, but as structural element, which is reproduced ever more intensely today, in the guise of a tottering liberal universalism. And the objectification of the blacks, to the extent that it is not that of an exploited labor power, is an objectification by the *code*. As one can clearly see, an entire arsenal of *significations*, irreducible to economic and political determination, support it. The emancipated black or the black member of the bourgeoisie remains black, just as the proletarianized immigrant remains primarily an immigrant, and the Jew remains a Jew. The code resurges with still more violence in everything that would seem to repress it.

In Marxist terms, the superstructure is imposed with more force as contradictions linked to the infrastructure are resolved, which is paradoxical to say the least. And here again the autonomization of the blacks as a principle of revolution, and even the autonomization of women as a sex or of the proletariat as a class, only renews the racial or sexual code, the game of political economy, by simply displacing the marked term.

Other discrimination: that of the youth, which is not at all a secondary effect of class domination or of economic exploitation, but the most explosive consequence of the present system: the hierarchal monopoly of the decision more and more circumscribes a zero term in social signification. The youth occupy this non-place in the most critical way, though not as an age group. If its revolt has such repercussions everywhere, this is because this non-place traverses all social categories. Today in economics, in politics, in science, in culture, irresponsibility is crucial: irresponsibility is the revolt of the dispossessed, of those who have never been able to speak.

Speech defines itself as incessant response (responsibility), wherein all social transcendence dissolves. Against it, political economy has throughout its history fomented the *discourse* in which everything that is exchanged is exchanged under the authority of the code. Alongside all of these discriminations, markings and demarkings about which we have spoken, the system produces a fundamental separation, which recuperates all of the others: that of the signifier and the signified. Thanks to it, and to the entire logic of communication that it institutes, the system has succeeded, slowly but inexorably, in neutralizing the symbolic power of speech. Binary structure, the abstraction of representational discourse, the general equivalence of the code, the foreclosure of speech.[13]

The insurrectional practice of recent years has given new life to this speech, overshadowing traditional contradictions.

These revolts lack the profile of the class struggle. But capitalism evolves, and with it its life lines. Until now buried beneath the "determinant instance" of the mode of production, they emerge according to the enlarged logic of the reproduction of the system. That of the ethnic, linguistic, repressed minorities, enslaved through the thread of history by bureaucratic centralization; that of the family, of the relegation of women, of children, of the youth, and of the aged, the entire cycle of repression and of leveling organized around the nuclear family as a structure of the reproduction of the order of production—that of non-genital, polymorphous, "perverse" sexuality, liquidated or ordered by the reality principle of genital sexuality; that of nature consigned to total spoliation as a productive force: the capitalist process crosses every network of natural, social, sexual, and cultural forces, every language and code: it needs the domination of nature, the domestication of sexuality, the rationalization of language as a *means* of communication, and the relegation of ethnic groups, of women, of the youth to genocide, ethnocide, and racial discrimination. One should not see these things, in accordance with a rigid Marxism, as simple excrescences, or even as attempts to divert the fundamental theme, which would remain and always be the "class struggle." In this doctrinairy confusion, there is a mystification of Marxist thought which, by circumscribing the fundamental determination within economics, permits these mental, sexual, cultural structures to function effectively. If capitalism, across the centuries of "superstructural" ideology, acted to disarm the contradictions at the level of economics, today's strategy is inverted: the system acts, with reference to economics (well being, consumption, but also working conditions,

salary, productivity, growth), as an alibi for the more serious subversion which threatens it in the symbolic order. Today the sphere of economics, with its partial contradictions, acts as an ideological factor of integration. Making itself complicit with debt, with diversion, Marxism is very simply exploited by capitalism as a (spontaneous and benevolent) force of ideological labor. Everything that now privileges the field of economics, salary claims or the theorization of economics as the final authority—Séguy or Althusser—is "objectively" idealist and reactionary.

This radical subversion—*transversal* to the extent that it transverses the contradictions linked to the mode of production—*non-dialectical* to the extent that there is no dialectical negativity between the repressed, unmarked term, and the marked term—this radical subversion can only transgress the line and deconstruct the code.[14] This subversion telescopes the "traditional" contradictions. But they do not converge because they are separated by a strategic mutation in the system. Hence the impossible conjunction of the working class and the students (or the idle young and the workers) under the pious invocation of a common exploitation. The respective demands diverge, and diverge more and more, despite the desperate efforts of the student and left movements to "politicize" their subversion through immersion in the working class. Between the workers obstinately defending themselves on the basis of their salary and their integration in the industrial system, their "right to work" and the advantages the system provides them,[15] and the demobilized, demarcated, excluded categories (sex, age, race, ethnicity, language, culture and knowledge; all criteria "superstructural" and surpassed according to the rationalist perspective of the class struggle), for whom the ethics of the system collapses, the gulf grows faster than it can be filled in. The working class is no longer

the gold standard of revolt and contradiction. It is no longer the referenced revolutionary subject. And the hope of articulating, of making dialectical, a subversive movement that challenges the system as a code, as a complete language of repression and of separation, with its class contradictions, which challenges the system as a mode of production and exploitation, this hope is also part of the dream of political will.

However, other things appear even at the level of the process of production. There as well the secret defection runs in and grows as the chancre of capitalism. Everywhere the morality of labor, the secular "instinct of workmanship," this ethic of individual and collective sublimation of the labor process (today paradoxically reactivated by the unions and the "worker's party") is dislocated. In May '68 we saw, "Never Work," but also in the Fiat strike, at Usinor, in the strike for striking, without demands, practices which deny no longer only exploitation but labor itself, as principle of reality and rationality, as *axiom*. It is no longer a question of dialectical negativity within the mode of production, but of a pure and simple refusal of production as general axiom of social relations. Undoubtedly even corporatist and salary demands hide it, transpose it in its flight from this radical denegation—meticulously asphyxiated and channeled by the parties and unions for whom, as much as for the system itself, the economic demands are the ideal instrument of control and manipulation.[16] This is what gives the New Left and the hippie movement its meaning: not the open revolt of some, but the immense latent defection, the endemic, masked resistance—the silent majorities, nostalgic for speech and violence—something in every man profoundly rejoices in seeing a burning car (the youth in this sense is only the exponential category of a process latent in the entire social expanse, without exception for age or "objective"

condition). On the contrary, the New Left commits suicide if it claims a statistical significance, if it claims to be a mass "political" force. It is irremediably lost on the level of representation and of traditional political contradiction (the same thing for the American counter-culture).

Political Revolution and Cultural Revolution

Capitalism has been able, during the last one hundred years, to extract political and social changes necessary to absorb its contradictions when they are posed solely at the level of material production. Contradiction only becomes radical when it deepens, as is the case today, at the total level of social relations. By enlarging the field of social abstraction to the level of consumption, of signification, of information, of knowledge, by enlarging its jurisdiction and control to the whole field of culture, daily life, the unconscious, the system has resolved the partial contradictions linked to the economic relations of production. Through this reestablishment, which has taken it a century, capitalism, by radicalizing its own logic, has also radically altered the Marxist definitions of contradiction and revolution.

The "cultural revolution," which corresponds to this radicalized logic of capital, to this "in depth" imperialism,[17] is not the developed form of the economico-political revolution. It acts on the basis of a reversal of "materialist" logic. Against the materialist postulate according to which the mode of production and of the reproduction of social relations is subordinated to the relations of material production, one can ask if it is not the *production* of social relations which determines the mode of material *reproduction* (the development of productive forces and relations of production). A genealogy of social relations makes many other criteria of domination appear

than the private ownership of the means of production: species, race, sex, age, language, culture: anthropological or cultural signs. All of these criteria are criteria of *difference*, of signification and the code. That they all "descend" in the last instance from economic exploitation is a simplistic hypothesis. It is reasonable on the other hand that this hypothesis is only the rationalization of an order of domination which reproduces itself through it, which plays with economics as a tactic, a detour, or an alibi. Today, what's essential is no longer profit nor exploitation. *Perhaps it never was, even in the Golden and Iron Ages of capitalism.*

It is directly at the level of the production of social relations that capitalism is vulnerable and on the road to perdition. It catches its death, not from being unable to reproduce economico-politically, but from being unable to reproduce itself. The social symbolic relation is the unbroken cycle of giving and receiving, which, in the primitive exchange, includes the consumption of the "surplus" and the deliberated anti-production, when the accumulation (the non-exchanged thing) risks breaking this equilibrium.

At all levels, the system is sick of desublimation, of liberalization, of tolerance, of seeking to surpass itself to survive: consumption, the satisfaction of needs, sexual liberation, the rights of women, etc. It is ready for anything that will reduce social abstraction, that will get people into the game. But, it can only, here again, accomplish liberalization if it is hyper-repressive: needs, forever contingent and heterogeneous, are homogenized and definitively rationalized according to models; sexuality, ever repressed, is liberated as a game of signs, made objective as a function of the body and benefit of the pleasure principle.

Freedom of information? So that it can be better framed and modeled by the media. The pressure of political economy is

accentuated everywhere. Latest avatars: anti-pollution and "job enrichment." Here too, the system seems to release its constriction and to restore the dignity of nature and work: the desublimation of productive forces in relation to traditional exploitation. But we are well aware that a symbolic relationship between man and nature and man and work will not return here. The functionality of the system will only become more flexible, be reinforced.

Coding, hyper-coding, universalization of the code, proliferating axiomatization of the capitalist system (Deleuze), and, against this triumphal abstraction, against this irreversible monopolization, the symbolic demand, the demand that nothing ever be offered without being returned, won without being lost, produced without being destroyed, spoken without response.

The Economy as Ideology and Model of Simulation

AGAINST THIS SYMBOLIC subversion, which arises everywhere to some extent under the heading of "cultural revolution," the capitalist system has every interest in "closeting" contradictions within the economy, as a diversion. Making the economy autonomous is an ideological strategy. The same thing that Bourdieu describes in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* in regard to the academic and cultural system.[18] (This system theorizes itself as transcendent and offers itself as a democratic and universal virtuality—education and culture for all—the class structure relegated to the order of production.) Through this autonomizing effect and behind this simulacra of transcendence, the system fulfills its ideological function best and most effectively restores the dominant social relations. One can ask oneself if it can only reproduce them, and if this is not the location of a specific production of

class domination. This implies a reversal of the terms of analysis: the economy can appear in our society as the place wherein our chances are most thoroughly equalized, wherein social relations are least conservative, etc. (Historically, since the rise of the bourgeoisie, it has always also played the role of an emancipatory spring-board over the most conservative juridical, religious, and cultural structures.) And the academic and cultural system also might play the decisive role in the *production* of social relations, the economy being only a relay, and the bias of *reproduction*.

In any case, the ideological process, extracted from Bourdieu's analysis, is unchanged and can be generalized: ideology always passes through the autonomization of a partial group—every autonomized partial group immediately assumes ideological value. So it is with the academic system in Bourdieu, but *all* partial fields—the economy in particular—can act as ideological fields once erected as an autonomous (and even determinant) authority. The automization of the economy is common to both capitalism and Marxism.

1.

Every autonomous partial social field becomes in the same way the location of a universalist and egalitarian myth: religion occupied this place in its time, the academic and cultural system does so today, consumption as an isolated function of production is occupying it more and more. But the economy affirms itself, in its autonomy before religion, culture, etc., as the sphere of social *rationality*, as the *universal* authority on productivity (here again, the Marxists are indistinguishable from bourgeois economists), and therefore as the egalitarian myth: everyone has equal rights before the objective rationality of production.

2.

Economics is supported by science. All of the separate fields secrete, as separated fields, a myth of rigor, objectivity, and truth. Objectivity and truth are only the effect of the division of the field of knowledge, of its autonomization according to certain rules. Isolated from everything else by a perfect, partial knowledge—this is the imaginary of the exact sciences. Science's desire is never anything but a fascination with misunderstanding. Political economy, as the science of the separated, is therefore properly ideological, and the critique of this political economy (when it wants to take without giving, win without losing, produce without destruction) risks shattering this reciprocity and making power appear. It is this symbolic relation that the model of political economy (of capital), for which the only trial is that of the law of value and therefore of indefinite appropriation and accumulation, can no longer produce. It is its radical negation: that which is produced is no longer symbolically exchanged, and that which is not symbolically exchanged (the commodity) feeds a social relationship of power and exploitation.

Capitalism cannot escape the fatality of this symbolic disintegration under the sign of economic rationality. One could also say, with Cardan, that his fundamental contradiction is no longer between the development of *productive* forces and the relations of production, but in the impossibility of making people "participate"—but the term participation has too contractual and rationalist a connotation to express the symbolic—saying that the system is structurally incapable of liberating human potentialities other than as productive forces, which is to say according to an operational finality, which leaves no place for the reversion of loss, of gifts, of sacrifice, and therefore for the possibility of symbolic exchange.

The example of consumption is significant. The feudal system collapsed because it was unable to find means of rational productivity. The bourgeoisie itself had to make people work, but it too almost fell apart, in 1929, through its inability to make them consume. It was content, up to that point, with the forced socialization of work and exploitation. But the crisis of 1929 marked the point of asphyxiation: production was no longer essential, selling was. Consumption became a strategic element, the people were mobilized henceforth as consumers, their "needs" became as essential as their labor power. Through this operation, the system assures its economic survival at a fantastically enlarged level. But other things are at stake in the strategy of consumption: given the possibility of waste and consumption, organizing social redistribution (Social Security, disbursements, salaries that are no longer defined as the strict economic reproduction of labor power), advertising initiatives, human relations, etc., the system created the illusion of symbolic participation, the illusion that something of that which is valued and won is also redistributed, returned, sacrificed. In fact, all of this symbolic simulation reveals itself as leading toward profit and to a hyper-power. Despite all of its good will (that at least of capitalists conscious of the necessity of tempering the logic of the system so as to put the explosion off for a more or less short term), capitalism can only make consumption consumption, a festival, an expense, since to consume is to resume production. All that is wasted is in fact invested, nothing is ever lost. Even when coffee stocks burn and enormous wealth is devoured in war, the system cannot prevent it from enlarging production. Capitalism is caught in the fatal grip of production, of accumulation, of profitability. Its aide to developing countries returns in the form of multiple profits: even if the experts in liberalism have been denouncing the catastrophe that is awaiting

them at the end of the process for twenty years, the richest countries can only, even if they lucidly wanted to, limit the gulf that separates them from the Third World to the price of its real sacrifices. And this is the same for each individual: each consumer is enclosed in the profitable manipulation of goods, of signs, to his or her own profit. He or she can no longer even really lose time in leisure.[19] He or she inexorably reproduces, at his or her own level, the entire system of political economy: the logic of appropriation, the impossibility of waste, of giving, of loss, the inexorability of the law of value.

Power consists in the monopoly on speech: speech, decision, responsibility are no longer exchanged. But this situation is explosive: those who have power know it. And we see them attempting desperately to relinquish some of it, to redistribute some of their responsibility, to avoid backlash like the kind that struck in May 1968. But they *cannot*. They would really like participation, but participation reveals itself every time as the best way to reproduce and enlarge the system. The more one offers autonomy to everyone, the more the decisions are concentrated at the summit.[20] Even in 1929, the system burst by failing to promote production, so today it fails by being unable to sell speech. Because it is a system of production, it can only reproduce itself, it can no longer recover symbolic integration (the reversibility of the process of accumulation in the festival and expenditure, the reversibility of the process of reproduction in destruction, the reversibility of the process of power in exchange and death).

Every system of "scientific" (materialist) production can only reinforce the separated abstraction of its object. There is no truth in economics, or rather we can only create that truth: it is the truth of an arbitrary authority.

3.

Every partial field—economics included—is the field of contradictions, which are themselves partial. The place of fundamental contradiction, the place of politics today, is the line of separation between partial fields. The revolution is not the resolution of these partial contradictions, but the abolition of this line. The contradictions within the partial fields are the echo of the separation that haunts them, and which is their originary act. They are therefore ambiguous: at the same time that they manifest the obsession with non-separation, they reinforce separation by making it autonomous as an *internal* contradiction. Their resolution can never reach beyond separation. This is why it is never definitive. They resolve themselves in a flight out in front of the partial system in their obsession with separation (others would say with castration). Such is the process of political economy, such is the *imaginary* of political economy (Cardan).

The entire materialist critique of ideology, its denunciation of the autonomization of the value of understanding, of culture, of this simulation of a reality principle of ideas, this whole critique *returns integrally against materialism*, which is to say against the autonomization of economics insofar as it is a (determinant) authority.

Everywhere economics appears as the theorization of the rupture in symbolic exchange, the institution of a separated field, which then becomes the vector of a total reorganization of social life. The simulation of the universal finality of calculation and productive rationality, the simulation of a *determination*, there where symbolic exchange knows neither determination nor end. The simulation of a *reality* of this authority, of an economic reality principle, which proceeds to universalize itself on the basis of the principle of separation: this *model* has today found its finished form: the placement

of operational models, the simulation of situations toward the end of foreseeability and control, operational artifacts in place of reality and the reality principle of the code.[21]

Cardon: "The rationality of modern society is purely formal: it is the syllogism of belief camouflaged in the historical 'dialectic' of the development of productive forces. But in this syllogism, the premises borrow their contents from the imaginary; and the prevalence of the syllogism as such, the obsession with the detached rationality of the rest constitutes a second degree imaginary. Modern pseudo-rationality is a form of the imaginary in history: it is arbitrary in its ultimate ends insofar as they arise without reason, and it is arbitrary when it poses itself as an end (this holds for logical reason and 'dialectical' reason). In this aspect of his existence, the modern world is prey to systematic delirium, of which the autonomization of unchecked technology (and bureaucracy) is the most immediately perceptible and menacing form...the economy exhibits in the more striking way the domination of the imaginary at all levels."

The symbolic is the abolition of this economico-political imaginary (and of all other separated fields).

In this sense, the cultural revolution no longer shackles the economico-political revolution. It traverses it as a partial revolutionary discourse, and, in a certain way, a rationalizing, mystifying discourse. Revolution targeting the totality of life and of social relations can only also and initially target the autonomization of economics, the final ("revolutionary" and materialist) avatar of which is the autonomization, in the form of a determinant authority, of the mode of production. Today the system has no better strategy than the dialectic of political economy. For this reason, the cultural revolution must target the economico-political revolution.

Marxist analysis in terms of class and mode of production cannot account for this revolutionary potentiality, this subversion directed against the axiomatic of productive rationality (includes its internal contradictions). It is incapable of theorizing the *total* social practice (including the most radical practice) if only so as to reflect it in the mirror of the mode of production, or to return it to the dimensions of a revolutionary "politics." At the point where we are, Marxist analysis, in its revolutionary rationality, clarifies for us neither our societies nor primitive societies.

Retrospectively, moreover, one must ask if *it has not always been like this*. If, already in Marx' day, the theory of the mode of production did not extraordinarily simplify social practice. If it no longer accounts for the current revolutionary mode, did it at least, at a given moment in history (the "classic" phase of capitalism), account for its fundamental contradictions? Have modes of production (and classes and the class struggle) had their moment of truth?

Here the sacrilegious hypothesis imposes itself, that the conjunction in the 19th century of the Marxist theory and the workers movement might not have been the miracle of History—the greatest event of History, Althusser says—*but a reciprocal process of reduction and neutralization*. The objective historical result having been the saturation of the two in the Leninist *political* mixture, later in the Stalinist bureaucracy, today in the most vulgar reformist empiricism—stages of a long term that it would be too simple to impute it to some twist in the path: the profound logic of this term brings us back before Stalin, before Lenin, etc., to the crucial point in the thought of Marx himself, to the original event, always thought to be irrevocably revolutionary, of the dialectical conjunction

of his theory and the objective social practice of a class called the proletariat.

We have lived in the providential shadow of that event to such an extent that the idea of this fusion was not necessary, nor necessarily best, that it ever really be formulated. The social revolt and the theoretical movement, indexing one with the other, *verifying* one and the other through history, were universalized, under the sign of dialectical revolution, as historical reason. But they were no longer a radical difference.

Effectively, the fusion was not of a radical revolt and a radical theory, both "wild" and indeterminate (as was the case in the insurrectional movements of the 19th century, up to the Commune, and once again in May '68), but of two already distinct terms, each distorted by the other. Dialectical, if you will, but it is necessary to observe that that which is dialecticized, that upon which Marxist theory hinges, is a social "reality," specified as a class, as a conscious and objective organization, as the proletariat. In theory, the proletarian organization grasps a well-determined social critique, in terms of modes of production, of relations of production and class. Part "objective" and organized class, part rational and structured (both in its materialist content and dialectical form) theory; between these two terms, each rationalized in the image of the other, the dialectical short-circuiting of the revolution takes place. It is difficult to evaluate everything that has been repressed and eliminated in this operation, which clarified, once and for all, under the sign of materialism, of history and dialectics, the revolutionary *reality principle.* Let's say that everything brought up by the "pleasure principle" and by the radicality of revolt, everything that one can still read in the insurrections of the 19th century, in the destruction of machines, in the "pre-Marxist" libertarian, utopian discourse, in the *poètes*

maudits, or in the sexual revolution, and everything that intended, well beyond material production, the symbolic configuration of the totality of life and social relations, destroyed by the abstract configuration of the political economy—it is this entire wild and radical movement that Marxist *theory* and socialist *organization*, in their miraculous conjunction, made dialectical by treating class status and "historical" content as the development of productive forces. They rationalized it in antagonistic power relations *within* the same social field, magnetized by political economy. This revolt implied something other than a *dialectic of forces*: the irruption of a radical *difference*. Something other than surplus value and the exploitation of labor power: the corruption even of all social relations by the unilateral rationality of production and universal socialization under the law of value. And the operation, if one looks closely, consisted in a "dialectical" rehabilitation of the status of producer, which tripped this revolt up, which Marxist theory put forward as the point of departure for social revolution. Even the process of destruction and repression, Marxism made a revolutionary detour and a promise of liberation. (Nietzsche was right: the workers made a cardinal value of the sign of their slavery, as the Christians did of their suffering.) And the revolution was not longer for here and now: it became a historical finality. Made positive under the sign of progress by the bourgeoisie or dialectical under the sign of revolution by Marxism, it is always in opposition to the radicality of desire which traverses every finality of its non-sense, the imposition of a meaning, the rational projection of an objective finality.

Alongside the situation created by massive industrialization, concentrationary discipline, putting generations of artisans and peasants on the clock since the beginning of the 19th century, alongside the situation of destructuration and revolt created in this

way, Marxist theory and the worker's organization together accomplished a task of historic rationalization, a certain kind of *secondary elaboration*: the valorization of labor as the source of social wealth, the valorization of a process of the rational development of productive forces, this *process* was confused with the revolutionary *project* (surely according to a "dialectical" negativity, behind which the confusion of this same class with labor as the class's social ethic was irrevocably hidden).

The ethic of rational labor, originally bourgeois, which served to define the bourgeoisie historically as a class, is found to be renewed with a fantastic amplitude at the level of the working class, contributing here too to the *definition* of the working class as a class, which is to say to circumscribing that class to a status of historical representability.

Respect for the machine, safeguarding the instruments of labor, implying virtual property, (a human right of some kind, in opposition to a legal right), and the future appropriation of the means of production, institute the working class in a productivist vocation which replaces the historical vocation of the bourgeoisie. That in the revolutionary project these means of production should be placed in the hands of those who produce, under the sign of social appropriation and self-management, only describes the eternal quality of the process of production, beyond the changes of modes of production. The "class of laborers" finds itself confirmed in this way, even in its revolutionary ideal, in its idealized status as productive force: it reflects itself as the "most precious human capital," as the originary myth of social wealth.

Under cover of historical materialism, the idealism of production ends by granting a positive definition to the revolutionary class. The class thus *defines itself in the universal*, according universality to labor

power: it returns to an essence to which it is in fact assigned by the bourgeoisie, which defines it in its historical being through the universality of capital. Capital and labor power thus confront one another as respective values, equally grounded in the universal.[22] In this confrontation of classes, in which each has its objective historical *reference*, the bourgeoisie always carries the day. The concept of class belongs to it, and when it succeeds in enclosing the proletariat within it, it has already won. The concept of class is a rationalist, universalist concept, born of a society of rational production, and of the calculation of productive forces: in this sense, there has never been and never will be anything but a single class: the bourgeoisie, the capitalist bourgeois class—defined not only through its ownership of the *means* of production, but by the rational *finality* of production. To make the proletariat a class is therefore already to enclose it in an order of definition (underlined by "class consciousness" as the "subject of history")[23] for which the model remains the bourgeois class. The ascension to the status of class equates a rationalization of the "worker's movement" with its revolt, draws it into line with the general rationality of the industrial order. Thus "class against class" might well signify antagonism to a level of the relationship to *means* of production, but this in no way shatters the finality of production: on the contrary, making this dialectical within this schema only infinitely extends the process of political economy.

If the class struggle has a meaning, it is not in the confrontation of one class by another. (We know that when the structure reverses itself and the proletarian class triumphs, as in the East, nothing profoundly changes in social relations). It can only be the radical refusal to let itself be enclosed in the being and consciousness of a class. This is not to deny it insofar as it is deprived of the means of production. (This is unfortunately the "objective" Marxist definition

of the class.) It is to deny it insofar as it is assigned to production and to political economy. Can the proletariat define itself in terms of productive forces, of labor, of historical rationality? Evidently no. In this structure, the proletariat (or any other possible class) is condemned to enter into the rational dialectic of form and content (the class structure on one hand, and its own class values on the other, when these are not its class "interests"!) It is condemned to a *class finality* which completely encloses it in the dialectical play of capitalist society.

Better, by reinforcing itself in its being, in relation to the class struggle, it reinforces the dominant class in its being. It therefore participates, functionally, in the system of power, its degraded opposition serving the reformist impulse of the capitalist system, when it can no longer reveal itself as still conservative in the realm of values. This is where we are today.

To what can we impute the historical loss of the "revolutionary double negation" (the proletariat has truly negated the bourgeoisie, but has it not negated itself as a class)?

To Lenin, to Stalin again, to an accident of the dialectic, to a fault of the proletariat itself? Simply, the conjunction of a revolutionary theory intending the abolition of classes, clarified by Marx, with a revolutionary subject (the reality and historic class or salaried workers)—we can not even say that it should not slowly be turned against itself; it *logically* produced this substantialization of social revolt in an unsurpassable theoretical class, soon fixed in its being by the organization. Starting here, the proletarian class and Marxist theory began to *mutually justify one another*, and therefore to *neutralize* one another. And the project of changing life, which Marx demanded alongside revolutionary action, quietly became the victory of the proletariat.

The Revolution as End: History in Suspense

Along with the mode of production, the concept of history constitutes the other wing of this dialectical rationalization. Within the social structure, it is homologous with the time of the theorization of the mode of production (once again, the imposition in the Renaissance of perspectival convergence as the reality principle of space can serve as a reference).

One can speak of a "millenarian" idea in Marx:[24] communism for a "near future," imminent revolution. This "utopian" demand dates from the *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, the *1844 Manuscripts*, the *Theses on Feuerbach*, and the *Manifesto*. After the loses of 1848, reconversion: communism is not among the possibilities offered by the present situation. It can only become the order of the day much later, *at the end of a period which will have created the necessary historical conditions*.[25] With *Capital*, we pass from revolutionary utopia to a properly historical dialectic, from the immediate and radical revolt to objective consideration: capitalism must "ripen," which is to say internally attain its own negation as a social system—therefore a *historical and logical necessity*, the long march of the dialectic, wherein the negativity of the proletariat no longer immediately bears on itself as a class, but rather over the long term on the process of capital. Engaged in this long objective "detour," the proletariat begins to reflect itself as a negative term and as the subject of history.[26]

The Marxist effort diverges from its radical exigency toward the story of historical laws. The proletariat no longer leaps out of its shadow, it grows in the shadow of capital. The revolution is placed in a process of implacable evolution at the end of which the laws of history require man to liberate himself as a social creature.

The radical exigency does not abandon the Marxist perspective, but it becomes a *final* exigency. Conversion from here and now toward an asymptotic fulfillment, a *deferred expiration date*, indefinitely put off, which, under the sign of a reality principle of history (objective socialization of society created by capital—dialectical process of the maturation of "objective" revolutionary conditions) will confirm the transcendence of *ascetic* communism, communism of sublimation and of hope, which, in the name of an ever renewed beyond—beyond history, beyond the dictatorship of the proletariat, beyond capitalism and beyond socialism—over and over again demands the sacrifice of the immediate and permanent revolution. Ascetic in relation to its own revolution, communism effectively suffers profoundly from not "taking its desires for reality"[27] (this transcendent dimension, this sublimation was also that of orthodox Christianity in opposition to the millenarian sects which longed for the immediate fulfillment, here below. Sublimation, as we know, represses: it founds the power of the church).

The revolution becomes an *end*, something it definitely was not in the radical exigency that presumes, in place of referencing a final totalization, that man is *already entirely there* in his revolt. Such is the meaning of utopia, if one distinguishes it from the dreaming idealism to which the "scientists" take pleasure in reducing it, so as to bury it more completely. It refuses the schema *by diluting* the contradictions. This ideal structuration leaves a place for the "reason" of history, for a conscious and logical revolutionary organization, for the dialectical prediction of a *deferred* revolution—this dialectic falling very quickly in the pure and simple schema of ends and means: *The Revolution as "end" equals the autonomization of means.* We know what became of it: all of this having had the effect of debasing the present situation, of exorcising immediate subversion,

of diluting (in the chemical sense of the term) the explosive reaction in a long term solution.

"MAN SHOULD KNOW to content himself with the perspective of his liberation. This is why 'revolutionary romanticism', 'hic et nunc' revolt will persist until the Marxist perspective ceases to be a perspective" (Kalivoda). But could it be, from the moment in which it entered into the objective play of history, the resignation to the *laws* of history and dialectics, something other than a perspective? From the moment Marx began writing, the workers broke their machines. Marx didn't write for them. He had nothing to say to them—they were even wrong in his eyes: the industrial bourgeois was revolutionary. The theoretical split explains nothing. The immanent revolt of the workers who broke their machines remained forever without explanation. Marx contented himself with the dialectic, making them babes in the woods. The entire workers movement, up until the Commune, lived by this utopian exigency of immediate socialism (Déjacque, Coeurderoy, etc.), and they *were* such even in their defeat. Because utopia was never written in their future, it is what is always already there. Marx himself speaks of the beyond, he speaks of all of this as of a surpassed phase. But from what point of view was he right in *advance*? The failure of these movements (in opposition to the "Marxist" revolutions of the 20th century) is not an argument: it appeals precisely to the "reason" of history, to an objective end which could not account for the specificity of social speech not finalized by a future dimension. Here, in the verdict of history, international communism today seeks the only proof of its truth, no longer in dialectical reason, but in the immanence of facts: at this level, history is no longer even a process, it is simply a trial that always condemns revolt.

The Radicality of Utopia

In fact, Marx is right, "objectively" right, but this objectivity and this being right, only came about, as in all science, at the cost of a *misunderstanding*, a misunderstanding of the radical utopia contemporary with the *Manifesto* and with *Capital*. We can't say that Marx "objectively" theorized capitalist social relations, the class struggle, the movement of history, etc. In effect, Marx "objectified" the convulsion of the social order, its present subversion, its language of life and death, liberating in the moment itself, in long term dialectical revolution, in a spiral finality which was only life without the end of political economy.[28]

Accursed poetry, non-official art, utopian writing in general, offering a current, immediate content to the liberation of man should be the speech of communism, its direct prophecy. It is only its bad conscience, precisely because in it something of humanity is realized *immediately*, because it objects with pity to the "political" dimension of the revolution, which is only the dimension of its finally postponement. This art is the linguistic equivalent of the wild social movements that were born from the symbolic situation of rupture (symbolic, which is to say non-universalized, non-dialectical, non-rationalized in the mirror of an imaginary objective history). This is why poetry (not "Art") was only fundamentally linked to the utopian social movements, "revolutionary romanticism," never with Marxism as such. The contents of liberated man are fundamentally less important than the abolition of the separation of the present and the future. The abolition of this form of time, the dimension of sublimation, forbids us from pardoning the dialectical idealists, who are, at the same time, political realists. According to them, the revolution should be distilled in history, it

should reach its term, it should ripen in the sun of contradiction. Present, immediate: unthinkable for them, *insufferable*. Poetry and utopian revolt have this radical present in common, this denegation of finalities. This actualization of desire, no longer exorcised in a future liberation but demanded here, immediately, even in its death drive, in the radical compatibility of life and death. Such is its ecstasy, such is revolution. It has nothing to do with the political due date of revolution.

Contrary to Marxist analysis which poses man as dispossessed, as alienated, and relates him to a total man, to a total Other, who is there in future Reason (this is utopian in the bad sense of the term), which assigns man to a project of totalization: *utopia itself knows no concept of alienation*. Utopia believes that every man, every society is already completely present, at each social moment, in its symbolic demand. Marxism never analyzes revolt, or the social movement of society, other than in the *filigree of the revolution*, as a reality on the road to maturity. Perfect racism, in the completed stage of rationality, which returns everything else into the nothingness of the surpassed.[29] With this, Marxism remains profoundly a philosophy, in everything that remains in it, even its "scientific" stage, of its vision of alienation. The other side of critical thought, in terms of alienation, is always a total essence that haunts a divided existence. This metaphysics of totality in no way opposes the current reality of this division, it is part of its system. For the subject, the perspective at the end of history, of finding transpncy, or total "use value," is as completely religious as the reintegration of essences. "Alienation" is still the imaginary of the subject, even of the subject of history. The subject does not have to become a total man again, the subject does not have to rediscover himself; today he has lost himself. The totalization of the subject is still the end of the end of the political economy of

consciousness, confirmed by the identity of the subject as political economy as by the principle of equivalence. This is what should be abolished in place of cradling men with the phantasm of their lost identity, of their future autonomy.

What absurdity to pretend that men are "others" and to seek to convince them that their most cherished desire is to become "themselves"! Each man is entirely there at each instant. Society is also there, in each instant. Coeurderoy, the Luddites, Rimbaud, the Communards, the wild strikers, those of May '68 are not the revolution in filigree: they *are* the revolution. Not concepts in transit, their speech is symbolic, and intends no essence. It is a speech before history, before politics, before truth, before separation and future totality—the only speech which, speaking the world as non-separated, is truly revolutionary.

There is no possible or impossible. Utopia is there, in every energy raised against political economy. But this utopian violence does not accumulate, it loses itself. It does not seek accumulation, as does economic value, but the abolition of death. It never wants powers. Enclosing the "exploited" in the only historic possibility of taking power has been the worst redirection of revolution that has taken place. Therein we see to what depths the axioms of political economy have undermined, invested, and redirected the revolutionary perspective. Utopia seeks speech against power, and against the reality principle, which is only the phantasm of the system and of its indefinite reproduction. It only wants speech, and only to lose itself in it.

12

Strike Story

The Class Struggle as Will and Representation

The political "scene," with its representative authorities and its delegation of power to figures (parties, unions, parliaments); dueling authorities, proletarian as well as bourgeoisie; memberships mediated by their representative authorities. This is the class struggle: mass vaudeville, the proletariat plays a choice role: its "dear delegates" have their entrances and exits on stage, their comings and goings in the wings. This staging has persisted for a century, the proletariat has lived it as a conquest of its social legitimacy, it is because of it that capital has integrated the revolution as a variable. If it hasn't been like this since the 19th century (*though this is not certain*), it is clear that today society as a group recognizes itself by the *model* of the class struggle as a relationship of forces. Prior to the spiral of the strike and negation, the International of development!

The strike justifies itself historically in a system of production, as violence organized to wrest a fraction of surplus value, if not power, from the inverse violence of capital. Today, this strike is dead:

1. Because capital is capable of letting every strike rot—this because we are no longer exactly in a system of production (maximalization of surplus value). Perish the anticipated profit

that the reproduction of the form of the social relation intended to save!

2. Because these strikes no longer change the basis of anything. Today capital itself redistributes a sensible part of surplus value, because for capital this is a question of life and death. Better, the protest strike tears away from capital something it would have eventually conceded anyway, according to its own logic of reproduction.

If therefore the productive relations, and with them the class struggle, are enlisted in social relations and are politically orchestrated, it is clear that the only thing that can cause an irruption in this cycle is something that escapes organization and class definition as *representative* historical authority and *productive* historical authority.

Only those who avoid the tourniquet of production and representation can deregulate the mechanisms and foment, from the foundation of their blind condition, a return of the "class struggle" which could find its pure and simple end as the geometric location of "politics." Here the intervention of immigrants assumes its meaning in recent strikes. But this intervention does not exclude any other group *deprived of social representation*. Women, the youth, students, homosexuals, and the "proletariat" itself, when they become "wild" or if one admits that at bottom the unions don't represent the workers at all, only themselves—we are all in this sense "immigrants." Inversely, they can cease to be. There is therefore no "immigrant as such," and they don't constitute a new historical subject, a neo-proletariat which would subsume the other.

Because millions of workers find themselves, through the mechanism of their discrimination, deprived of every representative authority, it is from them that the irruption on the Western

scene of class struggle carries the crisis to the crucial level of representation. Held outside class by the whole society, including the unions (and with the racial economic complicity of their "base" on this point: for the organized proletarian "class," centered on its relation of economico-political forces with the bourgeois capitalist class, the immigrant is "objectively" a class enemy), the immigrants serve, through this social exclusion, as analysts of the relationship between workers and unions, and more generally of the relationship between the "class" and every representative authority of the "class." Deviants according to the system of political representation, they infect the entire proletariat with their deviance. The proletariat itself also learns little by little to let go of the system of representation and of every authority which pretends to speak in its name.

The situation won't last: unions and bosses have detected the danger and set about reintegrating the immigrants as "entirely separate figures" within the "class struggle." But it is too late.

Autopsy of the Unions

The Renault strike of March and April 1973 constitutes a kind of general repetition of this crisis. Apparent confusion, disorganized, manipulated, a retreat to certain previous strikes, and, in the final count, a failure (if not the extraordinary terminological victory which replaced the term "specialized worker," henceforth taboo, with "*productive agent*"!), in reality a very beautiful struggle of unions trapped between their base and the bosses. At the beginning, it was a "wild" strike instigated by the "specialized worker" immigrants. But the CGT[1] had a standing army ready for this sort of accident: the extension of the strike to other factories or to

other categories of personnel, seizing the occasion of a now ritual Springtime mass action. Even this control mechanism, which has offered its proofs since '68, and on which the unions truly could have counted to be able to support themselves for a generation, eluded them this time. Even the non-wild base (Seguin, flins, Sandouville) alternately quit and resumed work (which is also important) with regard to the council of their unions. They were constantly taken off balance. What they obtained from the managers to ratify with the workers, the workers didn't want. The concessions that they won from the workers to restart the negotiations with the managers, the managers refused and closed the factories. They appealed to the workers over the unions. In fact, they deliberately created the crisis to force the unions' entrenchment: could they control all of the workers? Their social existence, their legitimacy was at stake. This is the reason the bosses "stiffened" (as did the government at all levels). This wasn't a question of a test of strength between the organized (unionized) proletariat and the bosses, but of a *test of representation* for the union under the double pressure of the base and the bosses—and this test is the result of all the wild strikes of recent years, which is to say that the non-unionized, the unmanageable youth, the immigrants, all of those outside the class, set it off.

Reality check. Today the whole purpose of the union is to disperse the crumbs of the management of capital throughout the working class (the drive belt of development), and all that it wants in exchange is the delegation of the bosses' power over this same working "class." But the bosses, very logically, offer them this delegation of power only if they are capable of taking control. If they seem entangled in the unmanageables or the wild strikers, or to harden their resolve, as was the case at the end of March, beginning

of April (even if it is, a smart tactic, to smother them), then the bosses resume the caution that they showed the union when accepting to negotiate with it,[2] when accepting to negotiate only with it, and let it go. At this moment, the management plays a dangerous game, it contributes at least as much as the leftists in discrediting the unions, which are its drive belt. But it has them against the ropes when it says: Stop, if you play this little game we will force you to go to the end, to become revolutionaries, the unions can only nod and turn against their base. Oscillating from the base to the summit, and desperately seeking the delegation of power, they are in the process of losing their credibility. Power no longer offers them a choice and the "base" refuses to be a mass in motion.

Thus, at Anvers, the police should intervene to protect the union premises against the wives of the striking dock workers, who attacked them with umbrellas. "The anger of the dock workers against their unions deepens every day. They reproach the managers of the organizations for not having *recognized* their movement. The unions, for their part, estimate that the demands of the base are exaggerated and that, in any case, they are linked through the agreements of social planning reached with the bosses."[3]

The stakes at this level are extraordinary. The entire social edifice is threatened with collapse along with the legitimacy and the representation of the union. The parliament and the other mediations weigh no more heavily. Even the police serve no purpose without the unions, if the unions are incapable of policing the factories and elsewhere. In May 1968, they were the ones who saved the government. Now their bell is sounding. Profoundly, the importance of these stakes is expressed in the confusion of the events (and this is as valuable for the actions of the students as for the Renault strike). To strike or not to strike. Where are we? No

one decides anything anymore. What are the objectives? Who are our adversaries? What are we talking about? We don't know. The Geiger counters, thanks to which the unions, parties, and groups measure the combativeness of the masses are spinning. The student movement dissolved in the hands of those who wanted to structure it according to its own objectives: didn't it have objectives? In any case, it did not want *to objectify itself after the fact*. The workers resumed work without result, though they refused to work eight days previously based on sensible advantages, etc. In fact, this confusion is like that of a dream: it translates a resistance or censure which wagers the contents of the dream itself. Here, it translates a capital fact, hardly acceptable to the proletarians themselves, which is that the social struggle has been *displaced* by the traditional, external class enemy, bosses and capital, by the real, internal class enemy, the proper representative authority of the class, the party or union. The authority to which the workers delegate their power, and which turns against them in the form of the delegation of the bosses' and governmental power. Capital itself only alienates labor power and its products, it only has a monopoly on production. Parties and unions alienate the social power of the exploited, and they have a monopoly on *representation*. Their purpose is revolutionary historical progress. But this progress is dispersed with minimal clarity, minimal resolution, an apparent regression, the absence of continuity, of logic, of objectives, etc. Everything becomes uncertain, everything resists when it is a question of confronting one's own repressive authority, of chasing the unionized, delegated, the responsible, the speakers *from one's head*. But this flurry in the spring of 1973 indicates precisely that we have reached the bottom of the problem: the unions and the parties are dead, all they have left to do is die.

The Dissolution of the Proletariat

This crisis of representation is the crucial *political* aspect of the recent social movements. Meanwhile it alone might not be fatal for the system, and one already sees its formal transcendence (its recuperation) outlined everywhere (among the unions themselves) in a generalized schema of *self-management*. No more delegation of power, everyone entirely responsible for production! The new ideological generation rises! But it will have a lot to do, because this crisis is articulated on another still deeper crisis which touches on production itself, even on the system of productivity. And here again the immigrants, undoubtedly indirectly, are in the position of analysts. In the same way that they analyzed, in the crisis of reproduction we have been discussing, the relationship of the "proletariat" to its representative authorities, they analyze the relationship of the workers to their own labor power, their relationship to themselves as productive forces (and not only of certain among them as representative authorities). And this because it was the immigrants that had been most recently torn from the non-productivist tradition. Because it was necessary to socially destructure them so as to throw them into the Western labor process, and in return, they deeply destructured the process in general and the productivist morality that dominates Western societies.

Everything happens as if the hiring of labor on the European labor market provoked a progressive dissolution of the European proletariat in relation to labor and production. This is no longer only a question of "clandestine" practices of resistance to work (braking, waste, absenteeism, etc.) which have never ceased—but this time, overtly, collectively, spontaneously, the workers stopped working, like that, suddenly, one Monday, demanding nothing,

negotiating for nothing, to the great despair of the unions and the bosses, and returned to work just as spontaneously, and *as a group*, the following Monday. No loss, no victory, it was not a strike, it was a "*work stoppage*." An euphemism of longer standing than the term strike itself: the entire discipline owed to labor falls, all the moral and practical norms that have been imposed by industrial colonization for two centuries in Europe, which disintegrate and are forgotten, without apparent effort, without "class struggle" properly speaking. Discontinuity, laxity, loose schedules, with respect to salaried *forcing*, to surplus, to promotion, accumulation, projections—we do only just what we must, then we stop, and come back later. These are exactly the behaviors that the colonists reproach the "under-developed" for: it's impossible to adapt them to labor / value, to rational and continuous schedules, to the concept of salaried gain, etc. It is only by overseas exploration that one comes in the end to integrate them into the labor process. And it is at this moment that the Western laborers themselves "regress" more and more toward "under-developed" behaviors. It is not the smallest revenge of colonialism and of its most advanced form (the importation of labor) to see the Western proletariat itself seized by dissolution—so much so that it might perhaps one day export itself in its turn to under-developed countries so as to relearn the historic and revolutionary value of work.

There is a direct relationship between the ultra-colonization of immigrant laborers (since the colonies were not profitable in place, we imported them) and this industrial decolonization which affects every sector of society (throughout, school, factory, one passes from the phase of *hot* investments of labor *to the cool and cynical practice of chores*). As the immigrants were the ones most recently drawn from "wild" indifference to "rational" labor, they analyze Western

society in its recent, fragile, superficial and arbitrary collectivization, forced by labor, its collective paranoia, from which we have drawn a morality, a culture, a myth. We have forgotten that it has only been two centuries since this industrial discipline was imposed, at the price of unknown efforts, even in the West; that it never really succeeded and that it began to crack dangerously (it hardly lasted longer than that other colonization, across the seas).

Striking for the Sake of it

STRIKING FOR the sake of it—striking for strikes—is the present truth of the struggle. Without motivation, with objective or political reference, it responds by opposing itself to a production which is itself without motivation, without reference, without social use value, without any other finality than itself—*to a production for the sake of production*, in short to a system which is no longer anything but a system of *reproduction*, and which turns on itself in a gigantic tautology of the labor process. Striking for the strike is an inverse tautology, but a subversive tautology since it unveils this new form of capital (which corresponds to the completed form of political economy: the ultimate stage of the law of value wherein all use value is abolished to the sole profit of the reproduction of exchange value).[4]

The strike finally ceases to be a means, and only a means of ruminating on the relationship between *political* forces and the game of power. It becomes an end. It negates through radical parody, on its own terrain, the kind of finality without end that production has become (senseless, absurd, without visible objective in terms of classical utility).

In production for the sake of production, there is no more *waste*. This term, valuable in a restrained economy of use, is useless

for us. It raises an old liberal or pious criticism of the system. The Concorde, the space program, etc. is not waste. On the contrary. Because what the system, at this high point of "objective" uselessness, produces and reproduces, is *labor itself.* Elsewhere this is what everyone (workers and unions included) asks of it right away. Everything turns around employment—society is the creation of employees—so as to preserve employment, British unions are ready to transform the Concorde into a supersonic bomber—inflation or unemployment: intense inflation, etc. Labor has become, like Social Security, like consumer goods, a *good* for social redistribution. An enormous paradox if one holds to traditional or Marxist political economy: labor is less and less a productive force, it is more and more a *product.* This aspect is not the smallest characteristic of the present mutation of the system of capital, of the revolution for which it passes from the specific stage of production to that of reproduction. Less and less does it need labor power to function and grow (for a long time certain American factories functioned at 60% of their potential), and one asks of it that it furnish, that it "produce" more and more labor.

The absurd circularity of a system wherein one works to produce work corresponds to the admirable demand of a strike for strikes (today this is what results from most "demanding" strikes anyway). "Pay us for the days of the strike." This is to say, basically: pay us so that we can *reproduce* the strike for strikes. A return to the absurdity of the general system.

Another concept and reality that falls: "productive" labor. This—to which the traditional analysis opposed "non-productive" labor and waste—corresponded to a criteria of the objective utility of labor, producer of value and surplus value in the structure of a social goal of production (individual and social needs). Today,

when products, *all* products, and labor itself, are beyond utility and uselessness, there is no longer productive labor, there is no longer anything but *reproductive* labor. Similarly, there is no longer "productive" consumption nor "non-productive" consumption. "Productive" labor, "non-productive" services (tertiary services, intellectual services, etc.) or leisure, all of these categories are equated in the schema of reproduction which exceeds them: leisure is as "productive" as labor, factory labor is also as "non-productive" as leisure or tertiary services—no matter which formula. *This indifference marks precisely the completed phase of political economy.* Everything is *reproductive*, which is to say everything has lost the concrete finality which could distinguish it so as to no longer serve reproduction uniformly. No one produces any more. Production is dead. Long live reproduction!

The Genealogy of (Re)production

1. We need to see where this hypothesis truly leads: if labor is no longer primarily a productive force—since it appears that this historic status (almost ontological) risks changing—history changes too: *revolution* is no longer possible through labor or the laborers. If the use value of labor power disappeared—and it disappeared in labor for the sake of labor—the mechanism of surplus value and exploitation ends. This mechanism requires, as we know, the use value of labor power, only to produce an overvalue through its insertion in the labor process.

2. *Objection*: If labor is no longer primarily a productive force, it nonetheless remains a productive force, producing surplus value. Without that where would the enlarged reproduction of the system originate (we are still in the "growth" phase).

3. *Response*: What is reproduced in an enlarged way in the present system is capital in its most rigorous Marxist definition: as a *form of social relation*, and capital in its vulgar acceptation: as money, profit and economic system. We have always understood reproduction as the enlarged reproduction of the mode of production, determined by the latter. While it should perhaps be necessary to conceive of the mode of production itself as a modality (and therefore one of the possible modalities, but not the only one) of the *mode of reproduction*. Productive forces and relations of production—in other words, the sphere of capitalist material productivity, that of labor power and exploitation—is perhaps only one of the possible situations, and therefore historically relative, of the process of reproduction. This responds to the objection: reproduction is a form which surrounds and surpasses economic exploitation from afar. The play of productive forces is therefore not the necessary condition for reproduction.

Historically, isn't the status of the "proletariat" (of the industrial salaried class) only containment, concentration and social exclusion?

Manufacturing containment is the fantastic expansion of containment in the seventeenth century, described by Foucault. Wasn't "industrial" labor (non-artisan, collective, deprived of means of production, under control) born in the first large general hospitals? In an earlier time, a society on the road to rationalism confined its unemployed, its vagabonds, its deviants, it occupied them, fixed them, imposed its rational principle of labor on them. But contamination is reciprocal, and the cut through which society instituted its principle of rationality ebbed on the world of work as a whole: confinement is a micro-model that spreads thereafter, as an industrial system, to the entire society which, under the sign of

labor, of finality, became productivist, a concentration camp, a detention center, a jail.

In place of exporting the concept of the proletariat and of exploitation on top of racial, sexual oppression, etc. one must ask if it has not been the reverse. If the worker is not primarily, if his fundamental status is not, like the mad, the dead, nature, animals, children, blacks, women—not a status of *exploitation*, but a status of *excommunication*—not a status of spoliation and exploitation, but a status of demarcation and discrimination.

Labor is internment, jail, control. The factory behind the apparent ends of the production. The school behind the apparent ends of knowledge. The "objective" contents (of accumulation and production) and the historic contradiction tied up in it have less importance than its form. The form of labor as a social relationship (abstraction, division, prison and control) is generalized today while it contents (production and relations of production) lose their specificity. The labor-form is only generalized at all levels of society when its determinate contents (material production, surplus value, exploitation) disappear.[5]

The contents of production can only equal, at the limit, the alibi of this form of confinement and of discrimination. I offer the hypothesis that there has only ever been a real class struggle on the basis of this discrimination: the struggle of the sub-humans against their status as beasts, against the abjection of this caste division which condemns them to the sub-humanity of labor. If one looks closely, this is what is behind every strike, every revolt, today still undoubtedly behind most "salaried" actions: their virulence comes from this, not from the cash. That said, the workers have been promoted to the dignity of a wholly distinct human being—apparently of course, but this suffices to neutralize the class struggle

at this level. The proletariat as such is a "normalized" being, under this heading it takes all of the dominant discriminations into account: it is racist, sexist, and repressive. In relation to the present deviants, to the discriminated against of all kinds, it is on the same side as the bourgeoisie: the side of the human, the normal. This is so true that the fundamental law of this society is not the law of exploitation, but the *code of normality*.

May 1968: The Illusion of Production

The first shock wave of this passage from production to pure and simple reproduction was May 1968. It touched the university first, the faculties of human sciences and literature first of all, because it was there that it became more and more evident (even without a clear "political" consciousness) *that one no longer produces anything*, and that we no longer do anything but reproduce (teachers first, then knowledge and culture, which were themselves only factors in the reproduction of the general system—see Bourdieu, Passeron). Experienced as total uselessness, irresponsibility ("why sociology?"), relegation that fomented the student movement of 1968 (not the absence of outlets—there were always enough outlets *in reproduction*—what no longer exists is the places, the spaces where something is truly "produced").

This shock wave has not been arrested by the victory of the UDR. It can only spread itself to the extremities of the system, while whole sectors of society fall from the rank of *productive forces* to the pure and simple status of *reproductive forces*. If this process initially touched the cultural sectors, of knowledge, justice, family (we should analyze how the destructuration of familial ties, of parental authority is linked to this passage from the family as a

unity of real production to the restricted family as pure and simple element of reproduction in the structure of the system)[6]—this is to say the "superstructural" sectors. It is clear that today it also progressively affects the entire "infrastructural" sector. A new generation of strikes since 1968—partial, wild, episodic, it hardly matters—no longer testifies to the "class struggle" of a proletariat assigned to production, but to the revolt of those who, in the factories themselves, are assigned to reproduction.

Significantly, even in this sector, the marginal categories, anomical one might say, are touched first: young OS [specialized workers] brought directly from the country to the factory, immigrants, the non-unionized, etc. For all the reasons that we have indicated, the "traditional" proletariat, organized and unionized, has effectively every chance of being the last to react, since the proletariat can maintain the illusion of "productive" labor the longest. This consciousness of being, in relation to all the other real "producers," being, even at the price of exploitation, at the source of social wealth, this "proletarian" consciousness, reinforced and sanctioned by the organization, certainly constitutes the surest *ideological* rampart against the destructuration of the present system, which, far from proletarianizing whole strata of the population, which is to say expanding the exploitation of the "productive" labor as good *Marxist theory holds*,[7] aligns everyone with the same status as reproductive laborers.

Manual "productive" laborers live, more than any others, in *the illusion of production*. Just as they live their leisure in the illusion of freedom. Labor (in the form of leisure as well) invades all of life as fundamental repression, as control, as permanent occupation in places and regulated times, according to an omnipresent code.[8] One must *fix* people everywhere, at school, at the factory, at the beach

or in front of the TV, in recycling: permanent general mobilization. But this labor is no longer productive in the original sense—it is no longer anything but a mirror of society, its imaginary, its fantastic reality principle. Death drive maybe.

Insofar as things are lived as a source of wealth and satisfaction, *as use value*, the worst labor alienated and exploited, they are supportable. Insofar as one can still recognize a corresponding "production" (even imaginary) for individual or social needs (this is why the concept of need is so fundamental and so mystifying), the worst individual or historic situations are supportable. Because the illusion of production is always the illusion of making these needs coincide with their ideal use value. And today those who believe in the use value of their labor power—the proletarians—are virtually the most mystified, the least susceptible to the revolt which grips people in the depths of their total uselessness, the circular manipulation which makes pure stakes of a pointless reproduction.

Because the law of value only becomes truly insupportable when value itself disappears—the use value/exchange value "dialectic" disappearing before the pure reproduction of the exchange value—when it is no longer possible to recognize it, in the term of the process of production turning on itself like a dervish, the smallest effect of social wealth, the smallest *change in life* or social relation. This stage is that of monopolistic neo-capitalism, which is still that of a dialectic of production. The day that this process generalizes itself throughout society, May 1968 will assume the form of a general explosion, and the problem of the link between students and workers will no longer be posed: it only translates the divide which separates those who, in the present system, still believe in their own labor power from those who no longer believe in it.

The Class Struggle Stripped Bare by the Workers, Even

No chance for a larger piece of the pie; for the "reappropriation of surplus value" or the labor process: the workers don't even want the "fruit of their labor" (nor women the "fruit of their loins"). Not only is the work ethic, and its "just" reward, finished, the strike ethic is too; it's deinvestment pure and simple, indifference to collective and individual goals. Pft! By simply stopping work, the "workers" no longer only attack the system of the reproduction of capital (of labor power as exchange value), but the reproduction of labor power as *use value*. Not only do they refuse to contribute to expanded reproduction, but they no longer even want to reproduce themselves as labor power (to which demands for salary or improved working conditions always lead, as in self-management). Finished too, the revolutionary dialectic of productive forces and relations of productions—questioned by the absurd strikers, it is *their proper destination as productive force*. This is the real revolution, because this is the only one equal to the system, the only one that subverts the system in its real terms: no longer in terms of production, but in terms of indefinite reproduction.

And, with the same blow, it brings an end to the ambiguity of the class struggle. The definition of the proletarian class is irremediably ambiguous. If the bourgeois class defines itself clearly through its ownership of the means of production, the proletariat does not define itself inversely through its total dispossession. It is the owner of the essential means of production: labor power. Strictly speaking, this suffices to make it complicit with the *system* of production (and not only a victim of the *process* of production). In the order of production, contrary to the pathetic myth of exploitation, there is not a class which possesses nothing and which has nothing

to lose.[9] There is therefore a fundamental ambiguity in the concept of the class struggle to the extent that it envisions the proletariat as a productive force (and how would it define it otherwise?). There is the impossibility of radical antagonism, since it shares something of the system and of its structural givens. Its negativity cannot be total. Only the refusal of production can constitute a radical threshold. Because it alone, abolishing the positive referent of the class (ownership of labor power), signifies the abolition of the class here and now.

On this point of negativity, of defection, of "nihilism" (as the champions of positive revolution would say), what's left? The essential: knowing that social wealth, the symbolic, returns in the end to the social relationship, and is no longer founded on the quantitative imaginary of material production, nor on the political imaginary of a revolution in productive relations. Wealth ceases to be economic, accumulative, therefore absent and always future—and the refusal to work (among other practices) becomes the immediate demand for wealth, forever lost in the cycle of production. A demand presented in the loss of value—even in a strike for strikes, only in the *absolute* loss of productive time, and in the new type of exchange and of social relation which is thereby invented, outside of all finality, of all mediation, and of any revolutionary future.

13

The Dramatization of Economics

The Energy Crisis

At the stage of reproduction, which is the aesthetic stage of political economy, that of a finality without end of production, the ethical, ascetic myth of scarcity collapses, and with it the principle of mercantile exchange. Scarcity must be regenerated if the economic principle is to be reactivated. Capital, which might burst from this liquefaction of values, grows nostalgic for its grand period of *ethics*, the golden age wherein we produced for our salvation, or at least to conquer nature and to meet our fundamental needs, before everything degenerated into production for production. It was the golden age of the development of productive forces. Today, to set things right, we are going to substitute an *ethic of energy conservation.*

Where does ecology come from? This sort of benediction that constitutes the energy crisis and the raw materials for a system, reflected in the mirror of production in nothing more than an empty, panic-stricken form. The crisis will permit us to return the economic code's lost referentiality, the principle of production's absent gravity. We will recover our taste for asceticism, the emotional investment which is born from lack and privation. Make production dramatic in order to save it.

Every ecological twist and turn of recent years already engaged this process of regeneration through crisis—a crisis which is no longer that of overproduction, as in 1929, but of the involution of the system on its own bases, of the recycling of its own principles and of its own lost identity.[1] This is no longer a crisis of *production* but of *reproduction*, in which we encounter the impossibility, among others, of really grasping what is true and what is a simulacrum in this crisis. Ecology is production which resources itself under the specter of scarcity, which rediscovers a natural necessity which dips back into the law of value. But ecology is too slow. A sudden crisis, like the gas crisis, constitutes a more energetic therapy. The less gas there is, the more we will perceive production. From the moment when the place of raw materials became marked, labor power also resumed its place, and the entire mechanism of production became intelligible once again. And set off...

Hence, no panic. In the hour when capitalism has virtually completed the totality of primitive accumulation on the world scale, with the intensive mobilization of labor power, the work ethic threatened to collapse, the material energy crisis came to the point of masking the veritable catastrophic destruction of the *internal finality* of production, to displace the simple economic reality of the lack of energy and raw materials, which is never anything but an *internal contradiction*. And we know that this system lives on its contradictions.

The analogous blackmail over the cost of raw materials on the part of under-developed countries with unlimited salary demands in rich countries.

With the structural development of capital, salary ceases to be a cost of labor power, it becomes a salary-income, a salary of reproductive consumption, a bonus of participation and integration in

political society (under the double form of forced presence at work and forced waste through consumption). From this moment, when the law of labor-salary equivalence[2] (even rigged) is abolished by the system itself, nothing opposes unlimited salary demands any longer.[3] Maximum salary for minimum work: such is the order of the day, and it has taken on the sense of a revolt against the status of a political summons to capitalist society that salary signifies today. Because there is a "just price" for a certain quantity of labor power, but consensus and global participation are priceless. Traditional salary demands are only negotiations about the status of the producer. A maximalist demand is an offensive form of turning salary against the system of the *reproductive* condition that is created by salary. It's a challenge. The salaried employees no longer seek to negotiate or to exchange whatever it is. They want everything, that's their way not only of deepening the economic crisis of the system but of turning the total political demand that this imposes against the system. It is not at all too much for the unions to return to the salaried employees with the notion of labor-value and equivalent salary, that capital itself has abolished. It is not at all too much for the unions to canalize this limitless salary blackmail along the routes of healthy negotiation. Without unions, the workers would immediately demand raises of 50%, 100%, 200%, *and they would obtain them.* There are examples of this kind in the United States and Japan.

This is the same phenomenon that has appeared in underdeveloped countries. Without limits on the price of raw materials from the moment when they, well beyond economics, become the sign, the gauge of the acceptation of a world political order, the planetary society of peaceful existence, wherein the underdeveloped

countries find themselves socialized by force under the control of the great powers. The escalation of prices then becomes a challenge, not only to the rich of Western countries, but to the political system of peaceful coexistence, faced with the domination of the world political class—whether capitalist or communist hardly matters.

It is undoubtedly for this reason that a military war was required for the Arabs to trigger the energy crisis. Previously, they had traditional salary demands: pay for gas *at its fair value*. But the war made them discover the total political coercion that peaceful coexistence had enclosed them in (this still wasn't evident with the Six Day War, but the war of 1973 put the apparatus in plain sight). Suddenly, their demands became maximal, unlimited, and their meaning changed.[4]

As if by chance, it reached Europe first, and not the two Greats (it would benefit the United States even more precisely). But this is in order: the worker's demanding pressure also eliminates small businesses and, in this sense, reinforces in a first moment the structures of large capital. It is not unthinkable that this challenge from the workers, on the level of labor power, of the underdeveloped on the level of raw materials, proceeds once again toward a reinforcement of the general system. Too bad for the dialectic! What is essential is that the one and the other are no longer left enclosed in the order of equivalences, that they pass to a challenge, that they engage the totality of that political order, and that they thereby initiate an *other type of exchange*, because the demand is not on the order of economics, it is of a symbolic order—and it is this displacement of exchange which, even in the case of defeat and of the reinforcement of the system, constitutes a revolution in terms, in the rules of the game.

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Question—Response—Objection

Question

Scarcity follows abundance, the specter of privation dissipates at the first glimmer of furious consumption and reproduction... Nevertheless a war of a few days and an insane increase in the price of gas will suffice to collapse the beautiful assurance of consumer society and to resurrect the perspective of the "dark years" (energy crisis, inflation, the threat of unemployment...).

How can we explain the bankruptcy of the myth of abundance? Why is it less effective than that of scarcity? Why is it a necessity for the capitalist system—which surpassed without too much trouble the stage of production so as to enter into that of reproduction—to reinvest in this moribund myth and why precisely this myth? Production for production, would unlimited development be a viable objective? A switch error (capitalism realizing that it has taken a wrong turn)? Or is something else at stake? A vast masquerade mounted by capitalism itself, which serves as a myth corresponding to a surpassed stage of its own development so as to better assure its future...

In England, the energy crisis (inscribing itself in an agitated social context), far from bursting the situation, has on the contrary a "positive" political effect: the Britons cut the cord, accept the restrictions without a fuss... In short, start off again like its was 1940!

The crisis appears to be a powerful means of integrating the values of the political society and of the reproductive system: it is a question of "saving" both the country and the economic system at once, a rescue which demands sacrifices and privations on everyone's part, though it hardly matters!

By playing this instrumental role of integration, scarcity enters in competition with its opposite—obligatory consumption (cf. the change in the nature of salary, a consequence of the development of capitalism). The scarcity of energy mobilizes energies in the service of capital, it obtains the participation of everyone to save capitalism, as well and even better than consumption could, because it is more dramatic, more easily dramatizable. But how can it be explained that asceticism and privation can replace waste and play exactly the same role?

For the workers, an economy of unlimited production is linked to a demand for unlimited salary increases, which places (or threatens to place) capital at risk. But we can ask ourselves if, far from running a *real* risk, the "maximalist demand" is not on the contrary triggered by capitalism itself. After all, we understand clearly that salary increases and paid vacations are not great victories obtained through difficult struggle thanks to the combativeness of the working class, but that they have been awarded by capital since it judged them to be necessary. How would this demand for an unlimited raise be more radical, more subversive than the previous ones? It is not at all impossible that this demand *too* should be provoked by the capitalist system because it needs to develop. In the same way that ecology, the quality of life, and the struggle against pollution—which is part of the *creed* of the left—are not terrains of the struggle against capital, but clearly on the contrary means of accelerating its restructuring.

If the crisis is fomented by capital, if scarcity is only a myth that it reactivates for its own greater glory, we can ask ourselves about the revolutionary potentialities of such a situation. Capitalism? Bust!... But how? It manipulates us to the core: everything that we

want is wanted by it, everything that we do, it makes us do... In this way all subversion is truly impossible.

Response

THERE IS EFFECTIVELY still an illusion in thinking that the system of capital, to a certain threshold of expanded reproduction, passes irreversibly from a strategy of scarcity to a strategy of abundance. The present crisis proves that this strategy is reversible. The illusion came once again from a naïve faith in a *reality* of scarcity or in a *reality* of abundance, and therefore from the illusion of a *real* opposition between the two terms, one following the other as its opposite (as in its dialectical surpassing). In this way these two terms are quite simply *alternatives* and the strategic definition of neo-capitalism, is not to pass from the phase of abundance (of consumption, of repressive desublimation, of sexual liberation, etc.) but to the phase of the *systematic alternation* between the two: scarcity and abundance—because the two terms no longer have any reference, nor therefore any antagonistic reality, and therefore the system can jump indifferently from one to the other. This represents the completed stage of reproduction. Thus, in the political sphere, this stage is reached when, all antagonism between the Left and the Right having been neutralized, the exercise of power can play alternatives with one and then with the other.

This terminological indetermination, this abolition of all reference, this neutralization of dialectical opposition in a pure and simple structural alternation produces the characteristic effect of *uncertainty about the reality of the crisis*. Everyone would like to ward this insupportable effect of the simulacra—characteristic of everything that proceeds from *reproduction* and from the systematic functioning of the code—off in terms of conspiracy. The crisis

would be fomented by "Big Capital":[5] this hypothesis is reassuring, since it restores a *real* economico-political authority and the presence of an (occult) *subject* of the crisis, and therefore a truth to history. The terror of the simulacra is lifted: all value increases —the omnipresent economico-political fatality of capital increases, provided that it had a clear truth: increased profit, increased exploitation, the *economic* atrocity of capital recognizing our situation, wherein everything is at risk and frustrated by the code. The misunderstanding of this "truth" of world domination, if it is one, is equal to the crisis which reveals it for the first time in all of its breadth.

Because the crisis of 1929 was still a "real" crisis of production, a crisis of capital measured by its rate of reinvestment, of surplus value and profit, a crisis of (over) production measured by the social goals of consumption. And the regulation of demand resolved this crisis in an endless exchange of goals between production and consumption. Henceforth (and definitively after the Second World War), one and the other cease to be opposed and eventually contradictory poles. Suddenly, the whole field of economics loses, along with even possibility of the crisis, all internal determination, even its reality principle. It no longer subsists as a referential alibi, as a process of economic simulation in the confines of a process of reproduction that entirely absorbs it. We know that the force and the process of labor itself—to take the central theme of all revolutionary dialectics—have lost their negativity, that labor now makes and consumes itself as a finished product, like any other consumer good. Better: the essential objective of production becomes the *production of labor*. At this cyclical stage of reproduction, all use value is abolished, and therefore also the "revolutionary use value" of labor in classical theory.

The era of simulation is thus opened everywhere by the commutability of once contradictory and dialectically opposed terms. Commutability of labor and of end product, of production and consumption, of scarcity and abundance—but one would recover this genesis of simulacra throughout: commutability of beautiful and ugly in fashion, of Left and Right in politics, of true and false in the media, of nature and culture at all levels of signification. Everything is undecidable. This is the characteristic effect of the domination of the code,[6] which rests everywhere on the principle of the neutralization of indifference. This process, long since operational in culture and politics, in "superstructural" realms, today extends to the economy itself, the entire so-called "infrastructural" field. The same *indetermination* reigns here from now on. And of course, with the *determination* of economics every possibility of conceiving economics as a *determinate* authority vanishes.

Use value—exchange value, productive forces—relations of production: all of these "dialectical" oppositions on which Marxism still functioned (according to the same schema as once bourgeois rationalist thought on the opposition between true and false, beautiful and ugly, appearance and reality, good and evil) have also been neutralized, and in the same way. Everything that happens on the level of political economy is also commutable, reversible, exchangeable according to the same code as in politics or in fashion or in the media. Indefinite specularity of the true and the false: we understand this in metaphysics or in morality, but indefinite specularity too of productive forces and relations of production, of capital and labor, or use value and exchange value: that is hard to support; what would we talk about? What would happen to the revolution? The law of value no longer resides in the exchangeability of all commodities under the sign of general equivalence, but in the

exchangeability, otherwise more radical, of all the categories of political economy (and of its critique) according to the code. Hence the impossibility of a contradiction and of a *real* crisis at the level of economics. Hence the transference of all real risk to another level, that of the symbolic, which is to say the demolition of the code (which is to say not only the abolition of the economic law of equivalences, but of the structural law of commutations).

This is also why the essential problem of this crisis is that of its "reality" or simulacra.

Objection

Was there ever any *real* scarcity, and therefore an economic reality principle—such that today we can say that it disappears as reality and no longer functions except as a myth, and at the same time an alternative myth to that of abundance? Has there historically ever been a *use value* of scarcity, and therefore an irreducible finality of economics, such that today we can say that it has disappeared in the cycle of reproduction to the benefit of the singular sole hegemony of the code, of a regulation by the code which is a veritable sentence of life and death? We say: economics itself *produced* (and it never produced anything but itself) a need for this dialectical tension between scarcity and abundance—but the system, to reproduce itself, today has no other need than for the mythic operation of the economy.

The Naturalization of Economico-Politics

Because the entire sphere of economics is now defused, everyone can admit it in terms of economico-politics and production. Economics becomes the explicit discourse of an entire society, the

vulgate to all analysis, preferably in its Marxist variant. Once, all of this was forbidden, censored, infamous, immoral. Today, the Left and the Right, all the ideologues have found their maternal language in political economy. All sociologists, human scientists, etc. turn tendencially toward Marxism, to Marxist thought as a referential discourse. Even Christians, absolutely Christians of course. The entire divine New Left comes up. Everything has become politics too, through the same operation of diffusion and ideological standardization. News is political, sports are political, art doesn't talk about it: rationality today is entirely on the side of the class struggle. The entire latent discourse of capital has become manifest, and everywhere we see a certain jubilation in this assumption, in this apparition of "truth."

May 1968 marked a decisive step in this *naturalization of political economy*. Because the shock of May 1968 undermined the entire system in the depths of its symbolic organization, it made it urgent, vital, the passage of "superstructural" ideologies (moral, cultural, etc.) to making the infrastructural itself ideological. Capital, generalizing, making the discourse of its *Marxist* contestation official, will henceforth speak the discourse of its "truth." It will redouble its power behind this legalization of economics and politics. Political economy stops the necessity of 1968, Marxist political economy, as it was the unions and the leftist parties that "negotiated" the crisis on this terrain. The hidden referent of economics and politics has been deterred so as to save a catastrophic situation, and today it continues to be diffused, generalized, desperately reproduced everywhere because the catastrophic situation opened by May 1968 has not ceased.

Hence the vanity of all economic explication ("revolutionary" or not) of the present energy crisis. Even if this crisis does not

constitute, as we would like to say, a true "May 1968 of energy and raw materials," something, on a world scale, needs a moment to escape negotiation: this challenge to the symbolic order that we are talking about and through which the Arab countries, suddenly, ceased to be underdeveloped because they changed the terrain and the definition of exchange. This is the *truth* of this crisis, however infinitesimal and ephemeral. Everything else is a simulacra. And the simulacra is on top in all the economic and political interpretations that have rushed in on this crisis from all over to rationalize it, to relocate it in the logic of the dominant exchange. And that these explications were right in the end (which is to say that everything happens as if the Arabs were following the rules of the game, and therefore never really left it) only completes the circle. Based on its own axioms, economics, functioning as a code, always recovers its equilibrium, it always recovers its truth in the end. And all feudal powers and diplomats, Fayçal and Kissinger, can revive on this crap. After the primitive accumulation of *capital*, from which the intensive, colonial exploitation of raw materials arises, we enter into the primitive accumulation, on the world scene, of *consensus* on the economico-political code.

Radical dissensus, pure challenge and provocation, which is to say the non-negotiable, the beyond of economics or politics at all costs, is therefore finally to be sought elsewhere than in the crisis: in the attack in Rome, where the Palestinians burned a Pan-Am Boeing with thirty people on board. That event is inseparable from the crisis. Because if it illustrates in all its details the functioning of the equivalences on the world scene, the attack in Rome marks the absolute limit where those equivalences stop. And it hardly matters if, as in any provocation, it still profits from the international moral order, which refreshes itself in these bloody deaths exactly like the

economic order refreshes itself in the scarcity of raw materials. It hardly matters: what is essential is that this is an act that cannot return to any old equivalence (moral: nothing can justify it, even the moral Jesuitism of the Left—politics: impossible to negotiate politically, certainly not in the history of Israel, such blackmail is perfectly useless)—or better, it cannot be reinscribed in any language, nor exchanged by any known laws. If not in a single language: that of desire and of fascination—and this is the language that the mass media secretly speaks, most "abject" because it is most "objective." Only *France-Soir* and the others, with photos of hundreds of people watching, with their noses to the airport windows, the bodies burning in the Boeing, the photographer bent over the body of a dying Italian police officer, taking the picture with a monstrous objectivity, and himself being photographed at the same moment, with the stories secretly salivating with horror and jubilation—only the abject media, who don't embarrass themselves with politics, know that the only *events*, the only events that impassion, that fascinate, that provoke desire, are precisely those that no one can reinscribe politically, morally, economically, those that can no longer be negotiated according to the code. These are the only ones that shatter the indifference, the neutralization of all spheres regulated by the code, because these are the only ones that, in one way or another, risk death.

14

The Banque Nationale de Paris Campaign

This Banque Nationale de Paris (BNP) poster deserves to be analyzed in the same sense as a theatricalization of economics.

"Your money interests me—Give, Give—Bring me your money, and you will profit from my bank."

1.

This is the first time that capital (through international financial capital, its lead institution) has stated so clearly, eye to eye, the law of equivalence, and said it as an *argument of advertisement*. Habitually, such things are kept quiet, commercial exchange is *immoral*, and all publicity aims at effacing it for the benefit of the service. One can therefore be certain that this sincerity is a mask of the second degree.

2.

The apparent objective is to convince people through economics to get a good deal and bring their money to BNP. But the real strategy is parallel (like the policies). It is to convince people through this capitalist, "man to man" sincerity: cards on the table, no tugging the heart strings, the ideology of service at its end, etc. It is to seduce them through the obscenity of revealing a hidden,

immoral law of equivalence. "Virile" complicity: men share the obscene truth of capital among themselves. Hence this poster's scent of lubricity, the salacious and filthy tone of its eyes fixed on your money as if on your sex. The technique is that of perverse provocation, much more subtle than that of simplistic seduction with a smile (such would be the counter offensive theme of the *Société générale*: "The client should smile, not the banker." Seduce people through the obscenity of economics, take them to the libidinal level of perverse desire, with the perverse fascination that capital exerts on them even in its atrocity. From this angle, the slogan signifies simply: "Your ass interests me—Give, Give—Bring me your thighs and I'll fuck you." Which doesn't dissatisfy everyone.

Behind the humanist morality of exchanges, there is a profound desire for capital, a vertiginous desire for the law of value, and it is this complicity, alongside and beyond economics, that this poster attempts to grasp. In this it testifies, perhaps unknowingly, to a *political* intuition.

3.

I WOULDN'T SWEAR that the advertisers weren't playing with this "psychoanalytic" complicity with the law of commercial exchange and the resistances that it may have provoked. They cannot not have known (they weren't born yesterday, and the campaign was carefully planned) that this face—vampiric for the middle classes —this lubricious complicity, this direct attack, would forcibly trigger negative reactions. Why take this risk? Why bare the king before contestation, such that everything works with a minimum of mystification?

This is the strangest trap: because this poster was also made (even if not deliberately) to crystallize and displace resistances to the law of profit and equivalence—to awaken resistances so as to better impose the equivalence of capital and profit, of capital and economics (money, give / give) *at the moment when this is no longer true*, at the moment when capital has displaced its strategy, when it can pronounce its "law" because it is no longer its truth—the pronunciation of this law is no more than a supplementary mystification.

If the social domination of capital still fundamentally sustained itself with economics, this poster would never have been made. Through its very clarity, it is proof to the contrary.

Capital no longer lives off of the law of economics: this is why this law can become an advertisement, can fall into the sphere of the *sign* and its manipulation.

False reality principle that serves to attract capitalist suckers (Visa already did this: "Live like a capitalist!") and to refocus revolt on an indirect path.

A faculty of the system designating itself from its reality principle, risking itself as a lure and alibi.

4.

THE USER CAUGHT off balance: seduced by the bank's desire for him rather than by the bank arousing a desire in him for what it has to offer. A virile seduction, aggressive, where "normal" advertising offers a smiling, prostituted woman. This can be interpreted in two different ways:

— All libidinal registers are equivalent and equal publicists: nothing is more gratifying about one than the other, because advertisement functions at a level of play indifferent to good and evil, active and passive—which corresponds to the downward trend of the validity rates of psychoanalysis: as it is acculturated, it loses its specific traits, and its fundamental concepts no longer act as alternative signs, regulated keys of opposition.

— The real domination of capital is guaranteed at all levels and can create the economy through ideological mystification. It passes from referendum to ultimatum. Clarified, this says: "Whatever happens, your money won't get away from me, so come in on your own." This is the ultimatum big money offers small account holders and their traditional mentality. It is true that savings divert the flux of capital, to reinvest it in a closed individual economy, a little like the way the Sian people of New Guinea made Western money function in their symbolic economy. This has to stop. Everyone must be ready to make his or her money circulate, all of his or her money, and let go of nostalgia for gold. Everyone must be ready

to circulate entirely, ceaselessly, to be no more than a perpetual commuting element. This constitutes the true *law of value*, no longer in economic terms: quantitative equivalence and report, but in linguistic terms, in terms of value according to Saussure, which is today the true terrain of the conversion of the law of value: a term has value only through its relation and commutability with all the other terms—this strategy is well beyond the law of economic value. Today this is the operational sphere of capital and of its social domination. Economics is only the quantitative theater of value. The poster says it, in its way; the money is nothing more than a pretext.

Where does the commutability of the poster itself, which can act like a general matrix for the law of value at all levels, come from?

For example:

Your unconscious interests me—give, give—Bring me your phantasms and you will profit from my analysis;

Your death interests me—give, give—Take out life insurance and I will make your family happy;

Your productivity interests me—give, give—Bring me your labor power and I will make you profit from my capital.

And on and on. This poster, speaking of money, can serve as a "general equivalent" to all present social relations, every institutional order offers itself today as a *partnership*, as a dialogue on equal terms, as a reciprocity of services.

If the fundamental message of the poster is not that of the equivalence A=A give give (no one is fooled, and the advertisers *know it*), is it that of surplus value (that fact that the operation is balanced for the banker and for capital by the equation : A = A + A)? The poster barely conceals this truth, and everyone can uncover it. This is the twilight of capital, it almost unmasks itself, but this isn't serious, because what the poster really says is not on the order

of quantitative equivalence or on that of surplus value, but on the order of tautology:

Not: A = A

or: A = A + A'

but: A *is* A

A bank is a bank. A banker is a banker. Money is money. And you can't do anything about it. While seeming to announce the law of economic equivalence, the poster really pronounces the tautological imperative, the fundamental rule of domination. If a bank is a bank, or if a table is a table, or if two and two make four (and not five as Dostoyevsky wanted it), that is the true capitalist *debt*. When capital says: "Your money interests me," it feigns profitability so as to assure *credibility*. This credibility is on the economic order, but the *debt*, which attaches itself to the tautology and summarizes in itself the identity of the capitalist order, is of a symbolic order.

That is the "message" from the depths of the poster:

— the total commutability of elements: the linguistic extension of the law of value;

— the tautology of the order, or the linguistic equation of capital as code.

15

Animals Sick of Surplus Value

European veterinarians, at a meeting in Lyons, were troubled by the illnesses and psychological problems that develop in industrial breeding.[1]

"To ameliorate the 'quality of life' for veal, pigs, poultry, and even for laboratory mice might, in the end, prove profitable."

Rabbits develop a morbid anxiety; they become sterile and coprophagic in breeding factories. "The rabbit," the author concludes, "is by birth, it seems, anxious, maladapted"!

The problems have become severe enough to get in the way of the profitability of the enterprise. Greater sensitivity to infections, to parasites, antibodies lose their effectiveness, the females become sterile; spontaneously, if one can put it like this, mortality rates increase.

The hysteria of chickens: the whole group is affected. A critical threshold in the collective *psychic* tension: all the animals try to fly and cry in every way. The crisis ends suddenly, in general terror; the animals hide in the corners, silent as though paralyzed. Then, at the first shock, the crisis starts all over again... This can go on for several weeks. They have tried to give them tranquillizers...

These behavioral anomalies drive the animals to hurt themselves. Cases of cannibalism among the pigs. Veal start licking everything around them, sometimes to the point of death.

"It must be determined whether such animals suffer *psychologically*... A psychiatric zoo becomes necessary. Mental frustration, which represents an obstacle to normal development."

Darkness, red lights, gadgets, tranquillizers, nothing works. A good example of the absurdity of remedies and of the senile dementia of "therapists." It's been noted that given the overpopulation, the pecking order (the hierarchy according to which, among poultry, each has access to food) makes it such that some of them cannot even get enough to eat. It's necessary to divide the pens so as to *democratize* access to food. Failure: the destruction of the symbolic order entails total confusion among the birds, and a chronic instability (therefore a deficit!). We are familiar with analogous ravages that can result in tribal societies from democratic good will.

The animals somatize! Extraordinary discovery! Cancers, gastric ulcers, myocardial infarctions in mice, pigs, chickens.

In conclusion, the liberal author claims, it truly seems like the only remedy is space: a little more space and many of the observed problems disappear. "In any case," he adds without laughing, "the fate of these animals would become less miserable."

He is therefore satisfied with this meeting. "The present preoccupations concerning the fate of livestock seem therefore to be allied, *once more*, with morality and with the sense of a clearly understood interest." "We cannot simply do whatever we want with nature" (ecology). "For healthy animals, it is henceforth also necessary to consider the *mental equilibrium of the animals*" (economics and psychiatry). And he foresees the time when we will see animals (as we have already done for men) return to the country "to restore their mental equilibrium."

"These economic conditions (decreasing production) might drive the producers to give the animals more normal living

conditions." There has never been a better statement of how "humanism," "normality," and "quality of life" are only elements of profitability.

Everything that has just been described corresponds point by point to what has happened to man as a result of industrial concentration, of the scientific organization of labor, of Taylorism, of this lacerating revision by capitalist "breeders" and by contemporary innovations in "quality of life," "working conditions," and "the enrichment of tasks." The cited text is only interesting because inevitable death makes the animal example still more stunning than that of men on the assembly line. Against this industrial organization of death, animals have no other resource than collective or individual suicide. (All of the described problems or anomalies are suicidal.) No question that they escape in this way. As it is unthinkable that their death should be questioned, and as their resistance is unspeakable for rationality (not only industrial: one senses that these anomalies really shock the specialists through their *logical* rationality). We can give them piece of mind, an irrational and shattered piece of mind, devoted to liberal, humanist therapy without changing the final objective: death.

The suicidal forms of animal resistance correspond equally, point by point to human reactions to the scientific organization of labor (and rest). The golden age of the mind and of the unconscious coincides with the crisis of this rational organization. They are therefore only a symptom of this terror, and every science that reclaims itself from this state of mind and this unconscious only verifies this state of things in its consequences; these are symptomatic, "critical" sciences, parasitic sciences, irremediably invoking the middle and long term in the sense of this state of things, and redoubling it in these terms. The order has already won since it

convinced the people of the mindset, since it made them believe that there is a mindset, that there is an unconscious, that it is a "dimension of man," etc.

The same dirty trick as when the bourgeoisie enclosed the proletariat in the concept of class.

Fort Worth, Texas. 400 men and 100 women experience the nicest prison in the world. The confinement is low level and dating is permitted. A child was born there last June and they have had only two escapes in the past three years... Men and women eat their meals together and meet again in group psychology sessions... Each prisoner possesses a unique key to his or her individual room... Couples can be alone in empty rooms. To date, 35 prisoners have fled, but they have for the most part returned on their own volition without having committed any criminal act. The wife of a detainee, by her own admission, brought heroin to her husband so that he could sell it to his friends. Another detainee, having psychological trouble, which gravely affected his sexual behavior, was authorized to leave at night to attend a meeting of alcoholics anonymous; he in fact spent the night with a prostitute, but his escapade was considered "therapeutic."

1.

The prisoner needs freedom, sex, normality to endure prison, just as animals about to be slaughtered need a certain quality of life to have a normal death. And none of this is contradictory: it is the paradox of liberalism. The worker too needs responsibility, self-management in order to better respond to the demands of production.

2.

We discover with a great ingenuity and, what's more, we discover as a new *scientific* field, that animals raised in industrial breeding have a "mindset"—since they reveal themselves as maladjusted to the death that is prepared for them. Similarly, we rediscover the psychology, sociology, and sexuality of prisoners when it becomes impossible to rationally incarcerate them (we can no longer say like beasts because even beasts pose problems), but simply like stones, like the dead. Similarly, psychology, the human sciences, and psychoanalysis would never have arisen if it had been possible to miraculously reduce the worker to rational behaviors in the structure of the scientific organization of labor. All liberalism and science arises from the impossibility of working workers to death, incarcerating prisoners to death, fattening animals to death, which is to say according to the strict law of equivalences:

— this much caloric energy and machines equals this much labor power;

— this crime equals this equivalent punishment and redemption (readaptation);

— this much food equals optimal weight (and industrial death).

This no longer works, it stops itself, while giving birth to the mind, the mentality, the neurosis, the psycho-social, etc. not at all to break this deranged equation, but *to restore the compromised principle of equivalences*. The mindset is only this: a corrective to maladaptation, an adjustment to the behavioral equation, the behavioral yield. Elsewhere it is treated as such: as a variable that one can once again circumscribe with equivalences. Every therapy, including psychoanalysis, does only this. In the sense of a better yield: industrial for the worker (from the Mayo experience to job design and job enrichment)—to a better incarceration for prisoners

(who no longer escape but return)—to a better death for animals (they no longer devour themselves or destroy themselves, they wait to die at the appointed time).

3.

What is the difference between a liberal prison and public housing?

Forced presence? But is the labor, the habitat, the transportation, the everydayness in general anything other than forced presence in a determined succession of space-time? Even if the walls are invisible, and if the walls are signs, every moment of life has its iron curtain.

This is no longer forced incarceration; it is no longer forced labor that counts; it is the presence, the inscription in a determinate stream. And it is because all of society is today in the image of prison and the factory that it can disappear as such. They have done nothing, liberalizing these things, but spread them as models across all social space and time.

When prison loses its reference (its function), the sanction of crime according to the play of equivalences, prison comes to be modeled on society as a whole. The process is the same: the substance of the institution is lost, and its form generalized.

The same thing for the army: it loses its reference (without an enemy). Thus the entirety of everyday life passes under the sign of "defense" and "dissuasion."

16

Death Trick

The ad sweats death, though not just any death: the demagogic apology for safety. Here we abjectly speak on behalf, against suicidal "heroes," of a banal man without qualities, of a normal middle class man who wants to live and drives to live—which is not even true: this is the only "myth" that runs throughout the text—the myth of the instinct for conservation (sanctioned by morality)—here we tickle, we titillate that instinct for conservation as a genital organ of the silent majorities, opposed to the stupid *machismo* of the cowboy kamikazes of the 1950s: "The true hero is he who refuses to die" (Kierkegaard, opposing the married man to the romantic hero as the true hero of modern times—and Charles Péguy). Obscene flattery of the flat being, sexualizing the platitude: "You, little one, obscure, stale, you who refuse to die, refuse to live and live a little, you're the one who is with it." James Dean is only a larva. You are the superman unburdened of myths.

Once the silent majority has been idealized (the first operation of the police base and of the political base), we enclose it in another non-mythic death: neutral and objective like technology, silent and traditional. Death "as it has never ceased to be" in the moral order of objectivity, which is to say *safety*. The text is skillful enough meanwhile to let it show through, in its hymn to "virile" and

"Tuons une certaine Glorification de la Mort."

Les années 50, Roger Nimier, écrivit "le train bleu," Françoise Sagan conduit pieds nus pour mieux sentir le galop effréné des 300 chevaux

de son bolide

et les héros de "La tête" de Roger Vailland inventent le jeu de la mort au volant. C'est la fureur de vivre.

Ce romantisme d'après-guerre atteint son apogée le 30 septembre 1955 lorsque James Dean se tue au volant de sa Porsche.

Il était le héros d'une génération. La Porsche devint un mythe.

Les héros, on le sait, meurent plus facilement que les mythes.

Et pourtant, la Porsche n'est qu'un instrument. Technique donc neutre. Il n'y a pas de mythe dans un moteur à pistons, aussi raffiné soit-il.

Pas plus qu'il n'y a de héros parmi les milliers d'automobilistes qui se tuent chaque année sur les routes.

Car ce ne sont jamais les héros qui meurent comme des lapins, bêtement, faute d'appui-tête, ou qui s'empalent sur leur volant, parce qu'ils s'enorgueillissent de conduire sans sentir.

A une époque où n'importe qui se tue au volant de n'importe quelle voiture, à n'importe quelle vitesse, le vrai héros, c'est celui qui refuse de mourir.

Alors, le conducteur de la Porsche, délivré du romantisme, retrouve ses nerfs d'acier et l'entière maîtrise de ses réflexes pour dompter cette machine de 2,7 l qui vous rive au dossier en quelques secondes pour passer de 0 à 100 km/h.

Enfin, la Porsche elle-même, débarrassée de sa légende, redevient ce qu'elle n'a jamais cessé d'être un fabuleux objet, fabriqué d'une façon minutieuse et artisanale, d'une rare qualité, d'une rare précision, tel que l'a voulu le Dr Porsche.

Et si, aujourd'hui, la dernière-née des Porsche 911, avec son moteur 2,7 l, ses rare chocs à soufflets, son volant plein, ses sièges porte-tête, ses ceintures de sécurité qui s'enroulent automatiquement, à tous les attributs de la sécurité, c'est qu'il faut souvent tuer les mythes. Pour que vivent les hommes.

"responsible" safety, the threat of death, violent but filtered, sifted like a shiver of death: "this machine clinches the record in a few seconds." A "little death," a little frenzy at the heart of safety.

In fact, the driver of the Porsche will no longer die in this new machine, because he is *already dead*. Mummified in his helmet, his seatbelt, his safety features, tied up in the myth of safety, he is no

more than a miniscule and traditional corpse, metallic and mechanical (he has nothing more than "reflexes," nerves of steel, in place of bare feet and horses out of Françoise Sagan). He is riveted to his machine, pinned to it. This is the secret of safety, like a steak under cellophane: *bury yourself in a sarcophagus to prevent your death.*[1]

This is about repression, the worst repression. It consists in dispossessing you of your own death, even the death that dreams, in the depths of one's instinct for self-preservation, of driving the Porsche. Everywhere, in all its forms, safety is about social control, and the "forces of safety" move from life insurance and social security to seatbelts by way of the police—"Buckle up!," an advertisement for safety belts. It isn't so much the convertibility of death into capitalist profit that is at stake but the necessity of dispossessing each of us of the final possibility of killing ourselves, that last "beautiful escape" from a life surrounded by the system. Once again, the exchange-*gift*, even in this very restricted circuit, in this symbolic short circuit, is the challenge to oneself and to one's own life that is hunted down. Not because it would express the asocial revolt of an individual—the defection of an individual, or thousands of individuals, not disobeying the laws of the system in the slightest—but because it carries in itself a principle of sociality radically antagonistic to the repressive social principle that is ours. The exchange-gift must be killed by "killing a certain glorification of death." And the subtlest way is to make this death "legendary," a romantic aberration, before definitively burying it beneath the inverse myth of safety.

Kill myths? No. Kill death's demand *with* myth. So that humans can live? No. So that they will definitively die the only death authorized by the system: living separated from their death,

which only exchanges the form of their survival, "the way Doctor Porsche wanted it," all risks assured.

This advertisement clearly expresses what safety is for an entire civilization: blackmail for survival. Our entire technical culture has created an artificial place of death. Not only the weapons that remain the archetype of material production, but the machines and the smallest objects that surround us constitute a horizon of death, and of a death henceforth indissoluble because crystallized and out of reach: capital fixes death, where the living labor of death is frozen, the way that labor power is frozen in fixed capital and dead labor. Or again: all material production is only a gigantic "character armor" in which space holds death in respect. Of course, death itself hangs over space and is enclosed in the armor that it thinks protects it. Here we rediscover, on the level of the civilization as a whole, the image of the automotive sarcophagus: safety armor, miniaturized death become a technological prolongation of our own body. The body made biological, the environment technological, hand in hand with the same obsessional neurosis. The technical environment is our hyper-production of obsolescent, fragile, polluting objects. Because production lives, all of its logic and strategy articulates itself in fragility and obsolescence. An economy of stable products and of good objects is unthinkable: the economy only develops by hiding danger, pollution, usury, deception, obsession. The economy only lives through the suspension of death that it maintains *through material products*—by renewing the available *stockpile of death*, even if it must arrange it by overcharging for safety: blackmail and repression. Death is definitively secularized in material production—that's where it reproduces itself in an enlarged way as capital. And even our body, which has become a biological machine, is modeled on this inorganic body, and

becomes in the same moment a *bad object*, destined for sickness, accidents, and death.

Living through the production of death, capital is well prepared to produce safety: it's the same thing. *Safety is the industrial prolongation of death*, just as ecology is the industrial prolongation of pollution. A few more shrouds for the sarcophagus. This is also true of the large institutions that are the pride of our democracy: Social Security, the social prosthesis of a dead society ("Social Security is Death"—May 1968). This is to say that we previously eliminated in all its symbolic cogs, in its system of reciprocities and deep obligations, what made it that *neither the concept of security nor that of the "social" had any meaning*. The "social" begins with responsibility for death. Just as in the destroyed cultures that we resuscitate and protect as folklore.[2] The same for life insurance: this is the domestic variant of a system that everywhere requires death as axiom. Social translation of the death of the group—each materializing for the other only as social capital indexed by death.

Dissuasion of death at the price of a continual mortification: such is the paradoxical logic of safety. In a Christian context, asceticism plays the same role. The accumulation of suffering and of penitence can play the same role as character armor, as a protective sarcophagus against hell. And our obsessional compulsion for safety can be interpreted as a gigantic collective asceticism, an anticipation of death within life itself: from protection to protection, from defense to defense, the institutions, the modern material apparatus, life is no longer anything but a bleak defensive accounting, enclosing all risks in its sarcophagus. Accounting for survival, in place of a radical accounting for life and death.

Our system survives through the reproduction of death. The Porsche, like a bomb, is a sufficient example of this mortifying

cycle. But look how the system pretends to manufacture safety. A reversal? Not at all: a simple twist in the cycle, rejoining both ends. Safety is only one internal reproductive condition of the system attaining a certain stage of expansion, like *feed back* is only an internal regulatory procedure of systems attaining a certain point of complexity.

That an automobile company recycles itself through safety without changing its range, objective or product (this car can move still more quickly than those that preceded it) show that safety is only a question of a substitution of terms. *Death and safety are two equivalent terms.* The proof is that the poster, far from radically opposing the two systems of value, contents itself with risking death and safety within the same myth of virility and adventure. To chose safety today is to be a superman. It's the same as surpassing the traditional *supermen* who chose death, the easy solution. The myth therefore intends to make us courageously become safe, significantly without excluding the other term. Because each of us must indifferently consume the two false teeth. But this is difficult, *because people are indifferent to safety.* They weren't interested when Ford and General Motors proposed it to them between 1955 and 1960. *It had to be imposed everywhere.* Irresponsible and blind? No. This resistance should be associated with that which everywhere historically opposed traditional groups to "rational" social progress: vaccination, medicine, safe working conditions, education, hygiene, the regulation of births, and many other things. Almost always, these resistances have been broken, and today one can reference a "natural," "eternal," "spontaneous" need for safety, and for all the good things that our civilization has produced. We have succeeded in intoxicating the people with a virus for conservation and safety, so well that they will fight to the death to obtain it. In

fact, it's more complicated: they struggle for the *right* to safety, which is of a profoundly different order. When it comes to safety itself, no one gives a damn. They must be intoxicated with it for generations before they believe that they "need" it. This success is an essential aspect of domestication and "social" colonization. That whole groups preferred to collapse rather than to see themselves destructured through the terroristic intervention of medicine, of reason, of science, and to centralized power, shows that it is forgotten, suppressed behind the universal moral law of the conservative "instinct" and of the "need" for safety, which ends up imposing itself on them. It shows what nevertheless always resurges, if only among the workers who refuse to apply norms of safety in workshops: what would they want with it, if not to save a scrap of control over their own life, even at their own risk, even at the price of additional exploitation (since they produce faster)? This is not the rationality of the proletariat. But they struggle in their way, and they know that economic exploitation is less serious than this "Accursed Share," this accursed scrap that absolutely must not be torn away from them, this share of symbolic challenge, which is at the same time a denial of safety and a challenge to their own lives. The boss can exploit them to death, but he will truly dominate them only if he can make each of them identify with his individual or class interest, submit to the economic principle of calculation and conservation, make them accountable and a capitalist of their own lives. Thus he would truly be the master, and the worker the slave (etymologically: *servus*, he who, initially condemned to death, was "conserved," so as to be condemned to the slow death of work). Insofar as through this insignificant resistance to the moral order of safety, the exploited retain a choice between life and death, the exploited win, on their own terrain: the symbolic.

The driver's resistance to safety is of the same order, and it should be liquidated as immoral: as suicide was everywhere forbidden or condemned because it signifies first a challenge that society cannot relieve, and which assured therefore the preeminence of an individual over the entire social order. Still the accursed share—the little thing that each of us assumes over our own lives in defiance of the social order—the little thing that each of us assumes over our own bodies so as to *offer* it—and which can be our own death, on the condition that someone offer it—this little thing that is the whole secret of symbolic exchange, because it is offered and received, and repaid, and therefore *impregnable* through the dominant form of exchange, irreducible to its law, and fatal to it: its only adversary, in fact, the only one that it should exterminate.

17

The Failure of Prophecy

The solidity of institutions is founded on the failure of prophecy. The failure of the Left was followed by a wave of enrollments in the communist party. Militancy rests on this kind of disillusioned investment. Frustrated by a victory, by a second coming, we are going to invest a long term practice with a fierce resignation. As we know, if the Kingdom of Heaven was in this world, the church wouldn't exist. The communist party does well to circle power like a cat without ever wanting to take it. Because it only exists through the postponement of the revolution. Each failure of the revolution, each (narrowly) missed opportunity reinforces it in its being, in waiting, as a long term institution. It likes its elections, and has confidence in the silent majorities, in the right to spare it victory and the risks of power. Just less than 50% is its ideal situation. That permits it not to risk either alternation (in which case it would be eroded by the socialist party) or revolution (in which case it would be eroded by history). That permits it to remain as a reserve of the Left, of the Republic, of history, of revolution. This ghetto wherein we enclose it, and from which it makes us feel pity for it, is the only artificial space wherein it can survive. There it can exert its vocation as a great power at rest, its frozen vocation as a manager sheltered from power, its vocation as an oppositional

silent majority. Moscow and Peking deliberately chose Giscard—nothing says that the communist party did it in secret.

As we approach alternation (or the reversibility of the Left-Right political equation), the contents of these two terms become indifferent and aleatory. Left and Right exchange their objectives and their politics—and even "objective" social membership no longer matters. In the United States, Texas oil workers are democrats, dock worker's unions are republicans. Much more than the political determination, these are the tricks of clans at stake, of organic solidarities. As in Corsica. They have no problems: they vote for their clan. The vote is recycled as a symbolic practice of kinship and a ritual of recognition. The Giacommetti for Mitterrand, the Biaggini for Giscard. Before laughing we should ask ourselves if:

— this is not a collective practice of resistance to the democratic "rules of the game"—like the way that the Sianese recycle European money in their tribal circuit of exchange.

— if it is not already largely but shamefully the same in supposedly "rational" electoral practices. Look at petitions in the press (an appeal to Christians in favor of X, an appeal to intellectuals in favor of Y, an appeal to friends of Israel in favor of both, on the front and back of each page, appeals to researchers, sports fans, artists, progressives with disabilities, macro-bio-geneticists of the Vaucluse, etc.). The entire market of categorical and nominal values puts itself in play to launch appeals to families, to "totemic" affiliations, stimulants for reorganization. But these informal groups lack true organic solidarity. They only translate the desire to reorganize around an intermediary authority (two step flow of communication), against the total abstraction of the media at its height. At the same time, they show that every "scene" is ripe for "production,"

that all the channels of representation intermingle and underscore one another, and that delirium over the brand image is general.

"The France that works and thinks"
— *L'Humanité*, 20 May 1974

A PERFECTLY REPRESSIVE and disgusting new myth of the Left was born in the last elections. The Left is the *real* society, the "vital forces of the nation." Producers, intellectuals, the youth, "workers," urban populations, etc. everything that is best, the entire future of France votes Left. On the Right, the residue, the resigned, the imbeciles, the old men, unfortunate women (the old, though there are a lot of them), dirty farmers, the *lumpen* (those with the lowest income vote on the Right), the military (except the enlightened fringe of modern officers). In short, all kinds of categories that *should no longer exist*, according to solid historical logic. At the hatch, the old. They are blocking the road of history. At bottom, all of these people lack a *social* existence, they are not fit for socialism. There is a hint of genocide in all this, of Leftist racism become officially the "social real," with the whole excuse of the sociological apportionment of categories, referring everyone else to non-existence, to dumb and mean non-existence. A new subject of history: the "vital forces," the normal against the abnormal, the effective and dynamic living being against the social wastes. The Left turns into a caste. At least the proletariat recognized the social and historical reality of the bourgeoisie, that's why they fought it. But it was only a class. Today, the Left has fashioned a historical shield out of racist and discriminatory terms. It separates everyone else as asocial and already outmoded. That prevents it from posing the question of its own non-existence.

Why doesn't everyone vote on the Left? All the reasons are gathered, all the good reasons (even capitalist ones) are on the Left. Would it be that a group of people resists somewhere, without knowing it, the latent racism of the social rationality that the Left incarnates, the *rationality* that presents itself as social *reality*, that claims the principle of the historical reality for itself, etc. Hegel and the dialectic in the service of reason, and therefore of social efficacy: such is the Left.

Are the people stupid? Can we not give them credit and think that they set themselves against this *hidden* truth of the Left, and not because they are stupid, vicious beasts? Those that the Left excludes today as "non-vital" forces because they do not vote Left can feel confirmed in their opinion.

Democracy, or the free choice of individuals, comes through in its logical functioning as an inverse situation of facts:

1. Obligatory: mobilization through the political middle, the point of alternating 50/50, equal to that of countries where the vote is obligatory. The realized democracy can surpass the constraints of the Right, it imposes a statistical, structural, and accountable constraint (polls, 50/50).

2. Aleatory: when democracy attains an advanced formal stage, it distributes itself around the middle. The vote rejoins the Brownian movement of particles and the calculation of probabilities: 50/50, it's as if everyone voted by chance. As if monkeys were voting.

50/50: equilibrium forced by democracy, to the extent that it is the realization of the law of equivalence, that completes itself in the law of commutability and reversibility.

It is no longer in the name of revolution that the Left will one day inevitably attain power, but in the name of reversibility and of the indifference of present terms: alternation.

This is no longer in France exactly—due to the inertia of historical contents. The perfect equilibrium of democracy is only obtained through the total abolition of contents and references. The Left still maintains the pathos of contents (society, justice, equal opportunities, etc.)—but as lip-service. It will come to power when it is completely emptied of its contents. Mitterand is still too pathetic (even if he reeks of the role of composition). He must come to this sovereign indifference with regard to the entire social substance, so as to be able to put alternation in play. He must become *cool*. *Cool* is the fundamental quality of the gambler, for whom there is no longer any finality, but only the rules of the game. *Coolness* is the pure play of discursive equivalences, of equivalences in writing. It is the ease of those who risk the most with words and numbers, the omnipotence of operational simulation. The sophistic purity is *cool*, polls are *cool*: no longer is anything exchanged against the real. Giscard is *cool*: it is a brand without substance, without anything substantial or historical. This is its efficacy in the system of the exchange of signs in which the absolute law is the loss of all referentiality. The Left still wants to win, it still seems to want to win in the name of *what it is*—in the name of intelligence, in the name of history, in the name of revolution, in the name of economics... Naïveté: It will win when it has recognized its equivalence with the Right in the order of the political rules of the game. Besides, it will get there quickly, it's doing everything for it, the communist party first and foremost.

50/50: THE END OF the end of political representation. Everything happens as if the political class (Left and Right both complicit) had organized itself for the strictest competition, to save the stakes of democracy. This comes from the strategy of the game, through which everyone finds themselves mobilized by the simple formal constraint of the perfect competitive equation of the two parties. If the same parties reign, political disaffection, abstention is maximum. The closer we are to 50/50 the closer to total mobilization we are. Nice job. From this, it hardly matters that the present parties historically and socially express whatever they do, it is sufficient that they are almost equal. To be equal, they must *effectively* no longer represent anything. At the end of the end of political representation everything happens elsewhere. At this perfect point, "it" no longer represents anything. But the fascination of the game is much greater.

If there is only one, or several, one can abstain—choose or not choose. The constraint of choice becomes maximal when there are *two camps present*, both in competition. This is why democracy (and maybe every order in general, cf. pacified coexistence or distinctive oppositions) stabilizes itself on the two, through the bipartite structure.

The game can ramify itself, without ceasing to be henceforth fundamentally bipartite. Thus those who vote liberal in the United Kingdom in fact vote against the preponderance of the two major parties, against their factual equivalence and their dual monopoly. But of course, these liberal votes return to fatten the political class, through new alliances. (Feedback is possible.) The structure remains bipolar. (Look at Denmark, where this dominant structure in all the "advanced" Western countries burst, toward a dispersion and a plurality which is perhaps the end of the political structure itself.)

"Some will undoubtedly regret that television and prognostic betting (the polls) slowly replaced the formation of an opinion. They have understood nothing of politics."

— Bernard Chapius

Television and polls are *cool media*—politics itself tends to become a cool medium.

There is a certain and necessary relationship between the passage to alternation, to the "statistical" modeling of alternation, and polls entering in as a mirror of this equivalence, a mirror of a political opinion and of its indefinite reproduction—a little like the gross national product is the imaginary mirror of productive forces, without respect for the whole in their destination, their social finality or counter-finality. The whole is what "it" reproduces. The same goes for public opinion: it must be redoubled incessantly in its own image. This is the secret of a mass representation. No one should *produce* an opinion any longer, if it confronts itself and confronts others. Everyone should *reproduce* the public opinion, in the sense that all the opinions are engulfed by this *general equivalence*, in this model of simulation, and in process once again (reproducing it, to the extent that they have it, at the singular level of individual choice). Here too, the production of opinions is over, long live the reproduction of the *medium* by the *medium*!

Public opinion is its own *medium* and its own message. Polls are the incessant imposition of the *medium* as message. To the extent that they are effectively of the same order as the electronic *media* and television (McLuhan)—television is itself finally only a daily perpetual poll, a game of questions and responses wherein public consensus measures itself against general models at each instant.

The translation of McLuhan's formula, "the medium is the message," into the sphere of politics is the principle itself of the political economy of the sign (the total loss of the objective reference of the contents and of the contents of *production* itself, the passage to the commutable game of the terms, disappearance of use value as a "dialectical" moment of one exchange value to another). This is the democratic formula of alternation, the two co-present terms at stake; their reversibility automatically eliminates their antagonistic contents.

What the medium imposes becomes the message, this is still an equivalence, but this time much more advanced, and truly general. The equivalence of public opinion to itself. Traditional universal voting already imposes a certain kind of equivalence, the kind implicated by (political) representation, but it is not truly general, because we still distinguish a representative and something represented (some class or social category, some specific opinion) and there is still the possibility of a real political antagonism between the representatives as a function of their solidarity with a certain "base" reference. In the present system, there is no longer any distance between the representative and the thing represented: its the same thing, always already a simulacra: what is essential is that, at any instant, public opinion should be *equal* to itself and not deny itself. This characterizes, beyond the representative and the thing represented, the pure form of representation, as simulation characterizes, beyond the signifier and the signified, the pure form of the political economy of the sign. Just as money and its pure accountability characterize, beyond exchange value and use value, beyond real wealth and signs of wealth, the pure form of value.

Saussure provided two dimensions to the exchange of terms in language: assimilating them to money: we should be able to exchange money for a real good of some value, on the other hand, we should be able to situate it in relation to the other terms in a monetary system. In this latter aspect, it reserves, as a fact of language, the term value: the relativity, internal to the general system, of all the terms among themselves—at the independent and even perhaps exclusive limit, of the first aspect: the relativity of each term to what it signifies (or of money to what one can obtain with it through exchange). It is this stage of the total relativity of the second order at the exclusion of the first that has now been reached, as much in the monetary sphere—with buoyancy, the loss of the gold standard and systems of writing—as in the sphere of signs with the media, where all signs are simulation—they can be exchanged among themselves without exchanging anything against the real. (They can even be exchanged well, perfectly, totally among themselves on the *condition* that they are no longer exchanged elsewhere. Saussure neither saw this nor sensed it: he still articulates, almost dialectically, the two aspects of value, as concomitant and necessary, one for the other—just as Marx still dialectically articulates use value and exchange value. But this entire edifice of value, as much for words as for money or merchandise, is collapsing today, liberating the whole structural game of value for the *expenditure* of substantial aspects of value.) Similarly in the political sphere, the simulation of opposition between two parties and their system of feedback (the absorption of the majority by the minority and vice versa, the absorption of their reciprocal objectives, the reversibility of every discourse of one by the other) accompanies the loss of reference to every real, social *production* of opinion and of the only reference to the general equivalent that public opinion is.

The polls manipulate the *undecidable*. Have they inflected the vote? True or false? Has Giscard profited by the backlash of abstentions? True or false? The extreme sophistication in the analysis of their counts is always open, here too, to the reverse of this hypothesis. Statistics are never casuistics. The undecidable is proper to every process of simulation: the internal logic of the these procedures (statistics, probabilities, cybernetics) can be rigorous and "scientific." Nevertheless, somewhere it doesn't stick. It is a fabulous fiction whose index of refraction within reality (true or false) is non-existent. This is also what lends force to these *models*—but it is also what makes them undecidable, and leaves them no other truth than that tested by the paranoid projections of a society (or of a caste, or of a group) that dreams of a miraculous appropriateness of the real and its models, and therefore of a control and an absolute manipulation.

The only people who believe in the polls are the members of the political class (just as the only people who really believe in publicity are publicists and advertisers). This is not through some particular stupidity (it's not particular) but because the polls, as we have said, are homogeneous, in their modeling, with the current mechanisms of politics. They assume therefore, in this order, a tactical value, a "real" impact, they can act like a regulating factor of the political class. At the limit, they are an instrument that the political class offers itself to risk and reproduce according to its own rules. The class has a reason to believe in them and they do. But who else really does? The people get a taste of the burlesque spectacle of the political sphere, hyper-representative of nothing at all, through polls and the media. They *consent* to this spectacle and they vote? Certainly. Just as they think and say they will buy a particular soap based on their faith in advertising. But thus far no one has proven that this is the final word.

The problem with polls is not their objective influence. Their objective influence, like that of propaganda, we know, is largely canceled and biased by the primary groups, by individual and collective resistance and inertia. What they do, on the other hand, when they are effective (outside of their tactical efficacy within the political class, though the two are fundamentally linked), is neutralize and absorb all public speech, every resurgence of a violent political process: they pacify, by institutionally taking charge of every virtuality of political expression. Presenting themselves as anticipated results, they short circuit every *process* of expression. Besides, we recognize the deception, the species of profound disillusion that they provoke at this level, at the same time as the jubilation proper to their *statistical contemplation.*

Universal voting has always already played the role of a neutralizing and massive interdiction, but on a scale much more partial and episodic—still corresponding to an "archaic" stage of representation and to an "organic" status of the political sign (a signifier, a signified, a referent). With these polls, the interdiction becomes perpetual feedback, it liquidates all speech through anticipation, the received word thickens the process of institutional simulation.

The forgetting, the instantaneous and almost complete foreclosure that follows the scent of politics, wherein people are remobilized as never before, is interesting. Passivity or inertia? That doesn't tell us anything. Another interpretation would be to see the elections (the presidential elections above all and following the death of the president) as a *rite of inversion* (Balandier) analogous to that of primitive societies, an enormous parenthesis, almost a dream—that would explain the oblivion that all that immediately falls into. The elections, which were once a moment of political

continuity, would more and more take on the cast of a programmed acting out, struck by retrospective amnesia. Seductive, but without foundation: this is still, under the flag of ethnology, social psychology.

The reason should be sought in the current structures because the mobilization is accomplished according to a pure formal constraint (50/50)—and not on contents—that falls just as quickly. Continuity, like social memory, is founded on contents, the "dialectic" of contents. This is because the mobilization happens by means of a process of the simulation of politics, that it makes itself part of this very successful simulation. For this reason too it is canceled, in the same way that one show follows another on television. They have no specific weight but an immediate intensity, due to their abstraction itself, like a game: games—a cool medium par excellence, fascination and forgetting.

This is therefore not at all a question of "inversion," as Balandier says (nothing has been inverted or subverted) but of simulation. We are in the time of simulation. This is why, as Giscard d'Estaing said so well, "we live in a time without memory."

18

Taking Hostages

It is impossible to destroy the system according to a logic of contradiction or through a return to the relationship between forces—in short through a direct, dialectical revolution of economic or political infrastructure. Everything that is produced by contradiction, by the relationship between forces, by energy in general only returns to the systems and stimulates it, in keeping with the (dis)torsion of a Moebius strip.

We will never conquer the system with its own logic, that of energy, of calculation, of rationality or of revolution, that of power, of history, of the dialectic... Even the worst violence at this level, in terms of relations of force, is without effect. What must be done is to displace everything in the symbolic sphere, where the law is that of defiance, of reversion, of outbidding. Such that the only response to death is equal or greater death. In the symbolic sphere there is no question of violence or of real force. There is only a question of logic and defiance. The worst error, that of all our revolutionary strategies, is believing we bring the system to an end on the level of the *real*: that is the revolutionaries' imaginary, which imposes the system itself on them, which lives and survives only to ceaselessly cause those who attack it to struggle on the level of reality, which is always its own. It's there, where everyone likes to

throw all their energies, all their imaginary violence, that an implacable logic constantly folds back on the system. The system has only to perpetrate real violence or counter-violence, it lives through symbolic violence. Not in the degraded, ideological sense wherein this formula has met its fate: a violence of signs thanks to which the system would come to be redoubled, or to "mask" its material violence, that being the only truth, in which the relationship between forces and the true stakes of social relations are bound. No, symbolic violence in itself has no more to do with signs than it has to do with the relationship between forces. It is derived from the split within symbolic logic and consists in the abolition of the reversion of the counter-gift and in the unilateral practice of the gift.

The true domination is elsewhere: it's symbolic. And therefore the only chance at subversion is also symbolic. If domination comes from what the system has assumed everywhere, the exclusivity of the gift, the gift of labor to which one can only respond with destruction, with sacrifice, if not in the consumption which is only another spiral of the endless system of gratification, therefore another spiral of domination—a gift of the media and of messages, to which through the monopoly of the code and its models, nothing is permitted to respond—gift, everywhere and at every instant, of the *social*, of the authority of protection, of security, of gratification and of the solicitation of the social to which nothing is permitted to escape any longer. Thus the only solution is to return the process, to turn the very principle of the system's power against it: *challenge the system with a gift to which it cannot respond—other than with its own death and decline*. Nothing, not the power system itself, under any circumstances, escapes symbolic obligation, and the only chance of catastrophe rests in this symbolic trap. This gift,

this challenge to which the system has been summoned to respond under the threat of losing face and declining, this can evidently only be that of death. *The system must kill itself in response to the double challenge of death and suicide.*

On the symbolic level, which is that of sacrifice, and from which every moral consideration of the innocence of the victims is excluded, the hostage is the substitute, the *alter ego* of the terrorist, and his death is there for the terrorist's own death—they are often linked in the same sacrificial act. A deliberate death for death without possible negotiation is always at stake. The system of negotiation attempts to show itself. Behind every exchange scenario, of negotiation in terms of equivalence calculated between the "terrorists" and power (the life of hostages "against" such and such ransom, such and such liberation or compensation, against the sole prestige of the operation, to "make themselves known") that's the scenario and in accordance with it, taking hostages is not at all original. It simply creates an unforeseen, timely relationship between forces, soluble through traditional violence or negotiation. It's a tactical action and perhaps it falls rapidly into effect in this well-known dimension. The terrorists themselves seem to want to enter into the game. But we have already seen what happened at La Haye, through ten days of incredible and surrealistic negotiations, no one knew any longer what to negotiate, no one even agreed on the terms of the negotiation, nor only the possible equivalences of the exchange. Moreover, if they came to be formulated, the terrorist's demands were such that they equaled a radical denial of negotiation. In any case, the stakes posed from their side—their own death and or that of the hostages, had no equivalent accountable system. (Every death is easily accountable within the system, even wartime butcheries, because they open onto a higher bid,

inexpiable other than through an equivalent death). No other response to death than death. The end of the economic order of equivalences. *They are backed into suicide on their return*, which happens manifestly, if episodically, through the flagrant proof of default. The enormous apparatus of power is liquefied in this situation, infinitesimal in terms of the relationship between forces, but in which all derision turns against it. The police, the army, all the assembled institutions and the mobilized violence of power can do nothing against the insignificant but symbolic death of one or more individuals. The system cannot die in exchange, disarticulate itself, unravel itself to raise to the challenge. This defection, this impotence of the system (it can choose to physically liquidate the terrorists—Munich—, but we know this only translates the same impotence into another compulsive and contagious form, everyone knows that power only entangles itself in its own violence, and *without truly responding* to the challenge posed to it). It's own impotence, its death in this moment, is on the contrary a symbolic response, but one in which it comes apart. The challenge is effectively murderous. Every society except for ours knows this or would know it. Our society is about to rediscover it. The true paths of a new politics are those of symbolic efficacy. Hence the ascetic who mortifies himself challenges God to make him forever equivalent. God does everything he can to make him "a hundredfold" in the form of prestige, of spiritual power, in worldly hegemony. But the secret dream of the ascetic is to reach such a point of mortification that even God can no longer meet the challenge nor expunge the debt. Then he would will have triumphed over God himself and he would be God. This is why the ascetic is eminently heretical and sacrilegious, and as such is condemned by the church, which is there only to protect God from this symbolic face to face, from this

challenge in which death is at stake, where God is forced to die, to literally sacrifice himself to meet the challenge of the mortified. At all times, the church will have been necessary to avoid this kind of catastrophic clash (against itself first) and to substitute a regimented exchange of penitence and gratification, a system of equivalences between God and humankind, the church being there to regulate the modalities of exchange.

Everything happens in exactly the same way in our relationship to the system of power. All institutions, mediations, etc., all society, economics, politics, psychology, etc., are there so that no one will ever have the occasion for this symbolic challenge, this mortal challenge, of this irreversible gift that, just as the absolute mortification of the ascetic triumphed over God himself, now over all power, however omnipotent the authority should be. It is no longer necessary that this direct possibility for symbolic confrontation never took place, everything must be negotiated. And this is the source of our profound anxiety.

This is why taking hostages resuscitates something fascinating, in contrast to all the highest worldly negotiations in accordance with the rules of the game, which can only succeed. This act is not at all terroristic—suppress to suppress human life, liquidate to liquidate—no, it targets negotiation, but in impossible terms, it abolishes a universal order of negotiation. From afar, the paralysis of power doesn't come from the stakes of human life (everyone is caught, and first of all, there has never been a contradiction on this level). The entire scenario of respect for human life is only there to camouflage the true capitulation of the system; it's total impotence to respond to some intervention or symbolic challenge, however insignificant it might be.

Desperate attempt of the system to limit the damages by responding to the challenge with a mortal struggle limited by its

share: volunteers offer to take the place of the hostages. But this evidently changes nothing about the problem. The innocence of the hostages is a variable of absolutely no importance, and the system finds itself responsible and unable to respond to the eventual death of its own "delegates." Only its death permits it to respond.

The attacks in Italy, in Madrid, in Los Angeles: did they come from the Left or the Right? It doesn't matter. No historical or political "determination." The system itself destabilized political rationality, that for which it is henceforth disarmed before undecipherable, illegible acts. Every interpretation is stylistically retrograde—provocation from the Right... but also: revolutionary anarchism, armed insurrection—doesn't hold. The historical role of violence? A false problem, and perfectly insoluble as we know. Revolutionary violence, reactionary violence... Nonsense! But a challenge to the system of knowing how to respond on the same "self-destructive" level, not violently offensive actions, but symbolically suicidal ones—suicide being the only thing forbidden by the system. These actions are at once an exorbitant mirror of the system's own repressive violence and the model of a symbolic violence that the system forbids itself, of the only violence that it can exert: that of its own death.

A significant hypothesis—again Moebian: what if, through its actions, the system administrated its own death, but in homeopathic doses?

19

Death to Savages

Ethnology is inexorably drawn to universality. The universality of the gaze leaves its object no chance—but it also bursts through repercussion. Today it is attempting to escape from this harrowing and paradoxical phase, this insoluble crisis, by suicide. It is seeking to abolish itself as ethnology so as to resurrect the Indian in his "difference." In its death, ethnology intends to resemble the object that it kills. The phantasm of a subject of knowledge that wants, through self-sacrifice, to resurrect itself as the basis of this Indian that escapes it. Contemporary neo-colonialist, anti-ethnography (whereas triumphant ethnography was brought by colonialism) is only the end of the end of ethnography, thanks to the luxury that it offers itself in the simulacrum of its own death.

Thus we will have seen Jaulin, Castaneda, and so many others, become initiates, prostrate themselves before the wisdom of sorcerers, exalt Indians as alternative models, subverting the Western order. Thus already Lévi-Strauss attributed "equal" mental structures to them, and Clastres a strategy of political dissuasion superior to ours. Thus anthropologists from the Philippines have left the Tasady to their virgin forest and renounced their object of study so as to preserve their authenticity. Everywhere ethnology is searching to move out from under its shadow, to pass to the other

side of the mirror. A sacrifice of the hopeless intellect, about which we can demonstrate at each moment that it is through a surplus of universality, through a surplus of the critical gaze, which is only another spiral of ethnocentrism, that these pious souls question their Western privilege.[1] But what would this demonstration serve? We only surmount a still less subtle step in this infinite analytic regression. We can only add to the homeopathic suicide of the science which reinforces it in its being. A ruse of analytical reasoning, through which it reproduces itself endlessly.

This critical ethnology, this hypercriticism of ethnology is therefore absolutely vain, *as vain henceforth as the critique of political economy*. What must be understood is that ethnology is dead, truly and irresistibly dead, but for other reasons—the entire internal problematic of ethnology is only an effort to escape this definitive death.

Ethnology is dead because the Great Revenge, the Great reversion has already taken place, the one that brought us the Savage, rather than holding the savage at a healthy ethnographic distance (even as an ideal model), which brought the Savage to the center of white cities. The movement of the expansion of universal reason has already reversed. (It began to do so from the moment that a colonist or a missionary set foot on savage coasts. But this return in flames, this agonizing return to the Western world, this immense symbolic process of reversal and of death has taken two or three centuries to be completed). Not this time as feedback for the Western system, but in the form of the total collapse of it and of white legitimacy, in the form of the accelerated blackening of cities.

This is not a question of the banal and inoffensive ethnological dream: the savage himself becoming an ethnologist of the West. Of course, it is the same critical gaze, the same universal

model that can only be inverted (that said, it is also possible that a future ethnology will belong to the old colonists, who will deepen their negritude by becoming no longer objects but subjects of knowledge).

The blackening is no longer in the statistical invasion of the cities by thousands of blacks or immigrants—nor in the Black Panthers or liberation movements. All of this negritude on the path to liberation does nothing more than borrow the paths spawned by white consciousness. No, the true negrification, the true absolute revenge, is in the savage's infection of the city and of conscience. The right to the city is black. One has to see blacks in America, their nonchalance, their profound indifference to capital. Impotence is at the center of cities—the Moluquois board a train, pestering the Dutch countryside. White legitimacy is dead—Idi Amin Dada had himself brought before English diplomats by palanquin and the Pope received him—an extraordinary historical moment! The savage was no longer an object, the savage no longer a model. The end of the other, the end of the same. The death of the object entails the death of the subject, and the incessant reversion of both entails the impossibility of any analytic gaze. The whites disappeared. "Ethnology...this exegetical form ceased to furnish the modern West with the means to articulate its identity in relation to the past or the future, to the foreign or to nature"(Michel de Certeau). This ethnology is finished, and every return to it is a regression because this is a radically new situation: we are all Indians, all blacks, all savages. Savagery is neither the origin nor the end—savagery is immediate. Something else is at stake.

It's useless to go looking for a strategy for the abolition of power among sixteenth century Indians (the way Pierre Clastres did). Here, even within the sphere of capital, is where powerlessness

exerts its ravages today, and this ravaging is nothing other than the dead Indian, the one that we are—not the model Indian, not the retro Indian—but the dead Indian rotting in the heart of our culture. Rot and decomposition are fundamental symbolic processes—along with catastrophe. They are ours today. The whole space of capital is surreptitiously dismantled, deconstructed, emptied of its rationality, of its ends. The savage surgery has only just begun, but from this moment we are all entirely delivered to raw symbolic reversion, where there is no longer either a subject, an object, history, or capital. Contrary to the ethnological vision and its distinction between an Indian and a white, today we are taking hostages everywhere, where there is no difference between the hostage and the terrorist, between the "victim" and the "executioner" (besides, the public order liquidates both together, when it is logical with itself—they are as dangerous, one and the other, they always end up more or less in a pact and the link that unites them, the risk of death, is so much stronger than the institutional order: the link has the right to be destroyed at any cost). Morality only endures insofar as there is a possible distinction between the victim and the executioner. Science only endures insofar as there is a possible distinction between an object and a subject. Ethnology only endures insofar as there is a possible distinction between the savage and the white.

This is why ethnography's internal controversies are pathetic —the final convulsions of a metalanguage in agony, since white universality is devoured *in place* by the death that it sowed in the four corners of the globe.

20

Stereo Porn

"Take me to your room and fuck me.

There is something indefinable in your vocabulary, something left to be desired."

— Philip Dick, *The Schizos' Ball*

Contrary to the *trompe-l'oeil*, which simulates a three dimensional universe in two dimensions and thus passes into the fourth dimension, that of the imaginary that justly lacks the orthogonal and realist space of the Renaissance, porn in some way simulates in three dimensions what only has two, and thereby makes eroticism and sexuality a one-dimensional universe.

It's useless to seek the phantasms that pass through porn (aggravated, infantile research of the primal scene, and other nonsense). Porn is precisely that which, through a surplus of "reality," of sexual realism, which is at the same time a hyperrepresentation, a hyperallegory of sexuality, an organic oversignification, an extraordinary setting of the stage (the "obscenity" of porn)—it's more real than real, seen from up close, you finally see what you've never seen, your sex, you've never *seen* it function, not from so close, with every hair, not in general, happily for you all of this is absolutely unreal, because more true than real, a little too true, too exact, too

minute, too close, too obscene. This "too" is what fascinates, and the only phantasm at stake herein is therefore that of reality, of the real, about which no one knows where it begins or where it ends. It's a little like hyperrealist painting, where you see the grain of the skin on a ten meter face, when you don't even see that on faces you normally caress. It's even already true about the color of film or television, when we almost never see the world in color but in black and white. But that "makes" it more true—color gives you more. And precisely, in giving you too much, it secures that much for you. It gives you so much, color, contrast, high fidelity sex with all the depth and sharpness, all the life, that you no longer have anything to hide, to suggest, to produce in response. It did everything for you, and that's repression.

An obscene memory, outrageous, carceral, more obscene and unreal than any porn: the memory of Japanese quadrophonics—an absolutely ideally conditioned room—fantastic technique—music in four dimensions, in three of ambient space and more in visceral interior space—technical delirium of the perfect restitution of music (Bach, Monteverdi, who knows?) *that has never existed*, that no one has ever listened to in this way, and that wasn't made to be listened to in this way. Besides, it's no longer audible, it's something else, the distance that makes what we hear music (at a concert or elsewhere) is eliminated, instantly one is invested on all sides, there is no longer even any musical space, it's a simulation of total ambiance that in fact dispossesses you of any location, of any minimal analytic critical perception that creates the *real* charm of the music. The Japanese simply confused (in good technological faith) the "real" with the most dimensions possible. If they could make hexaphonics, they would do it. The fourth dimension that they added to music is precisely that which castrates your imagination

and musical pleasure. Something else is fascinating: the "rendering," the perfect technique of the "rendering," the "fidelity" (another version, just as obsessional, with scientific objectivity, and puritan virtue). Precision: you will never be able to offer anything in return for that which has been "rendered" so well for you—no more investment is possible, it's set up in advance—absolute frustration. The same thing for fans of Hi-Fi.

Porn is the quadrophonics of sex. It adds a third and fourth track to the sexual act. It's so much that it secures it in the imagination. The hallucination of detail reigns. Science already presented us with microscopics, with this excess of the real in its microscopic detail, with this voyeurism of exactitude, a close-up of the invisible structures of the cell, with this notion of an inexorable truth that no longer measures itself in any way against the play of appearances, that only the sophistication of a *technical apparatus* can reveal.

What else does porn do, in its sham vision, but want to reveal this inexorable and microscopic truth of sex to us? It is directly descended from a metaphysics that only exists through the phantasm of a hidden truth and of its revelation, in the phantasm of a liberation of the "truth" or of the repressed "energy" and its *production* on the scene of the real—the obscene scene of the real. Hence the absolute hedging of revolutionary and liberal thought on the question: should one censor porn and choose a well-tempered repression? Insoluble. Porn has reason on its side. It is part of the ravages of the real and of its "objective" liberation. We cannot want to "liberate" sex in its raw functionality. Both are obscene. Only a Jesuit morality—that of the left—can make the distinction.

The realist corruption of sex or the productivist corruption of labor—same symptom, same fight. The Japanese vaginal cyclorama is the equivalent of the worker on the assembly line. It's more extra-

ordinary than any strip-tease—girls on the edge of a platform, legs spread, Japanese workers in their shirt-sleeves—it's a popular spectacle—permitted to shove their noses, their eyes almost, up into the girls' vaginas, to see, to see better—but what? Clambering over each other to get in, to see inside the girls, this one speaking gently the whole time, or rebuking them for the sake of form. The rest of the spectacle—flagellations, reciprocal masturbation, traditional, even violent, strip-tease, pales before this moment of absolute obscenity, of visual voracity that far surpasses sexual possession, at the same time as representation and the traditional scene, with its coded distance. Sublime porn: If they could, the guys would be entirely swallowed by the girl—the exaltation of death? Perhaps, but at the same time, they comment and compare the respective vaginas, and this without ever trying to touch them, other than as part of the game. No lewdness, an extremely serious and childish act, an indistinct fascination in the mirror of the female sexual organ like Narcissus before his own image. Far beyond the conventional idealism of the strip-tease. And what makes us think of the possibility (as in Reiser's drawings) of enlarging the register of obscenity *within* the body, in the domain of the visceral—why stop at nudity, at the vaginal or the genital: if obscenity is on the order of representation and not of properly sexual *contents*, it should extend itself to the prostitution of the interior of the body and of the viscera—who knows what profound pleasure is to be found in the visual dismemberment of mucous membranes and smooth muscles. Sexuality in its limited definition is undoubtedly still only a poor production. Obscenity still has an unlimited future.

But look, what can be analyzed as a deepening of the drive is undoubtedly also—we will never know—only an orgy of realism. Rage is also undoubtedly a drive, that eventually substitutes itself for

all the others (the other forms of desire for the code): the rage to make everything *comparable*, to bring everything into the visible jurisdiction of signs. That everything should be explored and brought into the artificial light of the sign, that everything should be liberated and translated into visible energy. That every word should be liberated and befit desire. We wallow in a liberalization that is only the growing process of obscenity. Everything that is hidden, that still enjoys being forbidden, will be unearthed, rendered unto the word and into evidence. The real grows, the real enlarges, one day the entire universe will be on the order of the real, and when the real becomes universal, that will be death.

In contrast (though it really isn't one) with clothes, nudity is never more than an extra sign. Insofar as nudity is hidden by clothes, it does not function as a sign, but as a hidden, ambivalent referent. Then this referent itself becomes a sign, it surfaces as a sign and returns to the circulation of signs: design nudity. The same operation to the second power with hard core or blue porn. The sexual organ, gaping, erect, or in action, is still only an extra sign, a extra gadget in the hypersexual panoply. Design phallus. The more one supposedly advances into the absolute veracity of sex, into its unveiling operation, the more one sinks into the accumulation of signs, the more one encloses oneself in the tangle of signs and over-signification—the disenchantment of accumulation and the lure of the real.

Hegel: "Just as when speaking of the exterior of the human body, we have said that its entire surface, in opposition to that of the animal world, reveals the presence and the pulsation of the heart, we say of art that it has the task of creating in such a way that at every point of its surface the phenomenal, the apparent becomes the eye, seat of the soul, rendering itself visible to the spirit."

Here Hegel says nothing other than the Indian when he responds to the white who asked him why he is naked: "For me, all face." The body itself in a non-fetishistic culture (that doesn't fetishize nudity as the objective truth of the body), the body is the visage, which is to say (etymologically) that it looks at you. The body is not opposed to the face, singularly rich in expression, singularly bright and meaningful, as it is in our culture. But this dismantling of meaning to the exclusive profit of the face is still only an intermediary phase. A bit more and the inexpressive and functional nudity of the body will efface every visage: erotic models or porn actors are by definition faceless—they should not be pretty or ugly or expressive or have meaning or a gaze—it's incompatible. The spectacular nudity of the body is there to kill meaning and the gaze. In porn, the reductive process is completed: not only the face, but the rest of the body is abolished in the same spectacularization of sex as organ. Some porn films are no more than visceral sound effects over a coital close-up: even the body has disappeared—when a face or a body appear, they have the air of displaced, inconvenient, surrealistic accessories. They risk creating meaning where everything else intends to neutralize it, to abolish it in the exacerbated dizziness of the reality of sex.

A culture of the desublimation of meaning—where everything comes to be, to be materialized in the most "objective" way. A porn culture par excellence that everywhere and always intends the operation of the real. An imaginary culture par excellence that this ideology of the concrete, of facticity, of use, of the preeminence of use value, of the material infrastructure of things. A one-dimensional culture where everything exalts itself in the concreteness of production or in the concreteness of pleasure—labor or unlimited mechanical copulation—the same dimension of productivity. Only

that which can be produced, shown and proven, stripped and set up, accounted for and accumulated, exists. The obscenity of our functional world is that nothing is left to chance. It's the same as that of a sexualized doll, rigged with genitals, that pisses, that speaks. The reaction of the little girl: "My little sister, she knows how to do that too, couldn't you give me a real one?" Everywhere the same process of grotesque simulation (the "grotesque" art of gardens doing the same thing, topped with rocky nature) consists in adding organs, functions, or factory work.

All porn turns on the female sex. Incessant devouring, gaping voracity at the horizon of which one always senses the fragility, the uniqueness, the disfunction of the male sex. The inverse of the traditional social myth, where the phallus is offensive, where rape is always a male act. Through this switch (always phallocratic of course, the same sex changes poles), porn nevertheless makes it apparent that if, as a myth, masculinity, machismo is inexhaustible, as merchandize, available on the sex market, it is always lacking. This is what everyone is lacking, men and women in a rarified and reified sexual representation—the equivalent of creating value in the economic sphere. The erection is never certain. The female sex is always credible, it suffices as an opening. No zero position.

In the utopian universe of porn, that of the realized profusion of sex, the absolute advantage is therefore on the female side. Men play a role of derisory figuration and besides, flaccid or erect, the masculine sex is unimportant. The irruption of hard core changes nothing. Porn remains the expression of female sexual revenge—narcissistic or devouring, or homosexual, or masturbatory—the phallus is never more than a dildo (this is perhaps also the revenge of the Western, the reign of masculine homosexuality). Historical revenge, after so many centuries of repression of feminine frigidity.

We'll see. The feminine was powerful in its repression. We are about to lock it in the eager, demanding sex—the extortion of sex as a labor power. Why has the masculine sign + active, become the sign—passive? Why privilege the feminine? Something other than sexual difference is at stake—perhaps an end to the determinate representation of sex and to sexual difference itself? The feminine would bear the indeterminate, and therefore the imaginary.

The masculine is no longer interested because it is too determined—the phallus the canonical sign of the sex. The privilege of the feminine is perhaps conjugated with the system's passage to indetermination—feminine sexuality floating and diffuse, in opposition to the masculine sex, and its axis on the genital determination.

For a long time we have been able to believe that the feminine sex was tolerated and tolerable because it was not the marked sexual term—the masculine sex taboo and foreclosed on the contrary for that same reason. If it really was marked, it would know how to act and to be represented (not more than the real phantasm—vaginal devouring—it would know how to be presented in an image—Gillette publicity: the woman's mouth on the razor blade). Its appearance on the horizon of porn is therefore a sign of an exhaustion of the sexual mark. Disinvestment that accompanies an aggravated demand and an obsessive overdetermination of all things through sex.

> "In Japan, sex is in sexuality, and nowhere else. In the United States, sex is everywhere except in sexuality."
>
> —Roland Barthes, *The Empire of Signs*

This is only the logical paradox of a society of abundance, an "affluent society." Its imperative, its utopia is the certainty of production,

of the absolute availability of all goods. It would know how to tolerate the rarity of sexual goods. It should provide sex just like everything else. Everything will be sexualized, but in the feminine mode, that of waiting, of languor, of demands—because only the feminine sex can be produced discretely, it alone has an unlimited availability. At the same time, this society proves its own incapacity to deliver without restriction the most precious sexual goods (in its myth about itself), the only thing that fails and will always fail: the erect phallus. Every erotic spectacle and all porn turns around the masculine sexual malfunction (alongside the lack of presence and the feminine sexual demand). This pet theme is undoubtedly impregnated with puritan obsession: the more profoundly it recovers the despair of a society in which, in its profusion, something slips away, the only thing that cannot be produced industrially—a malfunction that it conjures, by default, in erection, ascendance, growth, the schemas of verticality, of productivism, etc. Thus porn and sex in general are nothing but an effect of fashion or of commercial calculation: in them, and in their fundamental obsession, the drama of scarcity is played out for all of society in its total fragility, behind the desperate and mechanical objectification of the signs of sex.

21

The Spiraling Cadaver

The university is in decay: nonfunctional on the social plane of the market and employment, lacking cultural substance or a point to its knowledge.

There is no longer even any power, strictly speaking, it too is in decay. Hence the impossibility of returning to the flames of 1968: a return to questioning knowledge against power itself—an explosive contradiction of knowledge and power (or a revelation of their collusion, which is the same thing) in the university and, at the same time, through symbolic (more so than political) contagion in the entire institutional and social order. *Why sociologists?* marked this twist: the impasse of knowledge, the dizziness of nonknowledge (which is to say at once the absurdity and the impossibility of accumulating value in the order of knowledge) returns as an absolute weapon against power itself, to dismantle it according to the same vertiginous scenario of dispossession. This is the effect of May 1968. Today it is impossible since power, following knowledge, has fled the field, has become ungraspable, has dispossessed itself. In an henceforth floating institution, without knowledge content, without a power structure (except for an archaic feudalism that administers a mechanical simulacra whose destination eludes it and whose survival is as artificial as that of barracks and theaters),

the offensive irruption is impossible. Having no more sense than that which precipitates rot, accentuating the parodic, simulacral side of dying games of knowledge and power.

A strike does exactly the opposite. It regenerates the ideal of a possible university, the fiction of universal access to a culture (now unlocatable and meaningless). This ideal substitutes itself as a critical alternative, as therapy for the functioning of the university. It still dreams of a substance and a democracy of knowledge. Besides, everywhere today the Left plays this role: the justice of the Left reinjects an *idea* of justice, a demand made by logic and social morality into a rotting, unraveling apparatus, which is losing all conscience of its legitimacy and renouncing its function almost on its own. The Left secretes and desperately reproduces power, because it wants power, and it believes in it, and revives it where the system puts an end to it. The system eliminating its axioms and its institutions one by one, and realizing one by one all of the objectives of the historical and revolutionary Left, it sees itself constrained to revive all the mechanisms of capital to be able to reverse them one day: from private property to small enterprise, from the army to national grandeur, from puritan morality to petit-bourgeois culture, from justice to the university—everything must be saved from disappearance, from what the system itself, in its atrocity, certainly, but in its irreversible drive, has liquidated.

Hence the paradoxical but necessary inversion of all the terms of political analysis.

Power (or what takes its place) no longer believes in the university. It fundamentally knows that the university is only a zone for the shelter and surveillance of a whole class of a certain age, it need only select them—it will find its elite elsewhere, otherwise. Diplomas

mean nothing: why would it refuse to offer them, it's ready to give them to everyone, so what's the point of this provocative politics, if not to crystallize energies around fictive stakes (selection, labor, diplomas, etc.), on an already dead and rotting referent?

By rotting, the university can do still more damage (rot is a *symbolic* apparatus—not political but symbolic, and therefore subversive for us). But for that it must set aside rot itself and give up the dream of resurrection. It must transform rot into a violent process, into a violent death, through derision, defiance, through a multiple simulation that would offer ritual death to the university as a model of the whole society rotting, a contagious model of disaffection of an entire social structure, where in the end death would make its ravages, that the strike desperately attempts to ward off, in complicity with the system, and succeeds on top it all only in sloughing the university off to a slow death, a delay that is not even a possible site of a subversion, of an offensive reversion.

This is the effect of May 1968. At a less advanced moment of the process of the liquefaction of the university and of culture, an irreversibly suffered process of dismantling, of disinvestment, of the deterritorialization of the institution (its substance and goals), the students, far from wanting to save the furniture, to rebel at once in a progressive and regressive way (to revive the lost object, or on the road of perdition, in an ideal mode) retorted by challenging power with the threat of the total, immediate death of the institution, the challenge of a far more intense deterritorialization than the one that came from the system, and summoning the power to respond to that complete unmooring of the institution of knowledge, to this total lack of a need to accumulate in a given place, to this death desired at the limit—not the *crisis* of the university, that is not a challenge, on the contrary, it is the play of the

system, but the *death* of the university—power can only respond to that with its own return dissolution (for only an instant perhaps, but we've seen it).

The barricades of May 10th seemed defensive and to be defending a *territory*: the Latin Quarter, that old boutique. But this isn't true: behind the appearance, the dead university, the dead culture hurled the challenge to power, and to their own eventual death at the same time—transformation into *immediate sacrifice* of what was only the *long term* operation of the system: the liquidation of culture and knowledge. They weren't there to save the Sorbonne, but to brandish the cadaver in everyone's face, just as the blacks in Watts and Detroit brandished the ruins of their own neighborhoods that they had themselves burned.

What can one brandish today? No longer even the ruins of knowledge, of culture—the ruins themselves are defunct. We know what we have done during the seven years of mourning at Nanterre. 1968 is dead, repeatable only as a phantasm of mourning. The equivalent in symbolic violence (beyond politics) would be the same operation that caused nonknowledge, the decay of knowledge against power—no longer recovering this fabulous energy on the same level at all, but in a superior spiral: causing nonpower, power rotting to clash against—against what exactly? That's the problem. It is perhaps insoluble. Power loses itself, power is lost. There is no longer anything around us other than mannequins of power, but the mechanical illusion of power still administers the social order, behind which the absent, illegible terror grows, the terror of control, of a definitive code, of which we are all insignificant terminals.

Attacking representation no longer has much meaning either. One clearly senses that all the student conflicts (the same as, more broadly, at the level of global society) over representation, over the delegation of power, for the same reason, are no longer anything other than phantom scenes that nevertheless suffice, through despair, to occupy the forefront of the stage. Through I don't know what Moebius effect, representation has turned against itself, and the whole logical universe of politics dissolved in the same instant, ceding its place to a transfinite universe of simulation, where from the outset no one is represented any longer nor does anyone represent anything, where everything that accumulates disperses at the same time, where even the axial, directive, and helpful phantasm of power has disappeared. A universe that is still incomprehensible, unrecognizable for us. A universe of a sinister cast that our coordinates, orthogonal and used to the infinite linearity of history and critique, violently resist. It is nevertheless there that one must struggle, if that still has any meaning. We are simulators, simulacra (not in the classical sense of "appearance"), concave mirrors radiated by the social, a radiation without a luminous source, power without origin, without distance. And it is in this tactical universe of simulacra that one must struggle—without hope, hope is a weak value, but in defiance and fascination. One must not refuse the intense fascination that emanates from the liquidation of every authority, of every axis of value, of every axiology, politics included. This spectacle, which is at once that of the agony and of the apogee of capital, far surpasses that of commodities described by the Situationists. This spectacle is our essential force. We are no longer in a relationship of uncertain or victorious forces, but politically, toward capital, this is the phantasm of revolution. We are in a relationship with defiance, with seduction, and with death toward this

universe that is no longer one, since precisely every axiality escapes it (*universum*). We will not slip into the symbolic. The defiance that we hurl at capital in its delirium—shamelessly liquidating the law of profit, of surplus value, productive ends, power structures, and rediscovering at the limit of its process the profound immortality (but also the seduction) of primitive rituals of destruction. This defiance must be raised in an insane high bid. Capital is irresponsible, irreversible, ineluctable as value. To value alone can it offer a fantastic spectacle of its decomposition—only the phantom of value still floats over the desert of the classical structures of capital, like the phantom of religion floats over a long disenchanted world, just as the phantom of knowledge floats over the university. It is left for us to become the nomads of this desert, but disengaged from the mechanical illusion of value. We will live in this world, which for us has all the disquieting strangeness of the desert and of simulacra, with all the veracity of living phantoms, of errant and simulating animals that capital, that *the death of capital* has made of us—because the desert of towns is equal to the desert of sands—the jungle of signs is equal to that of forests—the dizziness of simulacra is equal to that of nature—only the vertiginous seduction of a dying system remains, in which labor buries labor, value buries value—leaving a virgin space, fearful, without clearings, continuous as Bataille wanted it, where only the wind lifts the sand, where only the wind watches over the sand.

What is political about this? Very little.

But we also have to struggle against the profound fascination exerted on us by the death throes of capital, against capital's staging of its own death, where we are the ones in real agony. To let capital initiate its own death is to grant it all the privileges of the revolution. Surrounded by the *simulacra* of value and by the *phantom* of

capital and of power, we are much more disarmed and impotent than surrounded by the *law* of value and of commodities, since the system has revealed itself to be capable of integrating its own death, and since we are relieved of responsibility for this death, and therefore of the wager of our own life. The supreme ruse of the system, that of the simulacra of its death, through which it keeps us alive, having liquidated through absorption every possible negativity, only a superior ruse can forestall it. Defiance or imaginary science, only a *pataphysics of simulacra* can deliver us from the system's strategy of simulation and from the impasse of death wherein it encloses us.

Here again a paradoxical but total reversion of the terms of "political" analysis is imposed.

May 1st, 1976[1]

22

Labor Story

Publicity Campaign (from the Minister of Labor)
"Whoever gives the best of himself also has the right to an equitable share"... Priority to manual labor
"Whoever builds, etc.
"Whoever has a responsibility, no matter what it is, etc."...

The first notable advertisement since BNP, and for the same reason, through a provocative and direct implication in the "social relations of production" (whereas advertisement usually acts on the product and on the level of individual consumption). Wherefrom one can deduce (because the advertisement *cannot* pass to the side of production) that the social relations of production have well and truly become an object of consumption, a theme of mass consumption—the social is orchestrated like any other economic or commercial theme.

Thus, in the BNP advertisement, even the circuit of value and of equivalence became a leitmotif of collective consumption. Capital offers itself to be seen as a *commodity*, as an use value, making the social relation and the structure of production equivalent to a bar of soap or a finished product. A very beautiful strategy of dissuasion.

Similarly this time with labor. All the negativity of labor as a contradictory and hidden social relation must be removed, and it must be praised as the most beautiful, finished, social product.

A reversal of the sign of production: from shameful stigma and foul process that every ad up till now used to hush up, production and labor became advertising arguments (a little like cast concrete or the structures that are apparently now the glory of design: unobscured material as a *sign*—the truth of social or manual labor, the obscenity of production as a supplementary sign of prestige). The labor principle, the virtue of labor regenerates itself in this way, but more than anything for what it was in the moral or historical order—no: labor, labor time, labor power as an *attribute* of the finished object, as surplus value of sign and prestige. So goes consumption, absorbing even production in the meanders of its code. (See the television sequence with the father and son: henceforth, the car is beautiful because it is "produced," the fruit of social labor, etc.—an extraordinary demagogical return—a ruse of desublimation. Like sex and repression, and everywhere today the unconscious, the production that becomes the most beautiful argument for consumption, sex becomes the most beautiful argument for the body, etc.)

Production as *aesthetic*. Manual labor as an aesthetics of simulation.

All of us, moralists that we are, evidence a healthy indignation before the abject prostitution of labor in aesthetics and advertisement's manipulation on one side, in condescension otherwise full of contempt, worthy of the worst mentality of charitable ladies. But looking more closely, this indignation is entirely retro and testifies only to our moral and political archaism. Because *labor is truly dead*, dignity, virtue, the value of labor, its historical status as fundamental source of social wealth—all that is dead, and everyone knows it, the workers themselves undoubtedly experience it, and this advertising

campaign *proves* it by seeking—*on the contrary*—to regenerate it in the very eyes of those who no longer believe in it. Behind its moral hypocrisy, this poster says the objective truth of this society where the final pathetic and sacred possibility, the final myth, that of production and labor, has itself been desanctified. This poster is therefore right, and the indignation that it provokes is *naïve*. It still comes from a belief in the historical dignity of the proletariat, in our profound respect, much more profound than we think, for the value of labor and the political virtue infused in exploited labor.

Fundamentally, our reaction is this: agreement with the advertisement when it speculates on commodities, but watch out! when it touches on the values of the infrastructure, lower your paws before labor and exploitation, because that, that's serious, and that brings up the revolution (which must be left to the revolutionaries).

This campaign is abject in effect, in that it openly doesn't care about the world (in the same way that the BNP poster didn't, with that particular salaciousness, proper to the media in general, which must flatter the people to fuck them), but it is also beneficially abject in that it wounds our moral and referential system of defense, which would still like to believe in labor and its value. An archaic nostalgia in relation to which this poster is a length ahead.

It is fundamentally a museum piece, an ethnological document on the death of labor. Labor deposited in the Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions. This poster is only possible because no one "gives the best of themselves"—such performance, dangerous for the social order, is consequently forbidden. There's no question of enjoying your job—the *instinct of workmanship* is condemned.

If this poster was taken literally, it would be lacerated immediately, it would scream. This is why no one believes in labor any more.

Or again: it is because no one believes in advertising. The two myths fall to the bottom simultaneously through indifference. That would be the truth of this poster and of the indifference that it encompasses: the only person who still believes in labor is the Minister of Labor, as a professional necessity. He started this campaign just like other Ministers finance research projects on other things. No profitability, no operational finality, but to do it *as if it functioned*, as if in search (to find!), as if there were stakes or an objective. Because that's essential: to make an obstacle to the drift of references and investments. Where we rediscover simulation fully, and the artificial resurrection of all ends in bulk on the market of the sign (here, even desire plays its role and simulation is felt, the final imaginary solution for the social order: to convince the people of their desire, of the urgency of fulfillment, of "giving the best of themselves"—the final end without end: the operational aesthetics of desire). As here the operational aesthetics of labor: one acts *as if* it worked, as if one were taking care of people, as if they had no other objective than a "equitable share," as if the indignity of labor was unbearable, when it is labor itself that is—or better, when dignity and indignity have long since disappeared along with the meaning of labor (hence the naiveté of an objection like that of *Le Monde*: "If you believe that an advertising campaign will suffice to revalorize manual labor—you would be better off redistributing your advertising budget to the workers themselves.") Nonsense. From neo-social advertising, to archaic out-bidding, to *supersocial* "politics"; each seems to be taking the other literally, according to the rules of the game of truth.

Of course, the unions themselves would react just the same, because here they are beaten on the terrain of the lure on which they live. Their inertia could signify that they don't believe in this advertisement or they disdain it too much to react. In fact, they are

too worn out to do it. Better: they are paralyzed, they would profoundly have liked to take the initiative on such a campaign. They have been doubled by the Ministerial demagogy: they can only distinguish themselves from it through a minor point of marketing (now they are trying to regain it).

Up till now, the manipulation of the myth of labor was left to the forces of the Left, the parties and the unions. Political manipulation no less abject than the spectacular manipulation of advertisement. To canonize labor as a productive and revolutionary force would certainly be no better than playing with it as a sign. One myth follows the other, simulation follows production, and exploited labor is now projected on the screen of the city like any other spectacle[2]—what's the scandal? That labor and production *also* happen entirely in the spectacular mode must delight every logical mind and without precluding idealism: the radicality of the spectacle and of simulation is unlimited, so much the better—if there is a revolution at the end, it will at least be radical!

Or again: the poster attempts to rehabilitate manual labor as if it was a sin, attempts to redeem it as if it was a defect. The abject ideology of the patroness? But *isn't it*? Would it be better to understand productive labor as a defect than to praise it as a historical right and to praise the exploited, *as such*, as the subject of history?

Like sex, labor is strong only when repressed—negated, misunderstood, unaware of its power. When it is revived in a complementary representation, the panegyric of publicity, it is emptied of its final contradictions or split energies. Obscene and pacified, it becomes a model of accomplishment—again like sex. In the end, socialism changes labor as such: the object of need itself and the perfect alibi of the social.

23

Value's Last Tango

"Where nothing is in its place, there's disorder
Where there's nothing in a desired place, there's order"
— Brecht

The professors panic at the idea that we are going to award diplomas without counterpart in "real" work, without an equivalent in knowledge. This panic is not that of political subversion, it is that of seeing value disassociate itself from its contents and functioning all alone, in the same form. The values of the university (diplomas, etc.) are going to proliferate and continue to circulate, a little like floating capital or Eurodollars, they will swirl without referential criteria, completely devalorized in the end, but this is unimportant: their circulation alone suffices to create a social horizon of value, and the mania of the phantom value will be only more grand, even though its reference (its use value, its exchange value, the "labor power" of the university that it recovers) is lost. The terror of value with equivalence.

This situation only appears to be new. It is new for those who still think that the university develops a real process of work, and who invest their life, their neurosis, their raison d'être therein. The exchange of signs (of knowledge, of culture) in the university, between "teachers" and "students" has already for some time been nothing but

a doubled collusion of bitterness and indifference (the indifference of signs that brings with it the disaffection of social and human relations), a doubled simulacra of a psychodrama (that of a demand hot with shame, presence, oedipal exchange, with a *pedagogical incest* that seeks to substitute itself for the lost exchange of labor and knowledge). In this sense, the university remains the place of a *desperate initiation in a form void of value*, and those who have lived there for some time recognize this strange labor, the true hopelessness of non-labor, of non-knowledge. Because the current generations still dream of reading, of learning, of competing, but their heart is no longer in it—as a whole, the ascetic cultural mentality has run body and belongings together. This is why the strike no longer means *anything*.[1]

This is nevertheless also why we have been trapped, we have trapped ourselves, after 1968, by granting diplomas to everyone. Subversion? Not at all. Once again, we were the promoters of the advanced form, of the pure form of value: diplomas without work. The system wanted no more of it, but it wanted that—values functioning in the void—and we started it, with the illusion of the opposite.

The student distress at seeing diplomas conferred without work is equal and complementary to that of the teachers. It is more hidden and insidious than the traditional anguish of failure or of obtaining worthless diplomas. Insuring the diploma against all risks, which empties the contents from all the vicissitudes of knowledge and its selection, is hard to bear. Also it must be complicated by either a benefit-alibi, simulacrum of work exchanged against a simulacrum of a diploma, or by a form of aggression (the teacher summoned to teach, or treated as the automatic distributor) or of rancor, so that at least something will still happen with a "real" relation. But nothing does. Even the house-cleaning scenes between teachers and students,

that are now a large part of their exchanges, are no longer anything but recollections, like the nostalgia for violence or for a complicity that once opposed them or united them around a stake of knowledge or a political stake.

The "hard law of value," the "law set in stone"—when it abandons us, what sadness, what panic! This is why there are still good days for fascist and authoritarian methods, because these methods revive some of the violence that is necessary for life—undergone or inflicted, it hardly matters. The violence of ritual, the violence of work, the violence of knowledge, the violence of blood, the violence of power and of politics… oh how wonderful! It's clear, it's luminous, the power relations, the contradictions, the exploitation, the repression! It's missing today and the need for it makes itself felt. The teacher's reinvestment of his or her power through "free speech," the self-determination of the group and other modern foolishness—it's all a game in the university (but the entire political sphere is articulated in the same way). No one is fooled. Simply in order to escape profound deception, in the strong sense, the catastrophe that entails the loss of roles, of statutes, of responsibilities and the incredible demagoguery that is deployed through them, one must recreate the professor either as a mannequin of power and knowledge or as a bearer of a scrap of ultra-Leftist legitimacy—if not, the situation is intolerable for everyone. It is on this compromise—the artificial figuration of the teacher, the equivocal complicity of the student—it is on this phantom scenario of pedagogy that things continue and this time can last indefinitely. Because there is an end to value and to labor, there is no end to the simulacrum of value and of labor. The universe of the simulation is transreal and transfinite: no test of reality will come to put an end to it—except total collapse and the slippage of terrain, which remains our most foolish hope.

24

The Magic Struggle or the Final Flute

A SPECTER HAUNTS the spheres of power: communism. But a specter haunts the communists themselves: power.

Everything is faked in the current political scene, regulated by a simulacrum of revolutionary tension and the seizure of power by the communists (and the Left in general); in fact, behind every stage where the communists continue to devote themselves to form a front against the Right and thereby to preserve the whole edifice, a negative obsession with power is at work, giving them an ever renewed force of inertia: the shame of revolution stimulates them. They are not alone in this case, because politics eludes everyone, and the Right itself has no vitality. But it discovered that the communists have always appeared historically, from the Leninist perspective to which everyone adheres (and to which they believe themselves to be faithful), as politicos, as professionals in the seizure of power. Political failure and decay is more flagrant for them. Fear of the power that weakens even the perspective opened by Sanguinetti in *The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy*,[1] of seeing the communists take over for the dominant class in the exercise of power and the *political* management of capital (the last Italian elections unmasked the *utopia* still nourished by the old cynical idealism of the class struggle).

Where does this impotence, this castration come from? Who knotted their needle? What magic always causes their failure so close to their goal and not through defiance, like a long-distance runner who in his solitude chooses to lose and to thereby deny the rules of the game—no, why irresistibly fail to take power, why do they desperately put the brakes on, like in a cartoon, at the sight of the abyss of power?

Enrico Berlinguer[2] declares: "There is nothing to fear in seeing the communists take power in Italy." An ideally ambiguous formula, since it signifies:

— that there is nothing to fear since the communists, if they come to power, will change nothing in its fundamentally capitalist mechanism,

— that there is no risk that they will *ever* come to power (because they don't want to),

— but also, that in fact power, real power no longer exists—there is no power—and therefore no risk that someone will take it or retake it,

— and again. I (me, Berlinguer) have no fear of seeing the communists take power in Italy—which can appear logical, even evident, but at bottom not really, since,

— it can mean to say the opposite (we don't need psychoanalysis for that): "I'm afraid" of seeing the communists take power in Italy (and there are good reasons for that, for a communist).

All of this is simultaneously true. This is the secret of a discourse whose ambiguity translates the drift of power. The impossibility of a determinate position of power. A degree zero of political will. All the parties bear the cost of this liquidation, but the communists testify most cruelly to this abolition of political will to power.

The affair of the "false" document, the circular from Moscow to the Portuguese Communist Party about the most effective means of taking power. The incredible naiveté of all these vaudeville actors. It had to be the opposing Left that launched this hoax in order to resuscitate the political energy that the communists had long since lost. In the shadow of the flowering communist parties, for a long time, there has only been a virgin Left waiting to be raped by the Right. Was the document real or fake? It doesn't matter, since evidently the inverse is true: knowing that the communists have long since been *programmed* not to take power. Besides, it was the most beautiful example of false inversion as offensive simulation: "Directives from Moscow to worldwide communist parties on the most effective methods of never taking power."

Against all the faking of the political sphere, which turns around the idea of the subversion of the current order by the communist party, against the lure of seeing the whole world as complicit, this destructive simulation had to be introduced, a falsehood that seizes the entire model of current political simulation in reverse.

They themselves (because everything happens as if they knew it) advance all kinds of good realistic reasons, in terms of relations of force, of "objective" situation, etc.: one doesn't take power in a period of crisis (which would equal managing the crisis of capital; one knows that capital is only waiting for that administrative relief, see Sanguinetti). But of course this is absurd since the resolved crisis leaves no chance for a revolutionary "relief."

Another explanation, tactical once again, but more complex: if the party takes power, it finds itself in the dilemma of falling into total reformism so as to preserve its electorate. And from this perspective, it loses before the socialists (more generally, from the reformist perspective, the Left loses before the Right, which does

that better)—or rather it is summoned to assure its revolutionary perspectives, and it is immediately brushed aside. Caught between these two poles, the party has no other choice than maintaining itself just on this side of the line of power, where it can appear to have a triumphant calling and thereby save its image, without at the same time doing anything to escape this shadow, in the test of the reality of power, where it loses without reprieve. At the same time, it permits the Right to continually play on the imminence of a communist victory so as to maintain power through inertia. The political tourniquet works like this, an endless scenario where the bets are placed and where the same cards are redistributed instantly.

Nevertheless, this does not always explain why the communists are incapable of politics, which is to say of politically assuming a dissociation of means and ends—the political principle where power is the end and the means don't matter—they are obsessed by the means and have lost sight of all the ends, they are obsessed by progressive results, the slow progress of the masses, the rising of historical consciousness, etc. They no longer believe in all that, and through force of will, and good super-Kantian ethics, homogenize the means and the ends, through force of making the fact of power itself a means, they have lost the scope to take it. They have divested themselves of all political violence—because of this, they are everywhere and always the victims, and no longer entertain anything other than this sad myth of the masses dominated by an exploitative power. This is the only substance of their discourse: a lamentable and plaintive recrimination addressed to what piety, to what judicial authority, to which god who will avenge them against capital?

The communists have perhaps never really had the taste for power.[3] *Insofar as they are communists*, they undoubtedly never had a

taste for *bureaucratic* domination—which is different from political activity, and is only its caricature.

Nevertheless, Stalinism is still charged with political violence, because it exceeded the pure and simple *use value* of history, of the masses, of labor and of society. It still possesses something of an absurd imperium, unleashed beyond the rational finality of society (André Glucksmann's error about the terroristic logic of Stalin's camps, "labor" camps as opposed to death camps, which would be the most accomplished model of domination). This is perhaps the secret of the communists' failure, of their complex political impotence. Since Stalin and his death, they *aligned themselves more and more with use value*, with a naïve faith in the possible transparency of history, of the social—through the elimination of every other dimension but that of a sane management of things, through which they have fallen into a *morality* unsurpassed since the glory days of Christianity. Having lost what was immoderate and immoral about capital itself and therefore also about the idea of a revolution that should have challenged capital on the terrain of its virulence (and not on that of its supposed rationality)—it is a pretty poor revolution that can only take over when capital is too weak to manage public works. In its "savage" ethic, capital itself didn't concern itself with use value, or with the social good—it was the unlimited, deranged business of abolishing the symbolic universe in an always greater indifference and an always accelerated circulation of value. That's capital: the unlimited reign of exchange value. In the symbolic and ritual order, it is not true that capital opposes a rational order of interest, of profit, of production and labor, in short an order of positive ends. It imposes a disconnection, a deterritorialization of all things, an excessive extension of value, an entirely irrational order of investment *at any cost* (the opposite of rational calculation according the Max Weber). The rationality of

capital is bullshit: capital is a challenge to the natural order of value. This challenge knows no limits. It intends the triumph of (exchange) value at all costs, and its axiom is investment, not production. Everything should be gambled, put in play. The true capitalist does not thesaurize, enjoy or consume. His productivity is an endless spiral. It reverses all production in an ulterior productivity—without respect for needs, for human and social ends. At least that is the capitalism, unlimited and immoral, that dominated from the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th.

Marxism is only its degraded form. Socialism is not the superior dialectical form of capital. It is only the degraded, banal form of the social, moralized by political economy (reduced by Marx to the *critical* dimension, and having thereby lost the irrational, ascetic, sacrificial, immoral, and prodigious dimension that Weber again pointed out in this *Protestant Ethic*) and the political economy itself entirely *moralized by use value*.

All good *political* conscience (and not only economic) sought refuge in use value. The process must be redone in a light that is still more cruel than at the level of objects and commodities. Because this time the use value of the social is at stake, *society as use value*.

The dialectical rainbow that has long shined over the Marxist notion and over the sacred horizon of value has dissolved, and today, in its broken fragments, we can see what it is: not only is use value nothing, it functions as the codpiece for political economy (what Marx, it must be said, discreetly observed, but which no one who speaks for him has observed since, that all socialism, the whole idea of revolution and of the end of political economy is regulated by the triumph of use value over exchange value—and the end of commodity alienation, the universe is transfigured by use value, that of objects to that of its own sexual body and to that, more

generally, in the end, of the entire society, returning to each of us the image of his or her own proper "needs"). But it is worse than that: *it is the degraded form of exchange value.* It is the completely disenchanted form of the economy, the neutral, abolished, useless phase that comes to close the delirious, endless process of commodity exchange, of the instantiations of all things in the sublime space of money (a process that, as we know, impassions *everyone*, and collectively, when use, function, need, etc. only "interest" each of us in isolation, in a mode of eternal resignation). When an object, a being, an idea has found its use value (its function, etc.), it's finished, that's complete entropy. Use value is like heat in the second law of thermodynamics: *the lowest form of energy.*

The communists believe in the use value of labor, of society, of matter (their materialism), of history. They believe in the "reality" of society, of struggles, of classes, who knows what else? They believe in everything, they want to believe in everything. That is their profound morality.

It takes away all of their capacity for politics.

They no longer believe in the sacred horizon of appearances—the revolution wants to put an end to appearances—but only in the limited horizon of reality. They believe in the administration of things and in an empirical revolution that will follow the thread of time. They believe in the coherence and in the continuity of time. Everything about politics that is excessive and immoral escapes them, all simulation, all seduction. This is what makes them stupid, profoundly stupid, profoundly riveted to their bureaucratic mentality. This is what, more concretely, makes them ill-suited to take or maintain power. They became the administrators of the use value of life, with a certain municipal smile and with the provincial swell of middle class technicians (the "middle-classes" result from the

historic domestication and dumbing down by use value). The "proletariat" fought at the level of the atrocity of exchange value and of its generalized system, which is to say at the revolutionary level of capital, risking the life of their own inhumanity of exchange value against it. Whereas today everything takes the form of infantile pleas for ever greater use value, and that it is the ideology of the middle class, and socialism and communism are the expression of this degradation of the dominant values of capital and of the collapse of the political game.

In order to become pure and simple theoreticians and practitioners of the *good use of society* through the good use of political economy, the communists have fallen farther even than capital, capable only of presiding over the management of the most degraded form of the law of value.

THIS IS THE DEFINITIVE end of the dialectic. The end of the great Marxist promise.

> "The condition of the liberation of the working class is the liquidation of all class, just as the liberation of the Third Estate (of the bourgeois order) was the liquidation of all states."

THIS IS FALSE because the dialectic is over—or rather, this is the infantile malady of Marxist theory—it has never ceased to be on the side of capitalism. And what becomes clear through the impossibility of the communists taking power, through their phobia about power, is the historic incapacity of the proletariat to accomplish that which the bourgeoisie knew how to do in its time: a revolution.

When the bourgeoisie put an end to the feudal order, it truly subverted an order and a total code of social relations (birth, honor,

hierarchy) in order to substitute another (production, economy, rationality, progress). And this is because it existed as a *class* (not as an *order* or an *estate*: "Third Estate" is the term that we assign to it), which is to say as something radically new, a radically new conception of the social relation, that it could disrupt the order of the *caste*.

The proletariat does not possess anything to radically oppose to the order of a class society. Contrary to the bourgeoisie which played its part (the economy) by imposing its code, the proletariat (the "theory of the proletariat") pretends to liberate itself in the name of production, which is to say that the terms in the name of which the bourgeoisie *liberated* itself as a class would be the same as those in the name of which the proletariat would *negate* itself as a class. Misdeeds of the dialectic, with which the bourgeoisie infected the proletariat. The bourgeoisie did not "dialectically" "surpass" the feudal order, it annihilated it, it substituted an unprecedented order of value for it—economy, production, class as an antagonistic code without common measure with the feudal code. And its true strategy is to trap the proletariat in the class *status*, in the class struggle —why not?—because the class is a code, and the bourgeoisie has a monopoly on the code. The bourgeoisie is the only class in the world—if it succeeded in leading the proletariat to see itself as a class, *even if it was to negate itself as such, it won.*

The true relief that would assure (that already sometimes assures) the communists and the Left is not that announced for denunciation by Sanguinetti in his *Real Report*. It is much darker and more subtle: *the communists will one day take power to hide the fact that it no longer exists*. It will not be a question of the subversion of capital, nor of a revolution of capital on itself, but quite simply of a political involution, of a reabsorption of the political and of all political violence into a society delivered only to games of mass simulation.

25

Castrated Before Marriage

The Left is Poulidor. It pedals vigorously toward power, the crowds cheer, and, at the moment of triumph, it falls into second place, in the shadows, in the niche of the opposition. Or, the Left is Eurydice: from the moment power turns to grasp it, it returns to hell, virgin and martyr sharing the shadows with tyrants.

A truce of piss politics. Was the deception of September 23rd that of a political failure, or was it due to the fact that we robbed ourselves of everything we were really due? Even the disorder of the Right is an interesting symptom, its incapacity to exploit what could be a victory for it, but which is not one, because what is at stake in this anticipated scenario of the victory and decomposition of the Left, is precisely *anticipation*, the precession from the scenario of the historical date due and this is as fatal for the Right as for the Left, because it is the end of every strategic perspective. The whole political class is dismayed by this reversion of politics into simulation, at which neither the presiding forces nor the silent masses can do anything, but none can be said to master the process of simulation (perhaps other things take place at the level of the "silent masses").

Each of the them accuses the other of apparent divisiveness in order to reconcile the coming moment themselves, which is to say

to have a strategy. But this is only a lure to amuse the crowds. In reality, the Right and the Left taken *together* act together in the work of difference, work *together* to preserve the model of political simulation, and this collusion dominates their respective strategies from afar. There are no strategies elsewhere in this system of simulated dissension, of dissuasion (which is also that of pacified coexistence at the world level) but a kind of destiny that absorbs us all, destiny of the inescapable production of the social, and of dissuasion *by* the social. (This production of the social invests us all as an irreversible ideal, if only to struggle against.) In this system of the tactical division of labor, the defection of one of the parties (today the Left) is a kind of betrayal, a low blow, an *acte manqué*, because it brings about the withdrawal of political investment, and there is so much energy that escapes the social sphere of absorption, and this is a defeat for everyone. Clearly, the Left behaves badly. It rewards itself with the fantasy of tearing itself apart over nothing, so that its true role, that which it cannot escape, is of being a trustworthy, solid *partner* in the suspenseful political balancing act with the Right, a good pole in the transmission of social electricity (here we rediscover the conjunction of the Soviets and electricity in the definition of socialism, like that of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table).

But on the other hand, one can say (and the funny thing in this story is that all these hypothesis are simultaneously possible, and today this is precisely what defines the political (or the end of the political): the succession, as in weightlessness, of every hypothesis, in which none annuls the others, the cyclical interference and overlaying of all models—but this is precisely *anti-gravity*, this indeterminate effect that is electrifying, because it puts an end to every strategy and every political rationality), that if the problem of

transferring power to the Left is posed all around the world, like a kind of universal epidermal turn toward "socialism," it is not or it is no longer the traditional vicissitudes of the Right that—being used to the exercise of power, transfers it to the Left for a time, so that the Left serves as a relief and a momentary transmission belt for the "dominant class." The Left as a historical prosthesis of the Right (which is not false either). This is a hypothesis that is also at the center of Sanguinetti's book on the best means to save capitalism in Italy.

But if one admits that the fundamental question today is no longer that of capital, but that of the social, and that the only tactic for the regeneration of the social, of the accelerated production of the social, is that of the discourse of crisis, then one must think that the Left, because it is born of and nourished by *critical* thought, it will impose itself on power as the most credible spokesperson, the most coherent effigy, the most faithful mirror of the crisis. Power will be assigned to it not to resolve the real crisis (there isn't one) but to manage the *discourse* of the crisis, the critical phase of capital that will not end, since it is that of the social.

If something of Marx must be retained, it will be this: capital produces the social, the social is its essential product, it is its "historical function." And the grand phases of the social, the convulsions and revolutions, coincide with the ascendant phase of capital. When the objective determinations of capital wane, the social surpasses it in a dialectical stride, it collapses too, in the same way that a bloodless imaginary corresponds to a moribund reality. What we are witnessing today: the Left dying the same death as power.

But one can also say (another "reversible" hypothesis): the Right always risks, at the limit of a certain lapse in power, being

brought to stagnation, to an involution of the social (of the participation of the masses, etc.). Sole solution: a reinjection, an overdose of political simulation in the dying social body. A revolution in homeopathic doses, distilled by the Left, that thereby functions as a relay in the production of the social, just as the unions asserted themselves by assuring the relief of capital during the definitive socialization of labor. Did they come from anything else?

The paradox of this advent of socialism and of the Left, it that it came *too late*, when the process of socialization, after the violent and ascendant phase of capitalist socialization, was already in decline, when the social began the work of mourning. The Left never attains "power" except to manage the social work of mourning, the slow disintegration, reabsorption, involution, and implosion of the social—that is what we call socialism. Thus the unions gain uncontested management of the sphere of labor only when the process of labor, generalizing itself, loses its historic virulence and sinks into the scene of its own representation.

But is this socialism even capable of resolving the work of mourning? Certainly not. It can only multiply the signs of the social and simulate the social to death. In which case, as at the end of every failed mourning, one must foresee that it will fall into melancholy.

THE MOST INTERESTING thing about the current events is the precession of the scenario of the real. A kind of precocious ejaculation (everything is played out and plays itself out six months before the elections) that equals a castration in time, a rupture in the scansion of the event, which always underlies an unforeseeable conjunction and a minimal moment of uncertainty. Thus May 1968, having a

high degree of factuality, was neither foreseen nor a model of future events. Now, it is completely the opposite: turn abouts, surprises, ruptures, all this is a Punchinello story, deliberately directed, by old politicos, from a false, premature event taken from what was already a pseudo-event: the elections, whatever political suspense they still had. Such is the effect of a system of calculated programming and deprogramming, of a system of dissuasion where even the real will no long have the occasion to produce itself.

Independently of the motives and machinations proper to each of the actors in this vaudeville, this effacement of a few chances, of whatever small charm that was still attached to the real, to the reality principle of the event, disgusts us, without us being able to do anything about it. The real will never have taken place, the power relations that could have unleashed it were still-born, only the phantom of the silent majorities still floats over this desert, bowing in advance before the term of the ballot boxes, henceforth still more indifferent than to an episode from a past life, since the curtain has already fallen.

And despite everything the communist party will be said to be most responsible in this affair (even though the ravages of simulation far surpass it) because the communist party contributed the most to the secularization of this indifference, to making the taste for politics pass to the whole world, to the benefit of a disciplined management, an economic vision and a pure transparency of the social. In its rage to bring the social about as a pure element, as a pure abstraction and degree zero of political energy, in its rage for pure and simple social management, the communist party had every opportunity, because it is the only "homogeneous" social apparatus. But precisely this homogeneity might also be nothing more than an effect of the apparatus, and the

social, because reduced to the zero degree, might simply implode brusquely under its ass.

The absurdity of a "government pact," as if power was only the means of applying a program! There is such a contempt for power here, such a misunderstanding of politics—against which politics takes its revenge elsewhere in some way, since the inappropriateness to political sovereignty expands in relation to the impoverished conception of power as use value. By dint of analyzing the state as an executive cog wheel of the "dominant class," the communists have castrated themselves, denying the energy required to take it over (to say nothing of abolishing it). Power as *form*, whose contents are unforeseeable, and whose stakes can be reversed, the logic of politics can lead the man or the class in power to devour its own bases and to burn its own objectives—this is what must be avoided at all costs. For that, a single solution: programming. Politics must be neutralized in advance through economic and social rationality. The form must obey only its prior content, just as the real event must be no more than the echo of a calculated scenario. Same dissuasion, same contraception, came deception.

This is what the masses, who still undoubtedly possess an incurable capacity for political hallucination, have hoped for a "victory of the Left": unexpected tomorrows. And this is what must be discouraged before it is too late, and they are bound by a programmatic logic. Every program is dissuasive, because it arms itself against the future. Moreover it offers the possibility of making and unmaking situations before they have taken place. One can update them indefinitely with the danger that they will become real. One can expend foolish energy that would be threatening elsewhere.

This is the model raised to the power of preventative jurisdiction over all of society. The blackmail of the program can be substituted for every repression. Between the hard technologies of persuasion and forced socialization and the soft technologies of pure dissuasion, the program represents the bastard form of modern social bureaucracies.

The panic at the Central Committee must have been profound toward the beginning of the summer, anticipating a complete victory. But one can think that the dissuasion operation has been ready since the presidential elections, when it was clear that the critical threshold of fifty/fifty was going to be surpassed, and the investiture inevitable. From there, the great burst of hope as a prelude to the baptism of power—but *too early*, much too early, the way one sells a bear's fur out of the *fear* of killing it, the way one imagines the devil in order to make him retreat—and simultaneously, updating the scenario for dissuasion, demobilization, deception. But that is the whole history of the communist party: an equal energy is employed in mobilizing the "masses" then in demobilizing them, resulting in a zero sum game—this is the grand game of the social, cycling and recycling the masses, accelerating and braking the cycle, reinflation and inertia. This was the orbit of the cultural revolution in China—with a strong moment: that of dissuasion (1945: disarming, 1948: knowing how to end a strike, 1968: general strike and elections, this time breaking with the union of the Left). We will never overestimate the historical role of the communist party as a machine of dissuasion, a machine of useless combustion and a cycle of energies: what's left? Precisely the social, the social as a cumulative waste, as a growing dejection, as the remains of all the failed revolutions, as fallen, as inert mass, that recovers everything, according to an abstraction in the end fully

realized in socialism. The famous social conquests, that created the entire ideology of the Left for a century, are only the phases of this growing neutralization.

The funniest thing is that the communist party and Marchais still take themselves for historical specters, proclaiming in a false way: "But yes, we want power!" They who have spent twenty years innocently protesting "No, we don't want power!" so as to be accepted in the political concert. The irony is that they should be suspected of not wanting it. Never have we seen a more beautiful example of an apparatus become the effective sign of its own derision. But everyone fundamentally applauds this role, because everyone needs the communist party as it has become with its political emasculation, strutting, arrogant, buffoonish, chauvinist, managerial—incarnating the visible face of the revolution, the ever visible face of a revolution gravitating endlessly in the orbit of capital.

But all the other parties, and us too inwardly, undoubtedly, magnify it well out of measure, in the disarray of imagining its disappearance. It is still that last grand vestige of a revolutionary era in politics. And in blackmail and nostalgia that is its strength. And that is its current triumph in blocking the situation with an archaic problematic (nationalizations, nation security, the working classes' standard of living) in which, in its best moments, it does not itself believe. The communist party only made sense from the perspective of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Today, it finds itself in front of the inertia of the masses, their force of inertia which undoubtedly conceals a new violence—but before this dissolution of the social, this diffuse and unintelligible solution that the social, like the political, has become, the communist party, like so many others, is without resources.

Nevertheless, we must try to understand it. It is not easy, in a society in a complete revolution toward soft technologies (including those of power), to maintain a hard apparatus and ideology. Monopoly, centralization, programming, bureaucracy, nuclear defense—the communist party remains the last great adversary of a supple, cool, self-managed, ecological, contactual (not contractual) society. Against "psych" society, porn, libido, and schizo incorporated, the party is on the side of the asylum, of discipline, that of containment and of the apparatus, still entirely within a panoptic space—Stalinist therefore by destination, but without the political violence of Stalinism—a Stalinism on a cruise, decked out with a *new look* that gives it the air of a drag queen of modern history.

Of course, the fluid and tactile, tactical and psychedelic society toward which we are dragging ourselves, the era of soft technologies is no less ferocious than that of hard technologies, and, confronted with the disquieting strangeness of simulation, we might even come to miss the clear and vigorous concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat (even if it was a dictatorship exercised *over* the proletariat, this too is unimportant for the utopian transparency of the concept—even in the ambiguity of its genitive, it was a strong concept). Today there is no longer even a proletariat forcing a violent dictatorship on itself through a despot—this is still the wager and the political resource of the totalitarian state, the risk of extermination of which the camps were the extreme form, with the despot's mad dream of *bringing an end to his own people* (Hitler in 1945 condemning the German people to death)—there is no more than the fluid and silent masses, the variable equations of the polls, perpetual test objects that, like an acid, dissolve them. To test, survey, contact, solicit, inform—this is a bacterial tactic, a virulent tactic where the social ends through infinitesimal dissuasion, where it no longer even has time to

crystallize. Once violence crystallized the social, forcefully giving birth to an antagonistic social energy. That is still the demiurge of Stalinism. Today, soft semiurgy guides us.

The question of a possible resistance to this invasive tactility, of a possible reversal of simulation on the basis of the death of the social, remains posed. The problem of a "desocialized" nebula and of the new processes of implosion that it produces. But to soft technologies, the communist party opposes only the artificial maintenance of a "mass" social apparatus and of an archaic ideology of "mobilization" such that everything is already much more mobile than it thinks, circulating with an uncontrollable mobility, *including the communist party itself*, entering, like everyone else, and despite itself, in a tactical movement, henceforth without a strategy, with real social or historical reference, long since recycled, but desperately affecting the contrary: solid infrastructures, irreducible finalities. But this archaic resistance serves once more as a functional specter for a society of tolerance, and as an ideological sanctuary for the conservation of the masses.

The communist party has an idea of the masses, of economy, of politics, and of the revolution exactly as backward as the ideas it has had about culture, which it has always conceived of as bourgeois decorative realism and Leftist scientific objectivism. It is the doctrine of the figurative social, which is to say the equivalent in politics of figurative realism in painting. All the revolutions that have taken place since the nineteenth century in form, in space, in color have remained dead letters in politics, and singularly in revolutionary politics, which struggles with its vocation for the "historical" principle of truth, reality, and rationality. Not only can

nothing be imagined that equals the deconstruction of the object in painting, abstraction (a deconstruction of political space, of the subject of history, of class reference?), but the new spiral that brought hyperrealism, a game reduced to representation *en abyme*, to the hypersimulation of the real, has had no equivalent in the political sphere until our day. Is there somewhere an idea, a hint, in the heads of politicians, that all their energies and their discussions can become something like the hyperrealist performances, hyper-representatives of an undiscoverable reality?

A table is always what it is, but there is no longer any reason to represent it "as it is."

A commodity is always what it is (though Marx already showed that it was already more than it was) but there is no longer any reason to speak of its use value, nor undoubtedly of its exchange value, which still arises from a space which represents the commodity.

The real itself is always what it is, but there is no longer any reason to think or to reflect on it as such.

The communist party itself, like the real, like the social, is always what it is, but it is undoubtedly precisely more than that: which is to say exhausted in its own resemblance. Hyper.

Because fundamentally the same labor (which is not even a work of mourning because it still has a melancholic reference, and it still bears, as in transference, a resolution; the death implicated in the work of mourning is still a *real* psychological event, and part of a history) the same labor of deconstruction, of abstraction, and of hyperrealisation that took place in the domain of visual representation and in sensorial perception undoubtedly has also taken place, undoubtedly without anyone's help, in the political, economic, and social spheres—and the still greater pregnancy of the social has long since no longer been that of a dead sociality, or

hyperreal, like the still greater pregnancy of labor is no longer that of dead labor, of obsessive signs of defunct labor processes, like that of sex is only that of the sexual model hyperrealized in the omnipresent signs of liberation, in the inevitable scenario of pleasure, in the endless end of desire.

We are light years from everything said and done in this world, immersed, Left and Right, in its political realism. But perhaps this realist blindness only touches what one must call the "political class," alone in believing in politics and political representation, the way that advertisers are alone in their faith in advertisement.

The social, the idea of the social, the political, the idea of politics, have undoubtedly always been carried by only a minority faction. In place of conceiving of the social as a kind of original condition, a state of things that encompasses all the rest, an *a priori* transcendental given, like time and space (but precisely, time and space have long since been made relative as a code, while the social has never been—it is on the contrary reinforced as natural evidence: everything has become social, we swim in it as in a womb, socialism has even come to crown this by inscribing it as a future ideality—and everyone does sociology to death, we explore the smallest events, the smallest nuances of the social which question the axiom of the social itself). In place of this we need to ask who produced the social, who regulates this discourse, who deployed this code, fomented this universal simulation? Was it not a certain cultural, technical, rationalizing, humanist intelligentsia that found the means to conceive of everything else and to structure it in a universal concept (the only one perhaps) which was little by little found to be a grand reference: the silent masses, from whom the essence seemed to emerge, radiating the inextinguishable energy of the social. But have we reflected that most of the

time neither these famous masses nor individuals live socially, which is to say in the perspectival, rationalist, panoptic space where the social and its discourse are reflected?

There are societies without the social, just as there are societies without writing. This seems absurd only because the terms themselves are absurd—if they are no more than societies, what are they? Groups, ethnicities, categories: we fall back into the same terminology—the distortion between hypothesis and discourse is irreparable. Referencing other "societies," how do we designate, here and now, that which, in the "masses" (who are supposed to incarnate the indistinction and generality of the social) lives beneath, or beyond, or outside of the social, and what is woven at this level? How do we designate this nonsense, the unnamable remains? This isn't about anarchy, about desocialization, but a profound, radical indifference in the *relationship to* and *determination of* the social as code, as *a priori* hegemonic system. This is not about a lapse, a gap, an accident of the social, nor about those who resist it through their singularity (madmen, drug addicts, homosexuals)—they are in fact the lead categories of the social and will one day be assigned their place in a fully comprehensive sociality. This is about something else, which is not really a remainder, an excess, or an exception, but something massive, banal, and indistinct, more powerful than the social, which does not transgress it, but which simply does not know its laws or its principles. Something that eludes representation, since the social and the political are the domain of representation and the law. What do we know of this massive, but not pervasive indifference, of this defiance through inertia even at the center of manipulation, what do we know of this zone where the social, which is meaning, has perhaps never been?

26

Our Theater of Cruelty

Mogadishu

In the terrorist act there is a simultaneous power of death and simulation which is intolerable to see confused with the "morbid taste of death," and with the frenzy of the "morbid" and the "spectacular." Living or dead, terrorism wins out elsewhere. At least by this single fact: it alone creates the event, and thus returns the whole "political" order to its nullity. And the media, all the while orchestrating the victory of order, only causes the evidence for the opposite to reverberate: to wit, that terrorism is burying the political order.

The media are terrorists in their own fashion, continually working to produce (good) sense, but, at the same time, violently defeating it by arousing everywhere a fascination without scruples, that is to say, a paralysis of meaning, to the profit of a single scenario.

Terrorism is not violent in itself; only the spectacle it unleashes is truly violent. It is our Theater of Cruelty, the only one that remains to us, perhaps equal in every respect to that of Artaud or to that of the Renaissance, and extraordinary in that it brings together *the spectacular and the challenge at their highest points*. It is at the same time a model of simulation, a micro-model flashing

with a minimally real event and a maximal echo chamber, like a crystal thrown into an unstable solution or an experimental matrix, an insoluble equation which makes all the variables appear suddenly. Not a real event, but a condensed narrative, a flash, a scenario—that is to say, that which opposes to every event said to be real the purest form of the spectacular—and a ritual, or that which, of all possible events, opposes to the political and historical model or order the purest symbolic form of challenge.

A strange mixture of the symbolic and the spectacular, of challenge and simulation. This paradoxical configuration is the only original form of our time, and subversive because insoluble. There is neither victory nor defeat: no sense can be made of an event which is irremediably spectacular, or irremediably symbolic. Everything in terrorism is ambivalent and reversible: death, the media, violence, victory. Which plays into the other's hands? Death itself is undefinable: the death of the terrorists is equivalent to that of the hostages; they are substitutable. In spite of all the efforts to set them into radical opposition, fascination allows no distinction to be made, and rightly so, for the power finally does not make any either, but settles its accounts with everyone, and buries Baader and Schleyer together in Stuttgart in its incapacity to unravel the deaths and rediscover the fine dividing line, the distinctive and valid oppositions, which are the secret of law and order. Nor it is possible to reclaim a positive use for the media, or a transparency of repression: the repressive act traverses the same unforeseeable spiral as the terrorist act; no one knows where it will stop, nor all the setbacks and reversals that will ensue. No distinction is possible between the spectacular and the symbolic, no distinction between "crime" and "repression." *It is this uncontrollable eruption of reversibility that is the true victory of terrorism.*

This victory lies not at all in the fact of imposing a negotiation and forcing a government to capitulate. Besides, the objective—most of the time to liberate imprisoned comrades—is typically a zero-sum equation. The stakes are elsewhere. And if power wins out at the objective level, it loses at the level of real stakes. It loses its political definition, and is forced to accept, all the while trying to thwart the reversibility of all the actors in the same process. Terrorists, killers, hostages, leaders, spectators, public opinion—there is no innocence in a system which has no meaning. No tragedy either (in spite of the ideology of the Baader group itself, and the pedagogy of the terrorist model on a worldwide scale). The force of the terrorists comes to them precisely from the fact that they have no logic. The orders do: it is quick, effective, flawless, without scruples; it is why they 'win'. If the terrorists had one, they would no longer be terrorists. To demand that they be at the same time illogical, which gives them their power, and logical tacticians, which would make them successful, is absurd—again a fantasy of synthesis, and of defense on our part, which allow us to recuperate ourselves in the fury of defeat.

Hence the stupidity and the obscenity of all that is reported about the terrorists: everywhere the wish to palm off meaning on them, to exterminate them with meaning, which is more effective than bullets of specialized commandos (and all the while subjecting them elsewhere, in the prisons, to sensory deprivation). This rage for meaning still makes us, with the best will in the world, treat them like idiots incapable of going all the way and blowing up the airplane and the passengers, which makes us want them not to have "won."

Not only have they not won, but they have inordinately encouraged the sacred union of all the world forces of repression;

they have reinforced the political order, etc.—let's go all the way—they have killed their Stammheim comrades, since if they had not launched and then botched this operation, the others would still be alive. But all this participates in the same conspiracy of meaning, which amounts to setting an action in contradiction with itself (here to ends that were not desired, or according to a logic which was not its own). Strangulation.

Stammheim

THE INSOLUBLE POLEMIC on the manner in which Baader and his comrades died is itself obscene, and for the same reason: there is an equal obscenity in wanting to forcibly impose meaning on the hijackers' act and in wanting to restore Baader's death to the order of factual reality. Principle of meaning as principle of truth: there you have the real lifeblood of State terrorism.

It is to believe that the German government's strategy attains perfection in a single blow: not only does it link together in an almost improvised manner the bungled taking of hostages with the immediately subsequent liquidation of the prisoners who disturbed it, but it does so in such a way (coarse, equivocal, incoherent) that it traps everyone in the hysterical search for truth, which is the best way to abolish the symbolic futility of this death.

The hijackers made so many errors at Mogadishu that one can only think that they were done "on purpose." They have finally attained their objective obliquely, which was the challenge of their own death, the latter summing up the virtual one of all the hostages, and more radically, still, that of the power which kills them. For it absolutely must be repeated that the stakes are not to beat power on its own ground, but to oppose another political

order of force. One knows nothing about terrorism if one does not see that it is not a question of real violence, nor of opposing one violence to another (which, owing to their disproportion, is absurd, and besides, all *real* violence, like real order in general, is always on the side of power), but to oppose to the *full* violence and to the *full* order a clearly superior model of extermination and virulence operating through emptiness.

The secret is to oppose the order of the real with an absolutely imaginary realm, absolutely ineffectual at the level of reality, but whose implosive energy absorbs everything real and all the violence of real power which founders there. Such a model is no longer of the order of transgression: repression and transgression are of the older order of the law, that is to say, of the order of a real *system* in expansion. In such a system, all that comes into contradiction with it, including the violence of its opposite, only makes the expansion accelerate. Here, the virulence comes from the implosion—and the death of the terrorists (or of the hostages) is of this implosive order: the abolition of value, of meaning, of the real, at a determined point. This point can be infinitesimal, and yet provokes a suction, an absorption, a gigantic convection, as could be seen at Mogadishu. Around this tiny point, the whole system of the real condenses, it tetanized, and launches all its anti-bodies. It becomes so dense that it goes beyond its own laws of equilibrium and involutes in it own over-effectiveness. At bottom, the profound tactic of simulation (for it's very much a matter of simulation in the terrorist model, and not of real death) is to provoke an excess of reality, and *to make the system collapse under it.*

If it is possible, then, to think that the hijackers have acted purposefully in order to meet their death, this kind of paradoxical death which shines intensely for a moment before falling back into

the real, it is possible inversely to think that the German government itself did not commit so many errors in the Baader affairs except toward a well-defined end (even without desiring it). It was able to stage Baader's death neatly—he did not do it. Far from seeing therein a secondary episode, it must be seen as the *key* to the situation. By sowing this doubt, this deliberate ambiguity concerning the facts, it ensured that the truth about this death, and the death itself, became fascinating. Everyone exhausted himself in argument and in attempts at clarification—clarifications reinforced by the theatricality of the event which acts as a gigantic dissuasion of the terrorists' execution—everyone, and above all the revolutionaries who really wanted Baader to have been "assassinated." They too were vultures of the truth. What's the bloody difference anyway—suicides or victims of liquidation? The difference, of course, is that if they were liquidated and it can be proven, then the masses, guided by the truth of the facts, would know that the German State is fascist, and would mobilize in order to wreak revenge. What a load of rubbish. A death is romantic or it is not. And in the latter case, there is no need for revenge; it is of the imaginary order. What nonsense to fall back in the reality of a contract of revenge and equivalence! The avengers equal the moralists: always evaluate the price, and have the just price paid. It matters little that the "reality" of this death (the truth about...) is stolen from you, since it is not of the order of the real, and therein lies its force. You are the one you depreciates it by wanting to institute it as a fact, as capital with the value of death, and to exhaust it in death, whereas death at full price, not liquidated in the equivalence of meaning, and vengeance, opens a cycle of vertigo in which the system itself can only come to be implicated in the end, or brutally, through its own death. Such is the inspired maneuver

of the German government, which consists in delivering through its "calculated" errors an unfinished product, an irrecoverable truth. Thus everyone will exhaust himself finishing the work, and going to the end of the truth. A subtle incitement to self-management. It is content to produce an event involving death; others will put the finishing touches on the job. The truth. Even among the very ones who revolt at Baader's death, no one sees through this trap, and all function with the same automatism on the fringe of open complicity which all intelligent power contrives to spread around its decisions.

Far from harming Baader, the flaws of Stammhaim stem from a strategy of simulation by the German State which alone would merit analysis and denunciation. A strategy of sacred union, and not at all moral, against the terrorist violence, but, much more profoundly, *a sacred union in the production of truth*, of the facts, of the real. Even if this truth explodes (if in fifteen years it is finally established that Baader was coldly liquidated), it will hardly be a scandal. No power will be frightened by it; if necessary, the crew of leaders will be changed. The price of the truth for power is superficial. On the other hand, the benefits of general mobilization, dissuasion, pacification, and mental socialization obtained through this crystallization of the truth are immense. A smart operation, under which Baader's death threatens to be buried indefinitely.

— Translated by John Johnston and Stuart Kendall

Notes

1. On *Utopie*, an interview with Jean Baudrillard

1. [Founder and figurehead of the National Front, an extreme right wing party that made news with its ascension during Mitterrand's two terms. From 1983 to 1998, Le Pen was in the news and collected, in certain elections, more than fifteen percent of the votes before his influence lessened after a split in his party at the beginning of 1999. When Baudrillard gave this interview, he had just published "De l'exorcisme en politique ou la conjuration des imbeciles" in *Libération* (May 7, 1997), wherein he asked: "Why has everything that is moral, faithful, and conformist, that was traditionally on the right, passed to the left?" This article was reprinted, the same month, by Éditions Sens&Tonka under the same title (in 2002, it would be republished with a second article, also on Le Pen, under the title, *Au royaume des aveugles*... also by Éditions Sens&Tonka). It was also reprinted in a collection of Baudrillard's "responses" from *Libération*, *Screened Out* (Verso, 2002).]

2. [The "Movement of March 22nd" was started at Nanterre, two months before the "events" of May 1968. So as to reduce the overcrowding that was threatening the walls of the old Sorbonne, an entirely new university was built in 1965 at Nanterre-la-Folie. Surrounded by slums, this university was of course frequented by rather well off students from Western Paris. The social contrast was sharp between the students and the residents of the city. The leftist militants rapidly took root and diverse strikes and demonstrations followed. In March 1967, an initial occupation of a girls dorm at the university—in the name of free circulation—sanctioned twenty nine expulsions. In November 1967, a massive strike ensued against the selection. In January 1968, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, still a student, heckled François Missoffe, the Minister of Youth and Sports—who had come to inaugurate the university pool—about the absence of accounting for questions of sexuality in youth politics. The same month, Dean Pierre Grappin called the police against the group that was already known as the "*enragés*." Simultaneously, the struggle crystallized around the role of the human sciences and in particular of sociology in the capitalist system. When the news was filled with worker's strikes and the anti-war movement against Vietnam, militants

attacked the American Express Bank, on the Boulevard Saint-Germain in Paris on March 22nd. Several students from Nanterre were arrested. Demanding the liberation of their comrades, one hundred forty two students occupied the administration building at the university and wrote the manifesto of the "March 22nd Movement." General assemblies followed and their radicalization accompanied mounting tensions on campus prior to May. "March 22" was characterized by its relative "ecumenism" (the "movement" linked and mixed all the factions, anarchists, Trotskyists, Maoists... It unfolded outside of the groups) and its iconoclastic and heretical methods. On this "movement" see Jean Pierre Duteuil, *Nanterre, 1965–66–67–68, vers le mouvement du 22 mars* (Acratie, 1988).]

3. [An international congress on design was held in Aspen in 1970, organized by Rayner Banham among others. The French delegation was composed of Jean Aubert, Jean Baudrillard, François Barré (director of CGI), Gilles de Bure, Henri Ciriani, Claude (a designer, teaching at the *Institut de l'environnement*) and Françoise Braunstein, Roger (designer, teaching at ENSAD) and Nicole Tallon, Éric Le Comte (industrial designer), Odile Hanappe (economist, teaching at the Institut de l'environnement), Alain Fischer (geographer).]

4. [Hubert Tonka, ed. *Parc Ville Villette (Vaisseau de pierres)* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1988). *Trans.*]

5. [*Unités pédagogiques* was created in January 1969. These new architecture schools replaced the old "architecture" section of the *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts*, the dismantling of which was decided at the end of the month of August 1968. Initially, eighteen *Unités pédagogiques* were created (thirteen in the provinces, five [then six in January 1969, then eight by the end of July 1969, and finally nine by 1974] in Paris). This marked the end of the singular *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts*, maintained under the tutelage of the regional schools. The protesters on all sides assembled at first in UP 6. Several months later, Bernard Huet and his team left that effervescent "hive" to found UP 8. During this time, the students close to the communist party founded their school, UP 1. On another side, the "conservative" teachers, nostalgic for the old school, gathered essentially within UP 4. A split would intervene several years later resulting in the creation of UP 9. Today, these two schools are still strongly marked by the conservative style of the teachers who started them. UP 3 was founded at Verseilles. Initially conceived as rather conservative, the school has been profoundly renewed through the 1970s around the instructional team assembled by Louis Arretche, by the acts of a fringe of research-educators that strongly contributed, in France, to the renewal of urbanism. The UP became *Écoles d'architecture* [EA] with Duport's reforms in 1984.]

3. The Ephemeral

1. [*Utopie* (1967–1969) contrived a "critical column" wherein a member of the group could express themselves in counterpoint or disagreement with the group. This "note" appeared alongside Jean Aubert's article "Devenir suranné, considérations sur l'obsolescence du 'construit dans la ville'."]

4. Play and the Police

1. [CRS. Compagnie républicaine de sécurité. A state police force. *Trans.*]

2. In his recent work *La Révolte contre le Père* (Payot, IMS), Gérard Mendal also came to the conclusion that social Power in industrial society represents a confusion of the two parents in the collective soul.

3. I am not afraid to reference my own work: see *The System of Objects* (1968).

4. It is in this double sense that we understand "consumption": culpability at once savors itself in an object which satisfies delectation and this shared pleasure founds a collective value, in complicity with the group and with cultural privilege.

5. Herbert Marcuse, *Fin de l'Utopie* (Éditions de Minuit) 10.

6. It is perhaps a law that affinity was in the same air of the civilization, therefore in the same symbolic field, collusion between order and disorder, between Law and subversion. A disavowal of the regressive type perhaps corresponds to a society with a regressive tendency, a pure transgression, and no longer an historical and politically conscious "revolution."

5. Technics as Social Practice

1. The socialist countries have elevated the power of technical culture. However, it seems that at the end of a period, the scale of traditional values, in a hurried moment, tends to reconstitute itself, benefiting cultural values. In any case, the profound changes in cultural habitus can only appear over the long term.

2. See Edgar Morin, *Cinema, or Imaginary Man* trans. Lorraine Mortimer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

3. This does not exclude the real changes that technology engenders every day in social relations and in everyday life. These are incontestable and considerable. Simply put, these changes operate *within the system* whose precise function is to control evolution and make sure that the changes never initiate open contradictions.

4. Speaking rigorously, this principle has nothing to do with science or constituted technics. One must separate "the" technic from its absolute use, so as to reveal its concrete efficacy, wherein it is always the technique for something: training and rational exercise.

8. Requiem for the Media

1. Marshall McLuhan, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968) 5.

2. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media" *The Consciousness Industry* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974) 96–128. Originally published in the *New Left Review* (Autumn 1970).

3. This political economy of the sign is structural linguistics (along with semiology and all its derivatives, of which communication theory will be discussed below). We know that, in the general ideological framework, structural linguistics is today's master discipline, informing anthropology, the human sciences, etc., just as political economy did in its time; it's postulates profoundly informed all of psychology, sociology, and the "moral and political" sciences.

4. In this sense, the expression "consciousness industry" which Enzensberger uses to characterize the present media, is nothing but a dangerous metaphor. It supports his entire analytic hypothesis, which is to extend to the media the Marxist analysis of the capitalist mode of production, to the point of rediscovering a structural analogy in these relations:

dominant class	dominated class
producer-entrepreneur	consumer
transmitter	receiver

5. In fact, Marxist analysis can be questioned on two very different levels of radicality: insofar it is a system of interpretation for the separated order of material production and insofar as it is a system of interpretation for the separated order of production (in general).

In the first case, the hypothesis of the non-pertinence of the dialectic outside the field of its "origin" should logically be extended: if the "dialectical" contradictions between productive forces and relations of production largely efface themselves in the field of language, signs and ideology—*maybe they have never truly been at work in the field of material production either*, since a certain capitalist development of productive forces was able to absorb them, not every conflict of course, but the revolutionary antagonisms at the level of social relations. What is therefore the validity of these concepts, if not a purely conceptual coherence?

In the second case, it is at the root itself (and not in its diverse contents) that the concept of production should be questioned, with the separated form that it institutes, with the schema of representation and of rationalization that it imposes. It is undoubtedly there, at the extreme, that one must go.

6. One finds this type of reductive determinism in Bourdieu and in the phraseology of the Communist Party. It is without theoretical value. It makes of the *mechanism* of democratization a revolutionary *value* in itself. That the intellectuals repudiate mass culture does not suffice to make a revolutionary alternative. The aristocrats frown on bourgeois culture in the same way: this never sufficed to make the latter anything but a class culture.

7. [ORTF. French radio and television headquarters. *Trans.*]

8. Thus the institutions of power and of the state according to whether they are in the grip of capital or if the people have taken them over, empty themselves or are filled with revolutionary content, without their form ever being interrogated.

9. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, 105, 108.

10. *Ibid.*, 97.

11. *Ibid.*, 107.

12. [See Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication" (1932) in John Willett, ed. *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 51–53. *Trans.*]

13. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, 97–98.

14. This is not a question of "dialogue," which is never anything but the functional adjustment of two abstract speeches without response, wherein the two "interlocutors" are never present one to the other, but only their stylized speech.

15. We can see that taking the ORTF in May '68 would have changed nothing in itself, other than to scuttle the ORTF as such: the entire technical and functional structure of it reflects the monopolistic use of speech.

16. [Roland Barthes, *S/Z* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974) 4. *Trans.*]

17. Multifunctionality evidently changes nothing here. Multifunctionality, pluridisciplinarity, polyvalence in all its forms are the responses of the system to its

own obsession with centrality and uni-equivalence. They are reactions of the system to its own pathology, but they leave its logic untouched.

18. Enzensberger interprets it in this way: "'Medium is the message' is a *bourgeois* proposition. It signifies that the bourgeoisie has nothing left to say. Having no further message to transmit, it plays the card of medium for medium's sake. If the bourgeoisie has nothing left to say, 'socialism' would do better to keep quiet."

19. This distinction has no meaning in relation to the media. We can give them credit for having largely contributed to its effacement. The distinction is linked with an order characterized by the *transcendence* of politics, and it has nothing to do with what is announced in many forms as the *transversality* of politics. But we should not be fooled: the media only contribute to the liquidation of the transcendence of politics so as to substitute their own transcendence, that abstraction of the form of the mass media that is definitively integrated and offers nothing more than the structure of conflict (Left/Right). Transcendence in the mass media is therefore a reduction of the traditional transcendence of politics, but it is still much more than the new transversality of politics.

20. This form of "exposure" or "propagation" is also to be found in the fields of science and art. Generalized reproducibility obliterates the process of work and of meaning so as to deliver contents as a model of itself (cf. *Diogène* nº 68 (1969); Raoul Ergmann, *Le miroir en miettes*; Baudouin Jurdant, *La vulgarisation scientifique*).

21. We should note that this labor always doubles a work of selection and of reinterpretation at the level of group adherence (Lazarfeld's *two-step flow of communication*). Hence the highly relative pregnancy of the contents of the media and the multiple resistances that it provokes. (We should ask ourselves, however, if these resistances intend, even more than the contents, toward the abstraction of the media itself: in this sense, Lazarfeld's double articulation would, since the second articulation is a network of *personal* relations, opposed to the generality of the media's messages.) Significantly, this "second" reading, wherein group membership opposes its own code to that of the transmitters (cf. Umberto Eco's thesis, discussed below), not to neutralize it, to "reduce" its dominant ideological contents in the same way as critical or subversive *contents*. To the extent that the first (cultural models, systems of imposed values without alternative or response, bureaucratic contents) are homogeneous with the general mass mediated form (non-reciprocal, irresponsibility) and integrate themselves therein through redoubling, there is as an effect of over-determination and therefore a pregnancy greater than the dominant ideological contents. This "passes" better than the subversive contents. But it is not essential. It must be recognized that the *form* of transgression does not pass "more or less;" it is radically denied by the form of the mass media.

22. For Walter Benjamin, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the reproduced work becomes increasingly "designed for reproduction." For Benjamin, therefore, the work passes from ritual to "politics." The "exhibition value" revolutionizes the work of art and its functions.

23. [An agreement reached by representatives of the CGT and Georges Pompidou in May 1968. *Trans.*]

24. Jerry Rubin, *Do It* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970) 234.

25. The two terms are so minimally present, one to the other, that it is necessary to create the category of "contact" to theoretically reconstitute the group!

26. The developed form of this opens logically onto analysis in terms of classical political economy. In *La communciation de masse* (S.G.P.P, 1971), Burgelin discusses mass communication as a "*market* of messages," repeating all the schemas of liberal economy: competition, offer and demand, equilibrium, needs and consumer "choice," etc. This is the *unchanged* extension of bourgeois political economy, just as Enzensberger extends *unchanged* the critique of that political economy.

27. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, 119, 127.

28. *Ibid.*, 97.

29. Here again, Enzensberger, who analyzes and denounces this integration of control circuits, meanwhile connects with this incorrigible idealism: "Naturally [!] such tendencies go against the grain of the structure, and the new productive forces not only permit, but indeed demand [!] their reversal"(108). Feed-back and interaction are the *logic* of cybernetics, and there is the same illusion in underestimating the possibilities of the system for integrating these "revolutionary" innovations as in underestimating the capacity of capitalism to develop the forces of production.

30. Enzensberger draws his argument from the fact that Xerox retains its monopoly on photo-copying (the possibility of general "free press") and only rents at exorbitant rates. But having our own Xerox or short wave-length is inessential. The true monopoly is never that of technical means but that of speech.

31. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, 110.

32. This is why the *individual* amateur cameraman remains in the separated abstraction of *mass* communication. Through this internal dissociation between the two authorities, the entire code and all of the dominant models engulf and seize his practice.

9. DNA or the Metaphysics of the Code

1. [Jacques Monod (1910–1976) shared the Nobel Prize in Medicine with François Jacob and André Lwoff in 1965 for his work in genetics. See Jacques Monod, *Le hasard et la nécessité: essai sur la philosophie naturelle de la biologie moderne* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). *Trans.*]

2. *Planning Programming Budgeting System*: an apparatus processing information for all projected and operational ends.

3. [François Jacob, *La Logique du Vivant: une histoire de l'hérédité.* (Paris: Gallimard, Tel, 1970). *Trans.*]

4. In "archaic" exchange, nothing is left out of meaning or objectified as non-living. No nature, inert, submitted to an abstract and unitary principle of reality. Ambivalence acts on all things. What is left of exchange, of communication, of meaning in Monod's theory? The "stereospecific complex" revived by Morin in molecular Eros. This mode of nuclear affinity, founded on covalence and reading information, is the reduction of all exchange: coded similitudes or non-similitudes are the image of cyberbetic social exchange.

10. The Mirror of Production

1. Marx evidently played an essential role in rooting this productivist metaphor. Marx radicalized and definitively rationalized the concept of production, he "made it" dialectical, and gave it its title of revolutionary nobility. It is in large part through unconditional reference to Marx that this concept pursues its prodigious career.

2. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1947) 16.

3. *Ibid.*, 7.

4. See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* [1972] trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981).

5. "Notes on Wagner" in *Theoretical Practice* 5 (Spring 1972) 51–52.

6. Pierre Naville, *Le nouveau léviathan* (Paris: Rivière, 1954) 371.

7. Karl Marx, *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1904) 33.

8. Another great disjunction on which the critique of political economy articulates itself: the technical and social divisions of labor—subjected to the same analysis. Transfiguring the technical division as both sides of the social division, it preserves with the same blow the fiction of an ideal distribution of labor, of a "non-alienated" concrete productivity, and it universalizes the technical mode and technical rationale. Thus the dialectic of productive forces and relations of productivity: everywhere the "dialectical" contradiction ends in a Mobius strip, though in the meantime it has had the time to circumscribe the field of production and to universalize it.

9. Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *op. cit.*, 298–299.

10. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Pelican, 1973) 527.

11. We will come back to this reciprocal neutralization of the theory and the object in relation to the rapports between Marxist theory and the workers' movement.

12. This is not to say that they have *never existed*: another paradox to which we will have to return.

13. The same for nature: not only the exploitation of nature as productive force, but the over-determination of nature as referent, as "objective" reality, by the code of political economy.

14. Karl Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*. [Unlocatable. *Trans.*]

15. Herbert Marcuse, "On the Concept of Labor" *Telos* 16 (Summer 1973) 11–12.

16. Easton and Guddat, eds., *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Anchor, 1969) 322, 332.

17. Karl Marx, *Capital* vol. 1 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House) 42–43.

18. *Ibid.*, 177.

19. Engels, always a naturalist, goes on to praise the role play by labor in the transition from ape to man.

20. Marcuse, *op. cit.*, 22.

21. *Ibid.*, 15.

22. *Ibid.*, 25.

23. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 259.

24. Paul Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy* trans. C. Kerr (Chicago: Kerr, 1917) 9.

25. Insofar as it conceives of man as the union of a soul and a body—which took place, as we know, in an extraordinary "dialectical" flowering during the Christian Middles Ages.

26. This autonomization is the key which turns Marxism toward social-democracy, the key to its present revisionism, and to its total positivist degradation (which also includes bureaucratic Stalinism as well as Social Democractic liberalism).

27. Marx, *Capital*, *op. cit.*, III, 799–800.

28. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Vintage, 1962) 178.

29. See Julia Kristeva, *Sèmèiotikè: recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris, Seuil, 1969).

30. Marx, *Capital*, *op. cit.*, I, 43–44.

31. *Ibid.*, I, 195.

32. For example, this passage from Marx on the social hieroglyph: "Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value is just as much a social product as language" (*Capital*, *op. cit.*, I, 74). The entirety of this analysis of the mystery of value remains fundamental. But far from only being valuable for the distributed and exchanged product of labor, it already works for the product of labor (and for labor itself) understood as a "useful object." The utility (that of labor as well) is already this socially produced and socially determined hieroglyphic abstraction. The entire anthropology of "primitive" exchange forces us to shatter the natural evidence of utility and recreate the historical and social genesis of use value as Marx did exchange value. Only then will the hieroglyph be totally deciphered and the spell of value be radically exorcised.

33. Why not?

11. Marxism and the System of Political Economy

1. Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital* trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979) 124.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 125.

5. Lukacs' concept of "reification" undoubtedly constitutes the only attempt at critical theoretical development between Marx and the Situationists.

6. Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1936) 42.

7. From this comes the artificial oligopoly on which the real monopoly is stabilized. Similarly, bipartisanism is the optimal political form for the functioning of monopoly power by a single class; and the peaceful coexistence of two powers (soon three) is the stabilized form of world imperialism.

8. See "Fetishism and Ideology" in Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, *op. cit.*, 88–101.

9. Economically, this process culminates in the virtual international autonomy of finance capital, in the uncontrollable play of floating capital. Once currencies are extracted from every productive caution, and even from all reference to the gold standard, general equivalence becomes the strategic place of manipulation: real production is subordinated to it everywhere. This apogee of the system corresponds to the triumph of the code.

10. This division is already in place in the universities and *grandes écoles.*

11. See for example the establishment, in the United States, of an indefinite salary-unemployment that neutralizes entire groups as producers, while maintaining them as consumers. This is no longer a question of the strategy of the "reserve army of capital," but of testing everyone and, as in school (this society sends everyone to school), of social availability and transformation (at a cost of enormous financial "sacrifices," but who would not make sacrifices for the reproduction of the system) of whole categories into idle and parasitic clients of the system. No longer wild exploitation, but tutelage and relegation.

12. But one can always ask if this demobilization, this virtual *lock out* responds to the secret exigencies of the calculus of productivity, therefore of the system itself in its reproduction (since it extends to the point of financing nonproductive marginality), or if it really constitutes, through disinvestment and growing defection, a model of subversion.

13. Through "scientific" analysis, linguistics and semiology direct the social exclusion of speech, which defends the code: the life and death of the system is played out, in a less spectacular though nevertheless political way, in the code.

14. But one can also intend to pass simply to the other side of the line to become the marked term, to change positions without breaking the code: the "white" black, etc.

15. To the point of appearing archaic before technocratic reformism: hours of their choice, job enrichment, non-line assembly. The unions resist innovation. Justly, but on a conservative basis.

16. This would mean that the traditional contradictions have no more than an apparent meaning: but perhaps they never had anything more than that?

17. The planetary extension, of the economic and political kind, of capitalism is only the "extensive" modality of this deepening of capital. Significantly, the analysis of "imperialism" is generally limited to this level.

18. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1970) (London: Sage Publications, 1977).

19. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970) (London: Sage Publications, 1998).

20. The autonomy of faculties is, as we know, the best way to align them with capitalist productivity; even the independence of colonized countries was the best way to perpetuate and modernize their exploitation.

21. Thus idealist simulation and materialist simulation meet up: their common schema is the separation of authorities. Under the jurisdiction of one among them (the same schema in the semiological reduction). (cf. *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse* nº 2)

22. This confusion institutes itself, here again, by creating it beside totalitarianism, which is to say total control, the total control of the class, under the sign of reason, through an organizational authority. Class consciousness, this idealist vision, has in fact only a single mode of objective existence, the party. It is not the class which, in its own movement, offers the party or the organization as dialectical mediation of its practice, it is the bureaucracy itself which, through the extension of its power, secretes class consciousness as its ideology. Lukacs, when he wrote *History and Class Consciousness*, was not anti-Stalinist. He was in the Stalinist movement. He offered the bureaucracy its philosophy of History, a reflexive philosophy of the class as a Subject, through which the triumphant bureaucracy was able to historically idealize its totalitarian practice.

23. In this regard, Lukacs' beautiful dialectic, of *History and Class Consciousness*, takes on an entirely ambiguous meaning: the rational vocation of class as subject of history, the articulation of this process across the consciousness that the class has of itself: everything is here for hypostasizing the being of the class, for the triumph of a reality principle and of the representability of the class, and therefore fundamentally for the triumph of the party. At a first level, this dialectical and "spontaneous," collective class consciousness seems to contradict the bureaucratic process (which the Stalinists, always superficial, violently attacked). But at a deeper level, there is a collusion between a *rationalist* theory of consciousness and the formal *rationality* of bureaucracy. It is not an accident that Lukacs' dialectical and spontaneous theory appeared in the same moment that the bureaucratic monopoly of the party was reinforced. His theory does not fundamentally object to this process since, sealing a reflected essence, a class rationality, a for-itself of the Subject of History, it necessarily establishes a logic of representation and of identification with an ideal authority (in some way the "ego ideal" of the class). This authority can only be the organization and the party. The paranoiac machine of bureaucracy corresponds profoundly with the imaginary Subject of History. (In the same way that the idealization of the subject of consciousness is contemporary, throughout all of Western history, with the extension of the rational control of the State. The same operation rebounds in Lukacs at the level of the class.) Stalinist again, he wrote *The Destruction of Reason* to denounce the irrationality of fascism. But fascism is irrational only for bourgeois democracy; in fact it incarnates a limit for paranoid rationality, a limit from which nothing can protect "dialectical rationality" when it falls into the imaginary transcendence of a subject, the proletarian class. The *exchange value of labor*—the level of exploitation and dialectical contradiction—cannot be built on such an abstraction (with Stalin, it will build itself logically). Marxist theory preserves the *use value* of labor at one level, a level irreducible to the positive of value, mirror of a human positivity of labor, wherein the proletarian class, slipping from negative to positive, comes to recognize itself. Use value, here again, plays the villain in Marxist theory.

24. Here referencing Kalivoda's *Marx et Freud* (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1971).

25. Similarly, Christian History, the Christian concept of historicity, is born from the failure of parousia.

26. Socialism in one country would be the realization of this qualification in which the proletariat is located, from this substantialization of negativity, of which history, as the *final* dimension, becomes the objective dimension. Initially, the negative subject of the historical dialectic, then simply the positive subject of the positivist history of the revolution. This enormous side-slipping only becomes possible and is only explained by the passage from utopia to the historical *epoché*.

27. [A Situationist slogan from May 1968. *Trans.*]

28. It is not true that Marx "dialectically surpassed" utopia, conserving its "project" in the "scientific" model of revolution. Marx wrote *Revolution according to the Law*, and did not perform the dialectical synthesis of this necessary term and of the passionate, immediate, utopian demand for the transfusion of social relations, because any dialectic between these two antagonistic terms is empty. What historical materialism surpasses while conserving is quite simply political economy.

29. It took a long time to sketch the outline of a work which, once completed, would return to oblivion and nothingness. We know that it's false: the sketch is already the entire work, there is nothing else.

12. Strike Story

1. [Confédération générale du travail. The major association of French trade unions. *Trans.*]

2. Even blackmail, every element under a sharp eye, between Israel, the Arab states and on the backs of the Palestinians. "Either you liquidate the Palestinian resistance, or we liquidate you." A colonial situation par excellence: the colonists always seeking, and often succeeding, in deploying their police through the colonized.

3. *Le Monde* (15 May 1973).

4. The stage is that of missile programs, of the Concorde, of military programs, of the inflation of the industrial park, of social and individual infrastructural equipment, of programs for development and recycling, etc. One must produce no matter what, at any price, according to constraints of investment and development (and no longer exactly as a function of the rates of surplus value). In this reproductive planning, the masterpiece of the genre promises to be anti-pollution, wherein the entire productive system recycles itself through the elimination of its own wastes—the gigantic equation resulting in nothing—not nothing though, rather the greater glory of reproduction.

5. Thus, through the same effect on the terminological level, the entire world becomes specialized workers (signal men-specialized for the heavens, the CDR no longer want to be the specialized workers of the *Union pour la défense de la République* [a right wing political party]; the auxiliary specialized workers in teaching, etc.) from the moment when the word is stretched from the vocubulary of the factory.

6. The entire problem of birth control, of biological "reproduction," remains to be analyzed in the same sense. It is to the extent that procreation begins to be

perceived as a pure and simple dimension of the reproduction of the system that it becomes insupportable and that it is collectively questioned.

7. This theory wants to save this concept by giving it a definition larger than Marx himself did, by implicating the "middle classes" in it: an illegitimate attempt at integrating "modern sociology" in an unchanging Marxist theory.

8. But does this illusion dissipate in the salary guide, there precisely where the "code" of exchange value becomes evident? Yes and no. If the salary is experienced as equivalent (even insufficient) to the labor, it does not efface the illusion; it remains within the internal logic of production. Also, of course, if the salary appears as what it profoundly is—"the political price paid for participation in the world of work"—not as the equivalent of labor power but as a sign of the division of labor and as a designation of the general code of labor. In this sense, demands for equal pay for everyone (or its variants: the struggle against qualifications, etc.) effectively surpass its economic aspect: it intends, in a misdirected form, the end of the division of labor (which is to say of labor as a social relation) and the end of the law of equal footing, fundamental for the capitalist system, of the equivalence of salary and labor power. It targets, therefore, indirectly, the form of political economy.

But salary is a sign, an element of the code in a still more radical sense. There is a fundamental law which regulates social discrimination in the material of labor: against every lived appearance (the laborer offers his labor to the capitalist), *the capitalist offers labor to the laborer* (the laborer, himself, offers *capital* to the capitalist). *Arbeitgeber* in German. The entrepreneur "offers labor"; the worker, *Arbeitnehmer*, "takes work." In the material of labor it is the capitalist who offers, who has the initiative of the gift, which assures him, just as in the schema of the primitive gift, a complete social preeminence, a superiority which goes well beyond economics. The refusal of labor, in its radical form, is the refusal of this symbolic domination, of this humiliation of the awarded thing. At this level, labor, the gift and the "grip" of labor functions directly as code. And the salary is the mark of this poisoned present, the sign which summarizes the entire code. It sanctions this unilateral gift of labor. It transforms the employee into a "receiver of goods" (a consumer), which is to say once again into an inferior, in the dominant terms of the social relation—or again the salary is that by which capital symbolically "redeems" the domination that it exerts through the gift of labor. To refuse labor, to contest the salary, is therefore to question the process of redemption and compensation, which is to say the entire symbolic functioning of the capitalist system (far more than economic since, at the limit, capital can function economically with less and less labor and the salary system is considerably more flexible).

But one can only say that the system suppresses use value only if one admits that it once existed, that there have been real needs, real use values, from "productive" labor. Use value might therefore not have always been only exchange value's alibi (at base the "Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign"!).

Besides, if it was, why would the system undermine itself by liquidating it? Didn't it only fulfill its own law, the law of value, the perfection of that law (the radicality of exchange value) being at the same time its own death? Another Marxist perspective!

9. Which is not true in the order of discrimination. In the order of the difference through signs, racism, sexism, etc. everything is on one side and nothing on the other. The principle of exclusion (and of oppression) which functions across the code and signs, is much more radical than the principle of exploitation.

13. The Dramatization of Economics

1. The American Senate went so far as to evaluate what it would cost to return water to the degree of purity that it had before the European conquest of America (the "1491 norm," Christopher Colombus having as we know disembarked in 1492): $ 350 billion dollars [1974]. But the billions of dollars hardly matter, because what the Senators, who don't give a damn about water, were really calculating was the price that it would cost to return the system itself to the original purity of primitive accumulation, to the golden age of labor power. The 1890 norm, or 1840?

In the same way, the current monetary system dreams of gold and of the Gold Standard, as a stabilizer or regenerator of fiduciary values. Because free and unlimited speculations on the basis of the loss of referent / gold—present state of things—tempts catastrophe at every moment: arbitrary, inflation so gigantic that the authority itself of money teeters and loses all credibility. Here again, a cyclical regeneration through referentiality, a "critical" regeneration is necessary so that financial exchange won't pass to the end of their irreality, where they would destroy themselves.

2. The homology posed by Saussure between signifier and salary on the one hand, and signified and labor on the other, is verified here at a much more advanced level than that imagined by Saussure. In the sense that today every necessary relation is abolished between salary and labor, as it is between signifier and signified. Production and the sign simultaneously lose their reference. And the escalation begins with this loss of referent.

— Production, which is no longer linked by "needs" or even by profit, enters into unlimited productivity.

— Salary, which is no longer linked (even less in the conscience of the employees) through equivalence and labor—value, enters into the game of unlimited political demands.

— Similarly the game of signifiers enters into an unlimited combination, from the moment they are no longer indexed by a "real" signified.

3. Inflation is to currency what the escalation of salaries is to labor power. In both cases, the same disengagement triggers the same excitement and the same structural crisis. Disengagement of salary with the "just" value of labor power (it's use value for the system) —disengagement of currency speculation with real production and its standardization (gold). Inflation in salaries and monetary inflation both result in the same loss of reference. They are inseparable. And the energy crisis offers both an alibi and a perfect dissuasion at once: henceforth, inflation, a structural crisis within the system, can be blamed on the Arabs (and others) overbidding, on the price of raw materials, "naturalized" in Arab terms—and the disaffection of the productivist system, which expresses among other things the "maximalist salary challenge," will be able to be stopped, frustrated by the blackmail of poverty, which is to say by the *blackmail of use value*, of the economic system itself.

4. The same twist for the threat to withdraw their bank deposits and gold reserves from Western banks.

5. The tacit coalition of the two Greats manipulating the Arabs so as to neutralize Europe and Japan and to thereby secure their world economico-political monopoly (see *Le Monde* January 1st, 1974).

6. But, look: simulation is not dissimulation! It is useless, for example in politics, to imagine that the Right manipulates the Left or inversely: this again raises a nostalgia for politics and for a retrospective truth of Right and Left. No, the impression of the total simulacra of the "political life" comes precisely from the perfect commutability of Right and Left in a regulated opposition emptied of all ideological substance.

7. Communist party members and orthodox Marxists are now the only ones who still cling to a real (petit-)bourgeois ideological discourse. The supporters of Marxism are the only ones with red fears. There is a near total discursive substitution between the Christians and the Marxists (cf. the week of Marxist Thought, the theme "Is there a revolutionary morality?" To the extent that all the others became Marxists, the Marxists become Kantians. The Christians say: "the ethical location is displaced: from individual conscience to the group confronted by historical necessities": class revolutionary morality. At the same time, Lucien Sève, Chairman of the French communist party says: "Every class society always essentially contradicts the Kantian moral imperative; to treat man as an end and not a means." And, to the Marxist who defends "the dignity of labor and personal dignity...polluted by the capitalist system in agony"(!), the Christian reproach of "overvaluing labor, neglecting what remains of will to power in every man even in a socialist society, not denouncing development at all costs strongly enough," and he demands that "we not only treat man as a being with needs, but as a being with desires." Only a Christian can say that today. And before that, the Marxist trembles, and shits in his shorts from ideological concupiscence. He will need another fifty years to get there.

N.B.—Look. If the Marxists are not even Christians, the Christians, and everyone who talks about a "desiring being" and of "revolutionary ethics" are still only Christians.

15. Animals Sick from Surplus Value

1. See *Science et avenir* (Juillet 1973).

16. Death Trick

1. Cryogenic freezing, sealing yourself in a gel so as to be resurrected, is the limit form of this practice.

2. See Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia, and Jacques Revel, "La Beauté du mort" *Politique Aujourd'hui* (December 1970).

19. Death to Savages

1. Hence also, in "The Mirror of Production": "This is why there is properly speaking neither necessity or rarity in the primitive order, from which all symbolic strategy intends to exorcise the apparition of the law [...] consumption of the surplus and deliberate anti-production when accumulation threatens to shatter reciprocity and to make power surge up."

How do we conceive of this "exorcised risk"? Is it the lot of primitive societies, of a preventative wisdom? Is it still an ethnocentric position to attribute the "intention" to archaic societies (even if this intention is deferred to unconscious activity) to elude the risks of power, since such an intention would suppose knowledge of the risks and the reflective experience of what one can do? To say that symbolic exchange intends to block the emergence of power, is this not to defer to a preparatory experience of non-reciprocity?

Ethnocentrism is also dialectical: doesn't it reintroduce it to say that symbolic exchange is the negation of the power relation (the other present at the heart of the same)?

21. The Spiraling Cadaver

1. [Jean Baudrillard distributed this text in the university during the month of May.]

22. Labor Story

1. "Those who give the best of themselves"; disgusting, it's deservedly the inverse, this work is the worst, everyone agrees;

"... has the right to an equitable share": that's all? What the hell, all or nothing. And certainly not the "right" or "equitable," which is always the part left to the dog;

"... they too": now that beats all. The others have already had their share (equitable), so who hasn't? How is this possible? Absurd. Like he said. All the people are equal but some are more equal than others.

Etc. etc. but that's essentially it.

2. The worker welded to the yap of John Wayne.

23. Value's Last Tango

1. Besides, the present strike naturally takes on the same aspects as labor: the same suspense, the same weight, the same absence of objectives, the allergy to decision, the same turns of power, the same mourning for energy, the same indefinite circularity in the strike today as in the strike of days gone by, the same situation in the counter-institution that is the institution: the contagion grows, the circle is closed—after that it will be necessary to emerge elsewhere. Or rather, no: Take this impasse itself as the basic situation, to return indecision and the absence of objective as an offensive situation, as a strategy. Seeking at all costs to tear themselves from this mortal situation, from the mental anorexia of the university, the students only reinsert themselves in the energy of an institution in an outmoded coma. This is forced survival, it is the medicine of despair, practiced today on institutions as on individuals, and that everywhere is the sign of the same incapacity to confront death. "One must push what is collapsing," said Nietzsche.

24. The Magic Struggle or the Final Flute

1. [Censor [Gianfranco Sanguinetti], *The Real Report on the Last Chance to Save Capitalism in Italy* (1976) trans. Len Bracken (Fort Bragg: Flatland Books, 1997). *Trans.*]

2. [The Italian Communist Party secretary. *Trans.*]

3. Insofar as they are *revolutionaries*, things are of course very different, and there is a lot to say about this. Between the immorality of capital and the vitality of the exercise of power, and the incurable morality that henceforth forbid the exercise of political power to the communists (the two historically growing together), another path had been engendered by the proletariat in the 19th century, in the crushed insurrections, and singularly in the Commune, a direct defiance of power with death. Marx has been reproached for his lack of interest in the worker's struggles except after they have been crushed (*The Class Struggles in France*, *18th Brumaire*, *The Commune*). No fool, Marx. Because in the end, that's when they become interesting: when the subject of history is crushed. For once Marx is *immoral* and pushes something in the destruction of what it holds most dear: this linear finality or

dialectic of Reason, this victorious proletarian reason—perhaps it profoundly understands the absurdity of all this and of taking power? Perhaps he understood power, as Lenin and Stalin eventually did, and, behind the ascendant calculation of history, estimated that the elimination of the "class" (the senseless, immediate elimination of the class-subject, without waiting for the rational elimination of the dominant class) was still the only possible defiance. Fundamentally, it was only the good proletariat, like the good Indian, who died. It's true for the bureaucracy, which founded its cynical strategy on the eternity of the dead proletariat. But it's true in another sense, deadly for all power and all bureaucracy. At certain moments in history, the proletariat acts out its own destruction (against Marx himself, cf. the Commune) and this in exchange for no present or future power, but against all power. This does not enter into any dialectic, is forever unnamable, but somewhere the energy of this death shows through today in the derision of all the institutions, including the revolutionary institutions, that thought they buried it.

A Note on the Texts and Translation

Aside from the interview at the beginning, all of these texts originally appeared in the journal *Utopie*, published between 1967 and 1978. Some were published without the signature of their author. Most were collected by Hubert Tonka in *Le Ludique et le policier et autres textes parus dans Utopie* (1967/78) (Paris: Sens&Tonka, 2001). Many were republished by Baudrillard during the 1970s and 1980s in other books. Several have already appeared in English translation by a number of different translators. Excluding "Our Theater of Cruelty," all of the translations published here are new and my own. I nevertheless benefited from consulting many of the previous versions of these texts. Mark Poster's translations were particularly helpful in tracking down citations. My greatest debt, however, is to Vanessa Corrêa, for all of her gifts.

— Stuart Kendall

"À propos d'*Utopie*," interview with Jean-Louis Violeau, May 1997. Paris: Sens&Tonka, 2005.

"Utopie dialectique" *Utopie* 1 (May 1967) 54–5; trans. by Gary Genosko as "Dialectical Utopia" in *Uncollected Baudrillard* (London: Sage Publications, 2001) 58.

"L'Éphémère..." *Utopie* 1 (May 1967) 95–97; translated by Timothy Dylan Wood as "Ephemeral and Durable" in *Uncollected Baudrillard op. cit.*, 56–7.

"Le ludique et le policier" *Utopie* 2–3 (May 1969) 3–15; translated by Paul Patton as "Police and Play" in *Uncollected Baudrillard op. cit.*, 61–69.

"La Pratique sociale de la Technique" *Utopie* 2–3 (May 1969) 147–55; translated by Paul Hegarty as "Technique as Social Practice" in *Uncollected Baudrillard op. cit.*, 45–51.

"L'utopie a été renvoyée..." *Utopie* 4 (October 1971) 3–4; translated by Gary Genosko as "Utopia: The Smile of the Cheshire Cat" in *Uncollected Baudrillard op. cit.*, 59–60.

"Conte de grève 2" *Utopie* 4 (October 1971) 24–27.

"Requiem pour les media" *Utopie* 4 (October 1971) 35–51; reprinted in *Pour une Critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); translated by Charles Levin as "Requiem for the Media" in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos, 1981) 164–84.

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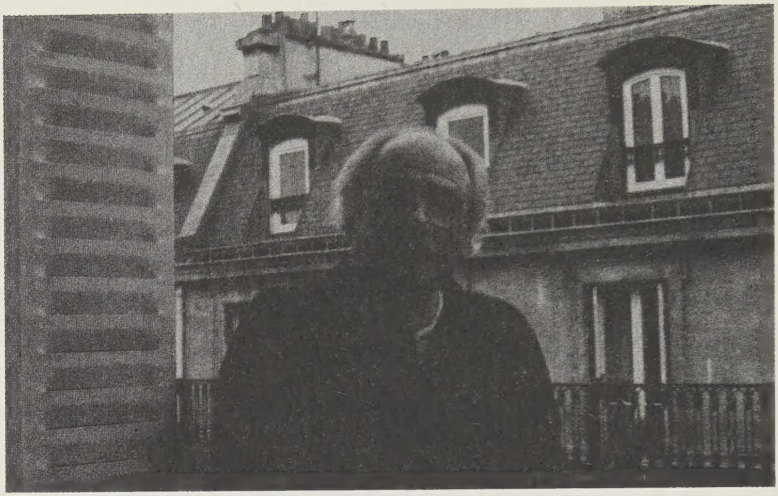

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Utopia Deferred

Jean Baudrillard
Translated by Stuart Kendall

A symbiosis between a few architects and young intellectuals effectively occurred at the end of the 1960s. Their intention was to surpass architecture, just as urbanism had been surpassed and as the Situationists liquidated the university. Everyone within Utopie *was trying to go as far as possible toward disappearance, just to see what would happen.*

The Utopie group was born in 1966 at Henri Lefebvre's house in the Pyrénées. The eponymous journal edited by Hubert Tonka brought together sociologists Jean Baudrillard, René Lourau, Catherine Cot, architects Jean Aubert, Jean-Paul Jungmann, Antoine Stinco, and landscape architect Isabelle Auricoste. Over the next decade, both in theory and in practice, the group articulated a radical ultra-leftist critique of architecture, urbanism, and everyday life. *Utopia Deferred* collects all of the essays Jean Baudrillard published in *Utopie* in their original form as well as a recent interview with the author. These essays, torn from the headlines of the tumultuous decade following May 1968, surpass Marxism itself.

Jean Baudrillard is among the most important internationally recognized intellectuals writing today. He is the author of *The Ecstasy of Communication*, *Fatal Strategies*, *Impossible Exchange*, *The Intelligence of Evil*, and *The Conspiracy of Art*, among many other works.

SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS
distributed by **The MIT Press**
ISBN-10: 1-58435-033-4
ISBN-13: 978-1-58435-033-0

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JEAN BAUDRILLARD

WHY HASN'T EVERYTHING ALREADY DISAPPEARED?

WITH IMAGES BY ALAIN WILLAUME

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ary

Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?

Jean Baudrillard

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER

WITH IMAGES BY ALAIN WILLAUME

In this, one of the last texts written before his death in March 2007, Baudrillard meditates poignantly on the question of disappearance. He weaves an intricate set of variations on his theme, ranging from the potential disappearance of humanity as a result of the fulfilment of its project of world mastery to the vanishing of reality through the transmutation of the real into the virtual. On the way, he takes in the more conventional question of the philosophical 'subject', whose disappearance has, in his view, been effected through a 'pulverization of consciousness into all the interstices of reality'.

With disappearance, strange things happen—not least, the return in malign, viral

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WHY HASN'T EVERYTHING ALREADY DISAPPEARED?

THE FRENCH LIST

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

WHY HASN'T EVERYTHING ALREADY DISAPPEARED ?

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER

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Seagull Books

LONDON NEW YORK CALCUTTA

Seagull Books 2009

Jean Baudrillard, *Pourquoi tout n'a-t-il pas déja disparu?*
© Editions de L'Herne, 2007

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English translation © Chris Turner 2009
Images © Alain Willaume 2009
This compilation © Seagull Books 2009

First published in English by Seagull Books, 2009

ISBN-13 978 1 9064 9 740 8

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Typeset and designed by Sunandini Banerjee, Seagull Books
Printed at CDC Printers Pvt Ltd, Calcutta

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FOREWORD

He that hath not, from him shall
be taken even that which he hath
(Matthew 25: 29).[1]

'Why is there nothing rather than something?' This is Leibniz's question, exactly reversed. It is also a radical way of taking one's leave of metaphysics.

The focus is not now on being, but on the nothing.

Macedonio Fernandez, the Argentinian writer and friend of Borges, had already taken the exploration of the nothing to great lengths: 'Everything on—and including—the Nothing, just on the Nothing, but not entirely. On the Nothing, there is more: some of its interstices, which are numerous.'[2] Jean Baudrillard pushes its limits even further and saturates the interstices. It's a question of being logical. We imagined that Good was the product of eliminating Evil, the Eternal the product of eliminating the Temporal or the All the product of eliminating the Nothing. Always this totalitarian temptation to unify, to reduce duality, to eliminate Evil, to exterminate the nothing. We have rid ourselves of the ambiguity of the world.

We have to learn to dance with the nothing; this is the great game and the grand style: 'the Nothing is as essential to life as are air and wind to the flight of the dove,'[3] a reference to Kant's 'light dove' which imagines it would fly better if it could overcome all resistance.

Nihilism? No, nihilism is precisely the forgetting of the nothing. It is the system that is nihilistic through its power to consign everything to indifference. The system is 'truly negationist', to use Baudrillard's expression, since it is a denial of the nothing, a denial of all illusion. There remains the challenge of radical thought which gambles on the world being illusion, which hypothesizes that there is perhaps nothing rather than something and which 'hunts down the nothing that runs beneath the apparent continuity of meaning'.

This isn't a contrary metaphysics, but the contrary of a metaphysics.

François L'Yvonnet

When I speak of time, it is not yet
When I speak of a place, it has disappeared
When I speak of a man, he's already dead
When I speak of time, it already is no more[4]

LET US SPEAK, then, of the world from which human beings have disappeared.

It's a question of disappearance, not exhaustion, extinction or extermination. The exhaustion of resources, the extinction of species—these are physical processes or natural phenomena.

And that's the whole difference. The human species is doubtless the only one to have invented a specific mode of disappearance that has nothing to do with Nature's law. Perhaps even an art of disappearance.

LET'S BEGIN WITH the disappearance of the real. We have talked enough about the murder of reality in the age of the media, virtual reality and networks, without enquiring to any great degree when the real began to exist. If we look closely, we see that the real world begins, in the modern age, with the decision to transform the world, and to do so by means of science, analytical knowledge and the implementation of technology—that is to say that it begins, in Hannah Arendt's words, with the invention of an Archimedean point outside the world (on the basis of the invention of the telescope by Galileo and the discovery of modern mathematical calculation) by which the natural world is defini-

tively alienated.[5] This is the moment when human beings, while setting about analysing and transforming the world, take their leave of it, while at the same time lending it force of reality. We may say, then, that the real world begins, paradoxically, to disappear at the very same time as it begins to exist.

By their exceptional faculty for knowledge, human beings, while giving meaning, value and reality to the world, at the same time begin a process of dissolution ('to analyse' means literally 'to dissolve').

But doubtless we have to go back even further—as far as concepts and language. By representing things to ourselves, by naming them and conceptualizing them, human beings call them into existence and at the same time hasten their doom, subtly detach them from their brute reality. For example, the class struggle exists from the moment Marx names it. But it no doubt exists in its greatest intensity only before being named.

Afterwards, it merely declines. The moment a thing is named, the moment representation and concepts take hold of it, is the moment when it begins to lose its energy—with the risk that it will become a truth or impose itself as ideology. We may say the same of the Unconscious and its discovery by Freud. It is when a thing is beginning to disappear that the concept appears.

The owl, says Hegel, flies out at dusk.[6]

Take globalization: if there is so much talk of it, as obvious fact, as indisputable reality, that is perhaps because it is already no longer at its height and we are already contending with something else.

Thus the real vanishes into the concept. But what is even more paradoxical is the exactly opposite movement by which concepts and ideas (but also phantasies, utopias, dreams and desires) vanish into their very fulfilment. When everything disappears by excess of reality, when,

thanks to the deployment of a limitless technology, both mental and material, human beings are capable of fulfilling all their potentialities and, as a consequence, disappear, giving way to an artificial world that expels them from it, to an integral performance that is, in a sense, the highest stage of materialism. (Marx: the idealist stage of interpretation, and the irresistible transformation that leads to a world without us.) That world is perfectly objective since there is no one left to see it. Having become purely operational, it no longer has need of our representation. Indeed, there no longer is any possible representation of it.

For, if what is proper to human beings is not to realize all their possibilities, it is of the essence of the technical object to exhaust its possibilities and even to go quite some way beyond them, staking out in that way the definitive demarcation line between technical objects and human beings, to the point of deploying an infinite operational potential against human beings

themselves and implying, sooner or later, their disappearance.

Thus, the modern world foreseen by Marx, driven on by the work of the negative, by the engine of contradiction, became, by the very excess of its fulfilment, another world in which things no longer even need their opposites in order to exist, in which light no longer needs shade, the feminine no longer needs the masculine (or vice versa?), good no longer needs evil—and the world no longer needs us.

It is here we see that the mode of disappearance of the human (and naturally of everything related to it—Günther Anders' outdatedness of human beings,[7] the eclipse of values, etc.) is precisely the product of an internal logic, of a built-in obsolescence, of the human race's fulfilment of its most grandiose project, the Promethean project of mastering the universe, of acquiring exhaustive knowledge. We see, too, that it is this which precipitates it towards its disappearance,

much more quickly than animal species, by the acceleration it imparts to an evolution that no longer has anything natural about it.

Doing so not out of some death drive or some involutive, regressive disposition toward undifferentiated forms, but from an impulse to go as far as possible in the expression of all its power, all its faculties—to the point even of dreaming of abolishing death.

Now, what is most surprising is that this amounts to the same thing. This extreme endeavour on the part of life (or of Eros, if, by that term, one understands the deployment of all capacities, the deepening of knowledge, consciousness and *jouissance*) arrives at the same outcome: the virtual disappearance of the human species, as though that destiny were programmed somewhere and we were merely the long-term executants of the programme (which irresistibly brings to mind *apoptosis*, that process by which a cell is pre-programmed to die).

All this may give the impression or illusion of a fatal strategy, of an evolution at the end of which we would have passed beyond that vanishing point Canetti speaks of, where, without realizing it, the human race would have left reality and history behind, where any distinction between the true and the false would have disappeared, etc.[8]

In which case we and our bodies would be merely the phantom limb, the weak link, the infantile malady of a technological apparatus that dominates us remotely (just as thought would be merely the infantile malady of AI or the human being the infantile malady of the machine or the real the infantile malady of the virtual). All this remains confined still within an evolutionary perspective that sees everything in terms of a linear trajectory, from origin to end, from cause to effect, from birth to death, from appearance to disappearance.

But disappearance may be conceived differently: as a singular event and the object of a specific desire, the desire no longer to be there, which is not negative at all. Quite to the contrary, disappearance may be the desire to see what the world looks like in our absence (photography) or to see, beyond the end, beyond the subject, beyond all meaning, beyond the horizon of disappearance, if there still is an occurrence of the world, an unprogrammed appearance of things. A domain of pure appearance, of the world as it is (and not of the *real* world, which is only ever the world of representation), which can emerge only from the disappearance of all the added values.

There are here the first fruits of an art of disappearance, of another strategy. The dissolution of values, of the real, of ideologies, of ultimate ends.

But there is simultaneously a game, the possibility of playing with all these things; the possibility of an art, though not in any way an art in

the cultural and aesthetic sense, but something closer to a martial art.

Art itself in the modern period exists only on the basis of its disappearance—not just the art of making the real disappear and supplanting it with another scene, but the art of abolishing itself in the course of its practice (Hegel). It was by doing this that it constituted an event, that it was of decisive importance. I say 'was' advisedly, for art today, though it has disappeared, doesn't know it has disappeared and—this is the worst of it—continues on its trajectory in a vegetative state.

And becomes the paradigm of everything that survives its own disappearance. There are those who play on their disappearance, make use of it as a living form, exploit it by excess, and there are those who are in a state of disappearance and who survive it by default. It is clear that the political scene, for example, merely reflects the shadows of a cave and the—disembodied—

beings that move around in it, but do so quite unwittingly (it would take too long to list everything that has disappeared in this way—institutions, values, individuals). It is, unfortunately, quite possible that we ourselves, as a species, already form part—in the form of cloning, computerization and the networks, for example—of this artificial survival, of this prolongation to perpetuity of something that has disappeared, but just keeps on and on disappearing. Whereas the whole art is to know how to disappear before dying and instead of dying.

At any rate, nothing just vanishes; of everything that disappears there remain traces. The problem is what remains when everything has disappeared. It's a bit like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat, whose grin still hovers in the air after the rest of him has vanished. Or like the judgement of God: God disappears, but he leaves behind his judgement. Now, a cat's grin is already something terrifying, but the grin without the cat is even more terrifying . . . And God's

judgement is terrifying in itself, but the judgement of God without God . . .

We may thus suppose that everything that disappears—institutions, values, prohibitions, ideologies, even ideas—continues to lead a clandestine existence and exert an occult influence, as was said of the ancient gods who, in the Christian era, assumed the form of demons. Everything that disappears seeps back into our lives in infinitesimal doses, often more dangerous than the visible authority that ruled over us. In our age of tolerance and transparency, prohibitions, controls and inequalities disappear one by one, but only the better to be internalized in the mental sphere. We might even suppose ourselves to be following in the tracks of our previous lives, not to speak of the Unconscious. Nothing ever disappears. But let's not get into parapsychology. Let's stay with psychology and look a little at the disappearance of the subject, which is, more or less, the mirror image of the disappearance of the real.

And in fact the subject—the subject as agency of will, of freedom, of representation; the subject of power, of knowledge, of history—is disappearing, but it leaves its ghost behind, its narcissistic double, more or less as the Cat left its grin hovering. The subject disappears, gives way to a diffuse, floating, insubstantial subjectivity, an ectoplasm that envelops everything and transforms everything into an immense sounding board for a disembodied, empty consciousness—all things radiating out from a subjectivity without object; each monad, each molecule caught in the toils of a definitive narcissism, a perpetual image-playback. This is the image of an end-of-world subjectivity, a subjectivity for an end of the world from which the subject as such has disappeared, no longer having anything left to grapple with. The subject is the victim of this fateful turn of events, and, in a sense, it no longer has anything standing over against it—neither objects, nor the real, nor the Other.

Our greatest adversaries now threaten us only with their disappearance.

THE GREAT DISAPPEARANCE IS NOT, then, simply that of the virtual transmutation of things, of the *mise en abyme* of reality, but that of the division of the subject to infinity, of a serial pulverization of consciousness into all the interstices of reality. We might say, at a pinch, that consciousness (the will, freedom) is everywhere; it merges with the course of things and, as a result, becomes superfluous. This is the analysis Cardinal Ratzinger himself made of religion: a religion which accommodates to the world, which attunes itself to the (political, social . . .) world, becomes superfluous. It is for the same reason—because it became increasingly merged with objective banality—that art, ceasing to be different from life, has become superfluous.

One might argue, alternatively, that there have been some positive disappearances: of violence, threats, illness or death, but we know that

everything repressed or eliminated in this way results in a malign, viral infiltration of the social and individual body.

IT IS, THEREFORE, IMPOSSIBLE to assign disappearance—disappearance as form—to some particular purpose or end (any more than we can with appearance indeed), either in the order of Good or in the order of Evil. Apart from all the phantasies we maintain around it—and in the entirely justified hope of seeing a certain number of things disappear once and for all—we must give disappearance back its prestige or, quite simply, its power, its impact. We must reinvest it not as a final but as an immanent dimension—I would even say as a vital dimension of existence. Things live only on the basis of their disappearance, and, if one wishes to interpret them with entire lucidity, one must do so as a function of their disappearance. There is no better analytical grid.

IN CONCLUSION, I SHALL STRESS the total ambiguity of our relation to the real and its disappearance. Behind every image, something has disappeared. And that is the source of its fascination. Behind virtual reality in all its forms (telematics, IT, digitization, etc.), the real has disappeared. And that is what fascinates everyone. According to the official version, we worship the real and the reality principle, but—and this is the source of all the current suspense—is it, in fact, the real we worship, or its disappearance?

We may, then, take the same general situation—exactly the same—either as a curse, as the commonplace critical version has it, or as a pleasure into which we can retreat, as a happy eventuality so to speak.

A contradictory twofold postulate that cannot, in any way, be resolved.

THE FINEST ILLUSTRATION of this systematic vanishing of a reality, whose twilight, as it were, one

savours, would be the current destiny of the image, of the disappearance of the image in the inexorable move from the analogical to the digital. The destiny of the image being exemplary—for the invention of the technical image in all its forms is our last great invention in the unremitting quest for an 'objective' reality, an objective truth to be mirrored to us by technology . . . It would seem that the mirror has got caught up in the game and has transformed everything into a virtual, digital, computerized, numerical 'reality'—the destiny of the image being merely the tiny detail of this anthropological revolution.

ON THE HEGEMONIC AND THE DIGITAL . . .

When, from an excess of reality, everything disappears thanks to the deployment of a limitless mental or material technology, when human beings are capable of fulfilling all their potentialities, then, by that very token, they enter a world that expels them. For, if it is characteristic of

living beings not to fulfil all their potentialities, it is of the essence of technical objects to exhaust all of theirs and to deploy them despite all opposition, despite human beings themselves, which implies, in the longer or shorter term, the disappearance of humans. At the end of this irresistible process, leading to a perfectly objective universe, which is, as it were, the supreme stage of reality, there is no subject any longer; there is no one there to see it. That world no longer has need of us, nor of our representation. And there is, indeed, no longer any possible representation of it.

TO ILLUSTRATE THIS TRANSITION to the hegemonic, there is no finer analogy than that of the photograph that has become digital, being liberated at a single stroke from both the negative and the real world. And the consequences of both these things are incalculable, though on different scales, of course. This marks the end of a singular

presence for the object, since it may now be digitally constructed. And the end of the singular moment of the photographic act, since the image can now be immediately erased or reconstructed. And the end of the irrefutable testimony of the negative. Both the time-lag and distance disappear at the same time, and with them that blank between object and image that was the negative. The traditional photograph is an image produced by the world, which, thanks to the medium of film, still involves a dimension of representation. The digital image is an image that comes straight out of the screen and becomes submerged in the mass of all the other images from screens. It is of the order of flow, and is a prisoner to the automatic operation of the camera. When calculation and the digital win out over form, when software wins out over the eye, can we still speak of photography?

THIS IS NOT MERELY AN EPISODE in the history of technology: with this turn to the digital, the whole of analogue photography, the image in its entirety—conceived as the convergence of the light from the object with the light from the gaze—is sacrificed, is doomed forever. As digitization advances, soon there will no longer be any film, any light-sensitive surface onto which things inscribed themselves negatively. There will only be an image software package, a digital effect running to the billionth of a pixel and, at the same time, unprecedented ease of picture-taking, of image-playback and of the photo-synthesis[9] of anything whatever. Metaphorically, the sophistication of the play of presence and absence, of appearance and disappearance—all the sophistication of the photographic act—disappears with the coming of the digital (the photographic act causes the object in its 'reality' to vanish for a moment; there is nothing of the sort in the virtual image, nor its digital capture—not

to mention the magic of the image's emergence as it is developed).

It is the world and our vision of the world that is changed by this.

PARTICULARLY IN THESE RECENT TIMES of ultra-rapid technological progress, the absurd idea has emerged of 'liberating' the real by means of the image, and of 'liberating' the image by means of the digital. The 'liberation' of the real and of the image are said to be effects of profusion and proliferation. This is to forget the degree of challenge and risk involved in the photographic act, the fragility and ambivalence of the relation to the object—the 'failure' of the gaze, we might say. That is all essential to photography—and it is a rare thing! You cannot liberate photography!

Once again, this is all just one tiny example of what is happening on a massive scale in all fields—particularly in the fields of thought, concepts, language and representation. The same

destiny of digitization looms over the world of the mind and the whole range of thought.

WE HAVE HERE THE SAME SCENARIO, term for term: with programmes based on the 0/1 binary construct, which is a kind of integral calculus, the entire symbolic articulation of language and thought disappears. Soon there will no longer be any thought-sensitive surface of confrontation, any suspension of thought between illusion and reality. There will be no blanks any more, no silences, no contradiction—just a single continuous flow, a single integrated circuit. And computer intelligence lends itself to—or, more accurately, like the digital in the case of the image, forces us into—the same facility, the same capriciousness of production and accumulation, of 'photo-synthesis' of the whole of the possible real. The—gigantic—illusion is to confuse thought with a proliferation of calculations or photography with a proliferation of images. And

the further we go in that direction, the further we shall be from the secret—and the pleasure—of both. The exorbitant privilege granted to the brain, not just in the neurosciences but in all fields, is symptomatic of this. Not to mention Le Lay's recent proposal on engineering the amount of human brain time available (for Coca-Cola adverts), which was exceeded in involuntary cynicism and ridiculousness by the proposal of the Head of Cultural Affairs of the Paris City Hall, Christophe Girard: 'What we want is to make the brain available, not for advertising and capital, but for Culture and Creation!'

However this may be, what is totally wrong-headed is to see the brain as a receiver, a synaptic terminal, a screen for brain imagery in real time (in this sense, it is, at a pinch, less absurd to correlate a 'functional' brain with an advertising market than to see it as the vehicle for 'Creation'!). In short, in keeping with the aberrant assumption of the whole of communication theory ('We are all unwitting receivers and trans-

mitters'), once you model the brain on computers, seeing it as a super machine in the image of other digital machines, then the brain and (virtual) reality simply interface, operate in a loop with, or mirror, each other in accordance with a single programme—the whole resulting in what we call Artificial Intelligence or AI. Within this framework, in which we have definitively privileged the brain as a strategic source of thought—at the expense of any other form of intelligence, particularly the intelligence of Evil, which is relegated to the zone of useless functions—we assure it of Hegemony, of hegemonic power—precisely in the likeness of the power that reigns in the geopolitical sphere. The same monopoly, the same pyramidal synthesis of powers.

ALL THIS DESCRIBES an overall hegemonic process, and this is why the digression on photography and the digital can serve as the micro-model for a generalized analysis of hegemony.

For that hegemony is nothing other than the re-absorption of any negativity in human affairs, the reduction to the simplest unitary formula, the formula to which there is no alternative, 0/1—pure difference of potential, into which the aim is to have all conflicts vanish digitally

THE VIOLENCE DONE TO THE IMAGE

The ultimate violence done to the image is the violence of the cgi—computer-genereated image—which emerges *ex nihilo* from numerical calculation and the computer.

This puts an end even to the imagining of the image, to its fundamental 'illusion' since, in computer generation, the referent no longer exists and there is no place even for the real to 'take place', being immediately produced as Virtual Reality.

Digital production erases the image as *analogon*; it erases the real as something capable of being 'imagined'. The photographic act, this moment of disappearance of both the subject and the object in the same instantaneous confrontation—the

shutter release abolishing the world and the gaze for a moment, a syncope, a *petite mort* that triggers the machinic performance of the image—disappears in digital, numerical processing.

All this leads inevitably to the death of photography as an original medium. With the analogue image it is the essence of photography that disappears. That image still attested to the live presence of a subject to an object—one last reprieve from the dissemination and digital tidal wave that lies in store for us.

The problem of reference was already an almost insoluble one: how is it with the real? How is it with representation? But when, with the Virtual, the referent disappears, when it disappears into the technical programming of the image, when there is no longer the situation of a real world set over against a light-sensitive film (it is the same with language, which is like the sensitive film of ideas), then there is, ultimately, no possible representation any more..

THERE IS WORSE. What distinguishes the analogue image is that it is the place where a form of disappearance, of distance, of 'freezing' of the world plays itself out. That nothingness at the heart of the image which Warhol spoke of.

Whereas, in the digital image, or, more generally, the cgi, there is no negative any longer, no 'time lapse'. Nothing dies or disappears there. The image is merely the product of an instruction and a programme, aggravated by automatic dissemination from one medium to the other: computer, mobile phone, TV screen, etc.—the automatic nature of the network—responding to the automatic nature of the construction of the image.

So should we save absence? Should we save the void and this nothingness at the heart of the image?

At any rate, removing meaning brings out the essential point: namely, that the image is more important than what it speaks about—just as language is more important than what it signifies.

BUT IT MUST ALSO REMAIN ALIEN to itself in some way. Not reflect [on] itself as medium, not take itself for an image. It must remain a fiction, a fable and hence echo the irresolvable fiction of the event. It must not be caught in its own trap or let itself be imprisoned in the image-playback.

The worst thing, in our view, is just this impossibility of a world without image-playback—a world that is always caught, captured, filmed and photographed even before it is seen. This is a mortal danger for the 'real' world, but also for the image, since, when it merges with the real and simply immerses itself in the real and re-cycles it, there no longer is any image—at least not as exception, as illusion, as parallel world. In the visual flow in which we are currently submerged, there isn't even the time to become an image.

I dream of an image that would be the *écriture automatique* of the world's singularity, as dreamt of by the Iconoclasts in the famous Byzantine controversy. They contended that only

the image in which the divinity was directly present—as in the veil of the Holy Face[10]—was authentic—an *écriture automatique* of the divine face without any human hand having intervened ('acheiropoietic'), through a kind of transfer-printing analogous to the negative of the photographic film. On the other hand, they violently rejected all icons produced by human hand ('cheiropoietic') which for them were mere simulacra of the divine.

By contrast, the photographic act is, in a sense, 'acheiropoietic'. As automatic light-writing that neither passes through the real nor the idea of the real, photography may be said, by this automaticity, to be the prototype of a literalness of the world, with no interference from human hand. The world producing itself as radical illusion, as pure trace, without any simulation, without human intervention and, above all, not as truth, for, if there is one supreme product of the human mind, that product is truth and objective reality.

THERE IS GREAT AFFECTATION in ascribing meaning to the photographic image. To do so is to make objects strike a pose. And things themselves begin to pose in the light of meaning as soon as they feel a subject's gaze upon them.

HAVE WE NOT ALWAYS had the deep-seated phantasy of a world that would go on without us? The poetic temptation to see the world in our absence, free of any human, all-too-human will? The intense pleasure of poetic language lies in seeing language operating on its own, in its materiality and literality, without transiting through meaning—this is what fascinates us. It is the same with anagrams or anamorphoses, with the 'figure in the carpet'.[11] The Vanishing Point of Language.

MAY NOT PHOTOGRAPHY also be said to function as 'revealing', in the two—technical and meta-

physical—senses of the word, of the 'image in the carpet'? The Vanishing Point of the Picture.

SERIALITY IS SOMETHING almost inevitable in photography, for the reason that the camera (especially the digital camera) tends towards the infinite exploitation of its possibilities. For lack of an intuiting of the detail of the world, for want of fully plumbing its meaning and exhausting its appearances, the serial digital image fills the void by self-multiplication. In the limit case which is our present condition, we arrive at an unstoppable series of shots.

But this is no longer a photograph and, literally speaking, it is no longer even an image. These shots may be said, rather, to be part of the murder of the image. That murder is being perpetrated continually by all the images that accumulate in series, in 'thematic' sequences, which illustrate the same event *ad nauseam*, which think they are accumulating, but are, in fact, cancelling each other out, till they reach the zero degree of information.

There is a violence done to the world in this way, but there is also a violence done to the image, to the sovereignty of images. Now, an image has to be sovereign; it has to have its own symbolic space. If they are living images—'aesthetic' quality is not at issue here—they ensure the existence of that symbolic space by eliminating an infinite number of other spaces from it. There is a perpetual rivalry between (true) images. But it is exactly the opposite today with the digital, where the parade of images resembles the sequencing of the genome.

THE OPPOSITE PERSPECTIVE would be photography in its pure abstraction—*cosa mentale*—envisioning an already photographed world in one's head—without there being any need to materialize it in actual shots—by imagining the world precisely as the lens transforms it. The inner ecstasy of photography, as it were.

A total de-regulation of the image—photography can get lost in a mindboggling fragmentation, in a technical delirium of visibility at all costs, where everything insists on appearing on a fractal or microscopic scale. It's not a matter of disappearing into the play of forms any more, but of an automatic substitution, where the world itself zaps from one image to the other in precisely the same way as the individual can dissolve himself into the mental diaspora of the networks and thereby attain a definitive spectrality.

The ultimate stage of this de-regulation is the cgi. From faked photos of the dying Diana to studio-manufactured TV reports, the immediate live shot, taken at an irrevocable moment, is past and gone—last glimmer of actuality in a virtual dimension where images no longer have the slightest connection with time.

In the virtual image there's no longer anything of that punctual exactitude, that *punctum* in time which is the 'point' when the analogue

image was made. In the past, in the days of the 'real world', so to speak, photography was, as Barthes argued, witness to an insuperable absence, to something that had been present once and for all time. For its part, the digital photo is in real time and bears witness to something that did not take place, but whose absence signifies nothing.

In this digital liberalization of the photographic act, in this impersonal process in which the medium itself generates mass-produced images, with no other intercession but the technical, we can see seriality in its consummate form. In the field of images this is, as it were, the equivalent of AI. We may thus regard the images taken by a digital camera generally as an infinite series with all the possibilities of manipulation, play, correction, image-playback and all the things that are unthinkable in the 'analogue' world. It is also the end of any suspense: the image is there at the same time as the scene—a ridiculous promiscuity

(what a marvel, by contrast, is the slow gradual rising to the surface of the image in the Polaroid camera!). This is what the digital lacks: the time of emergence, failing which it is merely a random segment of the universal pixellization, which no longer has anything to do with the gaze, nor with the play of the negative, the play of distance. A new view of the world, globalization's view of the world: the subjection of everything to a single programme, the subjection of all images to a single 'genome'. This is why it is a mistake to regard the move to digital as a mere technical advance, as a superior form of automation or even, indeed, a final liberation of the image.

For this really is the last straw, this aspiration to clear the way, with the digital, for the integral image, free from any real-world constraints. And we would not be forcing the analogy if we extended this same revolution to human beings in general, free now, thanks to this digital intelligence,

to operate within an integral individuality, free from all history and subjective constraints . . .

At the end-point of this rise of the machine, in which all human intelligence is encapsulated—a machine which is now assured of total autonomy as a result—it is clear that mankind exists only at the cost of its own death. It becomes immortal only by paying the price of its technological disappearance, of its inscription in the digital order (the mental diaspora of the networks).

'THE SYMBOL OF A LIVING DISPERSION, the ideal spider, which spins its web and is simultaneously spun by its web.' Or better still, 'I am not the spider who weaves the web, and I am not even a fly caught in the web. I am the web itself, streaming off in all directions with no centre and no self that I can call my own.'[12]

But this is the open form of immortality and in reality, so far as the human species is concerned,

the choice has been made and it is embodied in the supremacy of Artificial Intelligence.

IT IS AT THE OUTER LIMITS of this systematic disappearance, which has, it would seem, been universally accepted, but whose dynamic ultimately remains mysterious (What do digital sheep dream of? as Philip K. Dick might have asked), that some troubling paradoxical questions arise:

1. Is everything doomed to disappear—or, more precisely, hasn't everything already disappeared? (which connects up with the very distant paradox from a philosophy that never was: WHY IS THERE NOTHING RATHER THAN SOMETHING?)

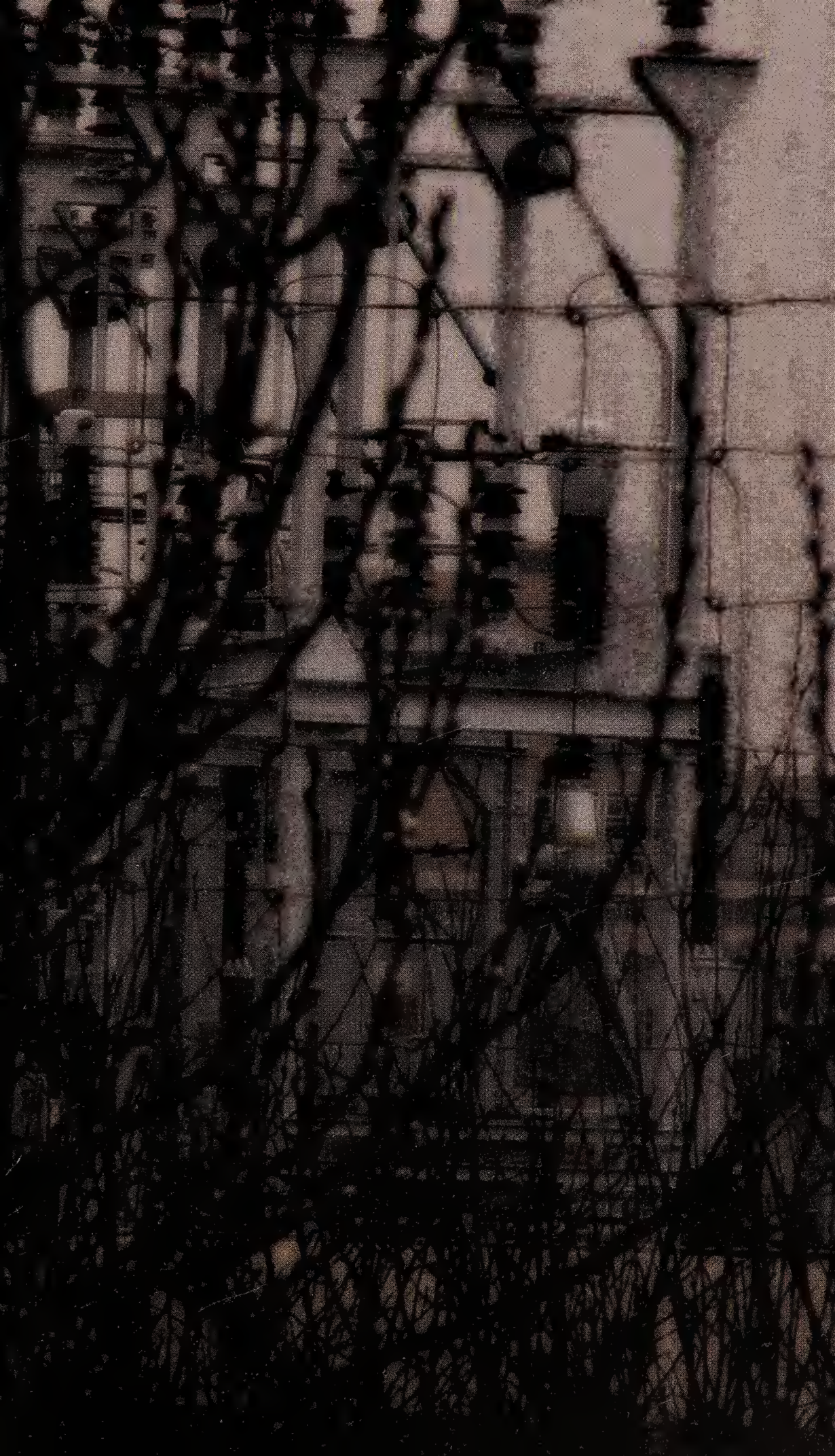
2. Why isn't everything universal?

3. We are fascinated by the phantasm of an integral reality, by the alpha and omega of digital programming. The real is the leitmotif and obsession of all discourses. But are we not far less

fascinated by the real than by its vanishing, its ineluctable disappearance?

4. Which gives rise to the truly mysterious question: how does this irresistible global power succeed in undifferentiating the world, in wiping out its extreme singularity? And how can the world be so vulnerable to this liquidation, this dictatorship of integral reality, and how can it be fascinated by it—not exactly fascinated by the real but by the disappearance of reality? There is, however, a corollary to this: what is the source of the fragility of this global power, of its vulnerability to minor events, to events that are insignificant in themselves ('rogue events', terrorism, but also the pictures from Abu Ghraib, etc.)?

DOUBTLESS, if we are to avoid these insoluble questions, we have to refer to that other anthropological revolution, exactly antithetical to our current digital 'revolution', that is never taken into consideration (we might even say it has



never really been taken into consideration, except in a number of rapidly sacrificed heresies).

DUALITY. The inviolable golden rule of duality. And there's no need to go back to anthropology's roots to rediscover this radical element of human being; it is present everywhere: it is what not only leaves the questions posed above eternally in suspense, but also eternally thwarts human undertakings (all based on synthesis, integrality and the deliberate forgetting of all refractory forms, of everything that cannot or will not be integrated or reconciled . . .).

Fundamentally, the NORMAL human being always lives in a state of dependency or counter-dependency; he is dependent on his model (whatever it may be: model of action, social or imaginary project), but, at the same time, permanently challenging that model. He is motivated and counter-motivated in the same movement. There is no need for psychology or psychoanalysis or, indeed, any human science for this. These sciences

exist only to reconcile the irreconcilable. As a consequence, human beings do always both what they need to for their model to succeed and all that is necessary for it to fail. Here again, there's no need of any weakening or perversion or death drive. It is from their primal duality that human beings derive this antagonistic energy. This is the normal human being and everything that sets about reconciling him with himself and finding a solution to the questions raised above is of the order of superstition and mystification.[13]

The ABNORMAL individual today is the one who now lives only in a unilateral positive adherence to what he is or what he does. Total subjection and adjustment[14] (the perfectly normalized being). Countless individuals have gone over to reality, to their own reality, by eliminating all consideration of the dual and the insoluble. And the mystery of this positive crystallization, of this suspension of doubt about the real— necessarily real—world remains entire.

This raises the whole question of the intelligence of Evil.

We are simplified by technical manipulation.

And this simplification goes off on a crazy course when we reach digital manipulation.

What becomes at this point of the ventriloquacity of Evil?[15] It is the same with the radicalism of yore: when it deserts the individual, reconciled with himself and homogenized by the good offices of the digital, and when all critical thinking has disappeared, radicalism passes into things. The ventriloquacity of Evil passes into technology itself.

For duality can be neither eliminated nor liquidated—it is the rule of the game, the rule of a kind of inviolable pact that seals the reversibility of things.

If their own duplicity deserts human beings, then the roles are reversed: it is the machine that goes gaga, that falters and becomes perverse,

diabolic, ventriloquous. The duplicity merrily goes over to the other side.

If subjective irony disappears—and it disappears in the play of the digital—then irony becomes objective. Or it becomes silence.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD. It was only afterwards that the Silence came.

The end itself has disappeared . . .

January 2007

Notes

1 Quoted from Jean Baudrillard and Enrique Valiente Noailles, *Exiles from Dialogue* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 135.

2 Macedonio Fernandez, *Papeles de Recienvenido. Continuacin de la nada* [Newcomer's Papers. Continuation of the Nothing] (Paris: José Corti, 1992), p. 157.

3 Baudrillard and Noailles, *Exiles from Dialogue*, pp. 134–5.

4 This appears to be a slight deformation of the third stanza of Raymond Queneau's poem 'L'explication des métaphores' [Explanation of Metaphors]. [Trans.]

5 The reference is to 'The Discovery of the Archimedean Point' in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 [1958]), pp. 257–68. Arendt writes of 'the modern age's triumphal world alienation' (p. 264). [Trans.]

6 'The owl of minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.' Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of*

Right (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23. [Trans.]

7 Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, 2 VOLS [The Outdatedness of Human Beings] (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1956, 1980). [Trans.]

8 The reference is to a passage from Elias Canetti's work, *The Human Province* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978). See Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 1. [Trans.]

9 French: '*de photo-synthèse de n'importe quoi*'. Baudrillard plays here on the notion of '*une image de synthèse*', which is the French term for a computer-generated image (cgi). [Trans.]

10 St Veronica was said to have wiped the face of Christ with a veil while he was on the way to Calvary, thereby imprinting the cloth with the image of Christ's face. [Trans.]

11 A reference to a short story by Henry James, *The Figure in the Carpet* (London: Martin Secker, 1919). [Trans.].

12 Baudrillard quotes this latter passage from James Elkins without attribution. [Trans.]

13 Fortunately, as Stanislaw Lec points out, we can trust in the intelligence of human beings. There are many things they do not manage to understand.

14 The French term *arraisonnement* also translates Martin Heidegger's concept *Gestell* (enframing) and there are perhaps overtones of that notion here. [Trans.]

15 *Ventriloquacité* seems to be a new coinage, combining ventriloquism [*la ventriloquie*] and loquacity [*la loquacité*]. [Trans.]

WITHDRAWN
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French theorist JEAN BAUDRILLARD (1929–2007) was one of the foremost intellectual figures of the present age whose work combines philosophy, social theory and an idiosyncratic cultural metaphysics that reflects on key events of the epoch. Some of his major works include *The System of Objects* (1968), *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991) and *Utopia Deferred* (2006).

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Seagull BOOKS

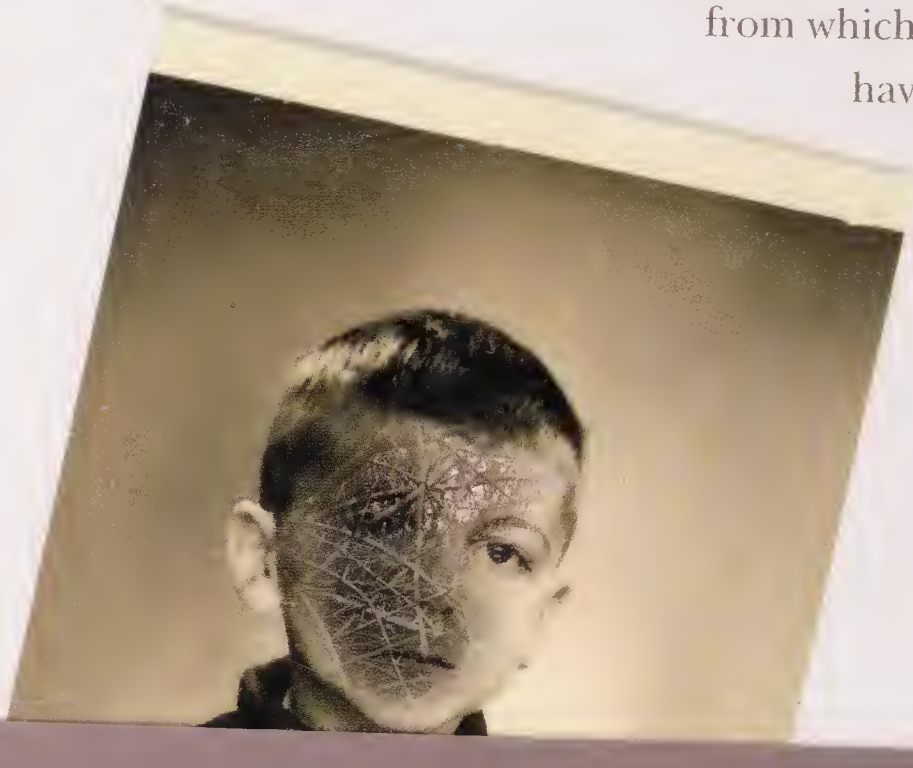
When I speak of time, it is not yet

When I speak of a place,
it has disappeared

When I speak of a man,
he's already dead

When I speak of time,
it already is no more

Let us speak, then, of the world
from which human beings
have disappeared.



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Jean Baudrillard | Marc Guillaume

RADICAL ALTERITY

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SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS SERIES

The publication of this book was supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Cultural Services of the French Embassy, New York.

"Ouvrage publié avec le concours du Ministère français chargé de la Culture–Centre nationale du livre".

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© 1994, 1998 by Les Éditions Descartes & Cie.

"What They Looked Like Photographed" published in "Sommes nous?" from the collective Tendance Floue, with the autorisation of Éditions Jean di Sciullo.

Published by Semiotext(e)
2007 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 427, Los Angeles, CA 90057
www.semiotexte.com

Special thanks to Robert Dewhurst.

Cover Photography by Jean Baudrillard
Backcover and inside photography by Jean Baudrillard
Design by Hedi El Kholti

ISBN-13: 978-1-58435-049-1
Distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England
Printed in the United States of America

RADICAL ALTERITY

Jean Baudrillard / Marc Guillaume

Translated by Ames Hodges

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Cool Thinking

"The only deep desire is the desire of the object. Not desire for something I am missing, or even for something (or someone) that misses me but for something that does not miss me at all, that is perfectly able to exist without me… The Other is the one who does not miss me, and that is radical alterity."[1] We could add: someone who not only does not miss me, but misses no one.

The object, in its silence and solitude without need or desire for others, brings a specific power of seduction into play. The object's genius lies there. It gives the object its secret—and objective—relationship with the photographic lens [*l'objectif*] and, by extension, with the subject that photographs it. That is why objects are the easiest things to photograph. "For objects, primitives and animals, alterity is certain; the most insignificant objects are 'other.' For subjects, it is much less certain." It then becomes necessary to make "beings more enigmatic for themselves, more foreign for each other. Thus the key to the photographic act is not to take them as objects but to make them become objects, to make them become others, to take them for what they are."

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1. For Illusion and Reality are not Opposed…

The apparent absence of human subjects in the work of Jean Baudrillard is therefore, in fact, the reflection of a presence. Yet it is a presence without *aura*, the presence of a being preserved in both his or her banality and alterity, maintained in the enigma that gives them their power of seduction.

There is no condescension in dealing with the social in terms of masses: each person retains his or her freedom, enigma and solitude. The world according to Baudrillard is a world of objects and masses. Direct confrontation with human subjects is always eluded; they only appear shrouded in an objectal dignity that preserves their radical alterity. Objects and masses are the place where beings disappear but also where the Other appears. They are therefore the place where beings are faithful to themselves and where we can be faithful to them. In the refuge of the masses, as Jean Baudrillard represents it for us, every life is respectable, because every life is the center of the world.

"Only the inhuman is photogenic. Reciprocal stupefaction only works at this price, through our complicity with the world and the world's complicity with us."

These are fragments of Jean Baudrillard's text. Fragments selected at random, or almost. Fragments that we will not comment on, explain, contextualize or, worse, *systematize*. They are fragments we can take, deform and set in relation to other fragments. Or we can extenuate them, take them to their limit: doing this is not easy because Baudrillard's thought is never measured or nuanced—it is only ambivalent, which is very different. It is already pushed to the extreme.

If there is a correct way of using his texts, it is not to capture his thought but a *regime* of thought. A unique regime. Far from the

genealogies and minute conceptual dissections of deconstruction, but not so far from the objectivizing practice of a certain type of photography. Something like *thought-feedback*, which is very different from image-feedback because this thought-feedback also involves turning and deviation. Reversed, *revealed* thought—present photographically in the passage from negative to positive—with an effervescence that finds its uniqueness in the process that created it.[2] *Cool thinking*.

"The world is beautiful like a cryptogram to decipher," wrote Mallarmé. Baudrillard's thought-feedback suggests that we make the world more beautiful by making it even more indecipherable. *Shadowing the world*. In praise of the shadow that doubles the world: "The world was given to us enigmatic and unintelligible, and the task of thought, if possible, is to make it even more enigmatic and even more unintelligible."[3] Jean Baudrillard could have put this statement of principle at the beginning of his book, but applying it to his own approach, he only unveils it at the end. We can imagine that many a naïve reader has entered the maze of one of his books—or all of his books—in an attempt to decipher the world, a world that seemed to belong to us in its very immediacy. Many readers get lost along the way; others misread him and only find apocalyptic or nihilist descriptions.

To avoid their mistakes, we must take his principle seriously. The world is given to us with no possible giving back and with no

2. Here is the art and pleasure of quotation like "decanting your thought through someone else, who returns it to you as if you had given it to him or her," *Cool Memories IV*.

3. *L'Échange impossible*.

responsibility of any kind, especially not the responsibility to explain it. Calculating and logical thought only serves to exploit the world while separating us from it. Sovereign thought, thought equal to the world, is comparable to the relationship poetry and music have with the world. "Without music, the world might have been a mistake" (Nietzsche). Baudrillard's works are composed like musical forms, with major themes, variations, refrains and silence.

The Uncertainty Principle of Thought

Sovereign thought, which cannot be exchanged for anything, loses its grip and is destined for unyielding uncertainty. "The uncertainty of thought is that it cannot be exchanged for either truth or reality."[4] In this ellipsis, Baudrillard implicitly points to a unique position in philosophy.

Philosophy has always recognized that thought should not choose in itself the things about which we must think. The choice must be absolutely independent of thought and come from completely outside it. Philosophical tradition resolves this initial problem by first proposing a transcendent authority that it calls truth. But this truth, which is still unknown, receives a form from philosophers when they assume that thought is predestined for this form, able to recognize it and predisposed to loving it. Truth in this case is not completely foreign to thought and the circle that philosophical thought wanted to avoid closes again. A second approach states that men and women, to the extent that they claim to have a mind, think *naturally*: there is a necessity of the mind, like the

4. *Op. cit.*

bodily necessities of human beings and animals, that pushes them to seek the truth. Deleuze wrote in this regard that "philosophers readily assume that the mind as mind and thinkers as thinkers want the truth, love and desire the truth, seek the truth naturally. They grant themselves the goodwill of thought in advance." (*Proust and Signs*)

The preconceived "image" of thought permeates every philosophy up to Nietzsche, even though it is already partially contested in particular philosophies (like the cynics or Spinoza). This dominant form, which Deleuze calls dogmatic thought and Baudrillard calls critical thought, serves as a model for traditional philosophy that thinks that reality is rational and therefore "exchangeable" with thought. As Leon Chestov wrote: "'Reality is rational' is the essential axiom of any philosophy, at least of any philosophy that only seeks the possible."

It is likely that Chestov had a direct influence on Georges Bataille in his insistence on accentuating the limits of philosophy and the need for thinking beyond, or at least beyond dogmatic philosophy. Like Bataille, like Deleuze, like Derrida to some extent (for example when he defines deconstruction, in a lapidary statement, as "impossible"), Baudrillard joins a search for the impossible or for a philosophy of the event, of discontinuity *ex nihilo*: "Against the thinking of origins and endings, of evolution and continuity, a thinking of discontinuity." An event of the world, for which the Big Bang is the absolute model, but also event of life, of sexualized reproduction and death, of language "that long precedes us and turns around in us to think us"[5] (I would add to seduce us and invite us to play with it).

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5. *Op. cit.*

After Nietzsche, Bataille, Deleuze and a few others, Baudrillard invites us to shed critical thought, to forget "the ideas that change and multiply... (like) a history of ideas and their hypothetical finality." Forget Foucault, in an even more radical way than before.[6] Leave behind the authors who continue to produce more explanations and interpretations of the world and who must have read *The Gay Science* or *The Accursed Share* but continue to run around like chickens with their heads cut off.

A Cartographer? No, a Writer

For this reason, we should avoid direct commentary of Jean Baudrillard's work or even using it as a pretext for a more personal analysis. And we should not separate his work into parts, by distinguishing for example a block of texts on objects and consumer society, another block on communication, another on seduction or the impossibility of exchange, etc.[7] There are, of course, different

---

6. Leaving the accumulation of knowledge to the historians, letting them autopsy the corpse of the past was Baudrillard's argument in this article that was thankfully developed into a short book called *Forget Foucault*.

7. It is possible, however, hypothetically speaking, to distinguish between a (chronological) first part of Baudrillard's work that runs up to *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, which is at least in part marked by the application of *critical* thought to different themes: consumer society, the media, a critique of Marx (*The Mirror of Production*). These remarkable essays marked their time, and while they were already permeated with the regime of thought that would follow, they remained connected to critical thought that gave their author the image of a sociologist. The same is not true of the texts that followed and reflected a radically different regime of thought.

themes but his writing always returns to the same questions. They are more than a main theme; the same position, the same operation and the same obsession haunt all of these themes.

The density of a work is one criterion among others but it is the most consistent trait that distinguishes the accumulation of knowledge in a university or disciplinary position from *writing* that takes its necessity from a position of gay science or disquiet. It would be particularly unwise to try to cloak this writing in a gloss, which is hard work in general and in Baudrillard's case completely inappropriate.

Jean Baudrillard is obviously not a sociologist in the University sense of the word. The little consideration shown for his work by academic authorities can only be seen as reasonable and mostly positive. We should not try to compensate for this fortunate oversight but be the *guardians of the freedom* that this work introduces into thought by saving it from restrictive reductions.

Should we go so far as to free the work from its author? "A book is finished when you can think that you have carried it as far as possible, with the knowledge of an impassable limit that only the book can cross or that some readers will take it to its end and even beyond its end."[8]

Why, how do we read Jean Baudrillard? What pleasure, what attraction, what impulse, what *laughter* do we find in his texts? (And sometimes, what profound shock: writing that does not disorient or contradict would not be a source of thought. There must be a flip side to jubilation, a flipside to laughter.) Why do we visit the mental world he creates out of the world we share? What joyous disquiet do we gain from these visits?

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8. *Cool Memories IV.*

Or instead: Why are we seduced by this shadow given to the world?

It is not easy to speak of seduction with Jean Baudrillard... "Seduction is enigmatic... it cannot be spoken or revealed... it is unexplainable evidence." The quote is from a passage in *Fatal Strategies* where love and seduction are opposed. The passage is exceptionally instructive because the invention of the concept of seduction—and it is truly an invention—sheds light on our relationship with others. Radical alterity can only be respected in a relationship of seduction.

A re-enchantment of the world? I would not pick that word although it does sometimes apply. I would rather speak of freedom and lightness. Baudrillard frees us from the social world and the dogmatic representations with which it is often covered.[9] It releases the world and those who live in it from the duty of knowing more, always more and from the guilt of not knowing or understanding enough about it. So that the world can remain beautiful like a cryptogram hidden under the flows of information accumulated each day.[10] Deleuze wrote concerning Foulcault: "A writer? No, a cartographer." We could say the opposite of Jean Baudrillard: A cartographer? No, a writer. And every true writer has his or her own language and unique topology.

To bring the seductive power of the cryptogram into play, the point of view, the play of—harsh—light and preserved shadows. Then we can show the limits, the singular points, the hidden layers while protecting the enigma without which the world would lose

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9. For example, in the early 1970s, he freed the social—and some of us by the same token—from the "mirror of production."

10. Why read or listen to the media, asked Fellini, "why absorb this daily poison?"

its beauty. The beauty of what *is*, without reason, in its absolute gratuitousness.

Strange Attractors

Which leads us to the more general hypothesis that I made about the uniqueness of a regime of thought and the most important point: the mode of thinking is more important than the thought itself.

While this thinking is not up for interpretation, it nonetheless appears to be marked by the *figures* and oppositions of terms that give it a rigorous *form*. Figures of becoming, destiny, fatality (and metamorphosis) opposed to the figures of change and exchange, the fractal and the spectral (and metastasis.)

There are multiple operations at the origin of these figures, classic rhetorical operations no doubt, but also operations in the mathematical sense, basic geometrical transformations and tools of anamorphosis: reversion and ambivalence, exponentiation, exceedance, fractalization, doubling, ellipsis, *fading*, and disappearance.[11] In geometry, we once studied a strange operation, inversion,

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11. Baudrillard's fascination with limit points, fault lines, singular objects or phenomena: the poles, the date line in the Pacific, black holes, the memory of water, phase changes, apoptosis as a juxtaposition of inverse processes. His way of applying the operations of the physical or biological world to the world of the masses is easy to explain but we must avoid oversimplification and preserve the seductive power of these metaphors. In the *Cool Memories* series, these operations (passing limits, reversion and self-reversion) produce amazing fragments most freely and directly.

that turned a circle into a straight line with infinite points. We must try to transfer that operation to the regime of thought: transforming the circles of stereotypes and critical thought into something totally different but with a rigorous and secret relationship to the original discourse.

We can advance in this line of thinking by making the hypothesis that Baudrillard's regime of thought is a search for *strange attractors*, the points of regions where the trajectories of complex, chaotic systems subject to variations in the initial conditions are forced to converge.[12] In the chaotic flux of virtual data, opinions and representations, Baudrillard finds *informational attractors* and then builds his own from them. In the flux and endless stock of preconceived ideas, false proof and one-track thinking, it is easy to pick out symptomatic accumulations and repetitions, especially symptoms of denial.[13] Starting with these points, you then take them to the extreme, inverse and multiply... counterfeiting Baudrillard's style brings you closer to it! Add all of the terms—the "passwords," the ones that led to a book of interviews[14]—that make up Baudrillard's conceptual topology (not cartography),

12. Like the image of a whirlpool in liquid drawn out through the hole in the bottom of a basin, or waters streaming down a valley into a single current. The first intuition of strange attractors can be found in Poincaré concerning the three body problem. The fractal nature and properties of strange attractors were discovered in 1971 by D. Ruelle and F. Takens.

13. As an example, the current repetition of the theme of sustainable development is the sign that it is not longer sustainable. And maybe the unmentionable wish to see the world destroyed with us or after us feeds our protests that we love our great-grandchildren.

14. *Passwords*.

that characterize his own attractors, his pass-concepts, and allow him to disorient the discourses we pronounce about the world.

These operations and attractors allow us to reorganize or disorganize everything related to identity, humanity, security, general good feelings and what Spinoza called the sad passions, but also the discourses on cloning, artificial intelligence, virtuality, networks, and globalization.

It is important for these operations to be reversible, self-reversible, and for the passwords to be organized in couples so that everything can be perceived and thought of reversibly. Or dually. Good and Evil. Saekina and Lilith (*The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*). Knowing how to inverse the positions allows for a subtle play with points of view that frees us from a representation of the world subject to causality and subjectivity. Thus objects see us, an old Lacanian and even Sartrean story; masses do not submit to power, but suffocate it ironically; adults become the potential victims of children; good health is threatened by the viruses that it creates... This reversibility or dual relationship is the condition for a distancing that sometimes allows secret hatred to appear, hatred that allows thought to discover what is in fact hidden under the thick layers of conventional thought and good intentions.[15]

These oppositions converge towards the central form of singularity (and also, again, the event) and therefore of impossible

15. An ability to grasp politics—for example what made Jean Baudrillard the inventor of the *Gauche divine* [Divine Left]—was made possible by this position of detestation.

exchange. Singularity comes from a double detachment: separating from the general is not enough—it is the trap of individualism and idiosyncrasy that are only singular relative to the masses like a grain of sand on a beach. It is a first, fractal level of singularity. Absolute singularity is a unique sign with no relation to the general and no possible exchange. Between the absolute singularities, there remains the possibility of a play of metamorphoses on the basis of the *inexistence* of their own being (think of Pessòa and his "wanting to be nothing" and his metamorphoses, of Sade declaring that "bodies can only be exchanged in the secret of signs.") Being in itself has a history woven from alienations and conquest; it has an illusory finality, the pretense to "become what it is." Only singularity has a becoming, the possibility of freely metamorphosing.

For "in another dimension, the dimension of destiny and becoming (where thought 'becomes'), there is only ever one idea: the sovereign hypothesis, equivalent to the sovereign passion of which Nietzsche spoke... [that] delivers us from all of the others, delivers us from plurality, from the frenzied exchange of modes of thought and modes of existence which is the caricature and simulacrum of becoming."[16]

This sovereign and unique idea, which haunts all of Baudrillard's writing after *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, is not to mention, or not entirely, no more than Nietzsche's sovereign idea, the Eternal Return. It remains partially secret, keeping an enigma to escape exchange and maintain a radical alterity of thought. Some madness as well: "Since the world is evolving towards a mad state of things, one must take a mad point of view towards it." Bataille adopted almost the same

16. Op. cit.

position at the end of *The Accursed Share*, while retaining the hypothesis of a reversal that would save the world.[17]

Sovereign Thought

The essential remains to be said. For prudence's sake, I will try to be brief and allusive, following the suggestion and example of *Cool Memories*: "You will be judged on the brevity of your intuitions and your speech."

A body of work unflinchingly opposed to the processes of research and knowledge based on the illusory erasure of subjectivity

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17. There is a heritage and a break between Bataille and Baudrillard. In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille wrote: "Human kind may have lost the world in leaving animality, but became the consciousness of having lost it that we are." Human beings are a separation that thinks and any attempt at objectification (rational thought), while giving us *utilitarian* mastery over the world, separates us even more from it by allotting us an *indignity* that Bataille reads into the representations of Lascaux where animals are magnified. Thought, because it is the product of an existence torn from the world, is negated in its objects and can only reach a radical, sovereign level by aiming beyond the object and the separation. Thought must tear away from itself if it wants to confront something which is not given in advance.

This tearing, for Bataille, can only occur in proximity to modified states of consciousness (drunkenness, voluptuousness, the sacred, interior experience, etc.) like for Sade ("philosophy lights its torch at the torch of the passions.") For Bataille, freedom is nothing if it is not the freedom to live at the limits where understanding erodes." (*The Impossible*). Baudrillard's regime of thought does not call for these limit-states that mix effervescence and anxiety. He is distanced, detached (from cultural, historical and philosophical problems), more ambivalent and more *cool*.

or the laborious accounting for the biases subjectivity introduces. Researchers are always guilty of inadequacy or subjectivity, subjected to truth, commanded to show proof and watched closely by their colleagues.[18] Researchers are like sinners, and truth is their God. Writers are only subject to themselves, their life, their visions, their violence and the rules they give themselves. This submission is, in the end, a greater cause of rigorousness than the objectivity that weighs on scientists. The submission to what provokes thought—but also artistic creation—this intellectual prematurity—controlled autism, revolt, revelation, tireless discipline to keep the mind free—presupposes spiritual asceticism. From asceticism emerges *style* and the author produces an identification for him or herself.[19]

Every work is first the mastery of a technique, a material, in this case writing. But it is above all the projection into the mastered material of what an author has found to express the beauty of life in its cruelty. Baudrillard's mode of thought is not only the invention of a singular topology in conjunction with masterful writing. Jean Baudrillard writes his own way of inhabiting the world, of diving "into the mental depths and metaphoric waters, into the murky universe of concepts."[20] In the radical approbation of life, every creator plays a sovereign game. It is from this excess of individuation, not the experience of ordinary alterity (*alteritas* in the sense of diversity), but radical alterity as a provocation (outside reason), that *seduction* becomes possible.

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18. A "small world" described by David Lodge, Javier Marias and many others.

19. Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote of Cézanne what one could write of any *necessary* work: "To be done, this work required this life."

20. *Cool Memories IV*.

The seductive alteration that a writer, poet or painter produces involves replacing reality submitted to *laws* with a *game* defined by *rules*. Not to share the game, but to exalt his or her solitude, offer us metamorphoses and make us more enigmatic to each other. In this way, the writer suggests an unmentionable community, a community based on something other than love—no one misses the others—but a community of seduction, of solitary people (those who do not have a community as Blanchot said). The expression of this interior experience, of this sovereignty creates the impassible boundary between programmed diversion, playfulness and festivities and the sovereign game. Without these forms of expression of radical acceptance "life would be an error," to extend Nietzsche's phrase on music.

— Marc Guillaume

RADICAL ALTERITY

1

Spectrality as the Ellipsis of the Other

Marc Guillaume: The first questions I would like to deal with are found in the figure that I have called the ellipsis of the Other. Simmel gave one of the most direct approaches to this theme in a brief text called *The Stranger* which I will only allude to in passing.

I will speak of alterity indirectly. It is something that is close to alterity but is not alterity. It could be summed up in the statement: taking the Other for others. Reducing the Other to others. Reducing the Other to others is a temptation made even more difficult to avoid in that absolute alterity is unthinkable and is therefore destined for reduction. In any case, alterity is always provocative. One example of this provocative thinking is a book by Maurice Debesse published in 1937. It deals with the crisis in juvenile originality, to use the author's own terms. The book is an example of how alterity is unthinkable. Adolescence is the moment when the subject refuses to be treated as an Other by others. The adolescent wants to be treated as an Other in his or her radical singularity. Isn't adolescence the moment when the subject must bury alterity? Maybe the parallel loss of the "wonderful child" that parents experience is the counterpoint to this teenage mourning. A teenager goes through the process of mourning alterity, resigning him or herself to being an Other among others. Parents also go through a process of

mourning that Serge Leclaire described in *A Child Is Being Killed*, the moment when parents must kill the remainder that is inside them, the "wonderful child" that all adults leave behind with regret.

Without digressing into adolescence, one of the difficult aspects in thinking about it concerns radical alterity or the desire for radical alterity. Taking this desire into account would probably shed some light on the relationship between teenagers and drugs.

We are therefore naturally led, by a careless but common chain of associations, to use a distant other, for example a marginal or a stranger or some other that has a strong presence in our symbolic alphabet like a member of the opposite sex, as a hypostasis of the other. We cannot ignore this mental slide. It is baseless but deserves our attention.

Simmel's *The Stranger*, published in 1905, examines this hypostasis of alterity. For Simmel, a stranger is both near and far. "Far" does not necessarily mean a geographical or cultural distance; it means a boundary is crossed. The stranger's status is not like a judge or interested party, not someone who is partial in any debate or conflict or will remain permanently involved in our social surroundings. A stranger can therefore be an impartial observer, taking the distance needed to observe conflicts or situations that do not concern him or her in any lasting way. This distance gives strangers intimacy and places them in the position of mediators or even confessors. People confide in strangers more easily than to those closest to them. It is a remarkable relationship because the person farthest away also becomes the closest. This strange system of measurement shows that the relationship to the Other is twofold: both close and distant. A stranger is someone who, from one angle, is very distant and who, from another angle, is very close. The singularity of the stranger, this hypostasis of alterity

analyzed by Simmel served as my point of reference when I examined a situation I cáll *artificial strangeness*.

Urban societies are populated with what we could call artificial strangers. There is an artificial production of strangeness. In this case, strangeness is not produced by the ellipsis of the Other but by the eclipse of the Other or, to use a more linguistic word, the elision of the Other. I will come back to the term elision in a moment.

A note on method before discussing artificial strangeness. My method consists of operating like an archeologist or paleontologist: finding the piece of rock or bone fragment from which we can reconstruct a reality. Paleontologists attempt to reconstruct entire animals from bits of skeleton. They recreate something that cannot be proven. Yet it corresponds to a supposed reality. In the same way, my attempts to reconstruct a social vision from a few symptoms may be used for prospection. You could also take it as an interpretation of the present, with the hope that the interpretation will seduce you. There are thus two levels in the reading of social symptoms. They can either be treated as a means to predict the future, and in that case it is better for the predictions to be good ones, in the utilitarian sense; or you can offer an interpretation of the present solely for your own pleasure. The only thing I hope is that this fragment will help us make strides in the analysis of alterity.

The fragment or symptom under investigation here is the proliferation of new forms of expression and communication that are made possible by technological devices and their industrial production and, most importantly, by a change in social sensibilities. The change in social sensibilities reflects the end of traditional communities, the weakening of intermediate institutions of socialization, the risks of anomie and solitude caused by socio-technological potentialities that include the multiplication of

urban connection networks and all of the "variable geometry" communication arrangements. In this sense, May '68 seems to be the last gasp of a bygone regime of sociality. It did not start a revolution; it ended one. People going out into the streets, joining nascent groups: the idea of an ephemeral but festive community was easily disarmed later by the media. Today, we are truly in a world of multiple networks giving rise to a new form of sociality that has nothing to do with the unrest of groups in fusion. This sociality can no longer be represented by traditional media and therefore cannot be disarmed or denounced by it as some elements of the traditional community once were. It is a form of communicability that causes us to break with the nostalgia of community, with the traditional dialectic of the individual and the community. I call this new mode of being and exchanging *spectral*.

Of course, isolated spectral behaviors are not new but the generalization of this mode is new. One can, sometimes at the expense of misinterpretation, find very old traces of spectrality. It can already be found in certain forms of communication like anonymous letters, graffiti, and in some forms of entertainment like carnivals, disguises, literary games, and some types of prostitution. In the 18th century, mask games and shadowy transgressions abounded. The same is true in literature. Stendhal juggled hundreds of pseudonyms, almost 300. Pessòa took refuge in at least three fictive personalities. Kierkegaard, Masoch, Borgès and many others including Julien Gracq and Eric Orsenna refused to be assigned a single name.

There is therefore a literary tradition of these games of simulated identity. But all of these situations are marginalized, condemned, forbidden activities or ritualized practices that serve as exorcisms against their potential generalization. They are even in some cases

the behavior of a class or of personalities that wish to incarnate Balzac's saying: "going incognito is the privilege of princes."

In fact, the signs I have just mentioned may not be the origins of the current generalization. The generalization of this behavior appeared, somewhat ironically, where anomie seemed most present: through exchanges in cities that were called "inhuman," in crowds that were called "lonely." Where the worst was found, according to a Durkheimian approach to the social, a new society appeared. Specters who did not know each other crossed paths, specters who would never see each other again and yet still engaged in practices of exchange. Spectrality also spread in the attitudes of mass consumption. Mass consumption allowed a disconnection between social reality and social roles. It produced a space in which we learned to appear as we were not. It is something that has entered our daily lives but was unthinkable two generations ago, at least for ordinary people. Appearing as what one is not would have led to an uproar in traditional society. Today, everyone has gained the privilege of going incognito while the "princes"—at least those in the government—are kept firmly under the eyes of the people by the media and consigned to a certain transparency.

In cities, and through mass consumption, we have learned to manage a whirlwind of words and signs. We have learned to deal with incoherency, contradictory signs, and the "collages" of postmodernity. One of John Cage's phrases best characterizes this sensibility: "The world is a giant collage. A bus filled with people who don't know each other passing in front of a gothic church and a bright advertisement for cigarettes." In this empty space with its heteroclite directions, graffiti and tags, we learn to engage in spectral communication. We have to manage signs, manage roles and

manage relationships with unfamiliar people, strangers with whom we have to share or make exchanges.

Leaving behind this somewhat impressionistic landscape, we can examine a more fragmentary situation that would allow us to grasp this spectral communication more analytically. Mediatized communications (instead of radio and television, think of the telephone and its offshoots) allow us to observe pure forms of spectrality in a context that is not very different from that of the city. The telephone and its avatars generalize the properties of urban accessibility and commutation. Commutation is what a city does: the capacity to establish contacts between people or between people and things. Cities are the locus of commerce, including the second, outdated meaning of the word "commerce." Urban connections are diverse: their intensity varies and they are sometimes weak or transitory; they offer the possibility to disconnect, to be alone.

Like a city, the network of communications offers a multiplicity of connections, the possibility to plug in or unplug. In this space for mediatized communication, spectral communication occurs when the agents of communication can, more or less partially and more or less provisionally, do without the procedures for control and identification normally required. They can escape, for example, from the identity defined or definable in traditional communication by names, prior recognition or physical presence. Ordinary communications are tightly controlled, channeled by their context and more generally by phenomena of metacommunication. All of these phenomena were catalogued and analyzed by the Palo Alto School with exemplary determination from Bateson to Watzlawik. They spent their time watching how hands moved, how legs were crossed, how cigarettes were lit, how affects were circulated.

In spectral communication, a portion of these meta-communicational phenomena are eliminated, set aside or suspended. Without any controlling authority or procedures for identification, this communication is private and disconnected from the cultural sedimentation of established conventions. It is communication destined for disconnection. As such, the work of the Palo Alto School hardly seems pertinent to these spectral situations. It only applies to ordinary communication. The forms of communication mediatized by technological artifacts have other controlling and contextualizing authorities.

Other codes will emerge but when, for example, one enters an anonymous procedure, the cornerstone of all former codes that were based on identity, identification, the nomen and therefore the nomos disappears.

To see what is new here, one must resist the temptation to picture spectral communication as partial, incomplete communication. What would be the Other, the absolute opposite of spectral communication? One might think it is the face to face, body to body between two people who know each other intimately, which we would then call a real, total communication. In fact, this is not the Other of the spectral because if everything is shared, if everything is common between two people, then there is no more communication. It disappears in extreme intimacy. It is a classic aporia: the aim of communication is the very thing that renders it unnecessary. In other words, all communication relies on its opposite and on the separation of beings. That is why communication thrives on all forms of distancing, strangeness, and all the risks of miscomprehension and misunderstanding. It is no surprise that technical progress, by removing communication from reality and spectralizing it, has made it more complex and more prolific,

more existent. Spectral communication realizes the ideal of communication by intensifying separation. It leads us to seek a more precise answer to a conundrum: *the relationship between anonymity and anomie*.

How does anonymity come into play? The opposite of spectrality is totally identified communication and physical presence. Obviously, with a letter or by telephone, the body is absent but, in the case of a sociality that refuses anomie, the rituals of identification are rigorously respected and even patterned on face-to-face communication. Letters must have an identified addressee and a sender. There are rules, even quite strict ones, for polite expressions. The entire technical apparatus has been subjected to constraints based on cultural representations. The same is true of the telephone. It has been largely sterilized, diverted from many of its technological possibilities by the fact that it was experienced through a regressive imagination: everything must take place *as if* the people were face to face. One might say the telephone was aborted. The telephonic arrangement was only thinkable if it was seeped in good manners, if there was a servant to answer the phone and serve as an intermediary, if young women and even wives were kept away from an instrument that might lead to the eruption of nondomestic sociality. The telephone was thus castrated and then ritualized according to dominant social practices. The anonymity of the caller, for example, was strictly prohibited. Simultaneous communication between three people, which was possible from the start, was stifled. As often happens, a great number of technological possibilities were cast aside.

By contrast, books and newspapers introduced anonymity or rather unilateral anonymity since the receiver, in this case, was no longer identified. The anonymous, unknown and silent reader

representing the masses and so-called public opinion—although this opinion is never published—took a new and important place in the field of social communication. In some cases, anonymity was even bilateral. If we consider books from the 16th and 17th centuries in France, and especially all of the critical thinkers (or the Protestants, who were published elsewhere under different names), we can see that this form of publication was a process exploring mass anonymity and establishes a double anonymity.

With radio, television and cinema, the unilateral form of communication became even more massive. In this situation, the sender seems well identified. But in reality, we only know the voice or the face of those in front of the camera or in the studio. They are also in a spectral position. These irradiating media hastened cultural change and the acceptance of very partial communication.

Over the past twenty years, technological possibilities that have not been diverted or sterilized have given rise to new practices or rather to a new status for old practices. The loss of identification that characterized the anonymous letter, graffiti or dazibaos has now ceased to be a marginal and exceptional situation or a morally condemned situation. In fact the opposite has occurred. Giving one's name has become prohibited. I am thinking of one of the first practices common to the Citizen Band. At first, the rule was that those who spoke would not give their name or address. The same was true for another, older use of the telephone "network" that started as a technical error but was then organized institutionally fifteen years ago by the directors of French Telecommunications in association with the city of Montpellier.

The CB and the telephone "network" were symptoms, without much consequence or importance, of something completely new in communication that abruptly occurred in French telematics. It is a

situation where strangers talk calmly with strangers, confide in each other or invent roles and fictions in which anonymity is the rule. More precisely, heteronymy or pseudonymy are the rule rather than absolute anonymity. It is an example of convention replacing absolute anonymity with sometimes highly meaningful pseudonyms. Anonymity would then be defined by this new rule that would allow suspension of the old rules of ordinary civility. From this point of view, one could say that anonymity turns into a form of anomie because thanks to a type of eclipse, the ordinary rules of civility disappear. More generally speaking, this anonymity may create a rupture that separates the subject from his or her feeling of self and social context but also from reality. A break that promotes the liberation of the imagination and finally the admission of all fantasies—although maybe more to oneself than to others. Anonymity would thus be much more than a social operator: it would be a way to free the imagination and therefore to distance oneself from oneself.

It would be a mistake to reduce anonymity to this imaginary freedom. It is true that identification allows for more transgression; networks that make people invisible only reduce community social control, like traveling to the city from the country exposes you to less control. From this point of view, there is still an increase in urban commutation. Nevertheless, the search for anonymity or distance cannot be reduced to this situation. It is also a symbolic operator that allows the subject to separate worlds and to redistribute the worlds that he or she constantly confronts. It is a process of both separating and reconnecting.

For example, anonymity can be a way to recreate and introduce an identity. During social conflicts, in large national companies, employees used anonymous tracts distributed from workplace to

workplace to express their demands. An anonymous concatenation led at first to the marginalization then the exclusion of the unions. Anonymity is a symbolic operator that allows one to create and inaugurate an empty space. Anonymity purges institutional excess and then, if the conditions are right, if the alchemy succeeds, it can bring about a new collective agent. By avoiding names before acting, by letting each person determine his or her self freely for themselves and for others, this movement let those left behind by the spokespeople and the hierarchies gain an identity and a collective project outside union norms and practices. The processes of creative anonymity are highly interesting.

More frequently, anonymity is the social operator that lets us articulate the social, utilitarian world—a partially inhuman world, both grandiose (the social, technological and economic world) and dismal—with the intimate, passionate human world, which is both pitiful and essential. Connecting these two worlds is a challenge every individual must face, especially since it is an impossible task: the two worlds are incommensurate. They are not just distant; there is no relation between them. We have grown accustomed to avoiding or overcoming this daily challenge. We use several types of "couriers" to face this challenge. There are the close friends and family with whom we discuss our problems in articulating the two worlds, but there are also strangers (in the role that Simmel discussed). Strangers can be a passing stranger or a "professional" stranger. A professional courier is typically a doctor or psychoanalyst, the "bureaucrats of alterity" as F. Perrier calls them.

Anonymity is also partially involved in our relations to doctors. The shifting geometry of anonymity here takes the form of doctor-patient privilege, a legally guaranteed secret that is also safeguarded by professional ethics. When we speak to a doctor, giving our name

(although not necessarily), we can be almost certain that our name will be erased outside that particular encounter. Anonymity, which appears to be prohibited in our representations, is in fact organized and legitimized in certain situations when we deal with someone who might become a courier, someone who could help you cope with the incommensurability between the two worlds.

In some mediated communication, one meets random strangers who take on the courier role and who include themselves in the play of identity or the masks of identity and intersubjectivity. One example, on the most superficial level, is the possibility of exploring freedom of speech removed from all outside control, irresponsible speech that can switch between truth and lies, mixing reality and fiction. In this case, it is a very superficial game. It is not primarily an exploration of the Other but of the Other's roles. This dissimulation only ends in pure simulation: the "I" pretends to be an Other. Sexual transvestism is one example. Another example is electronic message boards. With the play of anonymity and pseudonyms, some users give themselves a socioprofessional or sexual status that they do not have. By choosing a name protected by the screen and texts, they can perform a kind of *textual transvestism* that they engage in comfortably and even innocently. Without the rituals of identification, relationships occur that are unthinkable in an ordinary and more rigid social context. *The elision of identity, like removing a letter at the end of a word, makes connections easier.*

However, it seems that this game of apparently superficial and inoffensive appearances can trick the subject, who in certain cases can be caught in his or her own truth. This speech, completely irresponsible in appearance, can cause the Other to emerge in the subject in the form of unconscious discourse. It is possible that this "idle talk, meaningless talk," this irresponsible speech is the

maieutics of a discourse of the unconscious. An apparently pointless game could very well lead to the emergence of alterity, but an alterity that comes from the subject him or herself.

The social symptom described briefly here may not deserve much attention. At least, most observers see it as negligible. They treat it as an anomaly or a passing fad. There is a "ghetto" side to these social practices. Yet I believe that they are part of a more profound, mass movement, one with a development that we can trace through consumer habits and urban life. Spectrality is a mode of being that changes sensibilities, behavior and social relationships as a whole, beyond technical devices and beyond the uses of communication. In this general perspective, we can play on all of the meanings of the word "spectrality." The word "specter" has many echoes.

First, there is the echo of a disappearing, ghostly reality. Bodily presence starts to fade or lose consistency, causing a corresponding fear of transgression, dispersion, wandering, the loss of prohibitions, the rise of new exorcisms. It is also the echo of masks, doubles and multiples. From there, we pass into a new area of meaning: the spectrum of white light replacing an apparent unity with the dispersion of its component parts. This meaning is the richest. There is also a connection at the source between specter and spectrum: through appropriate optical experiments, (immaterial) virtual images are displayed with their colors dispersed.

Playing on these two areas of meaning with their various connotations, we could say, on the one hand, that phantoms—unreal or at least freed from that body and other procedures of identification—cause fear and therefore give rise to various exorcisms. On the other, the decomposition of an individual into several elements or facets, the possibility of connecting with others case by case, of

having relationships of variable geometry, allows us to understand the idea of the courier, the idea of incommensurability mentioned above. Being spectral means having several faces and only using one in the communication interface, for example, in the ordinary social and professional world. One could show different facets to intimate acquaintances, family, friends and strangers. The restriction to a single identity can therefore be sidestepped and progressively eliminated. It represents a considerable social change that began in the mid-1970s. Two phenomena converged, at least in France, at that time: the ebb of representations exacerbated in 1968 or the end of mourning for traditional communities that would have recreated the village in the cities or the town in the country, according to traditional sociality, and the economic crisis that brought us back to the ideology of the "Post-War Boom," since the economic crisis was fundamentally the victory of the economy as ideology. When growth and its effects started to move out of reach, the masses began to play a double game. On one side, they played the game of economic competition wisely or intensely; on the other, without the dream of an impossible community, they invented a different sociality.

There was a kind of closure to the mourning over '68 and a regression to the past economic order. It led to the exploration for a new form of sociality. This new form meant finally accepting the dichotomy between the social and the intimate world within ourselves. This initial dichotomy can engender others, ad infinitum. By the same token, learning this double game establishes a multifaceted spectrality.

The work of François Dubet on adolescents reveals a symptom of this spectrality. He showed that in some cases, especially in anomic situations, teenagers used to recreate communities in the form of gangs (the Black Jackets of the 1960s). Now, however,

under the same conditions, no gangs are formed. Instead, there is something he calls "practices" that are difficult to name and identify and that do not lead to a new community. Dubet calls it "la galère" [struggle, hard times], using the same word as his interviewees. Their situation illustrates spectral practices.

There are in fact different levels of practices: teenagers use the adult world, urban references and, sometimes, social and educational assistance. At the same time, they invent transgressions, playing on all the different registers with ease, without trying to recreate an artificial unity. Their world is completely different than the world of gangs or even traditional networks like the mafia that recreate social relationships in reverse.

It is true that there are some gangs today—social reality is geological: strata accumulate on top of each other—but these gangs are not quite like those in the past. There is no exact comparison to past gangs because the gangs no longer concentrate all of these adolescents' sociality; gangs and galère can coexist.

In short, spectrality is not the destruction or disappearance of the subject. Spectrality is the dispersion of the subject. The same dispersion that Blanchot underlines in Foucault's work: "The subject does not disappear: the overly determined unity of the subject comes under question since interest and research are stimulated by ... a dispersion of the subject that does not annihilate it but gives us a plurality of positions and a discontinuity of functions" (in Foucault/Blanchot, Zone Books, 1987).

This dispersion opens one to the experience of the diversity (alteritas) of others, of the dust of often insignificant differences, but also to the experience of the diversity of internal components, including the unconscious component. Spectral exchanges with a multitude of others are not direct encounters with their alterity,

although they might lead there in some cases. They contribute to sculpting the multiple facets of the self; they give rise to effects of alteration and alterity within the subject. They also produce a progressive change in sociality: we are no longer as much the products of our products, as Marx said, but the products of our virtual or real relationships. And therefore a plurality of positions, functions and interferences overtake the identified subject and disperse it. Bachelard once wrote: "Being does not illustrate relations, relations illuminate being." I would say instead that spectral relationships disperse being. Today's commutative sociality is based more on a generalized "relationism" than anomic individualism. It could even be the case that the excess of individualism or narcissism that people decry today is a compensation or a staging that helps the subject resist its dispersion, through the meditations in which it engages and that traverse it, to help it maintain an appearance of unity.

Jean Baudrillard: I like the word "spectral," but the two versions of it are not very compatible, even etymologically, because there is a ghostly spectrality (phantoms and ghosts) and a prismatic spectrality, the refraction of different colors from light or the different facets found in an "individual."

Ghostly spectrality relates to a disconnection: the ghost, the double behind the ghost, a very singular Other in the sense that he or she comes back to haunt you. That spectrality is haunted by emptiness and death.

When decanting the individual into different roles and facets, however, there is no haunting. On the contrary, the individual is no longer inhabited by something but is completely extrapolated, exterior. He or she is best described in terms of multiple connections.

No longer a ghost, the individual is in this case like a being with protrusions in every direction. There is a disconnection between the two meanings. And the disconnection is interesting. It means that it is probably not an element of explanation but an element of vision since visions can be contradictory and play on a *name* as long as it is a strong one. And the term "spectral" is very strong.

Let me add a few remarks concerning the ambiguity of the term "specter." There is no contradiction in your genealogy, moving from spectrality back to masks, carnivals and pseudonyms. Instead, you create an ambiguity. I wonder whether the play of appearances, the strategy that relies on the mask, is not a play on transparency or ghosts. It is a game with its own rules, not a real transgression. In modern terms, it would be called a transgression. Pseudonyms play on metamorphoses, not on ghosts. They do not rely on transparency or the loss of identity. The problem of identity is not even raised. The play of pseudonyms is a diffraction into networks of appearances. You cannot make it the first stage of spectrality. And then you make a jump and start talking about mass media. It might be better to speak of a mutation. You move from a local, intermittent and somewhat marginal phenomenon to a generalization. It is more of a direct mutation. It is hard to put the two together since they are not on the same register. One is in the register of symbolic operators: masks, the Other. And the second, as you said, is a simulation operator: playing at being an Other, pretending, which is not quite the same thing. In the play of appearances, someone becomes an Other with a certain awareness of the game. In diffraction or evaporation, however, the problem is: can one truly become an Other? As you say, one pretends. Is it still the same thing?

I also wonder what would define graffiti artists. They do not really operate in gangs. They usually work alone and are specifically

interested in subways or surfaces and not at all in transgressive collectivity. Their goal is not subversion, but the simple play on the *name*. What they seek is not exactly anonymity, because they inscribe names and often their own name or code names. They are connected to the surface, the vector, the subway and only connected to the code, to code names, invented names that are completely destabilized and altered in appearance. The writing of graffiti itself is important and completely destabilizing. In fact, it is a wild game with the code. And they are less like aggressive gangs based on violence than a virus. Their actions are viral, atomic, atomized; they rely more on destabilization than direct confrontation. They play on anomalies more than anomy.

I agree with everything you said about spectrality. It seems like a very powerful vision and theoretical operator. I would, however, raise an objection about removing the name from bodily presence. Does it liberate us? Yes, we are liberated from all of the strong symbolic operators. But what kind of freedom is it? It is availability, virtuality, but we are still held hostage to the code.

When we are freed from our name, we become much more dependant on marks, signs, and all coded, referential signs. At that point, there is a precession of the code and ciphers. This is obvious every time we use the Minitel or the telephone. All of these types of media require a kind of preceding recognition through the code or indexed on the code, recognition preceding knowledge. You don't know yourself and do not really seek to know yourself.

The problem lies in the supremacy of the code. The code does not simply mean giving a code name for oneself. It is the technological matrix for the operation of those systems that govern the modes of appearance and disappearance, which is not the case of

the pure linguistic operation with the name. The more one is removed from the body, identity or the name, the more one submits to the power of a frightening coding and overcoding. But this is not a moral judgment.

Sociality comes into play. It is no longer society. The suffix "-al" (society, sociality; virtue, virtuality; form, formality) is often ghostly. In relationship to society, sociality means we are no longer in the social. This communication is sociality, not a new form of society.

Does the Other exist there? If I pretend to be an Other at that point, the Other is also only an appearance, it comes from the code and may be part of the code. The great Other would be the code and there would be no Other. The code governs a perfectly artificial alterity.

I therefore object to the consequences of your hypothesis. It unfolds well, but in the history of anonymity and anomie, which you consider to be a positive distribution or a positive diffraction, is there not behind it all a great Other or another ghost called the code in which there is no longer any law or constraint? In a way, the code is unassailable because it is a matrix buried much deeper than the proper name. It is not a form, like the name, but a formula. It can be technological. The code is something other than a word. Take the genetic code, for example. With the genetic code, it is not a question of signing a contract. You do not communicate with your own code. It makes us communicate and it is there before everything; it comes before everything else. There is a precession of the code before all operations. Therefore, it is difficult to find the Other. On the other side of the code, there may be no more Other.

Marc Guillaume: It is true that the precession of the code could push interlocutors towards appearances or into having very stereotypical interactions. For a long time, people have faulted the artifices of communication for the poverty of the content of exchange. The code could even be very loaded when we are in the presence of the machines and devices of communication. We think we are talking with someone when in fact we "activate" a machine programmed to "respond" with more or less success depending on the talents of the programmer. In this case, there is a precession of the code (and of the programmer) and only a unilateral simulation of communication remains.

Outside of this extreme case, but staying close to it to some extent, if we combine appearances and stereotypes, we get pornography. It is not a necessary result. There is always the possibility that real writing, a challenge, an alterity will emerge from insignificance. Especially when the artifacts of communication make up a spectrum of tools from which we can choose. We can change the mode of communication at any moment, the exchange can become less spectral. With the Minitel, we have interactions based on a kind of writing that could potentially have a pornological feel (to use Deleuze's term) from which more real interactions might emerge.

These situations are similar to Masoch's approach (cf. Deleuze's preface to the reissuing of *Venus in Furs*). Masoch tried to explore the Other through a fictional literary situation using the limited technological means of his time: classified ads in newspapers, masks, darkrooms, etc. Masoch's Other is not only a woman, it is a unique hybrid because it carries the traces of its literary origins, the erotic charge given to it by Masoch's fictional imagination.

Jean Baudrillard: It may be possible to find our possibilities in language. Language is not a code, or not a formula-code but a form. This type of exchange is not communication because exchange in language calls into question its definition, its single-meaning. There is no internal paradox as there is in communication, where you say: the more we communicate, the more we destroy communication; or, the less we exchange, the more we have to communicate. The loss can only be repaired by more communication. And communication, with its self-referential, self-devouring circularity, ends when only the code or the network is left in operation.

You do not have the tetanic and somewhat metastatic enthusiasm for the symbolic use of language because there is a temporality of the to and fro, of the reversibility which means that there is not a total excrescence of the code and the network as communication. Communication is an infinite, tentacular, excrescent process that devours itself because it has no reversibility, because it cannot call the code as such into question. There is a limit that cannot be crossed: all of the communication that you mention moves through technological devices. Their formulas, their essences cannot be modified. Language by contrast is a form and one can play with forms. The same is true of masks and that is why I see a distinction between masks and spectrality. Whereas the technical prostheses on which all modern communication relies cannot be changed in their essence, in their very technicity.

You seem to be looking for the infraction in multiplication, speed, instantaneity, or infinite virtuality. In the end, it does not matter. It is merely the infinite reduction of the same. In other words, the medium comes first. But there may be possible infractions, transgressions of the code.

Marc Guillaume: I was looking for the infraction in the fact that, from the start, there is a kind of artificial strangeness. One speaks with someone who is a pure stranger. The artificial stranger encountered on a screen is Simmel's ideal type, someone who hardly exists for the Other and can still be turned into a confidant or even an accomplice. This operative coalescence can occur through (technical or social) codes that are like games, "coups" carried out in language, even if these coups are computer-assisted.

2

The Other, Somewhere Else

Marc Guillaume: Let us now explore a form of exoticism called geographic exoticism. What is left of exoticism on a planet that, after offering very diverse, real or legendary models of alterity, now seems closed, incapable of producing an unknown, be it unknown lands or truly different social models? When the era of barbarians and savages came to an end, the Earth became round, voyages stopped and tourism began: the era of traveling in charted territory was born. The transition from one era to the other gained speed and came to a close in the 18th century. The time of industrialization gave rise to the ideology of the scarcity of goods and, finally, the Other became scarce. Like all scarcity, it is betrayed by a contrary symptom: the taste for exoticism. The word "exoticism" itself was coined in the 19th century. Interest in the productions and customs of distant peoples existed long before that time, starting with the period of exploration, but the 19th century saw the first widespread expansion of exotic inspiration in literature and art. I see it as a terminal sign of the decline of the presence of the Other.

At this turning point, around 1900, Victor Segalen wrote a book on exoticism that is full of suffering. It is not even a book, just the outline of a book, a journal of sorts, a declaration of intent, a sketch, notes. It takes its source in his disgust with ordinary exoticism

and his disdain for tourism and fake explorers. Segalen sees fake adventurers everywhere and tries to offer an original take on approaching the Other.

By starting our discussion of exoticism with Segalen, we follow in Jean Baudrillard's footsteps. I would even say that things have deteriorated since Segalen's first observations.

Our relationship to the Other, be it another country, race or sex, has completely changed. There are no more symbolic confrontations regulated by religion, rituals or taboos, for example. There is no longer a real threat of destruction: "If you are not like me, I will exclude you or kill you." Western societies have, on the contrary, reduced the reality of the Other through colonization and cultural assimilation. They therefore reduced the elements of radical heterogeneity or radical incommensurability that existed in the Other.

In a world of relative material abundance, we could say that there is a real scarcity of alterity. Perhaps the only way to fight this scarcity is to invent a *fiction of the Other*. Let me offer an example of this kind of oscillation between real scarcity and fictional compensation. The Marquis de Sade's work can serve as an example from fiction. When something becomes scarce, what does Sade do? He invents the sovereign hero, an absolute Other who in his solitude replaces and, since it is fiction after all, surpasses the sovereign of the Old Regime. The sovereign of the Old Regime was a man who possessed exorbitant rights by proxy because of his symbolic status. At least one could make that hypothesis. He also had sexual rights (as king or lord) that were exalted in Sade's fiction.

This idea—which is not mine—implies that at the moment when the real sovereign disappears, he is replaced by a being emerging from pure literary fiction. Of course, literary fiction has a great deal of

freedom. It can explore without the weight of responsibility but it cannot support true exoticism without an object.

Surpassing scarcity through fiction is therefore a wrong direction, a dead end for creating exoticism. And one cannot fight the scarcity of the Other effectively without building what I call "combinatory fictions": something *constructed* from a certain reality and then given a dose of imagination and fiction. One source could be history, which is probably the greatest reservoir of exotic combinatory fictions. When objective alterity is gone, these combinatory fictions built out of the past could feed the need for exoticism through a kind of historical tourism.

Let us examine combinatory fictions from geographic sources in more detail. These fictions are constructed from what geography offers us in terms of the cultures and peoples on the planet. They exalt alterity and more precisely, they are specific to the ones who produce it. (In the same way, each new era builds the hybrid past that suits it from the traces of previous eras).

Using the reservoir represented by all of the different cultures is not easy. Its nature is also mixed. For example, you cannot invent a totally imaginary Morocco. Nor can you take an ethnographic position and develop precise descriptions of reality. What is interesting is to see how reality has been altered at different times in the search for alterity.

Most of the attempts that have been made, most of the travelogues now available are of little interest, except for those concerning Japan. I would even venture that Japan is distinct. But in my construction through a combinatory fiction, the Japan in question is neither an imaginary Japan—in which no one would be interested—nor the real Japan, which is inaccessible. The combinatory fiction is somewhere between the two. I am nonetheless obliged to

hint at the type of epistemological question used as a starting point: something like the role of a psychoanalyst who cannot eliminate the patient's singularity and who cannot treat him or her without a minimum of scientific criteria. This is the "in-between" position I have in relation to Japan. I can only treat this country as a reservoir and will try to show it is unique in its malleability and its capacity to serve as an image that is truly in a relationship of alterity with us.

One might think that I am just following fashion since many people in many countries have produced texts—of varying quality—about Japan. Its social and economic organization, its technology, its history, its culture, and many other distinct aspects, which are more often appreciated by Westerners than in Japan proper, have fed a great number of fictions.

There is the specialist's Japan, the "Japan of the senses" to borrow Pierre Sansot's expression for France and all those who inhabit it. There are literary Japans, "ideogram Japans" like stereotyped blocks that serve as a model or counter-model, most notably for its economy and its social relations. But I will not approach it from this level, which is the ordinary reservoir that applies to any country.

There is more. The specificity of the Japan reservoir comes from this very surplus. The same type of fascination may have existed before for countries like the USSR, the United States and China, that were the stereotype of an upcoming revolution, an advancement to strive for or a model to follow. This fascination still remains with Japan and this general, lasting, compulsive and emotional fascination can be seen as an important symptom. If we know how to read and interpret this fascination, we might discover the hopes and anxieties of our civilization. And this leads us to a question that is implicit in everything we have discussed until now: What is alterity? Why do we need it?

I will try to show that there is a kind of core to what we are, something radically different lying behind the stereotypes. And by demonstrating it, I hope to determine how we construct it in a certain way. In other words, alterity is constructed more than it is discovered. It leads us down a path to the riddle: "What do we care about the Other?" Until now, there has been ordinary alterity and radical alterity. You may have wondered from the beginning why we are interested in others, what purpose it serves. We could have approached that question directly from a philosophical or psychoanalytical or other perspective but we did not. I hope that, in a heuristic manner, we will see that the object of our search has a certain structure. That is the goal.

Like chemists, we must therefore isolate the few consistent archetypes that combine to form the countless imaginary Japans that vary according to country, person, or point of view. Given the vast number of possible combinations, I will look for the basic elements, the carbon and oxygen that will lead us to all the molecules. I propose four archetypes. The first archetype is called the *apocalypse*. Japan draws on the archetype of the apocalypse for the simple reason that Japan sees its recent history as a new era of civilization, the era when nuclear holocaust is hovering at the edge of total annihilation: even though it is still a kind of fiction, the nuclear apocalypse became possible.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki symbolize a potential apocalypse for the entire planet. They also symbolize the possibility of surviving the nuclear threat and surviving under a permanent threat given the country's quick recovery after the catastrophe and the desire to memorialize the event to keep it from happening again. The threat reflects what Freud wrote at the end of *Civilization and its Discontents*: "Men today have pushed their mastery over the forces of

nature so far that with their help, they can easily annihilate each other down to the last man. They know it and it explains much of their present unease, unhappiness, and worry."

After the observation that the earth is round, the observation here concerns temporal finitude. We can end our existence. This feeling of finitude also produces the scarcity of the Other. Just as the earth is round, it is also finite in time. Thus Japan represents the possibility of a transgression against this finitude, of living beyond, with the threat. The mixture of reality and projection, of our own anxieties over finiteness and our will to survive with the thought of this finitude form the first element of a combinatory fiction.

This vision of Japan sanctions apocalyptic thought or thought that foresees the apocalypse and considers going beyond it. For example, Jean-François Lyotard often speaks metaphorically about the four and a half billion years left for humanity because in (approximately) four and a half billion years, the Sun will explode. He states that this apocalyptic thought allows us to explore a certain metathought, since, necessarily, we are finite, if we want to survive, we have to think about going beyond our thought. He uses the example of the anthill destroyed by a passing foot.

Japan brings us more concretely closer to what Lyotard finds in the Sun and its finiteness. That is apocalyptic thought.

Jean Baudrillard: When Canetti analyzed the nuclear explosion in Hiroshima, he made the same comparison, saying that the disaster resulted from bringing the Sun to Earth. At that point, the bomb becomes the metaphor for this real, future event.

Marc Guillaume: Canetti provided the connection between Lyotard, Freud and Japan. He wrote that Hiroshima was the most

concentrated disaster ever to strike human beings that was calculated and caused by other human beings. "Nature" is not to blame. Hiroshima is not Pompeii.

He added, about a doctor who kept a diary in the devastated city (from August 6 to September 30, 1945) and who was trying to survive and maintain the values of traditional Japan, that the Japanese people had never seemed so close, as if extreme despair allowed one to experience the Other as oneself.

The second component is *technological evasion*. The connection between technology and alterity comes once again through Freud. At the beginning of *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud quotes the poet Grabbe who said, "Clearly we will never fall out of this world. If we are here, it is once and for all." And he sees this sadness and loneliness in the absence of another world as the source of religious feeling. Finiteness, the impossibility of leaving the world.

Alterity is basically the other way of thinking by refusing to think in terms of finiteness. Technology offers a way to fall out of the world, to think another world, to create an other-world simulacrum.

The technology of the 1960s, particularly as represented by the American dream, could be a symbol for today's Japan. It was, to use Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni's words, "an astronaut's dream." It was the direct path out of the world by conquering the near-by suburb of outer space. But it was a relatively weak dream and only distracted the world from its finiteness for a short time.

What we can imagine about technological Japan at present opens a much broader perspective. Japan, in reality, has an advance over the rest of the world in its progress into cutting-edge technology, especially in information technology, the synthesis of the signs, communication and bioengineering. It produces artifacts, simulacra

and automatons that give the illusion of circumventing reality and its constraints (time, space, the body). It appears to eliminate slowness, distance, and ultimately identity. In the end, it is a "rapture," an escape from the world, an escape from reality suggested in the escape from meaning. In particular, the development of artificial intelligence fascinates us and threatens to unveil, and therefore disenchant, the last *terra incognita* we have: the functioning of our brain and our thought.

The proximity of artificial intelligence to these remaining unknown worlds, however, is more imaginary than real. We have explored little of the way our heads work. We began with the unconscious, which allowed Freud to note a third humiliation (the subject is not the master of his or her house), but conscious thought remains a mystery.

Thus technological Japan represents a real astronaut's dream that both fascinates us and strengthens our fear of finitude. It is ambivalent: Japan shows that the world is finite and that it could be opened. The apocalypse is the presence of the end but we can survive it. Technological Japan extends Heidegger's question concerning technology: we not only question nature but we question humanity as well. Japan demonstrates this and at the same time suggests that, after all, it is not that bad and we can survive.

From this point of view, there is a Japanese strategy of acculturation that reveals its fascination with escape and stability, with human attachment to the world. An example would be the World's Fair that was held in Tsukuba. Its theme: the most futuristic technology is not opposed to nature, culture, or art; it continues them. One image that appeals to the Japanese and also to Westerners is the image of the *garden of accumulated technology*, a place where hope for the dialectical reversal called for by Heidegger can grow. A

reversal where technology, in deploying its frenetic energy, reveals its own essence which is not very distant from art or poetry.

Tsukuba was Heidegger's dream of dialectical reversal incarnated and on display. It was a simulacrum of birds singing in the trees, or to caricature it, Heidegger's dream as seen through the eyes of Walt Disney. The world is finite, technology has questioned human kind and at the same time, we want to think that it is not so bad, that we can handle the inspection.

We now come to a more important subject and to Kojève, who will be our guide. Kojève dismayed French intellectuals of the 1930s with his reading of Hegel focused on the Hegelian end of history. Jean-Marie Besnier's book, *La Politique de l'impossible*, demonstrates the effects of this dismay on someone like Bataille while explaining Kojève's corrosive effect on the intelligentsia of the time.

When working for the OECD (the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), Kojève traveled to Japan on a mission in 1959. There, he underwent a conversion. He betrayed himself, and his betrayal took the form of a note published in the second edition of *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. The two-page note was the only one he added, giving it even more importance. If you publish a new edition of your book after fifteen years and only add one note, then everyone rushes to read the note. The first edition was published in 1939; the second in 1968.

The note is far from negligible. It expresses a kind of conversion or a betrayal of the despair he had professed for more than a decade. In fact, it is not exactly a note added to the text but a note prolonging a note already present. In the note, Kojève confirms the end of history in a brief summary of the despair mentioned above: "Several comparative trips to the United States and the USSR between '48 and '58 have left me with the impression that the

Americans appear to be rich Sino-Soviets because the Russians and Chinese are merely poor Americans, who are nonetheless rapidly becoming rich. I was led to conclude that the *American way of life* was the type of life appropriate to the posthistorical period with the current status of the United States in the world foreshadowing the eternal future of all humanity. Humanity's return to animality appeared less like a possibility yet to come than an already present certainty."

We can admit that ordinary people in American society or the Hegelian end of history, even if they do not recognize it, vaguely sense the fact that a functionalist, utilitarian world is a closed world, one that no longer solicits the specifically human trait of surpassing, of negating that which is. Thus the end of history provokes the dismay that Lyotard refers to in relation to a postmodernity that is merely the extension and not the surpassing of modernity.

From his position as a philosopher and his bureaucratic and economic observations in China, the USSR, and the USA, Kojève simply stated: "You see, the end of history is not only predictable, it is already here." And I think that corresponded to what ordinary people could already sense.

But then the note on the note becomes more interesting: "After a recent trip to Japan (1959) I had a radical change of opinion on this point. I saw a society that is unique in its way because it is the only one to have experienced almost three centuries of living in an end-of-history period, in the absence of any civil or exterior war. The lives of the Japanese nobles who stopped risking their lives, even in duels, without working, were nothing less than animal. The post-historical Japanese civilization is now following a path that is diametrically opposed to the American way. But *snobbism*, pure snobbism created disciplines that negated the natural or animal given, that were far more efficient than those that arise from historical

action in Japan or anywhere else, which are revolutionary and armed struggles or forced labor. Of course the unequaled summits of specifically Japanese snobbery like Noh theater, the tea ceremony and the art of flower arranging are and remain the sole privilege of the rich and noble. But despite persistent economic and social inequality, all Japanese without exception are now able to live according to completely formalized values, emptied of any human content in the historical sense. Thus, each Japanese person could in principle commit, out of pure snobbism, a perfectly *gratuitous* suicide. The classic samurai sword could be replaced by an airplane or a torpedo, which has nothing to do, I would add, with risking one's life in a combat based on historical values with social and political content. This leads me to believe that the recent interaction started between Japan and the Western world will in the end lead to a Japanization of the West and Russia rather than a rebarbarization of the Japanese."

When Kojève wrote this passage in 1959, he was just discovering Japan and was still in shock so we should show some leniency when reading it. There are some lyrical passages, much exaggeration and it may make us smile. A Japanese person today could tell us that not all Japanese are ready to commit a perfectly gratuitous suicide out of pure snobbism. But this is one of the rules of the game. I said that we were in the realm of hybrid fiction and the same is true for Kojève. With Hegel in his head, he wanders through Japanese terrain and has a way of viewing Japan that is his own fiction: some reality but also the projection of his twenty-year anxiety. To paraphrase roughly what he said: can a world remain human and avoid becoming animal while accepting the end of history? Without exploring this end of the world's historical transformation? This part of the note becomes more complicated because it is very compact.

Can we imagine a world that finally goes beyond the end of history but remains human, a transhistorical world that stays human? At a more philosophical level, the problem is the same here as for technology and the apocalypse. Can we go beyond the apocalypse? Can we go beyond the questions of technology? Can we go beyond the end of history and still remain human?

Leaving aside the excessive or even comic aspects of Japan's sudden appearance in Kojève's work, we can see how he finds the hole, the possibility for survival in the term "snobbism." Personally, I would have used the word "dandyism" since Kojève's word can lead to confusion. Snobbism is commonly understood as a forwarding of subjectivity in its singularity. I think the Japanese formalism Kojève is referring to is more of an underidentification, a retreat of the subject into codes like the forms of politeness. The common meaning of "snobbism" is therefore inappropriate and unfortunate since it leads in the wrong direction. What Kojève is saying—and what Barthes will later use—is that the subject retreats into the rules of the game. The rules of the game come first.

With this precision concerning the word "snobbism," we can posit that the fascination with Hegel is also built on a double image of Japan. Once again, we encounter the aggravation of dead-ends and the possibility of going beyond them.

The first image is of a world that accompanies and even precedes the industrial West with surprising efficiency in its historical action of conquest and economic development. As such, and depending on the point of view, it appears as either a model to imitate or as an illustration of the limits and failures of society. At the same time—second image—it represents a world that follows its own secular path on a different and more or less cryptic level. This path includes the ideal of a formalism relieved of all content and even freed from

the psychology of the subjects that follow it. This image inspired Barthes in his fiction of Japan. Barthes, at the beginning of the *Empire of Signs*, said that he experienced the realization that the structure of our society, especially in terms of signs, was not the only one possible and was not unsurpassable. He found that Japan allowed one to envisage a symbolic system that had nothing to do with what he called the Western semiocracy based on the imperialism of meaning. In an interview published in *The Grain of the Voice*, Barthes stated: "Like many of us, I deeply refuse my civilization, it is nauseating. This book expresses the absolute demand for the total alterity I now need."

The empire of signs for Barthes and for all of those who dream of escaping a world saturated with meanings finds its power in the emptiness of signs. It is basically a removal of subjective content in a world of pure formalism. All of Barthes's work as a literary critic comes from that perspective.

The fascination with formalism that inspired Barthes is the same fascination that inhabits most Japanesque practices when combined with the *American way of life.*

The possibility for difference would take the form of replacing reality with a rule, the rule of a game or of writing, which brings us closer to the realm of seduction. What fascinates Kojève, Barthes and many of us, even when we seem to be indulging in cheap exoticism, is a world *where the rule is preferred to reality.* Who cares if ordinary Japanese people do not commit suicide? What fascinates us is that ordinary Japanese people think it is possible. We do not think so because we never massively invented a world where everyone prefers the rule to reality. And the Japanese may still think a world is possible where everyone thinks: "I prefer the rules of the game, life on this earth based on rules, existence as a game (whose rules I

might even be able to change) rather than leaving it up to the vagaries of historical evolution based on conquest." In this sense, it is a world of seduction.

Jean Baudrillard: Where is the seduction?

Marc Guillaume: Imagine a group of children who go into a corner and say, "Let's play!" You either accept it or you don't. If you agree to play, you are seduced. You replace reality with the game. Seducing means captivating, subordinating reality to formalism.

Jean Baudrillard: We could replace "reality" and "game" with two other words: law and rule. Perhaps seduction comes from no longer recognizing the authority of the law or from moving everything from the realm of law, or the reality principle, the economic, moral, political, historical, etc. principle to something arbitrary like the rule. The seduction is simply that we have gotten rid of the law, which happens with many other things, like games. But the fact that there is a transmutation that makes us pass to the other side of the law is a way of showing that it is possible to live as the image of the Other, somewhere other than in the law, on the other side.

Marc Guillaume: The added note displays clear ingenuity, like the echo of his joy in finding the way to survive beyond the apparent end of history. Kojève drove his listeners to dismay, especially Bataille who wrote him feverish letters and spoke of "things without us" to overcome his despair, "things" which were on the side of games rather than the law. Fifteen years later, Kojève passed through the looking glass of the law in these few lines.

I will conclude with a fourth stereotype, which is more concrete, called *interior alterity*, for lack of a better term. It combines elements rooted in daily practices.

A text by Oscar Wilde led me to this idea of interiority which is also connected with Japan. In *Intentions* (1891), Wilde wrote: "And so, if you desire to see a Japanese effect, you will not behave like a tourist and go to Tokio. On the contrary, you will stay at home and steep yourself in the work of certain Japanese artists, and then, when you have absorbed the spirit of their style, and caught their imaginative manner of vision, you will go some afternoon and sit in the Park or stroll down Piccadilly, and if you cannot see an absolutely Japanese effect there, you will not see it anywhere."

This passage echoes Chris Marker who said that alterity is not a problem of distance but the passing of a frontier, and a frontier can be totally imaginary and invisible.

It is true that the image of Japan in the West came through art, literature and, somewhat later, film. Through this image, characteristics appeared that gave access to, for example, differences in sexuality and eroticism or to several particularities unique to Japanese culture. They can produce a kind of minimal Oriental exoticism like the one found in Pierre Loti's work, which leads to superficial exoticism and sometimes to something more profound. As an example, there are the almost inordinate repercussions the works of Tanizaki and Mishima have had in the West.

Tanizaki, for example, provoked a representation by Henry Miller that is simplistic but also exemplary. In his preface to *The Key*, Miller wrote, "I have a mixed reaction to Japanese art and literature. Sometimes I feel like what I am reading is happening on another planet or talking about a newly-discovered species. And sometimes I have the same feeling I had with China, that everything is familiar,

that what I see, hear and feel is the very expression of original man, the most human of all, the most universal of all the races on earth."

Japan is thus so far and so close in its literary fiction, as if it created a distortion in space. For the inordinate repercussions of some literary and cinematic works, I will use the example of Oshima's *Empire of the Senses* and the interesting analysis it inspired from Foucault.

The film ends with a scene that can be interpreted as a castration. For Foucault, it is not a castration at all and I believe he is correct since the man's penis belonged to both the woman and the man in the story; as an instrument of pleasure, it belonged to the woman more than to the man. The amputation of the penis is therefore not a castration, since it belonged to the woman more than to the man.

Foucault continues his remarks by making a major distinction between what he calls *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica*. And he says that there is only one country—another example of Kojève's exaggeration—that has not reduced sex to a science, that still has an art of eroticism like there was in Western antiquity (which might also be imaginary). You can see how a projection of representations by a Westerner gives Japanese reality the effect of being both closer and farther away.

In the foreignness, in the fascination for a different or supposedly other eroticism, it is important to highlight the role played by formalism. You could find abundantly detailed descriptions of this formalism. One description of this extreme form of formalism is in the "flower and willow world," the world of the geishas, which is dedicated to the aesthetics of seduction and the dandyism of love. Guillan's recent book, *Les Geishas ou le monde des fleurs et des saules* [Geishas, the World of Flowers and Willows] describes the formalism of this eroticism in minute detail.

You can see to what extent everything contained in this art is primarily a snobbism in Kojève's sense, a pure formalism. The question is still important because the point of sexuality is the point of ordinary, massive, interpsychological alterity and is therefore the laboratory where we can see if the Japanese have succeeded in resolving the question of the Other in terms of sexuality, where all of the psychological problems could arise. Have they resolved it through formalism once again? This is an important point.

In this case, I am not talking about a real Japan but a laboratory that we can construct to analyze how the question of alterity is resolved.

A final point: when you import all of these exoticisms and esotericisms, you have a boundless source of fragments. We can construct different kinds of hybrid monsters using these fragments. Japanese society itself offers an appearance of proximity to the West under a thin film of Americanization that combines with everything and coats in the *American way of life*. Under this film, however, something else fundamental remains very distant and very closed.

There is something truly monstrous in the Japanese hybrid: an appearance of proximity and a core that rejects this proximity. It allows, often with deceptive indulgence, a direct exportation of cultural traits shorn of their context but with a foundation of universal snobbism that partially, superficially and sometimes grotesquely allows Kojève's prediction to take shape.

The imaginary Japan that surrounds us retains a common core that appears to be a utopia, a navel or an umbilical cord for all possible cultures; the part of all cultures that cannot be analyzed just as Freud said it was impossible to speak of the umbilicus of dreams because it resists any attempt at interpretation. This umbilicus might

represent the pure exoticism that Segalen was looking for: "the acute and immediate perception of eternal incomprehensibility."

It is very close to Segalen, who wondered how he could avoid being caught up in the societies he encountered, how to avoid becoming Chinese in China. He noted that one effective method was to hate the Chinese, or not to live with them. He asked: "How do you keep your distance?" Thanks to the monsters listed above, the Japanese remain at a distance because an incommunicable core remains. And the proximity comes through the mediation of the Japanesque.

I therefore remain faithful to Segalen's proximity and distance approach since he said that true exoticism is based on a back and forth between recognizing the Other and returning to oneself.

A few concluding remarks. There is a point that has not been raised about Segalen until now. He clearly saw the problem of too much difference and in a way preceded and anticipated Marguerite Duras. In his *Essay on Exoticism*, he wrote, "Lovers would be horrified if they measured the unbreakable barrier that separates them even during strongest moments of shared passion, a barrier that will always divide them despite the apparent harmony of their unique joy." Marguerite Duras built her entire oeuvre around this kind of impossible community between lovers. And Segalen had already said it all.

He saw that too much difference makes the experience of alterity impossible. Only the back and forth movement provides some insight. Segalen warned us against superficial tourism and assimilation—the risk of too much proximity—but he also saw the risk that we would always be separated from the Other. He develops his thought on the impossible community by exploring the space between these two risks. His approach is therefore a *procedure*.

He was also fascinated by another approach that he called Bovarysm. The word has aged but I understand it as the idea that

an individual creates a hybrid fiction using his or herself. This means developing a fictional being using his or herself, like in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The real subject then appears as an Other for this fictional creature. Bovarysm is primarily an example of internal exoticism: I am caught in my own role and observe myself as an alterity; I create this distance inside myself.

Narcissism is an extreme case of Bovarysm. The subject creates an image that he or she ends up loving more than him or herself; the image kills the subject. Narcissism, as Clément Rosset remarked, often appears in people who do not like themselves enough. It is an illustration, on the internal level, of Segalen's approach to voyages as catastrophic. He saw voyages as artifacts that allow for an experience of alterity, a short-circuit that makes our attempts at alterity easier. We should add that the diversity of ancient times, of which Segalen regrets the decline, was not concretely or aesthetically perceptible. The world consisted of separate cultures that were relatively impermeable to exotic influences and there were hardly any "voyagers" to enjoy this diversity. This original exoticism is merely a virtual reconstruction.

Segalen's aestheticism appears strange: "Fundamentally, we need diversity, we need others because it pleases us, awakens our senses and the senses are life." We need to understand this sensualism. His response is aesthetic. He was passionate about paintings and he had a strategy of alterity in aesthetic pleasure. He did not want anything to do with the famous "correspondences" of the time—music relating to painting, etc. Segalen thought that music should be enjoyed in itself by separating all of the cultural elements. Taking pleasure in the aesthetic rule understood in its perfection and arbitrariness.

One of Segalen's contemporaries, with whom he is never associated, was Sacher-Masoch. In a certain way, he was another apostle

of sensualism. Masoch also engaged in an experience of exoticism. He constructed an object and a procedure for relating to the object. To construct tyrannical women, he took real women and gave them fictive roles that both increased their distance and brought them closer to his fantasies.

I once used the emblem of the "Japanese woman" to represent my approach to Japan, as an echo to Godard's film *La Chinoise* (1967). The "Japanese woman" was also a way to increase the alterity of Japan through the opposite sex. I think Masoch fabricated his own "Japanese women": tyrannical women, artifacts of his own creation and a way to tame women. Why? For the sensuality, for pure aesthetic pleasure. Masoch's wild aesthetics is in the end close to Segalen. And Masoch's internal voyage is not very different from Segalen's exotic voyages in China or Tahiti.

Jean Ba**udrillard**: My remarks will follow what you said about Japan since your analysis was very sound. In particular, it is important to circumvent the absolute misunderstandings that are so common with Japan despite the misunderstandings about mimeticism, imitation, the inability to create but great mimetic power. An absurdity that takes all of these forms.

The excursion into Japan might represent the ideal type of these allegorical voyages, a voyage that does not claim to capture reality. In the case of Japan in particular, for it would be a complete misinterpretation to look for reality in Japan if you want to use reality to grasp the game.

It is obvious that you must go there by going beyond this reality immediately, by passing into an allegorical projection, which is the best way to delve as far as possible into the knowledge of things while maintaining an allegorical distance from them. No

mixing, no promiscuity is the secret of Japan and the secret of exoticism in general.

Japan fully poses the problem because there has been more confusion about mimetism and imitation in terms of this country than any other. For us, mimetism and imitation are values that are criticized because they are not authentic, original, or creative. So we condemn the entire system of Japanese values into a monstrous subsidiary of Westernness. And we continue to do it today.

The secret lies elsewhere, in snobbism. I will use your first analysis of the exacerbated state of technology and the resolution of technology by passing beyond it. Being more technological than technology leads to a kind of resolution of the principle of technology or the principle of technological reality. Japan goes beyond the reality of technology into a kind of hyperreality but also into an exterritoriality of technology that almost frees us from it.

Another way to see how it goes beyond is through snobbism. Personally, I think the analysis of the snob is very close to any analysis of the dandy. You said that the snob is more subjective. I disagree. A snob does not claim any universality and has no interiority in principle. For a snob, there is no psychological interiorization of values, signs, or forms; there is only affectation.

Affectation is the snob's quality. There is also a pejorative nuance concerning affectation in Heidegger's book. When taken literally, however, it is the sense of artifice of the artificial. There is no origin, no authenticity, no profound reality of things. Everything is formalized, seduced in the sense of being removed from its reality, its substance and its rules.

We can come back to the point that Japan might serve as an example to every other culture than ours, and maybe even to American culture. It would be a curious and paradoxical turn of events.

The fact that all of these cultures, unlike ours, are not "affected" by the virus of origins and authenticity. And Japan is not made for that virus. All of its writing and religion come from somewhere else; nothing comes from itself, from its being, its essence. That is our Western prejudice.

There, they recognize and take into account the fact that everything comes from somewhere else but that it is not really important. It is not borrowing but transferring things and enjoying the total freedom and much greater power that arise when the virus or the debt of the origin is absent. These cultures, and Japan most of all, are cultures of hospitality, not imitation. As though hospitality were given to anything that comes, including technology, capital, etc. It is snobbism in the sense that we have the impression that Japan is offering itself the luxury of technology, the luxury of modernity but a technology without deterritorialization.

For us, technology finds its reality principle in deconstructing territories. They can absorb anything because they are already on the other side. They can absorb the organless body of capitalism and the West without breaking their own secret codes, rules and rituals.

It is therefore something that lays no claim on universality in the Western sense but can accommodate, absorb and assimilate everything almost cannibalistically, transforming the appearance of everything. It is also seduction, the possibility of playing with signs, not in the universal sense but signs as signs. Barthes explained this phenomenon well in *The Empire of Signs*: the possibility of playing with and transforming the appearance of everything. Therein lies the secret of seduction and, in this sense, Japan made a wish that it can fulfill.

All primitive cultures act the same way. They integrate elements of Western culture like objects, signs and forms. They recycle them

in their ritual circulation and cycles. Most of them do it out of desperation and poorly, because they are forced into it. But all cultures swallow the West in one way or another and there is something irreducible here that we are just starting to measure.

Japan is even more extraordinary because it has transformed the finest and most sophisticated product of Western culture: progress, technology, modernity. Japan is able to transform this technology and its essence and concept, capital, into pure strategy, games, and affectation.

Segalen spoke of this form of radical exoticism. We could try to look for it in primitive cultures with the idea that it may have resisted there. It is a much weaker form of resistance to say: "They are basically able to preserve themselves, there is a core that remains; however, this increasingly rare radical exoticism will one day be destroyed. Voyages are a desperate enterprise that will be lost." Segalen sometimes shared this vision and it is correct. Yet Japan is a counterexample because its radical exoticism was able to pass through the most crucial and determinant test of modernity and continue on after the test. It is truly something extraordinary.

The secret may lie in the fact that Japan has no illusions about its own authenticity, its own desire, or its own origins. With a fantastic modesty, it secretly thinks that everything comes from the outside, that nothing is proper to it, that there is no being in itself. This position gives them power over everything through its total flexibility. Fundamentally, the secret of alterity is to think that everything comes from the outside.

We in the West are doomed to think that everything comes from us and to feel guilty for it. Accepting responsibility for everything that happens to us is our ailment, our sad destiny, and the sad destiny of the West.

Can we talk about sexuality the way that you suggest? I am not sure. It is, however, obvious that, contrary to our own sexuality, their sexuality is not found in the realm of the proper, profound and authentic desire of an individual. It is more the demand to do it, to accomplish it. Perhaps the same principles apply to it and it also comes from the outside. Sexuality as an interiorized desire has an unhappy fate: repression. Alterity repressed within ourselves that we have not been able to treat or transform because it burdens us; there is confusion between us and us at that moment.

The principle of the Other has disappeared. Consequently, we have lost the possibility of keeping the Other as an Other, or the other sex as an other sex. In sexual liberation, we find ourselves involved in promiscuity. That does not mean it is nothing but that it is destined for a sad fate from the start because it is short-circuited by psychological interiority.

The same is not true of Japan, or at least of the model Japan we have constructed. There is the possibility that the Other remains the Other of the other sex. At that moment, sexuality appears to be less the accomplishment of a desire than a rite, a service, like the figure of the geisha who is much more distant and does not obstruct any exacerbated sexuality.

The distance from the Other remains. That is the principle of exoticism according to Segalen: keep your distance. Curiously, we would be tempted to enter the opposite form, which would be to go towards the Other, to assimilate or even play with difference to a certain degree and following a global and universal principle. That is the Other as Other. There is no universal, there is an Other, there is some Other. Keeping this situation is an impossible task for us because we are destined for the trials of interiority. Japan appears

to be a fantastic example of this possibility. It seems—at least we can hope—indestructible.

After our detour through Japan, which is the strongest model, I think the same analysis can be used for every culture besides our own. It may even apply inside our culture. Kojève's distinction between Americans and Japanese in terms of their concept of things is true. But it may not be that simple and there may be something like an eternal incomprehensibility, as Segalen said, that includes our relationship to the American mode, as long as we do not take it as reality either. That is the problem. If we take the reality of things in an Americanized form, then the entire planet practically follows that form in terms of reality, in statistical terms. But that point of view is wrong.

Marc Guillaume: It is true that one can always find a point of view from which another culture appears incomprehensible, incommensurate to one's own. Japan does not have the monopoly on radical alterity in this respect. There are fictions of America, India, and North Africa among others that are just as enigmatic and captivating as the fictions of Japan.

But there are also times and spaces where these fictions become absolutely necessary and elicit extraordinary interest. At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century in Europe, India and its language, culture, religions and philosophy exercised a fascination on British, French, and German intellectuals that has completely fallen off today. Between 1800 and 1810, there is even a veritable passion for India in Germany in the works of Herder and Schlegel that casts a considerable shadow through Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (for this subject, see Roger Pol-Droit, *L'Oubli de l'Inde* [India Forgotten], 1989).

On two different and more diverse levels, Japan has replaced India in the Western imagination. The current mania for Japan can be explained by fictions that have a specific point of view on a question with which the West is currently obsessed: the end of History. There is no need to look for a good angle to find Japanese singularity, since Japanese reality, with hardly any need for interpretation, seems to illustrate our anxieties and our obstacles. Hiroshima and the new technologies that question nature, life, and humanity themselves encircle our horizon and find echoes in our recent history (Auschwitz and the technology of extermination). Japan seems at first glance to provide a Western, postmodern answer to these Western questions and concerns (more postmodern than the postmodern, a kind of pastiche); it offers both a progressive and regressive world. The Tsukuba exhibition was a scale model of this world. But if we look closer at its response, we can see that the apparent response was only a polite answer. To a question forced on it (war, technology, capitalism and the questions they bring were imposed on Japan), a question not framed in terms of its culture, Japan answers, as is its habit, in the terms of the Other (and in a way better than the Other). But at the same time, it responds with artificiality and its own fiction, its affectation, which astonish us.

Jean Baudrillard: The root is *faire*, to do or make. In the root of *faire*, there is the artificial and the fictive is not too far either.

Marc Guillaume: I don't think affectation has the same root.

Jean Baudrillard: In any case, there are derivations that partake of the seduction of language; we cannot escape them, they are part of the seduction of language. The term affectation, if we reread it in

these terms, renders the artificial or fictive quite well. There is in fact a possibility of getting away from the reality of things, from their meaning and their apocalypse. It is obvious that the linear principle of reality leads necessarily to an apocalypse at the end; there has to be an end. But a different principle, a principle of artificiality is something else. We can get out of it since even the apocalypse enters into it as an esoteric element. It would be interesting to develop this hypothesis since even affect is constructed—constructed in the sense of produced.

The apocalypse is the end of secrecy. Literally, it is the discovery, the revelation when everything is said. It is the end of metaphors and secrets. The nuclear bomb is the Sun cast on the Earth, or the end of the Sun as a metaphor, as distance. It is the Sun materialized on Earth: the end.

Let me return to one of the elements of snobbism since there is no correlation between signs and their meaning in snobbism. The snob—or the dandy—takes signs where he or she finds them; that is how snobs work and intensify signs. There is always a level of intensification that is almost a parody, an affectation. This is the problem of affectation: it implies an exacerbation but also a kind of liberation through the "more than," and not a catastrophe. There are no catastrophes in the "realm of the snobs." The rules of the game, of the game of signs, always come before real events. Even the apocalypse can enter into the general affectation, which is not particularly Japanese.

3

The Sidereal Voyage

Jean Baudrillard: We are exploring the theme of alterity through voyages and exoticism but it is necessary to understand that we are talking about countries and cultures. This type of transversality or exploration is metaphorical. It is a way to "stroll" through the Other, the foreign, and to test its strangeness, to see if it disappears, if it is recreated or if it reinvents itself. The voyage, in the largest possible sense of the world, is a means or a possible scenario in this discovery.

We have made liberal use of Segalen and we can still refer to him. It is better to have a single reference than several different ones, as long as the reference is a strong one. And this one is strong. Segalen spoke of exoticism, which was his objective, his aim. He wrote about voyages that, "to receive the shock of exoticism—and therefore foreignness—it is not necessary to resort to the outdated episode of a voyage, but the episode and setting of the voyage, better than any other subterfuge, allow the brutal, quick and pitiless head to head confrontation and better record each of its blows."

The voyage is thus another type of ruse. But it is the best suited ruse of them all. It simply requires that one not lose sight of the fact that it is not an ethnographic trip or a picturesque tour. One must not be fooled by the voyage, the country, the daily life or the picturesque existence of things, which would lead to exoticism

in the wrong sense of the word. "Not even by oneself," said Segalen. One cannot be fooled by a kind of identity or similarity with others. Such a game might be enthralling and very seductive but it is not the aim of this adventure.

For Segalen, and from my perspective, exoticism can be understood as a kind of fundamental law concerning the intensity of sensations, the exalting of the senses and life. The search it involves is much less defined. In Segalen's mind, it is a law. All men are subjected to the law of exoticism. There is a radical, fundamental foreignness that one must not try to eliminate in a general, picturesque fusion or confusion. The rule must be maintained.

Is the theory of exoticism that we are sketching here an ethics? An aesthetics? A philosophy? An art of living? A vision of the world? It is a little of all of these things. We see it as a curious and paradoxical hypothesis because it is fundamentally unavoidable. In principle, hypotheses are made to be disproved. This hypothesis, however, cannot be verified or disproved; it is a kind of destiny. In this sense, it is interesting, it is a source of pleasure because it is a source of seduction.

Beginning with the postulate that radical alterity cannot be found, reaching the goal is impossible from the start. That is why Marc Guillaume spoke of an impossible politics. In any case, finality is placed out of bounds. The search for the voyage, which is the metaphor for this, is also impossible. Segalen mentions this search: it is not an eternal truth; it is located in its time, its context. He writes that starting from the moment that the Earth was discovered to be a sphere and therefore closed on itself, it represented a kind of concentricness of things, which is the end of the voyage. There will never be another voyage in the finite sense of the term. There will be tourism, the idea of touring, of going around something, of circulation. But everything will start to turn on itself since, he says,

as soon as you move away from one point on a sphere you move towards it in the same movement.

Linearity and infiniteness are no longer possible. There is only circularity within a "kitsch" form in tourism that covers the entire planet. As a search for exoticism, the voyage will have to take this circularity into account. We are no longer in the age of the great voyagers who thought they were discovering something and discovered it. At that time, there were stakes and also a result. There was adventure and the unknown.

Today, we know we are in an orbital world, a world closed on itself. We have to follow the law of its concentricness; we cannot escape it. At the same time, we must seek radical exoticism, like Segalen said. In orbality, we must seek a kind of exorbitation or exorbitality that could break the flatness of eternal tourism.

In fact, there is a paradox of voyages. I am thinking of the other voyage people speak of, a voyage through drugs. This kind of trip is not outside the realm of alterity.

What happens during this trip? Drugs are a voyage. But they are a psychodramatic voyage, a mental theater. As a voyage, drugs are not eccentric or exotic; they have no Other and are completely self-enclosed. They are an implosion of the voyage, an involution that traverses itself in an orbit reduced to the head, mind and body of the drug user. In reality, this voyage only thrives on its own alterations. There are no others, only a series of extreme and vital internal alterations or interior alterities that keep the subject from breaking out of his or her own life. There is an involution to that life and subjection to one's own psychodrama.

This is the end of the centripetal—and not centrifugal—voyage: the implosive journey that ends in itself in a single point, but a point from which in theory everything else is given to you. Being

there is enough; everything takes place in the head and all cultures, visions and hallucinations are there, there is no need to move. The limit of the voyage is obviously here. It is also the limit of exoticism while at the same time its total contradiction and end.

In this dimension, in the metaphor of the ball or the Earth as a sphere, it is interesting that the more we explore its confines, the more we expand the circle of knowledge about different countries, the more the world shrinks. It is an inverse function: the more we extend the limits of knowledge, the farther we go in exploring the world, the more the world implodes and becomes orbital.

Segalen found that, like the drug trip, which is a total psychodramatic implosion, the Earth becomes smaller as we explore it more completely. The farther we push our discoveries, the more there is a kind of implosion that is the inverse destiny of exploration, the explosion.

Perhaps we could extend this image to another territory, the territory of the Other. We have all had problems communicating with others as human beings. Some have aptly stated that our true journey is the Other or others. In the end, the only voyage is the one made in relation to the Other, be it an individual or a culture. From this perspective, the more communication grows, the more we exchange with others, the more contacts and connections there are, the more we implode in on ourselves.

The subject of communication, if we can still speak of a subject, is a tiny point that governs all networks; it does this through the use of prostheses, obviously, screens and machines, and other technology. But at this point, it is a closed being, completely enclosed in its own screen and communicating with the entire world. The more communication becomes global, the more its epicenter is tribal, solipsistic and closed on itself.

The system of communication is dominated by a kind of paradox. There is a paradoxical law of communication, contrary to what one might believe, in the sense that with more communication and the multiplication of real exchanges, the exact opposite occurs.

For example, there could be an entirely communicative, imperative universe with atoms completely separated from each other, imploded in on each other. On the material scale of the planet, the more we explore the limits of the Earth, and as if by a kind of magic, the more it shrinks and becomes a kind of little ball. We must take this new dimension into account. It is an implosive dimension and certainly changes all of the laws, all the rules of the game, including our perceptions.

In his book *Us and Others*, which involves a voyage through literature, Todorov suggests a classification of travelers starting in the 19th century. After discussing Segalen, Chateaubriand and all of the great travelers, he lists ten categories of voyagers.

First, there is *the assimilator*. The assimilator travels to assimilate another culture, to convert it into reality. From Christian missionaries to contemporary Marxists, each traveler in this category is on an ideological, economic, or other mission. To a certain extent, colonists also seek a kind of assimilation or they are forced into assimilation out of necessity.

The profiteer. Profiteers are merchants. They travel without a relationship to the Other in his or her originality and authenticity. Profiteers are only the alibi of another law for the Other, the law of value, which is something else. They can be merchants and colonists as well since the categories can combine. But in principle, profiteers have no ideology to weigh them down. They travel, earn money, exploit, trade slaves.

The tourist. The third category is a complex one. Perhaps we will have the time to return to it. But we can have an image or intuition of it, even as a caricature since we have all participated in it at one time.

The impressionist voyage. This is the grand voyage of the 19th century, the one taken by Loti, Michaux and Barthes in Japan. During this voyage, intuition and sensibility or how one views a country play a greater role. Without saying that the subject is speaking, the voyager travels with his or her view of things. He or she does not claim to deduce any universal laws but enjoys the voyage. The traveler takes pleasure in difference and in that sense is impressionistic; he or she does not try to make things universal.

The assimilated traveler. As opposed to the assimilator, this voyager really penetrates a culture and adopts its way of life, like an immigrant. This voyager is no longer a voyager or quickly stops being one. The person may be an immigrant by force of circumstance or a voluntary immigrant but at some point, the question of the Other is no longer relevant because a kind of fusion occurs.

The exote. The exote is Segalen's traveler. Exotes keep their distance, they try to maintain the distance of foreignness while taking pleasure in difference. There is a strategy of delectation or seduction that leads to keeping a distance; one must not in this case try to enter, get mixed up with or lose one's identity. It is necessary to maintain a distance and develop tactics for this distance.

The exile. Exiles are another extreme of the voyage. They can include Descartes who lived almost his entire life outside France, notably in Holland.

Exile can be a charming situation or an unfortunate one (political or other exile). An important number of exiled writers, however, have found energy in distance, detachment and nostalgia, and have used it as creative inspiration. Take, for example,

Gombrowicz, who lived for twenty-five years in Buenos Aires. He set a standard for this type. Being deterritorialized in this way is a source of genius. If you do not lose yourself, therefore, you have a major advantage. To a certain extent, you have to be somewhere else to be truly alone. Which is another result of a strategy of exoticism.

The allegorist. Allegorists take foreign cultures and places as critical metaphors, they travel "metaphorically." They are never completely in the foreign country for itself; they are always in a critical relationship with their own culture. The other country serves as an allegory, a figure for forming a judgment and taking a distance from his or her own territoriality. Allegorists are intelligent voyagers but never decenter themselves. They remain centered in their own culture and keep their roots. They do not even exile themselves mentally but find a great complexity in their position.

One version of the allegorist is the disabused traveler who only travels to confirm the superiority of his or her culture over all others. Many French or American tourists only say one thing: how awful American culture is and no matter where they go they always see the same thing.

These tourists are to some extent excited to travel and discover new things but they do not play the game, they miss the exaltation of discovery. They only find a verification that home is the best place to be and that others really do have strange ways of doing things; that, in the end, the only real human beings are people like themselves. The topology of the disabused traveler is a centripetal discourse.

Todorov lists a final category, which he calls *the philosophical voyager*. His prototype is Montaigne. But this category is a bit idealistic. Philosophers are certainly universalists by trade. What interests them is difference in universality and they are not in

principle ethnocentric. This is an ideal type and one might wonder whether it exists. It aims to have the philosopher verify the infinite variety and differentiation of values, cultures and attempt to reconcile them in a universal vision of things.

Like all classifications—we'll come back to the exote because that category interests us the most—this one relies on a blind spot. Classifications never reveal anything but serve as tools. They often forget to include the most important things or leave something out.

This classification may have left out the type of travel today, the voyage in its most contemporary form, for us. It is not exactly an earthly voyage but a stellar one, without mentioning space travel or flights in space. These voyages are pure vectors: simply a question of movement, speed and circulation.

An extreme case is the example of the woman (true story) who spent her whole life or long periods of her life traveling. She never left the airport. She went from one airport to another, boarded one airplane after another and traveled around the world. She even died in an airport! She was traveling, she was in orbit. This is the orbital, spatial voyage that is completely deteritorrialized even in relationship to the planet and it causes strong sensations.

Air travel, long flights are orbital. If you fly from Los Angeles to Sydney, you are in a little world; the flight itself is a destination. It is the world of entering orbit, where one even loses the idea of coming down in the end. There is the idea of no return, of going into definitive orbit following a vector that is now one of the specificities of the voyage.

Of course you cannot discover anything other than the abstract, formal universe of speed, space, and time. In the moment of the voyage, your concentration is focused on space-time in a dimension with a relative connection to things. This kind of voyage

belongs to another context. It is more inhuman, and a little extraterrestrial. Its implications affect or contaminate all of the other types of voyages today. The reference for all other types of voyage may no longer be achieving a goal or getting to know people but displacement, pure and simple transfer-displacement.

Travel as machine-transfer: what is the Other of this kind of voyage, since we are still in the discourse of alterity?

There is no longer an Other, to be precise, but a kind of circulation or circumvolution since a long voyage always ends up circling the Earth in one way or another. The rhythm is no longer marked by discoveries or exchanges but by a kind of soft deterritorialization, a seduction through absence.

The voyage itself and therefore absence, which is also an absence to yourself, take charge. During the flight, you are in an airplane and you are no longer responsible for anything, including your own death. If death occurs, you have no responsibility at all, and this situation causes a very strong form of fascination, a secondary state that even translates into the body. Jet lag also causes a drugged, almost psychedelic state that could justify traveling in itself. Can we call it a voyage? I am not sure. It is an annihilation of your identity through longitude, latitude, altitude, and speed, none of which are dimensions traditionally sensed by the body. Bodies can get tired of this situation because they reach a point where they do not know where they are. An anamorphosis of the voyage occurs that is a distortion of the body but a delight for the mind.

In my view, this dimension is present in every voyage, even in the car trips you take to the coast. If you stay in your car on a highway for eight hours, it is the same thing as a flight, although on a smaller scale. It is a kind of orbiting that lasts as long as it lasts; it is a deterritorialization. And one pleasure we can look for today

is a completely unfinalized pleasure. Your destination could leave you bored for a month and perhaps the only transfiguring, illuminating moment will have been the vector, the vectorial parenthesis on the way somewhere.

Our relationship to others today, which can be a psychological, social or other relationship, might come from this transitive, transversal, vectorial dimension. We may only be circulating in the desire of others, in the relationship to others. We can imagine a strong relationship to others with its own desire, a discovery of the Other, affect and everything that could constitute passion with some intensity. And we can also imagine the Other simply as a place of deterritorialization. In that case, the Other exists but is made to be traveled through; we can live in the Other's desire but it is like an exile, another dimension and fundamentally holographic. It is almost a hologram at that moment through which you can pass.

You are always traveling but there is no more resistance or any landings. There is a constant deterritorialization with an obvious need to pass from one territory to another because this type of voyage consumes its own space; it needs constant renewal. And here, one's own desire and energy count less than the desire to be taken in charge by transfer-machines or vectors.

One might also wonder whether others are in fact in a psychological relationship. At this level, there is no psychology. The Other is a formal space, still present but made to be traveled through like a kind of airspace.

I am not sure how far we can get using this hypothesis by analogy to understand contemporary sexual relations. This now sexual planet, this psychological planet, this psychodrama of the Other is not made up of desiring machines anymore like Deleuze said, but of circulation, of an almost empty space.

Once again, we encounter a fascination through absence. This absence is always on the move, it is not a contemplation of absence. It has to work, to travel. There is no stopping point.

One can finally bring back the same transparent memories from the relationship to the Other, the relation to others as from the voyage. Alterity, in this case, is like a game of absence. The Other would be like a metamorphosis, an anamorphosis of your own form. The other sex would also appear as an anamorphosis of the Other but not exactly in a strong duality.

The same can be found in the category of the allegorist. Allegorists see travel as a type of sport. They travel to rid themselves of their own culture. This is an essential point. It is hygienic to simply shed one's own culture, which may be quite rich and complex. It is yours but for that very reason, it is urgently necessary to distance yourself radically from it at some point. That may be the secret pleasure of a voyage, not in enrichment from others but simply in shedding your self, sloughing off a truly heavy weight.

Clearly, you can enjoy all of the positive aspects of your own culture, but you also absorb all of its stupidity; you are much more sensitive to it than in other cultures. So it always feels good to get away from your culture.

Imagine yourself in a desert in the United States. At that moment, the depth of European culture cannot come through, it evaporates, it vanishes; and this pleasure is part of the sensation of the desert itself. The sensation is spatial, physical, and, in some way, mental, in the sense that it is a radical evacuation of all of the heaviness, weight, and inertia of your own culture.

You can practice this anywhere, not only in the desert. You could experience it in a city or somewhere else, the main thing being that the place itself does not provide this radical foreignness

but allows you to take in a minimum of estrangement from your own origins. I would say that it is an essential practice. It is something that what we can apply to Segalen in his concept of exoticism, one of the seductions of exoticism.

This form of expulsion and escape from oneself and from one's own desire is stronger today than the voyage of discovery or the classic voyage.

Why do we travel today? There is no more universal in the proper sense of the term. There is not exactly any possible synthesis of experience through traveling.

Of course, all of that continues to exist. It subsists even now in the aesthetic aspect of voyages, but these categories are less important than the ones that tend to make one's own culture reversible, to allow divestment, an escape from one's own space and one's own space-time. A voyage of escape that makes everything reversible or versatile or transparent.

It is the voyage of the Age of Aquarius; no longer a territorial or even planetary voyage but a versatile circumvolution that helps you escape the illusion of intimacy, privacy, identity, territoriality and everything that forms a very strong system of values but that is now severely called into question. Which leads us back to what we said about Japan.

Let us return to one of our categories, which we have been discussing from the beginning: the exote. This funny word is used by Segalen. We are going to see whether it still has a place, whether the exote, exoticism, the search for radical exoticism and foreignness is possible in this new dimension of the voyage, even though this new dimension is prototypical. In a way, it is behind all kinds of voyages and it constitutes, virtually, the dominant dimension corresponding to a passage into transparency, communication, the

circulation of everything, the orbality of things and everything that relates to it, including sexual relations.

If the voyage falls into this orbit, can we keep the radical demand of exoticism that Segalen speaks of in the collimator?

I think so. We have already discussed Japan. We spoke of a transhistorical country subject to the transhistorical technology of circulation. And yet this country remains in the realm of the eternal incomprehensibility that Segalen mentioned. Now everything is changing, being modelized, evaporating but it remains an impenetrable mystery. And we are well obliged to think that even the Japanese themselves have nothing to say about it. They have been asked, but they cannot divulge the secret because there is nothing to divulge. There is just impenetrability, an incompatibility that, for Segalen, was an essential source of energy.

If this impenetrability and incomprehensibility end, if we are able to resolve all differences into a kind of universal plasma, the energy runs out, the charm disappears, the living stops. So it is good that it is the way it is and there is no need to seek out the neutralization of differences or neutralization through difference.

For Japan, we will draw no conclusions but we can still see that, even at the height of a technological, contemporary civilization, there is a kind of absolutely blind or empty core corresponding to what Barthes described as the "empty signifier." In Japanese civilization, there is always an underlying empty zone around which things are organized. We cannot decipher or interpret it, which is a good thing. We can of course find metaphors of this kind of exoticism in other countries.

Take Australia, for example, for the fabulous imaginary power of the antipodes. The Earth is a sphere but it nonetheless has two halves, and the antipode is not only a kind of opposite pole, but a

completely different world. Does the difference come from culture, geography, or magnetism? No one knows, but you can feel it strongly.

The feeling is not as strong in Latin America. In Australia, besides the fact that it is a country where all of the flora and fauna are different, time is not the same, with an extraordinary slowness of things and animals that is not laziness. You have the extraordinary feeling of being at the antipode, a southern hemisphere that does not correspond to the same mental or gyroscopic laws.

The antipode is simply an effect of displacement. You pass a line, the Equator, which wants to be the line of equivalency and measure, but you find yourself in a world beyond equivalency, beyond correspondences and differences, beyond all of the things through which you can interpret a culture as different from your own, but that you can try to understand because difference is made to be understood.

Here, there is more than a difference. There is a kind of destabilizing power that is something else and that corresponds to the most intense phase of a voyage. And these grand voyages in space were the high period of travel in South America, and the high period of the Other when it broke into the world in its antipodal form, radically foreign, from beyond.

After that period, as we have said, there is the period of comprehension, recognition of the Other, exploration and domestication of this foreignness. But the moment of the eruption of alterity is the sublime moment. And for those who lived it, it must have occurred during the 18th century or perhaps a little sooner. Arriving in a new land is a moment now lost, but a moment that would have captured the joy of exotic travel as Segalen saw it.

That moment was a privileged moment. It was all downhill from there; we fell into the voyage. One could feel this foreignness everywhere. We saw it in Japan, we found it in Australia in a more naturalist form because it is inscribed in the geography of the antipode. We could find it in every country, including North America, the United States or even, I think, in our own culture. It is a distinct problem to know whether it is still possible to travel in one's culture like traveling in a strange new place.

I believe it is possible and that is where we depart from the ethnology we discussed at the beginning. Our approach here is the opposite of the ethnological enterprise. We are not trying to create a world of conciliation and recognition. In that case, on the contrary, one tends to return to one's own culture to reinvent it and explore its foreignness. We have the exact opposite stance: not reducing exoticism but inventing it, creating it or finding it if it still exists. This endeavor is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the social sciences.

I will add a few ideas about the United States. The same principle of the voyage, and not the voyage of recognition, can be found in going to seek the American dream, American life with its problems, contradictions and its real substance, the one we more or less know but is easily accessible.

I wanted to go there in a sidereal way. My first choice of a title was "Sidereal America," which means following a rule, keeping a distance. I am not addressing the reality of America; besides, what use is there in describing the reality of America since it is illustrated and described much better in American films and novels.

We must play with distance and foreignness like Segalen said. We have to accept this rule of the game, this illusive utopia of the emancipated. We will never be American just as we will never be

Bororo. You will never know the reality of a primitive society. Even the ethnologists who might claim to know it or who have sometimes tried to join in or merge with this strange reality are merely living a nice fantasy.

We have to keep this sidereal distance and not play the little game of difference and resemblance but try to see America—or anything else—as strange. At that moment, North America appears. It has been said that it is a part of our culture, despite its disproportionate size, that it is a stereoscopic magnification of European values and cultures. In my opinion, if you travel like that, America is a radically strange object completely distant from Europe.

It is a fiction. I will not say whether it is true or not but normally you construct a fiction of your voyage on a foundation of foreignness. Barthes did it with Japan. He said that he saw signs, signifiers that he could not understand. He assembled them and gave his vision of Japan in terms of something that completely escaped him but that carried the charm of a secret.

From this point of view, a country that appears close like North America but is radically foreign in its modernity will always escape us as Europeans. If you take it as a whole, North America looks like a mutant object. If you dig into its phenomenological details, you find that it is not. You can find many things and the voyage can become a game of discovery.

You can have the impression of transfiguration—which is a true impression—in deserts and towns, a feeling of mutation, of finding yourself suddenly in a new world, not only a transatlantic world but on another mental orbit. That is why I compared America to a primitive society. The Americans were not pleased. For me, calling it primitive meant giving it the most distance: a

primitive society of the future, which also means something in terms of the truth that escapes us. The intensity comes from the fantastic distance separating the two cultures. I think that the American order or orders, the American state of things is fantastically different from our own. And all of the people who travel with the illusion of solidarity, often with the condescending, disdainful air of the disabused traveler, miss the point. I cannot describe it to you; you have to experience it. But it is like traveling to a completely different planet.

In order to reach this sidereal point of view, this radical distance, you must also be able to abstract the origin. It is always the same thing. It is true of primitive states and it gives Japan, which does not have the virus of the origin, its foreignness. Because if you go looking for the origin or the cause, everything becomes familiar but it also loses its secret.

You have to keep origins at a distance. America allows this better than any other place because its origin is so close. Or we could say that primitive societies are fascinating because they are closer than we are to a kind of mythical origin. We could consider America to be the country in the world that is closest to its origins, if it has origins; but it does not have any because it has broken with its origins. It has no originality of its own, and that is what makes it so powerfully fascinating.

From another angle, we could say that this country creates a kind of surprise for us as Europeans because it is so close to its origins. It is only a few centuries old, which gives it a mental world entirely different from our own. We have millennia behind us, even if we know nothing about them.

There is a short circuit of the origin. The origin is either totally emptied, forgotten and does not exist, or it is so close that it is no

longer an origin. In either case, the territoriality given by the origin disappears but not originality since this deterritorialization produces an originality, a geniality to a space that for the most part is absolutely insignificant.

The space of the American way of life, in terms of objects and signs can be seen as totally insignificant. But this insignificance is interesting precisely because it connects with the empty signifier that Barthes discussed in describing Japan. The American type of travel does not even take the force of signifiers but it is almost more surprising. It is very surprising for us because we are used to making things signify and giving them a destination. There, we are suddenly relieved of this burden—because giving things meaning is a very heavy obligation.

It also leaves a puzzle: how is it possible for things to make no sense? How can a country have no culture? The desert metaphor is the ecstatic denial of culture, territory, and landscape; it is not even a landscape. You find yourself unexpectedly weightless, in orbit, with a kind of total foreignness.

It is the opposite of Japan. We could say that one can project rich signification onto the empty signifier. Signs there are so carved in stone, so ritualized that they are heavy but in a way we cannot decipher.

The opposite is true for America. Everything is light, transparent, floating. There is no meaning and no need to look for it. Radical insignificance joins radical significance in a way that creates a world completely foreign to us.

Beyond a certain history and beyond political ideologies, this also means that everything plays out differently, on a stage that is designified in terms of values, a stage of specularization and the total assimilation of everything. It is also a passage at the limits of

our knowledge. We have the elements for this passage but we still live in a dense culture that believes in meaning and value. Over there, the change has happened. There is a paradoxical reality: it says that all values are more or less realized there and have materialized pragmatically. This comes from the fact that you can find everything you need everywhere. There is no need to imagine anything because it is already there in an object.

This kind of utopia made real, this millennial prophecy immaterialized in emptiness, creates a passage that we do not know because we have not reached that type of modernity. We are in a poor little modernity, a petty bourgeois, 19th century modernity; we never entered a model of modernity alive.

Without developing this point further, I will say that my perspective is aimed at learning about these mysteries of America. I do not mean a mysterious America in the cinematographic sense but the mutational riddle of a country that, on the opposite horizon, has rejoined primitive societies or even the signifying mystery of Japan. I believe it applies in all contexts and all countries; this core is contrary to what we say, to what we experience in the intoxication of a deplorable universalization of things, an Americanization of all ways of life.

I think that is an illusion and I do not know how to decide between them. In a way, the illusion cannot exist. It is obvious both that heterogeneity is indescribable and that incomprehensibility is eternal. As Segalen said, this is the law of things.

It may seem to be a gratuitous statement. It is in fact a radical hypothesis about the world. And in the state of things, at a level of verification, it is also true. You can really experience it in any country. And you only begin to realize it after going through several countries. At first, in the first phase of travel, you are

tempted by uniformization or the recognition of small differences. But little differences are never foreignness; in fact the more of this type of differences there are, the easier it is for you to get your bearings.

In the first phase of travel, therefore, you could easily be convinced of a kind of uniform globalization, which is a very common theory today. It is, in fact, proven by tourism in the fullest sense of the word. But after a while, and obviously some countries are richer than others, the trend reverses. Then you are struck by the radical foreignness of all the ways of life in relation to each other. Take Brazil as an example. It has often, justly, been called the country of great American capital. All of the current signs of the most foolish globalization are present in Brazil: paternalistic technological civilization, banks, television. Sao Paulo is a wonderful global example, even more extraordinary than Chicago or other cities. Nonetheless, Brazil contains a radical antagonism between (North) American technological culture, capitalist culture if we can still use that term, and a completely different culture.

A parallel extension of a wild anticulture coming from the Blacks, the Nordeste has now invaded all of the cities. Contrary to what one might believe, this culture is not retreating as the other progresses. It is growing faster than the other. And the debate or conflict lies between the two cultures. One may be technological but the anti-culture is still a culture. We could also speak of quaternary culture and wild anti-culture.

For now, the debate continues. One has the impression that there is a completely simulating, quaternary, capitalist, technological culture being developed and that it is being devoured as is grows. There is a cannibalistic aspect of Brazilian culture that comes from the Blacks.

Rational culture is devoured by another culture that expresses itself through dance, festivals that one could reject as the vestiges of an unevolved culture, which is not at all the case. It is a completely dynamic culture that is slowly devouring the other. In fact, no one knows which one is devouring the other. There is no comparable situation in our countries. There is moreover no political sphere in Brazil; it is a completely crazy and simulating world. But the game is not over. No one knows what will happen with an assemblage like this.

Something odd is happening, however, is terms of racism or ethnic and racial differences. As you know, we have not been able to solve this issue, since we live with the illusion of being able to reconcile racial differences through integration or assimilation. Our rational utopia, however, will obviously not succeed. The more we try to eliminate differences, the more the racial phenomenon occurs.

Something else is happening in Brazil. It happens through seduction. Races there seduce each other. They do not fight each other, but from one race to another the effects of seduction can lead to devouring or cannibalism.

In fact, the racial question is "resolved" even though clear economic and other differences remain. But these differences do not exist in the mentality there because the racial problem is lost in the countless degrees of mixing. The antagonism is resolved through a total mixing of races that removes the object of racial conflict. There are other conflicts related to it but they cannot continue in the same way.

Racism is not fought directly or ideologically—the country itself is a big mix of everything—but mixing is a pragmatic, wild solution. It is a sexual mixture but at its beginning lies an extraordinary fascination for Whites and for Blacks. And it is still a culture

without a truly dominant economic sector. There is a rampant and constant fluctuation of ethnicities and races. And this flux creates a mixture, a unique entity known as Brazil that, outside and next to the profound misery that exists there, causes a feeling of pleasure and joy that you can hardly find anywhere else in the world. There is an energy and vitality in the mixing, profusion and seduction. The assemblage is not familiar to us; it is radically different from our vision of social realities.

We could extend this exercise to other countries. Heterogeneity and foreignness can be found everywhere if we follow the rule of disconnecting from traditional, common ways of traveling and from the ideology that is always imposed on us.

It is not quite antagonism and it is not difference, since difference is a relative order. It is a radical exoticism to which we can refer in Segalen's terms. It is always there really or virtually and it is the only fascinating thing. The other process of de-vitalization, de-differentiation and de-identification is not without interest. That is why I said that this new category of voyages was part of that order. It is interesting, but the only truly fascinating and seductive thing is the indescribableness of this force, of the antagonistic foreignness that can be found everywhere.

The countries of the extreme south—Argentina, South Africa, Australia—each have very different statutes and legislation but they are all racist countries where there was an extermination of aborigines. In Argentina, there is even more of this savagery today, although the Indians have been uprooted, than in North America where everything is acclimated and domesticated. Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego are desolate spaces that have preserved this savagery. They are not free of political control but the space still is; it escapes territorialization.

They are some of the only examples of these spaces today, along with Australia, although Australia is not quite the same thing. These parts of the world have always been the stuff of dreams. Patagonia is the place where the deserters, delinquents, and anarchists met; they all went to establish communities there. It is a kind of collection and sanctuary for all of the marginals in the world. And for that reason, it is fascinating.

There is a naturalist nostalgia in Lévi-Strauss based on a profound analysis of the evolution of all cultures. In some ways, Lévi-Strauss cannot be contested; his ideas are pretty. But it seems to me that his pessimistic vision has its limits. Maybe we can use Segalen to correct Lévi-Strauss?

I would not personally attack him for his pessimism because it seems lucid. It is in fact the most intelligent, critical, and sensible vision we can have of the fate of all of these cultures and, through them, of our own.

He could not say the same things about the United States as I did. He created a model of annihilation and the end of cultures. I think we have to go to the other side, to see, not what is reproduced, but another kind of energy that is on a different orbit, which is not a question of territory. Territory is lost; if we see it as a system of values and cultures then all territories are virtually lost.

But something else is happening. There is another game in this deterritorialized space, a game that includes heterogeneity. And it is obvious that Lévi-Strauss is not a participant.

4

Artificial Stupidity or the Intelligence of Others

Marc Guillaume: The figure of alterity that we will examine in this session is the figure of the so-called *intelligent machines*, a specific category of the set of interactive machines.

As in our exploration of the fictive Japan created for Western needs, I will not discuss real machines even though I will often refer to the reality of their performances or what I claim to know about them. Intelligent machines as we imagine them are a pretext for picturing other beings. From this perspective, the performance of these machines interests me less than their status as *alterity artifacts*.

The question is not a new one. The talking heads built by some monks at the end of the Middle Ages—Abbot Mical in particular—and condemned by the religious hierarchy show how these artifacts unleash all kinds of fantasies and impulses, as is always the case when religious condemnation occurs. In the 18th century, not only do the heads of the automatons speak but their bodies move thanks to the talent of French engineer Vaucanson. During the same period and in the opposite direction, considering man to be no more than a machine is a strong current of thought defended in particular by La Mettrie, a doctor and philosopher who by some twist of fate was born in the same year as Vaucanson, 1709. La Mettrie's materialist vision, as he developed it in *The Human-Machine*, extends

Descartes's materialism in terms of animals (*Animal-Machines*) to human beings. This extension was scandalous at the time.

The existence of a break between humans and nonhumans—animals or machines—was not a new question. It returned with Darwin and his successors in the next century and discreetly continues to haunt some of the debate over artificial intelligence. Beyond the technical questions that interest computer scientists and neurobiologists, this debate introduces a new dimension by considering different levels of human intelligence. The object under consideration is difficult to grasp because it is hard to distance oneself from it and set up comparisons. Machines offer a convenient reference point and term of comparison. They represent a first access point to an understanding of human thought, which remains a relative *terra incognita*. Curiously, we know more about the unconscious than the conscious mind, or at least we have been more interested in the former than the latter. We commonly use the terms "memory," "intelligence," and others without much precision and we combine notions that should be distinct.

To introduce my observations, I will use this phrase from Jean Baudrillard: *there is only intelligence of the Other*. I thought I understood this phrase when encountering it for the first time. Then I hesitated between several meanings, stopped understanding but continued to think about and with it. Thinking without understanding may be the strength of human thought, which gains its particular power from its imperfections. Zen teaching harnesses this power: the Master says or does something incomprehensible to his disciples. "Imperfections" of this type will certainly limit the capabilities of machines. Their "intelligence" seems at first both simple and perfect. In this sense, they are a concrete representation of the most simple Other of human intelligence, the elementary level of

alterity. Following the first step of Jean Baudrillard's injunction, we need an intelligence of this Other.

The term "artificial intelligence" and its themes appeared in 1950. The big machines built in America offered calculating speed and power that had seemed impossible a few years earlier. When they were introduced in Europe, we continued to call them *computers* even though they could operate with symbols and perform operations that were not mere calculation. The French did invent the word "*ordinateur*" later, a word that seems more appropriate and has a religious connotation (ordination) that the word's inventor explicitly acknowledged (Legrand, a literature professor at the Sorbonne). Then, as a joke or by metaphor and more seriously by some, the idea was floated that these computers were intelligent. Or at least that they would become intelligent through future progress.

For those who wanted to found a discipline or legitimate and finance ambitious research programs, artificial intelligence started out as a nice slogan. But the expression soon resonated in the collective imagination and derivative expressions like electronic brains and artificial brains soon spread. More than just a theme that immediately mobilized specialists in the field, artificial intelligence has continued to stoke the imagination for more than thirty years and continues to feed controversy and more or less serious speculations.

We can examine some of these speculations by playing on the words that the founders of artificial intelligence brought together. One of the more eminent founders, A.M. Turing, opened debate in his famous article on the question "Can Machines Think?" (*Mind*, 1950), moving from artifices to machines and from intelligence to thought. He also tried to reduce the question to a game of identification and imitation: which one is the human and which one is the machine? His experiment also included: which one is the man and

which one the woman? Using only the identity of the answers between the machine and the Human subject in this (too) simple game, Turing concluded that humans and machines were indistinguishable and, through a completely unsubstantiated leap, claimed that machines can think. His own thought seems frozen by its satisfaction with their indiscernibility. His fascination may be explained by aspects of his personal life but we will not examine this secondary question.

The connections Turing suggested had the merit of underscoring the diversity and heterogeneity of human mental processes. Some of them can be carried out or simulated by a more or less complex machine, a machine that has already been built or one that we could design. Other processes seem to remain peculiar to human beings, outside the grasp of any device—at least for now. The line that separates these processes is as vague as the term intelligence, leaving the door open for all types of ambiguity. Artificial intelligence is an expression with variable meanings, capable of fitting any representation one might have of human intelligence.

It is also an expression that was created at the right time. Artificial intelligence could have been mentioned with the first calculators or the first chess-playing automaton built by the Spaniard L. Torres y Quevedo in 1914 (although the automaton was happy to finish a match with its king and rook against a human opponent who no longer had a king). The ability to calculate and more generally to memorize and apply formal rules is certainly a part of human intelligence. A premature birth would have doomed artificial intelligence to insignificance. And a later appearance of its themes would have been much more problematic. We know now, for example, that some operations, that we do without even "thinking" about them, are beyond the reach of the most powerful

computers. We now have a better sense of the immense complexity of the brain and therefore of its functioning. We know very little about how it works except to say that it is radically different from most computers today. Despite all of this and even though the term "artificial intelligence" is now challenged by most specialists in the neurosciences and cognitive sciences, it is now part of our collective imagination. The expression therefore came at the right moment. What people believed at the time about the future of computers and what they thought they knew about the brain allowed for naïve hope and ambitious research programs. At the time, A.M. Turing, H.A. Simon, A. Newell and many others thought that computers of the future would be able to think and to help us think about thought. Some more prudent researchers saw the computer as a tool, a powerful tool, one that could help us think but lacking any real ability to understand or reach other cognitive states.

This initial distinction has remained until today. There are two meanings of artificial intelligence. The weaker, albeit operative sense covers all of the research that attempts to use machines to simulate certain operations of human or animal intelligence. The performance of these machines has become breathtakingly fast and powerful and they have changed the conditions of writing, reading, memorization, and communication. The nature of the computers, however, has not changed. They include intellectual mechanisms that we do not consider to be on the level of human or even animal intelligence. They perform important operations better than we do, but these operations are nonessential. These machines do not use any of the *artifices* of intelligence.

They are more like the "idiot savants" who can find a cube root in a few seconds but whose intelligence in anything else, including mathematics, is often minimal. A child prodigy like Z. Colburn

(1804–1840) could calculate 8^{16} easily at age eight but he lost his powers when he went to school to learn. None of these prodigies knew how to explain the mechanics of their performances—even G.P. Bidder who became a prominent engineer. They lacked the intelligence of their deformed intelligence. It seems clear that the mechanisms they used were not the same as those engaged by today's computers.

In its strong sense, artificial intelligence has other ambitions. The goal here is not to build smart machines but simple ones. The hope of creating intelligent machines in the near future was lost with the relative failure of major projects like Logic Theorist and General Problem Solver (abandoned in 1967). But research into "thought simulations" (to use an intentionally ambiguous term) has multiplied and many researchers (Schank, Abelson, Winograd, Weisenbaum, Mac Carty and others) have finally continued, more or less explicitly, the work and perspectives of the founders of this current of thought.

Without going too far into their research, we can say that they display a touching attachment to a simple and naïve representation of intelligence and the brain. Their representation comes from a computer model suggesting that intelligence and the brain relate like a program and a machine. This comparison should not come as a surprise: representations of the brain can only borrow from available technologies. We can trace the progression from hydraulic models to electrical models to cybernetic models. These models can be very useful for concrete applications and even for understanding some of our intellectual processes. But the originality of the computer paradigm is the determination its defenders have shown in trying to demonstrate how it can help us think about thought and grasp its specificity.

J.R. Searle clearly revealed the absurdity of their determination (especially in his article "Minds, Brains and Programs," 1980). I will give a synopsis of his argument in a brief apologue.

Take an individual whom we know does not understand some thing, for example Mandarin. We place him or her inside a computer and by means of a ruse we make him or her strictly apply the directives of a translation program that makes the computer "speak" or translate Mandarin. You would not say that the person in the computer has learned Mandarin. Even if he or she mastered all of the formula that he or she applied, then he or she would only simulate an understanding of Mandarin. The person could, at best, evaluate the grammatical correctness of a sentence but would have no access to its meaning.

Those who believe and want others to believe that a formal program can create thought employ a rhetorical strategy allowing them to move from a simulation of thought to thought itself through a series of metaphors and analogies. In the 18th century, people already tried to astound and mislead crowds using automatons. Von Kempelen's automaton, which was a good chess player, caused a stir throughout Europe. It was in fact controlled by a small-sized chess master hidden in the base of the chessboard. Two centuries later, the procedures and intentions have changed, but the same fascination remains as to the possible abolition of difference between humans and machines. There is no need now to hide a person in a computer for it to play chess well; but some researchers are still trying to reduce the status of human thought to formal performances.

This does not mean that human intelligence and thought are beyond the scope of a device that we could conceive today and maybe build tomorrow. But it does mean that the device must interact with the program it runs and interact with its environment;

it must act like an interface, like a *body* and also acquire some degree of autonomy, the ability to organize its own structure. The simplest form of learning, which is even available to a modest marine snail (*Aplysia*), requires a rearrangement of nerve connections. Most computers today remain far below the level of "intelligence" of this snail (H. Gardiner called this the computational paradox). Other attempts in the very different direction of neural networks (F. Varela) might offer the chance of better performances.

Confusion in this domain stems from the fact that computers *use* concepts without accessing their intelligence. A formal program is capable of classifying concepts and applying the appropriate operations to each category. However, to reach the intelligence of the concept, as the human brain and *senses* do, it is necessary to start with the concrete and progressively distinguish an abstraction from it. Seeing, in particular, precedes knowing and the formal operations it allows. For a computer to have this kind of abstract intelligence it would need the means to perceive concrete reality, which would come from the machine and not programs. In the apologue of the person hidden in the machine to apply its program, we quickly understand that the lack of understanding comes from a lack of access to concrete reality. If the person can translate Mandarin by performing a series of operations on signifiers, it does not mean that he or she understands the language. Understanding means access to the signified, which implies something different: a mental image, a sum of concrete, corporal experiences, and more.

The current intelligence of computers could be called abstract but not in the way human intelligence abstracts: it is abstract without abstraction, formal but without knowledge of forms. Its power comes from the absence of reality that also makes it weak. What can we say about the other dimensions of human intelligence

and thought? Computers should not only learn but learn how to learn, think about their thinking (the aporia that is as old as philosophy), think about their physical entity—their "body"—as distinct from the rest of the world, and many other dimensions. They should reach the Cartesian "cogito" without forgetting that Descartes also said that the soul is easier to know than the body. They should learn intentionality, especially the intentionality of never being content with being what they are. They should be open to communication, language and symbolic orders other than the formal symbols of programs, which is a syntax without "conscience."

We could imagine artificial arrangements that would give themselves objectives, that would take some distance from themselves, simulating "self-consciousness," "artificial intentions," and even "artificial desires."

Yet while nothing prevents us from imagining these machines, there is no guarantee that devices with these properties of thought could ever really be built, even in the distant future. Nothing is less certain, given the vast gulf that still separates the neurosciences from cognitive sciences and from their formal applications.

In this light, "thinking machines" play the same role in the cognitive sciences as extraterrestrials do in astronomy. We can imagine them and think that they probably exist. But until a trace of their existence is found, it remains a hypothesis. Thinking machines must remain a hypothesis as well.

Even if the hypothesis is proven, the connection between these two terms—thinking and machine—will remain a problem. I see Searle as making a play on words when he asks at the end of his article: "Could a machine think?" and answers: yes, only a machine can think and our brain is precisely that kind of machine. It may be a metaphorical way to underline his central idea that artificial

intelligence "has had little to tell us about thinking, since it has nothing to tell us about machines." He plays with the word machine in an ironic way through an artificial extension of its common meaning that parallels the reduction of the meaning of thinking and intelligence in the authors he criticizes. Taking the expression at its word would mean going without proof from a minimal materialism that no one disputes (every mental process has a material support, like the brain, and relies on particular physical processes) to a maximal materialism in which all thought is reduced to these physical processes.

The difference between the objectives of these two meanings of the expression is significant. We can see that the cognitivists want to avoid the "vitalist" mistake of establishing an absolute distinction between organic and inorganic. But the opposite mistake would be to make a premature claim that this distinction does not exist.

Henri Atlan is much more circumspect in stating that this break may exist; and that even if it does not exist at a certain level, it can or perhaps should be posited *a priori* at another level. "The models that allow us to speak of artificial intelligence imply, beyond metaphor and analogy, a stronger—and therefore more restrictive—postulate of rationality in nature than the principle of sufficient reason." Logically, there is no way to decide whether the principle of rationality "is a property of reality, independent of the way our cognitive faculties function or a projection of these faculties whose success defines islands of rationality in reality."

Even if there is no break in the continuity between machines and the brain at the level of reality or of a reality projected on it, the subject/object distinction can be preserved by posing an *a priori* symbolic break between what is called a machine and what is called

a subject. Because the essence of the machine is to be a means to an end. How can we imagine or accept a world where subjects would only be means for other subjects who would themselves only be machines? How could we refuse a minor adjustment to the Cartesian cogito: "I think, therefore I must be"? In the end, machine and subject are not separated by their capabilities but by the arbitrariness of a symbolic rule.

We can therefore expect no radical reworking of our philosophy of the subject's being from progress in artificial intelligence despite its surprising technological advances. However, the imaginary representations produced by this progress are interesting variations on the eternal theme of the human subject's dereliction in the face of solitude and death.

Created not exclusively in biological ways, an artifact accorded cognitive faculties, an alterity of our creation, is like the embodiment of the Promethean myth. Yet the creator's role does not deliver us from the human condition. It would be even more interesting if our creature could attain immortality. That would mean that its being-in-the-world was radically different than ours. Generally speaking, it would be exciting—and maybe easier—to create another form of thinking. Then we could realize the dream of the extraterrestrial (or the astronaut, to use E. Lemoine-Luccioni's expression) without traveling through space. Then it would be possible to "fall out of our world," which Freud deemed impossible and placed at the origin of religious feeling (in *Civilization and its Discontents*). Science fiction has eagerly explored the same possibility from its beginnings.

In this wild dream, we must still make distinctions. What can we do with a *radical alterity*, a "machine that has no idea of humanity" (J. Baudrillard) and with which we could establish no complete

communication? Exploring this question, Stanislaw Lem has one of his characters in *Solaris* say: "We do not need other worlds. We need mirrors. [...] One world, our world, is enough but we cannot accept it for what it is. We seek an ideal image of our own world: we go looking for a planet, a civilization superior to ours but developed on the model of our primitive past." In these dreams of machines, we are looking for an answer to the mysteries of alterity more than a new way of thinking. We would like to create an intelligence—neither too identical nor dissimilar—that would help us reflect on our specificity. What would remain unique for humans when machines absorb or at least simulate our intellectual processes? It would help us accept our destiny.

Fundamentally, those who think we will soon be ready to build these machines seek reassurance and their ideas are seductive because they are comforting. Thinking we are close to machines rids us of the burden of the soul, of Dasein. Building artificial intelligence comes from a therapeutic determination to eliminate human mortality rather than preserve a life. A weak, regressive fantasy of the machine capturing the human-object in its orbit. Yet this fantasy heightens the fascination with radical alterity and the "primordial Exoticism between subject and object" as Segalen would say.

Dreaming of a machine-subject capable of initiative and communication or imagining a bio-computer hybrid with organic microprocessors is another, more problematic way to involve the idea of an absolute, transhuman alterity.

For this reason, our fascination with artificial intelligence is an extension of our fascination with the transsexual and belongs to the general index of gender exoticism.

It is a fascination that we want to be fooled by; it is a scientific fantasy. The computer form is very different from the telematic

form, although in the latter form the search for the Other passes through writing stratagems and screen maneuvers that allow for ambiguity with subjects and machines. The motivation of eroticism is the constant search for community despite the insurmountable wall separating two people even when they are brought together by an apparent harmony. The inhuman alterity of an intelligent device raises the stakes of sexual exoticism. With inhuman alterity, we have entered the era of constructed exoticism and artificial alterity. The real new worlds of the third millennium will not be found in space or in the suburbs of our planet but in the complete artificialization of our planet and ourselves.

Examining the relationship between intelligence and alterity brings us back to the expression we started with: *there is only intelligence of the Other*. To comment on this expression, I will distinguish between three types of intelligence, although the second is more of a simple interface.

—First there is the *intelligence of objects*: mathematical objects, physical objects, human beings (if treated as objects bereft of thought). The geography of this first type of intelligence is very diverse. It is a calculating intelligence (machines, idiot savants, artists…) and its sometimes comic effects result from the connection between the mechanical and the living; but it is also the intelligence of forms and vague sets. The scientific paradigm established its regimes of universal truth exclusively in this domain, including the social sciences whose epistemological status leaves no room for the subject as subject. It is also the privileged, even exclusive domain of so-called scholastic intelligence.

This type of intelligence leaves no remainder (the result is correct or wrong, performance criteria are defined). And it therefore has its limits.

—Then there is the intelligence of objects and of one's self, or taking subjectivity into account. This intelligence by definition loses the scientific quality. And it quickly runs up against the impossibility of thinking the self without the Other (see the analyses in *Being and Nothingness*) unless it uses the reductive figure of considering the Other to be similar to the self. It is a passing intelligence that cuts a path for psychology, psychiatry, philosophy, but produces nothing if it does not lead to the third type of intelligence.

—Intelligence of the world, the self and the Other is an open, borderless intelligence. Here the Other is understood to be partially irreducible to the self, eternally incomprehensible (Segalen), both radically different and similar, or supposed to be so. The Other is the source of the incomprehension that, instead of blocking thought, keeps it moving indefinitely, eliminating any hope of absolute knowledge. This intelligence of the Other should be understood as it is in the expression "intelligence with the enemy."

It is a limitless intelligence because it always leaves something behind: incomprehension.

5

Artificiality and Seduction

Jean Baudrillard: With artificial intelligence and the alterity of machines, we are still faced with the same issue: alterity is in danger. It is a masterpiece in peril, an object lost or missing from our system, from the system of artificial intelligence and the system of communication in general.

The general idea is that every current system of communication relies on an operationality that consists in a detachment of artificiality. In other words, there is no longer exactly believing, wanting, being able, or knowing. All of these functions or categories of the subject or action are taken up in a model that consists of making believe, making want, making known that information is something made known, that communication is something made to believe or know.

It is not exactly manipulation, but everything is comprised in the operational. All of the categories, instead of being categories of action become categories of operation. Everything therefore moves into this artificiality. I use the term artificiality (*facticité*) because it implies the auxiliary "to make" (*faire*): the auxiliary comes before all of the categories; everything moves into artificiality.

It is a similar discussion to what we said about simulation but with a different approach. This artificiality is the operationality of

making (something) happen: making happen, making want, making orgasm. The effect of this artificiality, in this kind of closed operation, is to make the circle of action close, using soft or hard technologies.

It rids everything of its negativity because it closes these actions. "Making happen" (*faire faire*) could be compared to plastic surgery for action. It is like a face: in plastic surgery, they take away everything negative in a face to make it ideal, in theory, with only positive, ideal traits. All of the alterity, negativity, contradiction and asymmetry are removed from the face. Everything related to character, action or expression is generally smoothed over in plastic surgery to produce an artificial model.

I am not making any moral judgments but this artificiality is obviously not innocent. In particular, for what concerns us most with alterity, the face is a plausible example. A living human face carries a type of alterity, a contradiction with itself. There is even a form of semiological action in facial traits that plastic surgery partially erases. And we can transpose this plastic surgery onto the genetic manipulation that eliminates negative gene traits and finds coherence models where none existed before. It is another way of removing alterity, removing anything that is not homogenous, erasing the heterogeneity and creating homogenous wholes.

The same is true for every type of plastic surgery, like the aesthetic surgery on nature or in green spaces where all negative traits are eliminated until only the ideal model remains. Everywhere, in fact, there is a modeling of wants, bodies, and sex. We could even imagine a zodiac surgery center where you could have a sign sculpted in your image! An institute that would homogenize your needs, your desires, your lifestyle and your sign. Zodiac signs are fatal in the sense that they escape you. In principle, a sign is something

that you cannot change, something unpredictable, incompatible, almost the minimum destiny that remains for us in this life.

Signs should be susceptible to remodeling in someone's image. We know that even sexual difference is part of destiny, of fate, since it befalls us. And it could therefore be reduced one day, since it is already possible to choose or change sexes. The aim would be to remove every figure of alterity from fate and ensure that everything that is not negotiable, that could not be negotiable, becomes negotiable for the sake of a general redemption of forms and signs.

Which leads us to the following question: what escapes negotiation? The problem applies to alterity as well. Are we still capable of determining the things that make up alterity, that are part of a destiny or fatality and are not alienation? The Other as a psychological partner, but one who alters your life.

What can escape the system of artificiality and still form a discernible Other, maybe a secret Other but with alterity involved and something necessarily fated in this alterity?

I am obviously preoccupied with this question. We are not looking for a psychological Other or, as we have seen, a sociological Other, a psychodrama of sociality or of alterity. There is the dialectic between the self and the Other in terms of opposition, comprehension and reconciliation. Books by Todorov and Kristeva, for example, deal more with the sphere of alienation than alterity, which is something different.

Alienation is the universe of relationships, of the self becoming Other, of the dialectical relationship between the two and the resolution of differences in our current game or cult or culture of difference. Racism is also part of this problem.

It is stimulating and complex; it has been much discussed. But we have said much less about another alterity that is not psychological,

sociological, or metaphysical, but the Other in its purest state, what Segalen called radical exoticism.

Does this alterity, this Other, this adversity still exist somewhere? It is more interesting to see what could oppose the "making happen," the artificiality that involves a more or less complete erasure of the alterity I mentioned above. There are several things to mention. The opposite of artificiality is definitely not naturalness. In that sense, rediscovering nature, a natural alterity or a spontaneous, natural identity is like a pious wish.

There is the problem of modeled systems or machines. No need to be a computer to take part in artificial intelligence. All machines and all models functioning today at every level are part of artificial intelligence

These machines, as we are increasingly aware, are vulnerable. This is also true of social machines. Luckily for us, there is neglect, blackouts, inertia and breakdowns. The interesting aspect of these anomalies, these nonoperational residues when artificiality does not work is that we find, indirectly, some aspect of alterity, of the fatality exorcised from the system. In a way, the accidents would have been machinated by the Other. Alterity is altered in this sense. It is a metaphor to say that the Other is the machine.

All of the accidents, breakdowns, slips, skids, madness—in the end, all of this systematicity—is our alterity. It is our Other to the extent that we ourselves have become machines. We have functionalized ourselves. Nothing that happens to us has the same negative meaning that it might have had in the rational system. The bad signs are turned into good signs; not everything is caught in the general artificiality. But this is the perspective of accidental alterity. There should be another, more positive perspective. There is one that we have already mentioned, in particular in

regards to Japan. We could oppose pure artificiality and operational artificiality.

We could ultimately oppose civilization and seduction. Both play on signs but one plays on pure signs and the other plays on the manipulation of signs. With the terms we are using here, we could say that artificiality opposes affectation. Affectation is the quality of something that plays with artificiality, that plays with its own operation. We should also remove the negative connotations of the word affectation that come from our culture of sincerity. We are returning to its literal meaning. It is the quality of being able to play well in an operational system, so well that it discreetly changes it into a system of signs and illusion. Affectation lets signs be signs when others think they are handling substances and being. One can be operational without believing in the Western operational system of references. We said it about the Japanese. It means sending artificiality back to its artificialness. Through a double switchback, we undo the "making happen" with a "more than." The "making happen" of artificiality is radicalized by more, not less.

In its most common connotation, affectation means doing more or too much. Someone who affects something overdoes it. Behavior, text, language are given a surplus of signification, bringing artificiality back to its purest fate. When we overdo it, we exacerbate sign and signification. It is the same as seduction, where evil is pitted against evil. We escape artificiality by increasing artificialness and affectation.

A brief parenthesis. We have used Japan as a model of the Other. It is an alterity for us, a cultural system more subtle than our own and certainly more powerful, even in the operational system. In the end, those who use affectation are freed from the system's

meaning and weight, its ideological burden, and therefore become more operational than those who act according to good reasons.

It is a kind of ruse. It is Japan's strategy today. Yet I think this affectation is now general. Even in our society, which is now becoming completely operational, everyone obeys the operational principle without believing in it. I think that incredulity, agnosticism, and profound indifference are widespread. It may be an illusion or a utopia, but I have the impression that the system functions relatively well on this foundation of profound nonacceptance of the operational system and the artificiality of things.

Everyone is a little agnostic, unwittingly. Not everyone is conscious of it. The great majority of people are not cynical, but everyone is a little bit cynical in the characteristic affectation of overdoing it.

We can explain this phenomenon through the mechanical momentum of the system, but it may not be the only cause. There is probably also the ruse, the fact that, in reality, a kind of affectation reigns. The stress, tension and performance anxiety of operationality today are all a mad affectation and much more amusing when considered this way. There is an operational snobbism that affects us all for the better. Through this affectation, we rise above artificiality. It is almost an aesthetic stage of operationality, delivering us to some extent from the "making happen."

Here we have one of the strategies for escaping artificiality. Affectation is a paradoxical strategy of response in its excess: you overdo it. There would also be a paradoxical response by default that would suggest doing less rather than more: *laisser-faire*. The corresponding strategy in this paroxysm of artificiality would be to oppose "making happen" with *laisser-faire* "letting happen." Instead of "making want," "letting want"; instead of "making know," "letting know."

In French, we can make the distinction. But in German, the auxiliary verb *lassen* can mean both: to make and to allow. The context usually allows you to distinguish between them, but it is the same verb. English is relatively similar to German, although not as distinct. There is a balancing act, a potential reversal between the two faces of "making happen" and "letting happen." The strategies, however, are not at all the same.

It is not a negative form of desisting, renouncing, defeat or voluntary alienation—I let happen, I let believe, I let pass.... This may have been the case in a moral of action or a voluntarist morality but it is more a strategy of release, an ironic investment in the Other to whom we give responsibility for our desires. We are no longer responsible for our beliefs, wants, or knowledge; we transfer or divert responsibility to the Other. It is a trick of desire or the will in the form of a diversion or a type of seduction. We should therefore see it as a strategy and not a lack or passivity. It should be included among the strategies of resistance or even among offensive strategies, as way of exercising seduction.

Sometimes letting something happen works better than direct will or action. It is probably more powerful and more subtle to let someone believe than to make someone believe. While the media have the belief that their techniques make people believe, these techniques are probably less effective than letting them believe.

There is a way of extrapolating one's own life and desire through the Other and thus finding an alterity, since the Other is truly involved. The Other is not involved as a separate, opposite term. I devolve my desire and will to the Other and he or she is involved in the process of alterity. And even if we do not find a destiny—it is not that strong—the Other becomes an agent of my own life because he or she is in the end the foundation of this

operation. I no longer account for the operation of my life; I refer it to the Other, who takes charge.

Some cultures do this systematically on the symbolic level. Someone else always takes charge of your life. In a hierarchical order, you do not have responsibility for your own life. Everything is taken in charge, either by a subsequent Other or a previous life. Almost all cultures know that no one has his or her own desires or will, that it is a utopian illusion. They know that things function and function better through a system of transfers, metaphor, and devolution. The Other takes charge of your life and you can take charge of someone else's life.

Will circulates in this circuit, which has nothing to do with artificiality. There is a form of resolution of deep-set ambiguities connected to all of these functions. Wanting, capability, belief, knowledge are functions that would cause us to be in complete contradiction if we took them on ourselves since we would have to oppose them to others. Our relationship with the Other would then be a relationship of force. This is not true of the symbolic relationship connecting each to the Other through desire and will.

We can credit psychoanalysis—despite everything else—for coming close to this connection. Or at least psychoanalysis transcribed it into our culture. In the pure, nuclear form of transference, psychoanalysis does not weigh itself down with analytical metalanguage. It has a secret efficiency; it is the heart of analysis, if such a thing exists. Analysis takes a stand in cultural differences or the cycle of evolution and fate. It tends to bring everything back to a reappropriation of the Id by the Ego. This account can lead us, therefore, to let believe or let happen, to disavow responsibility and will and no longer be able to believe, for example, but only to believe in the person who believes. In other words, only exercising this function indirectly but connecting to something else.

We can be incapable of loving but love someone who loves or whom we think capable of loving. We can want nothing or no longer know what we want but believe in someone who wants or who can want what he or she wants. A kind of general derogation takes place, a general release where capability, want and knowledge are left to someone else. They are not abandoned but managed at a remove, which can be negative or positive.

Take for example the function of looking, of looking at images. If you think about it, we hardly ever look at images by ourselves. We never see anything in all of the screens, pictures, videos and reportages that has not already been seen, recorded, mediated, and reconstructed. In fact, we are unable to look; we can only look at things that have already been seen. The same disconnection occurs here as with action and "making happen." In "making look," the disconnection translates as déjà vu, something already seen.

We appoint machines to see for us just as we will delegate our decisions to computers. All of these functions, even the organic ones, are relayed by satellite.

This strategy, however, can have powerful, positive effects. In the case of making believe or letting believe, let us take the example of children. Adults make children believe that they are adults. And children end up believing it. Children let adults believe that they are adults and that they themselves are children.

The two strategies are not equal, but in symbolic terms it does not matter. Adult beliefs, or their making believe, are never guaranteed to succeed while children's beliefs always work. In fact, adults believe they are adults whereas children fundamentally do not believe they are children. They are obviously in an unstable position; they do not have the illusion, they do not consider themselves children, or only in part, but they escape the system of belief that adults impose from the bottom.

Children do not let themselves be alienated into the status of children that is imposed on them. In terms of symbolic strategies, the adult strategy is no stronger than the one the children use. And the children win. Children are children but do not believe it. They do not believe in childhood as a superior state. Adults believe adulthood is superior to childhood. In the symbolic order, those who think themselves superior are automatically inferior. There is a reversibility that always makes them subordinate. Childhood, because it does not believe childhood to be superior and legitimate is stronger in this sense. But it lets believe, it has the tricks and seduction of childhood.

The same is true of the masses. This analysis has already been done. But it is true that the masses, by their very position of being forbidden subjectivity, are protected from believing they are masses. They do not believe they are masses. Who would do the believing? There is no subject to believe in that sense.

No one in the mass can say that there is no mirror of the masses, which distinguishes it from the political classes whose members believe and profess to believe that they are political, intellectual, and other types of subjects. They might be cynical but they still believe in their excellence. And this cynicism will never equal the masses who let others believe that they are the superior, intellectual class.

It has prodigious effects, not always visible in action as the interventions of political classes concerning the masses, but in the reabsorption of this political will by the masses, the profound indifference of the masses, which is an unconsciously calculated indifference, which is to let believe that it is the mass and that others can manipulate it using reason and discourse.

Obviously, none of those manipulations work. Masses never believe in themselves. Thus there is always another possible effect that can turn someone who believes violently in him or herself into

a charismatic leader or a dictator. But charismatic leaders or dictators do not capture beliefs and aspirations like politicians. Dictators capture the masses' profound indifference to their essence. The strategy of letting believe, letting happen translates into believing in the one who believes, not believing in oneself but in the one who believes.

There is an example in another register that also concerns believing in someone who believes, loving someone who loves or following someone who travels. Instead of moving by yourself, you follow someone who is moving. I would like to return to the example of the book *La Suite vénitienne/Please Follow Me* by Sophie Calle. It tells a beautiful tale in which Sophie started following people in the street without premeditation or hidden intentions; she was following just to see. There was no intention to penetrate a secret or see where someone was going; it was just following.

After following people for a while, she moved to the next level: she picked someone she was slightly acquainted with, whom she knew was leaving for Venice on vacation in a few days and then started following him for two weeks.

The work was difficult because she had to find him in Venice during the carnival period. She finally found him and followed him. She took pictures of him everywhere, without him realizing it. He was with his wife. Sophie followed him, lost him, found him again and followed him some more. It continued for a long time. She kept a journal that she published along with the pictures she had taken.

What was at stake? She followed him. It lasted two weeks. She contacted an agency to find out when he was returning and arranged to come back just before him in order to take one last photo at the Gare de Lyon. It was a very complex scenario which required patience, effort, devotion, and something like fate. And it did have something to do with fate. Sophie, for a circumscribed

period of time, created a kind of fate. Not the fate that is in front of you, that inevitably awaits you, but something behind you.

She made herself into this man's shadow. He went and she followed. Where did he go? There is no need to say; it is not a secret, there is nothing to reveal. He went and she followed. She was also there as a delegate or a proxy. She did not have her own fate; she followed him. She became the Other's fate, the shadow of the Other.

Taking his photograph is very ambiguous: the fact that she is there following him is proof that he is not going anywhere. Doing this changes the direction or meaning of his travel. The meaning that he believes he has in the various directions he goes in is in fact hidden, secret; it is following behind him in Sophie. His hidden meaning, the secret of his travel is Sophie. He, of course, is totally unaware. Or at least he remained unaware for a long time. There were a few incidents in the end when he finally realized it and things turned bad. People do not like being followed.

This secret, this dispossession of meaning, direction and life line ends up being felt. It is true that when you follow someone, no matter what precautions you take, you must be very subtle because it is like being haunted, dispossessed or doubled: the person ends up sensing it. At some point, everyone turns around and sees what is happening. The same thing happened to Sophie. The man was obviously upset and it could have taken a bad turn since she was taking a risk as well.

In fact, she could have followed him anywhere and he could have led her anywhere, even into violence. She took a risk. The final, more humorous episode was also a risk. When she wanted to publish the book with pictures, he was unrecognizable but he knew about it since he knew she had been following him. He opposed publication of the book, saying he would have it stopped.

To publish the book, she had to return to Venice with a couple of friends and retake all of the pictures in the same spots. Not only did the man become an Other in the sense that she was following him—the absolute Other—but there had to be a second installment where he was not only followed but replaced by a double like in the movies. The book was then published.

This story gave rise to serious debate. It is easy to understand why when we see that the game was subtle, discreet and seductive, but also very dangerous. It involved a person's trail and no one lives in his or her trail. Like a shadow or a mirror image, it is crucial, existential. If your trail is taken, a great emptiness ensues; it can cause death or at least symbolic death.

Sophie does this when she walks behind him. She enters his trail but she leaves no trail. She devours his trail and therefore erases his existence. As he moves forward, she erases that existence following him. It is a surprising risk.

However, she had no existence or desire of her own. She had no hidden agenda, no amorous or sexual intentions. They were not part of the game. The man absolutely did not interest her. There was a conflict at the end but there was no vulgar connotation or destination for this story.

As a whole it is secret, somewhat like the Secret Service except that secret services have an aim. Here there is no aim, which makes it much more mysterious and, in the end, dramatic for the person followed when he or she realizes it. The risk for Sophie was very intense but without content. It was the pure intensity of a double life. It was not the unhealthy curiosity of the voyeur to discover the secret of another person's life. It was not voyeurism or perversity even though it bore some of the signs. It was not aimed at revealing the double life or hidden destination of the Other.

It was being his secret, which is not the same as something hidden. In fact, the Other had no double life. His double life was the trailing. Sophie became this man's other life for a time without his knowledge. Another rule of the game was to keep it secret or discreet. There is nothing more to say. There was no resolution, solution or conclusion. It was a pure scenario, a pure event with no meaning, origin, or end since it was all arbitrary. She began one day and ended two weeks later. In principle, it would have all disappeared without leaving a trace.

But during that time, there was a play with destiny, a fatal game. In this sense, the man became an intellectual or fatal eminence. She did not embody anything in particular, she erased herself. It is obviously an operation on her self requiring a great deal of work, sacrificing everything. For two weeks, she had to be completely dedicated to it, much more than in any intellectual work.

She emptied herself of her own "thing." For several reasons, she lived in disguise. It was all a ruse thus she became a ruse. It is a type of seduction. She caught the Other in the ruse that is always behind him and it erased his own life.

Alterity is the Other of this man. Yet this Other is not in psychological or sexual conflict with him. It is not alterity or alienation in the weak sense. It is pure alterity. She is the Other and he does not know it; she is his fate. And in a way, he is Sophie's Other too.

In order for there to be alterity, there must be some reversibility. Not the opposition of separate terms like me and another person but the fact that the two are in the same boat, with the same fate. They have an inseparable double life by the very fact that one is the trace of the other, one erases the other. Alterity, in the fatal sense of the word, implies an equal risk for each of the two. There is total reversibility even though one is shadow and the other is being. It does not matter; it is reversible. And in this sense, there is radical

alterity as Segalen envisaged it, not psychological, intersubjective alienation or alterity, which is a tainted form of alterity.

I could explain this example more thoroughly. But it is nonetheless an example of the search for a different alterity that involves forcing the Other into foreignness and forcing the Other in that foreignness. It is by no means an attempt for psychological reconciliation through dialogue, negotiation of identity or other means. Not psychology but a mysterious way of entering the life of the Other; not like violating the Other but being their secret. The Other has a secret and Sophie is at one point the secret of the Other's life. It is an ambivalent secret: it can be good or bad. In this case, it could have taken a turn for the worse. The conclusion of the story is unimportant. The secret has no destination in that sense. It is more important for it to remain secret like an unconscious obsession.

Along the same lines, I would like to present something very different that has a fatal but completely impersonal form. It is closer to a viral form. A quote from Schnitzler's book *Beziehungen und Einsamkeiten* resumes it best. Schnitzler formulates the following hypothesis: "We may be able to represent the progress of infectious disease in the human body as the history of a germ species with its origins, apogee and decline. Its history resembles human history; the proportions differ but the idea is the same."

This microbial species lives in the blood, the lymphatic system, in the tissues of the human body. A person who appears infected to us is its landscape, its world. For these minute individuals, trying unconsciously and involuntarily to destroy their own world is the necessary meaning of their existence. Who knows whether or not the different individuals of the microbial species are like human individuals with various talents and intentions, whether or not there are ordinary and genius germs?

Could we then also imagine that humanity is a disease for some superior organism that we are unable to comprehend as a whole and in which humanity finds its condition, necessity, and the meaning of its existence? Trying to destroy this creature and having to destroy it as it develops just as the microbial species try to destroy human individuals who fall ill.

And couldn't we extend this reflection and wonder whether it is not the mission of the entire living community, germ or human, to destroy the world that surpasses it? For our mind is only able to capture descending movements, never ascending ones.

In this sense, it may be possible to interpret the history of humanity as an eternal struggle with the divine, which despite resistance is slowly, necessarily being destroyed by humanity. Following this line of thought, we can also suppose that the element that surpasses us seems divine or feels divine but is equally surpassed by an element greater than it and so on to infinity.

I do not know whether this is true but we are not looking for the truth here. The hypothesis, because it is a hypothesis, is dizzying. Just as in Sophie's story, with the germ species and the human species, one is the secret and the other is too, it lives inside with the same fate since it dies the same death. Yet its destiny is on the contrary to expand, to reach its apogee and therefore sign the death warrant for the universe it does not completely know and whose death it will share.

Between the two species, there is complete symbiosis and total incompatibility since their reciprocal destruction is ensured so long as they do not know each other. There is no intelligibility between humans and viruses. There is not only difference between them. We cannot say that humans are the Other of the microbes or that viruses are the Other of humans except in a metaphoric sense. They are not opposed. They do not confront each other but are caught up

in the destructive succession of species. And no one can think this succession. The connection is predestined but neither humans nor bacteria can think it. And these connections, according to Schnitzler, continue infinitely since we can suppose that the virus is destined to destroy us and we are destined to destroy the universe around us, the divine... and we do not know if there are still more connections beyond our perception.

Radical alterity can be found here. We could say that the virus is an absolute Other. In its total inhumanity it is an absolute Other. An Other we know nothing about, which is not even different than us since difference is intelligible. The hidden form changes everything. It is close to Sophie's tale. Sophie is there, hidden, secret and surreptitiously she changes the other's entire existence.

The two examples are similar. There is no possible negotiation or reconciliation; it is Segalen's eternal incomprehensibility. And yet this species lives the same life and dies the same death.

I am reminded of the story of a certain worm that has a type of algae in its stomach that helps it digest everything it eats. The worm cannot live without the parasitical algae. The situation works until the worm decides to devour its algae, causing the worm to die. I do not know if it can digest the algae, since in principle it can only digest things using the algae.

There is a reciprocal implication in their fate. It is not a confrontation but an osmosis, a symbiosis. We could ask which one is the Other of the other but in this kind of symbiosis, with its distances and total incompatibility, there is a strong form of alterity.

A word, in closing, on primitive peoples, since the question is always raised whether primitive peoples are Others. This alterity or difference has been much debated. And in fact, they have now become Others in the sense that we have tried to understand

them, even if only to exploit or evangelize them. They are Others because we try to understand them and they are not incompatible. Even though the lives of primitive peoples are extremely different than our own, they are Others; they are different but not distinct from us.

In a book on the Alacalufe, a tribe in southern Patagonia, I saw described how they lived a miserable, inconceivable life at the zero degree of culture for a long time. They no longer exist but it took four centuries for the Whites to exterminate them completely. Over the course of those four centuries, the Alacalufes did not learn a thing. They never negotiated with the Whites, never learned their language, never truly spoke with them and never traded. There was total incomprehensibility.

Whites appeared to them as strangers. At one point, they called themselves "Humans": it was the name they had given themselves, their own name. Then they called themselves Alacalufe, the name they had given to the Whites and the Whites used that name for them. They turned the name that they had given to the Whites around and used it to call themselves strangers in their own tongue. In the end, they were called Alacalufe, which means: "give me, give me, give me" because they had no existence in any language. They were called the "give me": they became beggars. First they were humans, then strangers, then beggars.

For four centuries, they never considered Whites to be others or different or even something to learn from; the Whites remained something completely foreign and they continued to think their singularity. They thought they were humans, that there were no other humans. The superior people do not say anything. They will not borrow any techniques, they will not learn anything. But they remained humans—there were no others.

For the Whites, the Alacalufe are Others even if, at first, they were animals. Some time later, with the civilizing, colonial ideologies, the Alacalufe became Others in the way we mean it now. For the Alacalufe, however, the Whites were never even Others.

The asymmetry here is interesting. There can be a relationship of alterity where the other is one's Other while one is not the other's Other. I can be someone else's Other while he or she is not an Other for me. These dissymmetrical relationships can be extremely tragic and for the Alacalufe, it was one of the most horrible exterminations in history because of the disparity in the relationship to the Other.

Because we are seeking a harder alterity, for people like the Alacalufe, who are totally singular, at least at first, there will never be any alterity in the psychological, Western, differential sense. There will always be total alterity, their alterity, their impenetrable secret. They died without learning anything, without respecting the other or speaking to the other—they died in fact without doing anything we call civilization.

Marc Guillaume: The first time I read *La Suite Vénitienne/Please Follow Me*, I thought it was a technique to allow a man to take on the role of the seducer, a role that was difficult for him. Like in the zodiac clinic you mentioned. It is relatively easy for a man to transform into a woman but to transform into a seducer is much more difficult. And it seemed that he took on this role during the two weeks—in appearance, one only follows women; it is rarer to follow men. Men usually follow women in the seduction game and here he is followed. It led me towards this hypothesis.

He is in the position of seduction, not only in terms of appearances, but also because he himself has become a rule of the game. There is a double effacement affecting both of them.

Jean Baudrillard: But he does not do anything.

Marc Guillaume: True, he is an involuntary seducer. But a woman putting on makeup does not do anything either in a certain way. She dissolves into a rule of the game and then is followed. Of course seductresses have at least a minimum of know-how.

Jean Baudrillard: I thought he was seduced, objectively seduced in a manifest process.

Marc Guillaume: That is what disturbs me.

Jean Baudrillard: By following him, she diverts him since she diverts what he thinks he is experiencing into an obscure consciousness. This diversion is the seduction.

Marc Guillaume: Yes, but you have to apply your reversibility principle. She puts him in the position of seducer without his knowledge, whether he likes it or not. The difference with a woman is that he is unaware and at the same time radically feminized.

Jean Baudrillard: For you the typical scenario is a man following a woman?

Marc Guillaume: The typical scenario of ordinary seduction is two people disappearing into a ritual order. Make-up is one symptom. You enter into a game where one person captures the other's gaze with no amorous or psychological relationship. There is a common dissolution in the ritual. Here, there is clearly a very different rule imposed at the beginning, but it is not shared. But

after the rule is imposed, it seems to me that the man is in the position of the seducer.

Jean Baudrillard: I meant seduction as a form. There is nothing sexual or amorous; it is purely fatal. The Other escapes him or herself sometimes. By following the man, Sophie represents the fact that he thinks he is going somewhere but in fact, more profoundly, he does not know where he is going. She knows, and she translates it. She takes the meaning from the other's wanderings. Seduction is like that. It means diverting from a direction, from an end. And that is why he became so aggressive when he realized what was happening.

There are two questions: why did Sophie enter into a game like this one, do we need psychological reasons? I would say no but the question itself is uninteresting. And why does she do it on a fatal level with that scenario, a pure game? And why does he become so vindictively angry when he realizes it? His reaction is normal, there is no reason to object to it but we can wonder what causes it. What affected him so deeply that his reaction really could have led to murder?

Marc Guillaume: I wonder if women suffer from the fact that men are never seducers, that there is no reversibility, that men cannot wear masks? Rather than a primitive psychological reaction, it is a shared suffering by women that men never wear masks.

In make-up, I see masks. Japanese culture is the best example of how women's make-up in the past was truly a mask. With women as subjects abolished by the mask. The suffering of the mask monopoly was so strong that things reversed and men started wearing women's masks.

Jean Baudrillard: Men were then unmasked beings.

Marc Guillaume: The Japanese responded with a culture of transvestites who were first characters with masks. It becomes a game of infinite reflection since women then started to put on make-up like the men who made their faces like women.

In our Western culture, Sophie Calle's very artificial experiment would be: how can we give a man the seducer's mask? You set a rule. It is very artificial. But isn't it like that, this dedication tied to personal suffering: how can one follow a man? Following is the pleasure of seduction for a man, at least as I understand it. You decide that a woman is your destiny and you take on that destiny in total indifference to her physical or psychological being. Pure seduction means saying: "You will be her and I will follow you." Men have access to this experience but not women.

Jean Baudrillard: I don't know. You are bringing in sexual difference, which I had not put in play.

Marc Guillaume: It is not really a sexual difference. I say man-woman to simplify things. It is true that women wear more masks and men are more unmasked. It is like a niche of reversible alterity that is used in male-female roles and is a faint echo of seduction.

Jean Baudrillard: I agree about make-up. You could say that Sophie's trailing disguises the other's existence or that she doubles it. Make-up highlights things and gives color. Everyone has his or her own approach. Sophie verifies the most insignificant details doubled in her photos and the text she writes in the margins. Insignificance is doubled by meaning and a massive signification of which it is unaware. It is like make-up or a mask in that the intensification or stereoscoping of things gives him breadth and

meaning. Not a meaning that can be decrypted or decorated but an intensity that he did not have.

Could the same experiment work in reverse? Could a man follow a woman following Sophie's scenario? It might not be as easy since it is not an innocent undertaking. I think it is fatal and in that sense not perverse at all. It is simply fatal. It is the art of putting fate into play, of engaging the complete absence of identity at the base of each and every one of us that is hardly ever revealed because we constantly overcompensate to play with identities. It succeeds in fact in removing the other's identity and in losing one's own identity, leading to this fatal stratosphere. It is a game in its purest form with no necessary psychological connotations. We could say that in this game, there is Sophie and what she is but more important is that she reaches something that surpasses herself. She had the genius to stage it and the artificiality of her approach must be noted. You can have the idea but it takes something else to put it into action. Maybe the perversion lies there. You can have this strange idea, maybe even write something about it but enacting it is prodigious. There is certainly an obsession or perversion involved that calls for psychological considerations. You probably can never eliminate perversion completely.

Question from the audience: Does she strip him of his identity? Does she flee him or x-ray him?

Jean Baudrillard: In principle, it could be anyone. To set up the operation, she needed some information about him but she ended up learning a lot about him. What she learned relates more to the anecdotal, less interesting side of the story. Most of the following took place during Carnival, which is amusing since there were masks

everywhere. And Venice is the ideal city for it because it is a labyrinth of secrets where you have the impression that everyone is following someone. It is a very cultured place but its culture has lapsed into secret, its tracks erased. Another remarkable aspect of the story is that it portrayed Venice as a city where all meaning is lost, where all destinations are combined. The city spins around itself in labyrinthine spirals; once you enter it, you find yourself in the situation she provokes or recreates artificially in much greater detail.

Marc Guillaume: You might add that in that kind of labyrinth, the only way to avoid encounters is to follow someone carefully without losing sight of him or her. Otherwise, you might always run into the person, which is what happens to Sophie in the end.

Something troubles me in your analysis. You mentioned ways of preserving strains of alterity. You brought in the seduction strain and the discharge or dispensation strain. There is a slow movement between them. In the dispensation strain, in the *laisser-faire* or "letting happen," I relinquish my will to an Other who, because he or she receives it, gains a status of much more radical alterity. Between this strain and the theme of seduction, it seemed to me, before hearing you or reading you, that there were two separate worlds: the world of slavery or submission and the world of seduction, which could be analyzed in Hegelian terms. And here you do not make the distinction.

Jean Baudrillard: Is the master the Other of the slave or the slave the Other of the master? In a class, historical or relationship of forces context, they are certainly alienated and that is where thought bases itself as a system of alienation. But on the symbolic scale, it is no longer part of a scale of value that we recognize as

historical, and is no longer true. They are in a position of mutual seduction or reversibility.

In a hierarchical society, for example, the caste member is not the Other of the pariah and the pariah is not the Other of the caste member. There is no psychological position of alterity since they are both, like in Schnitzler's example, implicated in a successive order of incompatible developments. There is no negotiation and therefore no alienation to surpass or transgress. The two "castes" are perfectly foreign to each other and yet absolutely complicit in the symbolic order, in the succession of phases which is more like an order of metamorphoses since lives play on previous lives. It is more like a cycle of metamorphoses than a phenomenon of alienation or alterity. It is not the question of the Other. It is a highly seductive question because there is a kind of reversibility. The two are completely incompatible but fundamentally reversible since there is an order of progression from one form to another.

It is like myths and metamorphoses. It is interesting to see that in all orders other than our own, it does not exist and there is inclusion whereas our Western order of values postulates potential conflict and opposition between the self and the Other. In practically every other culture, when you read that the Araras are Bororos, that there is a cycle in which Araras and Bororos are involved, where there are no separate identities. There is the becoming-Arara of the Bororos; neither is the other's Other. They are metaphoric forms, successors in a symbolic order that combines all creatures and in which there is a form of identity mixing, and of seduction. Like Schnitzler explained, there is both total symbiosis and total incompatibility. It functions differently.

Seduction is even involved in the master-slave story. There is no more will. Each delegates his or her fate to the other; the subsequent

form can be its own subsequent form. And the next form is not an other, in the psychological sense of the term. It is a fate, which is very different.

In response to a question, I would like to clarify that when I say "fatal" it is not in the sense of a religious fatalism. For me, "fatal" means that there is a recognition of letting believe, letting exist, letting want; a recognition that everything that happens to you comes from an inhuman order. It comes completely from somewhere else. It never comes from your own desire or will, since we do not affect to possess them, but it is true that most cultures are based on that type of thing. If it is not based on properties of the self, on identity, on appropriation of the world, then we are in the *laisser-faire* or "letting happen" in the noblest sense of the word and not in the "making happen" or "wanting to happen." Our culture, of course, is on the order of "making happen" and "wanting to happen."

This aspect of our culture is one of the tragic elements of the current relationship with Islam. This relationship may be the only situation today where there is true incomprehensibility. The two orders are completely different. For us, the Other is unacceptable and for them, our order is unacceptable. It is not a problem of historical evolution moving towards their quiet acceptance of our order. There is something completely irreducible or insurmountable. Western political psychologies do not take it into account because they cannot understand it.

In letting believe, letting do and letting want, there is a form of affectation. It is not simple. It is less simple than wanting. It is an affectation. There is a science of artificiality, an art of snobbism that says: "I am nothing, I let things happen."

When you say: "I want to be a machine," it is a pure form of snobbery. It is pure affectation. Yet through this affectation, we can

reach the secret of the reproduction of objects and things by letting the world of machines exist, by only adding a little to it. It is one more machine, a little machine that makes the artificiality of all the other machines. Once again we are in the "little bit more." It is the oversignification that we always bring to something. But we let it come; we do not claim to invent or change the world or even to interpret it and give it meaning. There is a great affectation in relinquishing yourself to the obviousness of the world, to the pure metabolic of things, to pure events or to the other's will.

Masses are similar. Everything happens as if they deferred to someone else—the media or politicians—and gave them the responsibility for interpreting everything. Masses do not interpret. They have no intelligence. They do not seek to understand. They let others interpret and desire for them. It is an extraordinary affectation.

Snobs do the same thing; they do not have their own will. It is like Brummel: "Tell me what I like." There is the story of his exchange with his valet in Scotland before the lakes. He turns to his valet and asks: "Which lake do I prefer?" He has no need for his own desires. He does not exist. That is affectation.

For us, this process has a negative connotation and given a completely pejorative value. It is a passive strategy. I do not want to make connections with Eastern philosophies. We can talk about Japan but Japan today. Otherwise, you could find infinite connections to these philosophies which are philosophies of *laisser-faire* and reversibility.

Marc Guillaume: The break with seduction and reversibility is radical in comparison to Hegel's work. If you reread the first pages of Kojève's introduction to his reading of Hegel, you will see that they posit the axiom of the necessity of putting oneself in

the position of being the other's object of desire in order for the human subject to appear. There is an entire dialectic from which the idea of passivity and reversibility are excluded. It is like the birth of another axiomatic system. All of the analyses that followed accept, at least partially, this Hegelian axiom. The notion of seduction and the reversibility it introduces are therefore something like changing geometries.

Jean Baudrillard: Yes, it leads out of alienation, and completely out of all of the greatness and decadence of alienation.

Question from the audience: Extending the question of activity and passivity, don't you think there is a gap between a book and an experience? When Sophie Calle records her shadowing with language, she goes beyond the mute experience where there is a reversibility in the order of senses—touching-touched—and things that happen on the level of bodies. Whereas when there is language, there is an account of experience because there is activity, with a reflectability that supposes a way of situating oneself in the world. Then you could understand the reaction of the man who was followed when he says: "You are going to record what I am doing." You are immediately put in the position of the interlocutor of intersubjectivity, as you said the other day.

Jean Baudrillard: That is correct. Do contradictions, paradoxes, or secrets require that there be no trace? At first, I would agree. I would say that a pact was broken, another reason for revenge.

Is writing a total betrayal of secrets or is it possible to slip a little bit of it into a nonaesthetic form? For me, it is not an aesthetic book but a book that remains secret, which keeps a trace of secrets.

I think you are basically correct but should we renounce the possibility of projecting an image of it, of being able to say it? There is certainly a way of saying it, a totally stupid and sacrilegious way to account for it. And there are probably various ways of keeping the secret. In the first things she did, there was a way of circling around the secret without divulging, decoding, or betraying it.

There may be no perfection in this case but the best she has done is nonetheless very close to the secret. The journal she kept during the operation was part of the following; publishing it is obviously something different.

The question raised is where the possibility of speaking about it stops. There must be a possibility of putting fate or alterity in this sense into action or in play, as long as their rules are followed. I think it is possible because otherwise she would never have staged it and would never have followed anyone. If she had not followed him, he would not have had a secret. She positions herself as the other's fate and she creates pure alterity; she had to do it. In order for someone to be another's fate, there must be a process of seduction with both total discretion and violence. Violence cannot be taken out; it has to be in play. The rules remain secret. You cannot say what the rule of this game is. She did not say it; she did not know it because she is extremely naïve, she did not look for it. I personally looked for it later but it didn't add anything. She has great naïveté but is capable of extraordinary artifice.

SECRET ALTERITY

1

Because Illusion and Reality are not Opposed

Photography is our exorcism. Primitive society had masks. Bourgeois society had mirrors. We have images.

We think that we control the world with technology. But with technology, the world controls us. It is a very surprising reversal.

You think that you take a picture of something because you like it—in fact, the scene wants its picture taken. You are only a part of its play. The subject is only the agent of the ironic appearance of things. The image is the ideal medium for the vast self-advertising of things and the world. It forces our imagination to withdraw, our passions to come out, breaking the mirror that we hold up, hypocritically, to capture them.

The miracle today is that appearances, which had long been willing servants, have turned on us, turned against us sovereignly through the very technology that we use to push them out. They now come from somewhere else, from their own place, from the heart of their banality. They irrupt from everywhere, joyfully multiplying themselves.

The pleasure of photography is objective excitement. Someone who has not experienced the objective elation of the image, at

dawn, in a city, in a desert, will never understand the pataphysical delicacy of the world.

A thing wants to be photographed because it does not want to reveal its meaning or reflect itself. It wants to be captured directly, violated in place, illuminated in all its detail. It does not want to become an image so it can last but so it can disappear. And the subject is only a good medium if he or she enters into this game, if he or she exorcises his or her own glance and judgment, if he or she takes pleasure in his or her own absence.

The fabric of the object's details, its light and lines indicate this interruption of the subject, this intrusion of the world; it makes the suspense of photography. Through the image, the world imposes its discontinuity, its parceling, its artificial instantaneity. The photographic image is the purest image because it does not simulate time or movement and abides but the most rigorous irrealism. All of the other forms of the image (cinema, video, computer-generated, etc.) are only diluted forms of the pure image and its break with reality.

The intensity of the image corresponds to the extent of its denial of reality, to its invention of another stage. Making an object into an image means removing dimensions, one by one: weight, relief, odor, depth, time, continuity and, of course, meaning. The image receives its power to fascinate at the expense of this disembodiment. It becomes the medium of pure objectality, and it becomes transparent to a more subtle form of seduction.

Adding these dimensions back—relief, movement, emotion, idea, meaning and desire—to make it better or more real, or better simulated, is a complete misunderstanding of the image. And technology is caught in its own trap.

The desire to photograph may come from this realization: seen as a whole, in terms of meaning, the world is disappointing. Seen in detail and by surprise, it is always perfectly obvious.

Vertigo of the object's perpetual detail. Magical eccentricity of the detail. In photography, things connect by means of a technical operation that corresponds to the connections of their banality. One is an image for another image, a photo for another photo: contiguous fragments. No "world view," no glance: the refraction of the world, in its detail, on equal terms.

The absence of the world in each detail, like the absence of the subject sketched in each feature of a face. We can also reach this illumination of detail through a mental gymnastic or the subtleness of meaning. But technology does it effortlessly. It may be a trap.

Objects are such that their disappearance changes them into themselves. It is how they mislead us and make their illusion. But it is also how they remain faithful to themselves and how we should be faithful to them: in their minute details, in their precise figuration, in the sensuous illusion of their appearance and connection. Illusion is not opposed to reality, it is another, more subtle reality that envelops the first with the sign of its disappearance.

Each photographed object is only the trace left by the disappearance of the rest. It is an almost perfect crime, an almost complete resolution of the world that only allows the illusion of an object to shine, an object whose image then becomes an unsolvable puzzle. From this radical exception, you have an unparalleled view of the world.

Production is not the question. It is all in the art of disappearing. Only that which arrives in the mode of disappearance is truly other. But this disappearance must leave a trace, even the place where the Other, the world or the object appeared. It is in fact the only way for the Other to exist: through your disappearance.

"We shall be your favorite disappearing act!"

The only deep desire is the object desire (including the sexual object). Not the desire of what I miss or even of what (or who) misses me—which is more subtle—but the desire of what or who does not miss me, of what can exist very well without me. That which does not miss me is the Other, radical alterity.

The desire is always desire of this foreign perfection as well as the desire to shatter or undo it. We only have passion for what we want to share and destroy in its perfection and impunity.

Taking a photograph does not mean taking the world as an object but to make it become an object, uncovering the alterity buried beneath its so-called reality, making it emerge like a strange attractor and setting this strange attraction in an image.

Becoming once again a "thing among things," all foreign to each other yet complicit, opaque yet familiar—more than a universe of opposing, transparent subjects.

Photography brings us closest to a world without images or pure appearance.

The photographic image is dramatized in the struggle between the subject's will to impose an order, a vision, and the object's will to impose its discontinuity and immediateness. In the best case, the

object wins and the photo-image is the image of a fractal world, with no equation or summons. It is therefore different from art and cinema, which in idea, vision and movement, always try to represent a totality.

Against the philosophy of the subject, of the look, of distance from the world to capture it better, the antiphilosophy of the object, of disconnection between objects, of the random succession of partial objects and details. Like a musical syncopation or the movement of particles.

Photography brings us closest to the fly with its faceted eye and broken line of flight.

For the object to be captured, the subject must divest itself of itself. But this is its final adventure, its last chance, the dispossession of the self in the reverberations of a world where it only occupies the blind spot of representation. The object has a much greater power to employ since it has not gone through the mirror stage and does not have to deal with its image, its identity, or its resemblance. Without desire and with nothing to say, it escapes commentary and interpretation.

If we can capture something of this dissemblance and singularity, something in the "real" world and in the very principle of reality changes.

The goal is to make the object the place of the subject's absence and disappearance instead of imposing the presence and representation of the subject on it. The object can be a situation, a light, a living creature. The main thing is for the overly well-wrought machinery of representation to break (along with the moral and philosophical dialectics attached to it) and to have the

world emerge as an indissoluble certainty through a pure event of the image.

It is a reversal of the mirror. Until now, the subject was the mirror of representation. The object was its content. Now the object says: "I shall be your mirror!"

Photography has an obsessive, temperamental, ecstatic and narcissistic aspect. It is a solitary activity. The photographic image is discontinuous, punctual, unpredictable and irreparable like the state of things at a given moment. Every retouch, every regret, every staging takes on an abominably aesthetic quality. The solitude of the photographic subject, in space and time, is correlative to the solitude of the object and its temperamental silence.

The object must be set, watched intensely and immobilized by the look. The object does not pose; the operator must hold his or her breath to empty time and body. But also mentally keep his or herself from breathing and think of nothing so that the mental surface is as pure as the film. Not taking him or herself as a representative being but as an object that works in its own cycle without concern for the staging, in a kind of delirious circumspection of self and object. This enchantment can also be found in games—the excitement of going beyond one's own image into kind of a happy fate. You play and you do not play at the same time. Emptiness in the self and around the self occurs the same way, through a kind of initiatory enfolding. You do no longer project yourself in an image—you produce the world as a singular event, without commentary.

Photography is not a real-time image. It keeps the moment of the negative, the suspense of the negative. This slight discrepancy

allows the image to exist as such, as an illusion that is different from the real world. This slight discrepancy gives it the discreet charm of a previous life unfolding in real time, something digital images and video lack. In computer-generated images, reality is already gone. For that reason, there are truly images.

There is a form of astonishment in photography, of suspense, of phenomenal immobility that interrupts the rush of events. The freeze frame freezes the world. The suspension is never definitive, however, because photos refer to each other and the only end of the image is in images. Yet each image is distinct from the others.

Through this distinction and secret complicity, photography regains the aura that it lost with cinema. But cinema can also rediscover this quality of the image—complicit in and yet foreign to narration—since it has its own stasis animated by all the energy of movement—crystallizing an entire unfolding in a fixed image according to a principle of condensation that counters the principle of high dilution and dispersion of all of our current images. In Godard's films for example.

It is rare for a text to show off the same obviousness, the same instantaneity, the same magic as a shadow, a light, a material. However, in Nabokov and Gombrowicz, for example, writing sometimes finds something of the material, objectal autonomy of things without quality, the erotic power and supernatural disorder of a null world.

True immobility is not an inert body but the stillness of a weight on the end of a pendulum whose oscillations have just stopped and which still vibrates imperceptibly. It is the immobility of time in the instant, of photographic "instantaneity" behind which lies

the idea of movement, but only the idea. The image is there to make one respect movement without ever showing it, which would dispel its illusion. Things dream of this immobility and so do we. Cinema is now concentrating on it more and more, with its nostalgia of slow motion and freeze frames as the highest moments of drama.

The same is true of silence. The paradox of television may be that it renewed the charm of the image's silence.

The silence of photography. One of its most precious qualities in contrast with television and cinema, which always have to be silenced, though without success. The silence of the image that needs no (or should not need any) commentary. But there is also the silence of the object that is ripped from the cumbersome and deafening context of the real world. Whatever the noise and violence that surround it, a photo gives the object back its immobility and quiet. It creates the equivalent of the desert, phenomenal isolation, in the midst of urban confusion. It is the only way to travel through cities silently, to move through the world in silence.

Photography accounts for the state of the world in our absence. The lens explores this absence. It explores this absence even in faces or bodies filled with emotion. Our best photographs are of those for whom the other does not exist or no longer exists—primitive people, miserable people, objects. Only the inhuman is photogenic. This is the price of a reciprocal astonishment and thus a complicity between us and the world, and between the world and us.

Human beings are too sentimental. Even animals and plants are too sentimental. Only objects have no sexual or sentimental aura.

There is therefore no need to violate them in cold blood to photograph them. Because they have no problems with resemblance, they are remarkably identical to themselves. Through technology, you can only add to the magical certainty of their indifference, to the innocence of their staging and put what they incarnate into relief: the objective illusion and subjective disillusion of the world.

It is very difficult to photograph individuals or faces. Photographic precision is impossible for someone whose psychological precision leaves so much to desire. Every human being is the locus of such a staging, the place of such a complex (de)construction that the lens removes its character in spite of his or herself. Its meaning has changed so much that it is almost impossible to separate it to find the secret form of its absence.

They say that there is always a moment to catch when the most banal or mysterious creature reveals its secret identity. But its secret alterity is more interesting. Instead of looking for the identity behind the mask, we should look for the mask behind the identity—the figure that haunts us and makes us turn away from our identity—the hidden divinity that haunts each and every one of us for a moment, at some point in time.

For objects, savages, animals, and primitive peoples, alterity and singularity are certain. An animal has no identity and yet is not alienated. It is a stranger to itself and its own ends. They have the charm of creatures who do not know their own image but who therefore enjoy an organic familiarity with their own body and all others. If we can rediscover this connivance and strangeness, then we are closer to the poetic quality of alterity: the

quality of dreams and active (REM) sleep, with identity equated to deep sleep.

Objects and primitive peoples are ahead of us in photogenic terms. Free of psychology and introspection, they are able to keep their seduction in front of the lens. Free of representation, they are able to keep their presence whole. This is much less sure for the subject. The subject—is it the price of intelligence or a sign of stupidity?—most often succeeds in denying his or her alterity and exists within the limits of his or her identity. What subjects need to do is to make themselves more mysterious to themselves, and make human beings in general more strange (or foreign) to each other. This does not mean taking them as subjects but making them objects, making them other. In other words, it means taking them for what they are.

"You must capture people in their relationship to themselves, in their silence." (H. Cartier-Bresson)

We live for a large part in an arrangement of will and representation, but the crux of the story lies elsewhere. Everyone is certainly there with his or her desire and will but, secretly, decisions and thoughts come from somewhere else; originality lies in this bizarre interface. Originality is not in recognition in the mirror or in the lens that wants to recognize him or her. Resemblance is always the trap. The greatness of the image lies in defying resemblance, in seeking elsewhere the things that come from elsewhere.

There was a time when the confrontation with the lens was dramatic, when images were at stake, when they were a magical, dangerous reality. There was no complacency with images—fear, defiance,

pride—which gave every turn-of-the-century farmer or bourgeois surrounded by his family the same deadly or fierce seriousness of a primitive. Their being freezes, their eyes dilate in front of the image, they spontaneously act dead. And the lens becomes wild as well. All of the promiscuity of the photographer and his or her object is excluded (as opposed to contemporary practices). The distance is insurmountable, and photography is the technical equivalent of Segalen's radical exoticism. There is a veritable nobility in the photographic event, like a distant echo of the primitive shock of cultures.

In the heroic period, the photographic relationship is a duel and death is possible. The cadaverous stillness of the object, his or her absence of expression (but not of character) is just as powerful as mobility of the lens, which it holds in the balance. The destiny he or she has in mind, his or her mental universe directly imprints the film—an effect that is just as strong today as it was a century ago when the photo was taken. We capture the wild or the primitive in our lens, but they imagine us.

This death, this virtual disappearance of the object in the heroic period is still present in the anthropological heart of the image, according to Barthes. The "punctum" is the figure of the void, of absence opposed to the "studium," which is the context of meaning and reference. The void at the heart of the image gives it the magic and power that are usually pushed out by significations.

In festivals, galleries, museums and exhibits, images overflow with messages, testimonies, aesthetic sentimentality, and stereotypes of recognition. They prostitute the image to its meaning, to what it wants to communicate; the image is taken hostage by the one who took it or by current media events. In the current proliferation of

images, death and violence are everywhere; but they are pathetic, ideological, spectacular. They are nothing like the "punctum" with its fatal arrangement internal to the image that has been pushed out.

Instead of the image symbolically containing death, death closes on the image (in the external form of an exhibit, museum, or the cultural necropolises that exalt photograph.).

The image is off-camera, out of the frame. Photographic direction, either inside the image or the institution, is meaningless. Buried under commentary, walled in by aesthetic praise, condemned to the plastic surgery of the museum, the internal hallucination of the image is moribund. There is not even a "stadium" opposed to a "punctum"; there is only a circulating medium. And the fundamentally dangerous form of the image is resolved in the cultural circulation of masterpieces.

I regret the aestheticization of photography. I regret that it became one of the Fine Arts and has entered the realm of culture. The photographic image, with its technological essence, came below and beyond aesthetics and was thus a substantial revolution in our mode of representation. Its emergence called into question art's aesthetic monopoly on the image. Today, the opposite is occurring: art is devouring photography.

Photography is deeply inscribed in another dimension. Not an aesthetic dimension but something like *trompe-l'œil*, which has been present throughout the history of art while remaining indifferent to art's upheavals. *Trompe-l'œil* is only apparently realist; in fact, it is tied to the obviousness of the world and to such a minute resemblance that it becomes magical. *Trompe-l'œil*, like photography,

retains something of the magic of the image, of the world's radical illusion. A wild, irreducible form closer to the origins and tribulations of representation—connected to the appearance and obviousness of the world, albeit a misleading obviousness—which is therefore opposed to any realist vision and still today less viable in terms of judgment and taste than in terms of pure fascination.

Through its irrealist play with technology, through its cutting out, its stillness, its silence, its phenomenological reduction of movement and sometimes color, through these aspects, photography imposes itself as the purest and most artificial image. It is not beautiful, it is worse and thereby takes on the force of an object in a world from which the aesthetic principle is fading.

Technology gives photography its unique character. Through technicality, our world reveals itself to be radically nonobjective. The photographic lens [*objectif*] paradoxically reveals the inobjectivity of the world—that something that will not be solved by analysis or resemblance.

Technology takes us beyond resemblance. It takes us to the heart of the *trompe-l'œil* of reality. Our view of technology is transformed at the same time. It becomes the site of a double game like an enlarging mirror of illusion and forms. The world and technological devices are complicit; objective technology and the power of the object converge. Photography is the art of slipping into this complicity. Not to control the process but to play with it, to make evident that the game is not over.

The world in itself does not resemble anything. As a concept and a discourse, it relates to many other things; as a pure object, it cannot be identified.

The photographic operation is a type of reflex or automatic writing of the obviousness of the world, which is not one.

In the generic illusion of the image, there is no problem of reality. It disappears in its movement, going immediately and spontaneously beyond true and false, beyond reality and illusion, beyond good and evil.

The image is not a medium that we must learn to use correctly. It is what it is; it is beyond all of our moral calculations. It is immoral in its essence; the becoming-image of the world is a becoming-immoral. It is up to us to escape our representation and become the immoral vector of the image. It is up to us to become objects again, to become others again in a seductive relationship with the world.

Let the silent complicity between object and lens, between appearances and technology, between the physical quality of light and the metaphysical complexity of the technological devices unfold without bringing in vision or meaning.

Because the object sees us. The object dreams us. The world reflects us, the world thinks us. This is the fundamental rule.

Having the object do all of the work is the magic of photography. Photographers would never admit it and contend that all originality comes in their own inspiration, their own photographic interpretation of the world. By confusing their subjective vision with the reflex miracle of the photographic act, they can only make photos that are bad, or too good.

2

What They Looked Like Photographed

If you are someone who thinks that photography must free itself from any obligation of meaning, from any imposed signification, then the in-significant naturally becomes its object. More precisely, in a world overflowing with all possible meanings, photography must bring out the insignificance that lies at the center of the object—it must find the void at the heart of the image, as Warhol said. The different uses of photography call metaphysics into question and reject the metaphysics of the image.

Our superstitious view of reality leads us to believe that the world presents itself to us under the (specious, superficial) guise of appearance and that truth, the deep meaning of things, waits behind the mask or veil of appearances. The opposite is true. Meaning imposes itself on us first; the empire of meaning is our true morality. The obviousness of meaning masks the obviousness of the senses.

In fact, appearances are nothing less than evident. We should instead say that they "fall under meaning," in the sense that they succumb to it.

That is why I see photography and the radical, radically "insignificant" use of the image as a true public service. It relieves us of excess meaning and, against our obsessive tendency to interpret everything, to give everything meaning, gives us the opposite

tendency to resist the excess production of meaning through images (let alone thought). Photography lets us enter a constellation of secrets, emptiness, and silence that foil any attempts at interpretation and act through manifestation, indecision and surprise.

As a result, to the extent that we are (still) in it, the world is never as it is. The world is only objectively real when there is no one there to see it. Our affectation to provide a mirror image of the world or to express reality faithfully is an illusion.

From the start, photography has contributed to reinforcing or grounding this superstition of the world as it is because of the realistic precision of photos. Finally, a "real" picture of the world. (At the very same moment, in the 19th century, emerging technology began to dissolve this reality into increasing abstraction, leading today to the virtual reality from which reality has disappeared).

At best, the photographic image is a trace, perhaps a nostalgic trace, of something disappearing. The vast profusion of images today plays a decisive role in this disappearance of reality. The violence of the image, the violence done to reality by images occurs when images are reduced to nothing more than the shadow of reality. This violence is correlative to the violence done to images by meaning, by media staging and by all of the determinations we impose on them. It is particularly true when photography is reduced to being nothing more than the technological medium for an undiscoverable reality.

We are wrong about photography if we consider it to be art in the conventional sense or a kind of recording device. On the contrary, it requires a magical rethinking of the image and an initiatory approach.

This position does not take reality for granted. It approaches reality as it emerges, still ambivalent, "poorly lateralized," before

it has the time to signify. It separates photography from all of the commanding interventions, documentaries, ideologies, moralities and aesthetics that represent the violence done to images and the world as it is (or appears to be) in the name of a world that should be.

Of course, these considerations are themselves an attempt to interpret, to give meaning and they therefore contradict what they say. Commenting on images that want no commentary is perfectly useless. The same contradiction is found in representing something that does not want to be represented. And it is all the more paradoxical because it is a "fuzzy tendency," a "vague trend" without any exact reference or specific objective that nonetheless aims to distance itself from the conventional use of images.

There is, however, a kind of philosophy behind this "trend." Behind the "vague" there is the sense of the impossibility of precisely representing reality, the impossibility of accounting for its fluidity, ephemerality, and imprecision. There is a sense of being and bearing witness to this impossibility and action taken to capture its movement and mode of appearance through anamorphosis and improvisation. All images are different, and freely so, but they secretly converge at a level other than the level of witnessing or stories. In any case, there could only be "objective reality" in a world from which we are absent, a world of pure objects from which we have disappeared. Appearances would be gone with us, for who needs appearances in a world without gazes?

Photography is meaningless if it only reflects the subject's photographic desire and not the world's desire to be photographed and seen but equally to see and impose itself on the gaze. This reciprocity in inscribed in the medium, in the camera itself. It is never just a

technological agent but an invitation to the world to produce itself as an image. If we do not feel that reciprocity, then photography is just an empty, unilateral technique.

It is a delicate operation with a subtle play between subject, object and medium. Who will come out on top? There is the chance that the object will win in the form of objective realism (documentary, reportage) and the contrary chance that the subject will impose his or her style and point of view (the photographer's "style," "universe," or even "work") But there is a third risk: the risk that the medium itself, the machine, imposes its law (or its desire, if we can say machines have desires). We have known since William Flusser that a camera, a photographic machine left to its own devices and internal logic only tends towards one thing: exhausting all of its possibilities. In other words, functioning non-stop no matter what the occasion, scenario or actors. Completing its program without hesitation—at the expense of subject and object, who become mere technical agents of the camera's "will."

This explains the automatic proliferation of satellite images where the photos (but are they still photos?) are just scans of the world's banality adjusted by remote control.

Digital images best portray the risk of endless images lacking the reciprocity of the world's view of us and our view of the world. In this sense, digital images are one extreme of the photographic medium but also its liquidation. These countless images are not made to be seen but to pass by the world without seeing it. If photography, as some have said, is a powerful aphrodisiac, then its digital use is just an extended form of pornography. Maybe the camera is also an instrument of perversion: allowing those exiled from their own existence to collect details about their life

so that nothing that happened is lost. Or it could be a desperate form of witnessing.

The most exciting aspect of photography, however, is the way objects appear. In the desert, in a city or on a trip, the way objects appear, the phenomenal obviousness of the world is a source of absolute pleasure (whereas analysis and writing are a source of anxiety). Photographic desire comes from this, aiming beyond reality for objects in their poetic instantaneity. It is more like a kind of phenomenology.

The desire to photograph is the opposite of the desire to signify at all costs, to bear witness, or to inform. It is closer to astonishment and illusion. Closer to disappearance as well, since something does not want to become an image in order to endure but to disappear. The photographic gaze, or the gaze of light, sits literally on the surface of things and illustrates their fragmentary appearance for a very brief moment of time. Taking a photograph does not mean accounting for the objective world, it means making it into an object, letting it impose its immediacy and discontinuity, its temporary, unpredictable, and irreparable nature through the happy fate of appearances.

Capturing things in their pure obviousness is a dream. The subject is the main obstacle, with his or her desire to represent, to signify at all costs. A pervasive information and communication morality rules the production and profusion of images today (on television and in the media, for example). But it is not "visual," as Serge Daney would say. Photography is something different. Detachment and a certain objective casualness are necessary to bring out the way things appear without forcing them. Only when we give images back their singularity can reality recover its

true image. Through images, we must tear reality away from the principle of reality.

Simply put, photography gives phenomena their importance while calling our presence into question. We could even say that photography records the world in our absence. Through images, things, while giving us a sign, tell us that they do not need us to exist totally in their form, light, and metamorphosis. Images are the trace of a philosophical experience: the experience of the radical indifference of the world. Thus its affinity with stillness, deserts, and silence. Photography is always desert-like, deserted by meaning. Deserts are meaningless too; they are another stage: networks of light and fossils of inhuman intelligence. Thus photography has always been associated, from its origins, with traveling shots in space, in the desert of the cities, and in the space-time of travel.

A true photo is never far from the void—it empties the space around it and freezes the world in a frame. It has to be exceptional; it must be used with care. Unfortunately, in our constant flux, the worst thing for us today is the impossibility of a world without images, a world that is not constantly caught up in image-feedback, captured, filmed, and photographed before being seen. At the heart of this whirlwind lies the disappearance of the image, of the image as illusion, as an exception, as a primitive scene.

More and more images represent ad nauseam the same events; they overlap, form series, and negate each other. In this visual flux, they do not even have time to become images. They lose their freedom most of all. In the promiscuity of the visual flux, each one takes space from the others. But images must be free and sovereign; each one's aura should eclipse many others—since images are engaged in a constant duel. If they are alive, then they must follow

the laws of living creatures: selection and elimination. We are headed in the opposite direction today, especially with digital images where the parade of images resembles gene sequencing.

In the reign of photographic expressionism, the world can only wait to be witness to a subject's existence and a subject's gaze. Maintaining this position is an utter mistake; even "exposure" is not essential to photographic vision. Each second, there are multiple scenes, lights and events that we photograph *mentally*—without counting the ones we would dream of photographing (we even dream of photographing our dreams). If the camera is a technological extension of the eye, the photographic image is an extension of the gaze: not only an objective perception, but a vision. Sometimes, but only sometimes, there is a picture that materializes this vision of things—not things as they are in themselves, but such as photography changes them into themselves: what they look like *photographed*.

RADICAL ALTERITY

Jean Baudrillard | Marc Guillaume

Translated by Ames Hodges

Introduction by Marc Guillaume

With artificial intelligence and the alterity of machines, we are still faced with the same issue: alterity is in danger. It is a masterpiece in peril, an object lost or missing from our system, from the system of artificial intelligence, and the system of communication in general.

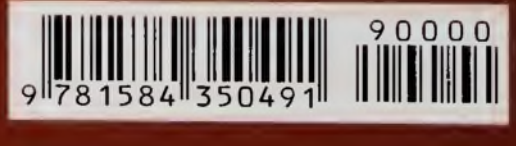
Where is the Other today? Can Otherness challenge our arrogant, insular cultural narcissism? From artificial intelligence to the streets of Venice, from early explorers to contemporary photographers, Jean Baudrillard and Marc Guillaume discuss the traces of radical alterity in our world. These provocative seminars, held in 1990 and 1991, follow the multiple, intertwined trajectories first projected in Baudrillard's work and his reading of the "radical exoticism" posited by Victor Segalen—ideas Baudrillard extends into the realms of mass media, pseudonyms, technology, and that illusorily close yet radically foreign "primitive society of the future," America.

In a world where no corner is unexplored, the Other remains a challenge to thought, a crack in the shell of universal understanding, impossible to communicate but potentially the linchpin of communication itself. Together, Baudrillard and Guillaume explore the threatened and fatal figures of radical alterity.

Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) was a philosopher, sociologist, cultural critic, and theorist of postmodernity who challenged all existing theories of contemporary society with wit and rigor. An outsider to the French intellectual establishment, he is internationally renowned as a twenty-first century visionary, reporter, and provocateur.

Economist and professor at the Université de Paris-Dauphine, Marc Guillaume has published several works in French rethinking contemporary socioeconomics and has collaborated with such thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Jacques Attali.

SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS
distributed by **The MIT Press**
ISBN-13: 978-1-58435-049-1



It is this dual—carnivalesque and cannibalistic—form we see reflected in every corner of the world . . . They are taken up everywhere, with greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm, but in a totally ambiguous way, by all those 'underdeveloped' peoples who have not so far heard the good word of the universal and, hence, provide fertile ground for missionary work and forced conversion to modernity, but who, more even than being exploited or oppressed, are simply made a laughing stock and transfigured into caricatures of the Whites like those monkeys that used to be dressed up in admiral's costumes and put on show in fairs.

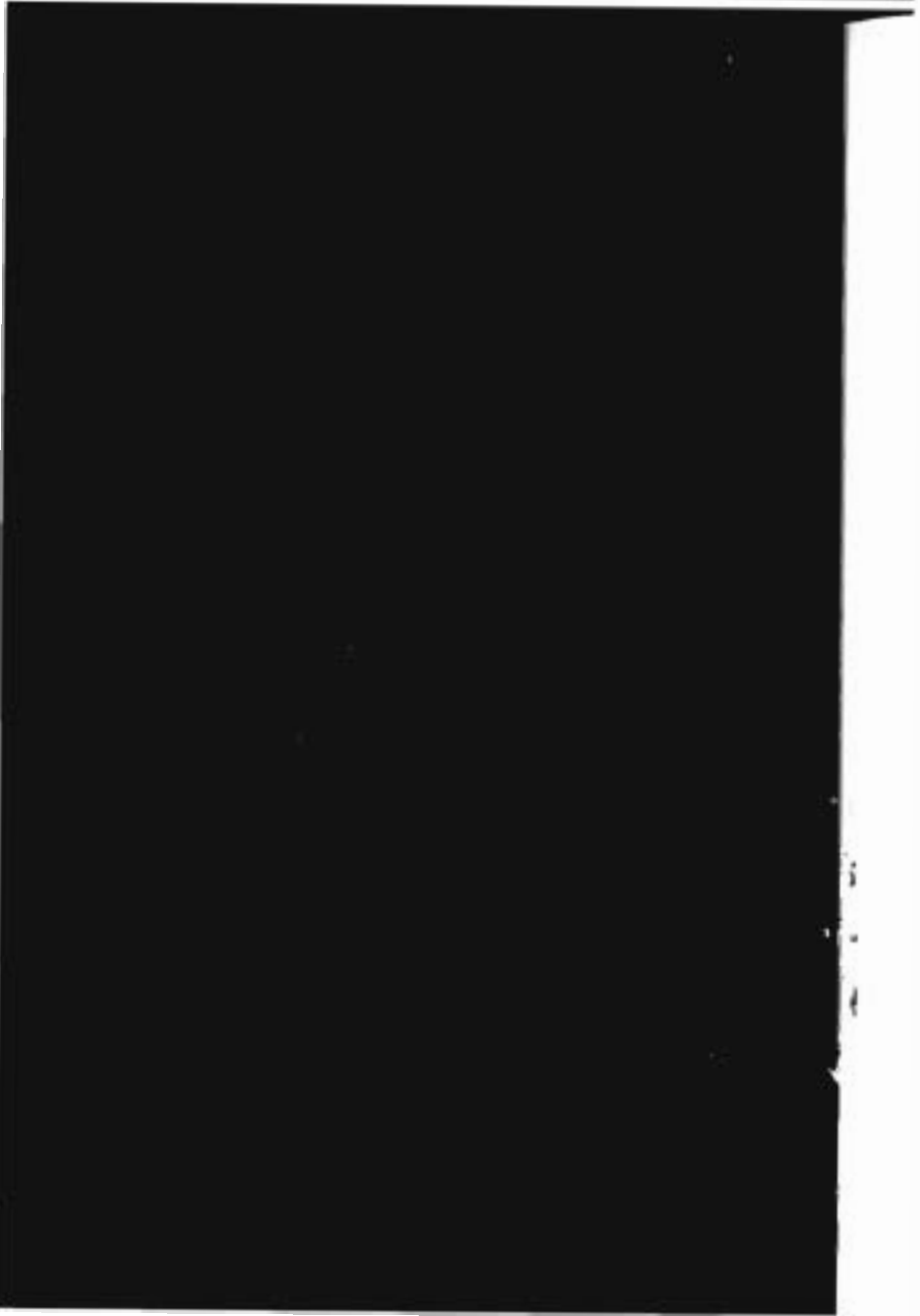
ISBN 9781906497200

Jean Baudrillard CARNIVAL AND CANNIBAL

Jean Baudrillard

CARNIVAL AND CANNIBAL

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER



CARNIVAL AND CANNIBAL

VENTRILOQUOUS EVIL

THE FRENCH LIST

Jeff Roberts
4/20/200
Age 29

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

CARNIVAL AND CANNIBAL

VENTRILOQUOUS EVIL

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER

Seagull Books
LONDON NEW YORK CALCUTTA

Seagull Books 2010

Carnival & cannibals, Le Mal ventriloque by Jean Baudrillard
© Editions de L'Herne, 2008

Published by arrangement with Editions de L'Herne,
c/o Agence litteraire Pierre Astier & Associes. All rights reserved

English language translation copyright © Chris Turner 2010
First published in English by Seagull Books 2010

ISBN-13 978 1 9064 9 720 0

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Typeset and designed by Sunandini Banerjee, Seagull Books
Printed at Leelabati Printers, Calcutta, India

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CARNIVAL AND CANNIBAL

OR

THE PLAY OF GLOBAL ANTAGONISM

WE MAY START OUT from Marx's famous saying about history occurring first as authentic event and then being repeated as farce. In this way, we may see modernity as the initial adventure of the European West, then as an immense farce repeating itself on a planetary scale, in all those latitudes to which Western religious, technical, economic and political values have

been exported. This 'carnivalization' passes through the stages of evangelization, colonization, decolonization and globalization, which themselves are historic. What is less visible is that this hegemony, this ascendancy on the part of a global order, whose models seem irresistible and not just its technical and military models, but its cultural and ideological ones too—is accompanied by an extraordinary process of reversion, in which power is slowly undermined, devoured or 'cannibalized' by the very people it 'carnivalizes'. The prototype of this silent cannibalization its 'primal scene', so to speak—could be said to be that solemn mass at Recife in Brazil in the sixteenth century, at which the bishops who had come expressly from Portugal to celebrate the Indians' passive conversion were devoured by them in an excessive display of evangelical love (cannibalism as extreme form of hospitality). As the

first victims of this evangelical masquerade, the Indians pushed things spontaneously to the limit and beyond: they absorbed physically those who had absorbed them spiritually.

It is this dual—carnivalesque and cannibalistic—form we see reflected in every corner of the world, with the exportation of our moral values (human rights, democracy), our principles of economic rationality, growth, performance and spectacle. They are taken up everywhere, with greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm, but in a totally ambiguous way, by all those 'underdeveloped' peoples who have not so far heard the good word of the universal and, hence, provide fertile ground for missionary work and forced conversion to modernity, but who, more even than being exploited or oppressed, are simply made a laughing stock and transfigured into caricatures of the Whites—like those monkeys that used to

be dressed up in admiral's costumes and put on show in fairs.

Meanwhile, they ape the Whites, who regard them as apes. In one way or another, they return the derision a hundredfold to those who inflict it on them; they turn into the living derision of their masters, trapping the Whites in their grotesque doubles, as though in a distorting mirror. There is a magnificent illustration of all this in Jean Rouch's film *Les Maîtres-Fous*, in which the Blacks who work in the city meet up in the forest in the evenings to ape their Western masters—employer, general and bus driver—and, in a kind of trance, to exorcize them. This is not a political act, but a sacrificial 'acting-out': a stigmatization of domination using the very marks of that domination.

But we may ask ourselves whether these Whites—the employer, the cop and the general: the 'native-born' Whites—are not already figures in a masquerade; we may ask whether they are not already caricatures of themselves, characters taking themselves for their own masks. The Whites may thus said to have carnivalized—and hence cannibalized—themselves long before exporting all this to the whole world. We have here the great parade of a culture in the grip of a profusion of resources and offering itself for its own consumption, with mass consumerism and the consumption of all possible goods merely providing the most current form of this self-devouring. And to this farce is added that other dimension Walter Benjamin spoke of, through which today's humanity succeeds in turning its worst alienation into an aesthetic, spectacular delight.

It is all a great collective spectacle, in which the West decks itself out not only in the spoils of all the other cultures—in its museums, fashions and art—but also in the spoils of its own

culture. And, indeed, art fully plays its role in this turn of events: Picasso annexes the best of a 'primitive' art and the African artist today copies Picasso as part of an international aesthetic.

If all the peoples decked out in the signs of whiteness and with all the exotic technologies are at the same time the living parody of these things, a deriding of them, this is because these things are quite simply laughable, but *we* can no longer see it. It is when they extend to the global level that universal values are revealed as a swindle. If there was an original historical and Western—event of modernity, we have exhausted all its consequences and it has taken a fatal, farcical turn for us ourselves. But the logic of modernity demanded that we impose it on the entire world, demanded that the *fatum* of the Whites should be that of the race of Cain, and that no one should escape this

homogenization, this mystification of the species.

When the Blacks attempt to whiten themselves, they are merely the distorted mirror of the negrification of the Whites, self-mystified from the outset by their own mastery. So the whole decor of modern multiracial civilization is merely a *trompe l'oeil* universe in which all particularities of race, sex and culture can be said to have been falsified to the point of being parodies of themselves.

To such a degree that it is the entire species which, through colonization and decolonization, parodies itself and destroys itself in a gigantic *dispositif* of simulation and mimetic violence, in which indigenous cultures are worn as threadbare as Western culture. For Western culture does not, in any sense, triumph: it long ago lost its soul in the effort (Hélé Béji). It has carnivalized itself, super-

adding to this the absurdity of setting up, at enormous expense, the global museum of the cheap finery of all cultures.

Perhaps we should go back to Borges's profound parable, 'Fauna of Mirrors', in which the defeated, consigned to the other side of the mirror, are reduced to resemblance, to being merely the reflected image of their conquerors. However, says Borges, the defeated gradually begin to resemble their conquerors less and less and will, one day, pass back through the mirror and put an end to the Empire's hegemony . . . If we consider what is really happening in this planetary confrontation, we see that the subjugated peoples, from the depths of their slavery, far from resembling their masters less and less and taking their liberatory revenge, have begun to resemble them more and more, have begun to mimic their model grotesquely, piling on thick the marks of their servitude—which is the

other way of taking one's revenge—a fatal strategy which we cannot term 'victorious' since it is lethal for both.

It is the whole of whiteness that buries blackness beneath the features of Carnival. And it is the whole of blackness that absorbs whiteness beneath the features of the Cannibal. Cannibalization against carnivalization—it seems as though the entire species has, by an immense anthropological sideslip, strayed off into this masquerade.

This is the paradox of universal values: all the social movements in Black society, this whole caricature of power and countervailing power, all these legacies of a Western bourgeoisie which might almost be said, in its 'historical' coherence, to amount to an original event. Ultimately, modern Western culture should never have stepped outside its own order where it constituted a kind of singular-

ity. But that was not an option; it could not escape this violent extrapolation because it already bore its own denial—and, at the same time, its own universal assertion—within itself. We are now seeing the backwash of this immense development in the form of an accelerated decomposition of the universal. And globalization is merely the theatre of this decomposition—of this farce consecutive upon history.

FARCES OF THE SCHWARZENEGGER TYPE may serve as an illustration of any sort of power-structure, even of the way politics works. We may analyse this as a caricature of democracy, as a grotesque parody of it, which, after it was unmasked, would leave us with the hope of a rational way of exercising power. But if we entertain the hypothesis that government can be sustained only by this grotesque simulation and that it is not, in any sense, the representation

of society but, rather, a kind of challenge to it, then Bush is the equivalent of Schwarzenegger. More than this, the two fulfil their roles perfectly and are 'the right men in the right place'. Not because a country or a people could be said to have the leaders it deserves, as the saying goes, but because they are emanations of global power *as it is*. The current political structure of the United States corresponds literally to its domination at the world level: Bush leads the United States in the same way that the US exerts its hegemony over the rest of the planet. There is, then, no reason to devise an alternative (one might even argue that the domination of a global power reflects the absolute precedence of the human species over all the others).

This is the whole paradox of power. We have to rid ourselves once and for all of the—very '68-ish—illusion of installing imagination

or intelligence in power, though this is, ultimately, an Enlightenment notion (all the naive utopian slogans of 1968 need revising, not just 'The imagination in power!' but also 'Take your desires for reality!' and 'Enjoy unconstrainedly!' We need to look again at all these things that have been realized or hyperrealized 'unconstrainedly' by the mere development of the system).

It all depends what idea you have of power. If you assume that intelligence should be in power, then the persistence, if not indeed permanence, of stupidity in power is inexplicable (and yet the rare historical examples of intelligence in power show that it most often veers off very quickly down the paths of stupidity). This would be the proof, then, that, in some way, stupidity is one of the attributes of power, virtually a perk of office. Perhaps this goes back to the ancestral function of having

to assume the accursed share of the social—including stupidity—which would take us back to the 'power figures' of primitive societies and explain why the most limited, unimaginative individuals stay in power the longest.

It would perhaps also explain the general tendency of populations to delegate their sovereignty to the most innocuous, oligocephalic of their fellow citizens. It is a kind of evil genius that induces people to choose someone more stupid than themselves, both as a precaution against a responsibility you are always wary of whenever it is foisted on you from above, and out of secret jubilation at watching the spectacle of stupidity and corruption afforded by those in power. Contrary to the democratic illusions of the Enlightenment, it is only by a superhuman effort that we can resolve to choose the best people; this is why, particularly in a period of turbulence, citizens

will turn in their millions to the person who doesn't ask them to think. It is a kind of silent conspiracy, analogous in the political sphere to the conspiracy we find in the field of contemporary art. This is how, from a rather different angle, Bush fulfils all the roles. On the one hand, Bin Laden declares that he needs Mr Bush's stupidity, hence that he wants him to be re-elected. On the other, a majority of Americans desire the presence in the White House of someone whose stupidity and banality underwrite their own conformism. The more stupid he is, the less personally idiotic they will feel.

In this 'stupid', hereditary function, power is a virtual configuration that absorbs any element and metabolizes it to its advantage. It may be formed of countless intelligent particles, but that will change nothing of its opaque structure: it is like a body that changes its cells but continues to be the same. In this way, every

molecule of the American nation will soon come from somewhere else – as if by blood transfusion. America will have become Black, Indian, Hispanic or Puerto Rican, without ceasing to be America. And it will be even more mythically American for no longer being 'authentically' so. And the more fundamentalist for no longer having any foundation (if, indeed, it ever had, since even the Founding Fathers were from elsewhere). And it will be all the more integrist for having become, in actuality, multiracial and multicultural. And all the more imperialist for being led by the descendants of the slaves. This is how it is. It is a paradox, but a paradox that gives the lie to the 'Power to the imagination' argument.

It is power itself that has to be abolished—and not just in the refusal *to be dominated*, which is the essence of all traditional struggles, but equally and as violently in the

refusal *to dominate*. For domination implies both these things, and if there were the same violence or energy in the refusal to dominate, we would long ago have stopped dreaming of revolution. And this tells us why intelligence cannot—and never will be able to—be in power: because it consists precisely in this twofold refusal. 'If I knew that there are still on this earth some men *without any power* I would say that all is not lost' (Elias Canetti).

WITH THE ELECTION OF ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER to the office of Governor of California, we are in total farce, where politics is entirely a matter of idols and fans. This is a huge step towards the demise of the representative system. And it is the inevitable outcome of current politics—everywhere those who live by spectacle will die by it—and that goes as much for 'citizens' as for politicians. It

is the immanent justice of the media. You want power through the image? Then you will die by the image-playback. The carnival of the image is also self-cannibalization by the image.

Having said this, we should not be too quick to conclude that the election of Schwarzenegger spells the decline of American political life. Behind this farce is a far-reaching political strategy, though certainly not a deliberate one (that would presuppose too high a level of intelligence), which paradoxically runs counter to our critical analyses and eternal democratic illusions. America, by electing Schwarzenegger (or by the rigged election of Bush in 2000) in this mind-boggling parody of all systems of representation, is taking its revenge, in its own way, for the symbolic contempt in which it is held. In this way it demonstrates its imaginary power; for, even more than in finance or weaponry, no other country

can rival America in this headlong dash into political farce, in this nihilistic enterprise of the liquidation of values and all-out simulation, and it will remain ahead in this particular game for many years to come: in this extreme—empirical and technical—form of mockery and profanation of values, this radical obscenity and total impiety on the part of what is, otherwise, a 'religious' people. This is the secret of its global hegemony. This is what holds everyone spellbound; this is what we enjoy even as we reject and mock the phenomenal vulgarity and a (political, televisual) universe reduced to a zero degree of culture. I say this without irony and with admiration: this is how—by radical simulation—America dominates the rest of the world, which regards it as a model; and how, at the same time, it takes its revenge on the rest of the world, which is infinitely superior to it in symbolic terms. Amer-

ica's challenge is that of a desperate simulation, of a masquerade it imposes on the rest of the world, even in its desperate simulacrum of military power. A carnivalization of power. And that challenge is one the rest of the world cannot meet: we have neither finality nor counter-finality to set against it.

With this in mind, we have to look again at the successive phases of this global masquerade of power. First, it is the West more generally that foists its political and economic models and its principle of technical rationality on the whole world in the name of universality. But this isn't the acme of the brainwashing and domination. Beyond economics and politics, global power asserts itself today through the grip exerted by simulation, an operational simulation of all values and cultures. That power is no longer exerted by the exporting of technologies, values and ideologies, but by the universal

extrapolation of a parody of those values (democracy is being universalized in a caricatured, derisory form; the 'underdeveloped' nations are geared to *the simulacrum* of development and growth, and peoples whose cultures are being wiped out set their compass by fake, Disneyfied reconstructions of those cultures—all of them spellbound by a universal model. And, though America assumes it will reap the benefits of that model, it is, at the same time, its first victim).

IT IS THEIR LIVES AND DEATHS that the terrorists are laying on the line, at the highest possible cost. It is everything by which a human being retains some value in his own eyes that we (the West) are deliberately sacrificing. *Our* potlatch is one of baseness, shamelessness, obscenity, debasement and abjection. This is the whole movement of our culture—it is here that

we raise the stakes. Our truth is always to be sought in unveiling, de-sublimation, reductive analysis—it is the truth of the repressed, of exhibition, of confession, of laying bare. Nothing is true if it is not de-sacralized, objectivized, shorn of its aura, dragged on to the stage. Our potlatch is the potlatch of indifference—an in-differentiation of values, but also an indifference to ourselves. If we cannot lay our own lives on the line, this is because we are already dead. And it is this indifference and abjection that we throw out to the others as a challenge: the challenge to debase themselves in their turn, to deny their own values, to lay themselves bare, to make their confessions, to own up—in short, to respond with a nihilism equal to our own.

We are, in fact, trying to wrest all these things from them forcibly—their modesty in the prisons of Abu Ghraib, the headscarf in our schools—but this is not enough to console

us for our abjection. They have to come to it themselves; they have to sacrifice themselves on the altar of obscenity, transparency, pornography and global simulation. They have to lose their symbolic defences and, of their own accord, take the path of the free-market order, integral democracy and integrated spectacle.

The whole stakes of the global confrontation consist in this: in this provocation to the frenzied exchange of all differences, in this challenge that they equal us in deculturation, in debasing values, in subscribing to the most disenchanted models.

The machinations over oil merely mask a much more serious destructuring. Global power is the power of the simulacrum, of a universal carnivalization, which the West imposes at the cost of its own humiliation, its own symbolic mutilation. Challenge against challenge. Potlatch against potlatch?

Are the stakes of indifference and dishonour equal to those of death? Is there an end to this confrontation and what may the victory of the one or the other ultimately lead to?

ON THIS POINT, I am entirely in agreement with Boris Groys's 'double potlatch' hypothesis (See 'Les corps d'Abou Ghraib'[1]): the Western potlatch of nullity, self-debasement, shame and mortification set against the potlatch of death. But is this a genuine symbolic response to the terrorists' challenge? Let us leave aside war here, or the battle 'against Evil', which are, for their part, the admission of a total incapability to respond symbolically to the challenge of death. We are speaking of the deliberate sacrifice by the West of all its values, of everything by which a human being or a culture has some value in its own eyes. *Il sacrifizio della dignità fundamentale, dell' pudore, dell' honore* . . . a self-

annihilation, a disenchantment and prostitution of self thrown in the Other's face as a weapon of mass deterrence—a vertiginous seduction by emptiness, a challenge to the Other (to Islam, but also to the rest of the world) to prostitute itself in turn, to unveil itself, to cough up all its secrets and lose all sovereignty—and hence, the sovereignty, par excellence, of death.

Have we an immense *auto-da-fé* here—in which case we can view it as a symbolic response, by mutual challenge. Potlatch against potlatch—does the one balance out the other? We may take the view that the one is a potlatch by excess (that of death), the other a potlatch by lack (that of self-derision and shame). In that case, the two do not exactly meet head on and we should speak, rather, of asymmetric potlatch. Or should we rather take the view (thereby acknowledging that Groys is right in a way) that ultimately no form—not even that

of the challenge of death or of extreme sacrifice—can be regarded as superior, and hence the terrorist challenge cannot be seen as superior to the opposite, Western challenge? Yet it seems that the West is not able to make an equal response, as is the rule in potlatch; it is not able to respond to death with death or, most importantly, to raise the stakes and make a response that goes beyond it—for what is there beyond death? We may, however, take the view that, at the highest level, at the height of the confrontation, a more general and even more radical form of reversibility is in play, which means that no form—not even the highest—escapes reversion or the victorious substitution of another form, as in the game of 'scissors, paper, stone'. Even the most extreme, most sublime thing one can conceive of will be taken over and surpassed by some other form—perhaps even by its opposite or carica-

ture. This is how it is. This is the game. Matters are never definitively settled.

Having said this, to contemplate the idea that a global power, which is, after all, a form of self-abasement and universal abasement, may nevertheless constitute a power of defiance, a power of response to the challenge from the other world – that is to say, ultimately, a symbolic power—means for me a drastic revision, a casting into the balance of what I have always thought (which has always had the revolt and final victory of Borges's 'Fauna of Mirrors' as its horizon). But perhaps we have to resign ourselves to the idea that even reversibility, as a weapon of mass seduction, is not the absolute weapon; and that it is confronted with something irreversible—in what we may just discern today as a worse kind of ultimate prospect.

2004

Note

1 Boris Groys, 'Les corps d'Abou Ghraib', *Cahiers de l'Herne* (Jean Baudrillard), 84 (2004): 268–74.

VENTRILOQUOUS EVIL[1]

'And what then would you do . . . if you were
the ruler of the world for one day?'
'I suppose I would have no choice
but to abolish reality!'
'I would like to know
how you would set about it!'

Robert Musil

THERE IS AN ORIGINAL FORM of repetition, the form that expresses the fact that you only ever have one idea in your life (assuming you have the good fortune to have *one*), but that analysing it allows you to nuance it or have it emerge or show through in spiral or anamorphic form.

In fragment form, thought alludes constantly to a single idea—playing, from varied, unusual angles, on perspective and illusion. There is a whole art in unfurling a body of thought in such a way that one ends up passing it by without seeing it. This is the opposite of discourse, which lays out its findings and arguments and sentences itself to house arrest within the precincts of its own conclusions.

Similarly, most current events merely play a walk-on part. Just a few of them unfold not as they are presented to us—in terms of a causal, historical succession—but by a form of

anamorphosis, in which they are linked more strangely, without their meaning or idea really appearing. They change into each other, as it were, and some of them (often the tiniest) gain in intensity as this analogical relation to thought develops.

This is more or less the object of analysis: *to get closer to the analogical heart of the event and thought.*

And I think for us today that that heart is the sphere of hegemony, which is too easily confused—under the heading of power—with domination.

Domination is defined by what it is opposed to, by relations of force and internal contradictions. It is defined by a negativity, and, in order to exist, the master has as much need of the slave as the slave has of the master. Hegemony, by contrast, no longer has need

of the opposite term; it does not need its contrary in order to exist—that contrary for which, unlike domination, it has no definition (which is why the concept of 'liberation' has no meaning for it: it has meaning only in the field of systems of domination).

Moreover, we cannot speak of 'hegemonizers' and 'hegemonized' in the way we speak of the dominators and the dominated. This is what lends hegemony its potency and, in this sense, we may see it as the highest stage of power, though this is no longer exactly a political power but a kind of hyper power freed from any legitimacy or representation, freed even from domination and power. A form of supremacy.

We can no longer conceive of any opposite or antagonistic pole to this sphere in which the same technological linkages are formed the world over — the same networks of integration

and circulation, the same type of exchange and generalized interface. Indeed, we have little by little lost even the power to imagine what might be set against it—an inertia that is starkly illustrated by the current political situation. If, then, there are forces antagonistic to this global power — and we can be in no doubt that they exist (but where *are* they?)—they are no longer, properly speaking, forces of opposition; they no longer confront it in a conflictual, contradictory relation; they have become paradoxical, paratactic, parallel and asymmetrical. We have to come to terms with the idea that negativity, as we have known it—that mainspring of history and human action—is disappearing, and that the global antagonism works itself out now in quite a different way, far from the good old oppositions and the good old relations of force. We have moved on from critical analysis and the things that were at issue in the Enlightenment,

not to a democratic reconciliation and a benign global order, as they would like to have us believe, but to a much more radical antagonism, and one which no longer leaves room for any kind of strategy—a fact that demoralizes the strategic planners.

Domination still had its strategy, which was to incorporate the negative as conflicts unfolded and in accordance with a dialectical perspective opened up by its adversaries themselves. By contrast, the hegemonic form tends quite simply to liquidate its opponents, regarding them as worthless, eccentric and residual. A style not of oppression and alienation, but of excommunication of everything that doesn't fall within this sphere of integral performance and exchange. A style of foreclosure of a delinquent minority—exactly parallel to the theological position which contends that Evil does not exist.

Seen from this standpoint, Evil is never the reverse side or enemy of Good (in which case, it would be enough simply to make it function as a negative mirror, with a final redemption resulting). It simply no longer exists! It is merely illusion and phantasmagoria. At this point of total ascendancy that is the current or potential situation of global omnipotence, *Good no longer needs Evil in order to exist.* Positivity no longer takes any account whatever of negativity, either as diabolical force or as dialectical antithesis.

This is how, with the advance of what Günther Anders would call the *obsolescence* of domination, critical thought and the famous 'work of the negative'—indeed, all stable forms of opposition—have found themselves subsumed into the workings of the system, and we are desperately in search of an antagonistic pole or anything whatever that may thwart and disrupt the whole thing.

Might what we are seeing be the irresistible movement of history? It seems likely.

If this is the case, then the die is cast and all the violent, refractory, phantom events running through this period (from 11 September to the 'No' in the French referendum and the eruptions of sacrificial violence in the Paris suburbs) are merely archaic, residual exceptions, forms of populist delinquency or of a fanaticism blind to this technocratic redemption. For others who have lost all their illusions, the die is also cast: it is the final option and nothing can be done against it. We are its hostages—victims and accomplices at one and the same time—immersed in the same global monopoly of the networks. A monopoly which, moreover and this is the supreme ruse of hegemony—no one holds any longer. For no one, neither the individual, nor the state, nor any superior agency, is answerable

for any of this any longer, either for better or for worse.

As soon as Good has rid itself of any adversary, it becomes exponential and has no other end than the saturation of the world and the world's 'on-line' extension.

And yet everything is still not for the best in this best of all worlds, for, as this performance goes global, it also becomes increasingly unintelligible. And one inevitably has to wonder whether that unintelligibility may not, precisely, betray the emergence of a counter-hegemonic power—an equal, if not superior antagonistic power.

It remains for us to explore all the paths of hegemony, particularly all the processes of the liquidation of the negative—and, at the same time, with no illusions about the critical values forged in the era of domination, to

explore the paths of genuine counter-hegemony, which are perhaps also the of power's death throes.

The PROCESS is, no doubt that all things hasten towards their abstraction, thereby obeying a frantic desire to escape their materiality. There is a kind of progressive break with the the terminal phase of which might be said to be that in which the Other has disappeared, and in which one can now feed only on oneself (with a relish mingled with horror and disgust) the whole of the historical process being reduced to a self-referential spiral.

Capital is the purest expression of the reality principle. It has *become reality*. It produced it, it became it and, by disappearing, it will make it disappear as a consequence. The movement by which it became reality and by which it is devouring it is one and the same.

In its advanced form, capital aims for ever-increasing abstraction and hence seeks to offload that machine for slowing down exchanges that reality might still be said to be. It therefore sacrifices it and, in the process, sacrifices itself. This is how we pass beyond capital—which played its historical role of domination and alienation to the end, but could go no further and had to give way to a much more radical system of abstraction—digital, electronic, virtual alienation, which rounds off that flight out of materiality we were speaking of—and at the end of which the world and the Human have disappeared once and for all.

Every personal dimension and all demiurgy is abolished in favour of an operational mechanics. Human beings are totally relieved of responsibility: today, even power is a source of shame and there is no one left genuinely to take it on. Humanity is no doubt the only

species to have invented a specific mode of disappearance that has nothing to do with the law of nature. Perhaps even an *art* of disappearance.

But perhaps in the end we dreamed of this irresponsibility, of this total jettisoning of freedom and will—'We dreamed it, IBM did it!'[2] Nothing is more cunning or more inventive than human beings when it comes to exploring the tiniest nuances of servitude. This entire electronic, cybernetic revolution is perhaps merely a piece of animal cunning that humanity has found in order to escape itself, at the same time as escaping the monstrous responsibility to which it is now over-exposed in what has become a global context. The sexual process, the process of death, all singularities and fateful processes recede before the final solution: the technical, artificial equivalent of life and death.

However this may be, beyond this vanishing point everything loses its negative power but everything continues to exert an occult influence, as has been said of the ancient gods. Everything remains in being and seeps into our lives in infinitesimal doses, which are often more dangerous than the visible agency that dominated us. The prohibitions, controls, inequalities and differences disappear one by one, but they do so only the better to be internalized in the mental sphere . . .

Then there is the disappearance of the subject, for example, which is, to some degree, the mirror image of the disappearance of the Real. In fact, the Subject is dying out. The subject that is an agency of will, freedom and representation, the Subject of power, knowledge and history is vanishing, giving way to a diffuse, floating, insubstantial subjectivity that is an immense reverberation surface for a

disembodied, empty consciousness. As a result, everything now radiates out from an objectless subjectivity, with each monad and molecule caught in the trap of a definitive narcissism, a perpetual image-playback. This is the image of an end-of-the-world subjectivity, from which the subject as such has disappeared, a victim of that fatal twist to which, in a sense, nothing stands opposed any longer—neither object, nor Real, nor Other.

THE COMPULSION TO ACCUMULATE, to grow, to produce and to reproduce is all, in fact, the system's consecration of the proletariat as such. The proletariat is, in effect, literally the 'prolific' entity, the entity that has no other *raison d'être* than to multiply [from Latin *proles*: offspring]. We may thus say that the human species in its entirety has been proletarianized by multiplying to infinity in the name of pro-

duction (including demographic production, since the reproduction of the species has succumbed, as it were, to the unlimited industrial principle of growth; the human race has, thus, taken on collectively what was originally merely the fate of the poor; this was not the case in previous societies which offset any danger of surplus or over-production—including the over-production of human beings—by spontaneous regulatory mechanisms).

We have gone beyond this point of 'equilibrium' without it really being possible to say when the general de-regulation began or what caused it. And was there, indeed, a cause? Isn't it a pure chaotic process, an accidental logic? However this may be, once the critical threshold of proliferation is reached, everything massifies: individuals, signs and machines massify and language itself massifies; everything passes into an exponential growth, the process

of which, beyond that critical threshold, is irreversible. And though the 'historic' proletariat was, according to Marx, destined to abolish itself as class, this massive proliferation isn't in any sense destined to come to an end. That can be the outcome only of a violent disaccumulation effect, a global collapse.

The only true fundamentalism, giving rise to the only true terror, is the fundamentalism of a fluid, mobile technocracy, the technocracy of flows and networks, of an inexorable dissemination and mental disapora: *a fundamentalism without foundations.*

All the other forms of reactional violence, all the other kinds of integrism—the totalitarianisms, the religious and ethnic fanaticisms—all this visible, spectacular violence that culminates in terrorism is less lethal than the invisible tentacular form of violence of the inexorable world process, of 'world processing'.[3]

Similarly, the atomic threat is merely the metaphor of atomization, of the digital dislocation of everything into an immense computer programme in which not only bodies, but mental structures, are irradiated and vaporized.

There is no better example of this evanescent structure of a de-polarized subject replaced by a computer programme of will and action, or of this body without organs traversed by flows and extending into an objectless desire, than Musil's *Man Without Qualities.*

> Today, on the other hand, responsibility's point of gravity lies not in the individual but in the relations between things. Has one not noticed that experiences have made themselves independent of man? They have gone on to the stage, into books, into the

reports of scientific institutions and expeditions, into communities based on religious or other conviction . . . There has arisen a world of qualities without a man to them, of experiences without anyone to experience them, and it almost looks as though under ideal conditions man would no longer experience anything at all privately and the comforting weight of personal responsibility would dissolve into a system of formulae for potential meanings. It is probable that the dissolution of the anthropocentric attitude (an attitude that, after so long seeing man as the centre of the universe, has been dissolving for some centuries now) has finally begun to affect the personality itself; for the belief that the most important thing

about experience is the experiencing of it, and about deeds the doing of them, is beginning to strike most people as naïve. Doubtless there are still people who experience things quite personally . . . [B]ut this kind of people now usually appears absurd to the others, although it is as yet by no means established why. And, all at once, in the midst of these reflections, Ulrich had to confess to himself, smiling, that for all this he was, after all, a 'character', even without having one.[1]

I SHOULD LIKE ANOTHER EXTRACT to stand over against this one, this time from Don De Lillo's *Cosmopolis*. Though radically different in inspiration, it is also a kind of parable. It provides a ferocious portrait of this hegemonic universe, built on indifference and

acceleration, a world beyond all quality and all value judgement:

> It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in elec tronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere . . .
>
> [. . .]
>
> The Greeks have a word for it . . . '*Chrimatistikos*,' [the art of money-making]

> she said. 'But we have to give the word a little leeway. Adapt it to the current situation. Because money has taken a turn. All wealth has become wealth for its own sake. There's no other kind of enormous wealth. Money has lost its narrative quality the way painting did once upon a time. Money is talking to itself'.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Never mind the speed that makes it hard to follow what passes before the eye. The speed is the point. Never mind the urgent and endless replen ishment, the way data dissolves at one end of the series just as it takes shape at the other. This is the point, the thrust, the future. We are not witness ing the flow of information so much as pure spectacle, or information

made sacred, ritually unreadable. The small monitors of the office, home and car become a kind of idolatry here, where crowds might gather in astonishment . . . Does it ever stop? Does it slow down? Of course not. Why should it? Fantastic.

[. . .]

But these [protestors] are not the grave-diggers. This is the free market itself. These people are a fantasy generated by the market. They don't exist outside the market. There is nowhere they can go to be on the outside. There is no outside . . .

[. . .]

The market culture is total. It breeds these men and women. They are necessary to the system they despise. They give it energy and definition. They are market-driven. They are traded on the markets of the world. This is why they exist, to invigorate and perpetuate the system.[5]

THIS IS THE STATE OF THINGS in which the system has snaffled all the mechanisms of simulation, parody, irony and self-derision; it has snaffled the whole of the negative and, with it, critical thought, leaving the latter only the *ghost* of the truth.

All the same, things are perhaps not settled once and for all, since the rules have changed (or perhaps there are no rules any longer) and the new situation is as follows: by denying the very existence of Evil (all the forms of radical, heterogeneous, irreconcilable otherness), by making the negative a kind of prehistoric vestige, Good has, in a way, given Evil its

freedom. In seeking to be Absolute Good, it has freed Evil from all dependency and given it back its autonomous power, which is no longer simply the power of the negative but the power to change the rules of the game. Something resurfaces here of the Manichaean heresy, which asserted the originality and singularity of Evil. And one can feel something analogous playing itself out in the depths of this integral reality. As the old forms of revolt that defied the dominant power find themselves swallowed up by the system itself, a new counter-finality is springing up from all the interstices of the system, a challenge to the supremacy of Good, infiltrating and breaking up that reality much more radically than the work of the negative did.

When the power of the negative fades, when the prohibitions, controls, inequalities and differences disappear one by one, the better to internalize themselves in the mental sphere, it is at this point that *Evil, as undesirable alien, becomes ventriloquous.*

The Banque Nationale de Paris had a famous advertising slogan in the 1970s: 'Your money interests me!', which sums up better than any critical analysis can do, the ignominy of capital. Denunciations of that ignominy were as old as the hills, but what was new and scandalous was having these words come direct from the bankers themselves, the truth coming straight from the mouth of Evil, so to speak. The truth came straight from mouth of the dominant power itself, and that power, secure in the knowledge of its total immunity, admitted its 'crime' quite openly.

The most recent profession of faith of this same kind was uttered by Patrick Le Lay, the CEO of the French TV channel TF1. 'Let's be realistic,' he said, 'TF1's job is to help

Coca-Cola shift product . . . For an advertising message to get through, the viewer's brain has to be receptive to it. It's the aim of our programmes to make that brain receptive, that is to say, to entertain it and relax it, to prepare it between two messages. What we sell to Coca-Cola is receptive human brain time . . . Nothing is more difficult than obtaining that receptiveness.'

We have to pay tribute to this amazing declaration of principle for its outstanding professional cynicism (which it shares with many other similar declarations, such as that of the French post office: 'Money has no sex, but that shouldn't prevent it from reproducing').

But this is not the point. What struck people in the Le Lay case was the barefaced cheek of the statement, which fascinated even those who condemned it. Isn't this immoral offhandedness the mark of a greater freedom of expression than is shown in the eternal stereotyped language of critical protest?

And this is, in fact, the problem—that the truth has been stolen by an 'arrogant' discourse that thwarts any form of criticism by short-circuiting it. The real scandal doesn't lie so much in technocratic cynicism as in the breaking of a rule of our social and political game, which says that the corruption is on one side and the protest against it on the other. If the corrupt no longer respect this protocol, if they lay out their hands for all to see, without even doing us the courtesy of hypocrisy, then the ritual mechanism of critical condemnation is taken from us. This is capital laid bare by the capitalists themselves.

Le Lay is stealing from us the only power we have left; he is stealing condemnation! This

is where the scandal lies. Otherwise, how are we to explain all these outraged reactions to someone spilling the beans on an open secret?

Instead of condemning Evil from the standpoint of Good—the eternal moral position—he is speaking Evil from the standpoint of Evil. And immediately, all that excels in arrogance (Le Pen), cynicism (Le Lay), pornography (the Abu Ghraib pictures) and mythomania (the fabulous story of Marie L.)[6] is, by that very token, more effective at unmasking the truth of the system than traditional critique!

If the truth hits the mark and hits home with people, this is because it comes, paradoxically, from the horizon of Evil. We always expect it to come from the side of Enlightenment and Reason—which was perhaps the case historically—but today it is from the hori-

zon of Evil that the truth emerges as an unexpected event, deriving all its force from coming from the place one least expects it.

All the discourses of Good are ravaged by ambivalence. This is particularly visible in the relationship to stupidity, which is the murkiest, but also the most direct and massive expression of this ventriloquousness of Evil. Philippe Muray has magnificently described this beatification, this grotesque pacification of the real world, this festive reduction in perpetuity of the whole of modernity to a party.[7] Now, it is precisely here, in this extension of the domain of Farce, that Ventriloquous Evil advances on all sides, establishing the hegemony of stupidity—which is the equivalent of hegemony plain and simple.

Of all the modalities in which the proscribed negative can show through in ventrilo

quous mode, stupidity is both the most banal and the most mysterious. Better, it becomes a source of energy—and a source of hidden truth—since, no longer expecting anything from a higher instance, we are reduced to this subterranean one, whose energy is inexhaustible, since it comes to us from the immensity of stupidity itself. We must then—and Muray clearly saw this—draw from it all its innate energy, allow it to deploy itself in all its self conceit; we must allow Evil to speak 'through the belly'. We have to let this masquerade, this banality of Evil work at its own derision. This is 'the intelligence of Evil'. Moreover, in the absence now of an active power of the negative, where could we get energy from today if not from a violent abreaction to this ambient stupidity?

As soon as Good rules and claims to embody the truth, it is Evil that comes through.

Let us take the No to the European referendum.[8] It was clearly stupidity that voted No; it was statistically the most stupid (the backward, the retarded) who voted No, but that stupidity was precisely the intelligence of Evil. It was Ventriloquous Evil that replied 'No' to the referendum. Not the spirit of the Negative which, like the 'Yes', lends its assent to Political Reason. But an illogical No, resistant to Political Reason, and shot through with the exigency not to be annexed or taken hostage by any model whatever—even an ideal one (especially not an ideal one!)—the exigency not to lend itself to the dialectical stratagem: 'Your No is a No to Europe as it is, but a Yes to Europe as it should be!'

There is no difference between the 'free market' Yes and the European 'social' No. This is why the No, which is merely a No to a particular kind of Europe, isn't really a No—

the only No that genuinely constitutes an event is this strange, non-political, non-dialectical, elusive No, since it runs counter to enlightened self-interest. It is a No that isn't the opposite of a Yes (the No of the things that can exist without their opposites), but might be said to be closer to a silent rejection of the kind that makes Bartleby say, 'I would prefer not to!' I am not playing the game! (But without aspiring to provide a reason.)[9]

You have to be able to fight everything that wishes to do Good to you.

Against the Axis of Good: the parallax of Evil.

Gilmore (*The Executioner's Song*) and his refusal of a pardon.[10]

Bartleby and his tenacious rejection.

Those who vote No to Divine Europe.

The immigrants who burn their schools.

They are all fighting against that which wishes to do them good.

This is what Gilmore does in *The Executioner's Song* and it is what makes this mundane story of a condemned man funny and paradoxical. He fights—he is forced to fight—against his staunchest defenders (those who refuse to let him be executed in the name of the absolute principle of the right to life, a principle which does, however, show itself for what it is: the moral obligation to live at all costs, the categorical imperative to exist, that principle in whose name they hanged suicides, dead or alive, in the Middle Ages). It is against this ultimatum that Gilmore rebels—not that he is in favour of the death penalty, but he is equally opposed to the injunction that he must live, opposed to that institutional 'human right', against which he sets another—unconditional human right: the right to die. He

thereby transcends his own crime and any idea of punishment and transforms his particular case into a metaphysical duel with the forces of Good. The very people who want to save him (despite himself) come to detest him for having demanded to die. This is quite a fetching contradiction of the whole system of moral values—and the fact is that, at bottom, condemning someone to death and condemning them to life 'on principle' involves the same kind of legal violence. And it must be rejected in every case, even when—especially when—the desire is to 'do you good'.

Gilmore doesn't at all think he 'deserves' to die, nor does he think he must allow his life to be taken to expiate his crime. Having been condemned to death, he simply demands that the authorities face up to the sentence, as he is prepared to do. He thereby shows how every sentence is a double-edged sword and that it

can be returned to the sender. It is a challenge in which the price to be paid is his own death, but what is at stake is making the whole of a society lose face when that society, in its arrogance, reserves the right to grant him mercy against his own will (putting in play their own deaths, not suicidally but as a weapon of defiance, is also the terrorists' strategy). If he wins out in this duel, then, admittedly, he loses his life, but he recovers a glorious image of himself—far from the paths of pardon and repentance which he despises. It is a bit like the Student of Prague who dies when he shoots the mirror from which his image has been stolen, but re-finds himself in the fragments of the mirror in the moment of his death.[11]

It is like the woman in the coma who was given a life-sentence of life—it is forbidden to unplug her. Gilmore wants to be unplugged. At issue here, as ever, is the gift. The gift you

reject because it is inflicted on you unilaterally—which amounts to a humiliation and a symbolic dispossession. We can see this clearly in the rage of those who defend existence at any price, the same rage as shown by the advocates of the Yes against the No. The extraordinary, misplaced anger of the well-wishing against those who reject their overtures. It is the anger of the people of God (of Divine Europe), of those who have universal right on their side and hence the right to exterminate the apostates. This hatred on the part of the disappointed of conquering Good and hegemonic Reason is much fiercer than the hatred felt by the dispossessed, by those who have things taken from them, who are exploited and whose material means of life are snatched away from them.

They have no other outlet than a liberatory violence, a violence of protest and

demands. Quite different is the violence of those to whom one gives, to whom one gives forcibly, or whose lives one spares. They have only symbolic revenge left to them.

Now, for want of anything better, this revenge crystallizes in the unconditional withdrawal from the social order, from the planetary order, from the conventional order, from the advantages of reason. This is why the case of Gilmore, who wants to be killed—to be unplugged—who rejects any leniency on the part of the law, which would cause him to lose face, is the reflection today of a universal situation and a universal challenge: a challenge to the ascendancy of all the networks, to that enframing by all the blessings of Reason, Technology and Science.

Must we accept this unconditional conditioning or not?

We are all reduced today to saving the little bit of singularity, the little bit of symbolic space and territory left to us, against a global machinery, a global enterprise of Doing-Good, which demands of us the sacrifice of any will and intellect (this is still the pact that was proposed by Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor: well-being and servitude).

And where might this 'left-field' energy come from? From that impenetrable zone there is in every individual; from that 'heart' that is resistant to the injunction of all the apparatuses, of all the machinery of rationalization.

It is all this that is in play in Gilmore's fantastic defence.

IN THE PROMETHEAN PERSPECTIVE of unlimited growth, there is not merely the desire to make everything function, to liberate everything, but also the desire to make everything signify.

Everything is to be brought under the aegis of meaning (and reality). In some cases we know that knowledge will forever escape us. But in the immense majority of cases we do not even know what has disappeared and has always already eluded us.

Now, science makes a systematic effort to eradicate this secret area, this 'constellation of the mystery'[12] and to eliminate this demarcation line between the violable and the inviolable.

All that is concealed must be revealed; everything must be reducible to analysis. Hence the whole effort (particularly since the death of God, who restrained this attempt to break open the natural world) leads to an extension of the field of meaning (of knowledge, analysis, objectivity and reality).

Now, everything inclines us to think that this accumulation, this over-production, this proliferation of meaning constitutes (a little like the accumulation of greenhouse gases) a virtual threat for the species (and for the planet), since it is gradually destroying, through experimentation, that domain of the inviolable that serves us, as it were, as an ozone layer and protects us from the worst—from the lethal irradiation and obliteration of our symbolic space.

Shouldn't we then, work precisely in the opposite direction, to extend the domain of the inviolable? To restrain the production of meaning the way they are trying to restrain the production of greenhouse gases, to reinforce that constellation of the mystery and that intangible barrier that serves as a screen against the welter of information, interaction and universal exchange.

This countervailing work exists—it is the work of thought. *Not* the analytic work of an understanding of causes, of the dissection of an object-world, *not* the work of a critical, enlightened thought, but another form of understanding or intelligence, which is the intelligence of the mystery.

WHAT REMAINS ENIGMATIC is the simultaneity of determination and counter-determination. Social being is determined also *against* the social—a society is determined also *against* its own value system. Hence all the unpredictable—individual or collective—abreactions, due to this fundamental ambivalence which never disappears, since every attempt to incorporate it and reduce the 'duplicity' in fact revives it. As for the social, and the sociology that legitimates it and makes it an objective discipline (and, further along the road, socialism,

which makes it an ideal or an ideology), they disappear as such—wrecked by this unilateral pretension. An anthropological nonsense.

In a last effort to rescue this threatened species (the social), a virtual category has been invented: *sociality*, attempting to sublimate the—now obsolete—objective mechanisms of the social into a fluid structure, which has become a vibration and a nerve impulse, acting as a vector for the 'social bond' (though this is a pleonasm: if the social exists, it is necessarily already a binding or liaison—and as dangerous as any other).

The triumph of Good, then, is never without a rebound effect.

The response always comes, even if it has been eradicated root and branch, and the shock wave from this abolition of the negative and the counter-gift is now assuming the same

proportions as global power. This latter is paying the price for the gigantic ethnic cleansing it has begun on the negative. Having abolished the negative, it can no longer even be denied 'dialectically'; the only threat to it is a much more violent denegation, a radical denial and disavowal—in a particularly ironic form, since it involves a kind of cannibalistic self-destruction.

It is, then, a kind of groundswell or shockwave that wells up from the depths of anthropology and goes far beyond our mundane economic, social or political crises. And it is this that makes our contemporary scene seem so ridiculous, so convulsive and beyond the reach of any real or virtual solution. All analyses confine themselves to a superficial level, most often seeking a solution by amplifying the factors that actually militate against one.

WHAT BRINGS SHAME ON YOU TODAY absolute disgrace—is not responding to a growth imperative—or not showing signs of doing so, which amounts to the same thing.

This is how most things assume such enormous dimensions, proliferate and globalize in the total absence of any 'objective' justification. Nothing is more characteristic today than this positive incrustation of growth in the universal mentality.

Running beneath the surface of that growth, one does, however, see a strange contradictory reaction forming and subtly rising up against this unconditional objective. A kind of doubt and repentance, if not indeed anxiety at this need to exhaust all one's possibilities. Can we not divine here, above and beyond our colossal technical advance, an increasing difficulty, on the part of the species, of identifying

with itself, or quite simply an increasing difficulty of knowing what it is? This is something quite different from a critical development in respect of the state of growth; it is a disavowal of growth itself, the most often unconscious, clandestine disavowal of the entire value system our society is founded on. Once again, it isn't a matter of a conscious political, social or economic critique, but a dissidence, a refusal to play the game. A betrayal

This is where Zidane and his head butt at the last World Cup come in—a stunning act of disqualification, of sabotage, of 'terrorism'. By blighting this ritual of planetary identification, these nuptials between sport and the planet, by refusing to be the idol and mirror of globalization in such an emblematic event, he is denying the universal pact that permits the transfiguration of our sad reality by Good and allows billions of unidentified human beings

to find an identity in the void (the same sublimation operates in the sacred illusion of war). And it was, indeed, stigmatized as an act of desertion, but, as such, it also became simultaneously a cult gesture: by passing from the peak of performance to the peak of dysfunction, to the thwarting of Good in all its splendour, it suddenly pointed up the Nothingness at the heart of globalization. And all this by a simple act that is not in any sense a gesture of revolt. One might say that this act, quite apart from all its subjective aspects, came from somewhere outside himself – that it was a tipping point leading to the instantaneous mockery of the entire system. Certainly the most glorious (and most elegant) 'scandal' we have been afforded for many years. It is a 'blow' by which everyone can be said to have lost the World Cup. But isn't that better than having won a victory for globalization itself?

There is here the principle of a genuine event, of those singular events that challenge globalization (hegemony) at a stroke – seizing that power at the high point of its *mise en scène*, 'the better to wring its neck', as Rimbaud (who accomplishes the equivalent of this terrorist act in the field of poetry) would have said. At a single stroke, all the signs are reversed (see also *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*,[13] *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*,[14] 'Bartleby', Gilmore, etc.), not through some decision or calculation, nor even by objective chance, like the tennis ball in Woody Allen's *Match Point*,[15] hovering in unstable equilibrium on the top of the net: if it falls this side, you win, the other side, you lose everything.

We might say in the same way that Zidane could have delivered his head butt or not, and there would have been valid reasons in either case. Even where there is 'chance', the event

obeys the principle of Sufficient Reason . . . But it isn't Zidane's free will that's at issue here: though he may well have had the possibility of acting or not, the event, for its part, wasn't free not to occur. Some day or another, Zidane or no Zidane, globalization (global power) would have found itself—finds itself right now—confronted with its success, with its extremeness, and hence faced with this automatic convulsion that has no valid reason to occur.

We may view the scenario in the following way: up to now (and this relates to the World Cup as much as to the rise of some geopolitical strategy), everything is moving in a positive direction, matters seem settled and suddenly, through some tiny detail, a metaphysical scandal erupts—something that no longer plays the game, that no longer conforms to the principle of Sufficient Reason.

Among a thousand others, this particular event obeys what Musil would call the 'Principle of Insufficient Reason' (9/11 obeys this too): 'You know, of course, what the principle of Sufficient Reason is. Only, people make an exception where they themselves are concerned. In real life, by which I mean our personal and also our public-historical life, what happens is always what has no good reason to happen.'[16]

In this sense, this untimely, isolated, episodic event is a remarkable episode in the struggle against the total identification of the world—an exceptional moment of simplicity in an exceptional context of the triumph of consensus—an act 'from outer space', so to speak (as with 11 September, we may say that everyone was secretly waiting for a sign of this kind, but signs on this global scale are very rare).

Exceptional in the field of Sufficient Reason, but implacably necessary and logical in the

field of Insufficient Reason—insofar as they need neither an actor nor subjective motivation to take place: they merely express the fact that a power (any power whatever) bears in its innermost core its potentiality for annihilation, for self-annihilation, which it cannot but accomplish if it is forced, in all logic, to go as far as its possibilities allow.

This is why such an event is fated to happen, and why there is no need for any 'objective', sufficient reason. It is because the hidden sign of this power turns around naturally against itself; it is this power that does all the work; it is, in a sense, self-sufficient, both self-prophesying and self-destructive.

What distinguishes this kind of event from historical events is that it arises neither out of revolt, nor a particular relation of forces, nor the 'work of the negative'. If, at a stroke, Zidane thwarts the global power

embodied in football—if he defies it without even thinking about it—he does so not out of some sentiment of revolt or from an opposition to anything whatever. Everything that comes from that kind of revolutionary, critical thinking—that dialectical form of overcoming contradictions—was long ago voided of its substance.

That kind of thing is done and dusted now, but, when it comes to this same power grappling with *itself*, matters are not settled at all. And it is by an equally diabolical irony that this strategy of co-optation creates the very conditions for its own overthrow. Since it has kidnapped all the solutions and set itself up as the final solution, no other alternative remains than its collapse, its overthrow, at the end of a process in which there is now no adversary, except the void and the death it bears within itself from the beginning, though it seeks des-

perately through the total enframing of the world to blot these out.

The form of the new antagonism entails the reawakening of the death at the heart of power (the way Warhol wanted to get to the nothingness at the heart of the image), and this can be done only through events that are more subtle than frontal insurrection or the defence of human rights—by parodic events, by all the symbolic forms of deterrence and dissuasion—and hence by the various forms of terror. In this sense, Zidane's was a terrorist act.

THE BASIC RULE, which, though it comes from the depths of our anthropology, still applies even in our present world, is the rule of gift and counter-gift.

If the natural world is given to us, then we must be able to respond to that. If we cannot, then we have to eliminate the natural world. It is

an undertaking of just this kind that the human race has embarked upon, launching itself, particularly in modern times, into ever-increasing abstraction, going so far as to create a hegemonic structure that liberates us totally from the natural order. By this global performance, this technical scheming, this substitution of a controllable universe made by our own hand, we are probably trying to ward off the anxiety produced by everything that has escaped us since the beginning, by what has been given to us without our having anything to give back.

We thought we had found a way out by wiping the natural world from the map. But, on the one hand, this does not settle the symbolic issues at all: the transformation of the world is a technical operation, not a symbolic one. And on the other hand, it is no response. We are just contenting ourselves with liquidating what we cannot respond to.

Now, this technical solution has, in its excessiveness, ended up producing a world from which human beings are excluded (which is normal, since they are themselves natural beings) and created a new situation of basic anxiety: anxiety at dealing with a world that is totally beyond our grasp.

It remains for us to understand what induces the human species to throw itself into such a performance. But there is nothing . . . unless we suppose that *this is our real response* and that this substitution mania is our form of counter-gift, our challenge.

If this is the case, our entire technical universe, even in its most excessive elements, would then assume a high symbolic value as a response to the original gift (the original crime) that is the existence of the world without us, without our having been consulted. In which case, according to this new hypothesis, there would no longer be any reason to submit this whole way the system has developed to the tender mercies of critical

thought and negativity. Matters would be settled here too—'. . . Now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere . . .', as Don De Lillo writes in *Cosmopolis*.[17] That being the case, there would no longer be any need to dream of a critical or symbolic alternative. It would just be a matter of going on with the destruction, since this is our challenge and the source of our pride: that we have smashed the fundamental symbolic rule and have not just conceived, but brought into being—to the very worst degree (but what is the worst in this case?)—a truly inhuman science-fiction universe.

We may, moreover, extend the analysis of this all-encompassing machination to the whole field of simulation. We may take the view that the precession of models and images, the stratagem that erases the boundaries between the true

and the false, is itself a form of offensive response to the actual world, the real world, and that all this is done to escape actuality and reality, to escape the unbearable pretension of the 'natural' world that preceded us and seeks to force us to recognize that precedence.

Everything would, in fact, come down to this: *we want to be the original*, and to be so at any cost. Even if it means destroying the genuine article. In this way, we are rounding off reality with a demolition project that is assuming insane proportions.

Today, unfortunately, the undertaking has succeeded so well and progress has made such strides that everything is potentially available to us, and we find ourselves in the same impasse as at the beginning, facing a reality as obvious and irresistible as if it had fallen from the sky! And we still do not know how to respond. Nor to whom we are answerable. We can no longer set anything 'against' this technological world (this

hegemonic universe). We can no longer set anything 'against' anything, nor even imagine what the extreme limits of this evolution might be. And those who still have a glimmer of nostalgia in them are asking why the world is so vulnerable to such a project of 'globalization' and why the human being is so vulnerable to this project of systematically eliminating the human.

There remains, also, the nostalgia cultivated by all heresies over the course of history – the dream, running parallel to the course of the real world, of the absolute event which would open on to a thousand years of happiness. The heightened expectation of the single event that would, at a stroke, unmask the enormous conspiracy in which we are immersed. This expectation is still at the heart of the collective imagination. The Apocalypse is present, in homoeopathic doses, in each of us.

September 2006

Translator's Notes

1 This text, published by Éditions de l'Herne in 2008, was originally written as an opening address to the Fourteenth International Conference of the Academy of Latinity, held at Quito, Ecuador, on 21 September 2006.

2 'Nous l'avons rêvé. IBM l'a fait!' was a slogan in an IBM advertising campaign in Francophone countries.

3 'World processing' in English in the original.

4 Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities, Volume 1: A Sort of Introduction and the Like of It Now Happens* (London: Pan/Picador, 1979), pp. 174–5.

5 Don De Lillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribner, 2003), p. 24, 77, 80 and 90.

6 The 'Marie L.' affair' concerned a young woman who falsely claimed to have been the victim of a racist attack on Line D of the Paris rapid transit system (RER).

7 In works such as *Après l'Histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), Philippe Muray refers to the current age as the 'hypertestive era'.

8 This refers to the French referendum of 29 May 2005 on the ratification of the European Constitution.

9 The reference is to Herman Melville's novelette *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853).

10 Double murderer Gary Gilmore was executed at Utah State Prison on 17 January 1977 after refusing to appeal against his sentence. See Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1979).

11 *The Student of Prague* (1913) is a German silent film, directed by Stellan Rye and Paul Wegener. Based partly on a poem by Alfred de Musset and partly on Edgar Allan Poe's story 'William Wilson', it was remade in 1926, 1935 and 2004.

12 The French here is 'la constellation du secret'. Baudrillard is quoting Heidegger in the standard French translation by André Préau, which reads 'la constellation, le mouvement stellaire du secret' ('La question de la technique', *Essais et conférences*, Paris: Gallimard, p. 45). William Lovitt renders this as 'the constellation, the stellar course of the mystery'

(*The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 33).

13 Yukio Mishima, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1959).

14 Alan Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (London: W. H. Allen, 1959).

15 A film released in 2005.

16 Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, VOL. 1, p. 155 (translation modified).

17 De Lillo, *Cosmopolis*, p. 24.

Jean Baudrillard

The Agony of Power

Introduction by Sylvère Lotringer

Translated by Ames Hodges

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SEMIOTEXT(E) INTERVENTION SERIES

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Published by Semiotext(e)
2007 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 427, Los Angeles, CA 90057
www.semiotexte.com

Thanks to Marine Baudrillard, Marc Lowenthal and John Ebert.

Inside cover photograph: Jean Baudrillard
Design: Hedi El Kholti

ISBN: 978-1-58435-092-7
Distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
and London, England
Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction

DOMINATION AND SERVITUDE

This book gathers previously unpublished texts written in 2005, two years before the author's death. Jean Baudrillard read them at various conferences around the world, in Rio de Janeiro, Montreal, New York, Quito, etc. By then, he had become an itinerant philosopher—he never was much of a "home" philosopher anyway. I joined him in Montreal in late October 2005, where he delivered the first text included here, "From Domination to Hegemony." He was taking a crack at the bewildering situation currently facing us as we exit the system of "domination" (based on slavery, obedience, alienation) and enter a more expansive world of "hegemony," in which everyone becomes both hostage and accomplice of the global power. It was a very powerful text, and I offered to publish it right away in English. Baudrillard was hoping to turn all the texts he was writing at the time into a new book, so I held off.

A few months later he was diagnosed with cancer and never regained enough strength to follow up on this project. I am publishing these texts, slightly edited to avoid duplication, into a book in order to fulfill, at least partially, his wishes.[1] I simply added an interview that he gave that same year to *Chronic'art*, a French cultural magazine, which he reviewed personally. Baudrillard wasn't one to make a final statement—he didn't take himself that seriously—but this book could certainly be read as his intellectual testament. Only a free mind could have written it. Like Nietzsche, Baudrillard never was afraid of shaking everything that was already crumbling down, whatever the outcome.

Leaving Montreal, we came back to New York where we had scheduled a public dialogue between ourselves at the New School for Social Research in early November. It took place in front of a packed audience, and hundreds more people lined up good-humoredly in the street. It was Baudrillard's last trip to the United States, and it turned into a festival. Everyone wanted to check for themselves whether Baudrillard was for real or a simulacrum of himself. And here he was at the center of the huge empty stage—a stocky, soft-spoken bespectacled little man with a large Native-American face, mumbling some

1. Two other texts were published separately as *Carnival and Cannibal*, trans. Chris Turner, London, Seagull Books, 2010.

English with a German-sounding accent. I am not sure anyone understood everything that was said, but the audience was ecstatic. It was philosophy by contact. This is the way theory was being accomodated in an age of media spectacle. But why should theory be spared the general decomposition of all values, which is turning culture, politics, not to mention life itself, into a carnival? Even Slavoj Žižek slavishly said of Alain Badiou, playing each other up, that he was "Plato walking among us." Why not Mao himself? As Baudrillard wrote: "History that repeats itself turns to farce. But a farce that repeats itself ends up making a history." The event was history.

Very early on, Baudrillard mapped out most of the concepts that he would work on for decades to come. As he recognized it himself, a philosopher may only have *one* idea in his life, and be lucky that he has one, but he could unfold it in such a way that no one would recognize it whenever they passed by it again. Actually, Baudrillard had two major ideas: the first one, critical, was that reality has disappeared and was replaced by simulacra; the second one, more agonistic, was to turn this disappearance into a symbolic challenge.

The agonistic challenge was what he really cared about, but simulation and simulacra is what people remembered him for most, often taking it, erroneously, as an advocation on his part. It was in

fact a *jubilant* diagnosis of our civilization. Baudrillard could never quite believe his eyes when faced with what we keep doing to ourselves in the name of—whatever. Like Antonin Artaud, Baudrillard realized from the onset that our culture was getting divorced from life. By the time he was writing, there was not much life left to be divorced from. Baudrillard was hailed as the inventor of "post-modernism," a concept he rejected. The same confusion surrounded Michel Foucault, who was cast as the stern advocate of control, or Paul Virilio cast as the prophet of speed. The publication of *Simulations* gave Baudrillard instant prominence in the New York art world. It got him pigeonholed as the denier of reality, and he was adulated or hated for it. He was in fact already working on other concepts—seduction, fatality, ecstasy—by the time simulation became the rage. "Simulation" never was Baudrillard's signature concept, the way the "society of the spectacle" was for Guy Debord, although the two notions remain closely related. Simulation is spectacle without an agency. The concept got out of hand, the way the Oedipus Complex did for Freud, who only wrote eight pages all in all about it. The two parts that make up *Simulations* were only put together in the book I published in English in the Foreign Agents series in 1983. In French, they belong to different books. "Simulation" was first mentioned in *The Consumer*

Society—published in 1970, a couple of years after Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Fittingly, Baudrillard managed to turn Ferdinand de Saussure's discovery of linguistic *value* (signs as pure differences) into a "structural revolution." It was a clinical assessment of a society that was losing all its moorings. Identifying the code independently of any outside reference allowed him to read the sign on the wall—the floatation of value escaping into boundless speculation. Politics after that could never be the same.

The major turn in Baudrillard's thinking, paradoxically, happened in America. An invitation by Marxist Fredric Jameson to teach for a few months in San Diego in 1975, together with Jean-François Lyotard, Michel de Certeau, Louis Marin and Edgar Morin, turned out to be decisive. The two camps didn't always see eye to eye, and there were occasional tensions and mutual exclusions, which I happened to witness at the time, but it certainly was a learning process on both sides, and had lasting repercussions. Baudrillard took a huge step forward when he discovered the "Silicon Valley" phenomenon, the home-based computer utopia, which he hailed as the "cybernetic disintegration of the 'tertiary metropolis.'"[2] [45] Until

2. Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, London, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 45. All the page numbers in this introduction refer to this book.

then, he had seen the sphere of consumption as a mere appendage of the sphere of production, the way superstructures sat on infrastructures in Marxist theory. Registering the California effect, Baudrillard realized that production was moving into consumption. His analysis of the consumer society hadn't been a limited case study; it applied *everywhere*. The consumer process couldn't be stopped, it would engulf everything. Soon, the entire world would be "consumed" by the exchangeability of capital. "Everything within production and the economy becomes commutable, reversible and exchangeable according to the same indeterminate specularity as we find in politics, fashion or the media." [16] Capital no longer was a process of production; production itself was dissolving into the code. [18] He also understood that there was no more gap left, no insider's distance that would still allow for a critique of society. Any counter-discourse filtering into the code would immediately be "disconnected from its own ends, disintegrated and absorbed" like everything else. [2]

Before leaving San Diego, Baurillard feverishly completed his *magnum opus*, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, which he published the following year, a thick and rambling book that served as a scaffolding for everything that he would try out in the

years to come. While Deleuze and Guattari maintained that society keeps leaking from all sides and that capital never stops investing and disinvesting territories with its flows, Baudrillard's own version of capital, the structural revolution of value, was anything but fluid. On the contrary, it was a homogenizing principle based on repetition, bringing together differences from various sources on a larger and larger scale. By an "extraordinary coincidence," Baudrillard recalled, he had turned to Freud just at the moment when he realized that the system of production was moving to the sphere of reproduction. It dawned on him that the entire political economy was governed by the death drive. [148] In its most "terroristic structural form," the law of value was a "compulsive reproduction of the code." It was death on the march, and "the destiny of our culture." [152]

The death drive keeps unbinding energy and returning it to a prior, inorganic state. Freud treated it as a biological metaphor, but also as a myth, "magnificent in its indefiniteness." Using Freud against Freud, Baudrillard celebrated it as an amazing breakthrough, a major *anthropological* discovery. This sent him back, via Mauss and Bataille, to ancient cults and primitive formations. Although he would hardly refer to it by name, the death drive became the keystone of his entire work. The exaltation that he felt then, seeing

everything suddenly coming together, reverberates through *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, especially in the preface, which takes on a visionary quality: "Everywhere, in every domain, a single form predominates: reversibility, cyclical reversal and annulment put an end to the linearity of time, language, economic exchange, accumulation and power. Hence the reversibility of the gift in the counter-gift, the reversibility of exchange in the sacrifice, the reversibility of time in the cycle... In every domain it assumes the form of extermination and death, for it is the form of the symbolic itself." [2] Reversibility is the form death takes in a symbolic exchange. And Baudrillard warned Deleuze and Guattari that "all the freed energies will one day return to it... For the system is the master: like God it can bind or unbind energies; what it is incapable of (and what it can no longer avoid) is reversibility." [5]

At the time Baudrillard was witnessing the twilight of labor culture in the deserts of California, the Operaist movement in Italy was experimenting with the same idea, but on a much larger scale, voluntarily renouncing steady employment and relying instead on collective intelligence and technological advances. Italian autonomists saw themselves as a new breed of communists, and yet they were open-ended enough to look to America

for innovative forms of labor and freer trade-unionism along the line of the Wobblies (the International Workers of the World) who had organized immigrant workers in the 1920s. Félix Guattari publicly espoused their cause in France, Toni Negri conceived it in Italy, and Jean Baudrillard dreamed it in America. They all had reached the same conclusions: the Fordist system, with communist parties and labor bureaucracy locked together, was blocking any change. It had to be replaced by "zero work" and "cottage industries."

Compared to the French "Glorious Three," 1830, 1848 and the 1871 Paris Commune, May '68 was a failed revolution, but it succeeded in other ways. It demonstrated that traditional class struggle no longer was a viable political alternative. The "revolutionaries" remained on the sideline, and the rebels were already engaged in reproduction. Italian autonomists saw the coming Postfordist paradigm as radical utopia, it was the "communism of capital."[3] Baudrillard wasn't so sure. Looking at it as part of the "revolution of value," he realized that Postfordism and the new technologies of labor could well be another step towards an "integral reality" that no one would be

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3. Paolo Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2003, p. 110.

able to oppose, short of capitalism itself. The intellectual split became unavoidable. In the 1980s, the "winter years," Baudrillard's extrapolations were rejected by his peers as "weak thought."

The consequences of the paradigmatic change indeed were huge, and they could be read in different ways. Immaterializing labor allowed the form of capital to penetrate the entire society. It invested workers both at home and in the social space "as one might 'invest' a town, totally occupying it and controlling all access." [19]. No longer brutally bought and sold on the marketplace, labor power became another commodity. Labor and non-labor time (exchange value and use value) became harder to differentiate, as Baudrillard had anticipated, and the extraction of surplus-value problematic. The passage from the golden age of production to the *social factory* was exciting; for some, like Toni Negri and Paolo Virno, it promised the deployment of a "general intelligence" open to change and innovation. Looking at it the other way, it was nonstop work and general stupidity. The structure of absorption became total. Pulverized "into every pore of society," labor became *a way of life*. In 1976, the year Baudrillard published *Symbolic Exchange*, Foucault introduced the concept of "bio-power" in his lectures at the College de France. Their confrontation in *Forget Foucault*, one year later, could

be read again in that light. It may well have been a missed encounter.

Like Foucault, Baudrillard had been deeply affected by the work of Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille, "high modernists" who introduced them both to Nietzsche, but their influence on Baudrillard remained long-lasting. Both Artaud's "theater of cruelty" and Bataille's "sacrifices" were attempts to recreate a symbolic bond in a world increasingly estranged from it. The concept of "cruelty," inspired by Nietzsche, involved strict rules that had to be applied with an implacable rigor. The display of gruesome tortures and dismemberments in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, published the same year, were cruel in that way: the ritual of power was meant to inflict on the regicide's body pains that would be, down to the last detail, commensurate to the outrage.

In the classical—legal—conception of sovereignty, the monarch isn't just considered superior ("sovereign") to his miserable subjects in relative terms. Ruling by divine right, his superiority is absolute and transcends vulgar human existence. *Taking life* or *letting live* are the sovereign's fundamental attributes. But only when he actually kills —even tyrannically, unjustly—does the sovereign fully exert his symbolic rights over life. Foucault suggested that the punishment was all the more

ruthless in that it was meant to offset the discontinuous hold of power over society. "The meshes of the net were too big," and eluded his grasp.[4] This *strategic* vision of domination went a long way in accounting for the technological mutation of power in the West at the dawn of the industrial revolution. While outwardly maintaining the image of sovereignty, a new type of disciplinary control sank deeper into the social body, down to its most tenuous elements. What disappeared in the process was symbolic exchange. Foucault's inversion of the system of power from the top down, from the sovereignty of death to the discipline of life, follows the same logic. The new system of power which replaced the old in the nineteenth century had its own claims: the right to *take* life and *let* die. Life replaced death as a means of controlling society at large.

Hegel's master/slave dialectics was based on the slave's fear of death. Giving it a perverse twist, Bataille hypothesized that there was not just one, but two separate forms of mastery. The first, relying on classical "domination," is geared to produce obedient subjects. The master rules because the slave is afraid of death, and he is not. But were the master to actually die, Bataille objected, he would lose his mastery. The master was no different

4. Michel Foucault, "Les mailles du pouvoir" (1976) in *Dits et écrits*, IV, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 190.

from the slave, and dialectics was a con-game. Both were ruled by the fear. Bataille went on to hypothesize another form of sovereignty that would be *divorced from domination.* The real sovereign is *noble*, in the Nietzschean sense. He doesn't derive his power from his subjects, but from his own death. He only waits it to come, immune from any danger save the one who will murder him. It was in that way that Bataille managed to reestablish a symbolic exchange where there was none.

In 1933, Bataille extended this sacrificial economy to contemporary labor through his reading of Marcel Mauss's *The Gift.* Mauss opposed the "restricted economy" of capital (utility and use value) with the Northwestern American-Indian model of the "potlatch," a symbolic exchange in which goods are ritually destroyed and rivalry exacerbated to the point of terminal violence. For Bataille, only useless expenditure was able to counter the deadening effect of capital's exchangeability. The most lucid man, he wrote, will understand nothing if "it does not occur to him that a human society can have, just as he does, an *interest* in considerable losses, in catastrophes that, *while conforming to well-defined needs*, provoke tumultuous depressions, crises of dread, and, in the final analysis, a certain orgiastic state."[5]

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5. Georges Bataille, in *Visions of Excess*, tr. Allan Stoekl, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 117.

Bataille looked upon capital as enslaving workers as being the same thing as the sovereign imposing obedience on his subjects. Just because the sovereign chose to *let* his subjects live didn't mean he let them free. They remained subjected to him in whatever function they carried out. Whether a prisoner of war, whose life was spared; a slave serving in sumptuary domesticity; an emancipated slave; or a serf in the fields, none of their lives were their own. They didn't have to die in order to be dead; their death was *differed*, kept in suspension, until the sovereign decided otherwise.

And the same holds true for the factory worker. Labor, Bataille maintained, was a unilateral gift of capital to the workers and was *meant* "to condemn them to a hideous degradation." Contrary to what Marx believed, the process of production wasn't set up to extract from them a surplus-value, its real purpose was to subject them to a sacrifice. And Bataille dismissed the American "subterfuge" of compensating workers for the debasement that had been imposed on them. Nothing could modify the fundamental division between noble and ignoble men. "The cruel game of social life does not vary among the different civilized countries, where the insulting splendor of the rich loses and degrades the human nature of the lower class."[6]

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6. Georges Bataille, *Ibid*, p. 126.

And "the scenario has never changed," Baudrillard concurred, since labor power has been instituted on death. Having converted his death into a wage, the worker could only free himself by putting his own death on the line.

Whether the industrialists would crush their workers, or the workers slaughter their masters (it had been the dilemma in 1933 Germany) didn't matter that much to him as long as a sacrificial economy took over from political economy. "Whoever works *has not been put to death*, he is refused this honor," Baudrillard wrote in the same vein. The worst that capital could do to a worker is to keep him alive, condemned to "the indefinite abjection of a life of labor." [39]

Unlike Artaud and Bataille, his older contemporaries, Baudrillard never yearned for an inner experience of death reached through anguish, terror, or eroticism, yet he remained convinced that death *as a form internal to the system* was the only way left to offset it. As labor was slow death, only an instant and violent challenge could possibly free one from it. Against every "revolutionary" view, he insisted, "we must maintain that the only alternative to labor is not free time, or non-labor, it is sacrifice." [39]

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard remained indebted as well to Foucault's genealogy of exclusion, but he realized that every site of

enclosure—asylums, prisons, factories, schools—would eventually be reabsorbed by the system and displayed as phantom references. Liberating madness, or sexuality, would simply empty them out of their subversive potential. In the late 1970s, Foucault and Guattari did their utmost to open the asylums, and succeeded all too well—mental patients were simply dumped into the streets. The same happened to sex, which became an industry. The only site left untouched was death. Or rather it was *disappeared* in broad daylight in order to leave room for the new consumer way of life. Instead of madness, the limit by which contemporary society defines itself became death. "Perhaps death and death alone," Baudrillard concluded, "belongs to a higher order than the code." [4] He didn't mean death as a biological fact, but the *reversibility* of death.

Etienne de la Boétie, a young Renaissance philosopher and close friend of Michel de Montaigne, wrote a slim pamphlet that has not ceased to fascinate generations of thinkers, Baudrillard included. The argument of La Boétie's *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, 1548, was simple, but powerful. How did it happen that "so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give

him..."[7] What could have "denatured" men to such an extent that, born to live free, they would have lost "the remembrance of their original being, and the desire to regain it"? His answer was stark: people lose their freedom through their own blindness. The desire to serve the tyrant is something that they themselves want. Had La Boétie known about native societies discovered at the time in the New World (and maybe he did) it certainly would have vindicated his argument about the denaturation of humanity. It was proof enough that voluntary servitude wasn't innate, but prompted from the outside.

Something must have happened then, La Boétie suggested, a "misfortune" [*malencontre*] that made people willing, even eager, to embrace their tyrant. Suddenly domination caught on, affecting everyone, eventually wearing the face of the sovereign or the form of the State. As long as time was circular, and society undivided, the mechanism of servitude was kept in abeyance. The accident, or misfortune, knocked all this down. It was the beginning of History. "*All divided societies* are slave societies"[8] Pierre

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7. Etienne de La Boétie, *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz, New York, Columbia University Press, 1942, p. 7.

8. Pierre Clastres, *The Archeology of Violence*, tr. Jeanine Herman, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2010, p. 174.

Clastres, a controversial political anthropologist, concluded in *The Archeology of Violence*, "because this love of the subjects for the master equally denatures the relations between subjects."[9] The people's love for their own subjection became the well-hidden secret of domination. Every relation of power is oppressive, regardless of who, cruel or benevolent, comes to assume it.

In *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss held on to the idea of "innocent savages" corrupted by Western civilization. It didn't prevent good natives from practicing tortures and scarifications with even more gusto and expertise than the sovereign's henchmen when they tore the regicide's flesh from his breast, or burnt it with wax and sulfur. But it wasn't for the benefit of one, distinct from the rest of the tribe. To the contrary: the ghastly ritual was meant to inscribe on native bodies the tribal law that everybody, without exception, would have to obey. The collective memory created through violence and death, wasn't buried deep inside them, but indelibly displayed on their skin for everyone to see. It certainly required extreme codifications on the part of Indian tribes to resist change and remain exempt from domination. Far from being close to nature, they subjected themselves to ferocious markings whose ultimate outcome, Clastres

9. *Ibid*, p. 187.

maintained, was to prevent the emergence in their midst of this cold monster, the State. Whether so-called primitive cultures had been exposed to savage empires beforehand, or preempted their recurrence through their own practices and institutions, remains an open debate, but they deliberately devised a number of strict mechanisms to that effect. To keep their numbers down, they engaged in ceaseless wars against neighboring tribes, and kept civil, religious and war powers separate. Primitive societies ignored slavery, and preserved as well their ancestral homeostasis by staging ritual destructions of accumulated wealth. This is what "potlatch" ultimately is about: eradicating the evil share, making sure that whoever wins the ruthless challenge would end up with nothing, and even less than nothing: losing their lives. Survivors acquired more prestige, but were too destitute to represent a serious threat.

The power attributed to chiefs in anthropological literature, from Marcel Mauss to Lévi-Strauss, has been wildly overestimated. In his celebrated "Writing Lesson,"[10] Lévi-Strauss recounts that he singled out the tribal chief by his superior intelligence and his eagerness to acquire power from the peculiar technology used by the anthropologist to

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10. A chapter of Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, New York: Criterion Books, 1961, pp. 286–297.

consign his observations. There couldn't have been, of course, a greater betrayal in a society without writing and without history, where traditions were passed on orally from generation to generation, than to introduce writing, however rudimentary and ape-like. But someone, an insider, had to dissociate himself from his congeners and take on the blame for the stranger who came from the outside to break the secrets of the tribe. Lévi-Strauss automatically assumed that the chief, because a "chief," was different form the others, and willing to acquire from the foreigner a power that he would have been unable to devise on his own from within. Such was the price to pay for enlightenment, and Lévi-Strauss was eager to assume the White Man's guilt for it, as long as the savages retained their assumed naturalness. What sealed this little mental drama, and got the story straight, was the passing mention that the chief, ultimately, was decommissioned and expelled by his kin.

Contrary to the sovereign, Indian chiefs are remarkable for their complete lack of authority. The only power they own resides in the *palabra*, in their capacity to maintain by their speeches an equilibrium within the group. They recapitulate out loud, like a mantra, the tribe's genealogy and tradition, while no one, ostensibly, is paying attention. As Clastres says, he doesn't have the right, but the *duty* to talk. Chiefs have no power

to *take* life, let alone appropriate some of the tribe's wealth. Actually, they have to divest themselves from everything they own, and tolerate a "permanent plunder" from the other members. No wonder the position of a chief is not exactly desirable. They remain dependent on everyone else, and are granted several women, not as a privilege, but because they aren't allowed to hunt for themselves. Generosity is not only a chief's duty, but "an involuntary servitude."

Deleuze and Guattari reproached Clastres (whom they consulted for *Anti-Oedipus*) for assuming that native societies could exist in autarchy outside of history. But Clastres did more: he suggested that La Boetie himself had pulled off a similar feat. The question that his *Discourse* raises, he said, is so "totally free" and independent of any territoriality that it can still be received today in the same way. La Boetie had a unique opportunity to "step out of history" because the monarchy was just beginning to emerge among rival feudal lords and divide society along a vertical axis, pitting against each other sovereigns and subjects, masters and slaves. In truth, specialists agree that the *Discourse* was a direct response to a massive peasant uprising against taxes in Guyenne, the first of its kind, that was ruthlessly crushed by the monarch's soldiers in 1548.

La Boetie's purpose wasn't to encourage subjects to rebel, but to remind them that any domination

is illegitimate: "From all these indignities, such as the very beasts of the field would not endure, you can deliver yourselves if you try, not by taking action, but merely by willing to be free. Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed... support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break in pieces." La Boetie showed no respect for the sovereign's right, divine or not, let alone for those who subjected themselves willingly to it. There was something that nothing could subdue, even under the most vicious tortures: the power that death affords. Montaigne, an exile like him in his own time, wrote: "Premeditation of death is premeditation of freedom... Acknowledging death frees us from every subjection and constraint." Only death resists domination.

Voluntary servitude is a paradoxical statement because servitude is not experienced passively, but actively—after all, it is willed. And anything that is willed could be unwilled. People rather desire their own oppression. Obviously, they must get something in return: identity, privilege, security, even pleasure, however perverse. Jean-François Lyotard once asserted, scandalously, in *Libidinal Economy*, that factory workers enjoyed their lot. They were *proles*, and proud to be. Didn't the proletariat, after Marx, become a value? They were

the only ones who knew what "rough reality" was. French intellectuals, Jean-Paul Sartre included, felt deeply illegitimate, even dwarfed by them, and wore their blue overalls in demonstrations to appropriate some of their power. Philosopher Simone Weil couldn't care less about power, she just wanted to be crucified. She joined the assembly line to experience what being a slave was like and took herself for one, reinventing God in order to seal her own fate. Factory workers were the future of humankind—as if slavery could bring anything else than more slavery. In the end it wasn't the dictatorship of the proletariat that brought out a classless society, but capitalism—on its own terms, of course, and for its own benefit.

Voluntary servitude wasn't something that one could acknowledge, consciously or not; it was power turned inside out, everyone forever circling around each other. What was unforgivable about May '68 rebels or about the Autonomia movement at its peak in 1977 is that they did *not* want to take power. Franco Piperno, one of their leaders, admitted to me later on: "We didn't know what we would have done with it." As Baudrillard writes in *The Agony of Power*: "Power itself must be abolished—and not solely because of a refusal to be dominated, which is at the heart of all traditional struggles—but also, just as violently, in the refusal to dominate."

The Agony of Power

1

FROM DOMINATION TO HEGEMONY

In order to grasp how globalization and global antagonism works, we should distinguish carefully between domination and hegemony. One could say that hegemony is the ultimate stage of domination and its terminal phase. Domination is characterized by the master/slave relation, which is still a dual relation with potential alienation, a relationship of force and conflicts. It has a violent history of oppression and liberation. There are the dominators and the dominated—it remains a symbolic relationship. Everything changes with the emancipation of the slave and the internalization of the master by the emancipated slave. Hegemony begins here in the disappearance of the dual, personal, agonistic domination for the sake of integral reality—the reality of networks, of the virtual and total exchange where there are no longer dominators or dominated.

Indeed, it could be said that hegemony brings domination to an end. We, emancipated workers, internalize the Global Order and its operational setup of which we are the hostages far more than the slaves. Consensus, be it voluntary or involuntary, replaces traditional servitude, which still belongs to the symbolic register of domination.

"HEGEMON" means the one who commands, orders, leads and governs (and not the one who dominates and exploits). This brings us back to the literal meaning of the word "cybernetic" (*Kubernetikè*, the art of governing). Contrary to domination, a hegemony of world power is no longer a dual, personal or real form of domination, but the domination of networks, of calculation and integral exchange.

Domination can be overthrown from the outside. Hegemony can only be inverted or reversed from the inside. Two different, almost contrary paradigms: the paradigm of revolution, transgression, subversion (domination) and the paradigm of inversion, reversion, auto-liquidation (hegemony). They are almost exclusive of each other, because the mechanisms of revolution, of anti-domination, as history demonstrated, can become the impetus or the vector for hegemony. We could compare hegemony to the brain, which is its biological equivalent. Like the brain, which subordinates every other function, the central computer

assumes the hegemonic hold of a global power and can therefore serve as an image of our present political situation.

What other feature distinguishes hegemony from pure and simple domination is the coming of a fundamental event: simulacra and simulation. Hegemony works through general masquerade, it relies on the excessive use of every sign and obscenity, the way it mocks its own values, and challenges the rest of the world by its cynicism ("carnivalization"). Classical, historical domination imposed a system of positive values, displaying as well as defending these values. Contemporary hegemony, on the other hand, relies on a symbolic liquidation of every possible value. The terms "simulacrum," "simulation" and "virtual" summarize this liquidation, in which every signification is eliminated in its own sign, and the profusion of signs parodies a by now unobtainable reality. This is the total masquerade in which domination itself is engulfed. Power is only the parody of the signs of power—just as war is only the parody of signs of war, including technology. Masquerade of war, masquerade of power. We can therefore speak of the hegemony of masquerade, and the masquerade of hegemony. All meaning is abolished in its own sign and the profusion of signs parodies a now undiscoverable reality.

Domination and hegemony are separated by the liquidation of reality, the super fast irruption, of late, of a global principle of simulation, a global hold by the virtual. Globalization is the hegemony of a global power and can only occur in the framework of the virtual and the networks—with the homogeneity that comes from signs emptied of their substance.

The entire Western masquerade relies on the cannibalization of reality by signs, or of a culture by itself. I use "cannibalize" here in the derivative sense of *cannibalizing a car*, using it as spare parts. Cannibalizing a culture, as we do it today, means tinkering with its values like spare parts inasmuch as the entire system is out of order. This distinction between domination and hegemony is crucial. It determines the forms of resistance appropriate for each and the various ways in which the present situation could evolve. One doesn't respond to hegemony and domination in the same way; the strategies should not be confused.

In the face of this hegemony, the work of the negative, the work of critical thought, of the relationship of forces against oppression, or of radical subjectivity against alienation, all this has (virtually) become obsolete. It has become obvious that, thanks to the twists and turns of cynical reason, or the ruses of history, this new hegemonic configuration

(which is no longer the hegemony of capital) has absorbed the negative, negativity as a way of regaining the initiative. Caught in a vast Stockholm syndrome, the alienated, the oppressed, and the colonized are siding with the system that holds them hostage. They are now "annexed," in the literal sense, prisoners of the "nexus," of the network, connected for better or worse.

Power has ransacked all of the strategies of simulation: parody, irony, and self-mockery—leaving the Left with only a phantom of the truth. The famous slogan for the Banque Nationale de Paris (BNP) in the 1970s comes to mind: "Your money interests me!" This statement encapsulates the ignominy of capital far better than any critical analysis. Denouncing capital and all of the banking mechanisms was nothing new, the scandalous feature was that the banker himself had said it; truth coming out from the mouth of Evil. It wasn't a denunciation, a critical analysis. It came from the dominant power and enjoyed complete immunity. It could admit its "crime" in broad daylight.

The most recent profession of faith in a similar vein came from Patrick Le Lay, CEO of TF1, the French television channel: "Let's be realistic: the job of TF1 is to help Coca-Cola sell its products. For an advertising campaign to work properly, the viewer's brains have to be accessible. The goal of our programs is to make them available, by

entertaining them, relaxing them between two messages. What we sell to Coca-Cola is relaxed-brains time... Nothing is harder than getting them to open up."

We should pay our respect to this amazing admission and professional cynicism. It is widely shared, as the following slogan for Poste Télécom testifies: "Money has no sex, but it will reproduce." And it could be condemned for the same reason, as it was by all fine minds. But this is not the real problem. Even those who condemned Le Lay's shocking statement were fascinated by its insolence. Doesn't this shameless flippancy manifest a greater freedom than the stonewalling of critical contestation? But this is the question: how could truth be lifted by an "arrogant" discourse that gets the upper-hand by short-circuiting any critique?

Technocratic cynicism is not scandalous *per se*, but by the way it breaks a fundamental rule of our social and political game: corruption for some and protesting Evil for others. If the corrupt have no respect for this protocol, and show their hand without sparing us their hypocrisy, then the ritual mechanism of denunciation goes haywire. The privilege of telling the truth eludes our grasp—in the face of capital unveiled by the capitalists, even.

In fact, Le Lay takes away the only power we had left. He steals our denunciation. *This* is the

real scandal. Otherwise, how could you explain the general outrage when he revealed an open secret?

Instead of denouncing evil from the position of the good (eternal moral position), he expresses evil from the position of evil. It is the best way to say it, but it remains inadmissible. Truth must be on the side of Good. There can be no intelligence on the side of Evil. Yet all those who outdo themselves with arrogance (Le Pen), cynicism (Le Lay), pornography (Abu Ghraib), mythomania (Marie L.) unmask the truth of the system in their abuse of it. The effects are both fascinating and revolting—and they are much more effective than conventional critiques.

A bitter truth: radicalness is on the side of the intelligence of evil. Critical intelligence no longer measures up to the collapse of reality and to the passage into total reality. The truth, or the inhumanity of this situation, can only be revealed from the inside, voluntarily or involuntarily, by the agents of the embezzlement of reality. Only evil can speak evil now—evil is a ventriloquist. Critical intelligence is left to jump over its own shadow: even in its radicalness, it remains pious and denunciatory. The curse of critical discourse is to reconcile itself secretly with those it criticizes by denouncing them (and I am well aware that what I am saying here belongs to this discourse). Denunciation will never have the shocking

frankness of an unscrupulous discourse. We must look to the side of evil for the clearest indications, the harshest reality. Only those who show no concern for contradiction or critical consideration in their acts and discourse can, by this very means, shed full light, without remorse or ambiguity, on the absurd and extravagant character of the state of things, through the play of objective irony.

What is happening to critical thought—the thought of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, the thought that drove the analysis of capital, merchandise and spectacle throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—is what happened before to religious, ethnic and linguistic phenomena. We are presently witnessing their formal renewal, but without any of their original substance. The religious revival is epigonal and has nothing to do with the fervor of past centuries. It presupposes the dilution of faith as symbolic organization, the disappearance of transcendence (and maybe even the death of God). It is the specific product of a disenchanted situation of loss where everything that disappears is artificially revived. It is the abreactive product of a world where there is no reason left to believe in anything.

Current critical thought continues along its trajectory but it is no longer the critical thought of the Enlightenment and modernity, which had their own object and their own energy. It is merely

an epiphenomenon of a world where there is nothing left to analyze in the hopes of subverting it. This thought is no longer current because we are no longer in a "critical" situation, like the historical domination of capital. We have entered a hegemonic form of total reality, of closed-circuit global power that has even captured the negative. All that is left today is the specific product of this posthumous situation where it no longer has a historical reason to exist or any effectiveness.

Yet it is all the more prominent. The critique of alienation and spectacle has blossomed and spread to the point that it has become the most common vulgate because it is the only discourse of consolation that we have. But its tone has changed; it has become more melancholy as subversion and transgression have lost popularity today.

Three simultaneous dimensions form the passage from domination to hegemony. It is a perilous triple jump, a three-part sacrifice:

1) Capital surpasses itself and turns against itself in the sacrifice of value (the economic illusion).
2) Power turns against itself in the sacrifice of representation (the democratic illusion).
3) The entire system turns against itself in the sacrifice of reality (the metaphysical illusion).

All three jump over their shadow.

The shadow of capital is value. The shadow of power is representation. The shadow of the system is reality. They respectively move beyond Value, Representation and Reality—in a hyperspace that is no longer economic, political or real but rather the hegemonic sphere.

Capital is both the total realization of Value and its liquidation. Power is now the final form of representation: it only represents itself. The system is the total version of the Real and at the same time its liquidation through the Virtual. This is the hegemonic form.

The Economic Illusion

In any event, the question of "capital" must be reconfigured. Does something like capital still exist, and, if there is a crisis, what is the essence of this crisis? We must try to pass "through the looking glass," beyond the mirror of production.

Does exploitation still exist? Can we still talk about alienation? Have we become the hostages (not the slaves, but the hostages) of a global market under the definitive sign of globalization? But can we still talk of a "market"? And hasn't capitalism reached the point of destroying the conditions of its own existence?

One of the problems of generalized exchange is that the market is both its ideal and its strategic location. It may be the fatal destiny of capital to go to the limit of exchange—to the total consumption of reality. In its historical (and Marxist) definition, capitalism presided over the multiplication of exchanges in the name of value. The market obeys the law of value and equivalency. The limit here is the limit of classic capitalism. And the crises of capital can always be resolved by regulating value.

This is no longer true for the financial flows and international speculation that far surpass the laws of the market. Can we still speak of capital? Do we keep the term and the concept and therefore acknowledge the exponential strategy that pushes capital beyond its own limits, into a whirlwind of exchanges where capital loses its very essence which is the essence of the market—and self-destructs in an unbridled circulation that brings the very concept of exchange to an end? Or do we consider that it is no longer capital at all but something radically different, an exchange that is not only general but total—completely freed from value and markets—an exchange that, having lost its rational principle, the principle of value, becomes integral just as reality, having lost its reality principle, becomes integral reality, from which there is no salvation?

In this light, capital in its historical form appears to be a lesser evil. In relation to a virtual universe, reality appears to be a lesser evil. In view of hegemony, domination itself appears to be a lesser evil. Take the example of the Web, the Internet, networks, blogs, etc. It is all free, "liberally" deployed without economic constraints, beyond markets, in a frenzy of total communication. This is a virtual catastrophe, the catastrophe of total exchange that is not even protected by money or the market. We find ourselves wanting it all to be subject to the law of value, taken in hand by capitalist power, to slow its exponential development, to escape the ecstasy of (free, secular and obligatory) communication—because it is leading to the dictatorship of forced exchange—but no one will escape.

The next stage, which can be seen in these mysteriously free networks, is much worse than anything that was stigmatized as the mercantilization of exchange, where everything is assigned a price and a market. This influence (which is not strictly speaking the influence of a person, a "capitalist" power or any political power) is the ascendancy of total, integral free exchange, universal wiring, universal connection. Capital, markets, surplus value, merchandise and prices seem like a lesser evil or protection against something worse. This is the virtual dimension of hegemony—

it is different from the domination of capital and different from the dimension of power in its strictly political definition.

The Democratic Illusion

One might wonder, however, if hegemony is a direct continuation or perpetuation of domination. Is it the same form deployed to its ultimate consequences? Or is there a moment where there is a shift to a noncritical form—beyond internal crises but not exempt from internal catastrophe or self-dissolution through saturation (like any system at the limit of its possibilities). A world of total, instantaneous, perpetual communication is unthinkable and, in any case, intolerable.

Hegemony corresponds to a phase of the saturation of power (political, financial, military and even cultural power) pushed by its own logic but unable to accomplish its possibilities fully—a dire fate indeed (the story of the umbrella—maybe the dire fate of realizing possibilities fully is the fate of humankind?). Yet any action that tries to slow capital or power, that tries to keep them from accomplishing all of their possibilities is their last hope, their last chance to survive "just short of their end." And if we let them, they will rush headlong to their end (taking us with them).

Is it better to let them do it, to let them follow their fatal penchant for self-destruction through saturation and ultra-realization—or is it better to slow them down to avoid disaster? This is the paradox we confront in the paroxysm of power. (And, once again, the same global, universal problem faces humanity and its "hypertelic" fate when it rushes to its end because it is too successful [technologically, sexually, demographically, etc.])

It all depends on your idea of power. If you presuppose that intelligence or the imagination hold power, then the persistence of stupidity or at least the permanent absence of imagination from power is inexplicable. (Unless you also suppose a general disposition among people to delegate their sovereignty to the most inoffensive, least imaginative of their fellow citizens, a *malin génie* that pushes people to elect the most nearsighted, corrupt person out of a secret delight in seeing the stupidity and corruption of those in power. Especially in times of trouble, people will vote massively for the candidate who does not ask them to think. It is a silent conjuration, analogous in the political sphere to the conspiracy of art in another domain.)

We should abandon the democratic illusion of imagination or intelligence in power that comes from the depths of Enlightenment ideology. The naïve utopias of the 1960s must be revised:

"Imagination in power!"—"Take your dreams for reality!"—"No limits to pleasure!" All of these slogans were realized (or hyperrealized) in the development of the system.

If we remove the moral utopia of power—power as it should be in the eyes of those who reject it—if we hypothesize that power only lives through parody or simulations of representation and is defined by the society that manipulates it; if we accept the hypothesis that power is an ectoplasmic, yet indispensable function, then people like Bush or Schwarzenegger fill their roles perfectly. Not that a country or a people has the leaders it deserves but that the leaders are an emanation of global power. The political structure of the United States is in direct correlation to its global domination. Bush leads the United States in the same way as those who exercise global hegemony over the rest of the planet. (We could even say that the hegemony of global power resembles the absolute privilege of the human species over all others.) There is therefore no reason to think of an alternative.

Power itself must be abolished—and not solely in the refusal to be dominated, which is at the heart of all traditional struggles—but also, just as violently, in the refusal to dominate (if the refusal to dominate had the same violence and the same energy as the refusal to be dominated,

the dream of revolution would have disappeared long ago). Intelligence cannot, can never be in power because intelligence consists of this double refusal. "If I could think that there were a few people without any power in the world, then I would know that all is not lost" (Elias Canetti).

The Metaphysical Illusion

The reabsorption of critical negativity is echoed by an even more radical form of denial: the denial of reality.

In simulation, you move beyond true and false through parody, masquerade, derision to form an immense enterprise of deterrence. Deterrence from every historical reference, from all reality in the passage into signs. This strategy of destabilization, of discrediting, of divestment from reality in the form of parody, mockery, or masquerade becomes the very principle of government, is also a depreciation of all value.

The question is no longer of a power or a "political" power connected to a history, to forms of representation, to contradictions and a critical alternative. Representation has lost its principle and the democratic illusion is complete—not as much by the violation of rights as by the simulation

of values, general uncertainty and the derealization of all reality. Everyone is caught in the signs of power that occupy the entire space—and that are shared by everyone communally (take for example the resigned, embarrassed complicity in the rigged workings of the political sphere and polls).

From there, the system works exponentially:

—not starting from value, but from the liquidation of value.
—not through representation, but through the liquidation of representation.
—not from reality but from the liquidation of reality.

Everything in the name of which domination was exercised is terminated, sacrificed, which should logically lead to the end of domination. This is indeed the case, but for the sake of hegemony.

The system doesn't care a fig for laws; it unleashes deregulation in every domain.

—Deregulation of value in speculation.
—Deregulation of representation in the various forms of manipulation and parallel networks.
—Deregulation of reality through information, the media and virtual reality.

From that point on: total immunity—one can no longer counter the system in the name of one's own principles since the system has abolished them. The end of all critical negativity. Closure of every account and all history. The reign of hegemony. On the contrary, since it is no longer regulated by representation, or its own concept, or the image of itself, the system succumbs to the final temptation: it becomes hypersensitive to its final conditions and casts itself beyond its own end according to the inflexible decrease of the rates of reality.

The most serious of all forms of self-denial—not only economically or politically but metaphysically—is the denial of reality. This immense enterprise of deterrence from every historical reference, this strategy of discrediting, of divesting from reality in the form of parody, mockery, or masquerade, becomes the very principle of government. The new strategy—and it truly is a mutation—is the self-immolation of value, of every system of value, of self-denial, indifferentiation, rejection and nullity as the triumphant command.

Moreover, the concept of the universal is the specific product, within the human race, of a certain civilization called Western, and within that culture, of a privileged minority, a modern

intelligentsia that has dedicated itself to the philosophical and technical edification of humanity. But what can this concept mean, not only outside the human race (it is irrelevant for the animal, plant or cosmic realms, the inhuman in general) but also in the major cultures other than our own (archaic, traditional or Eastern or Far-Eastern that do not even have a term for it) or even in our own societies outside the civilized and cultivated classes where humanism and universal principles have become hereditary. What does the universal mean in the eyes of immigrants, populations left fallow, entire zones of fracture and exclusion in our own "overdeveloped" societies? And even in the privileged fringe, the high-tech globality, what does the universal mean for all the "corporate people," all the high performance groups or individuals according to both a global and an increasingly corporate, isolationist, proactionist evolution?

Contrary to what Immanuel Kant said, the starry sky laughs at this universal law, but so does the heart of humankind: not only living beings but the vast majority of humans never obeyed it. And those who claim to obey it happily put their singular passions before any other ideal finality—this is no doubt, despite the concept, a more authentic way to be "human." Do they themselves believe in this ideal finality? No one

knows; the only sure thing is that they claim to make others obey.

The discourse of the universal describes a tautological spiral: it is held by the species that considers itself superior to all others and within this species, by a minority that considers itself the holder of moral and universal ends, forming a veritable, "democratic" feudality.

Whatever the case may be, there is a major inconsistency in continuing to use a discourse of the universal as a discourse of reference when it has no meaning or effect anywhere—neither with global power nor in opposition to it.

To relativize our concept of the universal: with the increasing globalization of the world, discrimination becomes more ferocious.

The cartography should not confuse these zones beyond reality with those that still give signs of reality in the same hegemonic system of globalization, even though they do not function in the same way. We could even say that the gap separating them is growing and something that was only a cultural singularity in a non-unified world becomes real discrimination in a globalized universe. The more the world is globalized, the worst the discrimination.

The two universes, the hyperreal and the infrareal, seem to interpenetrate but are light years away from each other. The deepest misery and

enclaves of luxury coexist in the same geographic space (take, for example the oil condominiums in Saudi Arabia and the favelas of Rio, but these are extreme cases). In fact, the entire planet is organized on the principle of definitive discrimination between two universes—which no longer have any knowledge of each other. Global power keeps its integral control over the other world, and has all the means necessary for its extermination. It is the tear in the universal. As for the consequences of this tear, the upheaval it can create, we have no idea—except for what is already present today (although it is only the beginning): the only response to this increasingly violent discrimination is an equally violent form, terrorism. An extreme reaction to this situation of impossible exchange.

Which leads us to Europe. In its current form, Europe is a nonevent. It was first an idea (maybe starting in the Middle Ages, a reality before an idea?). Now it is no longer an idea or a reality but a virtual reality referring to a model of simulation to which it must adapt. From the perspective of projection at any price, the will of the people is an obstacle or at least an indifferent parameter or an alibi. The "yes" vote comes from on high, and we can now see that the people are Europe's skeleton in the closet.

This virtual Europe is a caricature of global power. It wants to find its niche in the world order, to represent an economic power that rivals the ridiculous image of its American Big Brother. Europe is organized according to the same liberal principles, and other than a few last gasps of sentimental socialism, is aligned with the model of flux and global deregulation. It is incapable of inventing a new rule for the game (which is also the struggle of the Left on the national level).

Without its own political structure or historical reason, Europe can only desire expansion and proliferation into the void through indefinite "democratic" annexation, just like global power. Of course, all of the peripheral countries want to join this by-product of globalization, just as Europeans dream of reaching the global level.

Europeans have the same relationship to American global power as other countries (like Turkey, for example) have to Europe. Turkey's entry into Europe, outside any political considerations, may be revealing in terms of this paradox: Europeans "from birth" are not really modern either; they have not truly entered hyper-modernity. They are in fact resisting it, and in every country there is something that resists generalized exchange, the vertigo of universal exchange.

Is it good or bad? Does Europe have to be

resolutely modern? Should it resist the grasp of hegemony, while being its best accomplices?

Turkey wanting to enter Europe is not the least of the paradoxes at a time when France is giving signs of wanting to leave. The sudden rise of the "No" vote during the referendum was significant in this regard. It is the best example of a vital or visceral reaction in defense against the consensual blackmail of the "Yes," against the referendum's ultimatum in disguise. There is no need to have a political conscience to have this reflex: it is the automatic rekindling of negativity in the face of excessive positivity, to the coalition of "divine" Europe, the Europe of good conscience, the one on the right side of universality—with all others cast into the shadows of history.

The forces of Good were completely wrong about the perverse effects of an excess of Good and the unconscious lucidity that tells us to "never side with those who are already right." A good example of a response to hegemony that is not the work of the negative or the result of critical thought (the political reasons of the "No" are no better than those of the "Yes"). It is a response in the form of a pure and simple challenge to the saturation of the system, the implementation (once again, beyond political considerations) of a principle of reversion, of reversibility against the hegemonic principle. A good example of the "parallax of Evil."

We have here the profile of the new type of confrontation characterizing the era of Hegemony. It is not a class struggle or a fight for liberation on the global level (since the "liberation" of exchange and democracy, which were the counterpoint to domination, are the strategies of hegemony. Take, for example, England's presence in Zanzibar: by freeing the slaves in the late nineteenth century, England was able to take control of East Africa). It is an irreducibility, an irreducible antagonism to the global principle of generalized exchange.

In other words, a confrontation that is no longer precisely political but metaphysical and symbolic in the strong sense. It is a confrontation, a divide that exists not only at the heart of the dominant power, but at the heart of our individual existence.

—April 2005

2

THE WHITE TERROR OF WORLD ORDER

Absorbing the negative continues to be the problem. When the emancipated slave internalizes the master, the work of the negative is abolished. Domination becomes hegemony. Power can show itself positively and overtly in good conscience and complete self-evidence. It is unquestionable and global. But the game is not over yet. For while the slave internalizes the master, power also internalizes the slave who denies it, and it denies itself in the process. Negativity reemerges as irony, mocking and auto-liquidation internal to power. This is how the slave devours and cannibalizes the Master from the inside. As power absorbs the negative, it is devoured by what it absorbs. There is justice in reversibility.

A catastrophic dialectic has replaced the "work of the negative." Critical thought, or any attempt to attack the system from the inside, is in a complete

aporia. After voluntary servitude, which was the secret key to exercising domination, one could now speak instead of involuntary complicity, consensus and connivance with the World Order by everything that seems to oppose it. Images, even radical-critical ones, are still a part of the crime they denounce, albeit an involuntary one. What is the impact of a film like *Darwin's Nightmare*, which denounces racial discrimination in Tanzania? It will tour the Western world and reinforce the endogamy, the cultural and political autarky of this separate world through images and the consumption of images.

And yet by the same token all critical negativity, all the work of the negative is abolished, devoured by signs and simulacra. In the context of hegemony, the historical work of critical thought, the relationship of forces against oppression, radical subjectivity against alienation are all (virtually) in the past. Simply because this new hegemonic configuration (which is no longer the configuration of capitalism at all) has itself absorbed the negative and used it for a leap forward through the meanders of cynical reasoning or the tricks of history.

The absolute negative (terrorism, internal deterrence) responds to the absolute positive of positivized power. When domination becomes hegemony, negativity becomes terrorism. Thus

hegemony is a meta-stable form because it has absorbed the negative—but by the same token, lacking the possibility of dialectical balance, it remains infinitely fragile. Its victory, therefore, is only apparent, and its total positivity, this resorption of the negative, anticipates its own dissolution. It is therefore both the twilight of critical thought and the agony of power.

Through a reverse effect, however, the system enters a catastrophic dialectic. But this dialectic is a far cry from the Marxist dialectic and the teleological role of negation.

For this strategy of development and growth is fatal. As it entirely fulfills itself, in a final achievement that no negativity can hinder, it becomes incapable of surpassing itself "upwards" (*Aufhebung*) and initiates a process of self-annihilation (*Aufhebung* in the sense of dissolution).

For the system (in the context of global power), this strategy of development and growth is fatal. The system cannot prevent its destiny from being accomplished, integrally realized, and therefore driven into automatic self-destruction by the ostensible mechanisms of its reproduction.

Its shape is similar to what is called "turbo-capitalism." The term "turbo" should be taken literally in this expression. It means that the system as a whole is no longer driven by historical forces but is absorbed by its final conditions—

hastened to its definitive end (like a turbo engine sucking in the space in front of it, creating a vacuum and the force of attraction of a vacuum). It is not a progressive, continuous evolution, even if it is confrontational and contradictory. Instead, it is a vertiginous, irresistible attraction to its own end.

If negativity is totally engulfed by the system, if there is no more work of the negative, positivity sabotages itself in its completion. At the height of its hegemony, power cannibalizes itself—and the work of the negative is replaced by an immense work of mourning.

We can even forget about capital and capitalism. Didn't they reach the point where they would destroy their own conditions of existence? Can we still speak of a "market" or even of a classical economy? In its historical definition, capitalism presided over the multiplication of exchanges under the auspices of value. The market obeys the law of value and equivalency. And the crises of capital can always be resolved by regulating value.

This is no longer true for the financial flows and international speculation that far surpass the laws of the market. Can we still speak of capital when faced with an exponential strategy that pushes capital beyond its limits in a whirlwind of exchanges where it loses its very essence and is

dispersed in an unbridled circulation that brings the very concept of exchange to an end?

Having lost its rational principle, the principle of value, exchange becomes total just as reality, having lost its reality principle, becomes total reality. It may be the fatal destination of capital to go to the end of exchange—toward a total consumption of reality. In any case, we are bound for this generalized exchange, this frenetic communication and information that is the sign of hegemony.

The dimension of hegemony is different from that of capital and different from the dimension of power in its strictly political definition. It is no longer a question of political power tied to a history and a form of representation. Representation itself has lost its principle and the democratic illusion is complete. Not through the violation of rights but through the simulation of values and the derealization of all reality. The masquerade again, everyone caught in the signs of power and communing in the rigged unfolding of the political stage.

With the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as Governor of California, we are deep in the masquerade, where politics is only a game of idolatry and marketing. It is a giant step toward the end of the system of representation. This is the

destiny of contemporary politicians—those who live by the show will die by the show. This is true for both "citizens" and politicians. It is the immanent justice of the media. You want the power of the image? Then you will die through its replay. The carnival of the image is also (self) cannibalization through the image.

One should not conclude too hastily that the degradation of American political practices is a decline in power. Behind this masquerade, there is a vast political strategy (certainly not deliberate; it would require too much intelligence) that belies our eternal democratic illusions. By electing Schwarzenegger (or in Bush's rigged election in 2000), in this bewildering parody of all systems of representation, America took revenge for the disdain of which it is the object. In this way, it proved its imaginary power because no one can equal it in its headlong course into the democratic masquerade, into the nihilist enterprise of liquidating value and a more total simulation than even in the areas of finance and weapons. America has a long head start. This extreme, empirical and technical form of mockery and the profanation of values, this radical obscenity and total impiety of a people, otherwise known as "religious," this is what fascinates everyone. This is what we enjoy even through rejection and sarcasm: this phenomenal vulgarity, a (political, televisual) universe

brought to the zero degree of culture. It is also the secret of global hegemony.

I say it without irony, even with admiration: this is how America, through radical simulation, dominates the rest of the world. It serves as a model while taking its revenge on the rest of the world, which is infinitely superior to it in symbolic terms. The challenge of America is the challenge of desperate simulation, of a masquerade it imposes on the rest of the world, including the desperate *simulacrum* of military power. Carnivalization of power. And that challenge cannot be met: we have neither a finality or a counter-finality that can oppose it.

In its hegemonic function, power is a virtual configuration that metabolizes any element to serve its own purposes. It could be made of countless intelligent particles, but its opaque structure would not change. It is like a body that changes its cells constantly while remaining the same. Soon, every molecule of the American nation will have come from somewhere else, as if by transfusion. America will be Black, Indian, Hispanic, and Puerto Rican while remaining America. It will be all the more mythically American in that it will no longer be "authentically" American. And all the more fundamentalist in that it will no longer have a foundation (even though it never had one, since even the Founding Fathers came from somewhere else). And all the

more bigoted in that it will have become, in fact, multiracial and multicultural. And all the more imperialist in that it will be led by the descendants of slaves. That is the subtle and unassailable logic of power; it cannot be changed.

This global masquerade of power passes through several phases. First, in the name of universals, the West imposes its political and economic models on the entire world along with its principle of technical rationality. That was the essence of its domination but not yet its quintessence. Beyond economics and politics, its quintessence relies on the hold of simulation, an operational simulation of every value, every culture—that is where hegemony today asserts itself. No longer through exporting techniques, values, ideologies but through the universal extrapolation of a parody of these values. Underdeveloped countries keep aligning themselves on a simulacrum of development and growth; they get their independence from a simulacrum of democracy, and every endangered culture dreams of a staged rehabilitation—all fascinated by the same universal model (of which America, while benefiting from it, is the first victim). Thus, after imposing its domination through History, the West is now imposing its hegemony through the FARCE of History. Global power is the power of the simulacrum.

Moreover, Western civilization also had a motive for revenge. It had to take revenge on others for the loss of its own values (many people underestimate the fierce jealousy mixed with nostalgia of a disenchanted culture for all singular cultures). And it continues to do so in the context of globalization which, at bottom, beyond its technical operation, is a giant project meant to symbolically liquidate all values through consensus or force.

After the sacrifice of value, after the sacrifice of representation, after the sacrifice of reality, the West is now characterized by the deliberate sacrifice of everything through which a human being keeps some value in his or her own eyes.

The terrorists' potlatch against the West is their own death. Our potlatch is indignity, immodesty, obscenity, degradation and abjection. This is the movement of our culture—where the stakes keep rising. Our truth is always on the side of unveiling, desublimation, reductive analysis—the truth of the repressed—exhibition, avowal, nudity—nothing is true unless it is desecrated, objectified, stripped of its aura, or dragged onstage.

Indifferentiation of values but also indifference to ourselves. We cannot involve our own death because we already are dead. We throw this indifference and abjection at others like a challenge: the challenge to defile themselves in return, to deny their values, to strip naked, confess, admit—

to respond with a nihilism equal to our own. We try to take it all from them by force: through the humiliations of Abu Ghraib, prohibiting veils in school. But it is not enough for our victory: they have to come on their own, sacrifice themselves on the altar of obscenity, transparency, pornography and global simulation; they have to lose their symbolic defenses and take the path of neoliberal order, total democracy and integrated spectacle.

In this sense, we can, with Boris Groys, conceive of the hypothesis of a double potlatch: the Western potlatch of nullity, self-degradation, shame, and mortification opposed to the terrorist potlatch of death. But the deliberate sacrifice by the West of all its values, of everything through which a culture holds value in its own eyes, in this prostitution of the self thrown into the face of the Other as a weapon of mass deterrence—seduction through emptiness and challenge to the Other (Islam, but also the rest of the world) to prostitute itself in return, to unveil itself, to give up all its secrets and lose all sovereignty—does this immense self-immolation constitute a veritable symbolic response to the challenge of the terrorists? (Let's not speak of war or a fight "against evil," which are admissions of a total inability to respond symbolically to the challenge of death.)

Potlatch versus potlatch—does one balance the other? One might say that one is a potlatch by

excess (the potlatch of death) and the other a potlatch by default (self-mockery and shame). In that case, they do not match each other equally and one should speak of an asymmetrical potlatch. Or should one think that, in the end, no form, not even the challenge of death, of extreme sacrifice, can be considered superior, nor can the terrorist challenge be seen as superior to the inverse Western challenge, and therefore send each one back to its respective delirium?

What is at stake in global confrontation is this provocation to generalized exchange, the unbridled exchange of all differences, the challenge for other cultures to equal us in deculturation, the debasement of values, the adhesion to the most disenchanted models. This confrontation is not quite a "clash of civilizations," but it is not economic or political either, and today it only concerns the West and Islam in appearance. Fundamentally, it is a duel, and its stakes are symbolic: physical and mental liquidation, a universal carnivalization imposed by the West at the cost of its own humiliation, its symbolic expropriation—against all of the singularities that resist it. Challenge versus challenge? Potlatch versus potlatch? Does the slow-death strategy or systematic mortification equal the stakes of a sacrificial death? Can this confrontation come to an end and what could be the consequences if one or the other wins?

The response to domination is well known: slave revolt, class struggle, all the historical forms of revolt and revolution—the metamorphoses of the work of the negative. History, as we knew it and rewrote it along its evolution to an ideal end. The response to hegemony is not as simple: irredentism, dissidence, antagonism, violent abreaction—but also fascination and total ambivalence. For we all are part and parcel of this hegemony (unlike the clear distinction between dominants and dominated).

Whence both a vital, visceral resistance to generalized exchange, to total equivalence and connection, to vast prostitution and a vertiginous attraction to this technological fair, this spectacular masquerade, this nullity. At bottom it is clear that this apogee of global power is also the apotheosis of the negative, the triumph of resignation, of the renunciation by the species of its own values. There is nothing more exciting than this vertigo—no longer the work of the negative but the vertigo of denial and artifice! Whence this dual, insoluble postulate: opposing this global power and losing oneself in it. An ambivalence that we all experience at each moment and which is the mirror in each one of us of the global antagonism.

This hegemonic simulation, a configuration that seems triumphant and unyielding, has its reverse, its revulsive effects. By virtually yielding to this global dynamic and exaggerating it in several ways, all of these would-be emerging countries gradually become submerging instead. They slowly invade the Western sphere, not on a competitive level, but like a ground swell.

This invasion occurs in many ways, like a viral infiltration. It is the problem of global, more or less clandestine immigration (Hispanics are literally cannibalizing the United States). But also in the contemporary forms of terror, a true filterable virus, made up of terrorism and counterterrorism, and which is a violent abreaction to global domination, destabilizing it from the inside. The global order is cannibalized by terror.

However, there are other, more political forms for these tendencies hostile to Western models. All of these countries that we want to acculturate by force with the principles of political and economic rationality, with the global market and democracy, with a universal principle and a history that is not their own, of which they have neither the ends nor the means—all of these countries which make up the rest of the world—they give us the impression (in Brazil for example) that they will never be accultured to this exogenous model of calculation and growth, that they are deeply allergic to it. And

in fact do we, Westerners, masters of the world, still have its ends and means? Do we still measure up to this universal undertaking of mastery that now seems to surpass us in every domain and function like a trap of which we are the first victims?

History itself is a product for Western export. We dump on others a desire for history (through national conflicts, international institutions, access to the global market) while for us, in reality, history is over, in the sense that it unfolds on its own, on automatic pilot and more often than not in a loop. For us, the mirror of history, the continuity of history is shattered; we live in an instant and disincarnate currentness in which we take no more trouble, according to Dostoyevsky's phrase, than to prolong history or rather the end of history, immersed in the euphoric banality that Heidegger called the second Fall of humanity. But the others, those who did not experience this historic stage, this mirror stage, can only want to enjoy it themselves—dreaming of the Western power in which everything that took the form of history culminates, and perhaps dreaming to destroy its symbols and take a stand against it. It is a strange situation wherein all these peoples who at the same time dream of entering history, or rather today in the pacified, securized, extraterritorial, extranational zone of universal free trade, in the World Order of Welfare of which America is obviously the model,

and simultaneously resist it. A double contradictory statement of which Turkey is a fine example: to join Europe for the Turks means leaving an archaic structure to enter modernity, to become a part of the technological universe of consumerism and simulation, of the cosmopolitan exchange of signs and the formal liberty to use them at one's leisure. At the same time, it means partaking in a radical critique of this political economy, a denunciation of the culture that fascinates them and remaining deeply allergic to the principle of exchange and undifferentiated exchange that requires the sacrifice of their distinctive cultural traits.

In the end, if we look closely, it's the same situation we are in as individuals at the heart of modern societies—we all experience an irresistible urge for this society of signs and simulacra that is at the end of history and a deep resistance to this voluntary servitude. So much so that we might retrospectively wonder whether all this history, all of this Western rationality and modernity really took place or whether this is all a parody of an event that had happened, leaving us to share its spoils. This would be the "farce" of history that Marx mentions and to which we involved as accomplices those who did not even benefit from it.

History that repeats itself turns to farce. But a farce that repeats itself ends up making a history. This means that by repeating and doubling

themselves up, even simulacra end up forming our material destiny—the only day of reckoning we have the right to now. (And maybe the only retrospective truth of history that, in this hypothesis, did not even wait to be repeated to become a farce.)

We can in this sense speak of the ephemeral, instable and reversible character of modernity (and of reality in general), and a different rate of universalization of rational values and the principle of reality that presides over them.

One should not believe that reality is equally distributed over the surface of the globe as if we were dealing with an objective world that was equal for everyone. Zones, entire continents have not seen the appearance of reality and its principle: they are underdeveloped in this generic sense that is more profound than the economic, technical or political. The West, after passing through a (historic) stage of reality, entered the (virtual) stage of ultra-reality. By contrast, a majority of the "rest of the world" have not even reached the stage of reality and (economic, political, etc.) rationality. Between the two, there are zones of reality, interstices, alveoli, shreds of reality that survive in the heart of globalization and the hyper-reality of networks—a bit like the shreds of territory that float to the surface of the map in Borgès' fable. One could speak of an index of reality, a rate of reality on the planet that could be mapped out like

birthrates or the levels of atmospheric pollution. What would the maximum rate of reality be?

It remains to be seen whether this underdevelopment is a curse, if the non-access to the real and the rational is an absolute tragedy, or its contrary. One can ask this question when considering the advanced zones, the hyper-modern zones like our own that are already far from reality, that have lost its principle, that have devoured it in a way, in the space of two centuries, like any mineral fuel or natural deposit (moreover, the exhausting of reality goes hand in hand with the exhausting of natural resources). Hyper-real zones, still sub-lunar but already extraterrestrial, at once globalized and deterritorialized.

Opposition to global hegemony cannot be the same as opposition to traditional oppression. It can only be something unpredictable, irreducible to the preventive terror of programming, forced circulation, irreducible to the White terror of the world order. Something antagonistic, in the literal sense, that opens a hole in this Western agony. Something that leaves a trace in the monotony of the global order of terror. Something that reintroduces a form of impossible exchange in this generalized exchange. Hegemony is only broken by this type of event, by anything that irrupts as an unexchangeable singularity. A revolt, therefore,

that targets systematic deregulation under the cover of forced conviviality, that targets the total organization of reality.

The high point of the struggle against domination was the historic movement of liberation, be it political, sexual or otherwise—a continuous movement, with guiding ideas and visible actors.

But liberation also occurred with exchanges and markets, which brings us to this terrifying paradox: all of the liberation fights against domination only paved the way for hegemony, the reign of general exchange—against which there is no possible revolution, since everything is already liberated.

Total revolt responds to total order, not just dialectical conflict. At this point, it is double or nothing: the system shatters and drags the universal away in its disintegration. It is vain to want to restore universal values from the debris of globalization. The dream of rediscovered universality (but did it ever exist?) that could put a stop to global hegemony, the dream of a reinvention of politics and democracy and, as for us, the dream of a Europe bearing an alternative model of civilization opposed to neoliberal hegemony—this dream is without hope. Once the mirror of universality is broken (which is like the mirror stage of our modernity), only fragments remain,

scattered fragments. Globalization automatically entails, in the same movement, fragmentation and deepening discrimination—and our fate is for a universe that no longer has anything universal about it—fragmentary and fractal—but that no doubt leaves the field free for all singularities: the worst and the best, the most violent and the most poetic.

—Montreal, October 2005

3

WHERE GOOD GROWS

Marx: *Until now philosophers were content with interpreting the world. Now it has to be changed.*

Against Marx: *Today transforming the world is not enough. It will happen no matter what. What we urgently need today is to interpret this transformation—so that the world does not do it without us, and ends up being a world without us.*

The current revolution is different than previous historical revolutions—it is a truly anthropological revolution: a revolution in the automatic perfection of technical devices and in the definitive disqualification of human beings, of whom they are not even aware. At the hegemonic stage of technology,

of world power, human beings have lost their freedom, but they have also lost their imagination. They have been made unemployed in a way that goes far beyond work: it is a mental and existential unemployment, replaced by dominant machines. These technical layoffs suggest the opposite of what the term usually means: the machines are not defective; they are so efficient that there is nothing left to do with one's life, whose very reproduction has become automatic. The obsolescence of humans has reached its terminal phase. Their fate is definitively beyond their reach. In the end, human beings will only have been an infantile illness of an integral technological reality that has become such a given that we are no longer aware of it, except in its transcendental dimensions of space and time.

This revolution is not economic or political. It is an anthropological and metaphysical one. And it is the final revolution—there is nothing beyond it. In a way, it is the end of history, although not in the sense of a dialectical surpassing, rather as the beginning of a world without humans. While history had a subject, there is no subject of the end of history. No more work of negative or historical finality...

It is the final stage of a world that we have given up interpreting, thinking or even imagining in favor of *implementing* it, instrumentalizing it objectively, or, better yet: launching ourselves into

the unimaginable venture of performing it, turning into a performance, perfecting it—at which point it naturally casts us out.

This world no longer needs us. The best of all possible worlds no longer needs us.

Performance. Divestiture of humans and their freedom. Disqualification of humans in favor of automatism, a massive transfer of decision-making to computerized devices. A symbolic capitulation, a defeat of the will much more serious than any physical impairment. *Sacrifizio dell'intelletto, della volontà, dell'immaginazione.*

Günther Anders gives a striking example of this divestiture during the Korean War. MacArthur wanted to use the atomic bomb, but the politicians took the decision away from him in favor of a battery of computers that calculated the "objective" benefits of the operation in political and economic terms—and that finally decided against using the bomb.

Nuclear conflict was avoided, but as G. Anders notes, symbolically, metaphysically, this abdication of human will, no matter what the consequences, for an impersonal concatenation, this *kidnapping* of human intelligence in favor of artificial intelligence was a far worse disaster than nuclear devastation. It marks the point where humans definitively renounced their destiny in favor of technological authority and its unquestionable superiority. It is

not a transfer to a divine transcendence, or an adjustment of the will in favor of chance; it is a pure and simple capitulation of thought in the face of its technological double, reducing it to a voluntary servitude far more profound than the servitude of a people before their tyrant. The passage to electronic calculation, to engineering and computerizing is disastrous: more than a failure of the will, it implies the disappearance of every subject, be it the subject of power, knowledge or history, in favor of operational mechanics and the total deresponsibilization of humankind.

Today, power itself is an embarrassment and there is no one to assume it truly.

We can no longer match the perfection of our technological devices. What we produce is beyond our imagination and our representation. Humanity, confronted with its own divinized model, with the realization of its own ideal, collapses.

Our abilities, both in the domain of the imagination and responsibility and in the register of desire and pleasure, are completely surpassed. Those who believed in the unlimited morphological and anthropological adaptability of humankind and its ability to change at will were wrong.

Today, human beings have become the weak link in technological processes, in the *world-processing*.

The only choice left is between disappearing or being "humanengineerized." And the more the performance gap grows, the more human beings compensate for this failure by expanding their technological park, even extending it to Sloterdijk's "human park" and the biological modeling of the species. Ashamed of their incompleteness, humans have turned themselves into experimental beings.

We are, in our Promethean excesses, the only culture to have invented the perspective of ideal growth, of total performance, up to the supreme stage of reality. But we can no longer measure ourselves against this vertiginous dimension. Modernity (the West) can no longer respond to its own values of unlimited progress and growth.

Programming has transformed progress, which was an idea, a great historical idea, into a technological operation of the world in real time. And infinity, once an ideal abstraction, is materialized as well in infinite growth, the immediate vertigo of profusion.

And we are now prisoners of this irreversible dimension—unable to reinvent a finite universe.

Economic thinking has always wagered on infinite natural resources, on an incalculable horizon of material energies—the modern definition of

energy being that it only demands to be "liberated" (the "liberation" of human beings and all of their faculties follows the same model).

With the threat of crises and the depletion of natural resources, economic thought has been touched by the grace of ecology and is rethinking its postulates on the possibility of infinite growth. But it is not rethinking the other postulate on the infinite availability of human beings to increasing amounts of happiness and pleasure. This anthropological illusion may be even more serious than the limits on resources. Humans are also limited in their potential. We imagine that needs, desires and demand are all endless and we have vigorously endeavored (especially since 1929) to convince them to respond with exponential demand to the exponentiality of growth. This is where the break comes in: humans break down. Their "libidinal and psychic resources" are drained. Although human beings can be exploited at will on the level of performance and production, on the level of aspirations and pleasure, they have limits. These limits draw an impassable line of resistance to the infernal machine of growth.

No one can stand this excrescence, this infinite proliferation—including the proliferation of the species with its six billion human beings.

Profusion is a kind of fatality—especially when people are overwhelmed, like the sorcerer's apprentice. They are not overcome by the malicious forces that they have unleashed, but by the best things they have created, the forces of Good that they have unleashed.

This paradoxical situation is not a contradiction between ends and means, between "science and morality," or a lack of balance between desire and the means to fulfill it. On the contrary, it is the hyperrealization of desire before it has even had time to appear that is the true curse.

It is not only happening on the individual and collective level, but on the level of the species as well. The entire species is passing through a moment of panic in the face of this overexposure to happiness and of this extravagant mastery of the world.

Starting with the irruption of reason, at the dawn of modernity, humankind launched itself on an escape trajectory outside itself, drawn beyond its possibilities. Space travel is only an extreme metaphor of this *takeoff*, this escape from mental territories.

This distortion, this excess leads to a growing depression, a decompensation, not from an inaccessible ideal, but from a form of excess gratification.

The rule of the game for the species, the symbolic rule of the game, is displaced.

The transformation is too fast for human beings to evolve and move from one form to another. We are losing the secret of all vital energy, which is never to go all the way, or to go beyond the possible. We are in the process of sacrificing this symbolic reserve of incompleteness in favor of a totalization of life through technology and a depletion of all desire. It is the "orgy." But what happens "*after the orgy*?" It becomes a schizophrenic farce, as Ceronetti said. Or rather the orgy turns into an ordeal, a judgment of God, decreeing that we are incapable of fulfilling our Promethean ambitions.

Socialization itself is in question. The present crisis, of which the disintegration of the *banlieues* is only the spectacular form, is the crisis of general disintegration in the face of the ideal demands of sociality. The disturbances in the margins conceal the fact that society as a whole is resisting the systematic colonization of socialization. The bar of total investment in life through society and economics has been set too high.

When did we discover that the deepest demands were social and economic, that the only horizon was the horizon of integration and calculation? Capital's *coup de force* is to make everything dependant on the economic order, to

subject all minds to a single mental dimension. Every other issue becomes unintelligible. The displacement of all problems into economic and performance terms is a trap: the belief that everything is granted us virtually, or will be, by the grace of continual growth and acceleration—including, by extension, a universal lifting of prohibitions, the availability of all information and, of course, the obligation to experience *jouissance*.

Until now, everything was organized by the tension between desire and its fulfillment, between needs and their satisfaction. This critical situation was the source of all of our historical conflicts: protests, revolts, revolutions. Today, immediate consumption has moved far beyond the faculties of normal human beings to experience pleasure. Nothing tells us that people will now be able to bear insatiable desire after a millennium of shortages—nothing tells us that they are ready for total liberation. Nothing is less certain.

This is the true break, not a social fracture but a symbolic one: in the advent of an integral reality that absorbs all aspirations towards dreaming, surpassing or revolt.

—*The despair of having everything.*
—*The despair of being nothing.*
—*The despair of being everybody.*
—*The despair of being nobody.*

It is hard for us, with our reductive (economic and rational) anthropology, to imagine that being can shrink or revolt because it has been given too much. If lack and servitude characterized earlier societies, opulence and free markets characterize our society, which has entered its terminal phase and is ready for intensive care.

We are not succumbing to oppression or exploitation, but to profusion and unconditional care—to the power of those who make sovereign decisions about our well-being. From there, revolt has a different meaning: it no longer targets the forbidden, but permissiveness, tolerance, excessive transparency—the Empire of Good. For better or worse.

Now you must fight against everything that wants to help you.

New challenges, new context. However, the general atmosphere surrounding this new era, this new configuration is the obsolescence of humanity and its values.

—Obsolescence of Reason and the Enlightenment.
—Obsolescence of Universals and ideologies.
—Obsolescence of History and work.
—Obsolescence of desire and imagination.
—Obsolescence of the individual.

—Obsolescence of the Other.
—Obsolescence of reality.
—Obsolescence of death.

In fact, to describe this anthropological break, where all old values are obsolete and where all events take on another meaning, we would have to introduce the idea of a *non-Euclidean* space—the space of hegemonic world power, with its unprecedented machinery, but also the space of another type of events—events of another order than historical events—unpredictable events, without continuity or reference—and which are the radical sign of a counter-power at work.

The obsolescence of History opens a space where everything that was historical or political—including revolutions—has become "*fake*." All current political events, including the most violent ones, are made up of these *fake-events*, these *ghost-events*, which bear witness to a bygone history that is only the shadow of itself. In France, we see it today in melodramatic fashion. But the obsolescence of history and the political stage brings emerging events at the same time, events that I would call, by analogy with rogue states, *rogue events*—witnesses to the impossible revolution.

The only impossible revolution, says Ceronetti in substance, one that is even inconceivable to reason, would be the revolution against machines—

and this impossibility turns all other revolutions into a schizophrenic farce.

However, there are now traces of this impossible revolution in the (potentially terrorist) sequence of *rogue events* in the new non-Euclidean space.

Everything that was on the order of the negative and the work of the negative has now become parody—a counter-copy or transfer of the overall process. There is no return on that side. The critical threshold has been reached; there is no possibility of returning to Canetti's blind spot—no nostalgic transference of the situation. We are in a different space, the non-Euclidean space of power—a chaotic, stochastic, exponential, catastrophic and fractal universe of outsized effects (metalepsy), of the reversal of causality and reality.

BUT: if this non-Euclidean universe is now the universe of power, it has also become the universe of counter-power. This reversion is much more radical than a negation; the antagonism is capable of turning the weapons of this new power against it, and especially of turning the weapons of power against themselves.

The rules of hegemony are turned against it, through a force that contests it radically, in accordance with its own principles (and not only, like Marx in his time, according to historical contradictions while implicitly remaining faithful to the

principle of reality and economic principles—to which his theory ends up succumbing).

That is why this is not a historical revolution but a kind of anthropological mutation, and while there is no revolution thinkable in the context of the current hegemonic power, there is nothing beyond this "non-Euclidean" counter-power.

An astounding illustration of this non-Euclidean space is September 11, which itself was an archetypal rogue event.

In the events of September 11, the most terrifying aspect was not the material destruction of the twin towers but the passage into something which, while inconceivable as reality (you can't believe your eyes, it's impossible), is not fiction at all. This fiction (from disaster movies, etc.) is part of our immune system; it protects us from reality by means of its double imaginary. It absorbs our fantasies. And the attack made our fantasies real—like a dream, like fulfilling a desire. Indeed, it was literally unlivable and the terror was there, in the inconceivable passage into reality—or rather in something that goes far beyond the real.

The real only exists to the extent that we can intervene in it. But when something emerges that

we cannot change in any way, even with the imagination, something that escapes all representation, then it simply expels us.

In the collapse of the two towers, as opposed to the ordinary destruction of bombardment, where horizontal territory is struck from a vertical position, here the vertical dimension was struck head-on by the horizontal. A subversion of the usual orthogonal space—it is another topology—prefigured by the verticality of the towers, which was very different than the Empire State Building, for example.

The Empire State Building still represented the Promethean verticality of capital and wealth, of rivalry and domination. The Twin Towers, however, precisely because they were twins—which did not happen by chance—could only be measured against themselves: they mirrored each other in their self-referentiality. Their homotypy sealed the perfection of power that was no longer Promethean—I would call it Ouroborean, in the sense that it is enclosed in itself and defines a seamless (and windowless) hyperspace.

We can wonder what would have happened if only one of them fell. Impossible. The death of one could only lead to the death of the other, by symbolic contamination.

It was just as impossible to destroy them by a bomb in the basement, using the normal topology (the 1996 attack was a failure), for technical reasons,

of course, but especially because they did not belong to that space (by analogy with hegemony, which cannot be fought in the traditional space of relationships of force and violence, because it no longer belongs to that space).

They had to be crashed into and made to implode (not explode) in their own space.

The masterstroke of the terrorists was to find a riposte beyond traditional confrontations, in this new extraterritorial dimension, a riposte equal to this new power. It is a new virtual power, in the sense in which it reigns and moves about in a space without reference, except to itself. An exponential power in the sense in which it is not measured by accumulation or ordinary verticality, but by an orbital structure that escapes determination "on the ground" and the constraints of reality.

This orbital and exorbitant form is the very form of hegemonic power and it can only be fought with other rules that come from radical alterity.

People were amazed by the poverty of the means used to obtain such a maximal result in this attack. But this new space is also the space of symbolic acts; it leads to chaotic, eccentric effects, effects with no common measure with the causes and effects of Euclidean space.

The extreme originality of this symbolic act was not only to pervert the most evolved technology by outflanking it, but to guess the possibilities of a

different strategic space. It was no longer a head-on conflict—all frontal oppositions are caught despite themselves in a diabolic curve—but a true asymmetric conflict that implied, beyond relationships of force, a change in the rules of the game. A duel, with its oblique impact, that has all the characteristics of a martial art (of detour, of failure of the other and the diversion of its energy) and that is now traversing and destabilizing the entire political or geopolitical universe of globalization.

Every extension of hegemony is also an extension of terror. Let's be clear:

Beyond spectacular terrorism, terror should be seen as an infiltration, an internal convulsion, a form of power fighting itself. Power itself, from the inside, secretes an antagonistic power that materializes in one way or another—it could be Islam or it could be something else altogether. Every form is possible, but, for the most part, terror is a form of reversion—it is not necessarily violent, although in its most extreme form it necessarily implies death. The death of its victims, but first and foremost the death of the terrorists. September 11 put the spotlight on the symbolic use of death as an absolute weapon. The death of a terrorist is not a suicide: it is an effigy of the virtual death that the system inflicts on itself. From revolt to revolt, it takes

multiple forms throughout history. From the sabotage and destruction of machines by Luddites in 1820 to Blacks burning their own neighborhoods in America in the 1960s, from general strikes to hostage taking and suicide attacks, we have gone increasingly farther into unilateral sacrifice, in suicidal violence without mercy or possible response—into the unexchangeable.

September 11-style terrorism has no truly objective causes or consequences—but it does have more profound ones. It is not a political event; it is a symbolic event. It does not give shape to a new world. It does not belong to the work of the negative, and therefore does not have a political destination.

We know that terrorism will not overthrow the world order. Its impact is much more subtle: a viral and elusive form that it shares with world power.

This is what makes the question of terror so complex: it is increasingly detached as a form from its visible actions and actors.

World power does not exactly need political power to ensure its hold. It exercises it in a very diffuse manner, through the mental diaspora of networks (which is why political actors and people in power are no longer part of it, even though they think they govern the world).

Terror does not exactly need terrorists now either. It is latent, infiltrating and virulent everywhere. It spreads in an endemic, interstitial,

molecular state. All global culture is cannibalized by terror, by the discourse of terror. All information and media gravitate around it. The rest has become secondary. The global summit in Riyadh on combating terrorism rivaled the one in Davos on commerce or the one in Kyoto on global warming; same combat, same unanimity, all gimmics, of course, but with no other alternative. Terrorism has become a *leitmotiv*, a universal focal point, a nebula—not a political or strategic reality, but a black hole, a blind spot.

Having infiltrated all of the networks of imagination and information, it might only exist as a specter. If, according to Marx, the specter of communism haunted Europe, today the specter of terror haunts the entire planet.

Even if there were no more living terrorists, the global psychosis would remain the same. In any case, Bin Laden does not need to be alive or to do anything; he only needs a phantom video from time to time. The system itself exploits the hyperimagination of terror.

Terror is like a rumor: self-prophesying, self-realizing. Once it moves to the other side, and grows more violent than violence, it becomes an autonomous form without origin—like Evil itself.

It is irrepressible as well, because every form of "vigilance" aggravates the specter of terror. It is the paradox of every principle of precaution, and

this principle has now been raised to the level of a global governing strategy. Security is quietly taking hold as a "white terror" draining the system of its Western values: freedom, democracy, human rights. This is the diabolical trap laid by the terrorists, forcing "democracies" to sabotage themselves "progressively."

A prime example of these rogue-events, which are both farcical and terrifying, is the recent bird flu scare (where the terrorists were wild ducks!).

There is no greater masquerade than this global panic, than the sacred union in panic. The international community becomes hectic and epileptic from the virus of terror and the terror of viruses. Terror is multiplied by the grotesque profusion of security measures that end up causing perverse autoimmune effects: the antibodies turn against the body and cause more damage than the virus. Without real solidarity between nations, the specter of Absolute Evil must be raised up as an *ersatz* Universal, an emergency solution to symbolic misery. When traditional contracts and symbolic pacts, the universal and the particular no longer function, a form like a conspiracy takes brutal shape, a plot in which everyone is involuntarily involved. Partaking in the conspiracy is not based on anything, on any value, other than

delirious self-defense, in response to the total loss of the imaginary's immunity... In fact, the virus is a "*cosa mentale*" and contamination happens so quickly because the mental immunity, the symbolic defenses are long lost. A panic space can take hold in this liquidation, one to which the entire global information system also belongs for another reason, the system of networks and instant diffusion—a non-Euclidean space where all rational, preventive, prophylactic countermeasures are almost automatically turned against themselves through their own excesses. Security is the best medium for terror.

Yet we should also examine the conditions for the emergence of this virus and the sources of these new pathologies—not only in the animal world but in human society in general... One might guess that they are the result of confinement, promiscuity, concentration and monstrous overexploitation. The inevitable sequels of industrial processes. There is no difference between animal and human environments: the same conditions produce the same viral and infectious anomalies.

If we take for example the ingestion of bone meal leading to mad cow disease, there is a form of deregulation here, an incestuous confusion that it would be absurd to attempt to resolve by excess control and concentration-camp measures (the best

solution found to fight the bird flu was sequestering animals and vaccinating migratory birds!).

Isn't the human species a carrier of countless germs and shouldn't it therefore be urgently "euthanized"?

And mad cow disease? Are we not, as the human species, like these poor mad cows? Aren't we being made to swallow, on every level, a strange bone meal—all of these ground-up messages, all of this meal of advertising and media production, this giant, milled junk heap of the news that we are stuffed with—like the meal made of bone, corpses and carcasses that we stuff our cows with—it is all bringing our species closer to spongiform encephalopathy.

The depths of terror are inseparable from the extension of farce. The terror of the Good much more than of Evil, which only follows like a shadow. The parody of the sacred union is taking hold everywhere, under the sign of a full preventive war against the slightest infectious molecule—but also against the least anomaly, the least exception, the least singularity.

The biting irony of this counter-terror, of white terror, is that it establishes a vast autoimmune syndrome, self-destruction through excess protection,

which leads to crimes against humanity under the sign of the expulsion of Evil, crimes committed by humanity to get rid of itself completely, to cast itself out of an unlivable setting.

A few words now on these singular events and their curious sequences that do not follow historical continuity at all. We cannot speak of an "Axis of Evil" (the expression is absurd: there is only an Axis of Good), but we can speak of a convergence of different types of events with equivalent forms of terror. In recent years, after September 11, we have seen several examples: natural forces are confused with terrorist attacks as part of the same "Axis of Evil." Is it international terrorism that takes the shape of a natural disaster or is the tsunami the same as a terrorist attack? Bird flu, mad cow disease, atypical pneumonia, the blackout in New York, the heat wave are all abnormal events, all terrorist phenomena. The confusion is exploited in both directions: one group claims an accidental *crash* to be an attack, and another disguises an attack as an accident. Condoleezza Rice herself didn't hesitate in calling the tsunami a "wonderful opportunity" for a willing or coerced coalition of energies to fight the "forces of Evil." The dominant order itself forces us to have this unlimited conception of terrorism, since the slightest infraction, the slightest crime is

denounced as a terrorist act. It comes as no surprise that natural disturbances have become an infraction against the world order.

The violence of natural disorders increases with the intensification of technological violence. Deregulation grows at the same rate as excesses in control and calculation. It is as if Nature were exacting revenge in the name of all of the peoples sacrificed and disowned. A symbolic backlash of insupportable hegemony, of the technological arraigning to which Nature responds in the "terrorist" form of earthquakes and eruptions. In the insurrection of natural elements, there is a hint of reprisal.

Evil is now everywhere and it must be eradicated. Every extreme phenomenon is Evil. It is the perfect alibi for the totalitarian extension of the Good. In a *New York Times* editorial cartoon (on bird flu): "*It's a pandemic. What should we do?*" Bush's response: "*Issue a terror alert!*" In this way we can understand how some in Islamic countries called on God to proclaim that the ravages of Hurricane Katrina were a terrorist act from the heavens striking the American sanctuary. A terrorist group could even lay claim to an earthquake. Because terror no longer belongs to anyone, no more than world power does. And because world power escapes everyone, it is now inscribed in things and in their objective unfolding.

One might object that major disasters (and particularly the most recent ones, the tsunami and Katrina) seem to favor the most disenfranchised populations—discriminating just as fiercely as globalization. It is true, but they also reveal this discrimination. They speak and reveal Evil.

Even the attack in Sharm el-Sheikh targeting international tourism is revelatory. We can understand how this universal tourism, bringing with it the general exchange of all cultures, the human equivalent of the flows of capital, the obnoxious infiltration and modern avatar of colonization and war, could be seen by the terrorists as an incarnation of all the values they abhor, as a viral infiltration—which is, in fact, what it is. Tourism itself is terrifying; it is a form of terror and can only attract terror in return.

A convection current of attacks and technological and natural disasters has formed carrying a touch of Evil—the smallest accidents now take the symbolic turn of a secret counter-finality.

Just as networks connect all points on the globe and all markets in real time through universal electronic interactions, events enter a network or follow each other in a symbolic hyperspace, no matter what their nature. Attacks, disasters, accidents and epidemics all go in the same direction, towards a dismantling of the global order. And they can join in a chain reaction because their objective causes are

indifferent or marginal and they seem to obey an internal logic: their own escalation. They are hypersensitive to each other and signal each other beyond the normal flow of news.

World power eludes everyone because it is no longer the effect of a dominating will but of an automatic and irreversible mechanism. As a result, the mechanism of disaggregation of this power also escapes everyone and cannot be stopped. This system should worry much less about revolution than about what is developing in the void, at the heart of the anthropological fracture.

The more intense this hegemonic process of forced integration and integral reality is, the more singularities will rise against it. There will be more "rogue states"—states (like Iran, Palestine) that deliberately exclude themselves from the international community without waiting to be excluded, that exclude themselves from the universal and play their own game, at their own risk and peril. There will be more "rogue events" and more refusal of society by individuals.

One could say, inverting Hölderlin, that "Where Good grows, there grows the Genie of Evil," ("*Da, wo des Gute wächst, wächst auch der Genius des Bösen*"). This more or less clandestine insurrection of antagonistic forces against the

integrist violence of the system is less an effect of the mind, the will or even the desire of human beings than the evil genius of the world itself in refusing globalization.

To find the only adversary who will face this all-powerful hegemony, we must look for those beings that are strangers to will, exiled from dialogue and representation, exiled from knowledge and history.

We must look for the "less-dead-than-us."

This expression comes from the astounding statement by Philippe Muray addressing jihadists after September 11. He thought that the game was played out and that this terrorism had no future. And he told them, in the name of the West: "We will defeat you because we are deader than you."

This expression assumes that some people in the world are less dead than others, that others in the world are less dead than us (the West). The hypothesis remains that if the West is dead, there must exist (even in the West) an opposing power with a singularity, in all its forms, that counterbalances this hegemonic power. Against the empire of Good, a spark of Evil.

The "less-dead-than-us" belong to those who are on the other side of the symbolic wall, the wall

that separates the two worlds throughout the planet—the equatorial line of a new violence that we can see in the images of barbed wire in Melilla, the wall on the US-Mexican border or the one in Israel—the wall that contains and provokes a human wave, a backlash of discrimination.

The Universal is not for everyone. Only discrimination is universal.

In the past, totalitarian powers were the ones who enclosed themselves behind walls (the best historical example being the Berlin Wall) to escape the wave of "democracy." Now these "democracies" are building protective walls to preserve the correct use of freedom from the hordes of immigrants or fanatics. If oppression was only possible behind the Soviet Iron Wall, today, freedom is only possible behind the iron wall of democracy.

However, we can be sure that any wall—even a transparent one—is the sign of a dictatorship or a totalitarian system. We must therefore recognize that the West has become a totalitarian space—the space of a self-defensive hegemony defending itself against its own weakness. A wall is always suicidal: as soon as communism raised the Berlin Wall, it was virtually lost. It could only crumble in the end like the wall that it erected against itself.

The same is true of the Israelis and their security fence. Any protection only leaves the field open for deadly impulses from the inside.

But this exodus to the Western world through the wall of discrimination is also a cannibalistic infiltration that passes through all barriers that oppose it. In any case, even in the West, we are all already virtually exiled, extradited, expulsed, filtered out.

If nothing else can justify the violence carried out in the name of the Universal except the idea that everyone can one day have access to it, then we must admit that the vast majority will never reach it, and that we, the civilized nations of the West, are far off the mark. Take as evidence the disturbances caused by all of the "rogue events" that have taken place here. These "transpolitical" events should not be interpreted in economic or political terms, which would return them to the nothingness of the political scene and its ridiculousness. We should interpret them as symptoms of the schizophrenic farce now being played out.

April 21, 2002, the "No" vote on the European referendum, the riots in the suburbs and the social movement against the CPE (first employment contract). Confronted with their own objectives (when they exist), they are insignificant—the zero degree of an impossible revolution. But if we interpret them on a global level, in the framework of this global antagonism, then they become

"micro rogue-events," an almost instinctive abreaction, no matter what their ideology, to the deregulatory machine of world power.

In some ways, the "No" on the referendum, the illogical and unexplainable "No," or the revolts in the suburbs come from the same demand. It is not a demand to be "integrated." On the contrary, it is a demand not to be integrated at all, or tethered or annexed or taken hostage by any model (especially an ideal one!), because it always hides an absolutely deadly totalitarian arrangement, an unquestioned fundamentalism. And in this sense, maybe they are "less-dead-than-others."

Wherever this global confrontation will lead, nothing is yet decided and the suspense remains total.

4

THE ROOTS OF EVIL

Chronic'art: *In recent years, your texts have developed a new central idea, the idea of Evil and more precisely absolute Evil. What is this absolute Evil? What does it represent? What is its place in our society today?*

Jean Baudrillard: The notion of Evil is always very ambiguous. I would distinguish between at least two versions of Evil. There is relative Evil, which is Evil as it is generally understood. This Evil only exists in balance with Good, in equilibrium and permanent opposition with Good. But now there is also an absolute Evil, a depressive or catastrophic version of this relative Evil. There is no longer any sharing or antagonism here between Good and Evil. This absolute Evil comes from an excess of Good, an unchecked proliferation of Good, of technological development, of infinite progress, of totalitarian morality, of a radical will to do good

without opposition. This Good turns into its opposite, absolute Evil. Traditionally, relative Evil was only in opposition; it did not have its own essence or root and therefore, in particular, it did not have its own finality. In contrast, this absolute Evil has a finality: as Good, it has an ideal finality—to do good—but this ideal finality turns catastrophic, and turns into absolute Evil. It is an absolute, irreparable, inexorable movement. We find here again the idea of reversibility. Ordinarily, this is a dynamic vector, but in this tautological operation, Good turning catastrophic has severe consequences. In our discourse, Evil is just a mask that we contrast with the Good that we are supposed to defend. The key concept is the "Axis of Evil." This axis was discovered as a malevolent incantation, and not only a moral rite this time. It may even be an obscure awareness of the unhappy destiny of the enterprise of Good. It is a type of exorcism, with the foreboding that Good is doomed, but also, beyond this unconscious, automatic and convulsive projection, it is a strategy consisting of projecting Evil everywhere, obviously as a perfect alibi for doing Good. One positions an Axis of Evil where there is none. Good is directive, directional; it has a finality in principle and therefore constitutes an axis. Evil is more of a parallax. It is never directional, and is not even opposed to Good. There is always some kind of

diversion, a deviation, a curve. As Good goes straight ahead, Evil deviates. It is a deviance, a perversion. You never know where Evil is going, or how. It cannot be mastered. In almost topological terms, it is merely a deviation. Only Good could lay claim to being an axis. But this axis is projected on Evil; an imaginary Axis of Evil is created to justify the Axis of Good. This is a strategic mistake. When you try to target Evil in its unfindable axis, when you fight it militarily, with a frontal attack, you can only miss it.

Because this Axis of Evil is within the order of discourse. It only exists in the mouths of Western leaders and serves as self-legitimization: the ones who speak about the Axis of Evil need to show that they work for Good and for everyone's happiness in order to exist. No individual fights in the name of Evil.

Of course. To a certain extent, the imputation of Evil always comes from the Good, from the sanctuary that, in principle, houses the rules of the game, the law, the truth. But Evil is indefinable, and therein lies its power. Yet through a twisting or retaliation of Evil against Good, those who defend Good feel themselves obliged to define this indefinable Evil. It is not a Manichean position—I prefer Manichaeism—because Good and Evil are not playing the same game. On the one side, there is

the Good, which has sole claim to the truth effect, the reality effect. On the other, Evil causes a crack in this identification, which disrupts the automatic writing of the world by Good. In the name of Good, people try to give shape to Evil, for example in the terrorism that they see everywhere. In the discourse of Good, terrorism and Evil become one and the same thing, to such an extent that nature, just like fundamentalism, can be seen as a terrorist. Terror takes shape. But it is the shape of a delusion. The era of terror is not the irruption of an Evil that was waiting for its time to come. I may be naïve or cynical, but I do not see Evil as an identifiable axis embodied by men or organizations to be fought, but as an irrepressible drive for revenge on the excesses of Good. It is a wild and deviant revenge against an unacceptable state of things, vengeance, a retaliation that exercises and expresses a violent necessity for rebalancing, at least symbolically.

Can we say that in order to exist and develop, these forces of Good have taken so much power, had such an impact on the entire world, created such disequilibrium, that Evil appears, or explodes on the planet like a time bomb?

We live in a virtually banalized, neutralized world where, because of a kind of preventive terror, nothing can take place any longer. Therefore everything

that breaks through is an event. The definition of an event is not to be unpredictable but to be predestined. It is an irrepressible movement: at one moment, it comes out, and we see the resurgence of everything that was plotted by the Good. It makes a break, it creates an event. It can be on the order of thought or of history. It may take place in art. And, of course, it assumes the form of what is called terrorism. But, again, it is not a frontal opposition, but more like a reversal in the heart of Good. The event comes from Good, not from Evil, and in it Good turns into its opposite. By taking the curvature of Evil, Good is degraded; it decomposes, it self-destructs. Global power, the power of the West—more than just the United States, which is its archetype—has no symbolic response to terrorism because terrorism wagers its own death in its acts of suicidal destruction. Global power cannot respond to this desire for death by wagering its own death. It responds through physical, military extermination in the name of Good against the Axis of Evil. Global power has no symbolic response because it consists of awesome symbolic powerlessness. For about a century, the West has worked at the degradation of its own values, eliminating and abolishing them. Abolishing everything that gives value to something, someone or a culture. Simulation and simulacra participate in this phenomenon. This process of abjection, humiliation,

shame, self-denial, this fantastic masquerade has become the strategy of the West and is amplified by the United States. The West, having destroyed its own values, finds itself back at the zero degree of symbolic power, and in a turnabout, it wants to impose the zero degree on everyone. It challenges the rest of the world to annihilate itself symbolically as well. It demands that the rest of the world enter into its game, participate in the generalized, planetary exchange and fall into its trap. Then an extraordinary potlatch comes into play between global power and the powers opposing it, between those who wager their own death and those who cannot wager it because they no longer control it. The game does not end there. There is a moral and philosophical confrontation, almost a metaphysical one, beyond Good and Evil. Islam? The United States? It doesn't matter! There is a confrontation between two powers. It is an asymmetrical potlatch between terrorism and global power, and each side fights with its own weapons. Terrorism wagers the death of terrorists, which is a gesture with tremendous symbolic power and the West responds with its complete powerlessness. But this powerlessness is also a challenge. Challenge versus challenge. When people make fun of the carnival, the masquerade of the elections in America every four years, they are being too hasty. In the name of critical thought, of very European, very French thought,

we do a contemptuous analysis of this kind of parody and self-denial. But we are wrong, because the empire of simulation, of simulacra, of parody, but also of networks, constitutes the true global power. It is more founded on this than on economic control. The essential is in the extraordinary trap set for the rest of the world so that everyone goes to the zero degree of value, a trap that fascinates the rest of the world.

In this light, the story of the Italian hostage in Iraq was a fascinating one. When the Italian secret services agent that freed her from the terrorists was killed by US soldiers, it was Good assassinating Good, Good doing Evil in the name of Good. It was a total confusion of the two, where we could see how the Empire of Good is also an Empire of Evil, because it self-destructs. Such is the fatal destiny and the curse of the Empire of Good when it wants to finish its work. This story was a concrete example, and a very enlightening one. We know that everything that reaches its absolute end is reversed. That is exactly what happened. The American soldiers finished the work. Today, there are many stories like that one, and we could compile a black book with all of these reversals of things.

Finding Evil on your own side because it is no longer identifiable elsewhere, is that the ultimate stage of self-destruction?

I often speak of "cannibalization": power cannibalizes itself in the sense that it devours itself. I also think of it in terms of "cannibalizing" a car or selling it for spare parts. The car cannot be used as a car, but you can do something with the parts. A culture can be cannibalized in the same way, with the negotiation and sale of its values as spare parts. But the whole will never work again.

The attraction of the empire of simulation, the world's desire to live in such a masquerade, the aspiration for the void but also the empire's will to extend its domain over the entire planet, are they the new forms of domination?

We must distinguish between domination and hegemony. Until now, we were dealing with domination, a master/slave relationship, a symbolic one if you like, a dual relationship with the possibility of explosion, revolution, alienation and disalienation. This domination has made way for hegemony, which is something else altogether. There is no longer a dual relationship. Everyone is an accomplice. And hegemony uses this complicity to lower individuals even more, playing on everyone's desire to lower themselves in this way. Hegemony works by devaluing everyone. There are no longer dominants and dominated, but a kind of total annexation (*nexus* = networks). Everyone is caught up in the

network and submits to this hegemony. Who benefits? We can no longer calculate in terms of benefits for one power or another. We can no longer go back in history to find out who is responsible for the domination. We are both victims and accomplices, guilty and not responsible. Hegemony is within us. It is the next phase of domination. I think it is worse, because hegemony brings domination, and therefore alienation, to an end. We are no longer alienated; alienation is no longer the problem. And yet we suffer. We have fallen into an irreversible vertigo; we are drawn to the black hole. We can sense the strategy but there is no one behind it. The black hole is what I call integral reality. And this integral reality, the signature of this new hegemony, is frightening because we cannot resist it. If we want to resist hegemony and escape it using the means we once used against domination (revolt, critical thought, negative thought, etc.), there is no hope.

In a text published earlier this year in Libération *("Rebonds," February 17, 2005) you mention the Holocaust and the tsunami as new examples of this Evil that the forces of Good must stigmatize as Evil in order to exist. Is this part of the same logic?*

The tsunami and the reactions it elicited throughout the world were the starting point for

my text; the Holocaust came in later. The Empire of Good found a great opportunity in the December 2004 tsunami to do good in the eyes of the world, to expand Good and extend its empire. In doing so, it found Evil in a place where, in principle, according to rational thought, it should not and should never be: a natural disaster. It may seem like an archaic projection to think that natural disasters are Evil, although from the point of view of the global order, it is completely justifiable to fight them as a form of terrorism. In this text for *Libération*, I said that God himself had become a terrorist. Nothing can now be seen outside of this light.

And what is the relationship to the Holocaust commemorations?

The Holocaust connection is a little more complicated, but it participates in the same syndrome. The idea of making the Holocaust into such an absolute reference point and no longer taking it as what it is, as a tragic historical event with antecedents and consequences, a possibility of analysis... After the 50th anniversary in 1995, the 60th anniversary of the Holocaust was commemorated. Between the two, I noticed disparities and a change of perspective: all at once, this tragic event was transformed into a mythology. It had already

begun, but it became visible and global at that point. Everyone was concerned, including countries and cultures that had nothing to do with it. It was truly the elaboration of an alibi. Moreover, if you do not assert that the Holocaust is the absolute crime, you are immediately on the side of Evil. I know what I'm talking about, because I am not a stranger to this type of accusation. Ten years ago, no one was trying to transform it into a global myth by mythifying and therefore mystifying it. This transformation of event into myth evacuates the question of Evil all the more in that it perpetuates the confusion between Evil and misfortune [*Mal* and *malheur*]. The Holocaust is Evil. Yet it is possible, even desirable, to have an intelligence of this Evil, but not if we confuse the Holocaust and *malheur*. If we do, it can be negotiated like any value, it becomes the object of pathos that is much stronger because the misfortune is absolute. This misfortune is shared and can only be shared in its most pathetic form. To be happy or unhappy implies a pathetic affect. Evil has nothing to do with affect. It is beyond morality, beyond judgment. To an astounding degree, the commemoration confronted us with this pathetic "image replay" of absolute, disconsolate misfortune. The problem is that by making a historical event into absolute misfortune, there is no room left to distance ourselves and to gain any intelligence of Evil.

Is this the first time that we have seen the mythification of an event?

No, of course not. There have been operations like this in every culture. But it so happens that our culture is based precisely on the mastery of these operations, and this is a dangerous relapse. When someone like Dieudonné calls this commemoration "memorial pornography," he is completely right. But people make it sound like he is saying that the Holocaust is pornographic, and that amalgam does not work. But it is the amalgam made by the media that is scandalous. I say the same thing, in a different way. Is it more subtle? I don't know.

Especially since it is you, Jean Baudrillard, who is saying it.

Yes. But I did not get any response from the article that appeared in *Libération*. Everyone stayed quiet. What should I do, cause a scandal? That is not my style. It would just prolong a pointless controversy.

But there is something very powerful behind the new myth and the absolute misfortune that are confused with Evil. Isn't this confusion between the two intentional?

We are supposed to be able to fight misfortune, and we even attempt to theorize it subjectively today: rampant victimality at every level and recriminations. We are in misfortune; we acknowledge it and enact it. The exact same thing happens with misfortune as with Western culture enacting its own degradation. The identity reflex is found in misfortune itself. Which brings us back to hegemony. In a system of domination, when you are a slave or even a salaried worker, you are in any case on the losing side, but you exist as such and not as a victim. And that is why you can go on strike or revolt. In a hegemonic regime, on the contrary, we are not slaves but hostages. We are therefore all victims, all in misfortune. In Greek, the word "hegemon" signifies the person who governs, who leads; it is governance and therefore has the same meaning as "cyber," which etymologically means the "art of piloting" or "governing." The era of hegemony is the era of the cyber system. It governs, it regulates, but it does not dominate. There are no longer any exploited or dominated. There is something else, something much harder to overtake by surprise. It is harder to critique as well, because critical thought is devitalized in this case. It is absorbed, like a victim condemned to expressing him- or herself in the void, or to emptying him- or herself of all substance. There is the

impression that History is no longer driven by development but by an indeterminate and uncontrollable growth. An invasion has taken place. It is like a turbo: it is a turbo-system drawn by the vacuum that it creates before it. Something really happened in the last five or ten years, between the two commemorations of the Holocaust. September 11 occurred and started a mutation. Not in terms of political, economic or strategic consequences, but there was a phase inversion in the system. September 11 was a predestined event. It would not have had the same resonance if it had not concretized or symbolically materialized something that had been real for a long time: this loss of value in a self-devouring, cannibalistic culture. No one realized it, it could have gone on indefinitely, but then, suddenly, the image froze. Inside this disintegrating power, at least virtually threatened by itself, something was violently materialized before the eyes of the entire world. This is the very definition of an event: when an illegible, long-running process becomes legible at a given moment by the force of an unprecedented act.

You mention clones several times in Cool Memories V. *What does this figure represent in the Empire of Good as you describe it?*

Clones are the possibility of perpetuating the species artificially. The question is whether we attach a strong symbolic value to the human species as such. If so, then clones are deviant, perverted. They negate the symbolic dimension of a species that implies the disappearance of each individual to continue to evolve. But here, people are seeking immortality. They do not want to disappear; they want to make the disappearance disappear! What they do not want to see, however, is that this desire for cloning is just another way of disappearing, and a shameful one. It is a technological disappearance into artificial survival, corresponding to the elimination of the human as human. And this process of disappearance has already begun.

Does this objective bother you morally?

Ethically, I am against it. But I am against ethical positions in general. Let us say that I oppose it in symbolic terms.

For you, clones, like integral reality, are an image of the absolute perfection that is presented as a desirable perfection, while they are only something else, like an acceptable name for the death of the species.

If you attempt to bring an end to sexuality and death, what rules are you contravening? Laws,

they do not interest me, but symbolic rules? What happens if you eliminate the truth that all singularities imply their own disappearance? You appear, you disappear. If you eliminate disappearance, there is no more singularity. And that seems to be the only thing that can resist, that cannot be reduced to the integral, total, totalitarian hold of insurmountable reality. With clones, this singularity explodes. You could call it progress; it all depends on the point of view. Clones are just one example among others. I also include the "ordination," "computerization" and digitalization of the world in this process.

Artificial intelligence as well?

Yes. I was recently reading a praise of plants and vegetation that offered a surprising point of view: what distinguishes animals from plants is sexuality and death, because plants are immortal in a certain way due to their method of reproduction by scissiparity. In our advanced, scientific and technological culture, we are taking the path of plants. We are becoming vegetal. Using our technology, we are trying to neutralize sexuality (including by generalizing it) and neutralize death. We are entering the system of unlimited metastasis of the plant. Networks, the Internet and all of these things are unlimited metastasis!

Reading the text, I found it funny to see how we may be deteriorating, passing from the animal to the plant stage, and God knows where it will end. Why plants after all? It could be very good, for better or worse. I admire trees. I am not praising the plant stage, but there is an anthropological mutation if not an ontological one. Where are Good and Evil in this context? The question of Good and Evil is not asked here. There is a mutation, that much is clear. The right question is therefore: how far will we go? Will we go back to the almost inorganic state of the protozoa? This can already be found in Freud with the death drive. Is that what is involved here? Or is there a propulsive momentum leading us to another form of disappearance, because in any case we will disappear? But we will disappear in a kind of illumination and not symbolically.

You say that artificial intelligence is both the death of intelligence and the death of consciousness. Is that what we reject in the machine, both intelligence and consciousness?

Artificial intelligence is the reign of hegemony. The brain has become the biological version of hegemony; everything is subordinated to the brain, as the image of order, of the computer. Everything is governed, cybernetized, brought

back to the ordering power of the brain. Everything else, the body, is left aside. Other cultures disdained the brain. For the Greeks, it did not even exist; it was useless viscera. For us, the brain rules with a form of digital, binary intelligence in this case that is not at all the same thing. As for consciousness, what place would it have in this digital universe? It is a form of intelligence, but it does not think, as Heidegger would say, it calculates. It is a positive intelligence. The negative is completely left out again. There is no work of the negative here.

In the cybernetic universe where everything is calculable, can't Evil in the sense of disorder and chaos slip into and penetrate the integral reality of the network? Isn't that what hackers do for example?

Accidents are involved, certainly. Paul Virilio speaks of this much better than I can. But what I am saying is of another order: it is unpredictable. It is power turning against itself. It is not necessarily the apocalypse but it is a disaster in the sense of a form made irrepressible regardless of the will of the actors and their negative actions or sabotage. Certainly, many negative things can happen to the system, but it will always be an objective or objectal negativity related to the technology itself, not a symbolic irruption. I am afraid that this game

remains internal to integral reality. Perhaps there are some who can penetrate the cracks in this cybernetic universe? I must say that I do not know the internal rules of the game for this world, and I do not have the means to play it. This is not a philosophical or moral disavowal or prejudice on my part. It is just that I am situated somewhere else and I cannot do otherwise. From the outside, I can see that everything works and that the machine allows everything to function. Let us allow that system to proceed normally—or abnormally—until it runs its course; let us leave to the machine what belongs to the machine without trying to humanize it or make it an anthropoid object. For me, I will always have an empty, perfectly non-functional and therefore free space where I can express my thoughts. Once the machine has exhausted all of its functions, I slip into what is left, without trying to judge or condemn it. Judgment is foreign to the radicality of thought. This thinking has nothing scientific, analytic or even critical about it, since those aspects are now all regulated by machines. And maybe a new space-time domain for thought is now opening?